

## Blindfolded and Immutable

By Lana Malekan

### Chapter I: Blindfolded

I just want to tell the truth. I think I will. Now that I am old enough to think for myself, I want people to stop thinking for me, to stop speaking for me, to stop telling me how to live and who to be. Once I started reading, started going to school and participating, I realized how good it makes me feel. I like to talk to people. I like to hear the noise of many voices, the expressions of those who share their thoughts and insights. Silence is empty and boring and if you leave yourself exposed for long enough, it will overtake you, dragging you into a state of self-consciousness that you couldn't ever possibly escape. Once it takes your immunity, it exposes your body to every little disease there is. Silence drags you under, leaving you groping in the dark, against the walls, and chairs, and floors for a door that you couldn't possibly know how to open even if you had the key. Soon you won't know how to speak to people, how to look into someone's eyes directly for more than three seconds when they are addressing you, and even if you manage that, you will always feel uncomfortable when you try really hard to hold your gaze. You won't know naturally how to form sentences that make sense out loud, or how to contribute to conversations without becoming so embarrassed that you realize that your hand is always inadvertently finding its way to your neck. It creeps across the front, for some reason, as if you yourself have been conditioned to act on behalf of those, who surely if they were present, would wrap their own four fingers in front of the skin that covers your vocal cords while tucking their thumbs snugly on its arch where your hairline begins. You're not supposed to talk, remember, not supposed to have an opinion. What's a little girl like you, a teenager like you, a young woman like you, got to say to adults anyway? Nothing. So you go watch some TV or set the table and leave the talking to us big people. You don't know the first thing about truth anyway.

I dance in a three-generation long conga line of women whose bodies gyrate at the rhythm of a silent beat. We know the art of dancing since dancing is something that we are allowed to do. Getting our hair done, painting our nails and face and smiling, always smiling, is expected. And dancing, oh that's a definite asset. If a girl can dance and steam up a nice pot of tea, she might actually be able to get away with weighing more than 125 pounds, but that really depends. Let's not make any grand generalizations though. But besides for those easy things, we can really do anything it is that we would like, except for having an opinion or wanting agency or imagining privacy— every other thing in the world is permitted, though. My father always tells me that men like best women who speak the fewest words possible – choose carefully! he says. I think that must be why he wanted to marry my mother. He couldn't have known then that when she got far enough in her own career and

submerged deeply enough in her own passions that she might have grown the courage to talk back to him. Talking back to your husband does not work, he yells this at me, the news reaches my sensory receptors vibrating over me with heightened sensation, hitting my inner ear at an abnormally high decibel level, hoping to substitute with his screams what my mother has taught me quietly in years of growing up.

As a young girl, I was always talented at being to myself. I used to think that being introverted and shy was naturally encoded in my DNA. Some girls were loud and outgoing and some very just, you know, born shy. I don't think that I was born shy anymore. These days, I actually feel myself bursting out with something to say, but mostly being held back in hesitation. There is a process involved in speaking. First you must think of something to say—then you must decide if it is important enough to say—then you must consider whether or not what you think you want to say will be valuable to the people that you say it to—then you must recite it in your head at least two times to make sure that you will not in fact say something different once you begin to speak because something different needs to be subjected to the process too—then, if you still have the nerve after all of that consideration and estimation, then you can totally say whatever it is that you are thinking. It took me the majority of my life to get to the point of feeling comfortable enough to speak in academic public spaces. A lot of my practice included cutting the whole editing process out and just moving onwards, relentlessly forward. I taught myself to stop thinking, considering and qualifying everything to the point of not feeling confident enough to come out with it. Did you know that you could convince yourself that anything doesn't matter if you think about it hard enough? That nothing will seem important enough to say once it has been debated at so much length? The only way you can get past this feeling of inadequacy is to tell yourself to use "blindfold." Blindfold is my own invention; it's what I refer to when I want to make myself do something without affording my consciousness the time to slip in and stop me. "I want to go to Medical School," I wrote on a post-it that I taped to my desk during my freshman year of college. And then, whenever I started to disappear into the darkness of self-doubt that was waiting, patiently on all fours, ready to pounce, I would just remind myself—blindfold. And just like that, with it, I was gone, my mind would close up and nothing, no one, could get in. I have had to turn to blindfold a lot over the past few years, like when I sat down at the MCAT and clicked the start button that opened me up to the first section of the exam, or when I went sky-diving for the first time, or when I taught my first planned activity to a group of hungry, steel-eyed pre-medical students who I was certain had the intellect and pre-existing knowledge to drive me into exile. These were all typical blindfold moments. The ability to blindfold really saved my life. I might have ended up like the others if I let myself go to the starving vultures that I knew were always waiting for my mind.

