

ALIYEH ATAEI

# TEN MINUTES

*Translated from Persian by Siavash Saadlou*

**RAKHSHAN BELIEVED** no sins existed, unless a woman had committed one. That may be why her life had always progressed like a chain of dominos, invariably promising complete destruction with the fall of the first piece, after which she would have to build everything anew. Ever since childhood and into her youth, until now, at thirty-five years of age, she had always known what awaited her down the road with every first mistake, paying the price dearly and later beating herself up helplessly to get her life back in order.

She was considered beautiful in the eyes of the common man, but she believed her womanly seduction outweighed her beauty. Yet, she would feel guilty as soon as she turned on her charm. First, she would pretend she had done nothing wrong, but then she would be gripped by the cardinal sin of being a woman, seeing herself as the prime suspect in all the romantic entanglements in her life. As soon as she was arrested at her father-in-law's in Birjand, the first and most definitive thing she uttered were the words "I am innocent." But once seated inside South Khorasan's crime squad police car, Rakhshan began feeling guilty deep down.

She was a mediocre screenwriter who had kissed life in Tehran good-bye not long before her arrest and had returned to her father's hometown under the impression that working in a smaller town would be easier. She had convinced herself that she no longer had the patience to deal with TV producers and wanted to write only for the sake of her personal passion. She would invoke the kinds of reasons all failed writers cited when they quit writing, though occasionally putting her failures down to her mania, which resulted in impulsive, knee-jerk decisions.

Once the female officer closed the car door, Rakhshan looked out at her husband, who seemed nonplussed and no longer insisted on going with the cops. There was something in his face that made Rakhshan inch closer to feeling a twinge of guilt. This time around, she was carrying the worst accusation of all that can be leveled against a person: homicide. The officers slapped handcuffs on her with great haste, as

though they had apprehended an international terrorist. They made no mention of the deceased, nor did they bother to explain the difference between homicide and manslaughter. That someone would have to explain to Rakhshan the distinction between the two crossed her mind as well.

**FIRST INTERROGATION:**

(July 3, 2014, Birjand) *I do understand that you are intent on stripping me of my sanity, but since I happen to be a writer, I'm going to just cut to the chase. I had nothing to do with the murder of Behrooz Sobhani. I wasn't at the Asadiyeh sugar factory on the morning of the murder; I was there the night before. Isn't that enough? It puzzles me to know that you would be so negligent in asking an old man ten times whether he drove me back—so much so that he is all but stupefied, and now you want to claim that I stayed the night at the factory. If you take one good look at me, you'll know that I'm not the type to stay the night at some forsaken factory. I don't know what else to say. We—I mean me and my father-in-law—had returned from the factory at 10:00 p.m. and yes, I did have intercourse with my husband and then got some sleep, and I don't understand how I possibly could have committed murder the morning after. How is it that you won't take my husband's word for it? If you won't believe him, you probably suspect that he had a vested interest in the murder, or that he may have facilitated it. What about what the forensic officer had said then? How is it that you fail to understand that the forensic officer has confirmed the intercourse? That means that I was at home. Right now, you actually want me to write that I had a sexual relationship with the deceased and that I killed him afterward? This is how reliable your highway CCTV is? Really? You watch too many crime series! Here's my question to you: How did I get myself from Asadiyeh to Birjand without a car the next morning, if I stayed overnight at the factory? Based on what you're saying, I committed the murder on Friday morning, and if I did drive toward the border from Asadiyeh, the border patrol would have seen me and informed you immediately. Or maybe they did inform you about the real facts, but you'd prefer to say that somebody has killed Behrooz Sobhani, someone who is easily identifiable. And given my history with Behrooz, you'd think that I must have killed him and probably did so with the help of my husband and then, since I'm too stupid, I would leave a clump of hair next to Behrooz, so you could track me down!*

*It makes no sense for me to answer any further questions. I won't write one more word.*

**BEING A WRITER** doesn't put you at an advantage, but it could change the fate of someone who will have to chronicle their life story. Rakhshan believed she knew just what to do to elicit a response from the interrogator. She thought to herself that she had taken the upper hand, the kind of thing writers do in their stories to further confuse the reader. But she had no idea that the forensic officer might have handed in the results of potentially multiple sexual encounters to the interrogator prior to the cross-examination, and that the border patrol had already confirmed her exit on the night of the murder.

