

THE DAUGHTER  
WHO WALKED  
AWAY

Excerpt



# THE DAUGHTER WHO WALKED AWAY

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*With eternal love  
to Kristine, Julia, Maziar, Cyrus, and Layla*

EXCERPT



## PROLOGUE

MORNING ARRIVED AND TARANEH awoke with a sense of dread and despair. The dappled light on her bedroom floor and the birdsong from a nearby branch did nothing to diminish her belief that this was her day of reckoning. She squeezed her eyes shut, clenched her jaw, and pulled the duvet over her head, leaving only enough of a gap to breathe. She heard her partner, Haseem, snoring softly beside her. She heard her two young sons challenging each other behind their closed bedroom door. The world around her appeared to be a calm, sparkling ocean, but the world within her was a violent storm of fierce winds and unrelenting waves.

She admonished herself, *Get up! Always wallowing in your misery. Do something. You're plain useless, Taraneh!* Instead, she wanted to weep with abandon, to scream wrathfully. She had been agitated since the previous day, when Haseem had taken their sons, Zaeem and Ziyad, to see Taraneh's parents. They had left shortly after breakfast and returned home for dinner. From their quaint, postwar home in the cramped East End of Toronto, it had taken Haseem nearly forty minutes to drive to the suburbs of Ajax, where her parents, Reza and Mojegan, owned a palatial new house on a vast lot overlooking Lake Ontario.

Estranged from her parents since early adulthood, Taraneh had not accompanied her sons, who Haseem took to visit their grandparents once a year. Their last visit coincided with Noruz, the Persian celebration that occurs during spring equinox. Upon returning from their grandparents' on that cold, rainy evening,

Haseem had corralled the little boys inside and assured them that he would immediately unload their Noruz booty from the car. Within minutes, Haseem had returned with six large shopping bags filled with toys.

At the time, Zaeem was six and Ziyad was about to turn four. The brothers squealed with joy as they dragged the bags to the living room and dumped the contents onto the carpet. Like the animals on Noah's ark, each toy came in twos: yo-yos, silly putty, ukuleles, baseball gloves, racecars, monster trucks, teddy bears, construction sets, and light-up swords. Taraneh had watched her sons from the kitchen doorway. She had wanted to revel in their excitement as she had when they had their first taste of ice cream, their first feel of snow, and their first thrill of going down a slide alone.

As much as she had wanted to lie on the carpet, help open packages, and teach them how to use their new toys, she couldn't bring herself to approach. Taraneh didn't see toys strewn on the carpet. She saw random, generic purchases given to her children from two people who knew next to nothing about her sons. Cynically, she assumed her mother had shopped with the help of a store clerk and her father had carried the bags to their car as his meagre contribution.

Taraneh was aware that she was being rigid and unfair to her parents. After all, they were trying their best to connect with their grandchildren. Yet, it bothered her that her parents barely knew them. They didn't know that Ziyad loved to play hide-and-seek, though he didn't grasp the rules. They didn't know that Zaeem believed himself to be an expert gardener. They didn't know that, despite having no allergies, the boys warned everyone that they were allergic to green foods. Her sons had opinions, preferences, and personalities that her parents never saw, never heard, never noticed. Her sons enjoying their loot might have appeared delightful to someone else, but it was a tragedy-in-waiting to



Taraneh. She grew anxious about the day that Zaeem and Ziyad grasped the shallow nature of their grand gestures.

The previous evening, before Haseem and the boys returned, Taraneh had set the table for dinner and crawled into bed at five o'clock. She had been certain her parents would send the boys home with presents again, even though it wasn't a holiday, possibly larger ones in an effort to outdo themselves. The boys were too young to grasp the impersonal nature of their relationships with their grandparents, but Taraneh understood it very well, and she dreaded a rerun of last year.

In bed, with the lights out and the duvet over her head, she had tried not to hear Haseem and the kids arrive and unpack. She had known that she was safe in their bedroom and that Haseem would uphold her privacy. She had known that she had permission to be sad, to be tired, to cry, and to sleep. She had slept until morning.

In those first moments of consciousness on Sunday morning, Taraneh realized that the anxiety and sadness of the previous day had not subsided. She found herself barely treading the dark waters of self-loathing. She was within reach of the shore, where she had once stood safely with Haseem, where she was grounded by her intimate understanding of clinical depression and its roots in her father's alcoholism, but she was being pulled out to sea by a fast-flowing rip current. In the brief moments between the pounding waves of self-hatred, she desperately wanted to swim back to the place where her childhood trauma was recognized, where Haseem reminded her that she was good enough, and where she could express discomfort and dissatisfaction without being reviled, ignored, or abandoned. Yet, the waves of doubt and contempt continued to crash on her head; her resolve weakened and she increasingly doubted that she had ever been on dry land or even that there was dry land to reach.

