

Book One

Tehran, Iran

Chapter 1

When I was nine, I read an article in the *Ettela'at*, our newspaper, about an audiologist fitting a deaf child with hearing aids. The caption in Farsi under the photo of the little girl with tears rolling down her face read: “Oh my! I can hear my voice!”

That was the moment I decided I must have hearing aids, too. I lobbied my mother, showing her the article, but she just smiled and nodded. Report card day bolstered my case, showing poor progress in math. My parents wanted to hire a tutor, but I suggested they invest in hearing aids instead. I said, “If I could hear the teacher, I would do a lot better in class. I would rather have hearing aids.”

I kept nagging them over months, never missing an opportunity to make my case. I pounced one evening while they were relaxed and least expected it as Papa sat in his leather lounge smoking and Maamaan crocheted a blanket. Taking a stance on the Persian rug between them, I clapped my hands to secure their attention and announced, “I cannot hear my voice and I do not have the slightest idea what your voices sound like. My grades in school suffer because when the teacher turns her back, I miss everything!” I crossed my arms stubbornly and stared intently at them. “I want hearing aids!”

Maamaan never looked up and continued crocheting “Go to bed. It is late. Your father and I will discuss it.”

I understood why my parents wanted to turn a blind eye to the problem. In our culture it was not safe to be different. Being Jewish in a Muslim country was difficult enough, but if your child had a disability, you kept that fact very private. People with disabilities in mid-twentieth

century Iran were considered tragic and pitiful. Those afflicted were seen as unfit or feeble-minded and incapable of contributing to society. Their worth was only valued as entertainment in a circus sideshow or as objects of scorn. Many disabled individuals were forced to undergo sterilization so as not to pass disabling genes to their offspring.

I could appreciate that my parents wanted my deafness to remain a secret; hearing aids would be stark evidence of my inferiority. They feared ridicule from the community for their inability to sire healthy, normal children. It was safer and much less complicated to pretend all was well, until the consequences began to force the issue.

I arrived home from school, bleeding, crying and dripping wet. “My God, Zhila! What happened?” Maamaan dropped her duster on the living room table and rushed to my side. I kicked off my boots near the front door and ran to my room.

“Nothing!” I slammed the door behind me. Maamaan waited a few minutes, and then knocked softly on my bedroom door.

“Go away!”

She ignored my drama, came in and sat down next to me on the bed. “Let me look at that,” she said pointing to the wound on my head caked with dried blood. “I need to clean it.” She placed the first aid kit on the night table, wet a ball of cotton with antiseptic, and said, “This will sting.”

As she worked, Maamaan asked, “Who did this to you?”

“My teacher!” I broke down and cried in her arms.

When the shaking and sobs subsided, Maamaan gently moved me to arm’s length, “Tell me what happened.”

“We were working on a math problem and Mrs. Saidi’s back was to the class, writing on the board as she spoke to us. I had no idea that she had called on me to come up to solve the problem.

“She turned around, her face beet red, looking at me with fire in her eyes. ‘Miss Shirazi, when I speak to you, I expect a response!’ She turned back to the board and put up another problem. In her fury, even I could hear the scraping chalk echo in the room.

“Mrs. Saidi turned around again her face even redder and screamed at me so hard stray spittle took flight and landed in my hair.”

Maamaan put a Band-Aid on the side of my temple and closed the first aid kit. “What happened next?”

“She ordered me to stand by the door and then said something with her back to me and a few students laughed and then she asked why I was still standing there. I did not know what she was talking about, and I was so embarrassed standing there completely confused. Mrs. Saidi grabbed the pencil from behind her ear, lunged at me and gouged it into my head and said, ‘That should wake you up, you stupid Jew, now get out of my class and don’t come back until you learn respect.’

“So, I stood outside under an awning with the wind and rain blowing in my face waiting.”

I sneezed and Maamaan ordered me to get out of my damp clothes and take a shower. As I undressed, I said, “If I had hearing aids this would not have happened.”

Maamaan got off the bed and held me in her arms. Then she pulled away and said, “For your twelfth birthday we will see an audiologist.”

That was three years away, but I had a delightful shower.

Chapter 2

I never looked forward to a birthday with more excitement than my twelfth. I had waited three long years and now it was Operation Hearing Aids!

As usual I walked to school with cousin Parry, Aunt Sabra's daughter. This school year was so much better than Mrs. Saidi's class not only because Parry was in my room but Miss Avedisian, our teacher was really kind. She believed in teaching using the philosophy of the school's Christian founder, a righteous woman who wanted to educate young girls, no matter what their background or religion.

Miss Avedisian was aware of my deafness because Parry told her. On the first day of class, Parry stopped at our teacher's desk while I stood waiting at the door. She whispered something to her and Miss Avedisian looked over at me and smiled.

That was all it took. Thanks to Parry, Miss Avedisian never spoke with her back to me. When she asked me a question, she looked directly at me and spoke slowly enough to make sure I understood. My grades skyrocketed and finally I was happy.

