

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 such incredible 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 Mafia that must go back decades, maybe even centuries, because the driver, despite what my eyes are telling me out of this window, is performing miracle after miracle trying to travel these mangled roads. "Here put this on." A hand reaches into my face from out of nowhere.

Desperate does not begin to cover what I'm seeing on the other side of this filthy glass... these damn potholes just go on forever!

"I mean it", her firm face makes sure I heard.

So I take a closer look at the mask she just gave me, checking it out to see if it's worth it; I've seen way-too-many of these contraptions in my career. 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 even more 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 a shiny silver 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... 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, arch-in from either side to create this canopy that makes you feel like Mother Nature just wants to hug you.

Corny... but true.

After that last challenging corner Daniel can finally see them... after a journey that filled him with boatloads of optimism, he rides up to all of them sitting on a perfectly-trimmed lawn.

"Hello my fellow Einsteins."

"Hey Daniel", is repeated by Lillian Chang, Perdi Lopez, Peter Yo, Afiya Adoyo, Anil Patel, Babek Jalili, Carm DeJesus and Ava Abadi - by Daniel's United Nations Posse.

"Are we ready everybody?", dropping one invigorating form of transportation and moving into the huddled anxiety. The glorious Rockies at their back plus an ideal breeze. "Everybody ready?", Daniel asks 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 Daniel’s encouragement is meant only for her; everything he does or says is meant only for her.

Her eyes... dark and enthralling.

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

Her body is curvaceous with a sexy-as-hell gait. Her brains. Her laugh. Daniel has never met a woman like her - and he does ok for himself 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 thought you were!”

That one wakes everyone 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.

For most that are here 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 and too-many deaths in ways that medical school just cannot teach; this is not the way Daniel thought he 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, Daniel admits while staring at the roof of his tent. And I can’t sleep a damn wink!, he concedes as well. Never have I used any Pharmacology before, and I won’t start now, sweating in this hotbox. They might help you stay up around the clock and then finally sleep, but they can become a habit that won’t stop. Daniel doesn’t judge though, everyone here is a trained Professional; he’s seen lots over the years.

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

Such experience means Daniel must accept that he is in a place that overflows with tribal allegiances that keep lethal sectarian divides going. Which in the end, feeling all that sweat soaking his sheets, only serves to enable ignorant superstitions of blind hatred be handed down to their young, along with the ancestral home. Daniel’s 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 his own extended family. Those barbaric Nazis wiped out 90% of his blood line... *lying there seething*... he knows how the system works here... *seething in a powerful insomnia*... nothing gets said without the approval of the Supreme Leader. If Daniel 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 also repeated plenty after his son graduated.

Lifting after lying in a pool of his 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 Daniel in ways he’s sure would not be pleasant... and no doubt include his loved ones.

Looking up lazily at the night’s star-filled sky... and yet Daniel must still try and remind himself how spectacular this world can be even in the most wretched of places. Sitting on a giant boulder outside his flimsy communal tent that smells of ‘disaster zone’... Daniel is having a rare peaceful moment. “You’re here to help those that cannot help themselves”, a reminder after another hellish day of back-breaking work. “If you can’t remove politics from your work then stop being a Doctor”, his father finished every discussion on the topic. To his truth Daniel is always quiet, but he’s not going to lie it’s hard sometimes.

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

He never shows it though, that would be unacceptable.

Finishing a tired sip of water.

All of a sudden a Nurse with big eyes runs towards him... startling his peaceful moment. 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!

Daniel quickly lunges off the stoop like a switch was just turned on... Nurse Big Eyes can really move. Running as fast as he can, racing through this makeshift city of shattered concrete and steel, and that stench... this place re-defines what the term *emergency* really means! Panting while following this new emergency... the Nurse in the hospital scrubs looks like she knows where she’s going.

Suddenly she stops at the entrance to a small tent.

“Come on in and join me”, a voice from inside invites.

Exhausted but still moving towards a sink that is already being used.

