

SHORT STORY

# Mecca Lipstick

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"Cravings II" by Fiona Hsu

It happened in Khayyam Street, in the heart of Urmia, full of boutiques and stores that sold fancy clothes and accessories. A year ago, people didn't have the luxury of walking among fancy boutiques. The country was in war for eight years with Iraq, and people cared about staying alive rather than shopping dresses for parties.

That war was finally over, and things were getting back to normal, the Islamic Republic way of normal, not the norm of Shah's time.

Solmaz, her three-year-old brother Yashar, and their mother were at the ice cream stand. Solmaz saw Komiteh vehicles parked around the street. The street was crowded with window-shoppers and young girls and boys walking up and down the street, smiling at each other cautiously. People were avoiding eye contact with Komiteh-chis. They rarely walked among people. Solmaz wondered if they feared being surrounded by people (who obviously didn't like them), or if people were scared of Komiteh-chis by the way they glowered at passing people, while they leaned on their vehicles, putting one hand on the waist belt. As Solmaz was wondering this, a Komiteh-chi started shouting at her mom.

Yashar dropped his ice cream cone and began crying. Mom hoisted him up. Yashar yanked at Mom's headscarf and it fluttered to her shoulder. Almost at once, a frowning bearded Komiteh-chi stepped toward them.

"Go home, Solmaz! Go!" Mom whispered. She swiftly covered her hair and stepped forward, shielding Solmaz.

But Solmaz didn't move.

"What are you doing, sister?" the Komiteh-chi said without looking at Mom.

"Can't you see? I'm trying to soothe my kid."

"I'm concerned about your hijab, sister."

"He's a little kid. He grabbed my scarf accidentally." Yashar screamed louder as he sensed the tension.

"I'm talking about your lipstick."

Mom put her hand over her mouth, having forgotten all about her lips. She usually put on a light red lipstick before leaving home.

"Aren't you not supposed to look at women's faces?" Mom opposed.

The man shook his head and signed as if he was bored and frustrated already. Two female Komiteh-chis, both in black chadors, got out of their parked van.

“You should be ashamed of the martyrs’ blood spilled to keep you and your family safe in this country,” one of the Komiteh-chi women told Mom as she grabbed her arm and led her to the van.

Solmaz watched Mom and her crying brother getting into the van. People started to scatter. Some didn’t even lift their heads to look at the scene.

Solmaz ran home. How could her mom talk back to the Komiteh-chi? No one was supposed to stand up against them. Solmaz remembered her aunt talking about how some anti-Islamic revolutionaries were being whipped at the regime's prisons. She couldn’t help but picture her mom being beaten up by that ugly bearded Komiteh-chi.

Luckily, Dad was home that afternoon. Later in the evening, he went to the main police station and brought back Mom and Yashar. Mom didn’t look like a beaten-up person, but she was awkwardly quiet.

Dad was used to listening to the 9 o’clock news every night. He usually labeled everything he heard as another lie that the media was trying to feed people. But that evening, instead of listening to the news, he sat on the sofa next to Solmaz, and read the bond that Mom had to sign in order to be released. ““The individual who signed this bond wouldn’t repeat their transgression. If they did, they would be condemned to receiving a serious penalty, the seriousness of which would depend on the type of the crime committed.’ Yeah. I’ve seen it before,” Dad said, “Remember when Ali got arrested for wearing jeans and a leather jacket? He had to sign the same shit.”

Mom didn’t say a word. Her face was still glowing with anger. She was rubbing the dining table with a wet cloth over and over, as if she was rubbing that wet, greasy cloth on the faces of Komiteh-chis.

Dad went to the kitchen to soothe Mom. Yashar was asleep. Solmaz thought how lucky, that he didn’t even understand what had happened that day. As for Solmaz, she had to write an essay for her composition class tomorrow.

“What is your opinion on the Iran-Iraq war?”

Sitting at her desk, Solmaz stared at the essay topic, wondering what she was supposed to write. The first page of every textbook at school was a picture of Khomeini, the Ayatollah; the second page was a black and white photo of a bunch of young men in uniforms, who were either smiling at the camera while holding RPGs, or praying in some trenches. Under the picture, there was usually a statement about the bravery and honor of war veterans and martyrs who sacrificed their lives in the sacred defense: the ones who went to the front lines to fight for Islam, to defend the country’s borders, and to show their loyalty to the supreme

leader, Khomeini.

