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Two Birds on a Postcard

Farideh Dayanim Goldin
Old Dominion University

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My sister, Nahid, is four years younger than me. She suffers from osteomyelitis, which began from an infected umbilicus at birth, the result of unsanitary conditions at Morsalin hospital in Iran. She was given massive doses of antibiotics to help fight the infection, followed by surgery at the age of one to drain the affected area. Despite these efforts, the top of Nahid's right femur was eroded by the infection. It left her with a hanging hip and a severe limp.

Walking at one, she had a barely noticeable discrepancy in the length of her legs. By three, she was walking on the tips of her right toes to gain a few inches for balance. This image of my sister, etched in my mind: a ballerina with the biggest black eyes, pointing with one leg only, looking at the world for answers to her differences.

When she was six, Nahid's body dipped right exaggeratedly. My father came home one day after visiting Nahid' surgeons. "I am taking Nahid to Israel," he said, looking serious and sad. "They want to immobilize her leg. What a terrible fate for a young girl," he added with tears in his eyes. My father and Nahid left for Tel Ha-shomer Hospital and spent much of that year away from home. Nahid had extensive surgery to reconnect the two bones to help the growth of her right leg.

I was ten years old and missed her terribly. I also resented her for having taken my father away from me. But because I loved her and I felt guilty for being mad at her, I wrote her letters every day. The two of us became poetic, dwelling on the sorrows of the unimaginable distance that separated us, in the florid tradition of Iranian poetry bemoaning heart-wrenching separations.

Nahid had not attended school yet and could not read or write. My father read my letters to her and wrote her responses. I looked for beautiful postcards of two birds for her— to give her something to look at when she did not understand the written words. We called ourselves two *bolbols*, nightingales, the symbol of pure love in Persian poetry. I sent Nahid long letters and postcards with pictures of colorful birds: tropical parakeets, whimsical ones, fanciful like the birds in the Iranian epic *Shahnameh*. My favorites had a sprinkle of glitter on them. Always, I put those in an envelope so their sparkle would not diminish on their long journey to Nahid.

With my three daughters, I visited my sister a few years ago. They were squabbling and picking at each other, the way teenagers do to get under their parents' skin. I was starting to lose my temper, when Nahid brought a shoebox to the table.

"Guess what I have here?" she asked. The bickering stopped and the girls tried to dig into the mysterious box.

"No," Nahid pulled it back. "This is fragile." She took out a stack of letters and postcards. On them, I read again the words of a young girl still trying to curve the Persian alphabet into her own writing style. I laughed.

"Hey Nahid, what would Americans think about such flowery words exchanged between two girls?"

My daughters were mesmerized by the beauty and the variety of the bird postcards with their dated, exotic images. Nahid and I took turns translating the words for them. They were not surprised at their sentimentality. Though my daughters are American, they have learned that, unlike the images on TV, their mom and other Iranians are a sentimental people: not afraid to touch, hug and kiss, often prone to bouts of romanticism; they stop on a nature trail to admire a flower, remark on the shades of blue in the sky and the formation of clouds, when everyone else is rushing to the end-zone. But they were surprised at the volume of letters I had written as a child in the space of six months. How can one explain what the gift of words meant to a child who learned the alphabet at age seven, who did not know about TV and computers, who did not have a phone to pick up and call her father and sister when she wanted to?

"Why so many birds?" my oldest daughter Lena wanted to know.

"Silly, the birds are mom and aunt Nahid," said Rachel, the youngest.

"Oh! Like the birds on your license plate, Mom," Yael added.

Yes, like the birds on my license plate. My sister is my best friend. I want my daughters to love each other the way the two of us have cared for one another. That day, I hoped that the message was clear.

I did not tell them that when I bought those postcards, and even when I looked at them thirty-eight years later, I still saw one of the birds with a broken wing.

When my little sister came back from her surgery, she still had those big black eyes, but she was not dragging one leg along either. She could not walk. Nahid was in a body cast. She could move only her arms and head. They put her on a single bed in my parents' room, with the headboard by the window. One day as she stretched to look at the people in the backyard, she fell off the bed and broke the leg in the cast. That day, my father told me that I was in charge of her, that I should not leave her sight unless someone else was there.