The South Khorasan border region, where Asadiyeh village is situated, is constantly monitored by CCTV cameras, but the border patrol has no idea who comes in or goes out beyond the border lines. Those same CCTV cameras had now revealed Rakhshan driving towards a side road leading to the border, with her father-in-law seated beside her all the while. In fact, Rakhshan had refused to concede that the accusations were right based on her *own* laws, and the interrogator had given away nothing, but it didn't take much doing to drive Rakhshan to the breaking point. As soon as the interrogator's female assistant shoved Rakhshan's chair, making her stomach hit the sharp edge of the table, Rakhshan realized that she hadn't been so successful in her attempt and that she had to talk because the interrogators knew a whole lot more than they had pretended to.

When they took her out of the interrogation room, she saw a girl facing the wall where the ground under her feet was wet. The girl's red tunic stuck with Rakhshan because she was still wearing the same clothes she was in when they'd arrested her—the loose-fitting shirt and roomy trousers that looked like a prison jumpsuit were clothes that belonged to her husband. While stretching her body after having sex, she had lit her cigarette, and her husband had put his own clothes on her, the two of them sharing a laugh. She had felt comfortable in the loose clothes and had no desire to spoil the time they'd spent together by getting changed. But at the detention facility, those clothes, more than anything, had made her look innocent. They were grey with black vertical stripes. It was always such instances of innocuous and incidental innocence that had come to Rakhshan's rescue. "You don't look like a murderer," a police officer whispered into her ear just then.

## SECOND INTERROGATION:

(July 4, 2014, Birjand) *At 8:00 p.m. on Wednesday night, my husband's father asked me to accompany him the day after, meaning Thursday, to Asadiyeh to visit the sugar factory where he had worked for twenty years. I knew that the factory had practically been shut down since 2010 and that this was a visit for personal purposes. Given the ample amount of information you have on me, to such an extent that even I am amazed, I am writing to you the parts that you may have no knowledge of.*

*My husband and I had found ourselves caught in the middle of some family feuds; my cousin had sarcastically remarked to me during a party that my father, "with all his bragging about family prestige, had married his only daughter off to the son of a laborer." This upset me a great deal. You need to understand, social class has always been a non-issue for me and my dad, but when I heard this remark, I got upset; I wish I'd never gotten upset and relayed what had been said to my husband. My husband's father is an extremely honorable and personable man. Again, I emphasize that I can't understand how you could accuse him of having a memory disorder. If the word "accuse" isn't what you're trying to do, I apologize for writing it. How can you claim that he didn't notice my departure from the factory or from himself?*

*My father-in-law thought that he was showing pride by giving me a tour of his workplace. I think that may have been the reason, but he may have a more explicit reason he can give you. Even though I had felt very embarrassed by my cousin's comment, I hoped that going with my father-in-law to the factory would mitigate the shamefulness of what my cousin had said. At 10:00 a.m., we left Birjand for Asadiyeh. The factory is in the middle of the village, and, as you may have noticed, it still accommodates some people in parts of its staff housing dedicated to engineers and workers. One of those workers, whose nickname was Gholamali, invited us in for tea, and then he opened the factory gates, using the keys that were on him. He was probably the guard.*

*There were some enormous machines I couldn't make head or tail of, and believe you me, I wasn't interested in the least to learn about them—it wasn't like I'd gone there for a specific purpose. This is a misunderstanding on your part. I had gone there to see the place, not because I wanted to see it, but because I wanted to make my father-in-law feel better, and as I mentioned earlier, I'd felt upset by what my cousin had said. The same gargantuan machines were on the second floor as well, but I simply walked past them. The machines were giving out a stench, which Gholamali said came from molasses—the remnants of sugar beet pulp that smelled like feces.*

