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THE STORY OF HOMA

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Behmanesh is a third-year law student at UCLA School of Law, where she has served as a Managing Editor for the Women's Law Journal for the past two years. She graduated from UCLA's College of Letters and Science in 2017 with a degree in Iranian Studies and a minor in Hebrew and Jewish Studies.

The following short story is in dedication to all the women who have been denied an education because of their gender.

"Come on, Homa! We're going to be late!" shouted my best friend, Leila. She was right. It was our second week of school, and I had already been late the first day. I couldn't risk a bad reputation with my teacher by being late a second time.

Salaam,¹ my name is Homa. The year is 1942, and I am nine years old. My family and I live in a small Persian Jewish neighborhood in Tehran, Iran. We're not rich, but we're also not poor. I guess we're somewhere in the middle. I have four older brothers and two littler sisters – Pari, who is two, and Maryam, who is one.

I love many things about my town, but what I love most is school – or *madreseh*.² Since the age of four, I've been enrolled in the local Jewish school for children. The best part of my week is getting to see my beloved teacher, Miss Simha, and reading the new books she assigns to us. I can't wait until next year, when I finally get to read the classics, like Saadi Shirazi's *Golestan*, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, and the quatrains of Omar Khayam.

"Hurry, Homa!" called Leila once more. I quickly gather the snack foods *maman*³ has prepared for me, put them in my knapsack, slip on my shoes, and head out the door with Leila. She and I are nextdoor neighbors and we've been the best of friends since we were born. *Baba*⁴ once told me that our families have been friendly for decades. I hope our children stay friends, too.

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1. Persian term for "hello."
 2. Persian term for "school."
 3. Persian term for "mother."
 4. Persian term for "father."

In school, Leila and I have always been excellent students. Just a few years ago, the *Shah*⁵ opened a university in our city, the University of Tehran. I know it is a silly thought for a Jewish girl from a small town, like me, to attend, but I still dream of going there to study medicine. I want to become the best doctor in Iran and discover the cure for heart disease, which cut my grandfather's life short and has endangered *baba's* health, too.

When we arrive at school, Leila and I are elated to find that Ms. Simha is also running late, and so she doesn't realize that we arrived at least five minutes after the principal announced the start of classes. "*Sob bekheir, danesh amuzan-e aziz!*,"⁶ said Ms. Simha as she hurried into the classroom. "*Sob bekheir, Khanom Mo'alem!*,"⁷ cheered my classmates. "Today, we are going to learn about how the Pahlavi dynasty was founded," said Ms. Simha. "History is an extremely important subject, *batche-ha*."⁸ It is through learning the past that we set ourselves up for a more well-prepared future."

Even though we're only nine years old, Ms. Simha makes hard subjects like the Constitutional Revolution⁹ and the coup d'état of Esfand¹⁰ easy for us to understand. She has never doubted our ability to understand difficult concepts, and she has always been supportive of our youthful aspirations. When I shared with her my dream of being a doctor, she said she had no doubt that I could achieve it. I beamed with pride, knowing that a teacher I loved so dearly had such faith in me.

After finishing the lesson about the coup d'état, Ms. Simha sends us home for lunch. In Iran, schoolchildren don't usually stay at school for lunchtime. We go home for lunch and then return to school at about 1:30 in the afternoon. When I arrive home, I find *maman* in the kitchen, pouring *abgoosht*¹¹ for my father, brothers, and me. Pari is still in her picky-eating phase, and so she sticks

5. Persian term for "king," referring to the Iranian monarch at the time, Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944).

6. Persian for "Good morning, lovely students."

7. Persian for "Good morning, instructor."

8. Persian term for "children."

9. The Constitutional Revolution was a political movement in Iran that lasted from 1905 to 1911. During the revolution, the Iranian masses protested the lack of formal, elected representation and successfully lobbied for the development of a national constitution and an elected parliament.

10. The coup d'état involved a series of events, beginning in 1921, which ultimately led to the creation of the Pahlavi dynasty.

