

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 that is 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 that is stuffed so friggin' tight with so many very suspicious building practises; I've been dying here in my seat these last few hours. I can't stop bouncing... and the airport was a zoo... a total and complete zoo... and now I'm on a crowded bus attempting to navigate hell itself! Clearly the local Planning Department in this place has been endorsed by a building-code corruption reality that must go back decades, maybe even centuries, because the Driver, despite what I'm seeing out this window, is performing miracles trying to travel these mangled roads. "Here put this on", a hand reaches into my face. Desperate does not begin to cover what I'm seeing on the other side of this glass... these damn potholes just go on forever! "I mean it", her firm face makes sure I heard. I look at the mask she just gave me... checking it out to see if it's worth it; I've seen plenty of these contraptions. The second I put it underneath my seat the Bus finally starts to slow down. The Driver then carefully... and I mean carefully... inch by inch in fact... tries to maneuver this beast into a sprawling camp of another type of organized chaos. "I want everybody to listen to me", the speakers blare. A woman stands at the front, she has the microphone in her hand and a face that means business; no doubt she is the person assigned with the gargantuan task of getting all the medical staff on this bus to the quake site. Tough task! "Nobody can leave this bus without having their mask on... there will be no exceptions, none." Really tough! 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?

"Check in at the table over there."

Stumbling for a second from the scores of rotting corpses in this scorching heat... my heart always races when I get off any bus. "Ok." One million dead in a day... just like that! I'm looking around with a mask that's not working so well.

No bombs.

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

No hatred.

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

No violence.

Just good old Mother Nature.

Hearing non-stop cries all around me.

Landlord of our precious Earth.

I'm trying to skirt the makeshift triage the ground has definitely become.

A blessed geography with blessed natural resources.

I'm moving fast now... like a running back dodging tacklers. I've already dropped my knapsack... and I need to get rid of this damn 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 anyways. "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!" A blonde older Nurse with sweat stains on her clothes approaches. I lose my balance... from head to toe my body immediately halts from another aftershock. Both of us grab onto a concrete boulder for dear life, there is nothing over a few stories that has been left standing; we both wait. The sweat keeps pouring out of me in this heat; and we wait. It is an enormous force that shoots through your legs... releasing a power you can't deny.

"I'll get more help right away Doctor", the same Nurse with the very 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. "Now!" Treating the injured, the maimed - it's like putting a finger on a rushing dam. "Take her straight into the surgery tent!" There's no time to overheat. Rushing to three small ones that are 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.

Riding my ten-speed through a leafy Campus that is absolutely perfect for trying to learn anything from a book... passing building after building with what must be the biggest grin plastered on my face... because that's all it takes some days. With a touch of Marlboro-Man ruggedness in the peaked distance everything here is so lush and green, those snow-caps look like they're touching heaven. Twisting and bending through roads that have an eyeful on both sides, trimmed hedges, thick towering trees, and flowers of all colors - compared to back home this place is another Planet. The Oaks, and some are really massive Oaks I must say, arch-in from either side to create this canopy that makes you feel like Mother Nature just wants to hug you. Corny I know.

After that last challenging corner I finally can see them... after a journey that filled me with boatloads of optimism I ride up to them sitting on a perfectly-trimmed lawn. "Hello Everybody." "Hey Daniel", is repeated by all... by 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, and moving into the huddled anxiety.

The glorious Rockies at our back... plus an ideal breeze, "Everybody ready?", I ask louder this time trying to 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 cheerfulness 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 meant only for her. Her eyes... dark and enthralling times a thousand.

Her hair... long and shiny in the same mysterious tone.

Her body is curvaceous with a sexy-as-hell gait. Her brains. Her laugh. I’ve never met a woman like her - and I do ok for myself on Campus.

“I wish I was as confident as you”, her nervous face looks back.

Causing sleepless nights weeks before the semester even begins - Organic Chemistry is renowned for stopping accolade-rich Undergrads right in their tracks. *Bam* - “You’re not as smart as you think you are!”