Taraneh beheld a vision of her parents: they floated even

farther out at sea. She imagined them having been adrift for more than three decades; she pictured them having sailed on a beautiful vessel, at one time buoyed by joy and determination. She smiled sadly to herself at the image of her parents as a young, confident couple who set a course through waters uncharted by their own parents: urban homes, professional careers, and upward mobility. In her youth, Taraneh had imagined that a cataclysmic event, possibly in the form of a ruinous affair or an untimely death, had destroyed the ship in one stroke and devastated the couple's plans irrevocably. But as a grown woman, Taraneh accepted that there had never been one insurmountable loss or betrayal. Her father's alcoholism, most likely a genetic disposition cultivated by commonplace mishaps and bad habits, had rotted the hull and rusted the engines in the slow and thorough manner of unattended decay. Their ship had disintegrated unremarkably and left them adrift, clinging to the remnants and exposed to the elements. Taraneh sympathized with their desire to bob at sea with the last waterlogged pieces of their plans, to refuse to change course, and to deny that their vessel was no longer seaworthy.

Her parents' existence, buoyed by their ongoing denial about her father's alcoholism, his impulsivity, and the resulting trauma, was a difficult life. It required their concerted lack of attention to the damage caused by her father's need to drink and her mother's need to protect him from scrutiny.

Taraneh realized that their life was difficult enough without their having to listen to her persistent demands that they acknowledge her suffering. She knew that they wanted her to hold tight to that largest remaining piece of their once-beautiful vessel: her filial obligation to her parents. She felt this obligation acutely. It was her disposition and her desire to please and protect her parents. More than anything, she wanted to protect them from themselves. In her youth, she had tried to manipulate

daily life and manage her two younger siblings. She had tried her best to pre-empt injuries to her father's ego and disruptions in her mother's plans. She remembered instructing her sister to bring any problems to her first, and she had scolded her little brother for complaining about their parents. She had even felt proud of herself for the part she played in the façade: her parents could count on her to put out the small fires and ignore the big ones. She had tried her best to remain with her parents and support her siblings. When her father's affection and her mother's admiration no longer relieved her pain or calmed her anxiety, Taraneh realized the unsatisfying and unsustainable nature of denial. As the dutiful daughter, she had worked single-mindedly to effect change and save her parents.

Unfortunately, her parents had not wanted to be saved. They had refused to acknowledge Taraneh's suffering and they had demanded that she stop undermining their authority. Taraneh realized that she was permitted to remain with them, pained and confused, so long as she agreed to deny her own traumatic experience of being the child of an alcoholic. These were, and continued to be, the conditions she had to meet if she wanted to be seen and loved. Sixteen years ago, she chose to stop denying her trauma.

Taraneh continued to flail against strong tides that pulled at her to return to her parents and nurse their wounds. She resisted, and when she grounded herself firmly in the experience of being heard, believed, and cared for, she had expected her pain to subside. In the sixteen years since she had last seen her parents, the pain had not subsided; instead, it had morphed into self-loathing. The medications, the therapy, and every act of self-care helped her reduce the urge to connect with her parents and deny her childhood trauma again; she understood that she was healthier being estranged. Still, Taraneh wished shamefully that she had died in her sleep.

*Stop being melodramatic. You've always made mountains out of mole hills.* Urgently, Taraneh searched for a lifeline to reclaim her peace of mind; she needed a path out of the abyss of suicidal thoughts, that dark and disorienting cavern where death seemed to be a reasonable and logical way to end her psychological turmoil. *What am I supposed to do?* Taraneh pleaded with herself. *Everything hurts too much. I am not strong enough for this.* The crashing of waves howled, *Drown yourself.* Overwhelmed, Taraneh seized the most reliable and readily available lifeline, sleep.



“Hi,” said Haseem softly as he lifted the edge of the duvet with one finger to reveal Taraneh’s face. He smiled and leaned in to kiss her forehead. His short, dark hair was mussed and his face was puffy from a good night’s sleep. Under the blankets, he wrapped one leg over Taraneh’s thigh and draped an arm over her body to rub circles on her back. Taraneh smelt his musky odour and pressed forward to lay her face on his chest. The comfort of being in his arms, in their bed, and in their lives was immeasurable.

