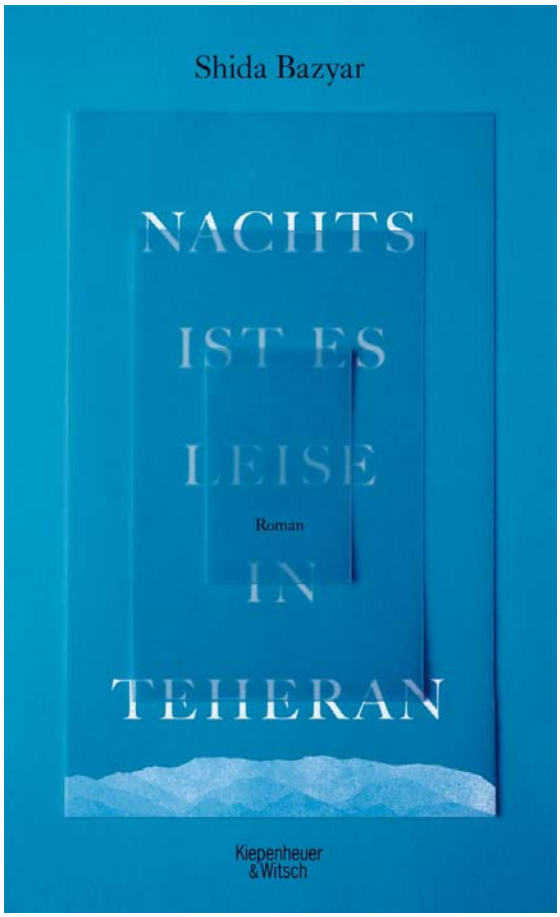
Sample Translation (pp. 11-32)

At Night All is Quiet in Tehran
by Shida Bazyar

Translated by Eleanor Collins



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King of kings they called him and said, we worship him, we worship his wife, Our Great Beauty, they said, we love this country and then we said, *we* love this country. We had to celebrate the birth of his new-born child far longer than we would have done for the children of our brothers and sisters, this new-born child, far away in the Palace of Flowers.

Our parents had been told that oil, the Americans, the English, they all belonged together, belonged to the Shah, were against us. Our parents stopped going to work, went out on to the streets only to come straight back home again, they were scared of the secret police, they didn't say anything anymore, never said anything against the Shah again. Sent us to school and said, We love this country, and you should love your school.

His proud gaze above the lectern, we learnt what we had to learn, we grew older and we decided that whatever was written in our school books, we wanted the opposite. We read *Long live the Shah* and we thought, Death to the Shah. We heard, *All work serves the King* and said, The work should serve the workers. And when it said, *He ensures our prosperity*, we spat on his palaces, on the English, on the Americans, and smuggled in books, copied them, learnt them off by heart, passed them from one to another to another. We read and we read and we read, we kept quiet at home and shouted loudly in the streets, we cursed our parents and died for our children. The Shah went because he was ill, the statues fell because the nation no longer believed. The revolution grows older every week and we love this country more than ever. The schoolbooks were changed overnight, we ripped the pages with the Shah out, we took down his photo. May photos of a single individual never hang in our classrooms again, says Peyman. May we soon be hanging up photos of the Ayatollah, back from exile, says his mother. May images of Marx and Engels, Che Guevara and Castro, Mao and Lenin hang in our classrooms say Sohrab and I in our lunch breaks, now we even say it in the staffroom, say it louder than we ever could before. And we wait for the moment when we get to decide who will fill the empty walls.

The revolution grows older every week, and it has barely even got going. The Shah has gone and we're preparing for the beginning of a new era, of a new system, of a new freedom.

What remains is the turmoil on the streets, still euphoric, but becoming less and less so each week. What remains are the movement's meetings, the plans, the pamphlets, the teaching units, the guerrilla exercises. What was once a secret is now becoming more public, we're more sure of our own victory, are sometimes more cautious, sometimes more radical, but are always keeping a close eye on those who call themselves revolutionaries and yet are also believers. And yet the real revolution is still to come, the nation overthrowing its institutions. All that has already happened is just the beginning. Long live socialism, long live our homeland, our pearl, our Iran!

