



THE LIFE
THAT IS **NOT**
HAPPENING

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A novella of memory, longing, and the space between two skies

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Siavash

I shudder awake. The stale taste of recycled air clings to my tongue—a metallic reminder that I’m on a flight to Iran. Going or coming, it’s only a line drawn on a map, a chalk mark on a blackboard that vanishes, leaving behind the dust of memory. Where is home? The soil your feet know or the air your heart aches for? The drone of the airplane hums like a long, metallic sigh dragging through the cotton sky. I like this sound. Like the rhythmic clatter of train wheels on rails—fingers drumming on the Earth’s body. Like the acrid smoke and restless anticipation rising from stations. Anything that smells of departure carries a longing I love.

I turn to the window. My gaze glides over a quilt of clouds—white, silent. Beneath their closed eyelids, the world sleeps. Further away, the blue deepens into indigo, like dye dripping from a washed shirt, mingling with the white seams of clouds.

A burst of laughter snatches my attention. I turn left. Beside me—where moments ago there was only the blue void of an empty seat—a child now sits. Sunlight slants through the window, scattering golden dust across the page of her picture book. Shadows of the story dance on her small face. A thin smile stretches from the corner of her lip almost to her ear—a trace of joy drawn by words.

My head spins; a room inside me tilts. *Wasn't this seat empty just breaths ago? Like the hollow left by an extracted tooth.* Perhaps while I slept, while my soul wandered among these same clouds, they placed her here like a little angel. Everything feels strange—like a clock whose hands turn backward. Where are her parents? My gaze scans the aisle; two middle-aged men sit further away, faces as indifferent as river stones. I scold myself. *Siavash! Let it go. You're not meant to pull every loose thread in this patched-up world to find its other end.*

The little girl laughs again—a laugh that smells of gingerbread—and suddenly, the warmth of her small fingers presses against my arm like an unexpected seal.

“Have you read this story yourself?” she asks.

I pause. My mouth is dry. From the bottom of a distant well of memory, my voice rises. “Yes ... I've read it. It's an interesting story.”

She smiles, oblivious to the tremor in my tone, and dives back into her book. I look closer. Seven, maybe eight years old. Wavy black hair. Oval face. Brown eyes. A faint, distant copy of myself from long ago. Her skin is white as untouched straw paper. She's beautiful. A wish forms in my chest like a soap bubble—colorful, trembling—and bursts silently before its taste reaches my lips.

Negah

Wow, this *Invisible Child* story is so funny! How cool would it be if I could be invisible, too? Then I'd tease Baba so much—I'd hide, and he'd never find me! This little "Ninny" in the book disappeared just because her relatives were mean and scared her. When her fear went away, she came back.

Baba's acting weird today. He keeps staring at me like I've grown horns or something! But I love my Baba. Lots of times he talks to me about big, grown-up things I don't understand at all. I just look at him like *this*. And guess what? Baba has a thousand names for me! One day I'm his little honey, another day his little flower, then his pretty girl. A new name every day. I wish it were my birthday every day—then I'd get lots of presents!

This is the second time we're going to Iran. The first time I was really little—maybe two—so I don't remember anything. Baba has so many relatives there: aunts, uncles ... and lots of kids waiting for me to play with them! Lately, we've been talking to them on the phone. They blow kisses and say, "You're so precious!" I don't understand some words because I grew up in Finland. I don't know how to write Farsi. But I love Iranian food! Macaroni, *ghormeh sabzi*, kebab ... yum yum! This time, Mommy didn't come. She

said she had something really important to do. I miss her.

I turn to him and ask, “Baba! How much longer ’til we get there? I’m tired!”

Baba looks at me funny. “*Baba?* I’m not your Baba! But don’t worry, we’ll be there in half an hour. Where are your mom and dad sitting?”

Suddenly, my heart sinks. Why is Baba talking like this? Is he teasing me? But his look is strange—worried. My heart beats fast. I sneak a glance around. The nice aunty—the flight attendant—is collecting cups. Other people are sleeping or reading. Nobody’s paying attention to us. Why did Baba say that? I want to ask him again, but the flight attendant’s voice comes over the loudspeaker. “Passengers, please fasten your seatbelts. We will be landing in a few minutes.”