“Hi,” Taraneh mumbled and pressed even more into his tufts of chest hair.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Same. Sad,” Taraneh managed without crying. Tethered to the safety of their relationship and aware that Haseem would persevere if she drowned in sorrow and lost all ability to care for herself and the boys, Taraneh ventured into dark waters.

“How was the visit?” she asked without lifting her face to read his expression.

“As expected,” Haseem replied lightly. “The boys ran about the place playing with their new toys. Your mom prepared a nice lunch. Your dad went back and forth from the garden and the television. Iran’s premier league games are on. I tried to follow the game, but mostly I kept my eyes on the boys.”

Following a deep inhale, she asked, “Did the boys ... have fun?”

“Sure!” Haseem replied gaily and rubbed Taraneh’s back with renewed vigour. “They made mud pies. They ran about with the hose. Got sopping wet.”

“Did they have fun with my parents?” Taraneh asked, holding her breath unintentionally.

“Yeah, of course,” Haseem reassured her with a kiss on her forehead. “You know the boys. They don’t need much for a good time.”

Taraneh lifted her face and looked sadly into his eyes, pleading for him to speak openly about the visit. She sensed that he feared his words would fuel her self-loathing. In that brief, silent moment, in their exchange of concerned expressions, he agreed to speak honestly even as each sentence cracked her protective dikes and the flood waters rushed forth, threatening to drown her. In turn, she agreed to resist the urge to unfasten her grip on him and yield to the rip currents. He remained firmly on the shore and shouted for her to try harder, to find the desire to survive, and to return to safety.

It had taken years of medications and therapy for the two of them to learn how to navigate these rough waters. They expected her daily struggle to find meaning in life. They worked through her regular bouts of crippling depression. They chipped away at her belief that suicide was a reasonable resolution. It had taken years of struggle and suffering to accept that depression would be their neighbour for the remainder of Taraneh’s life. They resolved to make peace with its unwelcome visits and to change plans during its extended stays. The result was a small, simple life that centred on the health and happiness of their quartet, with a handful of extended family members and friends orbiting their existence. It was an ordinary life where the fridge was full, the house was theirs, and the bills were paid. There were no hysterical friends, no swaggering relations, and no pressures to

make more, do more, or be more. Taraneh's pain was rooted in her childhood understanding of herself and the world, a paradigm of funhouse mirrors built by her parents. Two people she had not seen in sixteen years. Two people who could still break down her dikes.

"Your parents mostly did their own thing," Haseem started. "Your dad was preoccupied, and your mom was busy setting the table and then cleaning up."

"Oh." Taraneh returned to pressing her face against his chest.

Haseem kissed her forehead, twice. When he felt Taraneh shudder and sob quietly, he held her closer.

"Taraneh, this is not in your control," said Haseem, planting another kiss. "We are doing our best to bring them together with the boys. Right? I mean, yesterday's visit wouldn't have happened if we hadn't reached out."

Taraneh meekly corrected him, "You reached out. I didn't do anything."

Pressing her closer, Haseem reiterated gently, "Yes, but you managed everything else so that the three of us could go."

"Managed what?" Taraneh sobbed. "I spent the day in bed."

Haseem pulled back and held her face in his two hands, "I see you working hard to bridge the connection between the boys and your parents. I see you wanting them to know their grandparents."

"And it's not working," Taraneh replied dejectedly.

"That's not your fault," Haseem retorted, then returned to rubbing her back.

"Maybe if we set up more visits or if I went along ..."

Haseem pulled back again to make eye contact. In a serious tone, he asked, "Do you *want* to see them?"

With that, the weight of a colossal tide crashed on Taraneh's head. It collapsed her lungs and caused her world to darken. A memory came to Taraneh of her father holding a pastry for her

to taste. Then, another memory of the softness of her mother's hands in her own. Memories flooded her, and she let herself feel the sadness of being estranged from her parents. *His favourite colour is yellow. Hers is red. He likes his hair cut short. She prefers shade to sun. They both love gardens and brooks. She likes to read poetry. He likes the paper. Neither of them like spicy foods and they both have a sweet tooth.*

Taraneh knew all this and more about her parents. As their child, her understanding of them was intuitive. As a survivor of a broken family, she held a detached and informed perspective. As a parent, she was overwhelmed with profound compassion for their plight. The funhouse mirrors worked their art of distorting history to present tender memories starring well-intentioned parents and their darling daughter who grew up into a competent and caring adult. Looking upon this reflection, it seemed absurd and hard-hearted to continue to distance herself.

