THE OATH

david zane
I swear by Apollo the Healer, Asclepius, Hygeia, and Panacea, and I take witness to all these Gods and Goddesses to keep according to my ability and judgment the following Oath & Agreement:

I will prescribe regimens for the good of my Patients according to my ability and my judgment of medical laws, and never do harm to anyone.

I will give no deadly medicine to any one if asked, nor suggest any such Counsel.

I will not cut for stone, even for Patients in whom the disease is manifest; I will leave this operation to be performed by Practitioners, Specialists in the Art.

In every house where I come, I will enter only for the good of my Patients, keeping myself far from all intentional ill-doing and seduction.

All that may come to my knowledge in the exercise of my Profession, I will keep secret and never will reveal.

If I keep this Oath faithfully, may I enjoy my life and practice my Art, respected by all humanity and in all times; but if I swerve from it or violate it, may the reverse be my life.

Excerpt from the original Hippocratic Oath
5th century B.C.
A closed-society of stern religious ideology, fuelled by massive oil wealth just bubbling under the surface, is a recipe for disaster at the best of times - add in a 9.6 tremor square under one of the world’s most-densely populated cities - one stuffed so friggin’ tight with so many questionable building practises. 

_Bouncing in my seat on a crowded bus._

Which has clearly been endorsed by a centuries-old constitution of building-code corruption. 

_Riding mangled roads to an emergency aid station._

“Here put this on”, a hand reaches out. 

_These potholes seem to go on forever._

Desperate does not begin to cover what I’m seeing on the other side of this glass.

_Slowing down… turning into a sprawling camp of organized chaos._

Once the bus finally stops, I move to put it on. 

Usually I can get away without wearing one - pulling the straps tight - since I’m used to the smell. Which doesn’t sound right at all? Who gets used to the most wretched smell imaginable? 

Stumbling for a second from the scores of rotting corpses in this scorching heat... my heart always races when I first get off the bus. 

One million dead in a day... just like that... looking around with a mask that’s not working so well. 

No bombs. 

I never know what to expect from those first few steps off the bus. 

No hatred. 

They’re saying it’s the worst catastrophe in human history. 

No violence. 

Just Mother Nature. 

_Hearing non-stop cries all around me._

Landlord of our precious earth. 

_Skirting the makeshift triage the ground has definitely become._

A blessed geography with blessed natural resources. 

_Moving like a running back dodging tacklers._

I’ve already dropped my knapsack... and I need to get rid of this mask, “Take this one in for surgery ASAP!”

The dusty filth always plugs those things in ten minutes tops. 

“Hello! Someone!”

This place’s fierce religious dogma is merely the privilege of a blessed geography. 

“Right away Doctor.”

Good thing I’m a-political.
“These four need IV fluids right away.”
There’s no time to care about any religion.
“I need the dead to be moved quicker, much quicker. We don’t want disease spreading here people! That’s all we need is an outbreak on top of this.”
Halted from another aftershock, holding-on to a concrete boulder for dear life... there’s nothing over a few stories that has been left standing.
I’m waiting.
Sweating above earth’s ear-splitting anger.
And waiting.
It’s an enormous force that shoots through your legs... releasing a power you can’t deny... or explain.
“Yes Doctor”, a skinny nurse with a scared face runs in the other direction.
She must have been through this somewhere else.
This damn heat just won’t let up.
“I need help over here NOW!”
A mud-covered woman starts to cough up blood.
Treating the injured, the maimed - a finger on a rushing dam.
“Take her straight into the surgery tent!”

There’s no time to overheat.

Rushing to three small ones motionless not far from her... no matter how much we think we can control our environment - pumping both hands on the little one’s chest for a pulse - our Planet’s Sole Proprietor always has the final say.
“I need a body bag!”
Trust me on this one.
“Now.”
She’s my daughter’s age.

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Passing building after building with the most agreeable grin plastered on my face.
Riding my 10-speed through a leafy campus.
Because that’s all it takes some days.
Everything here is so lush and green... with a touch of Marlboro-Man ruggedness in the peaked distance. Extra-wide s-curve roads twist and bend through a landscape of trimmed hedges and thick towering trees, and flowers of all colors; it’s another planet compared to back home. Oaks arching-in from either side, some really massive Oaks... create a canopy that makes you feel as if Mother Nature’s arms are protecting you.
Riding up to a group seated on a perfectly-trimmed emerald lawn.
“Hello Everybody.”
“Hey Daniel.” Is repeated by all... Lillian Chang, Perdi Lopez, Peter Yo, Afiya Adoyo, Anil Patel, Babek Jalili, Carm DeJesus and Ava Abadi - by my United Nations Posse. “Are we ready everybody?”, dropping my bike, moving into the huddled anxiety. The glorious Rockies at our back... plus an ideal breeze for maintaining the most agreeable temperature. “Everyone ready?”, I ask louder this time to try and prod such serious faces from their binders. Messing up her hair, “You’re going to do fine. You know this stuff backwards and forwards.” “Someone’s cocky.” “I’m confident because that’s half the battle”, sitting down. “Does a hydrolyzed carbon form double or triple bonds?” “Triple.” “Which molecule has the largest dipole moment?” “Hydrogen Chloride.” “You’re going to do fine... all of you are going to do fine”, importing some well-needed buoyancy into the nervous air. It may look like it’s aimed at the group... but my encouragement is really meant only for her; everything I do or say is only meant for her.

Her eyes... dark and beguiling.
Her hair... long and shiny in the same mysterious tone.
Her body... curvaceous and feminine, with a sexy-as-hell gait.
Her brains. Her laugh. Never met a woman like her - and I do ok for myself on campus.

“Sure, but I still wish I was as confident as you”, her nervous face looks back at me.

Causing sleepless nights weeks before the semester even starts; organic chemistry’s renowned for stopping accolade-rich undergrads right in their tracks. Bam – “You’re not as smart as you think!” Wakes everyone in the middle of the night from hearing that one... probably why speed pills are such an easy sell; which are as trouble-free to get on campus as a can of coke.

For most trying to get into medical school, organic chemistry remains the sole defining Sentry that stands between satisfying every Parent and Grandparent... or merely becoming a Dentist.

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After six days of little-if-any-sleep and countless deaths - this is not the way I thought I would be seeing her homeland.

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

Striking at around three in the morning, when everyone was tucked away in their beds... presumably safe, this beast of a shaking is proving more merciless than anyone could have imagined.
BEEP BEEP BEEP.
The constant grating of those chirping excavators... so many of them working 24/7 in an attempt to haul out the rubble... and the bodies... I know exactly where I am, staring at the roof of my tent, unable to sleep a wink. I’m in a land overflowing with tribal allegiances that foment sectarian divide.

BEEP BEEP BEEP.
Enabling ignorant superstitions of blind hatred to be handed down to their young... along with the ancestral home... I’ve heard their Leader’s hate-filled rants go on and on whenever a microphone is put in front of him - denying the most unthinkable crime that just so happens to have been committed against my extended family by those terminally-organized, yet barbaric Nazis. Bastards wiped out 90% of Dad’s entire family... lying there sweating... I know how the system works here... seething in my insomnia... nothing gets said without the approval of the Supreme Leader.
If I got in a room with him... or had to treat his kids.

“The Hippocratic Oath is not something that’s just printed on a piece of paper”, Dad would bark during those early days. “A Patient is a human being only... not a part of any religion. We treat the body, not the mind”, he repeated plenty after I graduated.