That one wakes us all up in the middle of the night; probably why speed pills are such an easy sell, which are as trouble-free to get on Campus as a can of coke, by the way.

For most of us 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.

After six days of little sleep plus too-many deaths in ways that medical school just cannot teach; 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 work 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 in a disaster zone that the world unequivocally cannot get access to; I can’t sleep a damn wink! Never have I used any Pharmacology before, and I won’t start now. They might help you stay up around the clock... and then finally sleep; but they can become a habit that won’t know how to stop. I don’t judge... we’re all trained Professionals here. I’ve seen lots over the years.

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

In a land that overflows with tribal allegiances that foment very lethal sectarian divides, which in the end enables 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. The man has no problems denying the most unthinkable crime that just so happens to have been committed against my extended family. Those barbaric Nazis 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.

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

Lifting 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.

Looking up lazily at the night's star-filled sky... and yet I must still remind myself how spectacular it can still be even in the most wretched places. Sitting on a giant boulder outside my flimsy communal tent that smells of 'disaster zone'... I'm having a peaceful moment. "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, she appeared from out of nowhere. "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.

"Come on in and join me."

Moving-in towards a sink that is already being used, "What have we got?"

"I'll leave you two alone", Nurse Big-Eyes leaves as quickly as she appeared.

I lean-in and start washing my hands over the plastic sink that comes in stainless steel at any normal hospital back home. From that run, or more like chase, my heart is exploding... it's beating so fast I can feel sweat pouring out of me all over again. "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?"

Both of us are scrubbing ferociously... instinctively 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 do you have ready to go?"

You can see the lack of control in our eyes I bet.

"You're looking at her."

My legs go weak.

Throwing her towel in the bin, "Oh and my in-country liaison told me these are the offspring of some very high-up Mullahs." Doctor blue-eyes leads me in, "So no slacking."

I am Doctor Daniel Belrose... a-Political Man of Medicine, and I'm about to operate in a tent.

Unlike the chaotic and confusing 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 more 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, it was the family business - but only the Belrose way. Six generations of healing men of 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 his 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 night-time 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 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 from 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."

I gradually stand. "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!”

And start 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 Daniel’s 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 and he’s off. Keeping up the family business, in this part of their lives they’re inseparable, he’s the brother Daniel never had... nor sees much. Living life out of a knapsack... Daniel cannot remember how many times he has pleaded with him to work even one day a week at his Harlem Clinic. “Damn it you can do it for free”, Daniel insisted. Money means nothing to Adam. Instead he’s a Citizen of the World whose convivial aura fills any catastrophe zone with smiles and laughter; yet when the blood starts to fly he’s as sharp as a Cobra at saving lives, it’s what their 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 home 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 Daniel... that was their 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 their cups in the garbage.

“That I can’t help you with”, curious to check up on his 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.

As early as Daniel Belrose can remember he felt trapped by his Dad’s big powerful words and very deep gaze; a Master Diagnostician confident in his craft, no exaggeration Daniel truly idolized his Dad. Both young and confused when hearing that first argument for the first time... like it was yesterday he remembers their voices, and Mom’s endless tears. “You have a family Henri, you just can’t walk into a war zone without any protection”, screaming of desperation.

“I must Claire! I must!”, Dad kept pleading.

That high-pitched conversation seemed to go on forever.

“What’s the matter?”, standing there confused in his pyjamas.

“Go back to bed Daniel.”

“Where are you going Dad?”, standing and scared for sure, but still standing his ground.

“I said go back to bed.”

Two days later Henri was gone.

The house was now teeming with anxiety and sadness; Adam went through the same trauma. For three whole months nobody saw their Dads... which felt like forever. Every day Mom cried, it was awful. Only later, when they finally returned home noticeably thinner and paler, did everyone realize how lucky they were 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 Daniel’s Dad was there. It was 1971 and Medecins Sans Frontieres was born; the family business.

“How are they doing?”

“Good Doctor. How are you doing?”