“What have we got here?”, while studying her own hand-washing.

“I’ll leave you two alone”, Nurse Big-Eyes leaves as quickly as she appeared.

Leaning-in to start washing his hands over a plastic sink that comes in stainless steel at any normal hospital back home, from that run, or more like chase, his heart won’t stop exploding.

“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 them scrubbing ferociously... instinctively they 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?”

The lack of control is in their eyes.

“You’re looking at her.”

Daniel’s 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 with moxie, “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 everyone to; Denver of 1978 is nothing but an ethereal suspension of the most civil order. “The World is becoming more divided on ethnic and economic lines”, the Commander-in-Chief warns over and over. Excuse the disrespect Mr. Carter, but you could be speaking pygmy - the Middle East?... Russia?... Africa?... nobody here cares about any rising tensions – that is 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 the Belrose family. The only Medical School in the entire country to offer his 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 Daniel did two decades later - loyalty is everything to Daniel’s munificent father. Being a Doctor was all he ever wanted, it was the family business - but only the Belrose way. Six generations of healing men of Cosmopolitan Paris; never will Daniel 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”, his father said when Daniel was leaving for his first assignment.

Wise enough to flee Paris with only the clothes on his back - his 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, Daniel’s Grandfather, who was what one would’ve called *a Doctor to the Stars* today... following his great Grandfather Daniel before him, whom Daniel is 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 Daniel wouldn’t be here.

A night-time train ride to Calais with forged papers enabled Daniel’s father Henri, 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”, Louis confided in Henri 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 Henri would express a 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 does Daniel see the permanent stamp his years out there with his Dad left on him. It’s affected him more than he’s ever realized.

“Get up Danny-boy.”

Cold water splashes on Daniel’s face.

“It’s get-up-time Danny-boy.”

Rubbing the sudden jolt of that cold water... after seventeen hours leaning over a surgery table, "Damn that's cold!" This is hardly enough to get his body moving, or angry.

"When did you get here?"

Sitting up slowly, like an old-man. "Monday", catching the towel... then 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 his pants... one leg at a time. Everything hurts. "They say fifteen million people live here." Daniel gradually stands. "But who the hell really knows?" Moving towards exiting the tent together.

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

"Not like they do a census", smirking with some tired humour.

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 his life Daniel lives on coffee and water only, plus as much fruit as he can get his hands on; electrolytes keep him ready and able for anything without the bloat.

They both 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 their steaming brews.

"The first few days are always like a walk in the dark", trying to make Daniel feel better.

"All I hear is Dad screaming that each patient is your family."

"Oh do I know that sound... WE ARE ALL RELATED", mimicking... then taking 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 for him to work even one day a week at his Harlem Clinic.

"Damn it you can do it for free."

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.

“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 potatoes surgery.

“I’m going to find us a ride.”

Tossing their cups in the garbage.

“That I can’t help you with, but 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 he can remember his father’s long deep gaze and big powerful words felt like a tight clamp; a Master Diagnostician confident in his craft, no exaggeration Daniel truly idolized his father. Both young and confused when hearing that disturbing 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 with desperation.

“I must Claire! I must!”, Henri 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 fathers, 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. Henri 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 father 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”, Daniel tries to shake it off.

Jella Perkommen is a forty-something Finnish Nurse of incredible endurance, Daniel 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, Daniel quickly heads over.

“Gentlemen”, purposely interrupting a quorum he's seen way too-many times.

“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 sat-phone 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 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 the 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 keeps-on screaming.

Turning around after his buddy slams the back-door shut, “Danny-boy, this is our well-paid chauffeur Matti.” Exhibiting a warm smile and some neglected yellow teeth, “Hello Mr. Danny-boy”, along with a hand from a twisting arm.

“Hello Matti.”

The disheveled driver then swiftly turns back to the road... and pulls away fast... leaving a massive cloud of dust behind them. “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; Daniel has no clue how Adam lassoed this guy? Speeding through roads flooded with people... and pools of smelling water; what Daniel does know is that this Matti fellow has no chance - *holding on tight through the bumps* - none. Adam’s Machiavellian grin reels everyone in.