Rising finally after lying in a pool of my own agitation for far too long; it is a challenge being in a land that, if the circumstances were different, those pernicious Fanatics would prejudice me in ways I’m sure would not be pleasant... and no doubt include my loved ones.
Outside my flimsy communal tent that smells of ‘disaster zone’... sitting wearily on a giant boulder while looking up at the night’s star-filled sky.
“You’re here to help those that cannot help themselves”, I keep reminding after another hellish day of back-breaking work. “If you can’t remove Politics from your work, then stop being a Doctor”, Dad finished every discussion on the topic.
To his truth I’m always quiet, but I’m not going to lie, it’s hard sometimes. I never show it though, that would be unacceptable.

Finishing a tired sip of water.
Suddenly a Nurse with big eyes runs towards me, “We need you right away Doctor... it’s an emergency.”
Since those first steps off the plane everything’s been an emergency, I quickly lunge off the stoop like a switch has been turned on.
Nurse Big Eyes can really move.
Following her race through this makeshift city of shattered concrete and steel... and that stench - this place re-defines what the term emergency really means.
“What have we got?”, leaning-in to start washing my hands over the sink. “We’ve got ten children being prepped... their blood pressures have all dropped... I’ve got no clue why... unless of course you can find me a CAT scan in this mess?” Scrubbing ferociously the two of us. Quickly we both reach to hold on to either side of the industrial-sized sink... and squeeze to stay upright; those damn aftershocks just won’t let up. “How many Surgeons you have ready to go?” “You’re looking at her.”

I am Doctor Daniel Belrose... a-political man of medicine, and I’m about to operate in a tent.

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Unlike the chaotic, confusing, violently confrontational world President Carter keeps alerting us to; Denver of 1978 is an ethereal suspension of the most civil order. “The world is becoming more divided on ethnic and economic lines”, our Commander-in-Chief warns over and over. Excuse the disrespect, but Mr. Carter could have been speaking pygmy - the Middle East?... Russia?... Africa?... none of us cared about any rising tensions. That was all way too far away.

Starting with six Students and two Professors, the Anschutz Medical School was founded in Boulder, Colorado in 1883. Moving eight miles east of big-city Denver to Aurora in 1924 to give Students increased opportunities; this place has special meaning to my family. The only medical school in the entire country to offer my Father a full-scholarship, even though he had the grades for Johns Hopkins if he wanted - America in the fifties was different. He accepted it gladly...... as I did two decades later; loyalty is everything to my munificent Father. Being a Doctor was all Dad wanted... was the family business, but only the Belrose way. Six generations of healing men of progressively cosmopolitan Paris; never will I ever comprehend what it must have been like to pack up and leave that final time.

“Leaving everything you love the most is the arrow that the bow of exile shoots through first”, he said when I was leaving for my first assignment. Wise enough to flee Paris with only the clothes on their back - Dad’s journey to America must have been something for an eight year old. “Attachments are to People, not things”, his wisdom flowed. Dr Louis Belrose, my Grandfather, who was what one would’ve called a Doctor to the Stars today... following my great Grandfather Daniel before him... whom I’m
named after... knew something was up. Hitler was not going to be satisfied with just the Sudetenland, and from what his high-up Patients were telling him... Generals, Ambassadors, Parliamentarians... “Louis we’re preparing for war with this guy.”

Luckily Grandpa had read Mein Kempf... or I probably wouldn’t be here. A nighttime train ride to Calais with forged papers enabled Dad, his younger sister Marta, mom Claire, and stoic Louis to arrive as the guests of the French Ambassador based in London.

“I thought we would be there a few weeks... a month tops.” It took eight years... and was never the same.

“It never felt like home”, he told Dad near the end. France lost a great Medicine Man... geez, a great family of Medicine Men. “America has been good to us Daniel... we must give back”, without regret Dad would express his constant excitement towards his adopted country. Annual excursions to Yosemite, the Appalachian Trail, Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon... plus upstate New York for fishing and camping under the stars; for a boy brought up in concrete-obsessed New York, only now do I see the indelible stamp his years out here left on him.

It’s affected me more than I ever realized.

“Get up Danny-boy.”

*Cold water splashes on my face.*

“It’s get-up-time Danny-boy.”

Rubbing the sudden jolt... after seventeen straight hours leaning over a surgery table, *damn that’s cold*... this is hardly enough to get me moving... or angry.

“When did you get here?”

Sitting up slowly, like an old-man. “Monday”, catching the towel he throws at me. Using it to wipe off the sticky sheen that’s accrued in this heavy-aired sweatbox.

“What’s it been like?”

“Like any earthquake... only times a million”, reaching down, putting on my pants... one leg at a time.

Everything hurts.

“They say fifteen million people live here.”

Gradually standing.

“But who the hell really knows?”

Moving towards exiting the tent together.

*BEEP BEEP BEEP.*

“Not like they do a census”, my tired humour accompanies a smirk.

Heading to the coffee table... amidst the ruins... there’s food and drink available 24/7.

*BEEP BEEP BEEP.*
But while in this part of my life, I live on coffee and water only, plus as much fruit as I can get my hands on. Electrolytes keep me ready and able for anything without the bloat.

Both of us take a seat at one of the many picnic tables.

“Saved six kids last night... but the other four had no chance... not a god-damn chance!”

Nursing our steaming brews.

“The first few days are always like a walk in the dark”, he tries to make me feel better.

“All I hear is Dad screaming that each Patient is your family.”

“Oh do I know that sound... WE ARE ALL RELATED”, he mimics, then takes another sip.

“Eats me up when I have to put a sheet over another one... especially a kid.”

“It’ll get better Danny-boy.”

Kindred spirit Adam Babineaux is my best friend, a man of healing empathy... but also a man born with the malignant-adventurer gene; having one address was not in the cards for Adam, either was getting a haircut. Travelling the world 24/7/365 as one of Medecins Sans Frontieres permanent on-call Physicians... whenever... wherever... Adam needs mere minutes. Keeping up the family business; in this part of my life we’re inseparable. He’s the brother I never had... nor see much. Living life out of a knapsack... I can’t remember how many times I’ve pleaded with him to work even one day a week at my Harlem Clinic.

“Damn it you can do it for free”, I insisted.

Money means nothing to Adam.

A Citizen of the World whose convivial aura fills any catastrophe zone with smiles and laughter; when the blood starts to fly he’s as sharp as a Cobra at saving lives. It’s what our Dads demanded.

Cut from the same cloth, Isaac Babineaux and Henri Belrose were Practitioners to the James Mayer De Rothschild world - not to mention every prominent Catholic and Protestant family of France. Lot of good that did though, both still had to abandon everything to save themselves and their families from the approaching Nazis. Henri ended up in the lower east side of New York, while Isaac made it to Boston. They stayed in touch, but didn’t have a minute to see each other for almost a decade... well after the smouldering ruins from back home had been quashed. They went back together... no family, just each other... to reclaim both their property and their standing.

Neither was ready.

Returning to their awaiting families, they promised to stay in touch... alternate July 4th picnic festivities... plus do their utmost to provide benevolent support to all their respective community members in this new land of opportunity.
Dedicated.
Disciplined.
Fiercely egalitarian.
These two were exactly what America needed as immigrants; making money was never their raison d’être for being Doctors.
“Listen I need you to go with me to the northern part of the city.”
For both Adam and me... that was our inheritance absolutely.
“When?”
“Two hours ago.”
“But what about here?”, looking around, “yesterday I was half the surgical count?”
“I came in with half a dozen... they’ll be fine. I just need to talk to Moses and Gerhard and then we’ll be off”, Adam rises.
“Well?... ok?”, stretching... preparing for another day of back-breaking meat and potato surgery.
“I’m going to find us a ride.”
Tossing our cups in the garbage.
“That I can’t help you with”, curious to check up on my work from yesterday.
“Come find me when you’re ready“, heading towards the surgical tent.
“Ya sure”, Adam flees in the other direction.

