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The Hour When Peace Descends by Efreem Sigel

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THE HOUR WHEN PEACE DESCENDS

Efreem Sigel

When Leesa called from London to say she was coming home alone, hysteria welling up in her voice like a wall of water about to burst, Schiller knew at once. He recalled the building that had collapsed, the one next to their office on Takhte Jamshid, and how he and Hassan had waded into the debris to preserve life amidst the dust and destruction of Tehran. Who would wade in now to save Hassan?

He couldn't think of Hassan without guilt nor of Leesa without desire, the emotions arcing between these two poles like a bright surge of voltage.

It had taken Leesa almost seven months to flee, and when Schiller saw her he was shocked. Her billowing hair was as dull as faded yellow clapboards. With her puffy eyes and sallow skin, Leesa gave off the stale odor of too much travel and too little sleep. Still, the sight of her in a New York hotel room, where tall, double-glazed windows muted the noise of the city, filled him with the same breathless longing as on a Tehran night in Hassan and Leesa's garden, watching the spidery shapes of branches and vines, a wisp of a breeze tickling their necks.

"What happened to Hassan?"

"He's in prison. They arrested him 11 days ago." She paused, struggling to say what she thought, not to Schiller but to herself.

"I know I should have stayed and tried to help him, but even Shaheen told me, 'Get out, get out before they come for you, too.'"

Schiller and Hassan had been colleagues, then friends. With his MBA, his American ways, his gorgeous blond wife, Hassan at first had seemed a stranger in his native Iran. His Farsi was rusty. His open-faced geniality made him an easy mark. Not Schiller, whose snub nose and lean insouciance, his ability to curse the taxi drivers in one moment and calculate internal rate of return the next, gave him the persona of Steve McQueen with a Wharton degree.

In a few months' time, Schiller saw how Hassan's confidence grew. Farhad was swept from the directorship of the Management Center of Iran (MCI) in those tumultuous weeks in November and December. With the Shah in and out of a Cairo hospital and a feckless general clinging to the reins of government, they came to Hassan, barely six months on the job. Would he do it, the Minister asked, would he keep MCI going? Why had he agreed? Why hadn't he gotten out when he had a chance, taking his California golden girl with him?

Schiller asked about Shaheen, Hassan's formidable aunt, and Leesa's eyes flickered with admiration. Other women were hiding their French mini skirts and wrapping themselves in the chador, she said; not Shaheen. "That Shaheen--she's fearless. She says, 'This is my home. I won't let those hooligans put me out of it.'"

Fearless? It hardly seemed a virtue to Schiller. He was on the verge of quoting the Times about how many the Islamic regime had executed. Then he remembered Hassan and held his tongue.

He'd met Leesa at Kennedy and taken her to this quiet east side place. He'd made the reservation yesterday after her frantic call, his mind flooded with pictures of her. For 16 hours he'd thought of nothing else.

When he'd left Iran, Schiller had quit Malcolm Sennet to join a rival consulting firm. His new bosses bided their time, knowing that eventually Schiller would agree to go to back to the Middle East, perhaps to Dubai or Riyadh. Besides his knack for languages, he had a certain presence, a habit of command, which got results in these strange lands.

Leesa had been on the move for six days, a dash through the vast southwestern desert of Iran to Pakistan, first by jeep and motorcycle, then on horseback. The Baluchi tribesmen who shepherded her across the Pakistani border hated the mullahs but there was nothing ideological about their rescue of Leesa. To the Baluchis, smuggling refugees was business, just business.

During that journey she'd said little: "Pakistan"; "ke," when; "chand," how much. Shaheen had coached her to insist "kamtar boshe," should be less, when the Baluchis asked for money but her heart wasn't it. Indeed, Leesa had taken a perverse pleasure in handing over those big Iranian bills with the elongated script and the picture of the Shah.

"Tell me about Hassan."

Her blue eyes were large, intense, flecked with red dots. "They came to the house a week ago Monday, at 7 p.m. I was in the garden."

How many times had Schiller joined them for gin and tonics in that fragrant garden, when the brutal sun of midday gave way to a softer, more fecund heat?