Still brooding over the four that didn’t make it, “Surviving.”

Jella Perkommen is a forty-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.

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-apatetic 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 Daniel are going on twenty.

Sri Lanka 1986-2005.

Kosovo 1993.

Rwanda 1994.

Haiti 1996.

Sierra Leone 1998.

And now seemingly the biggest of them all... Tehran 2006.

“COME ON!”, hits barely two steps out of that sweaty hospital tent.

Honking.

“DANNY-BOY COME ON!”, Adam screams with his 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!”

Daniel jogs towards it.

“Two tickets to paradise”, Adam cries after his buddy slams 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?

Bright and serious... yet still precocious in a naive sort of way; Ava had lots of friends... but Daniel 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; love just snuck up on the two of them. Intoxicating and very Cosmopolitan... plus a melting accent that made him smile; Daniel was definitely smitten. Add in a boatload of youthful hormones and they were inseparable, it was mutual - that he knew for sure.

“May Alana forgive me... but I’ve never loved like that”, Daniel repeats to himself only.

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. She was never without her 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 though 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 Daniel's eyes. A few sentences later she said she wanted him... and he couldn't have been happier; although a Jew and a Muslim Daniel 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. They hugged tightly as they 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 responds to his obsessive pleadings, "now have a nice day... or I'll have to call security", with tone.

Ava just vanished from Daniel's life, and he hasn't heard from her since.

Entering the northern suburb of Tehran feels like the crossing of some kind of invisible barrier, the harm's bad, a 9.6 quake will cause destruction for miles... 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. That's probably why I'm seeing less damage... many of the trees, and the lush parks... many of them are not even uprooted?? The sprawling University Campuses... and the lighting of their Sports Complexes are still standing?? Shopping Malls with big Advertising signs that are 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 is draining on the street?? No animals are running around loose?? 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; I have no choice but to hold on tight.

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.

Quickly we’re both on a walkway of interlocking stones with well-manicured gardens on either side... 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 has taught me that it’s the older ones that are the more predictable, the less violent, the matter-of-fact in their demand for lazy yet very greedy bribes... which is then predictably followed by a charming insistence to, “Come... let’s break bread.”

So we share 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!

Following Adam past another pair of armed Guards staring straight ahead... we’re immediately in a massive white lobby. Adam heads straight for the general information desk to our left.

He moves in calmly, and begins a conversation in Farsi with an Islamic woman in full hijab.

The place is busy... which is not surprising considering it is a hospital... but what is surprising is that everyone here is so well-dressed.

Adam has her cracking a smile instantly - which is a skill never to be taken lightly when one is this far away from home.

I shift my eyes away from his Oscar performance and begin to try and get my bearings, to begin to 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. What I’ve just entered is a waiting room that functions with such order... the nurse’s station... such precision... admitting even... such 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 keep reminding myself, my God even the a/c works perfectly here. 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 start to... start to pass an endless amount of gold-framed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his beady-eyed pictures... and they’re everywhere. In each room... down every hallway... with an added sprinkle for today’s ruling Deity too... plenty of Supreme Leader

Khamenei to get tired of as well. 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 of full black beard and tightly-held machine gun 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 and 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 Republic’s sprawling Nuremberg-type rallies.

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.”

After finally making it out we both glance back at a vacuous group of Machiavellian enablers; 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!”

Unlike the many big-city schools, University of Colorado at Denver's Medical Program offered Daniel Belrose several rare educational tracks like rural medicine, cultural clues for illness, gender-based needs... and most importantly, triage in remote locations - how serendipitous is that!

Watching his best friend really trying hard with that Nurse... one must in this job, one must always 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. This is not my first mission of quid pro quo with Adam; I know where I am. I may not like it, in fact I never like it - but I know why I'm here.

Adam leans in and gives the big-eyed Nurse a small plastic bag along with some serious words. She quickly puts it in her pocket... and then picks up her phone as if to report that the 'product' has just arrived.

