

At his spot by an escalator in Madison Square Garden – potential Tests would pass there on their way to Penn Station, the subway, or the lower-level arcade all day – Kade stood behind the small folding table he’d bought at Staples for the occasion. Brushing aside the temporary embarrassment of looking like an unlicensed street vendor and trying for once to be organized, he had neatly arranged twelve bracelets on the table to his left, and on the right a flat-screen touchpad to log the names and GPS locations of the Hosts and to monitor bracelet charge and activity.

Folded into neat squares, the black headscarves were piled in an open cardboard box beneath the table. Kade had attached an electric blue cord to the messenger bag containing the bracelets and secured it to his left ankle with a bike lock.

Amir glanced along the street running parallel to the north entrance of Tehran’s bazaar. It was a busy road, and the city had installed barriers so that pedestrians couldn’t dart out into traffic – common practice just about everywhere in Iran. Here, pedestrians had to use the underpass to get to the other side of the street, unless they wanted to walk a few blocks out of their way to cross at the traffic light. Amir scanned the scene. Everything was going to happen simultaneously, and he wanted to get into position ahead of time. Tehrani naps lasted from just after lunch until about 4:00 p.m. By 4:30 most retail workers were heading back to open their shops, and around 5:00, places started to reopen their doors for business. Like the Mexican siesta, this sleep during the hottest part of the day was also practiced in the winter out of habit, although over the last few years, as the economy had worsened, naps had become more of a luxury. Amir noted that the bazaar was not as chaotic as usual. Saturdays being regular workdays in Iran, he assumed it was slow this afternoon because of the holidays.

On the ground he had laid out a woven cloth like those used by the local street vendors to display their wares, thinking he might want to sit on it when he wasn’t dealing with the Tests. Maybe he’d even have a chance to come up with a way to ask out Estella. As he waited for the satellite call to connect, he turned on the touchpad to check that it was charged and online.

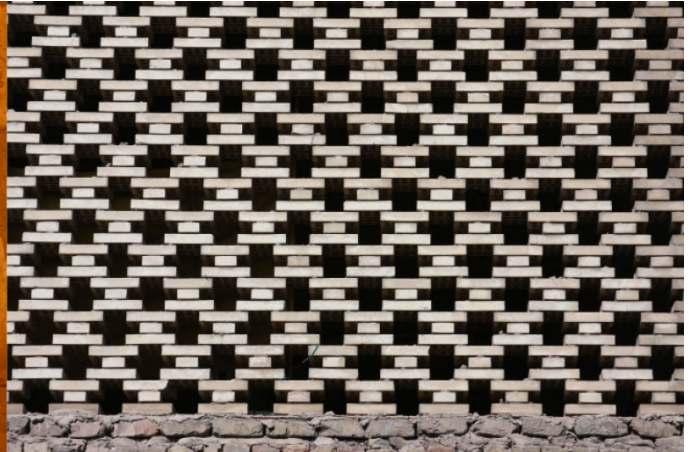
Kade’s voice crackled in his ear, broken up with static and sounding remote, as if the signal had to cross a space greater than the physical distance between the US and Iran.

“Kade?”

“It’s me. Are you in position?” Kade yelled.

“Ready to start, how about you?”

“I’m set up in the area to the right of the



escalator near MSG. I've been here for an hour already, what took you so ...” His voice faded.

“Kade? Maybe we should hang up. The orbit is worse than I thought. I wish we could have gone with LEO.” Amir waited for his friend’s response, but there was only feedback on the line. He enunciated into the bristling static: “I’m starting.”

Dasht-e Lut: Fire Girl

Hot sensation. Heat on your face. You squint and see dust swirling around. The ground goes up, the sky down. Hell as orange as Heaven. Burnt cadmium grains meet waves of shifting dunes. All hot. All iron-oxide orange.

You pull off your jacket and throw it down. You rip open your shirt. Your skin burns more. You try to retrieve your jacket but it has melted into the clumps of rock. Red fingers, red bones. Grasp your shirt to close it again. The heat decreases. The sand grains are now barred from hitting your chest, but they do not stop there. They move towards your head, getting stuck in your nose, your mouth, your eyes.

Visibility is not good. It’s best not to look ahead into the distance. As far as you can see, nothing but orange dust. Look down or look low. You try to move your feet and become aware of the soles burning, emitting a noisome toasted wheat odor. The heat comes faster. Swift here. All is swift.