Everything about Iran had seemed a trial for Leesa—the bargaining, the dust, the jubes with their foul-smelling runoff, the construction workers sleeping on the job site because they had no homes, the spending habits of Shaheen's daughter with her BMW and AmEx card. But this garden with its pink floribunda roses and delicate yellow coreopsis, the earthen planters overflowing with Algerian ivy, the mingled scent of

lemon trees and mint, had been her refuge. Leesa rose at 5 a.m. in the pink dawn, before the assault of the morning sun, to make a barefoot circuit of the pond with its floating lilies. The streets were silent at this hour. She sat at the table with the glass top that Bakhtiar, their housekeeper, polished daily, gathering her forces for another day.

"There was a commotion at the gate and Abdullah"—the ragtag chauffeur/watchman with the spindly legs—"ran in shouting, 'soldiers come.' But they weren't soldiers, just those dirty militiamen. It took four of them to wrestle him down, he's so strong."

Schiller marveled at her self-control as she told the story, sitting on the hotel bed with the beige spread. How could she have had so little awareness of what lay ahead? All you had to do was see them together—Leesa with her thin face and creamy skin and those blue eyes, Hassan with his powerful shoulders and lush black hair—to know it must end badly.

When they'd met that first time at MCI, Schiller had looked at Hassan's build, sizing him up: a football player, he said to himself. It wasn't the strength of Hassan's grip that surprised him so much as his trusting look. Schiller was used to the smiles of these Iranians, each smile a layer behind which was another and another and another.

The tea boy was paddling down the hall toward them with the tray, his baggy pants swishing inaudibly under the roar of the desert cooler. Through the window Schiller could see the tarmac bubbling under the July sun. 113 Fahrenheit. The inevitable traffic jam at Takhte Jamshid, two cabbies ready to kill one another over a scratch to a thrice-dented rear fender. From his wooden crow's nest high above the fray, a bored policeman watched, the way he might have tuned to a wrestling match on TV.

Football at UCLA, Hassan was telling Schiller, MBA, married an American girl. You? Single? We'll have you over, wait till you meet Leesa. And then he confessed, "I haven't lived here for a dozen years, I can barely speak Persian."

What in the world is he doing here? Schiller thought. For that matter, what am I? He could explain the two years spent teaching giggling sixth grade girls in an Azerbaijan classroom, offering them English, self-improvement, a chance for a less benighted life. But the decision to take this assignment in Tehran now seemed cynical, hard-bitten, like everything else in this mercenary place.

Outside there was a commotion, a bulldozer with a pockmarked

yellow cab about to invade a building site not 50 yards from the office. Hassan peered through the window as three men with pick-axes began to scratch at boulders too big for the bulldozer scoop. He pointed to the men chipping at stone, the angry drivers threatening one another with dismemberment.

"Tehran," Hassan said, a grin spreading across his face. "Feel the tension? Construction and destruction battling each other to the death, like a pair of scorpions."

Hassan pushed off with his powerful arms. "Great to meet you," Hassan said, "Farhad says you're the brightest guy he's worked with."

"Jesus," Schiller said, "You don't *believe* that crap, do you?"

Farhad headed MCI, which was the think tank of the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Farhad had thick black hair, the severe expression of a violin teacher. In Schiller's experience, whatever he said meant exactly the opposite.

Schiller's employer, the Malcolm Sennet Co. of Concord, Massachusetts, was being paid \$1.3 million by the Ministry to create an MBA program for Iranian managers. Schiller's job was to pick the students and write the case histories that would be used in the classroom. Sennet was supposed to spend up to 10% of the contract value on consulting with MCI and for weeks Farhad and Schiller had been haggling over what, if anything, MCI would do for its rakeoff.

Sennet's managing director had picked Schiller to run the contract, heady stuff for a 26-year old fresh out of Wharton. Before grad school, Schiller had taught in a village on the outskirts of Tabriz, a city full of smugglers, its women in funnels of black hurrying along windswept streets. Tehran was an eye-opener: a vast building site, by day swarming with Italian contractors, German machinery salesmen, American oil men, by night home to men in baggy trousers who cooked and slept among the girders.

"Do you want to eat? Sleep?"

Leesa had been in the bathroom for a long time, he'd heard the shower and now here she was in khaki pants and a pink shirt with her blond hair damp, falling down her back.

