

# Silenced Whispers

A Novel

Afarin Ordubadi Bellisario



*To my grandmother,  
Fatima Madadoff Radpay,  
and my aunt, Sorour Ordubadi,  
whose love and wisdom  
have shaped my life.*

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*And the night, the clock, and the moon;  
Tell you pensively,  
“One must fall in love and stay;  
One must shut the window and sit”;  
Behind the wall, someone sings.’  
“One must fall in love and go;  
The Winds are passing by . . .”*

A. M. AZAD



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## *Author's Note*

To enhance readers' experience, we have included a brief historical background, and a map of Iran at the turn of the 20th century (overleaf).

A short description of the Persian terms and traditions mentioned in this book can be found on pages 344-5.



## An Historical Background: Iran At the dawn of the 20th Century

At the dawn of the 20th century, the once mighty Iran was archaic, ruled by weak and vain monarchs manipulated by corrupt officials. Two neighboring colonial powers—Russia in the north and England through its Indian colony in the East—exploited its natural resources and threatened its sovereignty. Meanwhile, a rising militaristic Germany sought a foothold in the oil-rich Iran.

The introduction of Western science and technology to Iran in the mid-nineteenth century brought in ideas of democracy, secular laws, and social change, especially in the status and role of women. The Iranian quest for a representative government led to forming a parliament, the Majles, in 1906.

Nascent democracy was threatened from the start. Within the Majles, advocates for secular laws clashed with adherents of Islamic law, Sharia, their conflict often spreading to the streets and turning violent. At the same time, England and Russia strongly opposed any reform that threatened their interests, often in alliance with reactionaries and corrupt officials who benefitted from the status quo. Domestic discourse, combined with foreign power grabs, destabilized Iran as WWI engulfed the world.

This book is a fictional account of individuals caught in the upheaval of that pivotal era. The events portrayed in this book, including the Russian invasion of Northern Iran and the women's protest march to the Majles, are factual. Similarly, the women's societies advocating for women's rights and democracy in Iran existed. Their legacy is today's Iranian women's fight for freedom and democracy.



PART I

# Awakening

*If you come to my house, my kindhearted,  
Bring me a lamp and a portal;  
Through which I can gaze  
At the commotion of the fortunate alley*

F. FAROKHZAD

## 1

*January 1909, Gurdan, Iran*

“How could you?”

Gohar froze midway across the living room, then turned slowly. Framed in the doorway stood her accuser, the woman who had raised her from infancy: Qamar. In fourteen years of living with her, Gohar had never seen the old woman’s round, gentle face so hardened with rage.

Sweat drenched her loose blouse. How much did Qamar know about what had happened the day before? Would she beat her? Qamar had never hit her, but she had no qualms about smacking her own daughters or ordering her husband to cane their sons. That Gohar was a foot taller than Qamar wouldn’t stop her, either. She scanned the small room for cover. But neither the beat-up cushions on the floor nor the low table holding a samovar in the corner offered any protection.

She tightened her grip on her teacup and mumbled a greeting.

Qamar stepped forward, plopped down on the threadbare rug, and slapped a folded paper onto the floor. “Sit down,” she barked. Her narrowed, fiery eyes burrowed into Gohar.

Gohar paled. The paper was the letter her friend Kavous had dropped in the alley the day before when the local tough guy—a *luti*—chased him. The *luti* must have taken it and given it to Qamar. Gohar sat at the edge of the strip of sunlight pouring through the doorway, her back to the wall, her head bowed.

“Do you remember what happened to the butcher after the mullah caught his daughter talking to a man?” Qamar leaned forward. She smelled of fried onion and turmeric.

Gohar shuddered. Even after he sent his daughter away, the butcher

had lost customers, his wife had been ostracized, his son's engagement had been called off, and his other daughter had been beaten to a pulp by her in-laws. Soon, the family had vanished.

What if Qamar kicked her out? Gohar wasn't even her kin. A beating, she could endure. But survival was a pipe dream without family in a desert town seven days horseback ride from other towns.

What had she done? Correspondence with a boy—no matter how chaste—was trouble in a place where houses had no windows to the outside, and doors had separate knockers for men and women. When women heard a man knocking, they covered themselves and hid.

She grasped the medallion on her neck—her only keepsake from her mother. Engraved with a Qur'anic verse, it protected her from all calamities.

Qamar wagged her finger. "How long has this been going on?"