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The revolution is a month old and Dajeh is making stuffed vine leaves. They are all sitting on the floor, my mother, my sisters, my cousins, my aunties. The wives of my older brothers. They have laid out the *sofreh* on the floor of the sitting room and covered it with bowls full of rice and mince, full of herbs, full of lentils, are seated around it and are folding vine leaves, one after another, putting them in a pan and talking and laughing and talking and laughing. When we were small there were just as many women but different ones. Dajeh would send me and my sisters out of the room, we weren't allowed to hear the women talking, to interrupt the neighbourly gossip. We shouldn't disturb them when they were cooking, we were told, or we'd have to wait longer for the food to be ready, so we went outside and played with marbles or pretended we were gunning down the murderer of the great and most worthy Imam Hussain. That was Sohrab's favourite game. Sohrab, who had no siblings, who always hung around in front of our house in the hope that me and the other children would come and rescue him from his boredom, Sohrab, who will be waiting for me once again in a few hours' time. No longer driven by boredom, but by a sense of restlessness that we've been carrying with us since the beginning of the

revolution, since its outbreak and during the whole of last month, and that we know to hide. Restlessness means uncertainty and our future leaders cannot show uncertainty. Only those who have known Sohrab since he was little sense it in him.

Dajeh no longer sends me out of the room although I can tell she wishes I would leave. Everything in her gaze, in her posture says I'm not welcome here, that I should only be there to savour, to comment on the vine leaves the moment they land on the *sofreh*, hot and cooked and round and glossy, and that until that moment they are none of my business. Dajeh has a particular look just for me. For me, as I sit in the corner and smoke when I should really just go so the women can finally begin the interesting conversations they have been looking forward to for half the day already. Even as a child I realised fairly quickly that it was more interesting with the women. The men always discussed out-of-date politics or played cards, and I wasn't allowed to join in. The women, on the other hand, discussed real people and real problems. Which neighbour had fallen out with her mother-in-law, which daughter had got engaged to which son, and in doing so had revealed her indecency, which family had drifted into an American lifestyle, which vendor sold the tastiest aubergines.

My nieces and nephews cavort around amongst the women, knowing that the moment will come when first I, and then they, will be sent out and they'll have to find a new game to play. There isn't much to snack on while the vine leaves are being stuffed, the rice mixture is bland, the vine leaves don't taste of anything without the filling. If there isn't anything to snack on, we're allowed to have our say. My niece is the smallest, she wants the smallest *dolmeh*. My brother Mehrdad is the fattest, he wants the fattest *dolmeh*. The women give in, laughing, plant kisses on the children's cheeks. If I were a mother, a sister, an aunty, I would sit there and do the same, would use every opportunity to kiss these little creatures for being so happy, regardless of what happens outside, regardless of what they learn at school, regardless of whether their school books promote contradictory things within the space of a few weeks, regardless of the fact that, not long ago, their parents were spending their nights on the rooftops and their days on the streets, only to return home with blood on their clothes. Regardless, the children spend their days

laughing, questioning, eating, disrupting, sleeping. They have earnt all the kisses in the world, I think, but perhaps the life that awaits somewhat hesitantly, just around the corner, will be an even greater gift. I could sweep up my brother Mehrdad, the chubby one, could kiss him and say to him, Your new life isn't hesitating, we aren't hesitating, we just need a bit more time, that's all. But Mehrdad is currently pulling his sister's plaits and earns himself a fierce telling off from our mother. Only later will he understand what he has to thank us for, later, in a few years, in a few decades, when he is living the free and just life he deserves. When it is no longer his parents' simple house, but his own actions and knowledge that define his place in society, when his education is free from propaganda, and his thoughts can go uncensored, when he is working to improve our country without paying into the pockets of a dictator, when no one is above or beneath him.

Dajeh's gaze has changed now that I am no longer Behsad, the little snack thief. I was quicker to grab something to eat than my nieces and nephews are now, I was quicker to disrupt the group, was always disruptive. Yes, he's disruptive, but what can I do, he's too smart for me to be angry with him, she would say. Dajeh had a particular look just for us children, a severe look that matched the upright posture she adopted. Her head was always slightly raised, majestically, her lips pressed together furiously at the same time, in her large, warm eyes there was a faint, gentle, almost unrecognisable smile. Now that I've lit a second cigarette, a second cigarette to show I'm not planning to leave just yet, she is looking at me, and her gaze is that of a woman who wants everything to be just right for her guests. But I am that speck of dust she missed when she was cleaning, the smell of food from the day before yesterday that she simply can't mask, I am the rumour that hangs over us and that no one dares to speak out loud. But rumours about the movement aren't there to be discussed during the day with the neighbours, they're not there to be tested for their truthfulness. They're there to be whispered, hand over mouth, in intimate circles, for no one knows what is yet to come.

