

Risky Move

An excerpt from “Concealed” by Esther Amini

My father began his hunger strike. He stopped working, stopped eating, and no longer shaved. Each day I came home from Barnard College to find him in the same flat, horizontal position in bed, growing thinner, weaker, with no desire for food, speech, or life. An unkempt white beard had spread over his face. I wrestled with strangling guilt. *Am I killing my father?*

“Outbluff his bluff,” my friend Christine Buckley advised. “Just move out. He’s manipulating you.”

“You don’t know him, Chris. You don’t understand the Persian Mashhadi culture he comes from. Iran is not Iowa. A Mashhadi daughter only leaves her father’s home to enter her husband’s. She doesn’t move into a college dorm. He’s killing himself all because of me. The fact that I made it this far—that I’m a student at Barnard—is a miracle. I can’t push it any further.”

“Change rarely comes without a fight. Give it all you’ve got. I promise, he won’t die. You have to outwit him.”

“And, Chris, if he does die, what then?”

With unshakeable certainty she repeated, “He won’t kill himself,” and planted a kiss on my cheek.

I wasn’t so sure.

Christine was my cool and detached college confidante. She had a keen analytic mind and was always deciphering the indecipherable, but she had never met Pop. After living with my father for two whole decades, even I couldn’t predict his next confounding move. How could she? She was a blonde, blue-eyed, 20-year-old Wasp from Greenwich, Connecticut, the daughter of a charismatic, sailboat-racing, martini-drinking dad who was refined and rational. Hers talked. Mine didn’t. Hers

didn't go on suicidal hunger strikes. Mine did. How could she think she knew my Iranian father better than I?

This had all started in 1967 when Barnard sent me an acceptance letter. Drunk with joy, I clutched it to my heart, dreaming of the coveted Morningside Heights lecture halls. Not only was I the first female in my family to go to elementary, junior high, and high school; now I'd be the first woman to pioneer my way through college.

But once Pop got a whiff of my euphoria and learned the reason for it, he hollered, "Rip that letter up! I will never pay for college. You will not go!"

Blood drained from my face. I stood before him, chalk-white, terrified.

David, now 25 and working, leapt between us and threatened to take out bank loans. If Pop refused to pay, my brother said, *he* would. With that one swift blow, David dethroned our father, knocking the jeweled crown off his regal head, securely placing it on his own.

Pop heard the subtext: *Now, I will be her father.* A mounting coup. My father's face shattered. We had twisted a dagger into his heart. He had always believed that America was a melting pot of thieves, hoodlums, gangsters, rude children. Weren't we the living examples?

He was right: America did encourage children to reject their parents' teachings and replace them with *college*.

Outmuscled and humiliated, Pop knew he could no longer protect me from the evils of education, from the Ivy League brothels of America. Shamefaced, clutching his head, my father fell silent.

"Pop," I sputtered, "you have nothing to worry about. I'll be going to Columbia University, in Manhattan, where David went. I'll live at home like David did and commute each day to school. I'll be home every night, every weekend, and still sleep under your roof. You'll know where I am each day and see me each evening—it'll feel like I never left high school. Pop, I promise. You have

nothing to be afraid of. And if you give me this, I'll never ask you for anything ever again."

With head bent, hands jammed in his pockets, he brushed past me into his bedroom, dragging his feet. Days later, fearful of losing his patriarchal power in the family, he agreed to pay my tuition bill. But it was David's threat that made him do it.

I entered Barnard in September 1967, on the eve of explosive student protests and demonstrations on the Columbia-Barnard campus. Sit-ins and teach-ins. Rallies against the Vietnam War, military recruiters on campus, the University's involvement in Defense Department research. Opposition to the construction of a new gymnasium in Morningside Park that would allow only limited access to residents of the black and Hispanic community—a project protestors dubbed "Gym Crow."

In the spring of 1968, less than three weeks after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, student rallies swelled into a weeklong occupation of five campus buildings, including Columbia University President Grayson Kirk's offices in Low Library and acting dean Henry S. Coleman's office in Hamilton Hall, where he was detained for 24 hours. After a week of student sit-ins and campus demonstrations, President Kirk called in the police to empty the buildings and clear the campus. Violence ensued, and students organized a strike in response. Members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other groups reoccupied buildings a few weeks later. President Kirk once again called in the police, who unleashed even more violence, and the student strike lasted the rest of the semester.

Many participated. I didn't. Mob mentality scared me, and I knew why. It allowed for only one right answer. I stood to one side, watching, learning the issues but saying nothing, drawing from Pop's teachings: *Silence is safest*. My mind leapt back to stories Mom told of vicious mobs attacking Jews in Mashhad and rabble-rousing crowds throwing hand grenades in Bombay. Even though student rallies were peaceful, I kept my distance, expecting bloodshed. It was as if I were

living in Eidgah, seized with a deep need to hide behind thick black cloth. The urge to be veiled felt hereditary—a search for safety. That’s where campus unrest took me—to a Mashhad I hadn’t known but felt I had lived.

As demonstrations, sit-ins, protests, and rallies swirled around me, I kept my word to Pop, studying in college libraries late into the night and returning home to sleep. For the entire school year, I commuted from Forest Hills to Broadway and 116th Street, just as I had promised. Sabbaths and weekends were diligently spent with my parents, as pledged.