Noise of the storm – the roar of an overworked furnace, then hissing gusts of wind. Orange-out. Suffocating sky. Sauna stench one second, campfire smoke the next. All hot. Flame-hued. Rippling sand dunes like rows of weather-shifted trim. Your teeth hurt. You hadn’t realized there is a place on earth that looks like the craters of Mars. Abiotic. Incalescence, you think it cruel on your already charred body. Crueler still the speed.

You forgot about Iran before you arrived. Fall to the ground. One moment you think, *What kind of person am I?* The next, you have forgotten who you are.

The Jinn’s blue light pierces through the color with a force that only true complementaries can muster. Her light is cool blue, but hot to the touch. Jinns are smokeless fire.

A person’s body can call a Jinn. You did not know you had called her.

She makes no mistakes, punctures the orange in one straight shot. Jinn appears before you, first as glowing absence defined by orange dust, then visible in quasi-human form.

You ask, “Where are we?”

“Hottest place on earth.”

She taps the center of your back, cracking the bones in your body in one smooth motion. Next, she deactivates the constraints of the time

and space in which you move.

Blue squaring around you, as if looking out from inside a bottle of Bombay Sapphire. You close your eyes. When they reopen, you are on the back of Jinn. The body before you is solid. You hold tight.

Jinn shoots up like a rocket, kicking up sand mounds and stirring up the air. Elements collide – aggravated, they turn to deeper hues while pluming below you. The heat is still there, digging into your flesh, but now accelerated in the speed of its destruction.

The Jinn’s burst of speed creates an arc in the sky, curve of the Gateway Arch. You and Jinn touch down six hundred leinters from where you were, although in your state you are unable to gauge distance. As soon as Jinn hits ground, she springs up again. Over and over Jinn jumps with you clinging to her back. So fast is Jinn that her bounds leave trails of blue afterglow, like a row of arched plates on a dinosaur’s back. Jump-curling out of the waves of heat. At each touchdown, the heat decreases. Trail after trail out of the desert.

Jinn has been jumping for over a jarct but you can’t tell exactly how long. Below, you can see the plateau – flat, hardened soil full of cracks. Here, Jinn’s touchdowns hit the ground harder than they did in the dunes.

Over time, the landscape changes again, from desert to rolling mountains. Air becomes breathable again. The heat, while still scorching, is bearable.

The speed of the jumps has increased. You close your eyes.

The wind feels cooler, soothing the skin like aloe vera. No longer able to hold on, your arms fall to your sides, yet something keeps you attached to Jinn.

Jinn slows down near Sabalan, and you open your eyes. A valley between the snow-covered mountains. Further along, umber-toned formations jut from the ground, winding, gracefully weaving towards the sky, their curved, rocky peaks stationary yet in apparent motion. Hundreds upon hundreds of cone-shaped rock structures emerging from the earth, all over the incline of the hill, each rock two or three stories high and, she says, ten leinters wide at the base.

Suddenly, it becomes clear to you – the tinge and indentations of the rocks: honeycomb. *Land of the Beehive.*

You soon make out that the rocks are dwellings, with doors and windows carved out of the stone, paths and wooden rafters weaving around. Jinn’s landing is precise: a small clearing between two abodes. The larger of the two has smoke coming through a cutout chimney.

A quick, inexplicable motion, and you are lying on the ground. The surface of the path has

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been cleared, although snow remains at the edges. You are so numb that what must be frigid ground doesn't make you cringe, although you are conscious enough to realize that your body can't withstand any amount of freeze for long – especially after being burned by the desert.

“Brought you to an algid place.” Jinn does not seem winded after the journey.

“I would have died without your help in the desert.”

“True, humans can't survive in Dasht-e Lut, but I have done nothing for you ... although I can, before I leave you with the hive.” Jinn helps you sit up. “I can tell you what I see, if you'd like.”

“What are my injuries?”

“Not that kind of seeing. You need to warm up and drink the mineral water, and you will survive.”

She pauses to look up the paths leading to the higher dwellings, then leans down next to your ear. “What I see ...” She surveys the area again. “You will lose your faith.” After saying it, she shakes your shoulders in rounded motions, and bones crack as your body realigns.

“Not sure what you mean. Can you explain?” It's a lot of work getting the words out.

She stands, takes a deep breath, and blows blue toward the door of the closest house.

What are you? You shiver.

The wooden door and metal window on the second floor shake as if they are being blown out by a hurricane. She nods in your direction, then leaps up so fast you can't make out an afterglow.