HONKING.

And if Daniel knows 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.

Daniel has no doubt that Matti is going to love every minute of it.

Some causing loud thuds of his 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 they pass mangled rubble, not a hint of any civilized roads... Daniel’s stomach clenches from what he’s 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.

Daniel can taste this country’s desperation in his 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 smitten most definitely. 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 only to himself.

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. Ava 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 this 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 very attentive 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 both long and tight as they 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. Now have a nice day, or I'll have to call Security."

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 he's been working in these past few days, Daniel sees nothing here, not one cluster of flattened apartment buildings?? "This is Embassy Country", Adam yells after Matti whispered something in farsi to him.

That's probably why they're 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 Daniel feel light-headed. There is no sewage draining on the street?? No animals running around on the loose?? And no damn excavators?? Daniel is stunned from seeing that most of the buildings have made it through without very much damage at all... there's not even one Tent-City?? Not one?? Matti suddenly has the car up on two wheels. He then floors it down a long straightaway; Daniel has 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 - Daniel follows Adam with a passion.

Quickly they're 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, Daniel spots two soldiers on either side of the path; Adam moves even faster towards them.

Stone-faced the two of them... bookends with their kalashnikovs... Daniel's seen them all. Adam makes sure to have his Medecins Sans Frontieres badge on the outside of his sweat-stained shirt. His best friend does the same.

Guns that is.

Holding their badges up as they approach, the soldiers don't flinch, they let them through with sudden approving nods.

Daniel exhales - he hates young soldiers. History has taught him 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 they all 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 Daniel has heard way too many times. “Everybody needs their pound of flesh”, adding under his 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 their flag during their weekly hate-fest the day AFTER everyone is gone. Fuckers does not even begin to cover it!

Following Adam past another pair of armed guards staring straight ahead... immediately they're in a massive white lobby with high ceilings. Adam heads straight for the general information desk to their 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 you're this far from home. Daniel shifts his focus away from this Oscar performance, and begins to try and get his bearings, to begin to take stock of the world he's 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 Daniel has 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, he keeps reminding, my god

even the a/c works perfectly here. Sorry Dad, Politics and Medicine do go together unfortunately - that's what MSF has taught your son. Denying Elitism exists is merely a case of deceptive marketing, because everyone, Nurses, Patients, Doctors - everyone 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 heading down a long hallway.

Setting-out on their journey... with a purpose... their eyes cannot help but see an endless amount of gold-frame beady-eyed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini portraits... and they're eerie.

In each room... down every hallway... there is even an added sprinkle for today's ruling Deity...

as plenty of Supreme Leader Khamenei provides the same eeriness. Adam and Daniel 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 beards and tightly-held machine guns draped across their chests.

Creepy place - their eyes mirror as they 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", Henri Belrose stated more than a few times. He knew.

"Excuse me."

Adam and Daniel attempt to squeeze in.

"Pardon me."

If Daniel was here under different circumstances.

Bing.

His mind imagines being in attendance at one of the Republic's sprawling Nuremberg-type rallies.

Bing.

Hearing their lightness as they ascend.

Bing.

The doors open... and a few exit.

"Salaam."

While a few more get in.

"Salaam."

Adam and Daniel make room, pushing themselves 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, they both glance back at a vacuous group of Machiavellian enablers; who the hell am I kidding?, Daniel thinks, 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 while heading towards the Nurse's station.

"I'm beyond disgust"... Daniel feels throughout his body... "I'm Daniel Belrose, a-Political Man of Medicine", he keeps 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!"

