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TITLE INFORMATION

MESSAGE IN A MATCHBOX

Sara Fashandi

Self (294 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

A poignant chronicling of an impoverished childhood in Iran.

Mohsen Fashandi grew up in Tehran, where his family of five lived in a small single room without electricity. They didn't own a refrigerator until he was 15, and a TV came when he was 18. As a little boy, being rich "meant having a full stomach," a temporary bliss he never took for granted. His father was a cobbler who eked out a meager income, and his mother contributed by sewing clothes during a time when it was unusual for Iranian women to work. It was his mother's dream to be a homeowner, and when the family finally bought a house, she sold some of her wedding jewelry in order to afford it. But the home created an "immense financial burden," and the family rented space to seven tenants to make ends meet. Despite all these hardships, Mohsen's stories are remarkably cheerful, movingly told by his sister, author Fashandi. He was an especially resourceful boy—he taught himself how to become an electrician and later left for the United States to study electrical engineering after failing the Iranian college entrance exams twice. He endured terrible tragedies, including the sudden death of his first love, Banu, when she was only a little girl, heartbreakingly conveyed by the author: "My heart dropped inside my chest. I couldn't understand what was wrong, but I knew from Banu's unmoving form that something terrible must have happened. Her lips were blue, and her long black hair hung off her limp neck in thick, wet strands."

The 26 stories cover Mohsen's life from 6 to 23 and sensitively chart the maturation of an increasingly confident young man. Fashandi's love for and fascination with her brother radiate from every page—this is as much an endearing homage as it is a historical remembrance. At the very beginning of the book, she calls her brother an "interesting, jovial, yet hardworking man," and this is precisely what her affecting portrait communicates in a series of expertly crafted vignettes. Moreover, the author vividly depicts the onerous weight of poverty and the feelings of vulnerability it engenders. On rare occasions, the author shows Mohsen in despair, wondering sadly about the cruelty of life. Here, he expresses his sense of both anguish and indignation over the death of his younger brother, Majeed, who died when he was 9 months old: "I thought of those elderly woman who said that he was a special boy, and children with a cowlick like his would be returned to God soon. This had made me so angry. I couldn't understand why God would bother to give Majeed to us if He was planning on taking him back in such a short time. Did God like to see us suffer?" This is an uncommonly moving reminiscence, uplifting and melancholy by turns.

A thoughtful, tender series of youthful recollections.

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