Slowly, the door opens.

Ocean Drive: Vice City

He sipped his Bloody Mary from the outside café overlooking Ocean Drive, having picked the waitress's suggestion over his Host's because, as Dennis Hopper said, “Heineken, fuck that shit!” Palms, clear sky, and the beach right across the street: a replica of the layout in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. He'd also seen the location in TV shows based in the city – *Dexter* was his favorite.

Two women in bikinis passed him on the Miami Beach sidewalk, their skin glimmering in the sun, towels in their totes and iPods in their hands, just like the movie stars he had jerked off to on Oil Nationalization Day. He had watched three films that day, DVDs bought on the black market – aka his shady friend Reza who had been born the same year as him and lived down the street. Reza, who claimed he was a “writer,” had quit university to lounge around his bedroom all day ripping DVDs for customers. Since nearly all Western films are banned in Iran, it was a profitable business, and the ripper was able to travel to the United Arab Emirates and Malaysia for his product.

He had watched the films on his desktop

alone in his room. Oil Nationalization Day was notable because he had jerked off not once but three times. The films were full of sex. It happened like that: his friend would get films in batches. Thirty films with titles that started with N, or all the big Hollywood films from 2001, or every film made by a certain director. Sometimes it felt like he became a connoisseur of a genre whether he wanted to or not, like the time Reza sold him all of the Pink Panther movies at once and he watched them all in one day, because there was nothing else to do.

The girls were now way down the sidewalk, his eyes still locked on their swaying derrieres, but as they receded into the distance, even though there was no aliasing, he realized that what he was experiencing there on the street felt less real than it had at home in Iran. Maybe because games scrap the whole landscape except for the most essential components – not the details, but those kinds of things the brain doesn't overlook, those that inscribe the character of the environment in the mind. Color, the outlines of buildings, the textures of facades, the geometry of roads, and the invisible lines that bring skyline, beach, asphalt, palms, buildings, and passersby together without you even consciously noticing them. You could drive through an actual city and never notice how the place looks and feels at a specific turn or junction, but in video games you never miss it, and it sticks in the mind forever.

He remembered how, back home, Esmail had been offline for a few months. When he had checked up on his friend, he said he had been on vacation.

He asked Esmail where he'd gone.

“Miami,” was the response, which sounded implausible given Esmail's situation, so he had asked again. Eventually his friend admitted, “We've been playing *Vice City* for three months straight.”

Americans have their cruises, Iranians their virtual vacations.

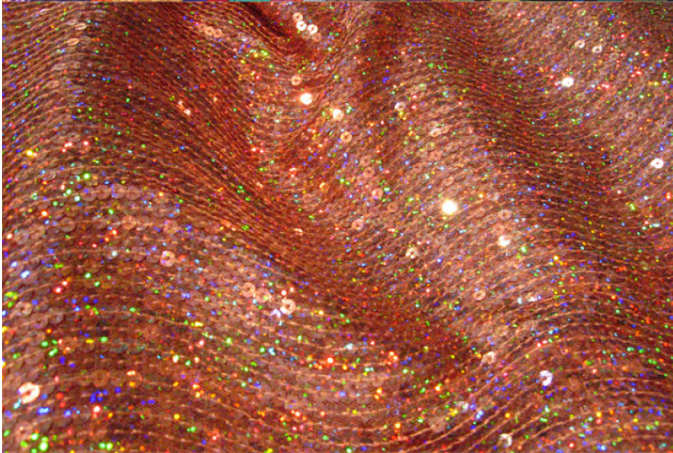
Ghamsar: Rose Essence

Suddenly I find myself in another room, a good deal larger. A kitchen, but there are no stoves. A few women and men busy working. Along the wall a series of plastic tanks six foot wide, each placed under a faucet protruding from the wall, from which small drips seep into the containers. A man stirs one of the tanks with a wooden stick that's as long as he is tall. Scent of Glade Jubilant Rose. They are standing around a table mixing something in industrial-sized bowls.

“I think I'm lost,” I say.

“Took a wrong turn?” The man stirs faster.

“Yes, sorry to interrupt. Can you tell me the way back to the tea house?”



“Of course. Have a seat.” He points to an empty wooden stool next to the table. “Can you do us a favor before you go?”

“I can do that.”

“Try our *Faloodeh* before we serve it to the customers?”

“Sure. What is it I’ll be trying?”