Taraneh closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. The heaviness refused to lift. She feared that reconnecting with her parents would bring on a bout of intense depression from which she could not recover. Simultaneously, she longed for their company and she yearned to be their daughter. Following another deep inhale, she asked herself, *Do I want to see my parents again?*

Before she could form an answer, seven-year-old Zaeem flung open the bedroom door. Dressed only in underwear and socks, spread-eagle against the doorjamb for amusement and grinning wildly, he exclaimed, "Ziyad's stuck under his bed!"

From the boys' bedroom, Taraneh heard five-year-old Ziyad shout, "No, I'm not! I like it here."

Haseem and Taraneh smiled knowingly at each other as parents do when patience is abundant. Taraneh gave a small nod to indicate that she was content to continue their conversation at another time. Haseem kissed her cheek lightly and sat up at the edge of the bed.

In a quiet and conspiratorial tone, Haseem leaned forward and asked Zaeem, “Is he okay?”

Zaeem, who loved to conspire with his father, especially about his little brother, cast off his pose, stepped into the gap between Haseem’s legs, and huddled close to talk. With their foreheads pressed together and their gazes locked, the parent and child demonstrated a depth of intimacy that Taraneh had never experienced with her own parents. In the slight space between Haseem and Zaeem, there existed more trust, humility, and compassion than Taraneh had known in a lifetime of being a daughter.

At the best of times, the closeness she observed every day between Haseem and their boys filled her with intense joy and gratitude. On the days when her will to live was an abstract concept, she regarded their bond achingly, and she dismissed her own role in the creation and continuation of their loving family dynamics. At those times, she perceived herself as an outsider, a fraud, a person pretending to believe in unconditional love.

Most days, she was relieved that the boys had Haseem. She observed him, mimicked him, and often consulted him. Taraneh didn’t trust herself the way Haseem trusted her; she feared that narcissism dictated her actions unconsciously. She feared that she would place her own needs ahead of her children’s, as her parents had. She feared that she might delude herself about the damage caused by her selfishness, as her parents had. Haseem reassured her that she was a loving parent and Taraneh tried to believe him. It was the daily effort to believe in herself as a loving, mindful parent that depleted her energy and caused her to withdraw, craving the quiet mind brought on by sleep.

“He’s okay,” Zaeem confided in his father, “but I think his shirt is caught on something and he can’t pull away.”

“Okay, I’ll check in on him,” Haseem said as he headed across the small hallway to the boys’ room.



Zaem smiled at his mother briefly before leaping onto the bed next to her. Kicking his feet wildly at the sheets, he managed to bury himself under the covers. With a self-satisfied smile, Zaem turned onto his side to face Taraneh. Immediately, Taraneh placed her hand on his nape and travelled the path to his bare shoulder before resting it in his hair. She loved to touch and smell her boys. At times, her desire to be close to them felt akin to hunger, an aching to consume them. Looking into Zaem's dark brown eyes and touching his short, curly locks, she could not conceive of a single flaw in his physicality.

"Mom, why didn't you come yesterday?" Zaem asked.

Having learned to answer minimally, Taraneh replied, "I was finishing chores." Still wearing her neutral smile, Taraneh averted her gaze to his head of thick hair. "I think we need to get you into a shower today," she suggested.

"Do you wanna know what Baba-*bozorg* and Maman-*bozorg* gave me?" Zaem asked her eagerly.

Taraneh nodded and resigned herself to hearing the list. Excitedly, Zaem jumped to a kneeling pose. With his fingers keeping count, he listed the toys that he and Ziyad had acquired. "And the best one's a crossbow. They didn't give one to Ziyad 'cause he's too small, but I'm old enough. Daddy said I could play with it in the basement, if I'm careful. Is that okay, Mom?" Zaem spoke rapidly and Taraneh barely understood his question.

"Crossbow? Is that what you said?" Taraneh heard the concern in her voice, as did Zaem.

"It's really safe, Mom. I promise. Wait, lemme show you." He made to retrieve the toy.

"Wait, wait." Taraneh patted the bed to prompt his return. "How about after breakfast you and I go to the basement? You can show me then."

"It's just in my room, Mom," Zaem insisted. "It's really cool. You can see it now."

“Zaeem, I want to see it. Just not now.” Taraneh smiled to reassure him. “Can we just hang out? I haven’t seen you since yesterday and I miss you.”