"Neither. Both. God, it's good to be here and alive." Leesa couldn't face going out so he called down to room service for a couple of club sandwiches with cut up pickles and a tiara of potato chips. Leesa ate every crumb.

She checked her watch: 6 o'clock, the pale spring sun diffusing in the sky. My God, it's already one in the morning in Tehran. Leesa lay back on the pillows of the bed and began to tell stories about Shaheen, an insomniac who prowled the downstairs of her house in bare feet, puffing a Marlboro. In the middle of a sentence she fell asleep.

As promised, Hassan had invited Schiller to supper. When Leesa opened the door she took his breath away. He'd expected her to be blond but not that blond: her hair was full and so fair that it seemed to be made from the sun and the moon. He stood there for a few seconds on the front step in the shade of a sycamore as the sun bathed the roof of the house in crimson.

"This is Leesa," Hassan said, so proud of her. "Leesa, Mike Schiller."

"It's so nice to see you. Hassan says you know all about Iran." She had that singsong Valley accent, each word ending on a higher note. The hair fell in silky waves to her shoulders.

They came inside where it was cool and where Bakhtiar had set out eggplant and chickpea salads. Hassan made gin and tonics, then went out to the garden. Schiller couldn't take his eyes off Leesa.

"I was in a village called Fekrishaar," he told her. "They're Turks up there. A Turk will slit your throat if he thinks you cheated him. Here in Tehran they figure, why slit your throat when they can pick your pocket."

"I hope none of your friends got their throats slit." Her voice was musical. She said she'd majored in theater. Her father worked for an aerospace company and coached Little League. A different world from Hassan's family, with their property in Tehran and London, their political contacts in Washington. Why can't I get a straight answer here? Leesa demanded. Why do they smile and lie to my face? Hassan had tried to explain but it made no sense to her. How could it? Schiller thought. Though Hassan seemed 100 percent American, he had that maddening Persian contradiction of quick intelligence and chronic evasiveness.

Hassan had installed her in his father's grand house in Shemiran. By day, at the nearby American Club, Leesa listened to the American wives like herself, complaining about their Iranian mothers-in-law as their bratty Iranian-American kids splashed in the pool.

Now, as Hassan busied himself grilling hamburgers, as if he were an Orange county suburbanite instead of the heir to a Persian fortune, Leesa pestered Schiller with questions: were people happy in the villages, what

were the schools like, how come a country with so much oil had so many poor people? "Why is everybody in this country either rich or destitute?"

Schiller laughed. "Look who you've met so far. Your husband's family's friends, with their fancy houses and cars, and a woman who cooks and cleans for a couple of dollars a day. There's a whole country out there; don't judge it by three or four people."

She was eager to learn; he found himself admiring her ability to cut to the core of things. Her questions, the way she fastened on to his words, drew Schiller into her orbit.

Leesa told him how she'd been introduced to Hassan at a fraternity party, unaware that this handsome hunk, unfailingly polite, was an all-Pacific Coast linebacker. Born in LA, Hassan had spent the first two years in the States, the next eight in Iran, then had come back to California. In high school he'd lifted weights and biked 50 miles a day to get in shape for football. Schiller began to get a picture of Hassan. His determination to see a job through. His obsessive desire to be liked. His complicated relationship with his father, a shadowy fellow who flitted in and out of his life—but who had urged him to return to Tehran. Why, Schiller wondered? And why now?

It's ready, Hassan announced; come, we'll eat outside. And Schiller saw what about the secluded garden had so charmed Leesa: the high brick walls with their trellises of ivy and primrose; the meandering stone path; the weathered fountain; the lily pond. It was 7 o'clock, the hour when peace descends on a Tehran summer night. The roar of the traffic ebbs, a breeze whispers in the treetops. High up in the mountains, the pink-ochre glow of the setting sun. They sat on the wrought iron chairs, listening to the gurgle of the fountain, surrounded by the scent of jasmine and lemon. From the brick walls, the heat reverberated like a dying sauna.

Schiller took to hanging out with another of the consultants: Daryoosh, a short, wise-cracking fellow, the kid who'd aced his exams and got on everyone else's nerves. He'd stick his head into Schiller's office and give him a conspiratorial smile. "Watch the papers tomorrow."