I have been this aware of myself for as long as I can remember. I was taught early how to behave by anxious grandparents, aunts and uncles and older cousins who were eager to instruct. A part of me was stolen then, but I'm in the process of taking it back. I am hopeful that I still can, but the truth is ugly and painful and exhausting. I'm going to tell it. Well, I'm going to try.

## Chapter II: Immutable

My great-aunt Neima suffered from a dementia of sorts. You might call it an inverted dementia, one that did not emanate from the inside out, but rather was elicited by a suffocating environment, pollutants from which seeped into the enfoldings of Neima's

mind. Those weeks that I spent living in my grandfather's dark, brown stone and white marble mansion spread out across my mind. I must have been eleven at the time and I can still access the prickly awareness that shot across my flesh in those days – the knowledge that I had to take care of Neima, a woman who was then only hearing voices inside her head and some cruel demands of her older brother who so often reminded her, “Shut up, Crazy Woman, or I will throw you out of my house.”

My father had dropped me off one morning at my grandfather's where I would be staying. I packed my stuff into his pearl blue Lexus truck one winter morning while he waited for me inside the car. Immediately overwhelmed by my inability to close the trunk's top, I began to jump up and down, like a young kid does when he stands under a basketball hoop that he thinks he might eventually reach if he invests enough effort. After realizing this as a physical impossibility, I climbed onto the thin back edge of the car. Tilting in a precarious balance and reaching over, I caught the trunk and lowered it down. Freezing by that point, I jumped into the passenger's seat and held my hands over the heat while I waited for the car to warm up. My father played 1010 Wins all the way from our small home in Westbury to my grandfather's mansion in Sands Point. When I once leaned in to turn down the news, asking my father how long I would be staying, he angrily turned the dial to make the news louder, drowning out my questions.

“Dad?”

“Dad...Dad.....Dad.....Dad.....”

“What Leyla,” the words rolled off his heavily accented tongue in three pieces.

“Dad, when will we get there? What time will mom be done with work? Where am I going to sleep?”

Silence.

“Dad?”

Silence.

“Dad?”

Silence.

“Daddddddd?”

“WHAT Leyla?”

This is how our conversations always worked. Either neither of us spoke or I spoke to myself. Both options were equally unappealing so I stopped trying to have conversations of depth with my father somewhere around that time. The car was filled with heat at this point, and besides for the small puddles of water that had formed under my boots from the melted snow, the rest was completely dry. As the warm air continued to fill my lungs, I sunk into a deep sleep. When I awoke, it was to the sounds of thousands of rocks that formed my grandfather's driveway shifting and crackling under my father's truck's tires. The noise began at the black, rusting metal gates and continued all the way down the long road that led to the expansive estate. Finally peeking through my sleepy eyes, I faced an immense rectangular brown-brick house realizing that this was the place I would call home for the next few weeks until my family made a move. Meanwhile, my mother told me, she would be staying at her mother's house with my three younger siblings while I would remain at my paternal grandfather's with my father. It only made sense this way since my bus was already assigned for pick up at what would be my new home next-door. There was no wiggling my way out of this situation and as much as just visiting my grandfather's house every Friday night for dinner already crept me out, this was something I would just have to deal with. It would be me, father, grandfather, grandmother and Neima living together for a short time, and that was that.

When we arrived in that moment of daylight, this all seemed simple. I again hopped onto the edge of the trunk, pulled out my suitcase, and ran up to stand behind my father as he knocked using the handle that hung down off of the lion's head cemented on the door.

That night, while barefoot, I became familiar with the cold marble tiles that covered every floor and surface; the next day, with the smell of this or that fruit that my grandfather picked from his garden and brought into the house; the next day with the vision of ivory smoke rising out after lifting the lid that covered the pot of snow-white rice that was always on the burner; after that with the paintings of cherubs and gothic portraits from the past that looked down on me disapprovingly; then, the ornate artist signed glass antiques painted with dancing nude bodies and men on horseback that lined the halls and filled the rooms of the entire house requiring me to turn every stride past into a mere tiptoe, lest I was planning to take the place down.

I imagined a life in captivity not so different from what I experienced at my grandfather's soon after. Living there was like being warped into a stranger Iranian matrix where I could only think and hear in Farsi. After just a few hours of envelopment in unnatural mixes of Farsi and English, I fell into the habit of rehearsing literal translations of every phrase that I heard, deriving out the English meaning that my parents had already taught me. One day, when I spoke loudly on the phone, begging my mother to pick me up because I was lonely, and another time, when Neima screamed from her room, we were both told by my grandfather to "*kehafeh sho*," a term that is used to say "shut up," but literally translates to "go choke." Pretending I did not hear these words, I walked gently into the living room that was situated just a few feet away from the kitchen where my grandfather sat manipulating his black and beige circular pieces across his ornate *shat rabnge*—chess board that he took out only to impress visitors. The men who were invited over by my grandfather were honored, and so they naturally would ask no questions about the way he chose to speak with the others who lived in his home.