This is how I became my sister's guardian the summer before my sixth grade. I taught her the curriculum for the first grade so she would not be a year behind. Even though the lessons were just writing and math, in the beginning I resented the task because it meant not having as much time to read for myself. Often I told her to just go to sleep, when I picked up a story to read.

"Read me your stories," Nahid asked, next time I told her to take a nap. I enjoyed reading to her. When I ran out of books to read, she asked me to tell her stories. I dragged a mattress next to her bed on the floor and lay next to her, telling her stories from *Shahnameh* in the imaginary mythical land of Touran; of Vikings on the cold seas, although I had never seen an ocean, or even a lake, or a river. Sometimes I forgot the stories in the middle. Nahid would not accept that. "Just make them up," she demanded, and so I did. Sometimes Nahid told me about the orange groves she had seen in Israel, of the ocean, of the airplanes she had flown in. I had never seen a plane. The two of us made

travel stories, and flew to exotic places like America in our imaginations. Sometimes, I made up stories about the rumors of little girls being kidnapped on the way to school. We stayed up all night in fear, although we were safe at home, locked in one room.

Does Nahid realize she was my first step to writing?

The situation did not get much better when Nahid was out of her cast. She had to relearn walking at age seven with braces tightly holding her right leg in place, her shoes heavy and cumbersome. My sister was brave. She never asked, "why me?" My grandmother bought a calf's hoof every Friday, filled it with water and made my sister drink the stinking fluid. A wise-woman had told her it would strengthen the weak leg, already looking much thinner than the other. When family members came to visit, women bent their heads close and whispered about Nahid's problem. "She shouldn't go out," many said. She will be mocked and laughed at. Paradoxically, Iran, a country of sentimental people, can also be cruel. Those with deformities are treated as street entertainment. At best, people stare; women pull their chadors tightly around themselves and gawk. Kind ones say, "*che heife*, what a pity!"

Nahid passed the exam for first grade and was allowed to enter elementary school at second grade level. As the principal gave her the results, she looked proud and confident. School, however, was not what she had dreamt. That year I was pulled out of class often. Having never attended school, Nahid still had a hard time shaping the more difficult Persian letters. When she failed to produce a perfect letter "K" at the beginning of the word *kam-kam* (ironically meaning *little by little*) her teacher slapped her. I was pulled out of class to calm her down. When I reached Nahid's classroom, she was standing outside sobbing. Her teacher, seething with anger, had hit my sister hard on her head in front of me, aggravated by a seven-year-old's lack of control over her emotions.

To make matters worse, Nahid couldn't go to the bathroom by herself. She could not untie her braces. She could not squat over the hole in the ground. I left a hospital bed-pan at school for her. It was a novelty to all others who had never seen one. It was a clear sign of humiliation and a lack of privacy for my sister, who had to use it in an open hallway.

As she was getting older, her problems grew. Women did not enjoy walking on the streets of Shiraz. Men tried to get close and stick their fingers where they did not belong. They pinched whichever part of a woman's body was closest. If men were in twos or threes, they surrounded any woman who ventured out alone. She became prey to men who laughed and leered, touched whatever they could. Most of us had learned to run the opposite way if we saw young men approaching. My sister with the broken leg could not run. She learned to constantly evaluate her surroundings as if in a war theatre and planned ahead to cross the street if necessary. When I was older, I realized that for her even the verbal abuse was different. Men sighed passing me: "who will be the lucky man to put it in?" To her, they offered their tools as an act of charity.

When Nahid and I were in college, suitors approached my family on a regular basis. Their mothers, aunts and uncles and family friends went to my parents, my grandmother, my uncle, and

our family friends to talk of marriage. They never asked for Nahid, although she was the prettier one, the more sensible one, the younger one in a culture where youth was the most important attribute in a woman. Although it was not unusual for families to demand that the older daughter marry first, there was always the unspoken reality that no Iranian would marry an imperfect specimen of womanhood.

