

Blood Revenge

by Luisa Summers

Sahana listens to the tinny sound of the phone ringing in the cold, black plastic of her receiver. Echoing down the hallway of Mrs Rashidi's quiet home, piercing and obtrusive in her grief. The rings continue. The smell of smoke, tea, and saffron waft through the open window. Her head begins to ache. Each new ring reverberates loudly in her ear. Sahana holds her breath. She feels nauseous. She wants to hang up but she cannot. Too much is at stake. Eventually Mrs Rashidi answers. 'Hello?' Slowly, Sahana says, 'This is Rani's mother.' 'How dare you contact me? How dare you think I will speak to you? The mother of that despicable, unholy girl. Nothing you can say will save her. I will not listen to your evil lies, like I have had to suffer listening to hers. We are a religious family. The shame on our family. The shame we have had to endure because of her. I will not even say her name. She is filth on my shoe. She is nothing. She is not fit to say his name. I cannot go to the shop. We cannot walk down the street. Our good name is as dirty as the lies that come from her common, whore mouth. How dare you. How dare you...' Mrs Rashidi begins to sob. Sahana lets her. She needs the time. She cannot react. It's just anger. It's just grief. Sahana feels it too. She feels the pain, the anger, the rage. The silence on the line buzzes loudly until it becomes an impenetrable hum. Sahana becomes aware of the rhythmic beat of the ceiling fan coming from the living room. The roaring throb of silence is penetrated by the soft sobs on the end of the line, almost as rhythmic as the continual whoosh, whoosh, whoosh of the fan. The women begin to feel at ease without words. Neither replace their handsets. Each listening to the other's breathing. The echoes of their houses in the background. The familiar sounds of motorcycle and car engines mixed with children's laughter coming from the street, piercing the interiors of their homes, and their shared thoughts. 'We are both mothers', Sahana slowly ventures. She waits again. The statement hangs in the air, suspended over the teeming noisy city between their two houses. The words duck and dive like a swallow, under the barbed wire and through the bars on the window, encircling Rani like an invisible embrace, then flying high from that place of despair and swooping down into the market, seeking Jahan, swirling around him wildly and giving him strength as he barter and gesticulates, laughing with a heartiness that fails to reach his lost, sad eyes. 'I want to talk to you about our children', Sahana says. 'This isn't about religion; this isn't about faith. This is about family. This is about the children we gave birth to. We raised them. We watched them grow. We nurtured every one of their hopes and dreams. We had even more dreams for them ourselves. More than they could ever imagine. We wiped the blood from their grazed knees and kissed away their tears. We still both have hopes and dreams for them. I know we do. Please?'

'We have nothing in common. You brought her up like you were Europeans, living without control, without consequences. It's unholy. You gave her a mobile phone. Look what has become of her. You should have raised her to follow the teachings of Ali. How many times a week do you go to the mosque to pray? How did she commit this sin? Her absolute belief in Allah would have made her infallible. A good Shia woman behaves modestly. She would have lowered her gaze in the presence of men, she would have stayed at home. This would