Later, I was called down for dinner. It was then that I learned what it meant to be a subject. When I sat at his table for a meal, I was only one of several women fed by my grandfather's great, selfish wealth. Preparing my food, my grandfather would dig his hand into a cooked and sauced chicken, breaking it to pieces, effortlessly separating the ligaments so that he could smash the remains onto a plate and then into the stew and rice that he also cupped with dirty, bare hands. He pulled out the plate, threw what was prepared on it, and barked, "*Bochor dochtar—Eat girl*," when handing it to me, and "*Bochor, chanameh deevoneh—Eat crazy woman*," when handing it to Neima, and "Eat Leyla," when forcing it upon a maid. Of course, his maid never had the same name as me, but somehow, he liked to confuse us in his addresses all the same.

My life began to transform into a routine. I woke up in the far too early hours of the morning when the world was still black on a chilly, stiff bed from which I forced myself up. After finally leaving the room, finding my belongings and gathering pages of the previous day's carefully handled homework, I made my way down the spiraling white marble staircase that I would frequently fall down if I lost my grip on the railings in just one moment of distraction. When I reached the ground level, I ran to the kitchen, grabbed any snack that my mother had dropped off days before, and gratefully escaped the house, leaving behind me the resounding KA-BOOM of the heavy door that had the width and height roughly equal to what would have been fifteen of my small bodies at that time. Although I was ready to leave the house for school, I dreaded what seemed to me two miles of a snowy driveway separating me from my bus during those dark winter mornings.

I remember one of these mornings more exactly than the rest. The day began on the cold bed, down those daunting spiraling stairs, into the kitchen still filled with the early-morning darkness and then back out, but on this morning I was early for my bus and to leave the house would have meant standing in the freezing cold until its arrival. Loitering slowly through the halls with some minutes to kill, I found Neima embedded in the darkness of a small room buried in the corner to the right of the staircase. I knew that she sat there every morning, that she always saw me out, but I never paid her much attention, as I had been taught not to. From a distance, all that was accessible to my unarmed eye was an almost formless, aged figure that swung back and forth in a white wooden rocking chair. How long had she been awake, sitting there, rocking? I was curious so I began to approach her, tiptoeing with the trepidation of a mischievous child who was about to engage in a forbidden act. As I drew closer, I noticed her swaying red hair more clearly and I heard her gibberish cries, resembling the nonsense uttered by parakeets. Even closer and I was electrified by the sight of the deep lines engraved in her tired, fragile temple, and then a definite smile—a smile that was disengaged and distracted in its own concentrated trance. Neima’s deviant countenance was shadowed by an interminable meditation and deep misery that oozed out of her wild, frenzied laughter.

I walked towards her while planning the words that I would say carefully as I moved forward, stepping into her room with just some of my toes extending towards the tip of my boots. “*Sobe cher Neima, chetoree?—Good morning Neima, how are you?*” I asked shyly. She waited with her face centered forward, finally tilting her head, just slightly away from the window and responded, “*Sobe cher Neima, chetoree.*” I half-giggled, confused, I did not understand why Neima was imitating me. I stood there, close enough to hear the squeaks of her rocking chair, in a few short seconds of almost silence before she began again. “*Deevoneh, kbafesh sho, deevoneh, kbafesh sho...kbafesh sho, kbafesh sho—crazy, shut up, crazy shut up...shut up, shut up,*” she parroted in tones of hysterical madness that bounced off the walls of that contracting room, crashing over me from behind like an unexpected wave that knocks you over at your heels first. I turned

half-way around, carefully, as if in an attempt to let Neima know that I respected the order of her space. I needed to leave. It was hard to move, but the last thing I wanted to do was run away, fearing what my mother had always told me about how sick murderers and rapists ran harder to catch you if you gave them the signal.

Seeing me leave the room, my grandfather warned me something along the lines of do-not-go-near-that-crazy-woman. He believed with every atom of his being that her insanity was contagious. I kept walking...then running...down the steps...spiraling...out the door—KA-BOOM. I looked back at her through her window as I began my two-mile walk down the driveway. I could not actually see her, but I envisioned her in that dark room where she sat now, where she would laugh all day with her red hair, formless, rising and falling as she rocked back and forth in that chair. Neima existed alone in that jolting snapshot of time until the day that she died.

I realize now that we shared much of our history as females who wanted to find voices sufficient to abate the high tides of an all-consuming silence. I rarely asked anyone in my family about Neima’s story before, or anyone else’s, because speaking is something that we simply did not do. This year, when I asked my mother about Neima, I was told that she was treated poorly, dismissed as being crazy because she wanted to claim her voice as a young girl, that she died at the age of 67 from ovarian cancer as a virgin. I am now aware that the name Neima actually means “nothing” – I think it odd. They named her just what they always wanted her to be.

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