Watching his friend move directly for the Nurse's station... Daniel knows this posture well. Fixed as the show begins to play out into a very Oscar-worthy performance... it does take time... these are some very determined efforts with this one particular Nurse. One must be charming in this job, and very creative, like Daniel was trying to be before his fearless friend kidnapped him into this fully equipped state-of-the-art-facility... with perfect air-conditioning! This is hardly Daniel's first mission of quid pro quo with Adam; he knows where he is. He may not like it, in fact he never likes it - but he knows why he's here. Leaning in all-of-a-sudden... Adam gives the big-eyed Nurse a small plastic bag along with some serious sentences. Quickly she puts it in her pocket, and then picks up her cell phone, and starts to look like she is reporting that the 'product' has just arrived.

For Doctors like Adam and Daniel, who travel anywhere around the globe where a disaster strikes, Benzedrine... or 'Bennies' as they're more popularly known, have become an exceedingly dear currency for the MSF world. And even though they most certainly are everywhere, Daniel's never used them, not once... but admits that he probably should have. Henri Belrose's constant pounding never allowed him to accept even one - it would have made him feel like a failure. Yet this experienced Doctor knows full-well that Adam has always had to find a way to make all kinds of contra deals for MSF to be allowed into these countries of little integrity. Daniel also knows he has no right to judge - none; that beach in Haiti was always 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; Henri 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 and British... every month another Chief of Neurology from another part of the world was following this group around, observing quietly, humbly 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 up throughout the country, his very well-insured surgery patients pay for it all.

"Dr. Ardalan?", asking his big-eyed conquest 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 keeps moving his gaze around to kill time, to keep learning something new in this Islamic Republic. The floor looks even more spotless than the main lobby was... this place has the feel of a downtown five-star hotel, is all Daniel can think. A man approaches, "Doctor Adam Babineaux", 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", and his grin is extra-wide.

"Ok then Mansoor", addressing the dark-haired democrat. It's definitely coloured... 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", 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 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", with the 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", Henri Belrose assured after one of his most gruelling trips abroad.

"How can we help Doctor?", Adam pushes the conversation. These two have done this so many times in their MSF careers. "Doctors, if you would be so kind and please follow me."

Filing 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 need to cozy up to this Quack if they have any hopes of getting out of here in any sort of reasonable time. That's why they keep listening to this sad excuse for a Doctor ramble-on... 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", reminding his son, "emotions cloud the mind."

"Ok let's see what we've got", Daniel must only try 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. Daniel treats 10 of their Gatsby-class so he can save 100,000 of their poor illiterates down south - twenty years and counting these two 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 on Rich People too - 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. He 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?

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

After seeing enough, he puts it back in the envelope. And then accepts his general chart from Mansoor. He reads 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 his pen light. “Ok I guess... I’ve noticed my fingers have started to tingle every so often.”

“Which hand?” “My left.” Putting his 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, 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.”

Daniel’s face is extremely serious.

“We are all related”, Henri Belrose implanted in his offspring, “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 Daniel 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 his 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 Daniel 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.

“Money is no object”, the collaborative Mansoor insisted when describing whatever is needed for *his* patients. After entering quietly, respectful to his patient’s sleeping, Daniel only gets close enough to read all the numbers on a slew of contraptions. Jotting down the readings; he just compartmentalizes the anger, it’s the only way to survive the unfairness.

“Hello Elias.”

His Patient starts to open his eyes.

“How’s that hand doing?”

“The only good news is that it hasn’t gotten worse, small miracles.”

“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 me in his country; to these Manchurian Candidates I’m 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.”

Daniel’s heart instantly speeds-up... he needs to turn towards that sound that’s just entered the room. Like never before he freezes; it’s been twenty-seven years. A black headscarf with big eyes looks back... he can’t help but stare. She breaks free from that stare, and walks towards her father. Reza saw it.

“Hello Baba, how are you feeling?”, 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 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 he wants to do is 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... 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”, exits 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 forever. “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 causes Ava to quickly wipe-away her tears, to quickly compose herself 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.”

“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 is scary.

Four hours later.

“Good evening Doctor”, Ava slowly lifts from sleeping in a cramped chair. Daniel moves straight for the machines... pulling out a pen and observing 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 for sure; her beauty is still very much there for Daniel.

Taking his pulse.

