

REZA NAGHIBI / North Van Farsi

My mother calls me to pick up the items for my *Haf-Seen* to display at my new place. It is close to New Year. With a week or so of school left, I don't have the time to celebrate anything, but essay or no essay, I have to go.

At my parents' place off Delbrook, I pick up the items for my No-Rooz spread (*Haf-Seen*). My mom has set out two identical parcels—one for my brother, one for me. No one's home so I'm left to my thoughts . . . the spread is analogous to the Christmas tree, but with seven individual items, all starting with the Farsi character equivalent to the English "S." A week before New Year, the *Haf-Seen* spread is displayed to set the mood for celebration. *No-Rooz* means a "New Day." I carefully examine my spread for compositional integrity. Near-dormant memories of my parents explaining the items' significance come to mind . . . Wheat stands for rebirth; flour and sugar, the sweetness of life; a coin, prosperity; dried lotus fruit, love; garlic, health; sumac berries, warmth; vinegar, patience; eggs, fertility; mirror, reflection; goldfish in a bowl, life.

Later, on the last Wednesday of the year, driving by Ambleside Park I see crowds jumping over fires. Because spirits visit the living on the last day of the year, the living must jump fire to cleanse themselves in honour of the visitation, to prepare for the new year and the longer days, and to celebrate the beginning of spring.

This year the Iranian New Year is Thursday March 20th at 4:43am, Vancouver-time. We will enter the year 1388. It's midnight as text messages start to come in wishing me a happy *No-Rooz*. My mother gestures with a nod for me to carry a platter of some rice dish to the table. And then another. And another. Ten of us sit down for the late supper and begin to mound plates with heaps of everything. My mom has cooked two fish; I have no idea what kind but they're about a foot and a half, silver, and delicious. *Sabzi polo* is a dish of cooked rice with coriander, dill, parsley, scallions, and chives. We eat and talk about what we should appreciate. Stories spanning experiences over about sixty years are shared, discussed, and mused over. My uncle tells jokes and for my two cousins who are shabbier at Farsi than I am, I translate the jokes word for word. The punch line in translation works on one, fails on the others. With my sub par Farsi skills I listen to my uncle recite some of his favourite poems and try and translate them into English for me

and for my cousins. I heap a second helping of *Sabzi polo* and *mahi* for my uncle as his poems have distracted him from his empty plate. He tries to feign no interest in another helping but I insist. My aunt is secretly doing the same thing to my plate. I turn to her and receive a squeeze of the cheek.

Oh, deliciousness in the form of rice with saffron, parsley for the palette, stews of spinach and celery and chickpeas, chutney so sour your eyes can't help but squint. On our New Year's Eve, as on any night, the rules are simple: there's never too little to share, guests have the biggest plate, we stand to welcome guests who have just arrived and insist they have second helpings, thirds if they can manage it. But the tradition of staying up for this is wearing thin—two cousins are falling asleep. A conversation about freedoms between an uncle and his eldest son is another sign of this Canadian-Iranian scene. Closer to the countdown we gather by the TV in the kitchen so we can help with dishes and eat the traditional rice pudding dessert. My sleeping cousins are roused for the countdown. At 4:43am we hug, and kiss, and shout. Every person accounted for is given a kiss per cheek and a big hug. We clink our glasses, make toasts, mention who's missed, and have a good time.

At my parents' house are traditional rugs—books of Persian poetry on one and *Payvand* newspapers on another. The standard phenotypic manifestations typify my appearance: dark hair, eyes, skin, and a nose capable of proficient respiration even in the worst sandstorm, but not much else will give away where I'm from. My name "Reza" is replaced by the assimilation-friendly sobriquet, "Ryan," my brother "Ali" by "Alex". At my apartment, Optimus Prime sits on one wall, photos of cars on another, a *Raging Bull* poster on another. My parents wonder if I'll settle down with a "nice Iranian girl." I wonder if I will pass the culture on to my children. Answers will offer themselves, no doubt. For good or bad remains to be seen, but two cultures in the same room this New Year seems like nothing but good.