And sure enough, the next day's Tehran Journal would tell how the head of a state company had been dismissed for self-dealing. Self-dealing—as if it only applied to individuals and not the institutionalized, Shah-directed practice of skimming five percent from every contract, whether it was the piddling one with Sennet or billions worth of German generating plants.

A few days later, Daryoosh whispered another tip: a group of mullahs had been arrested in Shiraz for making anti-Shah speeches in the mosques. The name Khomeini had never appeared in print in Tehran but Schiller knew about his exile in Paris and the inflammatory cassettes his followers had smuggled into the country. When he asked Daryoosh, the little man put his fingers to his lips.

The higher-ups at Sennet had warned Schiller about Daryoosh, fingering him as the Savak snitch, someone who diligently reported on everyone to the secret police for an extra few hundred a month. Over lunch at the kebab place next to the office, Schiller leaned toward Daryoosh and asked, "So who is the Savak guy in the office? Farhad?"

Daryoosh burst out laughing, bits of rice and lamb clinging to his upper front teeth. "Always you Americans are talking about Savak," Daryoosh said. "Don't you know it is really CIA that runs this country? Who is CIA man in MCI?"

Through his round rimless glasses Daryoosh eyed Schiller. "Maybe it's you."

When the check arrived Daryoosh let Schiller pick it up. "CIA has much more money than poor Savak."

That night in his apartment, the desert cooler shaking the flimsy walls, Schiller dreamt of Leesa and her astonishing blond hair. It was midnight in the secluded garden and sprinkles of stars were winking beyond the high brick wall as the two of them lay on two adjoining chaises longues, only their fingers caressing. He woke aroused but rueful. He wanted to be a good friend to Hassan. He wanted to solve the mystery of his wife. He wanted to finish his cases, pick his candidates and get the hell out of this cursed country. Insh'Allah, if God wills it.

Ten minutes to seven in this New York hotel room; Leesa's face masked by bands of light and dark as evening fell. Her lips were parted and the pink shirt swelled and subsided with her breathing.

Schiller recalled how Hassan had settled into his milieu like an otter slipping into a pond, barely a ripple as he became one with his surroundings, no longer hesitant in Farsi or impatient with Persian manners. Hassan had a way of engaging in a game of confidence with colleagues, Schiller included. His knack for doling out information put you at ease; you wound up telling him things you hadn't intended.

Schiller scribbled a note on a sheet of hotel stationery and left it at the foot of the bed. As he tiptoed toward the door to let himself out, Leesa shook herself awake.

"Don't go," she said.

It was Hassan who asked Schiller, "How does Leesa seem to you?" They were on top of the Golbuz, an 11,000-foot mountain that they'd started climbing at 5:30, before the heat of the day. Schiller's Kurdish friend Ahmad, a Marxist with a passion for American musicals, had led them to this windswept summit overlooking pine forests and shimmering lakes. Along the way Ahmad had croaked the words to "The Rain in Spain" and "Get Me to the Church on Time."

"She hates it here," Schiller said.

"I can't just pick up and go back to the States. I have my job at MCI. I have property to take care of for my father. I have family here."

To Schiller something didn't ring true. Family? His mother was living happily in LA. His sister was engaged to a Jewish stockbroker in Beverly Hills. Schiller asked, "Is any of this more important than your marriage?"

Hassan answered with a question. "Will you talk to her?"

Sure, Schiller nodded. Just what he needed: encouragement from his friend to spend time alone with his wife. They headed back down the mountain, brushing past the weekend climbers, men with wiry hair, women in heavy skirts and polka-dotted chadors.

A week later Farhad sent Hassan on a two-day business trip to Khorramshahr. At the end of the afternoon, desperate for companionship, Leesa called Schiller at his apartment.

Sitting in the garden, numbed by the heat and lulled by the gin and tonic he was sipping, Schiller told Leesa amusing stories about the applicants to the MBA program and the lengths to which they went to influence the decision: flowers, invitations to dinner, a visit to his apartment by a balding man in a gray suit, trying to present him with a five-pound tin of caviar.

He imagined that what he saw in Leesa's blue eyes was admiration for his cleverness. Perhaps it was not; perhaps it was merely a longing to twist free of the strait jacket of a hostile culture. Give Iran time, he urged. Time can make the strange familiar, the unpleasant bearable, even laughable. Don't talk nonsense, she said sharply. All this beauty—she waved her hands to take in the scented flowers—and all this misery, coexisting together. I'll never accept it.