It’s going to be another hot day in hell.

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A Master Diagnostician confident in his craft... as early as I can remember I was trapped by his magnetic personality, his use of big powerful words that went along with a deep gaze. No exaggeration I truly idolized my Dad. Young and confused when hearing them argue for the first time... like it was yesterday I remember their voices. Mom’s endless tears, “You have a family Henri, you just can’t walk into a war zone without any protection”, along with desperation.
“I must Claire! I must!”, Dad kept pleading.
The high-pitched conversation seemed to go on forever.
“What’s the matter?”, standing there confused in my pyjamas.
“Go back to bed Daniel.”
“Where are you going Dad?” I stood my ground, scared, but I stood my ground.
“I said go back to bed.”
Two days later he was gone.
The house teeming with anxiety and sadness; Adam went through the exact same trauma. For three whole months we didn’t see our Dads... which felt like forever. Every day Mom cried. It was awful. Only later, when they finally returned home noticeably thinner and paler, did we realize we were lucky to even be seeing them at all. Dad and Isaac had boarded a Red Cross plane with other French Doctors for
the unknown... deep into a little known place named Biafra, smack dab into a smouldering Nigerian war that every power of the world had washed their indifferent hands of. These were the first band of true healing heroes, and my Dad was there.

It was 1971 and Medecins Sans Frontieres was born; the family business.

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“How they doing?”
“Good Doctor. How are you doing?”
Still brooding over the four that didn’t make it.

Jella Perkommen is a 40-something Finnish Nurse of incredible endurance, served with her in Rwanda for three straight days without a wink of sleep - triage, surgery... post-operative care, a sturdy machine with heaps of blue-eyed peroxide-blond moxie.

“Those the new batch?”
She’s the only one who can handle Adam.

“Just got here a few hours ago.”
Seeing them get a tour from the Chief; Adam was right, I quickly head over.

“Gentlemen”, I purposely interrupt the quorum.

“Daniel”, greetings by Chief Surgeon Dr. Moses Berman, “Doctors, this is one of our finest Surgeons in the field, Dr. Daniel Belrose.”

Introductions and shakes follow as the foreign accents pierce the humidity.

“Moses, I’m heading up north.”
“With Adam.” “You know?” “I insisted.”
“I don’t know when we’ll be back?”
“We’re good here, but do me a favour and keep your cell on.”

“Will do. Gentlemen it was nice meeting you”, handshakes all around, seeing the inexperience in their eyes.
That’ll change soon enough.

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Medecins Sans Frontieres was created in the aftermath of the Biafra war by a small group of French Doctors and Journalists who believed that ALL people have the right to medical care regardless of race, religion, creed, political affiliation, or borders. “Health is not a tool of extortion!”, they yelled out to an incorrigibly-apathetic world. Pioneering efficiency methods for the perpetually-forgotten in areas with little water, electricity, any real infrastructure to speak of in fact... not to mention bullets flying everywhere - Biafra was just the start of our family’s adventures.
1972, Dad and Isaac leave for Managua after an earthquake kills close to 30,000.
1974, Hurricane Fifi causes major flooding in Honduras.
1975, MSF sets up camp in the thick jungles of Thailand to deal with the massive
influx of starving refugees escaping the repressive barbarism of the Khmer Rouge.
That lasted four years.
Lebanon’s civil war... eight years.
Sudan’s mass starvation... never ending.
From inside too many makeshift hospitals to count, Henri and Isaac have seen the
world together for close to thirty-five years.
Adam and I are going on twenty.
Kosovo 1993.
Haiti 1996.
Sierra Leone 1998.
And now seemingly the biggest of them all... Tehran 2006.
“COME ON!”’, hits me barely two steps out of that sweaty hospital tent.
Honking.
“DANNY-BOY COME ON!”, Adam screams with arms waving out the window.
Staring at a beat-up compact car with a Red-Cross sheet over one door.
Honking.
“COME ON GET IN!”
Jogging towards it.
“Two tickets to paradise”, Adam cries after I slam the backdoor shut.
Turning around, “Danny-boy, this is our well-paid chauffeur Matti.”
He turns back to exhibit a warm smile, and some neglected yellow teeth. “Hello Mr.
Danny-boy”, along with a hand from a twisting arm.
“Hello Matti.”
Our driver then swiftly turns back to the road, and pulls away fast... leaving a
massive cloud of dust behind us.
“If I were you I’d put on your seat belt”, Adam warns as warm dirt blows in from
every window, “Tehran drivers are ruthless.”
Swaying from side to side... click... as Matti navigates roads heavily blocked in
some areas... then wide-open in others; I’ve no clue how Adam lassoed this guy?
Speeding through roads flooded with people... and pools of smelling water; what I
do know is this Matti fellow has no chance - holding on tight through the bumps -
none.
Adam’s Machiavellian grin reels everyone in.
HONKING.
And if I know Adam, he must have convinced this poor driver that this was going to
be, “The Adventure of a lifetime.”
“Honking.
And that, “You’re going to be paid a thousand American dollars.”
Or some crazy amount.
Another one charmed by Adam’s chiselled aura.
*Turning to the desperate faces filing past.*
The truth is of little concern.
*Bouncing up and down from the tire-eating potholes.*
I’ve no doubt Matti is going to love every minute of it.
*Some causing loud thuds of my skull against the top of the car.*
Because that’s what Adam does.
“We’re heading up to a place called Elahieh”, he screams.
Dust everywhere as we pass mangled rubble, not a hint of any civilized roads... my stomach clenches from what I’m trying to process. Swarms with expressions of shock... zombies searching for the next aid station... not one damn building has been left standing.
*Glued to the massive devastation.*
I can taste this country’s desperation in my spit; even Adam’s speechless.
Didn't Ava say she was from Elahieh?

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Bright and serious... yet still precocious in a naive sort of way; Ava had lots of friends... but I was her only close ‘guy’ friend. Raised to be alone with a man only if he was going to be her husband... and he better be Iranian. Our love just snuck up on the both of us. Intoxicating and Cosmopolitan... plus a melting accent that made me smile; I was definitely smitten. Add in a boatload of youthful hormones and we were inseparable. It was mutual - that I knew for sure. May Alana forgive me... but I’ve never loved like that, ever.
Born in a northern suburb of a sprawling Tehran, Ava was ecstatic about being offered the first-ever opportunity to study in America. “My Father insists I should have an education”, adoring her open-minded Father. Never did I see her without an infectious grin... except of course during exam season.
“Education is everything to my family... I’m the first girl to be able to get a degree.”
Ava took this responsibility seriously; what she didn’t was the cultural demand to marry soon. After a quick trip back to visit her family over Christmas break, she said, with tears in her eyes, “That her Grandparents know a high-standing family who have the perfect husband for her. Dinner was terrible... I didn’t like him at all.”
In being here Ava had tasted the other side for herself and, “I knew it was going to be a problem”, she confided, “Iranian men are too serious, too close-minded... too patriarchal... and too damn religious!”, staring into my eyes.
A few sentences later she said she wanted me... and I couldn’t have been happier; although a Jew and Muslim I was quite sure was going to create plenty of ripples.
That was twenty-seven years ago, staring out the window of a speeding, late-model, barely intact car that’s vibrating through what seems like hell itself! After the revolution started, and the Shah fell amongst all that chaos, Ava was summoned home in a terrible haste. I hugged her tight as we both cried and cried.