*I don't mean to horn in on your business, but why would someone put a dead body in between those machines? If a corpse were to rot in there, no one would pick up the smell, right? So, why would someone who did something like that also place a clump of hair next to the body, a clump of very distinguishable hair no less? You mean, I would cut my hair and place it next to the victim like a serial killer?*

*I apologize for expressing my thoughts in the form of questions. As a screenwriter, I'm very invested in unraveling this incident. I've digressed from what you had asked me to write, and now I'll get back to writing about that: Behrooz Sobhani's relationship with me was never a serious one: we were seeing each other for a short while, back when I was a high school student. I ended the relationship because Behrooz wasn't a good student. Behrooz was studying at a technical school, and my father, who had knowledge of our relationship at the time, can testify that he knew all about it. The relationship was deemed destructive for me, during the years leading up to my university entrance exam. You see, to my father, school takes precedence over everything else. That's why he didn't care if my husband was the son of a laborer, because he was able to meet all my father's academic expectations. My relationship with Behrooz Sobhani ended right there and then, and later I learned that he had majored in engineering at Azad University, before starting to work at a factory. This, too, was just something I'd heard; otherwise, if I were to see Behrooz Sobhani now, I wouldn't even be able to recognize his face, much less kill him.*

*Regarding my husband, we returned to Birjand at 10:00 p.m. and had dinner. Then we went to sleep with the same details I mentioned before, and I apologize for writing them the way I did; this kind of detail is quite banal. I hope that further information from the forensic officer will clarify at least this one issue for you. My husband had no knowledge of my high-school relationship with Behrooz Sabahani, and I saw no reason to talk to him about a simple relationship from my adolescence. Sir, I had no motive for doing this. In fact, if I could commit murder, I would prefer to kill someone else rather than a person I've forgotten all about ages ago. I request that my father come to see me, because I know he must be worried sick.*

**DURING THE INTERROGATIONS,** Rakhshan had insisted on portraying Behrooz Sobhani, a former lover of hers, as minor and inconsequential. According to her, Behrooz was of no importance, but her phone logs had brought to light messages that had been exchanged between the two before being deleted. And let's not even get into the

fact that Behrooz Sobhani's phone had gone missing thereafter.

Police had discovered Behrooz Sobhani's neck-slashed body next to the sugar beet ovens, along with a clump of hair next to him that had been quickly identified as Rakhshan's. Nonetheless, police also knew that Rakhshan may have been framed. But who would set Rakhshan up like that? Why would someone put her up to murder, which had Rakhshan tiptoeing around before inmates and interrogators in Birjand while dressed in ludicrous clothes, at a loss about what to say or do? There was no news from her family, nor was there a single person paying any mind to her demands for a public defender. The only thing that was clear was a salvo of vague accusations, along with some questionable evidence that didn't quite establish Rakhshan as the murderer, only that she was a suspect.

"Watch what you're doing, and don't you think you're getting anywhere by making a scene," the woman who shut Rakhshan's cell door had snarled. "Tomorrow will be an even tougher day for you." In the pitch-dark room where nothing was visible, Rakhshan brooded over the trying days that had been more difficult—much more difficult—than this day; it dawned on her that this time around things were going to be harder than ever before. She contemplated the difference between varying kinds of "difficult": *difficult* at the age of fifteen, when her uncle had caught her with her first boyfriend and beat her within an inch of her life, and *difficult* at the age of twenty-four, when she got pregnant with her next boyfriend, which had forced her to undergo an appalling and agonizing abortion without anesthesia, up until *difficult* today—there was a fine line, even between two kinds of "harder." There was always something "more difficult" in her lived experience with men, the species never being the same. These thoughts alone, in a locked cell, made the prison harder than all the other "harder" times.