For Doctors like us that travel anywhere around the Globe where a disaster strikes, Benzedrine... or 'Bennies' as they're more popularly known, have become second nature. Have never used them myself, not once... but admit that I probably should have. Dad's constant pounding probably never allowed me to accept taking them, would have made me feel like a failure deep in my sub-conscious I guess. I know full-well though that Adam has had to always find a way to make all kinds of contra deals for us to be allowed into these countries of little integrity. I know I have no right to judge - none; that beach in Haiti was full of empty plastic bags.

After doing his residency at the University of Colorado hospital in Aurora, Daniel 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, Daniel's Dad was wholly impressed. A hard-nosed environment most definitely... surgeries which had never been attempted in human history were now being undertaken with vigour. When Daniel showed him the letter he cried. Chinese, German, Indian, French, Russian, British... every month another Chief of Neurology from another part of the world was following the group 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. Daniel got used to functioning on three hours sleep. Eight years later he could have named any city in the world... and any price; instead he set up walk-in clinics for the neglected in New York, Boston, Denver and Chicago. And he'll keep opening them throughout the country, his very well-insured surgery Patients pay for it all.

"Dr. Ardalan?", Adam asks 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. Daniel moves his 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 downtown five-star hotel.

"Doctor Adam Babineaux", a man approaches with an impressively lit-up face, a colorful tie, and a white jacket over a 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", with a very 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 Ferdowski 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 perfect tenor when he needs to fulfill a promise, when he absolutely must fulfill a grand bargain in these nations of ‘inbred inducements’.

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

“How can we help Doctor?”, Adam pushes the conversation. We’ve done this so many times in our MSF careers. “Doctors... please follow me.”

We file into a line behind Mansoor’s short but very determined steps.

“The earthquake was devastating, I’ve got Patients with bruised and broken limbs, hips especially... but what I’ve mostly got is lots of hematomas from all that falling debris... it’s been awful.”

“You’ve got concussions!”, Daniel wants to scream at the top of his lungs. With every step down this spotless hallway Daniel’s mind won’t stop wondering what kind of deal MSF had to make with this guy? And what his best friend had to say to Berman to get him out of there?

Adam’s posture reminds that they both need to cozy up to this Quack if they have any hopes of getting out of here in any sort of reasonable time. Adam and Daniel keep listening to this sad excuse for a Doctor ramble because there is no other choice. Daniel’s got crushed skulls, sheared-off limbs... comas where he doesn’t even know if they’re going to wake up or not? Or if they should? He’s got so many battered bodies - and this guy wants a consult on a little dizziness?! - Daniel bites his tongue.

“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 we’ve got”, trying his best to expedite this no-win situation.

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 - with 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 Daniel 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 Daniel’s MSF world.

“No problem Mansoor.”

Unfortunately.

“No problem at all”, forming his own devious strategy of quid pro quo. Daniel grabs the Patient’s chart with confidence. There are never any other options and he knows 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 Daniel 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 him so much that if their state doesn’t improve over the next twelve hours with these new treatments, he’s going to need to open them up. Daniel knows he has no idea what he’s 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 the envelope with the patient’s CAT scan. Seeing the last name Abadi doesn’t even register; what are the odds?

I take a long look holding it up to the light; Abadi is like Smith back home.

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

I read 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.” “Which 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 Daniel’s new Patient, a genuine smile on a warm face... his eyes look familiar. “I promise you’ll be out for six hours at least”, returning with his 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”, Mansoor sighs with relief while walking together. These two have moved swiftly from room to room this entire afternoon, providing Mansoor’s Patients... or maybe Patrons is more accurate... well whatever they are Dr. Belrose has 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!

Daniel started at eleven this morning.

It’s visit number seven for Elias.

Entering quietly... respectful to let his Patient sleep, he only gets 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 his readings; Daniel just compartmentalizes the anger, it’s the only way to survive the unfairness.

“Hello Elias.”