He tells me it’s like a Persian kind of sorbet, but it sounds better than it looks. While they scoop a heap of the white slush into my bowl, he adds that the base consists of frozen starch noodles. They add rose water from the liter-size bottle sitting on the table. The tanks along the wall are filled with rose essence, he says, which is being extracted from large piles of rose petals outside. He says the essence has been fermenting for months.

I taste the sorbet. Cold shock as the freeze drips down my throat. I wait to let the palate respond.

Instead, illumination! Before me, I see a Persian Miniature like the one my uncle brought back from the Orient years ago ... although this is no dusty painting from centuries past. No, this is something more convoluted, bristling and teeming with life. I swallow another spoonful. The Miniature fills out in front of me. There is no visual space that is not covered with elaborate patterning, vibrant figures in wild dress, animals, plants. I can no longer call it a Miniature: it is life-size. I take another spoonful. Cold churning in my stomach, the scene moving before my eyes, alive.

Strangely, the image preserves its flatness as life builds around the core of the main scenes, radiating from the center. Before my eyes, figures in turbans and robes doing all sorts of things I cannot fully grasp. Things happening. The more I eat, the more I see.

In the center I see a man in a long-sleeved red smock that covers his whole body. He is wearing knee-high leather boots. I know because he leans back on a pillow and extends his booted leg towards a woman. She is fully clothed and looks away from him while caressing the leather. Meanwhile, he looks in the opposite direction, grabbing the arm of another woman and pulling her towards the party. They all lounge beneath a wall painted baby blue with gold ornamental patterns. The boot-caressing woman glances down to a lanky man walking near a bush bursting with rust-colored flowers. On both of his shoulders he carries covered food platters, the curves of the covers rubbing against his beard. Above him, a cleric in a flowing gown with a turban and an ancient white beard reads from a scroll in his hand, gradually unfurling it as he speaks.

Below him to the left, a beautiful pink tent with Arabic lettering scrawled on the side is held

up by an orange pole. The flaps open just enough for me to see a man in a brown shirt with a royal-blue apron stirring a pot on the ground, smaller than the tanks of rose essence. Two women are with him, one in cherry red, the other in orange. Orange lady is holding a piece of meat on a stick from which she takes dainty bites. Cherry lady cradles a long loaf of bread, singing to it. Outside the tent, rocks line the ground and petite flowers push up from the yellowish dirt. Nearby, a horse drinks from silver water. Another blue horse loiters behind the pink tent, with his friend, the camel. A tiny man saddles the camel and mounts it; he wears a green suit with red sleeves, and has a bluish-white beard and pointed hat. Off he goes, seated in a saddle of the same blue as the cook’s apron.

As he rides away, the tip of his hat points toward an elderly woman carrying an oversized marbled portfolio with the help of a man who pulls as she pushes. He becomes lost behind the striped black-and-white pattern that separates the vignettes.

Further above: a bedroom, a seduction scene. She’s wearing a silk robe that looks more Chinese than Persian. He glances up at her in admiration. Another woman’s torso – a torso, nothing else – is slatted sideways, hanging between the side of the roof, a red-white-blue patterned rectangle, and the corner of a Persian rug which is guarded by its owner from above.

Further from the center, the stories become less straightforward. Less straightforward! Two women with head coverings share a mysterious round item, passing it back and forth. A man in blue carries firewood on his back, held there with strings. He must have come down from the high rocks, past the orange tree. A musician tries to sell a silver container with stones embedded on the top to a man with a rearing horse. Flying through the scene, a chunky albino demon with horns waves a staff in its hand. A couple of men barter over a bulbous copper vessel. The buyer wears a small purse embellished with gold embroidery hanging from a chain. A zoned-out man stands holding a long pipe that touches the ground – the way he is holding it, at first it looks like a golf club.

Birds hide in trees holding private conferences. A see-through square, next to the long rectangle filled with a navy-blue floral pattern, next to a bigger see-through rectangle ... all taking up visual space at the edge of the story. Will they be populated sometime in the future? I wait, nothing changes. I start to become overwhelmed by the effort of keeping track of the scene, all the details. Rose ice going to my head. A shifty camel looking east, and opposite, another one, just as shifty, looking west.

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Madison: Easter Sunday

Rouzbeh Rabiee attempted to work out how many hours he had been in the US. He had become increasingly troubled at the strike of each hour. Confused by the Tehran time still showing on his wristwatch, he resorted to counting on his fingers, counting off not ten but twelve hours since he had felt Iran's sun on his face. He was pretty sure it had been twelve hours.