### THIRD INTERROGATION:

(July 7, 2014, Birjand) *Hello. Everything I have written until today has been in shock from the news of Behrooz Sobhani's murder. I met Behrooz Sobhani in 2010, when he had just been released from prison and contacted me through a mutual friend to see if I could help him find a job, because the factory had been suspended. He told me he had been between jobs for a while and asked if I could help him land a logistics gig for a TV project. I did not have that kind of opportunity available and so couldn't help him out. I knew he was living with his mother, and I was worried that if I tried*

*to do something for him, it might cause problems in my personal life.*

*I did not see Behrooz Sobhani when I visited the factory, and I do not know what Gholamali's claim is intended to imply. I ask that you trust my word and investigate the issue further. Maybe other people in the factory had some kind of a personal vendetta against Behrooz. At this moment, I wouldn't trust my father-in-law and my husband, and the offer to visit the abandoned factory strikes me as suspicious. Save for my husband, no one could have had access to such a large clump of my hair. Whether these things remain confidential or not, it won't matter. It is imperative that you look further into this family, and I have the same request as my father did. I have no idea why my father-in-law would offer that we visit the factory exactly when Behrooz was being murdered there.*

**GHOLAMALI HAD CLAIMED** that he had seen Rakhshan and Behrooz Sobhani chatting on the emergency stairs before disappearing. The factory had separate entrances through the emergency stairs on all three floors, from which one could sneak into a corridor and vanish from sight. During the interrogations, Rakhshan's husband didn't reveal anything, except threats from the criminal investigators about pressing murder charges against Rakhshan. Contrary to Rakhshan's claim, her husband had said that he knew all about her past relationship and was certain she had no role in the murder. Rakhshan's husband was sure because, despite his father's illness, he knew the man had invited his daughter-in-law to the factory while in his right mind, and he had noticed his father sounded quite chipper when he and Rakhshan had returned home. Rakhshan's husband had told the interrogators that his wife could never kill anyone and that an investigation should have been made as to why his wife's hair had been found at the scene of the crime.

Local police officers were exactly that—local. They dealt with family disputes: What would have been the motive for Rakhshan's cousin to have humiliated her? What petty family feuds were there to be found, and other such queries that Rakhshan's husband, Rakhshan herself, and both their families, had already responded to. But for Rakhshan, who was now in an unlit solitary confinement, the situation had morphed into something beyond all these. That Behrooz had been killed was a very hard fact for her to come to terms with, but she didn't want her husband to know this because he had proven, with substantial evidence, that Rakhshan had been in a newly built café in Birjand with her old friends at the time of the murder. However, for the interrogators, Rakh-



shan's oftentimes fleeting innocence, which sometimes painted her as a lamb and other times as a wolf, had created a woolly, cryptic scenario.

Rakhshan had spent her entire life like this, and those who had come into contact with her always felt that they didn't know her. The lines between her crying and laughing were all but nonexistent, and much like a professional actor, she was able to travel from one to the other at the drop of a hat. These things had not been lost on her original interrogator and were left now to a more seasoned colleague—the man Rakhshan couldn't see and who would hit her against the wall, occasionally caressing her neck with a Taser to get her to talk.

#### THE FOURTH INTERROGATION:

(Birjand, June 12, 2014) *With respect and regards. My father-in-law had shown signs of amnesia during past checkups, but I had no knowledge of this. Signature.*

**LIFE IN A SMALL TOWN** had always been meaningless to Rakhshan, and when she asked her husband that they return to her hometown on the account of work, she struck him as heartbroken and manic once again. Nevertheless, he agreed, because he thought that at least they'd find some peace of mind in doing this. But it seemed that Rakhshan had returned to Birjand to be close to Behrooz. If you want someone to fail to notice something, put it right in front of their eyes; perhaps Rakhshan had every intention to put Behrooz at the center of attention to make him go unnoticed. This much had been figured out, but due to the complex nature of her case, Rakhshan was transferred to Tehran—this time, seated in a police van and not allowed to use the bathroom or eat a thing throughout the twenty-hour ride. Her feet were in chains and her hands in cuffs. They had changed her clothes, and she was wearing a prison jumpsuit that was neither as soft nor as comfortable on the waistline as she had been in her husband's clothes. The prison jumpsuit was very loose, so loose a thin woman like Rakhshan would feel lost in it. For the remainder of the ride, she would think about how there was nothing left for her to lose, so maybe it served her well to "start playing the rest of the game honestly," so honestly that she said this very sentence to the accompanying female officer. The officer, however, showed no reaction and seemed rather displeased for being entrusted with the task of delivering Rakhshan to the prison in Tehran. Not every woman, after all, would be happy to be given such a job.