Behsad*jan*, go and help your father in the shop, my mother calls to me. The women glance over at me, I laugh, shake my head, tap off my cigarette into the glass ashtray by my feet. And take the little ones with you, my aunty says with a pained

expression that causes laughter to break out. Since when do we smoke while the food is being prepared, my oldest aunty says, not to amuse the others, but more to show just what she thinks of me, she who still hasn't stopped wearing her headscarf, despite them being banned by Reza Shah. The women continue to smile quietly into their vine leaves as they carry out their nimble, delicate wrapping movements. How many hands are wrapping in the same way, day after day, across the country, I ask myself. How many are kneading, how many are knotting, how many are digging, how many are shooting, how many are losing their fingernails in the fight for a name? The women's hands are small and nimble and wrinkled. My oldest aunty tucks her hair carefully under her headscarf, directs a pointedly bored look at me and says to the group, Behsad*jan*, you still haven't said whether you liked my friend's daughter! I have brought her along twice now, such a polite, friendly girl, and I'm sure she's already hoping for a proposal from you. My aunties and cousins smile quietly into their vine leaves. Khale*jan*, I say, I have no idea who you mean, the most highly esteemed and honest women I know are sitting around this *sofreh*, how could I possibly notice another woman? My aunty grumbles to the rest of the group, I smile and say, perhaps you should invite her again and Dajeh clicks her tongue, Don't listen to him, she says, he only thinks about his books and his friends, no woman would want him, and the other women laugh. I put my cigarette out, get up, smooth down my army shirt, nod to the group and say, With your permission, and they hiss me out. It's detrimental to the struggle to appeal to romantic feelings, but if they really want to invite women round for me, then why not the woman with the serious eyes and the loud laugh, who I've recently been bumping into more and more often and whose name I am still trying to find out?

I put my shoes on in the courtyard, the old, worn-out ones, Dajeh tells me off every time she sees them. What do you want from me, I say then, they're the same ones my pupils wear. And there it is, that new look in her eyes, every time. Though she's still standing up straight, she suddenly looks so much smaller than me, it's suddenly no longer a secret that she really is much smaller than me now. I am twenty seven years old and the only one of her four, grown-up sons to still live at home, to bring in money, to look out for the girls, to give the boys a beating. She has

raised her head proudly, like she always did, only now she does it so she's able to look at me. As if she wants to commit the way I look to memory, as if she wishes I would just disappear to another room and not out into the city streets, as if she's seeing all the blood, the blood we don't talk about but that she still knows exists. *Khodā negahdar*, she then says, the way you would to say goodbye, God bless you, but she doesn't say it like the others do, rather as if it is a new realisation, makes an effort not to look at my worn-out shoes, and instead to look me in the eye.

Sohrab and I meet in front of the university. Our meeting points have changed, places we had never been to before have become more and more important for us over the last month. I spot him from a distance. Small, thin, hands in his trouser pockets, the back of his army shirt covered in sweat, his hair a little longer than his mother would like. He turns around and doesn't smile. We don't show that we're comrades, that we're here together, that we're fighting side by side, that we were scolded by each other's mothers when we were younger, were taken to the barber's by the other's father. The pavement is full of jerry cans. People are queuing to get petrol, they meet up with friends and neighbours while the cans keep their place in the queue, a row of brightly coloured plastic. It's Peyman's turn to pick up the petrol today. He used to come round to our houses too, but somehow he was always slower than Sohrab and I. He took his shoes off more slowly, greeted my mother more slowly, came stumbling into the room more slowly. Peyman never meets up with anyone when he goes to fill up with petrol, he just stands there and picks up snippets of other people's conversations. Nowhere are people as open as they are here, he says afterwards, we can't always sit in our living rooms talking about the people when we don't really know them. I always give him a quick nod then and think, if that's what you need, Peyman, if you want to listen to all the rubbish that does the rounds and is spread by those who were denied an education from the very beginning, then be my guest, go and fill up with petrol and blend in with the crowd and listen to their idle chatter. That Mosaddegh was a member of the Tudeh Party, that the Communists want to share everything, especially their women, that the attack on the Ayatollah Khomeini only failed because his bodyguards all magically