Then she was smiling at him. Enough, she said, enough of Iran. He got up to freshen their drinks. When he came back he drew his forefinger

along the top of the glass table. Perhaps he imagined that Leesa's hand, not six inches away, twitched ever so slightly. Had Abdullah come up from the guardhouse to call, "khanum, khanum," as he did to announce a visitor, he would have seen their two heads close together as dusk turned to night, the words flowing lazily back and forth like the lapping of the water in the lily pond.

The day after Hassan returned from Khorramshahr, Schiller was at his desk at 8:30 when he heard the rumbling. He'd been aware of the activity at the construction site next door as they dug deeper and deeper, close to the modest apartment house. Now he ran downstairs.

It was neither a bomb nor an earthquake; it was the apartment house collapsing into the foundation hole, half the building sheered off to expose the home life of the families living there. Schiller looked into a series of open boxes that had once been apartments, each one a separate tableau. The woman who'd been slicing onions in her kitchen was now sitting on the ground, up to her waist in debris; an old man was clinging to a bed that had slid across the floor and was on the verge of plunging over the edge; a young girl, crying loudly, lay half-buried in a mound of crumpled drywall, from which puffs of dust rose like steam. He heard the shrieking, the sounds of pots and pans clanging; saw the rubble cascading into the foundation hole.

At that moment Hassan got out of a cab and came toward Schiller, curious as to why his friend was out on the sidewalk in the dust and heat. When Schiller pointed next door, Hassan couldn't help himself and began to laugh.

The laugh unfroze Schiller. Come on, he said. He clambered down into the construction site as Hassan followed, his expensive black Italian shoes immediately coated with muck. Schiller scrambled through undulating piles of rubble to free the girl who'd been crying; he wielded a board like a paddle to sweep away the debris.

From the construction crew foreman, Hassan scrounged a shovel and dug out the woman holding the knife, her eyes still wet with onion tears. Schiller used a crowbar to pry open the front door of the apartment house, then climbed five flights of stairs, calling out in his clumsy Farsi, "Everybody out, very dangerous." He descended with a train of stunned residents in tow.

Construction came to a halt but the workers continued to live among the debris of the foundation hole, sheltering at night in the shadow of the yellow bulldozer. On Takhte Jamshid the traffic swarmed, the horns

honked, the policemen remained in their surveillance box high above the fray. Disaster struck one small corner of the city, and for the rest, life went on.

With the concurrence of Farhad and the Minister, Schiller filled his cohort of 15 for the first MBA class. He wrote his last case, made his plane reservation. Leesa asked if he was coming back. Of course, he said, doubting that it was true.

The Iran of throat-choking, traffic-driven dust, of cars that sputtered or roared along eight-lane roadways, of buildings that went up too fast and pulled down nearby apartment dwellings, of wild-eyed youths, urged on by the mullahs, challenging a bloated regime—this wasn't the country he'd been fond of. In Fekrishaar, where unshaved men in skullcaps sat at the sidewalk cafe, sipping glass after glass of tea, the loudest noise had been the call to prayer from the loudspeaker of the mosque; the most dangerous activity, the illicit, communal snorts of brandy late at night in a tumbledown speakeasy, with the chief of police joining the imbibers.

Eight days before he was to leave, there were demonstrations in Shiraz. Shots were fired, four young men lay dead. A huge rally the next day flummoxed the government; the Shah was away for medical treatment and the prime minister waffled over whether to roll tanks into the center of Tehran. Emboldened protesters seized the Ministry of Interior; hated Savak functionaries streamed into the courtyard, rubbing their eyes from the brightness of the sun. From a fourth floor window the demonstrators burned an American flag and the huge color portrait of the Shah. Other westerners were stunned by the rebellion; Schiller wasn't. He'd seen the repression of these young males at home and at school. The fury of their outburst was as much sexual as political and cultural.

Hassan, marooned in Khorramshahr on business, didn't know when he'd get home. They'd been canceling flights; the Tehran airport was ringed with troops. "Stay in the house," he shouted to Leesa over a scratchy line before the phone went dead.