Rakhsan thought about the female officer for the rest of the journey.

#### FIRST INTERROGATION:

(July 5, 2014, Tehran) *On Tuesday, Behrooz Sobhani contacted me and asked that we meet up, but I refused because he insisted no one should know about our meeting. I haven't had any other contact with Behrooz Sobhani. I only checked the emergency stairs at the factory because I found them bemusing. The spiral stairs were not like the other stairs and had been arranged like a ladder. I'm afraid of heights and closed spaces. I'm hard of hearing, but I have a keen sense of smell. I'm sure I smelled filth there. I don't know why their machines were still giving out a smell after the factory had been closed, but I only rubbed my hand against the machine to see if it was warm or cold—that's why my handprint was left there. At the time, my father-in-law told me that, if the machines had been on, we wouldn't have been able to hear each other over their noise. When I inquired about the smell, he said it was from molasses.*

*The smell of molasses was something similar to that of a corpse. I don't know. For someone like me, with my mental problems, these kinds of things are both attractive and insignificant. Just like Behrooz Sobhani, who was both attractive and insignificant. I admit that there have been many such men in my life, but none ever caused enough problems for me to want to kill them. My history with killing, as I previously explained to my interrogator, never went beyond killing dyed baby chicks. My father must have told you the same thing during his interrogation. My history with violence goes back to when I was eight years old and influenced by the rough environment I grew up in. As for my life situation, I can only say that I have never suffered financial hardships, but I have experienced emotional turbulence in my family growing up, and I'm not sure if that could cause a person to become a murderer or not. I request that a psychiatrist confirm if there are any links between killing dyed baby chicks in childhood with murder in adulthood.*

*The offer to have intercourse upon my return from the factory had come from me, and my husband is telling the truth. But for me to have put pressure on a man for a sexual encounter would be strange, and I ask that you send a psychologist to talk to my husband about this. I imagine he's very angry, because he just found out about my relationship with Behrooz Sobhani, but my connection with Behrooz has only been limited to brief updates about his life. I admit that I knew about the incident that had led to his dismissal, but I had no knowledge of the circumstances of his life, and I tried to find him a job in Tehran to improve his situation. Behrooz was*

*a good boy, but he would have ultimately been in the underclass. He was like that since our teenage years. He didn't have enough intelligence and competence, but he had great audacity, which stemmed from ignorance. I'm not aware of any further details about his life. Behrooz was a self-contained person, but he was also imbecilic. When I walked up the emergency stairs at the factory, I saw him seated on one of the housetops on the roof. He smiled at me—smirked at me. He had been following us, but I have no idea why.*

*Men make a lot of mistakes and get tangled up with the wrong emotions. Behrooz thought I still loved him. It's not my fault that even twenty years after our relationship had ended, he still believed I was in love with him. But I assure you, no woman would ever kill a man just because she loves them. That's the kind of revenge typical of men. I'm hoping that being transferred from the Birjand prison to Tehran will help resolve this situation. I'm a screenwriter, and my knowledge of medicine boils down to a desire to want to write something about it. I've never written a script about forensic science or the detection of a sexual intercourse, nothing that would make me want to erase my previous sexual encounter by forcing sexual intercourse on my husband, which is what the interrogator was implying.*

*Considering my inability to process what has happened, I can't quite tell who may be the main suspect. I emphasize that I had no knowledge of the details of Behrooz's life, and I do not know who might have killed him. Honestly, the Behrooz I knew was not someone who would cause intense grudges in anyone.*

