

REVOLUTION STREET

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ONE WORLD

A Oneworld book

First published in North America, Great Britain and Australia by
Oneworld Publications, 2014

First published in German by Kirchheim, 2009

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A CIP record for this title is available
from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978-1-85168-984-2

ebook ISBN 978-1-78074-224-3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Mackays, Croydon

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Oneworld Publications
10 Bloomsbury Street
London WC1B 3SR
England

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1

Fattah raised his head and looked over at the young nurse with tired, heavy-lidded eyes. Something was bothering him. He held up his gloved hands. The nurse returned his look, her eyebrows raised questioningly. Fattah barked, ‘Open it!’

Still confused, the nurse looked nervously back at Fattah, but had no idea what he wanted her to do. ‘Unbutton my collar!’ Fattah croaked. ‘I’m choking!’ And to get her to understand the urgency of his predicament, he made his eyes bulge and gasped for breath.

A pale young woman, her eyes closed, lay on a hospital bed covered with a grimy yellow sheet, spotted with blue and purple stains faded from repeated washing. Her bare, skinny legs were bent at the knees, splayed open under the glaring bright light of a lamp hanging from the ceiling by a chain. She was trembling slightly, as if feverish, and moaning softly through slightly parted lips.

A dull, murky light filtered through the narrow basement windows. The panes were spattered with mud and partly obscured by thick dust and mounds of trash piled up outside. There were no curtains, which was a considerable risk.

Outside, a motorcycle suddenly roared past, and the girl on the bed snapped open her eyes and groaned. The doctor and nurse looked up abruptly.

The nurse peeled off her gloves, one after the other, and undid the doctor's top button. Fattah took a quick breath and said, 'Finally . . . Now the next one; open the next one too!'

Breathing in deeply, keeping his half-open eyes on her, he said, 'Thank you.' and let out a huge sigh, which smacked the nurse in the face with the sour smell of fermented dough and rotten meat. He closed his eyes in obvious satisfaction.

The girl on the narrow bed slowly turned her head and looked at them out of the corner of her eye. Then she bit her lip and let out another moan. She was clearly in pain.

Fattah's flushed, flabby double chin had settled back into his loosened collar. He glanced down at the girl and grumbled, 'These whores! They give it away for free, but when it comes time to get married, all of a sudden they remember they're virgins only from the neck up!'

There was something malicious in his tone of voice, and he looked around as if to see the effect on his patient and the nurse.

'Sluts!' the nurse agreed.

Fattah resumed his work. He took a piece of sterile gauze from a stainless-steel tray and cleaned the area between the girl's legs. 'Hurts, doesn't it?' he said with pleasure in his voice.

The girl's eyes flickered open and she nodded. Fattah said drily, 'You're not at a party, my dear. This is a surgery! You should've thought of that before!'

Then, indicating the stainless-steel tray, he said to the nurse, 'Pass me that.'

The nurse pushed the cart closer to him. Fattah picked up a pair of scissors. When the girl saw the scissors, she began to wince and whimper again. Fattah scowled at her and, with hate in his voice, said, 'Quiet! I don't want to hear another peep out of you, understand?'

Without changing his expression, he stared at her for a few moments. The girl looked at him now in terror and pleaded with her eyes, but Fattah continued to glare at her. The girl winced again. Small beads of sweat, which had formed on her temples, now came together, moistening the fine hairs along her face.

Fattah bent his head and pried the girl's thighs open. Then he brought his head closer and held his hand out, saying to the nurse, 'Flashlight!'

The nurse switched on the flashlight and held it out. Fattah had her point it between the girl's legs and said, 'Look! The tramp!'

The area was fully illuminated. With the back of his hand Fattah slid his glasses up the bridge of his nose and took another close look. Then he started to cut the ragged edges of tissue with the surgical scissors.

The girl bit down hard on her lip and moaned in pain. Her forehead was bathed in sweat. Fattah pushed the flashlight aside with his elbow and said, 'I don't need it anymore.'

Then, rummaging through the contents of the steel tray with the tip of his finger, he said, 'Give me some suture thread.'

At the same time, he glanced at the girl out of the corner of his eye and said coldly, 'It's almost over now.'

The girl moaned again. 'I've already given you two injections of local anesthetic,' Fattah scolded. 'You should be able to put up with this little bit of pain!'

The girl burst into tears. ‘But, Doctor, you don’t understand . . . it’s like . . .’