“We mailed it to her Sir”, the postal clerk repeated. “You don’t have an address or anything?”
“I’m sorry Sir, but like I already said, there isn’t one”, she responded to my obsessive pleading. “Now have a nice day... or I’ll have to call security.”
I haven’t heard from her since.

Staring at the awesome destruction... the surreal landscape.
Ava just vanished from my life.

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Entering the northern suburb of Tehran feels like we’ve crossed some kind of invisible barrier... the harm’s bad... a 9.6 quake will cause destruction for miles... wrenching to take it all in.
That’s unavoidable.
But just a mere twenty kilometers north of the hell I’ve been working in these past few days... and I see nothing... not one cluster of flattened apartment buildings?? “This is embassy country”, Adam yells after Matti whispers something in Farsi to him.

Speeding.
That’s probably why I’m seeing less damage... many of the trees... the lush parks... many of them are not even uprooted?? The sprawling university campuses... the lighting of these sports complexes are still standing?? Shopping malls with big advertising signs, tilted a bit sure, but still very much intact?? There’s no swarm of people?? No desperation?? Twenty kilometers and it feels like a different country?? A different universe??

Matti skillfully skirts the many annoying concrete chunks... as gas-smelling smoke spews out the tailpipe... making me light-headed.
No sewage draining on the street??
No animals running around??
And none of those damn excavators??
I’m stunned that most of the buildings have made it through without very much damage at all... there’s not one tent-city?? Not one??

Matti has the car up on almost two wheels.
He then floors it down a long straightaway.

Holding on tight... wind swirling.
Minutes later he turns into a sprawling complex.
And slams on the brakes.
“Let’s go Danny-boy.”

Happy to escape Matti’s driving - I follow Adam with a passion.
On a walkway of interlocking stones... with well-manicured gardens... it looks like the earthquake completely missed this part too??

Up ahead I spot two soldiers on either side of the path.
Adam moves even faster.
Stone-faced the both of them... bookends with their Kalashnikovs... I have seen them all. Adam makes sure to have his Medecins Sans Frontieres badge on the outside of his sweat-stained shirt.
I do the same.
Guns that is.

Holding our badges up as we approach, the soldiers don’t flinch. They let us through with sudden approving nods.
I exhale.
I hate young soldiers.
History’s taught me it’s the older ones that are more predictable, less violent, so matter-of-fact in their demands for indolent bribes... which is then predictably followed by a charming insistence to, “Come... let’s break bread.”
Sharing a giant feast together... and I mean giant... which also includes many overweight family members in the most ostentatious mansion, even by American standards.

Dictatorships are all the same.
“This is the Gatsby-class of the country”, climbing the stairs, “part of the arrangement we had to make to be allowed in. Fuckers”, Adam whispers in a tone of disgust I’ve heard way too many times.
“Everybody needs their pound of flesh”, I add under my breath.

Dictatorships love to seize ANY opportunity to get western help for free and with no strings attached, AND yet still have every intention of continuing to burn our flags during their weekly hate-fest the day AFTER we’re gone.
Fuckers does not even begin to cover it!

Entering the massive white lobby... passing another pair of armed guards staring straight ahead... Adam heads straight for the general information desk.
Calmly moving in, he begins a conversation in Farsi with an Islamic woman in full hijab.

*People moving around.*
He has her cracking a smile instantly - a skill never to be taken lightly when far away from home. I shift my eyes away from his Oscar performance, and begin to try and get my bearings, to try and take stock of the world I’ve just entered.
Religion aside... privilege all smells the same wherever you go... humans can be greedy and horrible to one another everywhere and anywhere. Seeing the waiting room function with such order... the nurse’s station... admitting even... civility framed by spotless floors and every light-bulb working only four days after the quake?? This is simply the stench of the Islamic bourgeoisie class, I remind myself. Even the a/c works perfectly.

Sorry Dad, Politics and Medicine do go together unfortunately - that’s what MSF has taught me. Denying Elitism exists is merely a case of deceptive marketing, because everyone, Nurses, Patients, Doctors, everyone I see here is functioning like a catastrophe never happened.

Axis mundi - Elitism is in us all.

“OK we’re up on the twelfth floor”, Adam returns, then starts leading me down a long hallway.

Both of us passing endless gold-frames of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his beady-eyes... geez they’re everywhere... in each room... down every hallway... with an added sprinkle for today’s ruling Deity... plenty of Supreme Leader Khamenei too.

Adam and I look at each other... no words need to be said.

Approaching two dark-skinned Soldiers book-ending the elevator doors with that same angry fix and full black beard, plus tightly-held machine guns draped across their chests. Creepy place - our eyes mirror as we wait.

*Bing.*

The doors open.

“Salaam.”

“Chodahafez.”

Rings out amongst the Regime’s Cheery Acolytes who enter and exit... it’s impossible to miss the men’s $500 Fabio Renza silk ties... plus the women’s striking European-style in full make-up... their perfume filling the air... even their head-scarves are vibrantly original.

“The darkest places of hell are reserved for those that maintain neutrality in times of moral crisis”, Dad would muse.

He knew.

“Excuse me.”

Adam and I attempt to squeeze in.

“Pardon me.”

If I was here under different circumstances.

*Bing.*
My mind imagines being in attendance at one of the Islamic Republic’s sprawling Nuremberg-type rallies at Azadi Square.

*Bing.*

Hearing their lightness as we ascend.

*Bing.*

The doors open and a few exit.

“Salaam.”

While a few more get in.

“Salaam.”

Adam and I make room, pushing ourselves closer to the back, tolerating the looks.

*Bing.*

The elevator suddenly pulls.

Picturing a massive crowd getting worked up in a Goebbels-type frenzy by their Supreme Dictator; these damn indifferent Collaborators.

*Bing.*

“Excuse me... sorry... pardon me.”

Glancing back at a vacuous group of Machiavellian enablers after finally making it out; who the hell am I kidding? If the ground didn’t open up and swallow millions like it did... I would never have been allowed in here. “Millions are dying and all they can talk about is their damn shopping trips to Dubai”, Adam remarks with disgust as we head towards the Nurse’s station.

I’m beyond disgust.

“I’m Daniel Belrose... a-political man of Medicine”, I keep reminding, “I’m a Medecins Sans Frontieres Doctor and this is my family business”, proudly picturing both Dad and Isaac, and the selfless work they’ve accomplished. “But I’m also a Jew... and anti-semitism is not some tool for ignorant nationalism!”

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Unlike big-city schools, University of Colorado at Denver’s medical program offers several rare educational tracks like rural medicine, cultural clues for illness, gender-based needs... and most importantly, triage in remote locations - all of them serendipitous for my yet unknown future of lick and stick medicine. This is not my first mission of quid pro quo with Adam; I know where I am.

Watching Adam converse with the Nurse... my friend is trying very hard. One must in this job, one must be very creative, like I’d been doing before my fearless friend kidnapped me into this fully equipped state-of-the-art-facility... with perfect air-conditioning. I may not like it.

I never like it.

But I know why I’m here.
After doing my residency at the University of Colorado hospital in Aurora, I applied, and was accepted, to intern at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston under Dr. Martin Galbraith. One of the Planet’s most respected Authorities on Neurology and Neurosurgery, Dad was wholly impressed. A hard-nosed environment definitely... surgeries which had never been attempted in human history were now being undertaken with vigour.