**THE FORENSIC UNIT** had no idea about the sexual relationship. It was not clear in their examinations whether the intercourse had taken place with one, two, or several people. They conducted the kind of fruitless search they would conduct with all female suspects, and Rakhshan's husband said that his wife had been overly eager for multiple rounds of sexual intercourse on the night of the murder. But this had led police nowhere. Meanwhile, based on the phone logs giving away the number of calls between Rakhshan and Behrooz, and considering the nature of their relationship, there was no other woman in Behrooz's life he would take into his confidence or tell them how he was faring, except Rakhshan, whom he had known for years. This had been revealed by Behrooz's mother, who had heard the hours-long conversations between the two of them, feeling for her son for being unable to let go of a woman who was no longer his. In Behrooz's mother's opinion, Rakhshan was completely innocent, because her son had been

madly in love with her. She believed Rakhshan had no other choice but to murder her son. Behrooz was withdrawn and reclusive, and he didn't have a personal vendetta against anyone. He had been fired from the job when, together with other protesting workers, they had vandalized the sugar warehouse. This was the only crime on his rap sheet. Later, in his dismissal documentation, the factory managers agreed that he be let go on the condition that he paid the damages.

In a criminal case, the most important clue that can lead the interrogator to the killer is the motive for the murder, something that only Rakhshan's husband, who was immediately cleared, could have had. No one else had a reason to kill the docile and harmless Behrooz Sobhani with a knife stab into his neck, which had resulted in the laceration of his artery. Interrogators believed that Rakhshan, too, had no reason to have killed Behrooz, but they could tell she was lying about something. Rakhshan had left the abandoned Asadiyeh sugar factory with her father-in-law, driven in the direction of the border road, and then, after a quarter of an hour, had returned to the factory. She had cited her father-in-law's memory lapse as the reason resulting in the two of them being lost on the main road, which, given his medical history, would have been probable.

## SECOND INTERROGATION:

(Tehran, July 6, 2014)

*I deleted my mobile messages myself.*

*Signature.*

*My father-in-law had lost his way on a secondary road from Asadiyeh to Birjand due to an onset of amnesia, and so I offered to drive.*

*Signature.*

*My husband was not interested in having sexual intercourse, and I pressured him into doing it.*

*Signature.*

**EVENTUALLY, SHE HAD** to come clean. Perhaps the interrogations in Tehran had taken their toll on her, or maybe she had simply taken the initiative to confess. Whatever the case, it must have had something to do with her tolerance threshold. Patience was never Rakhshan's forte. The interrogators had managed to wear her down by flashing pictures of Behrooz Sobhani soaked in blood, his corpse having been discovered by Gholamali. They'd made her sign a few papers that put her ever closer to

being viewed as the killer. Several photos from different angles had been lined up in front of her showing Rakhshan and her father-in-law at the same locations where she had walked with him and heard stories about his past. Behrooz's bloody pictures could have been the last domino, but Rakhshan was transferred to the hospital, feeling nauseated and shell-shocked, until her next interrogation.

In the life of every woman, there are ill-timed moments when she doesn't even know herself and can't tell if she has really loved someone or not. This had become all the more conspicuous to Rakhshan. Upon seeing the blood-spattered pictures, she thought about the man she had been in love with. She couldn't exactly pin her feeling down, but she could see the man who had loved her and was now lifeless. She was adamant not to faint—she really was—but she had ended up fainting; it was one of those untimely incidents she had never gone over in her head until the day she was on her way to Tehran for interrogation. Before then, she had only heard about Behrooz having been murdered, and now she had seen the images.