Fattah spread his hands. ‘That’s just how it is! Besides, I’ll bet you weren’t feeling any pain when you—’

Then, stopping himself from saying anymore, he looked up at the ceiling, and said, ‘God forgive me.’ He turned to the girl and gave her a look of sympathy shot through with sexual desire. He nodded his head slowly for a few moments.

Outside the room, in a dimly lit corridor, two elderly women sat together on a narrow metal bench looking anxiously toward the closed door of the surgery. The one who appeared older, and who kept her face more tightly covered than the other woman, briefly rearranged her chador. She sighed and said to her companion, ‘Mehri dear, say a prayer. *Who Answers the Distressed* blessing would be good . . . it’ll pass the time so quick, you won’t know it!’

Mehri, who was around forty-two, rocked her body back and forth gently, like a mother lulling her child to sleep. As she swayed, a murmured prayer emerged from her lips. As though in mourning, she kept her head down and her eyes fixed on the grimy tiles lining the corridor. Suddenly the girl shrieked from behind the door. Mehri jumped up and stared in terror at her companion. Nearly in tears she asked, ‘What are they doing to her, Batul?’

Her voice broke. Batul stroked her back soothingly, and Mehri clasped her face in her hands. Batul took one of her hands in her own. ‘It’s nothing, my dear, nothing,’ she said. ‘It’s almost over!’

As if all the strength had left her body, Mehri slumped over and moaned, 'It's been a half an hour since they brought her in, and my heart is in my throat, Batul!'

'Fine, but don't you remember what he said? It takes half an hour just to bandage a wound, but hers is a big operation, isn't it?'

Mehri put one hand over the other. 'I'm just afraid they'll do something in there that will maim her for life.'

Batul sneered at her. 'What! Maim her? Doctor Fattah knows what he's doing; you've no idea what he can do. He just has to touch a patient and she'll recover. You'd be amazed!'

This seemed to calm Mehri. She closed her eyes and began to rock back and forth again, making that same soft, high-pitched sound. After a few moments her expression lightened, and she felt a spiritual peace, as if the gates of heaven were open to her.

Mehri and Batul were close neighbors. They kept nothing from each other, not the smallest thing. They never missed their Thursday-night visit to the holy Jamkaran. They would arrive in the early evening and, after saying their prayers and tearfully begging forgiveness from the saint, they would get back to Tehran at night. They told each other their problems, which was how the only person who knew Shahrzad was not a virgin was Batul. Batul, of course, was a good-hearted soul as well as practical. She was the one who had found Dr. Fattah, and, more importantly, got the money to pay his fee. She got it from Mirza, an old man to whom Batul was devoted, without having to say why she needed it. She had told him that it was for a Muslim, a believing soul who needed it to save her honor. That was all.

She took it from him and gave it straight to Mehri without keeping a penny for herself.

Fattah cut the thread with the scissors and handed them to the nurse. 'Finished!' he declared.

He puffed out his chest as though he had just won the Battle of Austerlitz. The girl opened her eyes and answered him with a feeble smile. As he removed his gloves, Fattah wagged his head and said, 'Done a lot of vaulting, have you?'

The girl nodded earnestly.

'Climbed your share of walls and trees, right?'

The girl nodded again.

Fattah brought his head closer and said in a mischievous, jokey way, 'Go tell that to your dear auntie!'

The girl looked at him self-righteously. This time, without sarcasm, Fattah said, 'When did you say the marriage was to be?'

'They've just started the negotiations,' moaned the girl.

'Meaning?' he said.

'At least two or three months,' the girl murmured.

The doctor paused for a moment and thought. He asked, 'What was the rush, then?' He brought his face closer to the girl's again and in a low voice said, 'You'll have to behave for all that time!' Then he snorted. The girl just stared at him innocently.

Fattah pulled away from her and, as if he had just smelled something foul, wrinkled his nose. 'Don't look at me like that!' he snarled. 'This wasn't the first time, or the second. It's obvious from the shape. Don't pretend you're so innocent!'

The nurse was happy to hear Fattah giving the girl such a hard time, and she nodded in agreement at everything he

said. When the girl's eyes fell on her, she scowled and turned her nose up to show her disdain—as if she herself were as pure as the driven snow.

The door opened, allowing light to stream into the hallway. Batul and Mehri hurriedly got to their feet and pulled themselves together. Batul said, 'Great job, Doctor! May the Lord reward you!'

Mehri tilted her head and asked, 'How is she, Doctor?'

Like all doctors—in fact, like any important person—Fattah was in a hurry and said impatiently, 'She's fine; just keep your daughters away from places they don't belong.'