turned into him, you go ahead and have a good listen, Peyman. All the same, there's an element of truth to what he says. We should be aware of what people are saying about the movement. But right now there are more important things to do. I mean, what nonsense! How could we not know the people? We *are* the people. Peyman's parents can't read, my grandparents live out in the countryside with no running water and my pupils still get lice, no matter how many times I shave their heads. Who are the people, if not us? Peyman, like so many others, wasn't politically active before the revolution. When Sohrab and I found new friends once our schooldays were over he wasn't interested in their ideas, when we read Gorki and Rousseau in secret he wasn't interested in books, when we composed text for the flyers shortly before the revolution he wasn't interested in the things they called for. He just smiled and said, we've got to make sure there's enough food to eat, that there's water to drink, that the children can go to school, and then the people will be able to lead a revolution. We have to make sure there are books to read, I replied, books that tell us how others succeeded before us, and we need to make sure that the weapons don't remain in the hands of the soldiers. Peyman's smile – the smile of someone who has understood something but isn't capable of making it accessible to everyone else. And because he's queueing calmly and conscientiously for the petrol, it's just Sohrab and I who are going to the demonstrations at the University of Tehran today, and when just the two of us go it's different from going as a threesome. Because even though everyone has somehow become politically engaged since the revolution began, even Peyman, it was Sohrab and I who became part of the movement first, and will be a part of it until we die. I approach Sohrab, he glances at me, looks away again, at his feet, perhaps, the same shoes as mine, his leg has already mended completely.

We walk quickly during the demonstrations, we were also walking quickly the day before the day when the Shah was deposed and the revolution celebrated its victory. We said we would tell our children about that day, where we were, what we were doing when we found out that the Shah was leaving the country, we left our houses, as we did every day at that time, we went out with a fury that drove us outdoors,

that still drives us outdoors, it's no longer a conscious decision, in a revolution the masses do away with individual thought, the masses replace any form of deliberation. Sohrab and I, in front of the house, I don't even know any more if we had planned to meet, we looked the same as we always did, the streets looked the same as they always did, but a magic, a song, lay over everything, a bit like at Eid Nowruz perhaps, apart from the fact that I've long thought it was a shame that Eid Nowruz simply reminds us of what it was like to be a child, the smell of the hyacinths, the magic of new clothes, the start of spring and the beginning of a new year. A revolution is different, everything in me cried, a revolution doesn't just affect our children. Sohrab and I, walking in step, we're walking faster and faster, we're always in a hurry, we bump into the others on the streets of our beloved city, men and women we hadn't met before from the neighbourhood, who became our brothers and sisters over the days and weeks in which everything became easier, in which everything was less secretive. Kisses and sweets being shared in the streets, and people hardly noticing the transformation from being together peacefully at home to suddenly being part of the crowd, part of the churning, chanting crowd, part of the movement, part of the fight and we threw our fists up towards the sky. As if we were being rewarded for all the times before, it was like a sprint that you're running for the hundredth time and you suddenly break a record, like beating the same man at *Koshti* for the hundredth time, but this time he's not deliberately letting you win because he is your father or your uncle but you've won because you're finally old and strong enough to be a real wrestler. Sohrab's voice and mine punch through the rallying cries into the cold winter sky, our husky voices, no longer the voices of children, voices so used to resounding as one. I raised my arm and my arm was his arm, arms all around us, black heads in front of us, behind us, army shirts and sweat, beards and moustaches, headscarves and dyed hair, cigarette smoke and perfume, all marching in step towards freedom, no more questions, no questions anywhere, all around us the answer that we had been predicting for so long. I saw it coming, a voice in my head cries, I said it after reading the first page of Marx, I said it after reading the first page of Lenin and I'll say it until I die, until I end up burning in hell, or until they realise that there's no other way except the one history has