When I showed him the letter he cried.
Chinese, German, Indian, French, Russian, English... every month another Chief of Neurology from another part of the world was following us around, quietly observing, humbled even, which doesn’t come easy to Doctors.
The learning curve was steep.
Dr. Galbraith was a Task Master to be sure.
I got used to functioning on three hours sleep.
Eight years later I could have named any city in the world... and any price, instead I set up walk-in clinics for the neglected in New York, Boston, Denver and Chicago. And I’ll keep opening them throughout the country. My well-insured surgery Patients pay for it all.
“Dr. Ardalan?”, Adam does his thing after arriving at the Nurse’s station.
A woman with heavy mascara holds up a finger.
Adam smiles back with lots of teeth.
She then smiles back too, like she has no choice.
I move my gaze around to kill time, to keep learning something new in this Islamic Republic. The floor looks more spotless than the main lobby was... this place has the feel of a five-star hotel.
“Doctor Adam Babineaux”, a man approaches with an impressively lit-up face, colorful tie, white jacket over powder blue shirt, “so nice to finally be face to face with you.”
“Nice to see you Doctor Ardalan.”
“Please, call me Mansoor”, his tone insists, “I believe formality is not good for a hospital... it defeats the collaborative process”, joining an extra-wide grin.
“OK then Mansoor”, Adam addresses the dark-haired democrat. It’s definitely coloured... I say... hmmm... mid-50’s.
“And this must be the famous Dr. Belrose”, drips from the Boulevardier’s mouth.
“Daniel, please”, reaching in to lock eyes, plus a firm shake.
“Welcome to the Ferdowsi hospital of Elahieh, I am the Chief of Neurology”, he asserts with pompous erectness.
“Impressive place”, setting out to ingratiate in the hopes of getting through this bullshit as quickly as possible, staring into a round and friendly face that basks in my sycophancy. There’s hardly human despair filling the air here.
“I’ve heard a lot about you Daniel... especially your work with Dr. Galbraith. Amongst my Interns you are, how do I say, like a Rock Star.”
“Daniel’s the best there is, we’re lucky to have him”, Adam adds with a tenor I hear when he needs to fulfill a promise, a grand bargain in these nations of inbred inducement.

"Nothing is more creative, more dangerous, than a brilliant mind with purpose”, Dad assured.

“How can we help Doctor?”, Adam pushes. We’ve done this so many times in our MSF careers. “Doctors... please.”
We follow Mansoor’s short, but very determined steps.
“The earthquake was devastating”, talking as he leads, “I’ve got Patients with bruised and broken limbs, hips especially... but mostly what I’ve got is lots of hematomas from all that falling debris. It’s been awful.”

“You’ve got concussions!”, I want to scream at the top of my lungs. With every step down this spotless hallway, my mind won’t stop wondering what kind of deal MSF had to make with this guy? And what my best friend had to say to Berman to get me out of there?
Adam’s posture reminds we need to cozy up to this quack if we have any hopes of getting out of here, listening to this sad excuse for a Doctor ramble. I’ve got crushed skulls, sheared-off limbs... comas where I don’t even know if they’re going to wake up or not? Or if they should? I’ve got so many battered bodies - and this guy wants a consult on a little dizziness?!

"You must commit to imagining the unimaginable if you want to be a true healer”, Dad would remind over and over, “emotions cloud the mind.”

“OK let’s see what you’ve got”, trying my best to expedite. A cozy office in tony Manhattan, playing golf on Fridays - entering the first room – was never seeded in the Belrose DNA. A room for two that would easily be used for four back home, maybe even six, offering plenty of privacy for those fortunate Patients and their families - comfy leather sofas and plasma televisions to pass the time. I treat 10 of their Gatsby-class, so I can save 100,000 of their poor illiterates down south - twenty years and counting Adam and I have been playing this game.
“I have some CAT scans I want a second opinion on”, standing over the Patient, “some MRI’s on their entire skeleton... and ultrasounds of all the vessels from the neck down.”
There are no other options in my MSF world.
“No problem Mansoor”, forming my own devious strategy of quid pro quo. I grab his Patient’s chart with confidence.
There are never any other options and I know it.
“This is Mr. Aref Moradi, he came in complaining of headaches and dizziness. As you can see the cut was pretty bad”, pointing to his forehead, “he needed fifty stitches.” Mansoor hovers like a nervous Parent.
Neurology is related to the human nervous system, not the bloody caste system; this guy doesn’t know from bad! Earthquakes have been known to make things fall even on rich people - but poor people better beware... because shoddy construction makes more things fall on them!

Mansoor and I spend the next two hours meeting with twenty-two of his Patients - going over every single diagnosis in great detail, while developing a strategy for treatment. Four concern me so much that if their state doesn’t improve over the next twelve hours with these new treatments, I’m going to need to open them up. I have no idea what I’m going to find... or if the Staff and all this shiny equipment is even up to speed??
Oh, and by the way, there are no female Patients on this floor.

“How is Elias this morning?”
“Good Dr. Ardalan.”
“I thought I told you to call me Mansoor.”
“I’m good Mansoor.”
“Did you sleep last night?”
“A little.”
“More than two hours?” “No.”
“Daniel, this is the Patient that can’t sleep for more than two hours... a sharp pain in the right side of his head always wakes him”, handing me the envelope with the patient’s CAT scan.
Seeing the last name Abadi doesn’t even register; what are the odds?
_Taking a long look holding it up to the light._
Abadi is like Smith.

I then put it back in the envelope after seeing enough.
And then accept his general chart from Mansoor.

_Reading all the particulars closely._
“He had three seizures in an hour yesterday”, adds a hovering Mansoor.
“How are you feeling today Elias?”, moving in to check his retina response from my pen light.
“OK I guess... I’ve noticed my fingers have started to tingle every so often.”
“What hand?”
“My left.”
Putting my pen away, and closing his chart. “Try and get some rest... I’m going to give you a new medicine that’s going to allow you to sleep.” A smile breaks out on my new Patient, a genuine smile on a warm face... a face of experience. His eyes look familiar. “I promise you’ll be out for six hours at least”, returning with my own warmth.
“Thanks Doctor.”

Once out of the room.
“He has a lot of swelling on the right side.”
“I know... his white cell count is sky-high.”
“We don’t have a lot more time to wait”, I need to stress, “this man is a stroke waiting to happen. We need to hydrate him like hell over the next twelve hours if we’re going to need surgery.”
Mansoor looks confused, “I’ve never operated that close to the stem.”
“I’m going to do my best to make sure you don’t have to.”
I’m stone serious.

“We are all related”, Dad implanted in me, “even the ignorant.”

“We’ll meet back here at the top of every hour.”
Exhibiting the look of a scared child, Mansoor’s once-gregarious face is flaccid. This one worries me too.

“Never let them see you sweat”, Dr. Martin Galbraith repeated every morning before rounds.

“I’m not going to leave until he’s in the clear”, pumping up my hesitant host. “Good... that’s very good”, he sighs with relief as we walk together. I’ve moved swiftly from room to room this entire afternoon, providing Mansoor’s Patients... or maybe Patrons is more accurate... well whatever they are I’ve given them all an A to Z service fit for Royalty. Ordering so many preventative scans, blood work, poking and prodding, that there’s a good chance they’ll be healthier than before the quake!
I started at 11 this morning.
Its visit number 7 for Elias.