### THIRD INTERROGATION:

(Tehran, July 19, 2014) *I had previously visited the sugar factory as a child, and the environment was nothing new to me. At that time, my father was going to Asadiyeh to visit a friend, and I went with him. The smoke resembling a heavy cloud that was released into the air caught my attention. The factory was still operating in those years, and my father took me to the outer courtyard to see where the smoke was coming from. It was during working hours, and the place seemed crowded and busy. My father said that the factory had been built there, so that people wouldn't be able to smuggle drugs from Afghanistan; instead, they would work there. I didn't mention this part of the story because I didn't know if telling you that I saw the factory as a child would make it seem like I knew how to navigate it; I didn't know if this would get me into trouble. I'd never gone up the emergency stairs as a child, but I thought they were rather bizarre.*

*Behrooz Sobhani and I go way back; our relationship had begun in my adolescence, hence the emotional attachment to each other. On the same day when I visited the factory, as I mentioned before, I saw Behrooz on the housetop. This angered me, since I had no idea what he was doing there. Behrooz loved me, but he was a nuisance in my life, though not to the point that I would want to kill him, and, honestly, I don't see my life as high-flying enough to be worth it killing someone. I regret having cried*

*and begged; this situation is harder than I had imagined, and I'm sorry I hid from you the encounter with Behrooz since day one. I only learned of how they poured beets into the shredder on the first floor with the help of Gholamali. If I were to talk about the thing that had caught my attention, I'm afraid I'd face an even more serious charge. I found it strange that the heavy blades looked immaculate while the machines themselves were quite grimy. I really hope this confession wouldn't insinuate that I'm capable of throwing someone into a shredder.*

*My father-in-law fails to recall many things. We wandered between the machines, with the ground shaking under our feet. He would randomly talk about someone who had drunk tea with him, laughed, or danced—stuff like that. Given his dementia, some of what he said was unintelligible to me. But I tried to keep an eager face on. His eyes would glisten as we walked around the storied place.*

*I loved Behrooz, but no more than the life I had, and I would resist his overtures. These relationships can't remain a secret in a small town like Birjand, and I had written to him about this in those deleted messages. Behrooz was generally an angry and aggravated individual, and, after the case that culminated in his expulsion, he grew even more angry and aggravated; more than ever, he asked for my company and other things. But he didn't pressure or threaten me. I don't know why the hair was found there. I didn't have a headscarf, because no one else was there at the time except me and my father-in-law, but I had tied my hair with a hairband.*

*We left the factory at around 8:00 p.m., and I didn't see Behrooz anymore. It had darkened outside on the way back, and my father-in-law was worried whether he was driving in the right direction or not. His anxiety exacerbated when he felt he had lost his way. I insisted on driving and had no plans to go anywhere else.*

*I did tell the psychiatrist as well that I always tend to take refuge in physical intimacy in stressful situations, such as the one that came about following the accidental meeting with Behrooz that night. I was afraid I was being chased, and I insisted on having intercourse with my husband because I was very nervous. I couldn't say a word about Behrooz and was feeling guilty at the same time.*

*I had no reason to go to the factory, other than to keep my father-in-law company. When I heard that a murder had occurred—with Behrooz being the victim—I was quite frightened and denied any involvement. Given the current situation and the fact that I can't prove my innocence, I hope you accept that, ultimately, I could never extricate myself from my past, even*

*after the death of the person you say was murdered. I think it would be better for me to be executed than to have to live with this loss. Losing anything from my past scares me. I'm too afraid to throw away my clothes and bags, and this has haunted me my entire life. I always carry the past with me and have a thousand drawers in my mind and heart; in each of those, I have kept a piece of someone. I am not the killer, and I hope you find the real killer of Behrooz.*

**THE TEARS SHE SHED** were exactly as she wanted them to be seen in their eyes. It made it look like at that moment Rakhshan wished, from the bottom of her heart, for the killer to be found, and that she was simultaneously worried that by now her husband and the rest of the family must have been informed about her relationship with Behrooz—a relationship that, according to what she had maintained, had never gone beyond phone conversations. Who wouldn't know that when a woman emphasizes a certain type of communication, it may not mean that exact type? A woman with such feminine qualities as the ones Rakhshan possessed was unlikely to not know that her emphasis would make the investigators more sensitive to something else that may have been going on. It was as if, by insisting that nothing had happened, she wanted to drive home to them that *something* had happened.