Things had quieted down on campus by the start of my sophomore year. President Kirk stepped down during the summer, and the University took steps to sever its ties with the Defense Department. Increased student and faculty input had brought gym construction to a halt, and the administration made other important concessions to student demands. I started to feel more relaxed strolling the campus, more able to breathe and enjoy my studies. But by the end of the first semester of my sophomore year, I had grown weary of subways and begun pining for the full college experience—dorm life.

Mustering courage, one morning I slunk into Barnard’s Housing Office and explored options. I was told there would be half of a double room available in a three-bedroom dorm unit the following semester and that a student by the name of Carmen Grazzia occupied the other half. Sight unseen, I said, “I’ll take the room and roommate.”

Riding home on the F train, I rehearsed my monologue. Once I stepped foot into our kitchen, the words shot out:

“Mom and Pop, I must tell you. This long subway commute back and forth to college is wearing me down. For one and a half years I’ve been attending classes, studying in the Columbia libraries, and at the end of each day returning to Forest Hills, way past midnight. This is too difficult. To make my life less stressful, I registered for a room in a single-sex, *all-female* Barnard

dormitory.”

Pop jumped out of his chair, charged up the staircase, ripped off his three-piece suit, threw on pajamas, and collapsed horizontally in bed. He had officially begun his hunger strike. His face a graveyard.

As the last days of the first semester of my sophomore year creaked by, Mom told me daily I was murdering my father. She made it very clear that I would be the cause of his upcoming heart attack and imminent death. Day after day he lay in bed, not going to the office, refusing to see or speak to me, rejecting food, occasionally sipping water, hoping his body would eat itself away in despair. My wish to experience dorm life felt lame. Was I trading my father for a dorm bed? How infantile, selfish, shortsighted of me. What if he suddenly died? Could I continue to live my life knowing I had killed him?

For Pop, sleeping in a Barnard Residence Hall meant rejecting his protection, his values, his moral codes, and he was convinced that college girls spent all their after-school hours engaged in sex—often for money. They were loose, wild, amoral women who would corrupt me. According to my father, I was leaving home to become a slut and would end up selling sex on street corners.

These twisted thoughts, products of his grotesque imagination, were insulting. I, straight-laced, intensely studious, never having had a boyfriend, was intent on remaining a virgin. I had never had a sexual affair, much less engaged in prostitution. Why didn't he have faith in me? Why was he so certain that if I slept in a bed outside of his home, that bed would overflow with naked men?

There were days when I wanted to murder him. But as my fury deepened, so did my guilt. And as my guilt deepened, so did my resolve. I didn't know if Pop would relent and pay my dorm fees, but I knew if I succumbed to the fear that this innocent wish to live on campus was going to cost him his life, I would never be able to live mine.

On a Sunday evening, the tenth night of my father's hunger strike, I clung to Christine's words and asked David to drive me with my belongings to Barnard. We packed my books and clothing into the trunk of the Valiant. Mom, ordinarily very loud, became silent. To her credit, she didn't protest. Instead, she announced that she was coming along to check out this place I had chosen far from home.

Chris's words echoed in my ears: *He won't kill himself. He won't kill himself.*

I climbed into the car next to David. Mom, tight-lipped, sat behind me. We backed out of the garage and were starting up the street when, suddenly, as if escaping from a sweaty nightmare, Pop appeared, his face stricken and unshaven, disheveled in his flapping flannel pajamas and slippers, running after us. David stopped the car. Pushing Mom to one side, my father squeezed in next to her. He had come to witness the loss and ruin of Estaire, his only daughter.

The four of us rode in silence all the way from Forest Hills, Queens, to Broadway and 116th Street. With windows sealed, Pop's stale breath filled the car with the sour smell of bile. Crossing the Queensboro Bridge, my head pounded and my hands grew sweaty. As we arrived in front of the building, a parking spot unexpectedly opened up—nothing short of an urban miracle. *This is an omen*, I reassured myself. *This parking spot is God's work. He's watching over me. He's in my corner. God wants me to move in—and He will make sure Pop survives.*

At the front desk, in the lobby and hallways, girls stopped and gaped as my father passed. They had never before seen such a grizzly, Neolithic caveman father. Waves of guilt, hate, shame churned inside me as Pop followed me up to my third-floor suite. We moved along in single file, passing students with hanging jaws. I rushed forward, hiding my burning face behind a coat sleeve. My father stomped down the hall in slippered feet, gray flannel pajamas, with the popped, predatory eyes of an alligator. His long white hair was thickly tangled. Ready for warfare. Fatulla Nissan Amini had come to see for himself the depraved life his American daughter had defiantly

chosen.

We entered the common area of my suite and, as quickly as I could, I found my room. The door was locked. While turning the key I told myself, *If he has to be here, humiliating me, at least he'll see this dorm room is just like my bedroom at home. It'll have a desk and chair so I can study. He'll return home feeling ashamed, knowing he made a fool of himself.*

Pop, straight from hinterland Mashhad, craned his neck as I slowly opened the door. Mom and David were directly behind him, carrying suitcases and cartons of books.

We walked into a large dark room. I switched on the light. To the right was my bed and desk. To the left lay a young woman I assumed to be my roommate, Carmen Grazzia, naked in bed.

Sexually intertwined with a man.