Daniel’s 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 his watch... timing the beats. Suddenly a large man walks into the room, “Baba”, straight for 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, Daniel turns to lean forward... they 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; Daniel is not feeling the love... not at all... only a blast of bigotry. The Qud’s force?... The Qud’s force?... of course... seeing it in his body language. The most fanatic of the Armed Forces... earthquake or not this guy does not want Daniel in his country; to these Manchurian Candidates he’s only an Infidel, end of story. “I’m so sorry”, Mansoor rushes in, “I got caught up with another Patient. Hello Reza”, with a distinct tone of deference. 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.”

Grinning, “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 Daniel’s wrist to come closer. “Unfortunately this place isn’t kind to intelligent women”, so a seated and distracted Reza can’t hear. Daniel sits 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 movements end 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 Daniel’s heart speeds up... he has to turn towards that sound that’s just entered the room. Absolutely frozen like never before; it’s been twenty-seven years. A black headscarf with big eyes looks back... his eyes can’t help but fixate. In barely a second she breaks free from his stare, and walks towards her Father. Reza saw it.

“Hello Baba... how are you feeling?”, showering him with loving kisses.

Daniel caught the curiosity in Reza’s beady eyes.

“Better. Ava meet my new Doctor.”

Fanatics are fuelled by paranoia.

“Hello Doctor, very nice to meet you.”

Her eyes tell of a past that is to be kept 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 his 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 Daniel like it was only yesterday.

A cell-phone vibrates.

“Excuse me I have to take this”, Reza excuses himself.

“Doctor, this is my daughter I was talking about. She has the same passion for helping her Patients as you.” Remaining controlled, when all Daniel wants 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 they both move away... Ava leads Daniel to another area, where an empty bed sits. She raises her hand and draws the curtain for privacy. Finally they’re alone.

“I’m sorry Daniel... I’m so sorry”, blurts 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 all the killing... and the religion... it’s been horrible Daniel... really horrible.” Like arrows her eyes take aim. “I’ve missed you Daniel.” He could just live right here. “Every day I missed you.” Staring into those amazing eyes... twenty-seven years and that’s all Daniel has ever wanted to hear - acknowledgment of her feelings... of *their* feelings, that it was all so very mutual, just like he 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 authority.

“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 lifts 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. There is 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, “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 outside the lobby”, 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 had to learn to survive here, because she was never this kind of subservient woman. “Good night”, sending her way.

I’m feeling sad.

A black tinted Mercedes sedan that is reserved only for our wealthiest back home sits parked in front, a few feet from the entrance doors.

“Thanks for this.” “No problem.”

Reza pulls out fast from the hospital parking lot with all the power of German engineering. He then aggressively turns into a very busy street... *horns blowing*... like he owns it. From everywhere those horns won't stop as he makes even more aggressive moves... I push back into my seat with fear, but show nothing to my Driver. At close to midnight Reza keeps navigating these packed streets forcefully. A Motorcycle flies by. “Quite the chaos.” And another just inches from the window. 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, and then through the very narrow streets of formidable privilege. “It won't take long.” My eyes are glued to the amazing world beyond the glass - Third World Wealth never ceases to amaze. The houses look like Castles... some ancient... and some very modern. “Nice neighborhood.” Reza smirks again. He keeps his aggressive style as he rolls through stop signs... and burns rubber down long straightaways. You never get used to the great wealth and great poverty that a Country can tolerate at the same time.

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. And then shuts off the car. He then decisively turns, and reaches for something in the back seat. He grabs 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 strides head 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... and unlatches 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.

Reza continues into the massive backyard. The vibrations feel like they're getting closer. “Stay close”, he turns around with an expressionless face. A few steps more into the trees, Reza then bends down into the tall thick grass like he has done this many times before, and pulls up a hidden cellar door. The second he does, the second he lifts that wooden door up and over... he unleashes a thumping bass into the sticky night air. He gives me a look... and 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 bottles of alcohol. The herbal aroma of dedicated Rastafarians everywhere. The dirty dancing and full-on groping. So this is the Islamic Republic?