Mehri looked at the doctor with annoyance and then hung her head in shame. The doctor said, 'I'll be waiting for you upstairs.'

Fattah opened a small door on the other side of the hall and went up a narrow stairway. On the floor above was a well-lit space, an all-day clinic full of the smell of alcohol, the sounds of creaking beds and groaning patients.

Dr. Fattah was a skilled and charitable physician who, rather than working in a fashionable uptown clinic, stitched up the rips and tears in his patients and retrieved the honor of their families. He worked in a cramped, underground office with a ceiling only half a meter higher than street level, off one of the alleys in the city center, with squat windows that the wind rattled all autumn long. God knows how many girls he saved from the evil of lost virginity in return for three hundred thousand tumans. A 'hymenoplast' famed throughout Tehran, he pronounced the term with such a thick American accent that you'd think he'd completed a course of advanced surgical

training in the United States. Lots of girls had said benedictions for him: the girls who were careless when jumping over the ditches beside the road, climbing trees, mounting bicycles—there was no end to the disasters that befell them! And suddenly you'd see they'd . . . He was not that strict about his fee, knowing that someday everybody would be six feet under with only a shroud to their name. That was why he worked with people; but he didn't let it be known from the start, otherwise they'd all want him to do the job for free. It was, all told, because of his helping hands that he had made a name for himself. In all Tehran, from Revolution Street to every part of the city, it was known that there was one doctor with principles, and that was Dr. Fattah.

Not many knew that fifteen years earlier he had been an orderly, but now: well, he ran his own clinic, a charity with ten or twelve young doctors at his beck and call. With medical colleges opening in every corner of the country, a constant stream of graduates entered the job market, making doctors as common as cow dung, and Fattah opened his clinic to any young doctor who came along. They wouldn't ask for a high salary, something of the order of what a plumber or an electrician would make. He liked to see a bunch of doctors working under him. He was thrilled when they bowed and scraped before him. Of course, he would guide them in the practice of medicine, having been around the block a few more times than they had. When he saw them *Doctor, Doctoring*, running after him begging for financial help or leave, every part of his body would fill with pleasure. At such times he would grow smug and stare at them arrogantly until the last vestiges of their pride and self-confidence were crushed. Then, like any

super-important person with a child blocking his path, he would wave his arms, and, with a forced smile, say nonchalantly, 'You again? What is it this time, my friend?'

Trembling with fear, the young doctor would say, 'If you'd be so kind . . . I'd like several days' leave.'

In the intervening silence, Fattah would scowl, reducing the young doctor's resolve to putty.

'You've just come back from leave!'

The young doctor would hasten to say, 'No, Doctor, that was three, four months back!'

'Can't it wait until next week?'

'No, Doctor, my mother back in the village is ill. There's nobody to give her her injections.'

'How many days?'

'Five.'

'It can't be more than three; bring me the slip and I'll sign it.'

While doing these favors Fattah seemed to crow like a rooster, and he would scratch his double chin. Then he would turn his head slightly in the young doctor's direction.

The young doctor would shift his feet, getting ready to try and convince Fattah to grant him the five days, but Fattah would cut him off, saying, 'Quickly now, my friend, I've got work to do!'

Then he would stare unfeelingly at the young man, waiting for him to reply. These stares had a petrifying effect; they were the stuff of terror.

Sometimes they would ask him for an advance, 'Twenty thousand tumans?'

Fattah would grimace and say, 'Money doesn't grow on trees, son . . . Ten thousand's enough for you! Go and write

out the slip and I'll sign it. Run along now, I've got work to do!'

He always had work to do. He was always dragging a black leather briefcase with him, which, naturally, was filled with super-important documents. Barrel-chested, with a short neck, he would march around smartly with long strides, and, naturally, to reduce the intensity of his insufferable self-regard, a kindly smile would play across his lips. But this only served to inflate his conceit, which, of course, was something he was aware of.

Fattah closed the door to his office behind him and went to a washbasin. He was washing his hands when someone knocked on the door.

'Who's there?'

It was Mehri; Fattah told her to come in. She opened the door and entered, closing the door behind her. She stood there with her face clenched in her chador and her chin down. 'Sit,' said the doctor.

Mehri sat. Fattah turned off the faucet and took a filthy, threadbare towel from the metal prong on the wall and, as he dried his hands, went behind his desk and sat down. Then he said, 'Well?'

He smiled and stared at her, wide-eyed. Mehri quickly pulled the envelope with the money from her chador.

Fattah glanced at the envelope and then at Mehri. 'Well?' he said again.