The boy's white skullcap had first piqued Gohar's curiosity three months before when he passed the alley while she watched from the rooftop. It was the kind only *Gabrs*, the followers of Zoroaster, wore, and Gabrs seldom crossed Muslim neighborhoods. She had tossed a pebble at him. He'd lifted his head and smiled. His narrow olive face looked harmless, with only a hint of hair above his full mouth. She'd smiled back.

But Qamar had no way of knowing who the letter was for or what was in it. No one in the area could read except for her and the mullah. And Qamar would never pay the meddlesome man to read it for her and spread the content around the neighborhood.

Gohar raised her head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, how many love letters has he left you?"

She met Qamar's eyes. "How do you know it is for me, Naneh? Or that it's a love letter? Shall I read it for you?"

Qamar stared back. "What else would a man write to a woman?"

"How should I know? I don't get letters from boys."

"Did you write back?"

The note Gohar had left Kavous in the crack in the wall had not been discovered. Silently, she offered a prayer of gratitude to Fatimah, daughter of the Prophet—May the Lord bless him and his family. She

would light a candle at the neighborhood shrine.

“Of course not, Naneh dear.”

Qamar tucked an unruly strand of hennaed hair under her scarf. “Worst of all, he’s a Gabr,” she fumed. “Doves with doves, hawks with hawks; Muslims with Muslims and Gabrs with Gabrs; everyone with their kind.”

Gohar wanted to blurt out that Qamar herself never missed a chance to chat and giggle with the Gabr confectioner or encourage him to give Gohar candy and sugar plums. But she kept quiet.

A torrent of words poured out of Qamar. “You must have done something. Otherwise, how would he know there’s a grown girl in this house? You are not a child. People would gossip if they saw a man leaving you a letter. You can close the city gate, but you can’t shut people’s mouths. We are lucky that the luti was there to save our honor.”

Qamar’s softening tone emboldened Gohar. “Maybe the boy was going to the post office and dropped the letter when the luti scared him.”

“Don’t be fresh,” Qamar grumbled. “The luti saw him with his own eyes bending down to leave the letter in our wall.”

“Maybe he was trying to tie his shoes,” Gohar offered.

Qamar rolled her eyes. “And maybe the shah was my father.”



Once Qamar was gone, Gohar rushed to her room, leaving her untouched tea by the samovar. Outside, the winter sun shimmered through the leaves of the ancient, gnarled tree that dominated their tiny yard. A breeze cooled her burning face as she sped through the veranda that connected all four rooms of their mudbrick house.

Though only large enough for her to lie down and separated from the veranda by nothing but a faded curtain, her room was her sanctuary. It was the only place she had never shared, even when the house overflowed with Qamar’s four sons and two daughters. At the back of her room, in a storeroom stacked high with extra bedding and out-of-season clothing, was an old, velvet-lined wooden trunk hiding her *tar*.



She grasped the musical instrument by its long, narrow neck, took it out, and clutched it to her chest. The touch of the well-worn skin of the tar's double bowls calmed her instantly.

The tar had captivated her from the minute she found it inside the trunk in the cellar. She was surprised to find an instrument played by female *motrebs* at weddings and circumcisions in the house she shared with Qamar and her family. Qamar loathed musical instruments and derided merrymakers. Nonetheless, Gohar had felt compelled to take the tar out, twist its pegs, and pluck its strings to make a sound.

Fearful of Qamar burning the instrument if she knew about it, Gohar had kept it hidden and played only when no one was around. Luckily, Qamar's husband, Amoo Ali, was busy at his greengrocer store every day while Qamar ambled through the market or chewed the fat at weddings and funerals. Soon, Gohar had mastered the familiar melodies and invented new ones. The tar became her friend and confidant, her respite when she was anxious, her tongue when she was lost for words.

She cradled the instrument and leaned on the wall in the dim light from the narrow window near the ceiling.



The disaster had struck the previous afternoon. Gohar had climbed the tree in their yard to reach the roof, as she often did while Qamar napped. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary in the alley. The cobbler was hammering shoes in the shade of a wall, and the cutler was flirting with a woman in a flowery chador. In front of the coffeehouse, emaciated dogs fought over a bone while a storyteller entertained men smoking hookah on carpeted platforms.

There was no trace of the mullah or the self-appointed guardian of local honor, the luti. No one would report her to Qamar for being on the roof. She sat on the sloping straw-clay surface. A draft ruffled the tail of her scarf and whirled softly in the wind-catchers—the slender towers that dotted the neighborhood, harnessing the wind to cool the houses.

