

Omid and Me

by Sara Valafar

“FARZIN!” OMID WAS

shouting at the top of his lungs. “Farzin! Come quickly!”

I groaned. What trouble had my brother gotten himself into this time? And how did he know the exact moment my footsteps turned down our street as I came home from school?

His voice was coming from the far end of the alley behind our house. Sure enough, there he was, surrounded by three older boys. The tallest held something in the air just beyond Omid’s reach, using his other hand to hold off the barrage of Omid’s furious fists. It reminded me of when bullies used to steal Omid’s lunch money on the school playground. A chain-link fence separates the upper and lower grades at school, so there was nothing I could do except watch Omid get bullied and fume. Now that I carry his lunch money, Omid waits by that fence every day with his face mashed up against the metal links, bellowing my name until I deliver his coins.

“Is that your little brother?” my friends always ask, awed by the mighty sounds emanating from the slight body.

“Yeah.” That was my brother.

“Farzin!”

“I’m coming,” I grumbled. I dropped my book bag near our door and trotted down the alley. Why couldn’t Omid start his homework

when he got home from school like other kids instead of getting into trouble? I had half a mind to turn around and head back home where Maman would have cucumber and feta cheese sandwiches waiting for me.

But my feet trotted along. Of course I would help him. He was my brother.

“*Chi shod?*” I demanded. “What happened?”

“He took my slingshot.” Omid pointed to the ringleader, a skinny boy named Reza who lived two doors down from us. Reza’s father was a loudmouth, always complaining about something or other.

“Give it back,” I said. I was two years older than Reza and a good head taller.

“Make me,” Reza sneered.

I didn’t want to fight, but Omid took advantage of our conversation to yank his slingshot free from Reza’s grasp.

“Hey!” Reza yelped. He grabbed the slingshot back and shoved Omid as hard as he could. Omid landed on the asphalt with a mighty howl of pain.

Without thinking, I slugged Reza. Reza pushed me, and I pushed him back. By the time we were finished, Reza was wiping dirt from his face.

“I’ll tell my dad,” he vowed. “You’re in big trouble.”

He was right. Maman would skin me alive if she knew I had hit a younger boy.

THIS STORY
TAKES PLACE
IN TEHRAN,
IRAN, SOME
YEARS AGO.



BACK
BEFORE THE
REVOLUTION,
WHEN THE
SHAH STILL
RULED.



“Come on,” I said to Omid. We ran down the alley and hid behind two cars.

Sure enough, ten minutes later Reza’s father came charging out his door and straight up our walk. He beat on our door with a fist until Maman opened it. We heard his bellowing, but not Maman’s soft reply. At the end, he pulled up short as if he had been struck. He stomped off, but wheeled back to face Maman, pumping a fist in the air. “If your boy lays another hand on mine, he’ll regret it!”

“Oh boy,” I groaned. “Now you’ve done it.”

“Me?” Omid was indignant. “You’re the one who slugged him.”

“I was defending you!” I thought for a moment. “I know what we’ll do. I’ll take you for a haircut.”

“A haircut?” Omid was disgusted. “How will that help?”

“Are you serious? Maman’s been begging you to get a haircut for the last three weeks. While we’re gone, she’ll have a chance to calm down. When she sees how good you look, she’ll forget all about being mad. Go ask her for some money.”

Omid flipped the hair impatiently out of his eyes. Frankly, I don’t know how he had managed to escape a haircut for so long. When we were younger, Baba marched us every two weeks to his favorite barbershop for a “German style”—short on top and shorter on the sides. That crazy barber actually laughed every time he picked up his razor.

Omid was still thinking, hands stuck mulishly in his pockets. “I’ll only get mine cut if you get yours cut, too.”

“What? I don’t need a haircut.”

“Forget it then. You can deal with Maman.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets so I wouldn’t get in trouble with my fists again. Sometimes that kid makes me so angry I feel steam rising from my head. I was out of options though.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll get mine cut, too. Go get the money.” At least I hadn’t seen that crazy barber in a while. I think his son ran the shop now.

Omid sped off and came back clutching two hundred tomans.

“What did Maman say?” I asked.

“Nothing. She just handed me the money.”

“OK. Let’s go.”

We took a shortcut through the park. It was too hot for anyone to be playing volleyball, but old men lined the benches and sat around the chess tables set up under the trees.

The ice-cream shop next door to the barber’s was conducting a brisk trade. The owner stacked cones with generous scoops of vanilla, banana, and chocolate and handed them to grinning customers. One of his assistants filled a plastic cup with frothy green liquid from a churning machine.

Omid wiped the sweat from his forehead and tugged on my arm. “Let’s get a melon smoothie,” he said.

I shrugged him off. “We only have enough money for a haircut.”

So we walked past the ice cream and took a seat inside the barbershop. A man was in the chair getting his hair cut, and four more





men waited ahead of us. I shuffled my thighs on the vinyl bench and eyed the clock. Half past four. Dinner was at six, and I had about three hours of homework to do.