Rouzbeh could tell that the Millers were just as keen for him to leave as he was to get back home. Calls made from the Miller's home in Wisconsin were not going through. No one could make sense of the strange noise at the other end of the line.

Rouzbeh's thoughts brightened for a minute as he sat on the single bed in the extra bedroom. What if the experiment had not worked as it had been described? He was already well over the three-hour time frame. From his childhood, he remembered the unauthorized translation of the Narnia books, with its badly photocopied illustrations, and wondered whether, when he finally made it back to Iran, it would be as if no time had passed, and they wouldn't even have realized he had been gone. He nervously ran his hand over the mustard-colored bedspread. He was, he thought, quite lucky that the Millers had an extra room for him to stay in overnight, although Rouzbeh wasn't looking forward to being dragged along to "church" tomorrow. Maybe he wouldn't still be here in the morning. He got up from the bed and glanced out at the snow-blanketed backyard, before pulling the canvas curtains closed.

He walked over to the dresser, where Beverly had placed a number of toiletries, a set of forest-green towels and an unused T-shirt of Paul's to sleep in. She had apologized for the "loudness" of the shirt, which was bright red, and featured a black-and-white cartoon animal wearing a red sweater with a big letter "W" on it. The shirt had been a holiday gift from Paul's employer, she had said, and it was all they had that was new. Rouzbeh looked through the selections, picking up the boxes and bottles and reviewing the brands. Unlike older generations of men in Iran who were for the most part uninterested in brands or fashion, Rouzbeh, although in his thirties, was more closely aligned with the younger generations of boys who enjoyed consumer products, especially those from the West. He recognized all of the brands: Crest toothpaste, Colgate toothbrush (medium), Gillette Series gel and disposable shaver, Axe deodorant, Aveda shampoo and conditioner. Rouzbeh carefully balanced the pile as he opened the door and tiptoed down the hall toward the bathroom Beverly had pointed out for

him to use.

The overly long Easter service gave Rouzbeh all the more reason to watch the clock, and he could hardly contain his impatience. Once the interminable sermon was over, the congregation joined the choir in a number of hymns while the ushers began to distribute green velvet pouches with wooden handles protruding from all sides. The pouches were passed from pew to pew, and each family put in either a white envelope or money as they went by, the handles swinging, the pouches turning in perpetual motion. As a pouch reached the Millers, Paul placed his white envelope inside. Rouzbeh grabbed a wooden handle with one hand and placed a few rial notes in before handing it off to the woman on his right. As he completed the transaction, he thought to himself mordantly: here, they are outright asking for money, and hence the patrons are provided with a seat. In the mosque, we're not asked for this kind of religious taxation, and that's why we have to sit on the floor.

The congregation read the Lord's Prayer, which was immediately followed by the Communion with Our Risen Lord. The pastor declaimed, "Welcome to the Lord's Table! Please proceed to communion at the direction of the ushers. After receiving the bread and wine, those who desire may go to the altar rail for prayer. Please return to your seat by way of the side aisles."

Slowly, during the singing of Hymns 148, 352, 144, and 145, the congregation made its way up to the front of the church. They stood in front of the pastor, who popped a white disk into each mouth, then they moved along the line to a table of miniature glasses. Each took one and drank its contents in one gulp, placing the empty glass on the next table. Like the offering pouch, it reminded Rouzbeh of an assembly line. All of the participants knew what to do, and so the happening was delivered efficiently and flawlessly.

Their pew's turn was nearing. Paul turned to Rouzbeh. "I suppose you won't want to go up. Do you mind staying here with the kids while Beverly and I go?"

"Sure I will," answered Rouzbeh with resignation.

When his parents were nearly to the pastor, Troy leaned over to Rouzbeh and whispered, "Thanks, we hate going up there."

"Someday, you'll think differently."

"I don't think so." Troy took a piece of candy from the Easter Bunny out of his pocket and started to open the wrapper, chocolate smudged around the corners of his mouth.

"You'll find your religion."

"I'll be what you are." The child looked up at the Test as he stuffed the chocolate in his mouth.

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“Muslim?”

“Yeah.”

“When you are older, you’ll think differently.”

A moment later, Rouzbeh was relieved to suddenly feel the same sickening lurches in the stomach as when he had arrived. *Goodbye Narnia*

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All images by Kristen Alvanson from the series *Photos from Iran* (2006-2009).

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