Her presence has him excited.

Recording the numbers.

But he shows 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, I insist Doctor”, sounding 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, in the parking carousel.”

“Thanks Reza”, kissing 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.” Daniel is feeling sad.

A black tinted Mercedes sedan that is reserved for only the wealthiest back home.... sits parked in the middle of the carousel, not far from the entrance doors. “Thanks for this.” Oblivious to any type of normal parking rules. “No problem.” Reza pulls out fast from the hospital parking lot with all the power of German engineering.

Horns blowing.

And then aggressively turns into a very busy street.

Horns blowing.

Like he owns it... those loud horns won’t stop as he continues making even more aggressive moves. Pushing back in his seat with fear, yet showing nothing to his 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 his Passenger’s obvious statement; traffic here is probably the worst he’s 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.” Glued to the amazing world beyond the glass - third world wealth never ceases to amaze... the houses are like castles... some ancient... and some very modern.

“Nice neighborhood.” Reza smirks again... keeping his aggressive style rolling through stop signs... and then burning rubber down long straightaways.

One never gets used to the great wealth and great poverty that a country must 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, and zips it all the way to the neck, as if wanting to hide his military shirt underneath. "Come on", with a tone that goes through him every time.

Daniel flees the car... and follows... like a good subordinate. Trying to keep up with Reza's determined pace... his Officer strides start to head down a long path on one side of this huge house. As if knowing where he's going... he is quickly in the back-half of this poorly-lit stone mansion. Keeping pace as best as he can - Daniel's tired hungry breathing is getting heavier with each step - suddenly Reza stops at the fence, and leans over it... unlatching this massive wrought-iron gate without hesitation. Surely I have nothing to worry about entering these elite streets of Tehran with a Lieutenant Colonel of the Qud's force?, Daniel's nervous mind asks.

Boom Boom.

The ground under his feet.

Boom Boom.

Starts to thud once he's through.

Reza continues into an enormous backyard.

The vibrations feel like they're getting closer.

"Stay close", from a twisting neck.

A few more steps into the trees... Reza bends down into the tall thick grass like he's 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 then gives Daniel a look... and descends... smack dab into that thunderous bass.

Where the hell is he going?, is the only thought Daniel has as Reza disappears.

After twenty steps or so into Mother Nature's cool earth - Daniel is now standing with Reza looking straight into a scene right out of Sodom and Gomorrah's Old Testament.

The bottles of alcohol are everywhere.

The herbal aroma of dedicated Rastafarians fills the foggy air.

Dirty dancing and full-on groping cannot be avoided in the least.

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 his right and... and... Reza's gone. "Hello handsome", a long-haired barely-dressed brunette whispers in Daniel's ear. "I'm just waiting for someone", over the ear-splitting noise. Her silhouette is striking. "Sure", taking his hand anyways, her soft skin squeezes that hand... and leads him into one of the many rooms. "I'm just waiting for myyy..."

Clearly not interested in his pleadings... she keeps heading, along with his hand, for the corner of a massive sectional spilling-over with party-goers laughing and touching. Daniel has seen plenty in his travels... *guiding him to sit*... but he has 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 his thigh.

When she moves closer one of her nipples pops out. “I love American men”, just before some very determined sucking of his earlobe.

A Waiter appears from out of nowhere with a full tray. “Thank-you”, grabbing two.

After a blue-blood air-kiss, she turns and gives the object of her attention one.

“Cheers”, tapping, “bottoms up”, in an English heavy with Persian overtones.

It’s the last thing Daniel remembers.

Checking all the relevant machines, verifying them with his final readings from last night...

which, according to his 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 an extremely sturdy cup of coffee lost in thought. What was her name?

“This place is not Denver that’s for sure.”

“Excuse me?”, startled by his Patient’s first words of the day.

“Or the University of Colorado.”

Moving in closer... shocked by what he thinks he just heard from his now growingly 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.”