School dismissed early that Wednesday afternoon as I ran home with Parry in my wake. At a busy intersection, my cousin caught up to me and asked, "What is the big rush?"

As the noisy traffic sped by, I said, "I told you already. Maamaan promised me hearing aids. We get them today!" As the light changed, I dashed off knowing I was being terribly rude, but I was so exhilarated I had no time for manners and left Parry at the corner shaking her head.

I burst through the front door sweaty with a blue scarf tangled haphazardly around my neck. Maamaan scowled, "Go take a shower, change clothes and we will go."

"But we will be late," I whined.

Maamaan stood with her hands on her hips, her apron concealing her pregnant belly. “We have an hour, plenty of time, now go.” Supergirl could not have showered and dressed faster.

I walked quickly ahead of Maamaan and kept turning to face her urging her to walk faster. She contentedly waddled behind making no attempt at all to satisfy my coaxing. From Darband Street, near Sa’dabad Palace, home to the Shah, we headed east on Tajik and entered a medical center at the end of the block. Maamaan filled out the requisite forms, handing them to the receptionist who puffed at her bangs to get them out of her eyes. “Dr. Mohammadi will be with you shortly.”

I was too excited to sit. Soon I would be able to hear! I imagined all the sounds I would hear: music, my teacher's voice, the new baby crying...the possibilities were endless. While we waited, I studied a framed drawing of an ear on the wall, labeled with the *Ear Canal*, *Middle Ear*, *Inner Ear*, and *Eustachian Tube*. The receptionist interrupted my intrigue and I helped Maamaan struggle to her feet.

Dr. Mohammadi had bushy eyebrows, and a kind face with a chipped front tooth that distracted from his bright smile. “Welcome, young lady,” he said offering his hand.

I shook it enthusiastically and blurted out, “I need hearing aids!”

He offered my mother a seat near his desk. “For that we will need to do some tests.” He spoke slowly and distinctly, just like Miss Avedisian. He escorted me to the sound-proof booth. “First we will do a Pure Tone test. You sit on that chair and place those headphones over your ears. If you hear a sound, raise your left hand. Okay?”

I nodded and eagerly entered the booth. Once the headphones were in place, a loud beep assaulted my right ear and my hand enthusiastically shot up. Another beep, up went my hand, then fewer, then nothing. I did better with the left ear although most sounds were faint as if from

far away, but still I was encouraged. I kept the headphones on for the next test where he instructed me to repeat the word that I heard. Again, my right ear failed completely and words made little sense in the left.

He performed a few more tests, sticking instruments in my ears then looking at his gadgets and meters and charts, then jotted down notes. When he finished analyzing the results, he informed us that I had a profound loss in my right ear and in my better ear on the left I had a severe loss. We quizzed him about the significance of that and what was the next step.

The technical explanation went over my head and I almost lost all hope when he told us there was no remedy for my right ear; no hearing aid could help. I perked up again when he said that with an aid on my left, I might understand some speech. "The Meningitis you had as a child destroyed the hair-like structures in your ears, necessary for the complicated process of hearing and understanding sound. You can hear sounds on the order of a fire engine siren or a school bell, but cannot comprehend human speech. But I see that you have compensated by learning to read lips. I rarely see anyone with your level of hearing loss to be so skilled at that, it is very impressive. It was helpful that you were born with hearing so your brain was able to process language for a time before the Meningitis destroyed it."

"When can I get the hearing aid for my left ear?"

"The hearing aid you need is only made by an American company." He went over to a cabinet and pulled out a box showing me what it looked like and how it worked.

"Can I try it?"

"Sorry, this device will not work for you. It is not powerful enough."

Maamaan asked, "What is the price of the one she would need?" I was so excited about getting a hearing aid that cost never occurred to me. I held my breath afraid of his answer.

Dr. Mohammadi turned his head away from me and spoke to my mother.

Maamaan gasped, stood up thanking the doctor for his time and briskly exited his office signaling me to follow. She walked stone-faced, down Tajik Road heading home. I ran ahead of her and then turned walking backward facing her. "Can I get the hearing aid?"

"No, It's too expensive."

"I will get a job! I will help pay for it." Maamaan found the energy to walk vigorously past me.

I screamed, "Maamaan, I want a hearing aid!" She did not respond; she just walked faster. "Please, Maamaan!"

She crossed the street straight for home, the bottom corners of her long winter coat flapping in the cold wind. I caught up with her and screamed, "Maamaan! I want to hear music and laughter. I hate being so different! You do not want people to know! You are afraid they will gossip that your daughter is defective! God forbid they see a hearing aid and realize I am deaf!"

Pedestrians stared and people stuck their heads out of windows to see what the commotion was about. Maamaan halted in mid stride shaking, her face flushed with anger. She turned toward me and I felt the bitter sting of her open hand against my face. "NEVER speak of this again."