**FINAL INTERROGATION:**

(Tehran July 28, 2014) *I haven't dyed my hair for the last four or five years, and as I told the doctor, I used to use natural colors similar to my own hair color to cover my gray hair before that. Five years ago, I met Behrooz in private for ten minutes. He had just been fired and was quite distraught. I don't want to say he forced me to do anything, but the whole thing lasted only ten minutes. Our affair lasted ten minutes. When I look back, it seems like it was ten hours. But it was only ten minutes.*

*Afterwards, I went over those ten minutes, repeating them in my head countless times. If I am released, I won't really be free; I will be transferred to a bigger prison because of those ten minutes I know I can't bear the punishment for; and I don't know what to expect from my husband. I wish Behrooz was still alive and could at least answer your question as to why he had kept the hair in his pocket. For me, this act of his was only about regret and love. I wish I hadn't resisted his insistence on repeating those ten minutes. I reiterate: Now that he's gone, I wish I could experience those ten minutes once again. I hope that with this confession, I won't be released and*

*instead be executed. Don't set me free. I don't know what to say about what I've done, but I loved Behrooz passionately, and I wish I could live those ten minutes once again.*

**SHE WOULD CERTAINLY** be set free. The hair found at the crime scene was re-examined in Tehran. It was Rakhshan's hair, but it had been dyed. The color was similar to her natural hair, but her current hair hadn't been dyed. It was the hair Rakhshan had given to Behrooz several years prior, at his request, to help him cope with Rakhshan's absence. Behrooz had later threatened her with the same hair, saying that if he couldn't have Rakhshan, he would make her life a living hell. It was probably an empty threat from a disgruntled man who had longed for a woman for years, but he was now faced with a crazed woman who had always been called "sinful" for being in love, a woman who had paid the price for her love all on her own, taking the great sin of being a woman on her shoulders every time a man had fallen in love with her. It was unclear whether she had really experienced ten minutes of love or she had just made the confession to cover up one sin with another.

The night before the crime, she had asked Behrooz to bring her the hair to prove that he had loved her all those years. She had planned his murder, and for this reason, when her father-in-law offered that they visit the factory, she saw it as the golden opportunity to free herself from Behrooz's threats and this time around be far from the only loser in a tale of unrequited love.

As Rakhshan's father-in-law was walking on the creaky iron ceiling of the second floor, he lost sight of her, and Behrooz got himself behind the garbage cans, looking at Rakhshan in awe, motioning for a kiss. A sharp knife found its way into his neck, the hair in his hand falling to the ground. Rakhshan didn't even need to touch the hair; everything had gone smoothly. Since she was secure in the belief that her father-in-law was too scatterbrained, she got rid of the knife and Behrooz's mobile phone somewhere on the other side of the border, before returning to the main road. The *real* main road in Rakhshan's life was her own body, which no one had the right to threaten. And yes, in a place where a woman's sin is all about the body, you can veil even a cardinal sin with a bodily one. Who could have written a story as action-packed and with so many twists as Rakhshan's very own fate?

She had returned to Birjand to seek revenge for a sin considered by the religious laws and conventions to be more unpardonable than any



other for her. It was as if she had returned, at the age of thirty-five, to settle the score with a past that was drenched in seduction and vengeance, to permanently close the chapter on her cursed saga of romance. And she chose to close it this way.

She would be released from behind bars and prison fences, would see the sky again, live again, until the next sin. This time, she knew all too well how to play the game. When you're a woman, you will stay alive by confessing to the unforgivable Original Sin, and Rakhshan survived because she had finally discovered the secret of casting a constant spell on someone by laying a guilt-trip on them like men in her life had done. She had successfully reached out, picked an apple from the tree in the Garden of Eden, and made someone else eat it.

The night before they pronounced her "not guilty" on the final day in court, Rakhshan bummed a smoke and noticed that her lungs were breathing better than ever. Now that she had taken cognizance of the male-oriented state of the universe, something inside her had come alive—she felt reinvigorated. It occurred to her that a guilty person wouldn't necessarily end up with their head in the noose. With a few deep puffs, she blew the smoke of her cigarette through the railings into the prison yard, laughing heartily. The dominos had reached their end.