Standing dumbfounded in this opium den.

So this is religion?

Staring into soft-lighting and flickering 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, and her soft skin squeezes that hand immediately... leading 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 Party-Goers laughing and touching. I've seen plenty in my travels... guiding me to sit... but I've never seen anything like this?? Suddenly the long-limbed Siren with the dark eyes starts to rub her hand up and down, as if she more than approves of my thigh. When she moves closer one of her nipples pops out. "I love American men", she announces into my ear. She follows that 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.

After air-kissing him, she turns and gives me one. "Cheers", she taps, "bottoms up", in an English heavy with Persian overtones.

It's the last thing I remember.

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.

"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 visible, "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." Seeing his trembling hand... his sudden bout with brutal honesty has rendered me speechless. "I'm sorry for Reza", aiming his stare 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", swallowing 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 the door, I spot his black blazer hanging there all alone. I frisk his jacket... and feel 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 right 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. I turn it over, and 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.”

“Of 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 starts 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 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 Haze."

Exiting the swinging doors from the restricted operating area, Daniel's scrubs are soiled in sweat that comes from standing over Elias these past sixteen hours. Every part of his body wants to scream in pain; he 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 his life - a few altered twists of life's compass and she could have been his wife, mother of his children, and he could have been his Father-in-law. Opening to go through... Ava's the first face Daniel sees.

She leaps to her feet.

She's in front of him in seconds, her bloodshot eyes staring back, waiting for a sign that her Father did not die on the table. Her anticipation is palpable. "He's going to be OK."

Ava leaps into Daniel's arms, which is clearly against policy... and not just of this hospital. Tears roll down her cheeks nonstop, "Thank You Daniel... thank you so much." She is seemingly not interested in policy. "You were brought here to save his life", she whispers in his 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 they are contained in the corner. Others from the Team move past with a look of complete exhaustion... every one of them admitting they never dreamed of being part of anything like this in their careers; that's Massachusetts's General and Medecins Sans Frontieres training. *Looking back confidently at them.* One is not good without the other! This herd mentality breeds such apprehension, including Mansoor; this Islamic Republic thing is not what Daniel thought. "Come here!", he instructed them, "you can do this... just concentrate. That's good.... very good." Same words Dr. Galbraith said every friggin' day. Daniel was desperate, he needed them to step up or else Elias was doomed.

"Good night Doctor", the last two Nurses file past.

“Good night”, he smiles back. They absolutely did step up to the challenge, taking off his 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 Daniel’s hand as they speak, her eyes are fixed. Her aura surges Daniel’s body as he tries to concentrate on his words. “That group was superhuman in there, I’m telling you Ava they were something.” Seeing her try to digest such robust accolades for the staff; Daniel understands 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 his 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 brilliance again.

“I’ll see you tomorrow”, closing the door of the taxi. Ava sends back a smile and short wave. After seeing her drive off, Daniel walks into the warm breeze of another summer Tehran night. He stops at the illuminated entrance... and tightens up. Sitting on one of the many scattered benches is Reza having a cigarette... one of those three-quarter-sized puffs they call BahMan. Daniel decides to walk over and confront this Brute once and for all.

“You mind if I join you?”

“Not at all... smoke?”

“No thanks”, that feels so good, Daniel’s 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.” Daniel can’t hold it in one second more. “You left me there on purpose.” Blowing out another puff as if any question of any kind must wait.

And then 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?”

Daniel instantly shrinks to the inference... he tilts up tongue-tied at the star-filled sky and waits for the words; Reza continues to smoke without moving a muscle... not one.

Time passes, and as it does, he keeps drawing deeply on that damn cigarette.

Daniel remains hushed because he doesn’t know Reza’s game yet?? He definitely has 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.

Reza keeps enjoying his now shortened smoke. Daniel remains 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.” Leaning in, “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. He stands up tall... and 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.

I open it... and 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... I’m transfixed on that treasured medallion because of those words... because of those daggers of irony from Rabbi Daniel Abadi.

For 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?