Mehri put the envelope on the desk before Fattah and then slid it forward. Fattah tossed the towel on the desk, picked up the envelope, and, without thinking, weighed it in his hand.

‘How much?’ he asked.

Mehri looked down at the floor and mumbled, ‘A hundred and fifty.’

Fattah pursed his lips. He put the envelope on the desk and slid it back toward Mehri.

‘What did I say? That won’t do!’

Mehri was at a loss and said, ‘Doctor, I beg you! We’re living hand to mouth!’

Fattah looked at the ceiling, swiveled in his chair, and said, ‘Here we go again!’

Then, leaning forward on the desk, he said, ‘Dear lady, why can’t you understand plain language?’

‘But . . .’

‘Try to see what I’m saying! Because you begged and pleaded so much, I agreed to the price; otherwise I wouldn’t touch it for less than three hundred.’

‘Then give me a couple of days to get the rest,’ the woman said, on the verge of tears.

Fattah put the envelope in his desk drawer and said, ‘I’ll give you till the end of the week.’

The woman got up. She bent her head humbly and said, ‘God preserve you!’

Fattah made a gesture of dismissal with his hand and said, ‘She’s not to move for a week. I mean it: absolute rest!’

The woman said, ‘God bless you!’

She was still in the doorway when Fattah said, ‘I told her to rest for twenty minutes. Then you can take her home.’ He added, ‘Leave by that door!’

The woman hesitated and looked at him, puzzled. Fattah said, ‘The nurse will show you where, ma’am.’

It was like any other fall in Tehran, when the city desperately gasped for fresh air after the long summer days of heat and suffocation. But now there was a stiff, dry breeze blowing from the east, which, in addition to breaking up the turgid mass of greasy air, would howl and whirl through the battered alleys and lanes, coating passersby in dust and debris, and nearly uprooting the bare trees found here and there along the gutters. The wind would stop just before the trees broke, but then it would gather strength again, gradually robbing everyone of all patience.

Across from where Fattah parked his car, the house was shrouded in black cloth. Low murmuring and the sounds of mourning came from the wide-open door. Over the doorway was a banner with big letters extending congratulations and condolences to the family and relatives of a war martyr. Fattah stopped for a moment, watching people come and go. All of a sudden they turned on the lights in a portable shrine and everyone sent up prayers to heaven. Fattah came closer. There were two pictures hanging on a mirrored column: one was a framed picture of a haggard old man and the other of a youth, jubilant and victorious; but the two of them looked exceptionally alike. Was it two people who had died? Were they father and son? Fattah read what it said under the pictures. No, only one person had died. All of thirty-five years of age, one soldier, victim of a chemical attack. Two pictures: one taken at the start of the war, the other at the end.

Fattah placed his black leather case in the backseat and sat behind the wheel. Then he spotted them in the thick cloud of dust stirred up by the wind. They were walking away. The girl was staggering as the other two women clad in black

supported her under her arms and walked with her step by step. They paused occasionally, probably to allow the injured girl to catch her breath, and again . . .

With a crooked smile Fattah started the car, put it in gear, and drove. He wasn't going very fast, and, as he watched them, he got an idea. When he reached them, he braked to a near halt and honked the horn.

Mehri bent down. Fattah said, 'You should have called a cab! That way . . .' Then he said, 'Get in and I'll give you a lift.'

They turned slightly toward the car; her pale profile was like a painting.

Mehri said, 'That would be too much trouble for you, Doctor. It's not far to our house.'

Fattah said impatiently, 'Get in.'

The women obeyed. Mehri got in first, followed by the girl. Batul closed the door and said, 'May God reward you!'

The car took off and the women settled into their seats.

He looked at the girl's face with her long lashes and sunken cheeks framed in the rearview mirror. *Who did she look like, this one? Oh, God!*

Fattah said, 'Where's your house?'

'After the crossroads, the second alley, but on the other side of the street,' said Mehri.

Fattah laughed, 'So, we're like neighbors!'

Then the girl raised her eyelids to see the possessor of the two eyes fixed on her so brazenly in the mirror. A passage from a book she had snuck home came to mind: *The man undressed the woman with his eyes.*

Fattah's heart sank in fear after he realized why he was anxious. Only one individual had those eyes, the same person

who had been Fattah's love all those years, yet whom he had never possessed. *But I had already forgotten her.*

As soon as he said this to himself, the memory that had turned his youth into a perpetual burning opened like an old wound, and suddenly he realized the futility of it.