When she was in medical school, Nahid fell in love with another medical student who loved her back, who wanted to marry her. She was visiting me in the States just as the Revolution was gaining momentum in Iran. I begged her not to go back, but she had to. She was in love. He was waiting for her. She did not know then that her boyfriend's family had found out about her disability and were threatening him with all the weapons parents can use against their children: money, love, education. That year Nahid lost not just a friend, a potential husband, but also her access to medical school as the country fell apart and she escaped with nothing but family pictures, my letters to her, and all she could find of my writings.

I visited her in Israel that year. The US government had not granted her a visa at a time when Americans were kept hostage in Iran. Depressed, out of her element, heart broken, Nahid hated her leg. She was going to look for a cure at any cost. She had herself admitted to an orthopedic hospital in Jerusalem, going through one experimental surgery after another. The operations never worked, but rather depleted her strength.

My sister with a broken wing.

I did not see Nahid for three years. She had given up on college and found a job, for which she was overqualified. She had a boyfriend but I felt he did not deserve her. When she next came to visit, I had two children and was pregnant with my third. I must have looked worn down and haggard. I was barely managing to keep up with life. Child bearing is lonely in the US. I used to lock myself in the bedroom not to hurt them, to scream and cry like a child myself. Then Nahid came and everything was calm. She knew how to take over. She read stories to the girls, took them for long walks, bathed them, and sang Persian nursery rhymes to them. She gave me a chance to lick my own wounds, to take care of myself, to become whole again.

Nahid stayed in the States. She had learned Hebrew when in Israel, now she had to learn a third language. Over the next decade, she went back to school; she met an American man, fell in love again, and married him. She had children of her own. She found a job and returned to school for a higher degree. Amazingly, she also taught her children a second language, Hebrew, that was not her own native tongue. She also learned to accept her disability.

I have had my own share of problems as my children grew older, raising sometimes very challenging teenagers, fighting depression, struggling with the distance that I felt was getting wider each day, with our parents. Moreover, in a rush to adopt American beliefs and standards, to be able

to fit into the country where I now lived, I had discarded my own heritage. I felt isolated, knowing that I did not wholly belong in either culture.

I went to my sister's house many times during those years, putting my own broken wing on her lap to mend. Always, I am amazed at Nahid's analytical ability to untangle problems, put them in manageable piles and advise solutions. Her years of suffering have given my sister wisdom to look beyond simple hurt and make sense of chaos. Her insight has given me direction.

A few years ago, at a low moment, when I was bogged down with problems with extended family members and petty rivalries, she invited my brothers and my family for the weekend. After dinner, she brought out two volumes of essays and stories I had written during my high school years, before I gave up writing. She passed them around. The Iranian guests spent hours reading them. I realized that day that I was going back to school. I would continue what she had started on a tiny bed, immobile in a cast—the desire to tell stories, to write them down, this time in a language my children could read as well.

Over the summer, I called my sister with another crisis. My aunt who has not spoken to me in twenty-five years warned my father that she would sue me if I wrote my memoirs, or if I mentioned my grandmother's name either in my writings or in lectures. I dipped into a terrible depression after speaking with my father, who has always believed it is best not to make trouble. I called my teacher who is also a foreigner, who also writes nonfiction. She sympathized with me. I called a feminist friend who told me I owe it to myself and all other women to speak up, so others would follow my path. I spoke with a mentor who encouraged me to turn my stories into fiction. I cried on my husband's shoulders and he put into words what I was afraid of: "What is the worst thing that can happen? She won't speak to you for another twenty-five years?"

They were all comforting. But my sister's voice again was the closest to my heart. "You will write. You will write everything down," she said gently. "I have seen scholars scavenging for the smallest bits of information on Jewish life in Iran." Nahid works as a librarian at the Library of Congress. "You will write but publish only parts that are not controversial at this time, and that you feel comfortable with. People die," she reminded me, "even you" – though she told me this not to make me afraid of my own mortality. "Just make sure that it is in your will for the book to be published in its entirety if you do not get to do it yourself." I may be the older sister, but my younger sister is wiser.