I enter quietly... respectful to let my Patient sleep... only getting close enough to read all the numbers on a slew of contraptions
“Money is no object”, the collaborative Mansoor insisted when describing whatever is needed for his Patients. Jotting down my readings; I just compartmentalize the anger, it’s the only way to survive the unfairness.
“Hello Elias.”
My Patient opens his eyes slowly.
“How’s that hand doing?”
“The only good news is that it hasn’t gotten worse... small miracles”, he shrugs.
“You know I’ve never had the chance to ask you”, checking his other eye, “how did your English get so good?”
“I studied at Columbia another lifetime ago.”
Reaching for his wrist, a frail wrist... feeling for a pulse, staring at my watch... timing the beats.
Suddenly a large man walks into the room.
“Baba”, straight to the opposite side of the bed.
He reaches in to kiss Elias on both cheeks. “Hello Reza”, Elias’s tone becomes noticeably different.
The Man stays next to the railing of the bed.
“Dr. Belrose, this is my son... Lieutenant Colonel Reza Abadi of the Qud’s first battalion.”
Finished with his pulse, I turn to lean forward... we lock eyes.
A firmer shake than what’s considered normal around here... that’s a cold gaze reflecting back.
“How is my Father doing Doctor?”
“He’s doing better... but the next twenty-four hours is what I want to know. I’m trying this new medication, hopefully it will kick in fast.”
Choosing to focus on his Father’s chart after the Lieutenant’s disapproving glance; I’m not feeling the love... not at all... only a blast of bigotry. The Qud’s force?... The Qud’s force?... my mind calibrates... of course... seeing it in his body language. The most fanatic of the armed forces... earthquake or not this guy does not want me in his country. To these Manchurian Candidates I’m only an Infidel, end of story.
Reza’s well-pressed, well-fitted Army uniform seems to put everyone on the defensive.
“Elias’ vitals have stabilized nicely.”
Mansoor smiles in relief.
“But we still have to watch the medication a while longer. Mansoor can you schedule a CAT scan for tomorrow please... I want to get a better look inside that wily head of yours.”
“I’m just an old man Doctor... nothing but silly old traditions in here.”
“Ya well, some of those silly old traditions are probably not so silly.”
“I’ll see you later Elias... Daniel... Reza”, Mansoor scurries out as frenetic as he arrived.
“Are you feeling any discomfort?”
“No.”
“Is your hand still tingling?”
“Off and on.”
“Can you sleep?”
“I can... but only until you come see me every hour.”
I grin, “That’s because I like you... I like all my Patients.”
“I can see the passion to help in your eyes. I have a daughter who is a Doctor, she has that same passion for her Patients as you”, grabbing my wrist to come closer.
“Unfortunately this place isn’t kind to intelligent women”, so a seated and distracted Reza can’t hear.
Sitting down next to him from his obvious tug.
“But that’s probably my generation’s fault... we were so naive.”
Reza abruptly gets up after finding nothing on the television... his move towards us ends the conversation.
“Is there anything I can do for my Father?”
“Just help him get some rest.”
“I see.”
“Baba”, suddenly hits the room like a bomb, “I miss you Baba.”
Instantly my heart speeds up.
Turning towards that sound that’s just entered the room; it’s been twenty-seven years, what I see staring back freezes me.
A black headscarf.
*My eyes can’t help but fixate.*
Over very modest clothing.
In barely a second she breaks free from my stare, and walks towards her Father. Reza saw it.
“Hello Baba... how are you feeling?”, showering him with loving kisses.
I caught the curiosity in his beady eyes.
“Better. Ava meet my new Doctor.”
Fanatics are fuelled by paranoia.
“Hello Doctor, very nice to meet you.”
Her eyes telling me our past is to be a secret; but why? Why not share those fabulous memories from back in Denver?
“Is my Father a good Patient?”
“He is that... and a very wise one too.”
Feeling Reza’s burning stare from over my shoulder.
“The medicine is going to take twenty-four hours to work. I’m watching all his vitals. All he needs to do is rest and keep up his fluids.”
“Rest and drink Baba... that sounds like every day for you”, her sweet laugh travels through me like it was only yesterday.
Cell-phone vibrating.
“Excuse me I have to take this”, Reza excuses himself from the room.
“Doctor, this is my daughter I was talking about. She has the same passion for helping her Patients as you.”
Remaining controlled, when all I want is to run over and give her a big hug.
“You must be very proud of her Elias.”
“I am... I most certainly am”, fading away into a much-needed slumber.
“You get some rest Elias”, tucking him in, “I’ll be back in an hour.”
From either side of Elias’ bed we leave. She leads me to the other area, where an empty bed rests.
She raises her hand and... draws the curtain for privacy.
Finally we’re alone.
“I’m sorry Daniel... I’m so sorry”, blurs from her sad eyes.
“Don’t be sorry Ava.”
“I am... I’m so sorry.”
“Please don’t cry”, pulling out a handkerchief.
“I had to come back... I had to... the Revolution... then the War”, wiping her tears away. “And then the killing... and the religion... it’s been horrible Daniel... really horrible.”
Like arrows her eyes take aim.
“I’ve missed you Daniel.”
I could just live right here.
“Every day I missed you.”
Staring into those amazing eyes.
Twenty-seven years and that’s all I’ve ever wanted to hear - acknowledgment of her feelings... of our feelings, that it was all so very mutual, just like I thought.
May Alana and the kids forgive me, I’ve never loved anybody like I did Ava Abadi - even if she did leave without saying goodbye.
Footsteps coming from the doorway.
Ava quickly wipes away her tears, and impressively composes in seconds; poor thing must have plenty of practise living under such repression.
“So what do we do now”, Reza enters like a man who likes to ask all the questions.
“I’m checking your Father every hour to make sure everything’s fine.”
“Is there anything more you need Doctor?... anything?... because if there is I am sure I can help”, Reza asks with explicit directness.
“Just rest and time...”, trying to get out of this conversation, “just rest and time”, moving towards the exit.
“Thank you Doctor”, hearing Ava’s crackling reply.

That Reza scares me.
Four hours later.
“Good evening Doctor”, Ava rises slowly from having dosed-off in a cramped chair.
I move straight for all the machines. Then pull out a pen and observe all the new readings.
I see no reason to wake Elias.
“Everything good?”, Reza pipes up as he enters.
“Looks very good, his vitals are starting to improve dramatically”, taking stock of the new numbers.
“That’s great news”, Ava adds a stare of gratitude.
Older, with more ignorance in her life I’m sure; her beauty is still very much there for me.
Taking his pulse.
Her presence makes me excited.
Recording the numbers.
But I show nothing. “I’m fairly certain your Father is going to sleep through the night, going home to get a good night’s rest is not only important for him you know. Don’t worry... I’ll be back first thing, before his eyes open.”
“You’re probably right Doctor”, Ava’s tired voice concurs.
“He’s in good hands here. You should both go and get some rest.”
“Can I give you a ride Doctor?”, Reza offers.
“No I’m fine... I’ll grab a taxi.”
“That is not acceptable”, he shoots back with a deep tone, “I insist Doctor.”
It sounds like an order.
Turning to face Ava, “And you should get home to Issa... I’ll call you a car.”
Broad shoulders in a deeply-revered uniform of war; nobody seems to question anything coming out of Reza’s mouth.
“Thank you... can you give me ten minutes just to finish up.”
“We’ll meet in the lobby downstairs”, Reza orders.
“Thanks Reza”, Ava kisses her brother on both cheeks.
“Thank-you Doctor”, a brief glance like strangers, before leaving looking tired.
Ava’s seemingly had to learn to survive here, because she was never this kind of subservient woman, not one bit.
“Good night”, I send her way.
I’m feeling sad.

A black tinted Mercedes sedan reserved for our wealthiest back home.
“Thanks for this.”
“No problem.”
After pulling out of the hospital parking lot.
Horns blowing.
Reza aggressively navigates the packed streets at close to midnight. 
*Motorcycles flying by the window.*
“Quite the chaos.”
Reza smirks, but says nothing to my obvious statement; traffic here is probably the worst I’ve ever seen... anywhere.
“I’ve got to make a stop.”
Winding up, through the very narrow streets of formidable privilege.
“It won’t take long.”
My eyes remain glued to the amazing world beyond the glass - third world wealth never ceases to amaze.

