

TLC Showcase

ALINAH AZADEH

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Introduction to *In the Skin of a Stranger*

During the five years following the sudden death of my mother in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, I created a collection of sculptures, *The Gifts of the Departed*, out of her most personal belongings, wrapping them in fabric and binding them with poetry, lyrics and my own diary entries from the immediate weeks following her disappearance.

In 2016, I was asked to write and perform the stories behind two of these sculptures for an event at the Stuart Hall Library, INIVA, London and then as part of the opening of a national touring show, *Tall Tales*, showcasing women artists working with narrative. After the performance, I was asked by several audience members whether there were other stories and when they would be available in print. This spurred me to keep writing and early versions of both stories featured in the *Hidden Sussex* anthology (2019, Writing our Legacy).

In 2017, with the support of a TLC Free Reads bursary via New Writing South (with Sharon Duggal as my mentor) and an Arts Council grant, I turned my stories into the first draft of a novel. I continued to use images of my artworks as 'memory objects', chronicling my mother's life, our close bond – and the impact of her death on myself as a new mother. As a backdrop, I also wanted to examine the long and marginalised history of colonial entanglements between Iran and Britain, which has so shaped my mother's diaspora, our experience as a family giving refuge to those fleeing the regime, and how it both enriched and cost us emotionally and psychologically.

When it was longlisted for the S.I Leeds Literary prize last year, *In the Skin of a Stranger* was a 'fiction novel based on real events'. After being offered a Sable Lit mentoring scholarship earlier this year by Kadija George and TLC, working with editor Thalia Suzuma to restructure and complete my book (to whom I am extremely grateful for her rigour and strong belief in my work), I was advised to claim it as my artist memoir, which I now have.

Time, space, TLC and so many other brilliant key allies and beta readers have been crucial in the completion of this book (thankyou) which, after five years is now ready to send out for representation and eventual publication.

Extract from *In the Skin of a Stranger* by Alinah Azadeh

1980

There is only one person ahead of me in the queue for the phone at school, which is in the corridor near the main hall and front entrance. It is morning breaktime on April 1st. I am trembling, ill-at-ease in an A-line, dark blue, crimplene skirt, white nylon shirt and gold and blue striped tie. I look down at the floor, see rows of thin, waxed, wooden diagonals slotted together, shiny, scuffed in places. I am shaking as I squeeze a bright silver coin in my hand. It is lodged, sharply cold in the centre of my sweaty palm, embedding a round, ridged, red mark onto my skin. My cousin – soon to be adopted sister – Banoo gave me this coin in the morning, sliding it into my hand – together with a phone number – as if it were a precious weapon. She looked me in the eye, and we each swore not to tell on the other if either one of us got caught.

I arrived during the second year of secondary school, and I am *the new girl*. This is a Girls Grammar School, and most of these teachers scare me with their strict tone and dourness. There are curtly enforced silences when we move between the classes. Yet something bubbles underneath the surface here, a faint air of subversion that gives me a little hope.

Last night, Banoo told me more about her life back in Iran, about our grandparents and the many cousins whom I haven't yet met; about boys, diets and the teenage inner life that awaits me. Her plan for today, April Fool's Day, involves me as her accomplice. *This is what we will do: we will both call each other's school offices up during morning break, put on the most convincing American accent we can each manage, and pretend to be terrorists who have planted bombs, warning them to evacuate. And then we will quickly put the phone down. Landlines in those days so no-one can trace us.* Beyond this, I don't know what then might unfold, and I am not exactly sure at this point why we have to be American terrorists specifically, but I am aware that America – or *Umrika*, along with Britain – was for decades unhealthily enmeshed in Iran's affairs, according to Mum, and I am piecing it together still. They were both major players in engineering an illegal coup in 1953 to overthrow Dr

Mossadegh, the democratically elected prime minister, because he dared nationalise the oil industry. An industry Britain had previously colonised through the Anglo-Persian oil company (now BP) in 1914, following an earlier prospecting deal in 1901 between a British millionaire and Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar, which effectively handed over the entire reserves of oil beneath the Iranian desert to Britain, making it their most profitable global enterprise and fuelling its economy and naval power into the 1940's.