11. *Abgoosht* is a popular Iranian soup containing meat, potatoes, and beans. The solid foods in the soup are traditionally also mashed together and eaten with bread and vegetables.

to her plate of plain rice, while Maryam eats her mashed-up meat and carrots.

After lunch, my mother prepares a cup of *chai nabaat*¹² for me before I take my usual brief nap. When I wake up, I see that it's 2:30 pm. 2:30 pm! I'm late for school again! I panic. I jump from my bed, slip on my shoes, and cry to my *maman*, "Why did you forget to wake me up for school? Ms. Simha must be worried about me!"

"Homa *jaan*,¹³ don't be concerned. Your father went to school while you were asleep to talk to Ms. Simha," *maman* says. I feel a sense of relief. My father must have let Ms. Simha know that I seemed extra tired today, and so he was going to let me sleep in. While Ms. Simha usually condemns tardiness, she would surely excuse it if *baba* allowed it. "Tell *baba* 'thank you' for talking to Ms. Simha. See you after class!" I shout as I leave the house.

"Homa, wait! There is no more school for you," *maman* calls out to me. "Did class end early today?" I ask. That seems strange, since Ms. Simha had made it seem as though we had a long day of learning ahead of us. "I don't know if class ended early, but you're not going to school anymore," *maman* said.

"Am I changing schools? But I like my school and the friends I have now!" I plead. "No, Homa *jaan*, you are not going to school at all. This morning, your *baba* went to go speak with your uncle, Rostam. With your brothers in school and your father at work, they decided we can use your help taking care of the home and raising Pari and Maryam," *maman* explains as she returns inside. She heads toward the stove to begin preparing dinner.

As I realize what *maman* is *actually* saying, tears well up in my eyes and my lips tremble. "Please, don't make me leave school. It is the only thing in this world that makes me happy. If I don't go to school, I will never go to college or be a doctor," I cry. "*Azizam*,¹⁴ you have learned enough. I was sad, too, when my parents removed me from school as a little girl. But just imagine how important it is for your sisters and brothers to be well taken care of. You will learn how meaningful it is to nurture your family," *maman* says.

At this moment, I feel as though my heart breaks in two. I consider running off to school, but I know *baba* will bring me back home. If I refuse to return home, there will be consequences too terrifying for a child like myself. I realize that my fate has

12. Persian for "sweet tea."

13. Persian term for "life," "breath," or "spirit." It is generally used to refer to loved ones.

14. Persian for "my sweet one."

already been decided. Feeling defeated, I drag myself to my room and lay on my bed.

That night, my pillow is soaked with the tears that seemed never to stop. My dream was dead. No more races to school with Leila. No more lessons from the wise and beautiful Ms. Simha. No more lunch breaks. And, worst of all, no more looking forward to high school, or university, for that matter. No more chasing of dreams.

The next day, *maman* wakes me up with news that she deems exciting. She has enrolled me in sewing classes taught by Mahin *khanom*,¹⁵ a local seamstress who apprentices young girls. As I set off for my first day of lessons, I stare at the small pad of fabric and needles my mother has “gifted” me. “This is the life they have chosen for you, Homa,” I think to myself. “This is the life that *they* chose *for you*.” And with that thought in mind, I keep on walking.¹⁶

15. Persian term for “woman” or “lady,” traditionally used after a woman’s name to show respect.

16. Homa *khanom* never had the opportunity to return to school. She was married off at the age of fifteen and began having children shortly thereafter. She briefly attended night school to learn how to read and write in Persian, but that was the extent of her education. Still, Homa never forgot Ms. Simha’s final lesson: that learning from her past would help her create a better future. She resolved to see all of her children graduate from university – regardless of their sex. Most of her children attended college in the United States, but two of her daughters fulfilled her dream of attending the University of Tehran, and one of them pursued a degree in medicine.

It is important to re-emphasize that Homa was one of many Iranian women denied an education based on sex and sex stereotyping. To learn more about the experiences of Iranian Jewish women throughout the generations, read *From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture* by Saba Soomekh, Ph.D.