Schiller showed up that night. He'd rented a car two days earlier when the trouble started, a red Fiat that bucked and stalled; it took him nearly three hours to drive through the chaos of central Tehran. Pahlavi, the main north-south artery, was clogged with Mercedes, ancient Chevy trucks, taxis, motor scooters, crawling northward to God knows where. Across the mountains lay the Soviet Union, hardly the place to seek asylum. Abdullah let him through the gate. Schiller's eyes went to the top of the wall, lined

with jagged pieces of blue-green glass. It wouldn't repel invaders for long, he thought. One mortar shell and the wall would crumble.

Leesa hated being imprisoned in the house. She was tougher, more self-sufficient now; she bargained for her bread and eggs, spoke curtly to beggars who stretched out their hands to her. Schiller knew that she explored the city alone these days, making her way to narrow lanes where artisans worked in bare courtyards sheltered by corrugated tin. Lately she'd begun working at the American Institute, teaching English to government officials and businessmen who endured her constant questions: how did this work, why do it that way?

She wanted to go for a drive. In 45 minutes they found themselves at the foot of the mountain he, Hassan and Ahmad had climbed. They walked a little ways up the dusty path, rose-colored in the setting sun until they reached a copse of pines, a soft carpet of grass. The tumult of the city in its revolutionary spasms was a million miles away.

Schiller pressed her to leave. "This government will be kaput in months, maybe in weeks. The Shah, the prime minister, Farhad, they'll all be gone. Get out now."

"No," she insisted, "not without Hassan."

The next day an edgy calm settled over the city as troops surrounded government buildings. Daryoosh took him to lunch to warn that Hassan was in danger.

"Hassan? Why?"

"You remember when we talked about Savak and CIA?"

Daryoosh refused to be explicit but his meaning was unmistakable. Schiller, dumfounded, saw the logic of it: Hassan's cultivation of everyone, his insistence on doing his duty.

Early on the day he left for the airport, Schiller confronted Hassan. "I know what you're doing here. Believe me, it's not worth it, not worth the risk to you and Leesa. Clear out while you still can."

Hassan was smiling, genial, at ease. "Everything will be fine, you'll see. You'll be back here in six months doing business, making money."

He wasn't the only one to walk into the flames. When Schiller asked Daryoosh, what about you, shouldn't you get out, he replied, "I live here, I know how to deal with what's coming."

He hadn't, of course. Schiller later heard that Daryoosh had been shot, one of hundreds, then thousands, to know the wrath of the mullahs and their firing squads.

Leesa was in the shadows. He couldn't see her face but he turned toward the bed on which she lay. Her voice came out of the pillows.

"Don't go," she said again.

"You majored in theater," Schiller said.

Instantly she was quiet. Only the scent of bath soap and shampoo gave away her location.

"You never told me you had enough credits to major in something else, too. Middle Eastern studies. Farsi. Arabic. I understand you spoke them quite well. Your professor was the one who introduced you? What a coup, to land someone like Hassan. Did he get something extra in the monthly pay packet?" The professor had recruited Leesa; Leesa had recruited Hassan. Except that along the way the two of them had fallen in love.

"Don't talk about money," she said. "None of this was about money." It had started so innocently: she'd had an Iranian friend in high school. Freshman year at UCLA, she'd taken a class, on a lark. She had an ear for the language. She was fascinated by the culture. One decision, then another, then another.

"What in the world were you thinking?" He stood there at the bed, his left knee pressed against the mattress like a policeman's billy club. All those questions she'd asked; all those conversations in Farsi seeming to swirl about her when she'd understood every word.

It was 7 o'clock, the hour when peace descends. "Can't they get him out?" Schiller asked angrily, "these geniuses who sent him there to do their work?"

A few days before she'd left, Leesa had had a visit from one of them: a spectral figure with a gap tooth and a Canadian accent. "Be brave," he told her. They'd do what they could but it was a bad situation.

"Be brave? That's the best those assholes have to offer?" Schiller had seized the extra pillow, pulled it out from under the bedspread and was pounding at it until she stopped him by clamping his wrist in her right hand. She was strong, Schiller realized; how could he have ever thought otherwise? In the dark his face loomed close to hers. Her hair, now dry, hung in a blond mass, framing her hollow cheeks and eyes that burned with despair.

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