I know at this point that this complex backstory had something to do with the subsequent rise of an army general, Reza Shah, backed by the British to replace Iranian democracy with the first modern-day monarch of a new Imperial Dynasty, the Pahlavis. Mum seems to really admire this family, argues for all they brought in terms of education and culture, but that it all went catastrophically downhill when Reza Shah's son, Mohammed Reza Shah, in the seventies, continuing his father's plan to modernise Iran, dared to repeat history by refuting British power once more and restricting their oil supply. The result was the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the effective decolonisation of Iran from western influence.

I hear whispers that this Shah was a *British-American puppet*, and notice Mum's utter rage when this is suggested, intensifying when the name *Khomeini* is mentioned. *If anyone is a puppet, it's him, a medieval puppet of the Americans, the British and the French!* It's all very complex and confusing. *So, everyone is a puppet.* I ask Banoo to give me her point of view on it all, to simplify it for me, but she just says: *Let's just have some fun. It's complicated. Too many bad stories, but anyway who cares, we are here now. Let's focus on tomorrow, come on!*

I am not sure about being a key part of *Operation April Fool*, it seems more than a bit risky. But I really want Banoo to keep me in her confidence, now that we are growing closer, so I agree. *No one will ever find out it's us*, she reassures me. I admire how daring she is. I think I might know where the specific idea for the bomb hoax came from: there is a hostage crisis going on. Mum is glued to the radio and TV. I see images of bearded Iranian revolutionaries scaling the walls of the American Embassy in Tehran. What with having to leave her country, the Iran-Iraq war brewing, much of her close family still in Iran, and then her mother's death – Banoo has a lot going on that's extremely painful. And then there are all the IRA bombings coming up in the news here too, so the powerful word *terrorism* is punching across all channels.

Banoo deserves a bit of light relief, even if it carries risk. And I can help make this happen, she has chosen me. I feel special.

As I reach the front of the queue, underneath the plastic hood of the telephone booth, I feel sick, so nervous it's as if my heart is beating inside my throat. I don't even bother to check who else is around, I just take a deep breath, dial the number and the secretary picks up. My tongue is completely dry. I start by trying to deepen my voice; *I'm an Ameerriican terrrrrr - iiiist and there is a bomb planted right in the heart of your school, so you better evacuate NOW!!* On the other end of the line, a posh and slightly irritated voice retorts, *Oh don't be ridiculous, you silly girl!* and slams the phone down. That's it. Complete anti-climax. Was my accent really that unconvincing? After a flash of disappointment, I feel my whole body drop with intense relief. Well, I did what I was asked. I didn't let my cousin, soon to be my newly adopted sister, down.

Only it isn't over. A hand grabs the back of my shirt collar and yanks me round. It's the Head Girl, who happens to have been standing right behind me, and has overheard everything. I would make a really terrible spy; I didn't even check if anyone was behind me. She practically drags me down the corridor to the headmistress's office. My eyes take in the light-blue, tiled carpet, matching her suit, the huge wooden desk which she sits behind, with her purple rinse hair in a perfect bouffant. Behind her, rows of immaculately arranged paper documents are stacked on the shelves. There are no pictures on the walls, just a small, golden crucifix above her. Austere.

I stand there, red hot and shaking, as I watch her face turning progressive shades of pink, darker and darker as she listens to the account of the overheard phone call, until it begins to match her hair colour. Something about this woman really terrifies me: a constant, seething anger just below the surface. She tells me she is deeply shocked that someone as *new and promising* as me to the school could have done something like this, and then sends me out of the office to wait while she phones Mum. I sit there for what feels like half an hour, my whole body constricted to ensure I won't cry, and I don't look up. I am relying on Mum to get me out of this.