chosen for us, that it's pointless to fight against us, that we're stronger. I held my fist up high, Up With International Solidarity. But suddenly Sohrab's fist was no longer my fist, suddenly Sohrab's fist was no longer in the air, only then did I hear the sound of the shot reverberate, the shot that sent him falling to the ground, how small someone seems when they're lying on the floor in the middle of a crowd. He wasn't looking at me, he was looking at his leg, his face racked with pain, and yelling, *Khodā!*, and I never mentioned it to him after, and perhaps he'd forgotten it himself, that when the pain was at its worst he called out to a god we don't believe in. And if we learnt one thing from all those days spent on the streets of Tehran, it's that there's always a doctor about. The bullet to Sohrab's leg like a bullet to my heart, and all around me people with slightly frosted beards, Sohrab's leg wouldn't stop bleeding and for a second I thought, perhaps this is the moment when someone close to me dies, when the martyr we hold up in our photos isn't an unknown hero, and instead is just Sohrab. But Sohrab wasn't to be a martyr, Sohrab got up supported by strangers who brought him to a doorway. Comrade, Sohrab cried, go on, there should be more of us in the crowd. And he said that even though his helpers could hear him, his helpers with their pictures of Khomeini. I nodded fervently to the men, nodded to Sohrab and hurried away. We are brothers, we are comrades, I thought, but the battle won't be won from doorways on side streets, and I went in search of the others, who had cleared out the barracks two days ago and were defending their barricades, and I thought, if I throw a grenade today, if I fling a molotov today, if I get hold of a weapon today, then I'll be throwing, I'll be shooting at the legs.

Since the revolution began we've been meeting in houses we had never visited before. In the past we met in living rooms, or sometimes in secret offices, sometimes in buses, we visited the movement in other cities. Since the revolution began it seems as if gates everywhere have opened to let us all in. Evin Prison, open to visitors. The place where we lost our brothers and sisters in the struggle against the monarchy, in actual fact a place that was never really a place, but a parallel world, a parallel hell, whoever made it out never talked about what went on inside, whoever made it out

had talked inside, and that was almost the scariest thing of all. Evin Prison, a place that swallows humans whole, a place that has been talked about too often to be true. Suddenly the gates were open. Suddenly we could go inside. Suddenly it was no longer a place of torture but an object of the greatest derision. The Shah will never return, every wall, every door cried.

But today we're at the university. Sohrab's leg has healed completely. He strolls proudly and unhurriedly along the campus paths, I do the same. We never studied here, we did military service instead, because the state wanted us to and because our parents got money for it. We learnt how to use weapons and memorised all we were taught. We used everything the military could give us, we enlightened the other soldiers, we rebelled against our colonel, we celebrated the outcome: The army was no longer on the Shah's side, from now on the army would be neutral, for the army had been transformed from the inside out, and that had been our doing. We used the army to become teachers, to learn everything we wanted to learn, to be granted permission to go out to the villages and to teach the children what we wanted to teach them. Every time we went we would stay as long as the SAVAK[1] let us. We didn't need the university to achieve all that, but we need it now, now that the gates are open and we can stroll along, proudly and unhurriedly. I don't know if Sohrab walks like this because I do, whether we're both walking like this because the rest of the movement walks like this, or whether members of other movements walk like we do, and in actual fact I think I walked this way long before the others were a part of my life. Even before the car, the white, shiny Paykan stopped in front of my school and a future comrade invited me to get in, and I wasn't suspicious because I felt, I sensed, that it wasn't the SAVAK who were driving me out to the mountains, who were with me as I looked out over the forests and said to me, think about it, comrade. And to be honest, I would've been surprised if I hadn't been asked. The grounds of the university are vast and complex, we walk along by the walls, looking at the posters and pamphlets, the way all these groups suddenly appeared out of nowhere a few weeks ago. Telling us what should become of our country and what

[1] Secret police service established during Reza Shah's reign

their goals are, their ideals, what kind of state should exist, now that everything seems possible. Sohrab and I don't show any reaction as we walk and observe. The days when everything was underground are behind us but no one has fired the starting pistol, no one has said to the movement, Let yourselves be known, no one has given us their permission.

