



The Gowkaran Tree in the Middle of Our Kitchen

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Translated by from Farsi (translator has chosen to remain anonymous)

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Contributor Bios

Shokoofeh Azar moved to Australia as a political refugee in 2011. She is the author of essays, articles, and children's books, and is the first Iranian woman to hitchhike the entire length of the Silk Road. *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree*, originally written in Farsi, was shortlisted for Australia's Stella Prize for Fiction and was her first novel to be translated into English.

Excerpt

Chapter One

As you know, I'm not a poet or a writer. I write simply and give everything away right at the beginning, but perhaps it's your fate not to be able to stop reading me, you who will inherit the sacred fire and the secrets of this great dynasty and this immense mansion, the white notebook of my memoirs with its two hundred pages is but one of the 1,763 dusty notebooks of memoirs sitting in the rusty iron trunk in the corner of the attic you have chosen to read. You certainly know by now that I am obsessed with the idea that everything in this world begins in ambiguity and that nothing in this world has a definite beginning. In the same way, no question in this world has a definite answer. Everything depends on everything. For instance, it would be naive of me to think that it all started that day when I saw him in the mansion courtyard. No! How do we know everything didn't begin with those two notebooks on love? Or much earlier, with the smells and colors, or, for example, the taste of wild raspberries in childhood? With the things that put me in a good mood, while at the same time a cry within me summoned him, he who would be the symbol of all the pleasures, joys, and beauties of this world, without me even knowing his name. Or who knows, perhaps even from much, much earlier . . . from a previous life or lives. Whatever

the case may be, I have concluded that in life either everything begins from everything or that nothing begins from anything. And is it even possible to say with which bud, which shoot, which tree spring begins? Or autumn with which yellow leaf? Which forest? My love for him began in the same way; calmly, beginningless, vague, and the size of the blossoming of the first blossom in spring, the size of the fall of the first yellow leaf in, in silence.

When I think about our family's many and winding adventures, the situation seems similar; sometimes it seems to me that everything started with the revolution and my uncle's assassination and my aunt's execution, yet when I think about it carefully, I see that's not the case! It's as if everything started when I met the twelfth prophet in my dream, or then again, maybe not! Perhaps it would be correct if I thought everything started with the tree; when the tree appeared, twelve of us emerged from the forest and the palace, and then the temple was discovered, and Leyla disappeared and the revolution happened and war came and Mehrab was lost. It's as if everything began with the tree. When the tree appeared, I fell in love and Eblis¹ descended upon me, he left and I went off to war. It's as if everything started with the tree; when the tree appeared, the revolution happened, and we were scattered. When the tree appeared, we came face to face with our true selves, yet we could not endure. In the chaos of life, we lost much, until only the most real parts of us remained.

Perhaps then we can begin what happened, starting with the tree; on the very day of the year, Nowruz 1976, the big dining table in the middle of the kitchen, together with all its dishes of fesenjaan stew and herbed rice with fish and their accompaniments, was flung into a corner, and all of us, terrified, half stood up and stared at the vast tree that had sprung from the kitchen floor, split the chandelier that hung from the high ceiling, and thrust itself up into the sky. The cooks dropped the dishes full of food, Jamshid Khan and Khanom Joon and Auntie Malek stood open-mouthed and stupefied by the girth and height of the still-growing giant tree, and the two servants froze by the door. Once the tree had settled, it was my Only Brother who asked, "Is it the magic beanstalk?" "Isn't it Zarathustra's tree?" Khanom Joon, with her permanent tear on her left cheek, asked. Mom cautiously picked a red apple from it and then stated with confidence, "It is Eve's Tree of Knowledge." I, who had had religious studies recently at school, jumped on a chair and from the nearest branch picked a mango, something I had not seen until that day, and said, "It's the Tuba Tree." Dad examined the enormous, blessed tree's various leaves and

¹ The devil, Azāzīl, the Iblīs who is the leader of the devils according to the Quran and God and the incarnation of love according to an ancient Iranian myth.

fruits and said, “it’s the Bas-Tokhmeh Tree,”² but it was our Leyla, the smallest member of the family, who with her usual powers of intuition, as if she was already predicting the disasters that would occur in two years’ time, had the final word. “It is the Tree of the Incident,” she said.

We were still stupefied by the ever-growing giant tree when the mansion began to shake and hundreds of pairs of birds, each one a different shape and color and size, broke the windows and knocked down the doors, and, singing, perched on the branches of the tree, their noise turning our mansion into a wild woodland orchestra. This was not all; we saw that the branches that had broken under the birds’ assault quickly grew back and were restored to their original shape. Our breath was trapped in our chests until Dad finally came to his senses and, pensively straightening the glasses that were askew on his face, inspected the leaves on the tree, not one of which resembled any of the others, before correcting his opinion: “this is both the Bas-Tokhmeh Tree and the Gowkaran Tree; it is the tree of life and eternity.”

² The tree of life. A tree from Iranian myth reckoned to heal all illnesses. The “Many-Seed’ Tree is the source of all the plants on earth; all species of plants grow from it. The Simorgh, the bird of Iranian myth, has its nest in this tree. This tree is located in the Sea of Farakhkard, the endless cosmic sea.