My mother had never struck me and I had never seen her so angry. I realized this subject must run much deeper than I realized. I had touched a tender nerve creating this dramatic response from this person that I no longer recognized.

I trailed behind her covering my face with my hands sobbing in bitter disillusionment.

Chapter 3

“You were born here in this room twelve years ago,” Aunt Sabra said.

“Yes, I remember. You told me that when Zandra was born.”

Aunt Sabra, Maamaan's oldest sister, readied her midwifery implements and placed them on the mahogany dresser disturbing my mother's sleep. Her eyes fluttered open and my aunt placed a damp cloth on her pained brow.

When Aunt Sabra told me that I was old enough now to assist her in the birth, I was so excited, but as the time came closer my excitement turned to nerves. She assured me she would guide me and not to worry. We arranged for Ziggy, to go next door to play with his friend; Zandra went to Aunt Rebecca's, and naturally, my father was at the pharmacy working.

I knelt on the Persian rug on the opposite side of the bed so that I could read my aunt's plump, red lips as she spoke to my mother. “The birth of this child will be powerful. I sense it is a girl and one day she will become a healer.”

Maamaan smiled. During her pregnancy I had asked her why she refused to have her baby in a hospital. She said, “Having my child at home is empowering and spiritual, making it a better environment to bond with my baby, creating a better relationship with my child.”

“I must have been born somewhere else,” I teased.

She scowled and pushed me away, still annoyed with me over the public display in the street we had four months earlier. She had not forgiven me yet for making her strike me to put an end to my tantrum. I had forgiven her, but I would never forget that day.

Maamaan's sudden high-pitched shriek brought me back into the present. Aunt Sabra placed a pillow against her back and rolled her onto her side to better position her body. “Deep breaths, Sara. Trust your body's instincts, breathe again... now rest.” I followed Aunt Sabra into

the kitchen and she prepared tea, heaping a stack of Koloochehs, her heavenly cookies, on a plate.

“I love your outfit, Aunt Sabra. It is simple but so elegant. Where did you buy it?”

“I bought the fabric at the Grand Bazaar and made it myself.”

I stared in wonder, “You are so gifted and do such beautiful work.” I took a bite of cookie and changed the subject, “Would not Maamaan be more comfortable having the baby in a hospital where she could get medicine?”

Aunt Sabra shook her head emphatically, her thick hair bouncing on her shoulders. “Iranian hospitals view birth as high risk and use technological intervention. As a midwife, I know that pregnancy and birth are natural processes. As a Jew I believe a new life is precious and should be given every possible blessing to start a strong life. Why should a sweet, baby girl start life surrounded by such inhospitable attitudes?”

I was so curious, “How do you know she is having a girl?”

“From experience and intuition, one gets a feel for it and picks up clues. I have been a midwife for many years and have helped many women birth at home.” She plucked a Koloocheh from the plate and dunked it into her tea. “Women in labor do not receive much attention in the hospital. Their husbands are not involved and family is not allowed. At home she is more comfortable, we can support her, and she can experience the birth the way she prefers. Pain is a natural part of the process.”

At that moment, a distressing howl echoed from the bedroom. Aunt Sabra put down her cup and darted out of the kitchen and down the long corridor toward her sister.

“That is natural?” I mumbled sarcastically scurrying off behind her, “I will definitely have my babies in a hospital.”

Maamaan's breathing came in agitated short gasps, but with soothing coaching from Sabra, she calmed and her breathing became deep and purposeful. Her dark hair clung to her sweaty, contorted face as she screamed again.

“Do something!” I shrieked.

Aunt Sabra stared at me with her intense, dark eyes and calmly said, “You are to be quiet and do as I say or leave this room.” Then her attention went back to my mother, “Sara you are fully dilated. It is time to push. Zhila, let her squeeze your hand it will help her.”

“Pedarsag! Keer bokhor!” My mother cursed, pushed, and nearly broke my hand.

Sabra reminded her to breathe, “Now, short breaths, Sara, short breaths. That’s right. Now push!” Aunt Sabra tapped me, to get my attention, “Go to the foot of the bed and prepare to catch the baby.”

Catch the baby? I thought to myself, what if I drop her? I am going to be the first to hold my new sister. I prayed, *please God do not allow me to do anything wrong.* Within minutes, the top of a dark, little head popped out from its hiding place then one last push and a wet, wrinkled baby plopped into my arms. Our sobs of joy and relief mingled with the protesting howls from this beautiful little creature were so loud that even I could hear them.

“You were right, Sabra, it is a girl!”

Sabra snipped and tied the cord. “Now place your sister on your mother’s chest.”

Carefully I handed the baby to my mother who had opened her arms in an adoring welcome. Sabra walked around to the other side of the bed and helped Maamaan to a sitting position supported by pillows as they guided the baby to nurse. The room went quiet.

I stared lovingly at this miracle who we called Zanna. Instinctively I knew this tiny, pink baby, so tightly swaddled, would one day become my best friend.