The narrow street was filled with exhaust fumes, the screams of children, car horns, and the clamor of people. Cars were moving in no particular order, scattered on the street like a regiment of escaping soldiers. No one paid any attention to the lines painted on the sidewalk or the tilting street signs, uselessly installed along the curb.

Cars would try to pass one another on all sides, motorcycles veered this way coming and the other way going, and all at once there was a car coming on Fattah's right trying to make a U-turn in front of him. Taken by surprise, Fattah slammed on the brakes, sending the women flying on the backseat. Fattah let out a stifled curse followed by a *Lord forgive me*; then he smiled in the rearview mirror at the women.

This was driving etiquette in the city: the sudden braking; the obscenity launched from the driver's window; and the response, just as obscene, albeit not returned with full force. It made little difference in the pandemonium caused by the pedestrians, who had been driven onto the street from the sidewalks—which belonged to the peddlers, with their cloths spread on the ground, and their customers.

Fattah looked again, and again those same eyes, at once modest and innocent, now suddenly agitated and heated, sent a thrill through his entire body. He scratched his chest vigorously, arousing himself, getting high.

Shahrzad suddenly sensed she had seen the man before; the face was familiar! But where? The memory came from some faraway place, from a time before she was born.

Mehri said, 'You can stop here, if it's not too much trouble . . .'

Fattah slowed the car, saying, 'Let me turn around and get you to the other side!'

Mehri said, 'Don't bother; walking a few extra steps is nothing.'

Fattah smiled, ignoring the woman's polite gesture, and made a U-turn around the divider. The two women sitting on either side of the patient looked at each other, surprised by this unexpected show of kindness. Mehri said, 'We've been a bother!'

Then, along with Batul, she nodded, affirming what she had said.

Fattah now saw her profile. The girl was looking out of the window, and it seemed like the warm breath coming from her lips was spreading through the closed air in the car. 'At the beginning of the alley, if that's okay with you,' said Mehri.

Fattah slowed almost to a halt and looked down the alley. 'I'm taking you right to your doorstep!' he declared.

Mehri said, 'No, I beg you, for God's sake!'

But he had turned around. Then he said, 'You mean it's impossible for a person to have a cup of tea at your house?'

Fattah laughed, relieving the tension. The women allowed themselves to laugh, and Mehri said, 'Anytime, Doctor!'

Then she looked at Batul out of the corner of her eye. The ambivalence in her expression didn't last a moment; the muscles in her jaw stiffened and, not knowing what all this

meant, she turned away. Mehri all at once swallowed her smile.

‘Right here, if it’s no trouble. We’re here!’

Fattah pulled over and stopped. As the women moved to get out, Fattah felt the warmth of the girl’s breath on his neck and earlobes, and suddenly he felt himself getting excited. He closed his eyes.

‘Thank you, Doctor!’

The voice had a silvery echo. Fattah opened his eyes and bent his head; the warm waves of its colorful, liquid aura receded into the distance.

Just before Mehri closed the door, Fattah said, ‘You don’t need to bring me the rest!’

Fattah said it in a low voice, as if he was speaking to them from some other world.

Mehri gave him a confused look. Without turning around, Fattah raised his eyebrows and said, ‘The rest of the money, I’m talking about!’

He said it so sincerely and with such kindness, you’d think he wasn’t aware of his own unprecedented generosity. He put the car in gear. Her hand still on the handle of the open door, and still dazed, Mehri said, ‘But . . .’

Fattah’s eyes sparkled. Then a moment later he bent his head and looked through the windshield at the girl. She was frowning sweetly as her mother kept her eyes on her. A sudden and pleasant arousal once again coursed through Fattah’s veins. Then he said, ‘I’m off!’

He looked at Mehri, waiting for her to close the door.

Mehri said, ‘This is not right; the least we can do is give you that cup of tea.’

Fattah said, 'Fine. Later! I'll take a rain check. There's plenty of time.'

He didn't wait; turning the wheel, he made a U-turn. Peering from the cracks in their doors and from behind their windows, many of the neighbors saw that a new, foreign car had let Mehri and Shahrzad out at their doorstep. Then they craned their necks to watch until the last moment when the back window of the car, which was filled with the dark reflections of walls and people, moved off into the distance. What was this new car doing in the narrow alley?

His eyes still sparkling, and with that same crooked smile on his lips, Fattah, before turning into the street, looked in the mirror as the three women passed outside the rusted metal gate of their ramshackle home and watched him disappear. Finally, they turned around and entered their home.

Then the gate closed.