The ribbon of hills to the east marked the path of the caravans

that once brought Chinese silk and Indian spices to Gurdan, the oldest city in Iran. Nowadays, the rare convoys that reached the town brought cheap Russian-made cotton and English-branded tea cultivated in India. Beyond the hills, the desert stretched boundless and wild. Only tamarisks kept the sandstorms at bay.

How glorious it would be to fly—to sail over the ocean of sand and see wonders she had only heard about: snow-capped mountains, rivers full of fish, forests bursting with flowers.

Kavous's white outfit caught her eye as he weaved through a mob of barefoot boys chasing a wooden wheel with a stick. What would be in his letter today? A report of excursions to a Gabr village marked by a pair of cypresses or a fire burning for fifteen hundred years? An account of mischief at school? Everything he wrote was new to her. Excited, she waved. He smiled.

Suddenly, from the corner of her eye, she saw the luti rise from a platform outside the coffeehouse. How could she have missed him? Her heart sank. He wasn't keen on stranger boys—especially Gabrs—frequenting the neighborhood.

He pulled on his cloth shoes and fetched a wooden stick. His eyes, cruel and narrow, scanned the rooftops as his beefy fingers grabbed the handle of the dagger tucked into his sash. He followed Kavous. Terrified, she silently pleaded with her friend to turn around.

Oblivious to his stalker, Kavous bent by the crack in the wall to replace the letter Gohar had left him with his own. The luti lowered the club. The boy grabbed his shoulder, cursed, and turned. At the sight of his assailant, Kavous dropped the letter and bolted.

The luti gave chase. A gust of wind blew his felt hat away. His shaved head glinted in the sun. Under any other circumstances, the sight of a bowlegged bald man in a short robe and billowing pants racing after a boy would have made her laugh, but now all she could picture was Kavous lying in the dirt, blood oozing out of his throat. She prayed to Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter.

As it turned out, Fatimah—or luck—was on her side. Kavous, twenty years younger and fifty pounds lighter than the luti, easily outran him. He disappeared past the bend in the alley before the luti could

touch him. The man didn't follow. Gabrs had their own tough guys, reputed to be much stronger than the luti and his cronies. Panting, the luti spat on the ground and vowed loudly to kill the boy if he ever dared to set foot in their neighborhood again.

She slid down the tree, oblivious to the branches tearing through her thin pants and bloodying her legs. In her room, she sat on her rolled-up bedding, trying to calm her racing heart. There would be trouble if the luti could connect her to the incident and report it to Qamar or Amoo Ali. But how could he? He hadn't seen her on the roof.

That evening, Qamar had looked skeptically at Gohar hammering at a sugar cone to break it apart. "Watch your fingers," she'd said. Gohar never volunteered for chores. Qamar never asked.

Amoo Ali had been equally startled when Gohar offered to carry the carrots and turnips he had brought home down the broken steps to the kitchen. His sallow face had opened to a rare grin, revealing the last of his tobacco-blackened teeth.

Shortly after the evening call to prayer, a knock on the door had surprised them. "There is a man at the door," Qamar had said, covering her plump body with her flowery blue chador. "I hope no one's sick." Then she sent Gohar to her room.

In her room, Gohar had overheard Amoo Ali invite the luti to their seldom-used sitting room, the largest in the house and the only one with a door. She had felt sick.



Gohar caressed the strings of the tar. She hadn't been beaten or banished, but she had lost a friend. Kavous could never return to her neighborhood, and she had no way of reaching him. The loss hung heavy on her heart. She longed to play, but with Qamar so close, she dared not risk her last companion.

## 2

*January 1909, Gurdan*

Qamar stayed home for days, praying late into the night. The furrow lines on her forehead deepened, and calluses formed on her fingers from counting the rosary. Distressed, Gohar quit climbing the tree and volunteered to read the letters the neighbors had received and write replies. That endeared her to women tired of paying the mullah to read their intimate letters and putting up with his inane and unwanted advice.

At night, the swirl of wind in the desert reminded her of Kavous's tales of the royal princesses. She pictured the noble ladies, tall and regal on white horses, fleeing the marauding Arabs. At the edge of the cliffs, their horses neighed. Then, the mountains wept, taking the women into their bosoms.



One afternoon, Gohar overheard Qamar confide in her eldest daughter.