The writing on the flyers offers such a variety of opinions but the way they are expressed is always the same. And I don't need to read them, I think, that's just as much a waste of time as going to fill up with petrol to listen to the latest rumours about us. We don't need to read when we can act, we have to keep fighting, fighting to create a new Cuba, a new Soviet Union. Sohrab calls the shots and I follow, Sohrab picks the groups we listen in to, the Ayatollah's followers, the Tudeh, the Mujahideen. They were our brothers and sisters in the struggle against oppression, against American imperialism. There were many of us, and we were strong. And that hasn't changed. Even though some of them believe in a divine power and a bloody conflict, and others believe in the *Communist Party Manifesto* and pacifism. The first step involved working together, but the next step involves *us* taking the lead. Sohrab listens to the speakers for a while, shows no emotion, walks on, I follow along behind, we leave the university. Outside we smoke a cigarette. How's your leg doing, I could ask, but we don't ask those kinds of things. What did you think of it back there, he could ask, but we don't ask that sort of thing. Which group did you think was the most convincing, I could ask, but we definitely don't ask that kind of question. We don't ask questions any more. Since the revolution began it feels as if people were always asking us questions and the revolution was our answer. Does your mother tell you off about your shoes? I hear myself asking. Sohrab looks at his feet. It's bourgeois to talk about clothing, he says, and he puts his cigarette out on the grey wall of the house. What actually happens after a revolution? I could ask, but we've answered that question too many times and it's not a question that needs to be asked again: class war, the overthrow of the institutions, a proletarian dictatorship. But actually Sohrab and I have spent the last few days just walking through prisons and universities, my comrades and I have just held the same meetings in the last few weeks as we did before, and actually our songs and anthems were only played in

public for a few days before every programme was suddenly full of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Driving out the religious leader was the Shah's greatest mistake, and now he is back and is being hailed as the leader of the revolution. My children can ask me what happens in a revolution and I'll hand them the answer on a silver plate engraved with a sickle and weapons. What will really happen after the revolution – I haven't heard anyone ask that question out loud yet. Dajeh made dolmeh today, I say. Sohrab nods. My mother loves him like a son. Peyman will have delivered the petrol to her by now. I'm hungry.

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Peyman is taking photos. He has a large camera and it makes him look even smaller in comparison. We make out it bothers us when he takes photos of our meetings, as if it were kitschy, vain. Nevertheless no-one stops him and what he does with the prints I've no idea. I only know that Che Guevara and Castro wouldn't be hanging on our walls if one of their comrades hadn't had a camera at the ready too. Today's meeting is over, it was about the current activities of the clerics, Sohrab and I gave a brief account of the demonstrations at the university, and as is often the case, the end of the meeting doesn't spell the end of the evening by any means. We don't need to be respectful of any sleeping family members here, we don't have someone telling us to go to bed early for the good of the revolution. It's just us, our cigarettes, our discussions, which lose their earnestness every now and again, our laughter, our black tea. Sometimes the women take a corner for themselves and sit whispering and giggling. Peyman, ever shy, gives the women a wide berth with his flashbulb, despite them repeatedly throwing him glances. The same women who, just a short time ago, still had perms, wore high heels, and watched American movies. Sometimes I ask myself whether it's a good thing that they've understood the spirit of the revolution and so have decided to dress like us, or whether it's a sign of weakness, what use to us are sheep who simply follow the herd, how can we build a new state and a new system with people who might change sides at any moment? Next to me Sohrab is talking to a thick-set man, one of the leaders of the movement

who keeps us, the group's foundation, up-to-date. Next time I would be going to Ilam as the speaker of the group, in order to keep the exchange with local groups going, he said, and for a moment I wondered if it shouldn't really be for the group to say who they want as speaker, then I noticed Sohrab's clenched jaw, his proud, distant gaze. Sohrab, who never looks at the women, never greets them, never likes to talk about them. Everyone has a place in the revolution, he'll then say, but anything outside of political action distracts us from the spirit of the revolution. Sohrab and the thick-set comrade are talking about the planned vote for a religious government, and I can hear from Sohrab's voice that he doesn't quite believe what he's saying but that he'd like to believe it, and that inside he's filled with fear instead, filled with the biting, niggling, panicked fear that everything we've hoped for could disappear faster than we think. A religious government would still be an anti-imperialist government he says for the hundredth time. I listen to him and the thick-set comrade talking, still proud to have been chosen as the group's speaker, try to give Sohrab the attention he demands, am distracted by the woman who laughs louder than all the others, has the gentlest voice and the most listeners. Who doesn't toss back her shoulder-length henna'ed hair, who doesn't make eyes at everyone, but who simply laughs loudly when she feels like it. *Ashraf* they call her, and I'd give everything to know what her real name is, but everyone who is involved in the movement only uses their code name. With her smoothly-combed hair and neatly-ironed army shirt, she looks rather prim and proper but when she laughs she is full of energy. Unfortunately she usually leaves the meetings early because she has to revise, because she has to read, because she's studying literature, because she loves the Persian language, because she loves the poet Hafiz, because she so often talks about the things she loves without noticing that I'm listening, then packs her bag, says goodbye to everyone proudly and calmly and leaves, with her flushed cheeks and earnest, clever eyes. That'll make a good photo of you says Peyman, who sits down next to me on the rug, after moving the ashtray to one side. A few cigarette stubs fall out, he hurriedly picks them up before our host can notice anything. Of me?, I ask and Peyman laughs mischievously, perhaps he learnt to do that because he was always the smallest in our neighbourhood, the smallest, but by far not the