What confused Solmaz was that Iraqis were Muslims too. So if the Iranians were the ones who defended Islam, what were the Iraqis doing? Also, Solmaz knew some young men among their relatives who had volunteered and joined Iranian forces at the front-line of the war. Some of them never came back. But before the war, they were just as her dad: drinking wine and vodka (forbidden beverages for Muslims) and cursing the Islamic regime. So, were they also martyrs of the sacred defense defending Islam, or were they just a bunch of clueless drunks who didn't know what side they were fighting for? The more she thought of the war, the more she became confused.

The next morning, students of Behjat Middle School, all in brown school uniforms with black headscarves, lined up in ten lines in the school yard. There was a daily routine before students headed to classes. One student went up the stairs of the school building, faced the students and recited from the Qur'an. Then another student went up and read the prayers of the day, "Dear God, give me the strength to respect my parents and the elderly. Dear God, give me the strength not to lie and to always be honest. Dear God, give me the strength to sacrifice my life for Islam and to defend my country. Dear God, don't let the enemies of Islam become powerful." The students were supposed to say, "Amen!" after each prayer.

Then the same student read some slogans, and four hundred students chanted loudly after her. Slogans like: "As long as we have blood in our veins, Khomeini is our leader!" The schoolmaster, who always had on a tight hijab, walked between the lines to make sure everyone was in line and to see if students were chanting aloud. That morning, Solmaz was standing behind Roghieh.

Roghieh, Solmaz's classmate, was a twelve-year-old restless girl. She was sent to the principal's office by teachers once every couple of days. She bullied everyone in class. She made faces behind the teachers back and walked up and down between the students' desks when the teacher was writing on the board. She pushed other girls in the hallways and her way of communication was usually screaming out loud. She even carried makeup in her bag, something that could get a student kicked out of school.

When they started walking toward their classroom, Roghieh looked back and saw Solmaz. "Chetori joojoo?" Solmaz frowned at Roghieh calling her a chicken. She was obviously looking for trouble, and Solmaz was not in the mood after having such an intense night.

"What's up? You're a chicken, aren't you? Always sitting at the front row, always being polite and prepared for classes. What are you scared of? That you wouldn't know the answer to one question and the teacher would get mad at you? So what, chicken?"

“I’m not a chicken.”

“Yeah, you are. Heard you’re afraid of me too!”

“Who told you that? I’m not afraid of you! Who are you?” No one was afraid of Roghieh. She was more of a clown than a monster.

“But you should be! Like all the other girls. You know why? Because my dad is a Komiteh-chi!”

Solmaz gasped, and bit her tongue. In her imagination, Komiteh-chis were not even humans. Humans couldn’t whip people in the prisons and then go back home to their Families.

“Liar! How can you be a Komiteh-chi’s daughter if you’re carrying all this makeup around?”

“My dad brings them home from his office. He takes them from the women he arrests. For my mom, you know? But I snatch them when they’re asleep.” Roghieh answered, made a face, and jumped to the back of the classroom to her seat.

During the break after the science class, Roghieh started her makeup show as usual. “This is a cheek powder. You’re supposed to rub it on your cheek with this brush. But the other brush is for eye shadow.”

It was the first time Solmaz watched Roghieh’s entire performance. As Roghieh lifted the cosmetics one by one, Solmaz stared at them, trying to imagine the scene where Roghieh’s father had dragged the women, to whom the makeup belonged, to his van. The next class was Persian composition. The teacher called a couple of students to the front to read their essays out loud.

“In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful, I’m holding the pen in my hand and I’m starting this essay. My opinion about the Iran-Iraq war is that the Iranian soldiers were very brave. They defended our dear country and protected it from the hands of great imperialists like America and Britain.” Students’ essays on the Iran-Iraq war nearly all started this way. Solmaz’s essay wasn’t an exception either.