never have happened if you had raised her in the eyes of Allah.' Sahana's heart beats faster at the reprimand. She often lay awake in the cold, dark hours of the early morning doubting herself. Doubting her parenting, her lenience, her love. She loves her daughters and wants them to be free. Had she been wrong? She aches with guilt at not protecting her beautiful Rani. Sahana glances in the mirror hung in the hallway, above the console table where the telephone sits. She studies her reflection. Deep black shadows encircle her eyes, and her eyelids look as heavy as the cloud of pollution that hangs over the city. Her once thick, black hair, is now mostly grey. Grey from shock and grief, a visual reminder of all the colour that drained from her life in an instant, the night her daughter was roughly taken away. She thinks of Mrs Rashidi, sat in court wearing the traditional chador, a symbol of her devoutness. She wonders if her hair is youthful and black beneath, or as white as snow. Has grief robbed her of the last of her youthful looks, or has her unwavering faith carefully preserved her appearance from before their lives were clouded by this unshakeable shadow. The wrinkles on Sahana's face, appear deep and etched now within her weathered skin, tracking the traces of her endless tears and her hours spent in the streets protesting her daughter's innocence. Just then the wind blew through the window like the whispers of one hundred memories. 'My Rani is a gentle girl. She has never even killed mosquitoes. She saved every cockroach that entered our home, taking them softly by their antennae and carrying them outside. Now she is accused of being a premeditated murderer. This is not her. This is not her nature.' Sahana swallows before continuing. 'I remember when she was a small girl, no older than 8 years old. We drove for many hours towards the coast, through the beautiful Alborz Mountains and past the lush green Hyrcanian forest on the Northern slopes. We made several stops along the way and on one stop we discovered a great number of baby frogs, all hoping away from their pool. Rani immediately panicked and dropped to her knees, scooping the babies up in her hands and carefully placing them next to the water. They ignored her gesture, and hopped blindly back towards danger. We had to drag her away from this futile effort, as she would never have stopped trying to save them. She sobbed for the rest of the journey and prayed for their tiny, precious lives for many nights afterwards.' Sahana smiles to herself at the memory of her beautiful daughter, her beautiful family, exploring the forests, safe and protected under the broadleaf canopy. Mrs Rashidi's voice startles Sahana, as it fills her silent reverie.

'I have always been so proud of my Jahan. He never seemed like a child, even as a small boy, he was always so grown up. He never cried when he fell over and hurt himself. He always acted like he was unbreakable. He would walk ahead of me and turn around and hold out his small hand to help me across broken concrete in the path, and he would help me carry heavy shopping bags. I oversaw my son's studies and education, but he worked so hard, I never had to worry, I was never, not once, disappointed in him. He looked up to his father and did not want to do anything to earn his disapproval. It was as if his whole childhood was spent modelling his father and trying to be as good as him. My husband was a responsible man who looked after his family and who was dedicated to a pious life in worship of Allah. My son should be able to live the same life. But look what Jahan has to do now. Is this his inheritance? It was the actions of that woman that has forced him into this situation. This decision that he has to make will stay with him every day of his life.' 'She is not a woman. She is my little girl. The world only allowed her to live for 19 years before she was locked away in that grave of a prison. I'm asking you to save my little girl.' Sahana pleads. 'If Jahan does this for you, will you love him like your own son? Will your family live a life honouring Allah? Will you make your daughter swear that she has told nothing but lies?

Will you make her swear that my husband was innocent and not the monster that she has accused him of being? Will you make her restore my family's good name? Only then will I ask my son to consider this. "I will do anything to have her home. But you must ask yourself - your husband was a holy man, then what was he doing with my daughter, my daughter who you think so badly of, my daughter who you say has not lived according to Allah's laws? She was a designer. She was beginning a business. He tricked her. 'The silence stretches endlessly from the other end of the line. Sahana freezes in terror. Has she said too much? The repetitive whoosh of the blades of the ceiling fan chopping through the dense living room air, echo the whoosh of Sahana's blood, coursing loudly through her frightened heart. 'She stabbed him.' Mrs Rashidi's voice punctuates the silence swiftly after an eternal pause. 'She stabbed him and left him to bleed to death like a dirty, tainted animal. She murdered my children's father. She took away their father and their innocence.' 'He tried to take away Rani's...' Sahana whispers softly. Can we speak again? Can I call you tomorrow? Sahana asks. 'Yes.' Mrs Rashidi replies. 'Ok, until then.' Sahana hangs up the phone and leans her damp back against the cool plaster of the whitewashed wall, slowly closing her tired eyes.

The next day Sahana dials Mrs Rashidi's number. She listens to the tinny sound of the phone ringing in the cold black plastic of her receiver. It echoes down the hallway of Mrs Rashidi's quiet home. The sound of motorcycle and car engines mixed with children's laughter wafts through the open window. The teeming noisy city beats with life beyond the confines and quietness of Sahana's hallway and hope. The sound of the ceiling fan whooshes rhythmically from the living room. The phone continues to ring.

(Although this short story was inspired by the true events of Reyhaneh Jabbari (1988-2014), an Iranian woman convicted of murdering her alleged rapist, all characters and events in this story are entirely fictional and no reference to any living person is intended.)