dumbest, and he laughs and says, I shall call the photo I've just taken of you *Revolutionary, Madly in Love*. I don't laugh and Peyman only gets away with making jokes like these because we've known each other since we were little and because I value his support. How about *Revolutionary, Shortly Before his Return Home*, I say, and Peyman smiles his silent, sly smile and nods. Let's go, I say. Peyman has got thinner, looks tired. Peyman, you look tired, I say, but he brushes my comment aside as he stands. He has become more pensive over the last few days and weeks and even though I regard what he calls his political views as being far too unradical and cautious, perhaps they make it easier for him to deal with the transformation his brother has undergone since the revolution. Peyman loves his brother, loves Amin, who is now growing a full beard. I never imagined the little rascals, who we never allowed to play with us when we were younger, would already have stubble. But suddenly Amin had caught my attention once more, he was at the protest march, not with our lot, but with the others, who cover their women up with headscarves and have their men growing full beards. I can see Amin's beaming face before my eyes as we celebrated the return of Khomeini from exile. Peyman, Sohrab and I celebrate because he is a revolutionary figure. Amin celebrates because he believes him to be the father of the revolution. Amin would probably agree with us on the use of weapons and violence, but only for a god he never believed in before, or for his friends, whose constant presence ensures that day after day we are once again forced to speak more quietly in the streets. His new friends, who get more support from our own mothers than we do, because believing in a god is so much easier than believing in new ideas. These clerics think they have the people and that we have the intellect, that we can profit from working together, they say this more and more frequently, but I don't know whether I really want to work with them if they're happy recruiting someone like Peyman's brother and kitting him out with weapons just like that. Seventeen year olds who were just wandering through Tehran's dusty streets, not knowing what to do with all their energy. Is Amin at home?, I ask, and Peyman shakes his head. Probably not, why? I say nothing but I think probably it's because I want to know what they're up to, the others. The ones who stand guard in the streets, who searched my younger brothers last week, presumably because they

all know me and know who my brothers are. They interrogated people in the middle of the street, near the bazaar, as if they had the right to do so. Was it true that I had been making fun of the prophet in public, was I the one who started the joke? This joke about the prophet, I don't even know what it was, but they still put the blame on me. As if being an atheist and being disrespectful were one and the same thing, but the rumours were still enough to earn me a ban from the mosque. Although I couldn't care less if I'm allowed in the mosque or not. And whether it was someone else who make the joke or there hadn't even been a joke in the first place, either way they want to keep an eye on me and my family. I can live with that, we are strong, stronger than those who won over Peyman's brother with their propaganda. To add to that Peyman's brother is still just a child, we should look out for our children, we do absolutely everything for our children, for the children alone. We don't have to worry about Amin, Peyman responds, he seems to guess what I'm thinking. It's just a phase, he's made new friends, and he's happy.

We say goodbye to everyone except Sohrab, who we'll be seeing again later, leave the house and set off in the direction of our neighbourhood. That it's just a phase goes without saying, I say, this whole religious movement is just a phase. Peyman turns his head towards me, nods, he looks suddenly relieved, walks a little faster. Amin's just trying something out, he adds, we all tried things out when we were seventeen. I light a cigarette and think, only Sohrab and I tried anything out when we were seventeen. Peyman was far too cautious as a young boy, was always there, but only keeping watch, providing advice, hoping to minimise the risk, giving us an approving pat on the shoulder afterwards. From those first cats, whose paws we stuck in walnut shells before chasing them through the streets, and the first marbles tournaments we organised to squeeze a bit of pocket money out of the younger pupils behind the school, despite games being strictly forbidden, to the first cigarettes we bought with the takings and smoked in secret.

[END OF SAMPLE]