Ten minutes later Reza pulls up in front of a giant... *holy shit*... a giant stone house with lush gardens.
He puts it in park.
Then shuts off the car.
He then decisively turns, reaching for something in the back seat.
He opens a black jacket, and then strangely removes his starched military one.
He puts the new one on quickly, the civilian one.
He zips it all the way to the neck - as if purposely wanting to hide his military shirt underneath.
“Come on”, he orders with that same tone that goes through me.
I follow.
And try to keep up to his determined pace.
His Officer stride heads down a long path on one side of the house.
As if knowing exactly where he’s going... he continues towards the back of this poorly-lit mansion.
*I keep pace the best I can.*
Suddenly he stops at a fence.
He leans over, unlatching this massive wrought-iron gate without hesitation; surely I have nothing to worry about entering these exclusive streets of Tehran with a Lieutenant Colonel of the Qud’s force?
Once we’re through - the ground under my feet starts to thud.
*Boom Boom.*
Continuing into the massive backyard... the vibrations feel like they’re getting closer. “Stay close”, Reza turns around with an expressionless face.
A few steps more into the trees, Reza bends down into the tall thick grass, and pulls up a hidden cellar door. The second he does, he unleashes that bass into the sticky night air.
He then begins down the stairs... smack dab into that thunderous bass.

Where the hell is he going?
After twenty steps or so into Mother Nature’s cool earth; I’m now standing with Reza... looking straight into a scene right out of Sodom and Gomorrah’s Old Testament.
The alcohol.
The dirty dancing.
The lubricious groping.
The herbal aroma.
So this is the Islamic Republic?
*Standing dumbfounded in this medieval silk-road opium den.*
So this is religion?
*Staring into soft-lighting and candles.*
A quick turn to my right and... and... Reza’s gone.
“Hello handsome”, a long-haired barely-dressed brunette whispers in my ear.
“I’m just waiting for someone”, over the ear-splitting noise.
Her silhouette is striking.
“Sure”, she takes my hand anyways. Her soft skin squeezes that hand... and leads me into one of the many rooms.
“I’m just waiting for myyy...”
Clearly not interested in my pleadings... she’s heading, along with my hand, for the corner of a massive sectional spilling-over with horny party-goers laughing and touching. Have seen plenty in my travels... guiding me to sit... but I’ve never seen anything like this??
Suddenly the long-limbed Siren starts to rub her hand up and down, as if she more than approves of my thigh. As she moves closer, one of her nipples pops out. “I love American men”, she announces into my ear. She follows her declaration with a very determined sucking of my earlobe.
A Waiter appears from out of nowhere, with a full tray.
“Thank-you”, my host grabs two.
“Cheers”, she taps mine, “bottoms up”, in an English heavy with Persian overtones. It’s the last thing I remember.

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Checking all the relevant machines, verifying them with my final readings from last night... which, according to my exhausted body, feels like a lifetime ago; what was in that drink?
Staring quietly into the day’s first rays of magnificence coming over the Alboorz peaks, sipping my strong coffee lost in thought; what was her name?
“This place is not Denver that’s for sure.”
“Excuse me?”, startled by my Patient’s first words of the day.
“Or the University of Colorado.”
Moving in closer... shocked by what I think I’ve just heard from my now very mysterious Patient. “Ava told you?”
“She didn’t need to.”
“I’m not sure I follow?”
“When your daughter cries herself to sleep for months after she returns from studying abroad... a Father knows a broken heart when he sees it.”
I’m quiet while staring at Elias.
“I should never have allowed her to come back to this mess. I should have made her stay right where she was.”
“How did you know it was me?”
“I didn’t until I saw her face yesterday.” Elias swallows hard a few times... then gets unexpectedly silent. I’m in his hands and we’re going at his pace... I’m all ears.
“She doesn’t even look at her husband like that”, tears visibly welling, “she could have fulfilled all her promise... been free to be as ambitious as she wanted.” He reaches to wipe them away. “I’ll never forgive myself.” Grabbing his trembling hand... his sudden bout with brutal honesty has rendered me speechless.
“I’m sorry for Reza”, aiming his stares at the hanging Khomeini.
“Sorry for Reza?”
“Yes... for his attitude. That boy sees everything as a Zionist conspiracy”, pointing at the picture of the hanging Supreme Leader. “He never had a chance for a mind of his own.”
“Oh”, I swallow hard.
“I should have stopped it.”
Seeing sadness overcome his face. “I should have encouraged them both to follow their hearts. I should have sent them away and insisted they never come back.” Struggling to catch his breath... “I should have... I should have been more forthright”, coughing uncontrollably.
“Easy Elias”, bringing a glass of water to his lips.
“Thank-you Daniel.”
Helping him drink, slowly.
“No problem”, watching over my patient; deep catharsis can be a telling sign.
“Daniel, I want you to do something for me please.”
“Sure Elias... anything.”
“Can you bring me my wallet... it’s in the left breast pocket of my jacket.”
I stand, and head for the closet.
After opening, I spot his black blazer hanging there all alone.
Feeling it right away, thick and well-worn, like any Grandfather’s cherished possession.
I move to hand it to him.
“Thank –You.”
And take a seat.
He fumbles through the bulging leather with fraying papers... digging in with his arthritic fingers. His face lights up when he finds what he’s looking for. “Here”, a deep stare at it. He then hands me a round, tarnished, metal object, that I’m sure was sparkling silver way back when.
Fitting it in the palm of my hand, I observe it closely.
On the first side I see a heart engraved in the metal... just a thin outline that’s 80% of the medallion’s size.
Turning it over, I begin to silently read the inscription.

*History prefers legends to men.*
*Idolatry to honesty.*
*Soaring speeches to quiet deeds.*
*Fantastic battles to preventing blood.*
*Always challenge history.*
*For what is built on falsehoods.*
*Is false itself.*

*Rabbi Daniel Abadi, 1865*

My eyes look up.

“When I’m gone please make sure Ava gets this, and tell her I love her so much... and that I’m sorry I ruined her destinyyyyy...”, his head slumps to one side. His body goes lifeless as his eyes roll back.

“ELIAS! ELIAS! ELIAS!”... yelling over the piercing sound coming out of those damn machines... *BEEP BEEP BEEP.*

“ELIAS! ELIAS!” Checking his retina response. “I NEED SOME HELP IN HERE!... I NEED SOME HELP NOW!”... pressing the emergency button on the wall.

*BEEP BEEP...* keeps blaring out uninterrupted.

“Come on Elias... come on... I don’t want to give this to her... you need to give this to her”, checking his heart-rate. “Don’t do this Elias... don’t fuckin’ do this”, dropping his headrest.
My heart pounds with fear.
I’ve decided to move him myself.
Once out of the room, a flock of Nurses and a frightened-looking Doctor move in.
“He needs to be operated on right now! Show me where it is.”

“The course Doctor”, one of the Nurses responds in perfect English, “follow me.”
My legs propel me with adrenalin as I push Elias... beads of sweat escape my forehead as I can’t stop imagining screams from Ava if she was here seeing this.
BING.
Pushing an unconscious Elias into the elevator.

BING.
I can’t stop pleading with my maker that his brain isn’t flooded with his own blood when I open him up, and that this god-damn hotel has all the proper equipment. Otherwise... not allowing my mind to go there... BING... I’ve operated on tens of thousands of broken bodies in my life. “Come on let’s move everybody!” Some so young you just want to crawl into a ball and cry for the raw deal they’ve been handed in life.