“Believe me, Gohar didn’t mean to harm us,” Qamar said as she sewed. “She didn’t know any better. But I had to fill up the bottomless well of that bastard luti’s stomach to keep him from blabbering all over the neighborhood.”

“What did he want?” Qamar’s daughter asked indifferently as she nursed her youngest.

“What do lutis want these days? Free food. In the old times, they guarded the honor of the neighborhood and asked for nothing. But now they’re no better than thugs.”

“You know best, Naneh,” Qamar’s daughter said. “But if you want my opinion, you are too lenient with Gohar. You should smack her like

you smacked the rest of us. Drill some sense into her. You shouldn't have hired a tutor. As the mullah says, teaching a girl to read opens the door to Satan."

"You know that wasn't my idea," Qamar said.

The woman responsible for hiring the tutor was a princess Qamar had nursed. She had been a friend of Gohar's mother. Gohar had met her only once, five years before, but the tears in the woman's sad green eyes still haunted her. The princesses in Qamar's tales never cried, except when trapped in a witch's spell.

Gohar knew nothing about her parents. Qamar claimed she didn't know them. She had taken in the infant Gohar after the princess's mother, Noor—a Georgian concubine of a past shah—had asked her to. And as generous as she was in embellishing stories of the princes and their steeds, Qamar was a miser when it came to Gohar's family.

Every detail of visiting the princess in the governor's mansion was still vivid in Gohar's: the thrill of meeting her mother's friend, the joy of taking a droshty—an unusual splurge for Qamar—the vastness of the reflecting pools in front of the estate and the intricacy of the plasterwork that had distracted her and caused her to trip on the carpet.

But it was the princess herself who had made the most enduring impression. Enchanting in a peach crepe-de-chine dress of a design Gohar had never seen before, she had surprised Gohar by embracing her tightly and kissing the parting of her hair. She was visibly dismayed to learn that Gohar was illiterate.

After the visit, Gohar had hoped to hear more from Qamar about her parents. But the more she prodded, the more indignant Qamar became. Finally, out of fear of hurting or antagonizing Qamar, Gohar had stopped asking.

A month later, a messenger had brought a dress with a full skirt and lacy collar for Gohar and money for Qamar to hire a tutor. The outfit was from *Farangestan*—*Farang* for short—the mysterious land that her tutor—when he was appointed—would call Europe, where *Farangis* lived. Gohar had worn the dress until it fell into tatters.

The whining of Qamar's daughter brought Gohar back to the present. "But *you* let her read useless books all day," she said. "She can't

cook, or sew, or clean. No wonder she gets into mischief. You ought to marry her off, and soon. She's already fourteen. In two years, she'll be a spinster."

Gohar glanced at the haggard face of Qamar's daughter, already old at twenty. What had happened to the vibrant girl who smiled constantly before marriage? She recalled the apprehensive look on the faces of local nine- and ten-year-old brides, dollops of blush plastered on their cheeks, some marrying men older than their fathers. It was a blessing that Qamar deftly avoided the matchmakers lurking in the public bathhouse.

"But to whom?" Qamar said, exasperated. "I can't marry her off to a baker or a butcher. She has to marry her own kind, and her kind wouldn't even look at a no-name, no-dowry girl living in this neighborhood."

But who was *her kind*? Did he, like her, look different from others? Gangly and flat-chested, with an unruly mass of auburn hair and a pale oval face, Gohar had none of the feminine attributes celebrated by the poets: voluptuous curves, a round face, and supple black hair. Only her eyes, shaped like almonds and black as a moonless night, drew praise.

More importantly, whoever he was, would he beat her black and blue, as Qamar's sons-in-law did to their wives, or be meek and mild, like Amoo Ali, who obeyed Qamar unquestioningly?

Qamar continued. "Even if a proper suitor comes along, she needs a male guardian to agree to the marriage and negotiate a contract."

"Oh dear. You mean you still don't know who her guardian is?"

"How would I? I haven't heard from the family since the princess visited."

"Then you'd better find out before we have a disaster on our hands."

Gohar glanced at Qamar's grandchildren fighting over a homemade doll in the courtyard. Despite their frequent squabbles, they were lucky to have each other.

"Easier said than done," Qamar snapped. "How am I going to find the family? I have no idea where Noor is. The old Shah is dead, and his harem is gone. She could've gone back to Georgia."

"What is she going to do with her life if you can't marry her off?"

“I wish I knew, my dear,” Qamar sighed. “I wish I knew.”