“Oh, okay.” Zaeem plopped back on the bed, slightly defeated, and rested his head on the pillow. He looked up at the ceiling momentarily before he turned over to stare into Taraneh’s face.

“Mom, what’s *pedarsag*?” Zaeem asked with eyebrows furrowed.

Taraneh chuckled and Zaeem smiled in response. He was uncertain about the cause of her amusement, but he enjoyed making his mother laugh.

“Did you hear that at your grandparents’ house?” Taraneh asked.

“Yeah. Baba-*bozorg* said it when I took a watermelon slice,” answered Zaeem. Proudly, he added, “It was the biggest slice. Bigger than my head.” His arms spread wide with exaggeration.

“Ah, well. It’s not a word you want to say until you’re his age. It’s his way of saying that he thinks you’re very clever.” Taraneh smiled at her own memories of outsmarting or surprising her father and hearing the same response, *jerk*.

“Why do I have to wait until I’m his age?” Zaeem frowned at his mother suspiciously.

“*Pedarsag* can also be an insult, that’s why,” Taraneh explained. “When you’re older, you’ll be able to tell when it’s okay to say it.”

“Mom, why do we visit them?” Zaeem continued to frown but averted his eyes.

“They’re your grandparents. They love you. We visit them so you can spend time together. Get to know each other.” Taraneh recited her list with all of the conviction that she could muster.

In her reflections while dishwashing, in her counselling sessions for post-traumatic stress, in her broken-hearted conversations with Haseem, she had arrived consistently at two conclusions: she was uncertain whether she wanted to have a

relationship with her parents, and she was certain that she did not want to prevent her sons from having a relationship with them. Primarily, she believed that Zaeem and Ziyad benefited from exposure to their network of relations and family friends, even if visits were few and far between.

Hidden under the surface of this progressive and benevolent approach to parenting was another reason: Taraneh remained doubtful about her account of the past; she wondered whether she misjudged her parents and whether she had caused her own childhood trauma. She feared that one day she would become aware of her misconceptions, and she didn't want her boys to resent her for not knowing their grandparents. It seemed possible that Zaeem and Ziyad could develop meaningful and satisfying relationships with her parents, in spite of her failed attempt.

"They don't want to know me." Zaeem glanced briefly at Taraneh and continued to frown at the ceiling.

Taraneh brushed back the fringe of curls from his forehead. The reasons to visit had been scripted and memorized. The reasons why her parents were unable to sustain interest in their grandchildren was a work in progress.

"What makes you think that?" Taraneh heard the quiver in her own voice and she hoped Zaeem did not.

"They don't want to play games. They talk over me. They don't answer my questions. They just do their own stuff. The whole time," Zaeem enumerated. With each reason, his expression darkened further.

"I see. You want more of their attention than they're giving," Taraneh replied lovingly as her mind worked busily to compartmentalize her emotions.

Her ability to parent on autopilot had switched on. She remained cognizant sufficiently to keep Zaeem talking, but she was no longer available emotionally. Her own childhood memories of being ignored and dismissed troubled her. She sought refuge

by disassociating, and she hoped for Haseem's prompt return.

"Yeah." Zaeem turned onto his side to face her. He wore a hopeful expression. "Like Jiddo."

Taraneh sighed. She'd had the same thought many times. Haseem's father, whom the boys affectionately called Jiddo according to Lebanese custom, was the archetypal parent and grandparent, though Haseem could easily list pet peeves in regards to his father. Widowed and recently retired, Ibrahim was a creature of habit who preferred ardent adherence to rules and routine. Despite his rigidity and much to Taraneh's surprise, Ibrahim adjusted readily to accommodate his children and grandchildren. She observed that Ibrahim's need to bond deeply surpassed his need for order.

"I see. You want to feel close to Baba-*bozorg* and Maman-*bozorg*," Taraneh paraphrased.

"Yeah," Zaeem said in a small voice, unsure where the conversation was headed.

"I wish you felt closer to them, too," Taraneh sympathized.

Also, she wished Haseem would return and the conversation would end. Hearing Zaeem describe his yearning for a meaningful relationship with her parents scraped off the scab that had formed over her grieving heart. She would hemorrhage for hours, days, and possibly longer, until the consistent pressure of Haseem's compassion and presence stemmed the flow and another scab formed.

"Mom, were you close to your grandparents?"

"Hm. I only had one." Taraneh inhaled deeply to ease the ache in her chest. Without relief, she exhaled and added, "My grandmother. My mother's mother. I don't remember her, but I know she was kind."