At last it was our turn. But just as I took my seat, the barber put away his clippers. “Baba,” he called. “Can you take over while I get a cold drink?”

The curtain separating the shop from the back room parted, and an older man with a crooked smile stepped out. My jaw dropped. It was the crazy barber!

“It’s been a long time,” he said, clapping me on the back and grinning widely. “I was afraid you boys had forgotten your old friend.” He rubbed his hands together gleefully. “So, whom should I start with?”

“Him! Him!” we shouted and pointed at each other in panic.

The barber chuckled and grabbed his shears. “Don’t worry. I remember how much your father likes the German style. Short on top and shorter on the sides, right? I’ll start with you, Farzin.”

“Don’t take off too much,” I begged. “I really only need a trim.”

“Sure, sure,” he soothed. “I understand.”

I could only watch in dismay as my carefully combed locks fell one after the other to the tiled floor. Omid’s laughter stopped abruptly when it was his turn. No amount of pleading could convince the barber that anything longer than German style was short enough.

It was two sorry-looking brothers who checked out their reflections in the mirror twenty minutes later. We left the barbershop and stepped into the still bright sunlight of

C'MERE, CRICKET! YOU
COULD USE A TRIM!



TRIM WHAT? I
DON'T HAVE ANY
HAIR!



the street. I paused to examine my hair again in the shop window's reflection. Boy, were my friends going to let me have it tomorrow! I switched my glance to Omid's shorn head.

"What's so funny?" Omid was eyeing the melon smoothie machine.

"I can actually see your scalp through your hair," I told him.

Omid checked out his reflection in the window, checked out the ice-cream vendor handing out melon smoothies, checked out my grinning face, and spit at my feet.

I sighed. "Come on. Let's go home."

It was just our luck to be caught by Reza. He took one look at us and howled with laughter. Worst of all, he had Omid's sling-

shot. I had forgotten to retrieve it after the fight. Reza was still clutching his stomach and pointing when I opened the front door and shoved Omid inside. Omid's fists were balled up in fury, and he was itching to let Reza have a taste of them.

Our house let off a tantalizing smell of chicken and rice. Maman was in the kitchen, spooning out *tah dig* from the bottom of the rice pot. She layered the crisp golden potato slices one by one onto a plate. I had hoped to sneak past the kitchen unseen, but she glanced up just as we passed the doorway.

"Come here, my sons," she called.

She carefully gave us a kiss on each cheek. She had a serious look on her face, the kind



TAH DIG IS THE CRISPY BOTTOM OF A POT OF RICE, WHICH IS SOMETIMES COOKED OVER SLICED POTATOES IN OIL.

she wore when one of us had done something to disappoint her. My heart beat fearfully. What had Reza's father told her?

The suspension built. Maman looked back and forth from me to Omid. Her face seemed to be quivering. I examined her suspiciously. Was it possible? Yes, it was.

She was laughing!

Maman gave way and broke down completely, her face loosening into all its familiar laugh lines as tears ran down her cheeks. She laughed until her legs gave way and she sank into a chair.

"I see my money went to good use," she said finally, wiping tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"So, you're not mad?" Omid blurted out.

That brought on another round of laughter. "Do I sound mad?"

"We saw Agha Hamidi leave the house," I answered carefully.

"Agha Hamidi is a loudmouth and a bully. Now go wash up. Dinner is ready."

As we left the kitchen, I had a thought. "So you were never mad at us?"

"I told you that Agha Hamidi is a bully. I imagine that his son is the same." She brought a bowl of herbs and radishes to the table and set it down decisively. "I don't respect the threats of bullies."

My head was spinning as I towed my hands dry in the bathroom. "Did you hear that?" I whispered to Omid in the hallway. "Maman was never mad."

But Omid was. He was so mad that he refused to speak to me for the rest of the night.

At dinner, he stabbed into his meat and scowled when Baba stared at his shaved head and asked if he was planning to join Shah's secret guard. He ignored me when I tried to make him laugh by holding parsley under my nose and waggling my eyebrows like Charlie Chaplin.

After my homework was finished, I climbed into bed and glared at his narrow back, hunched under a sheet across the room. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. He was mad at *me*? Because of him I had to go to school tomorrow looking like a fuzzy watermelon.

"You know this is all your fault, right?" I asked.

He sat up in fury. "My fault! Whose idea was it to get a haircut?"


"I was trying to distract Maman from the fight."

"Why should I pay the price because you hit another kid?"

"I was defending you!"

We slammed back into our beds and turned our backs on each other. Just see if I help him next time, I vowed. I kicked the sheet off my legs, hot with anger. Let him call me to rescue him from trouble, and just see if I come to help.

Across the room, Omid drew in a deep breath and gave a tremulous sigh. I pictured the sneer on Reza's face as he laughed and pointed, clutching the slingshot Omid had saved three week's allowance to buy, and just like that, I felt my anger deflate. Of course I would help him.

After all, he was my brother. 

YIKES! IT'S THAT CRAZY BARBER!  STAY BACK, LADYBUG. DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!

SNIK  SNIK ABOUT WHAT? HEH HEH HEH.