About ten minutes later, I am called back in and told that, in view of me being so new, and my *family circumstances*, I am suspended from school for two days – but

not expelled. A single tear falls onto my dark crimplene skirt, refusing to be absorbed, and rolls off onto the ground. Mum arrives to pick me up. Rather than being angry, she just seems exasperated. *Why? This is not like you at all, what is going on?!* I don't tell her that Banoo put me up to this, as it's looking likely she wasn't caught. I just shrug my shoulders, stay silent and sulk. *The less I say, the better, I conclude. They might send Banoo away if they find out it was her idea.*

Arriving home, I am sent straight off to have a hot bath and Mum tells me she will talk to Dad while I am in there – I just know he will be furious. He keeps telling me how difficult it was to get me into this school and how lucky I am to be in the *top 26% of the nation's academically gifted students. With no fees.* I don't know what that means, I just ask what about the other 74%? I want to be back at my old school, and house – the bungalow with the apple tree in the back garden, lying on my back in the grass – and for no one to have died. For nothing to have changed.

As I sink into the bath, Radox bubbles covering my belly and my school uniform slung on the chair (*no school for two days, great!* I secretly rejoice), I hear the front door slam and Mum saying *Now, darling... I need to tell you something...* I await the sudden outburst of rage which will surely come, a knock on the bathroom door, a shout maybe. Nothing. I get out of the bath and listen at the door to try to gauge the reaction. *She did what?!* Silence. I am genuinely afraid. Dad can be really scary when he is angry.

However, after a few, long minutes I hear, instead: laughter, giggles. Yes really, my parents both find this whole thing amusing. Well, that's better than rage. But a total surprise. However, when I come out of the bathroom, Dad pretends to be furious. *Do you know how privileged you are to be at that school? And how lucky you are not to have been expelled! And for what, a joke?* As a man from a working-class background, he cannot believe I would jeopardise my place at a Grammar school for a prank. *What were you thinking?! Go to bed, now! And think about the bloody stupid thing you've done!*

After about half an hour, Mum comes upstairs and sits on the edge of my bed. So, *what happened today? it just wasn't not like you, such a good girl usually these days... are you so unhappy at this new school that you have to threaten to blow it up?* I say nothing and shrug. Then she puts her head in her hands and I slightly panic. When

she re-emerges, I see her face is red from a convulsed bout of laughter, *I have to admit it is kind of brave, you do take after me more than I thought in that respect...* and she turns around to face my sister, with a long wink, who is on her bed in the corner, pretending to read.. *ay, Banoo azizam, don't you agree?* Banoo shrugs and smiles sheepishly but says nothing. She winks at me in solidarity as Mum leaves the room and we spend the rest of the evening whispering our versions of the day's events across the twin beds under the eaves of the dormer windows, as the sunlight fades on the wall opposite.

About the Writer

Alinah Azadeh is a writer, artist and cultural activist of British Iranian heritage, based in the UK. She has moved from a 25-year career in the visual and performing arts, more fully into her writing practice over the last five years and has had short stories, poetry and academic articles published. Her work will feature in *Glimpse*, the first anthology of Black British speculative fiction, published next year by Inscribe/Peepal Tree Press, edited by Leone Ross.



In the Skin of a Stranger, her recently completed artist memoir, is an unflinching exploration of devastating loss, the power of art in everyday life – and the unbreakable bonds between mother and daughter. Alinah used her own artworks as a starting point to explore the two defining events of her life: giving birth to her first child with her irreplaceable Iranian mother present, and then her mother's disappearance days later in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. It is her first book and her 2020 manuscript was longlisted for the S. I Leeds Prize.

Alinah is currently inaugural Writer-in-Residence for the South Downs National Park Authority, focused on the Seven Sisters Country Park & Sussex Heritage Coast, creating new, speculative fiction writing for permanent installation across that landscape, as well as curating/leading a literature focused programme around it, *We See You Now*. This includes *The Colour of Chalk* podcast, writer commissions and retreats, and a publication, all supported through a major project grant by Arts Council England and involving other partners, including New Writing South and Writing our Legacy.

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