At the end of the class, as the students were putting their things into their bags, the teacher announced, “I’m not happy with your essays!”

The class got quiet.

“I asked you to write your own opinion about the war, not to summarize what you hear on TV. I want to hear your stories. I’m sure every one of you has at least one memory from that time. So, you’re going to write another essay for our next class. We’ll forget about the one you wrote for today.”

She turned toward the blackboard and wrote, “Write about one memory you have from the Iran-Iraq war.”

The girls wailed out as they saw the topic on the board. What were they supposed to write now?

At the break, Roghieh started her makeup show again, because some girls insisted her to. As they gathered around Roghieh, Solmaz noticed that one of the lipsticks among her stuff was similar to what her mom had at the day of her arrest: a red lipstick with a golden case. Those lipsticks were called Mecca Lipsticks, probably because they were assumed to be imported from Mecca.

Her heart started beating faster. As Roghieh lifted the lipstick, Solmaz jumped and grabbed it from behind. She stepped back quickly. “I’m gonna take this to the principal! I’m gonna tell her you stole it from your dad, who stole it from some woman!”

Roghieh jumped up like a raging bull. “You fool! I’m not scared of the principal! Give it back!”

“Go to hell!”

“Give it back!”

“No! Never!”

Roghieh rushed toward Solmaz who was running around the classroom, pulling the desks to block Roghieh’s way. At that moment, the math teacher walked in and everybody ran to sit at their desks. Solmaz was breathing heavily. She raised her hand.

“Khaanoom? May I go to bathroom?”

The teacher frowned, but let Solmaz go out.

“Me too, khaanoom!” Roghieh said as she was short in breath.

“No, not you! Sit down!” the teacher said.

Solmaz ran out of the building to the backyard. No one was there. There were some young cedar saplings planted around the yard. She chose the one that couldn’t be seen from her classroom window, and dug a little hole next to it. She put the lipstick there, and covered the hole.

When the math class was over, Roghieh grabbed Solmaz’s bag and held it upside down in search of the lipstick. When she didn’t find it, she started screaming, throwing a tantrum, “Give my lipstick back, you mother fucker!”

She grabbed Solmaz's headscarf and pulled it hard. The headscarf tore. Solmaz didn't react. She was not going to give back the lipstick, even if Roghieh hit her.

After classes, Solmaz waited for about half an hour until everyone, including Roghieh, was gone. She pretended she was waiting for her mom. When the school became empty, she went to the backyard to retrieve the lipstick. Anxious about being seen by somebody, she dug several holes around the tree to find the lipstick. It was a cold winter afternoon and her fingers became numb.

Her initial plan was to give it to the principal the next day and explain everything.

But when she found it, after some effort, she decided to own it.

She peered at her reflection in the window glass of one of the classrooms. She cleaned the lipstick's golden case and opened the cap. The Mecca lipstick was almost new. She rubbed it over her lower lip and then on her upper lip. She pushed her lips against each other. Then she rubbed her index finger slightly at the middle spot of her upper lip, as her mother always did. This way, the curve in the middle of her upper lip could be seen clearly. She moved her head to left and right and looked at her face in the glass. Even with the cold, numb fingers and the torn headscarf, she felt like a Disney princess.

Going home, she took a detour to Khayyam Street. People crowded the boutiques and stores. Khayyam Street was always brightly lit. On the sidewalks, young girls and boys, in groups of three or four, were walking in opposite directions, facing each other and smiling.

Khayyam Street was famous for being the place to exchange phone numbers and to find dates. Even a middle school student knew that.

Solmaz wrapped her green scarf around her neck to cover the torn part of her headscarf. She raised her head and looked at the handsome young men passing her by. They didn't look back. She was tiny and too short to be noticed. But she didn't care. She pressed her lips together and moved on.

At the end of the street, a Komiteh vehicle was parked. Two Komiteh-chis were standing next to their van. Solmaz had to pass them by in order to go home. Her instinct told her to move her green scarf over her lips to cover the lipstick she had on. But she hesitated and decided not to. Before reaching those bearded men next to their white and green van, Solmaz looked at her reflection in the window glass of a Persian carpet store.

Yes. She looked exactly like a Disney princess.