“OK, on the count of three... one, two, three... up.”
Step one - Elias is on the operating table.
“I’m going to wash up. I want him out in the next three minutes.”
“Yes Doctor.”
Everyone scrambling... attaching all the proper tubes.
“I want everything ready to go by then!”
“Yes Doctor”, head-nurse Vida responds.

Pushing open the door of the next room... ripping off my shirt and pants... putting on my scrubs as if my life depended on it.
Leaning over the sink with short, rhythmic scrubbing - my head’s full of what I need to do first, second, third... turning left to grab a towel. Reza’s sinister gaze is looking through the glass.
I stare back with uncontainable concern while drying my hands.
Our eyes lock.
Dripping sweat down my temples... his face doesn’t move an inch. I take a final stare... and toss the towel in the bin... and then head in.
“We are all related, we are all related... Baruch Ata Adonei Elo-hanu Melech Ha-Olum Shehechee-anu Vekee-amanu Veheegee-anu Lazman Hazee.”

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Exiting the last row of swinging doors from the restricted operating area, my scrubs are soiled in sweat that comes from standing over Elias these past sixteen hours. Every part of my body wants to scream in pain; I had no intention of letting anybody lead one second of this surgery. This is the benevolent father of the first and only great love of my life - a few altered twists of life’s compass and she could have been my wife, mother of my children, and he could have been my father-in-law. Opening to go through... Ava’s the first face I see.

Leaping to her feet.
She’s in front of me in seconds. Her bloodshot eyes staring back, waiting for a sign her father didn’t die on the table.
Her anticipation’s palpable.
“He’s going to be OK.”
Ava leaps into my arms. Clearly against policy... and not just of this hospital... tears roll down her cheeks nonstop. “Thank You Daniel... thank you so much.”
Seemingly not interested about the perception??
“You were brought here to save his life”, she whispers in my ear, “I will always love you my Daniel.”
Weak in the knees for a second.
“Elias is a very tough guy”, exits fast to deflect the rising emotion welling up.
Thankfully we’re contained in the corner.
Others from the team file-by with a look of complete exhaustion... every one of them admitting they never dreamed of being a part of anything like this in their careers; that’s Massachusetts’s General and Medecins Sans Frontiérer’s training. Looking back confidently at them.
One is not good without the other! This herd mentality breeds such apprehension, not a risk-taker in the bunch... Mansoor included; this Islamic Republic thing is not what I thought.
“Come here!”, I instructed them, “you can do this... just concentrate. That’s good.... very good.”
Same words Dr. Galbraith said to me every friggin’ day.
I was desperate. I needed them to step up or else Elias was doomed.

“Good night Doctor”, the last two Nurses file past.
“Good night”, I smile back.
They absolutely did rise to the challenge, taking off my cap. “We were able to stop the bleeding and repair the rupture. The damage was minimal because we got him into surgery so fast.”
Ava holds my hand as we speak. Her eyes are fixed into mine. Her aura surges my body as I try to concentrate on my words. “That group was superhuman in there, I’m telling you Ava they were something.”
Seeing her try to digest my robust accolades for the staff; I understand why she distrusts everything here... patriarchal societies and intelligent women are combustible at best.
“He’s going to be sleeping for the rest of the day, so I suggest you go home and come back tomorrow”, looking at my watch. “He should be awake around now.”
“I think I will, but you have to promise me you’ll come to my house for dinner and meet my family before you leave.”
“I will do that... I will definitely do that.”
Seeing the smile on her face take shape, “That’s great... then I’ll see you tomorrow.” People all around us now; there is no kiss.
“You will... now come, let me walk you out.”
It took twenty-seven years to see such brilliant incandescence.
“I’ll see you tomorrow”, closing the door of the taxi.
Ava sends back a smile and short wave.
After seeing her drive off, I walk into the warm breeze of another Tehran summer night. Instinctively I stop at the illuminated entrance... and tighten up. Sitting on one of the many scattered benches, I spot Reza having a cigarette... one of those three-quarter-sized puffs they call BahMan.
I decide to walk over and confront this brute once and for all.
“You mind if I join you?”
“No at all... smoke?”
“No I’m good”, sitting down... that feels so good, my aching back yells.
“You have good news on my Father.”
“You already know?”
“No... I’ve been waiting down here, the smell of hospitals gives me a headache”, blowing out another puff. “But when I saw my Sister wasn’t hysterical, I realized the old man is going to be around a little while longer.”
I can’t hold it in one second more. “You left me there on purpose.”

Blowing out another puff... and another... so arrogantly slow, and unhurried.

“I think honesty is a vital standard between a Doctor and his Patient’s family... or should I say first love. Wouldn’t you agree?”
Instantly shrinking to the inference... I tilt up tongue-tied at the star-filled sky.
Reza continues to smoke without moving a muscle... not one.

Time passes, and as it does, he keeps drawing deeply on that damn cigarette.
I remain hushed because I don’t know Reza’s game yet?? I’ve been to enough third-world kleptocracies to know there’s always a game... just wait, and sure enough it’ll come; it’s the waiting that can drive you crazy.

Continuing to stare straight ahead, Reza keeps enjoying his now shortened smoke.
I’m fixed into the comings and goings of the hospital; another lesson learned... don’t rush it, never rush it... these Savages think differently... but they all have a price.
“I really appreciate what you did for my Father... I mean it. And I appreciate your very wise choice of deciding to spend a few more days making sure he’s back on track to a full recovery”, blowing out another puff.
Taxis pulling up.
Doors opening and closing.
People exiting, entering, smoking around the vast hospital entrance.
Taxis leaving out the other end of the drive-up carousel.
Most of the other benches are occupied too; I never said I was staying?
“You’re free to see my Sister as often as you like while you keep a very close eye on my Father. I’m sure she’s already invited you to her house for dinner.”

We lock eyes.

“It’s a Persian thing about having foreigners over for dinner... suppose to be a blessing. I think the world of my Sister, so do what she asks and make her happy.”

He leans in towards me, “I know what you’re thinking... it’s a pity she can’t be head of a department, but so what, there’s an Islamic Republic to run.”

Reza turns back into the movements.

“Don’t worry... I know the difference between a Zionist spy and a good empathetic Jewish Doctor.”

Puffing away... an original expression appears on his face. “You know we lived on a street that was full of Jews when I was growing up. Captains of every type of industry you can think of. Hard workers I’ll definitely say that... real contributors to Iran... a crooked Iran of course.”

He must have spotted my squirms.

“Oh relax, if I wanted you in jail that would have happened already. Petty I am not.” Reza rises to his feet.

Standing up tall... he takes another deep inhale.

He then empties his lungs while unabashedly flicking the thoroughly-used butt quite-a-ways in the distance. “I don’t want to have to explain you as anything more than an old friend from college who happened to be here to help those poor quake victims”, dropping an envelope down beside me.

Opening it... I feel a chill slither my body.

A dozen pictures at least... pictures of me performing the most perverted things to that sultry seductress from last night... and her liking it apparently. There’s some of her doing things to me too.

“You’ve got three days”, he turns and walks away.

Throwing the envelope down beside me in disgust; Elias was right. Reaching in my pocket... transfixed on that treasured medallion... at the prescient dagger of irony from Rabbi Daniel Abadi’s words.

*What is built on falsehoods is false itself.*

Lifting my head in total shock, especially from Reza’s now-revealed bloodlines... seeing him disappear into the darkness.

Do I say anything?