Phew! We’re almost there. My heart calms a little. I look at Baba again. Maybe he’s just tired. Yeah, that’s it. I remember the story of the invisible child. I wish I could be invisible sometimes too—then I wouldn’t hear these weird things Baba says.

Flight Attendant

The airplane begins its slow descent. From a distance, our job looks glamorous, even chic. But inside each of us, storms sometimes rage. We get used to it—but peace of mind is something else entirely.

With a professional smile fixed on my lips, I walk down the narrow aisle, performing the final checks: seatbelts fastened, seatbacks upright, tray tables stowed. I've walked this path for years, seen thousands of faces, sensed thousands of untold stories in the controlled silence of the cabin.

When I was a child, I used to watch flocks of birds and tell my mother, "Lucky them—they go wherever they want." She would smile and say, "Maybe one day you'll fly wherever you want." And now, with the help of this iron bird, I do fly—but it's nothing like my childhood dreams. Up here, nature's laws still rule: lift, gravity, air pressure. Physics reigns supreme.

I couldn't sleep last night—the previous flight was delayed—but I have to pretend I'm alert, refreshed, perfectly groomed. A smile is the main seasoning of our job; it is part of the uniform.

During this flight, one pair caught my attention: a little girl and her father. She was quietly happy, lost in her book—a joy that belongs to a private world. The father, though, seemed stunned, bewildered, as if

seeing his daughter for the first time. He slept most of the journey. At the start, he asked for water to take a pill—maybe a sleeping pill—then sat motionless like a piece of wood. The child, in her yellow-and-white striped tights, swung her legs back and forth. Her white-and-yellow dress made her look like a doll.

We're approaching Tehran's Imam Khomeini Airport. Birds probably land with tired wings after a long flight. I land with a tired soul. It's been a year since my separation—he left when he was sure I couldn't have children. That place where he left still aches. I pull myself together; it's time to bid farewell to the passengers.

I stand at the exit door, delivering one smile to each person. My cheeks ache from the effort. Between passengers, I have only seconds to rest my jaw before assuming the *smile guard* again. Suddenly, I notice the little girl crying. I walk over.

“Can I help you?”

The man looks at me, flustered. “Who is this child? She's mistaken me for her father. I don't understand why people have become so irresponsible! They abandon a child—on an airplane—and just leave.” The girl bursts into tears. The man pauses, as if realizing how impossible that sounds. But he keeps grumbling.

“What do you mean, sir?” I ask, keeping my voice steady. “This girl boarded with you. According to the

Siavash, an Iranian poet and researcher living in Finland, drifts between two realities - one anchored in loneliness, migration, and fragmented memories, and another in which he mysteriously has a wife, Shahrzad, and a daughter, Negah. His flights between Finland and Iran propel him into uncertain futures and forgotten pasts. Conversations with his mother and friends, encounters through a dating app, and reflections in a digital-storytelling workshop expose a fractured identity. Borrowing from astronomy the idea that light shifts red as things move apart and blue as they draw near, this novella explores themes of memory, time, immigration, and the liminal space between fantasy and reality - questioning how a life can be both lived and not lived at once. A novella of memory, longing, and a family that may only exist in the space between two skies.

From the book

Before the sky of Iran appears beneath us, sleep falls like a heavy curtain across my eyes ... The captain's voice pierces my sleep like a needle. I jolt awake. My eyes dart around, frantic. Shahrzad's seat. Negah's seat. Empty. Two strangers sit there now. Not just empty---curved, as if space itself has folded inward, erasing all trace of them. My mouth is dry. A flight attendant drifts past like a faceless shadow. My voice, brittle, escapes. "My companions ... a lady with black hair and a little girl ... where are they?" Her eyes, vacant, glance at the seats. Her tone is flat, almost bored. "You have been alone since the beginning of the journey, sir. Always alone."