Daniel is 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; Daniel is 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”, reaching to wipe them away. “I’ll never forgive myself.” His sudden bout with brutal honesty has rendered his new Doctor 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 it slowly. “No problem”, watching over his 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.”

Daniel stands... and heads for the closet.

After opening the door, he spots a black blazer hanging there all alone. He frisks the jacket... and feels it right away, thick and well-worn, like any Grandfather's cherished possession.

He moves to hand it to him.

"Thank you."

And takes a seat.

Fumbling 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 Daniel a tarnished metal round object that he's sure was sparkling silver way back when. Fitting it in the palm of his hand, he observes it closely. On the first side he sees a heart engraved in the metal... just a thin outline that's 80% of the medallion's size. He then turns it over, and begins 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

Daniel's 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. Daniel's heart pounds with fear. He's decided to move him himself.

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."

Propelling him with raw adrenalin... beads of sweat escape his forehead as he can't stop imagining screams from Ava if she was here seeing this.

BING.

Pushing an unconscious Elias into the elevator.

BING.

Daniel can't stop pleading with his maker that his brain isn't flooded with his own blood when he opens him up... and that this god-damn hotel has all the proper equipment... otherwise... not allowing his mind to go there.

BING.

Daniel has operated on tens of thousands of broken bodies in his life.

“Come on let’s move everybody!”

Some so young you just want to crawl-up 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 his shirt and pants... putting on his scrubs as if his life depended on it.

Leaning over the sink with short rhythmic scrubbing - Daniel’s head is full of what he needs to do first, second, third. Turning left to grab a towel... Reza’s sinister gaze is looking through the glass. While drying his hands he stares back - their eyes are locked. Dripping sweat down his temples... he takes a final stare... and tosses the towel in the bin... and heads 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.”

Soiled in sweat that comes from standing and concentrating these past sixteen hours... every muscle in Daniel’s body wants to scream in pain. Barging through swinging doors from the restricted operating area; there was never any intention of letting anybody else lead 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. Leaping to her feet barely two steps out... her bloodshot eyes stare back, waiting for a sign that her father did not die on the table.

“He’s going to be ok.”

Her anticipation is palpable.

It’s all Daniel is able to say before Ava jumps into his arms; which is clearly against policy... and not just of this hospital.

Tears rolling 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”, whispering 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... providing a grin of thanks as they pass.

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 frigg' 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", acknowledging back. They absolutely did step up to the challenge, taking off his cap... and wiping his brow. "We were able to stop the bleeding and repair the rupture. The damage was minimal because we got him into surgery so fast."

Holding his hand as they speak, Ava's 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; 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 them now; there is no kiss.

"You will, now come, let me walk you out."

It took twenty-seven years to see such brilliance again.

Holding the door of the taxi... "I'll see you tomorrow."

Ava sends back a smile and short wave.

After seeing her drive off, Daniel turns... and starts to walk into the warm breeze of another summer night in Tehran.

Once he gets to the illuminated entrance, he stops... and tightens. 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 must 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."

"You left me there on purpose", unable to hold it in even one second longer.

Reza blows out another puff as if any question is going to have to wait.

Then there is another... and it is even longer than the last one... so arrogantly slow.

"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 can only tilt-up at the star-filled sky... and wait 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 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 while he does; another lesson learned... don't rush it, never rush it, these Dictators 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 pull-up into the crowded carousel.

Car doors open and close.

People exit, and enter, and smoke around the vast hospital entrance.

Taxis flee out of the other end of the drive-up carousel.

Most of the other benches are occupied too; Daniel never said he 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."

Daniel and Reza 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." Turning 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 the squirming.

"Oh relax, if I wanted you in jail that would have happened already, petty I am not", lifting 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 on the bench.

Daniel grabs it from the intention, and opens it... and feels a chill slither his body.

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

"You've got three days", walking away.

Throwing the envelope down in disgust; Elias was right.

Reaching in his pocket... Daniel is 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 his head in total shock, especially from Reza's now-revealed bloodlines... seeing him disappear into the darkness.

Do I say anything?