## **All Good Here by Kevin Shushtari**

## **Ali finally fell asleep** around midnight but woke at three. He always slept poorly when visiting his grandparents and living by himself. He’d driven the hour from Weekapaug to Providence to take them out for dinner. His father, Mohammed, who liked to be called Mo, was eighty-eight and had been on the faculty at Brown’s medical school for nearly half a century until retiring last year. His mother, Helen, a retired nurse, was eighty-five. They’d met at Rhode Island Hospital shortly after Mo had emigrated from Iran to do his medical training, and notwithstanding the objections of Helen’s Irish-Catholic family, they married within the year. Although still mentally vigorous, they were both becoming physically frail. Mo had undergone surgery the year before to replace a heart valve, and Helen was recovering from a recent hip replacement, after tripping on the curb at the post office. Now she used a walker.

## Since his mother’s fall, Ali had been stopping by every week to help out. His three siblings lived far away and had busy families. To them, his being unmarried apparently meant he was on a perpetual vacation. Before each visit, Ali was full of good intentions, ready to ease his parents’ former life of competence and predictability into this new one of dependency and uncertainty. He disguised his trips as convenient times to stop by, telling them he was traveling through Providence on his way back from Boston or New York. In reality, he spent most of his time in his study above the empty stalls in the barn next to his eighteenth-century Cape, watching wild ducks paddle around the nearby saltwater pond.

## The solitude suited Ali. He liked the rigor and logic of his work, writing code that converted analog X-rays to digital ones. After receiving his electrical engineering degree, he had gone to medical school but never practiced. Instead, he worked at his own pace, sending critical data over the Internet to specialists who might use the information to save a patient. Ali’s lifestyle allowed him time to pursue his passion: writing poetry in Farsi. He had fallen in love with Farsi when he realized it was the language of those who dream, of those who tell stories for the beauty of the telling. Mo liked to say, only half-jokingly, that it was the language of liars—one can never get a direct answer from a Persian. In trying to formulate a response the Persian becomes aware of a hundred more captivating ways to recount his tale, and before he knows it a simple yes or no has become a journey that requires a thousand words in the telling. Ali studied the works of Sa’dī, Hāfez, Khayyám, and Rūmī, and discovered he had a talent for the syntax and meter of Persian verse.

## He’d almost fallen back to sleep at four-thirty when the slamming began.

## “Helen,” Mo called loudly from the bottom of the stairs, “where are the coffee beans?”

## She didn’t respond.

## “Helen,” he said, louder.

## “She’s not up here, Dad.”

## “Helen!” he shouted for the third time.

## “You finished them yesterday!” Helen yelled from the downstairs guest room, where she had been sleeping since her hip surgery. “There may be a fresh bag in the cellar freezer.”

## Ali wondered why his father still awoke at this god-awful hour. He didn’t want his father to maneuver the steep basement stairs, so he yelled, “I’ll be right there, Dad.” He threw on his robe and rushed down to the kitchen.

## “Why are you up so early?” his father asked.

## “I thought I’d help you find the coffee.”

## “You think I can’t find the coffee in my own house?”

## Ali flipped the basement light switch and reached to open the door to go down the stairs.

## “Stop!” Mo commanded, a tuft of thick white hair falling into his eyes.

## Ali froze. “What’s wrong?”

## “New burglar system. You have to put in the code before opening the door, or the alarm people are going to call.” He walked to a keypad near the light switch, his flip-flops visible beneath burgundy silk pajamas, and punched in the numbers. “It’s secret.”

## Ali noticed he was a full head taller than his father, though they used to be about the same height. He went down the stairs. He had given his father a Keurig coffeemaker for Christmas, but Mo refused to use it, with its prepackaged pods of coffee. Each morning he ground the espresso beans to make a single cup in his old-fashioned French press.

## “Here you go,” Ali said, coming up from the basement and handing the bag of Starbucks beans to his father.

## Helen appeared in a pink robe, her silver hair in curlers and bobby pins. She looked at Ali rubbing his eyes.

## “Why don’t you go back to bed, honey?”

## “I can’t sleep,” Ali said over the noise of the coffee grinder.

## “Mo, why are you grinding it for so long?”

## “He can’t hear you, Mom.”

## She wheeled her walker over to her husband. “You’ve ground it enough.” She touched him on the shoulder, and he started.

## “What? I’m busy.”

## “You’ve ground it long enough, Mo.”

## Mo snapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth while jerking his chin upward, a gesture Ali knew his mother disliked. “The grind must be fine for the espresso to be good.” He turned the machine back on.

## “What time are they coming?” Helen asked.

## Mo again shut off the grinder. “What?”

## “What time are they coming?”

## “What time is who coming?”

## “The cable people.”

## Mo pinched some of the grounds between his thumb and forefinger to feel the texture. He put the machine to his nose, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply.

## “Are you crazy?” Helen said. “You could cut off your nose. At least unplug it.”

## “When will it be ready?” Ali asked.

## “Between eight and twelve,” Mo said.

## Ali looked at his father. “For coffee?”

## “The cable people,” Mo said. “They’re coming between eight and twelve. They don’t give an exact time.”

## Ali had bought each of his parents a laptop and taught them how to go online and how to use email. He had the cable company install wireless access throughout the house. He had also gotten them smart phones. He showed them how to text, how to make calls and retrieve voice mail, and how to access the Internet from their phones. Both phones remained in their boxes, unused. Lately, the Internet had stopped working.

## “I know what the problem is,” Helen said. “You can’t have two computers on the Internet at the same time. It overloads the circuit.”

## Mo sipped his coffee. Then he put three cubes of sugar in the small demitasse. “People who have no facts should not speak with authority,” he said.

## “I had Maria pick up Splenda at the market,” Helen said. “People with diabetes should not be having three cubes of sugar in their coffee.”

## “I am human,” Mo said, smiling the way he did before he told a joke. “I can’t give up what I love. Why do you think I kept you for sixty-five years?”

## Helen said nothing.

## Ali set up one of the laptops on the kitchen table. He tried to access the Internet without success. “The wireless router can accommodate an infinite number of devices,” he said with absolute certainty, knowing this would sound impressive to his father.

## “Just wait for the cable people, Ali-Jon,” Mo said.

## **“You saying we’re stupid?”** Mo asked as he stared at a copy of *Smart Phones for Dummies,* which Ali had picked up the day before at the bookstore while his father waited at Walgreens for his prescriptions to be filled.

## “Absolutely not,” Ali said. “It’s just that these electronic gadgets can seem more complicated than they actually are. The book just explains things simply.”

## Mo took his smart phone out of its box and held it up close to his glasses. “Too small for me.”

## “Maybe you should try it and see how you like it,” Helen said, leafing through *Time* magazine.

## “It’s too small. How can I carry this *teeng?*” Certain words brought out Mo’s accent, something that seemed to be happening more and more the older he got.

## “It comes with a case, Dad. It clips on your belt.”

## “The word is *thing,*” Helen said.

## “Ma, let’s not start this.”

## “What?” Mo said to Helen. “You don’t understand me? You need your son to translate?”

## Ali got up and plugged Mo’s phone into the wall. “It’s not charged yet, but you can use it if it’s plugged in.”

## “I need to call Walgreens. They gave me the wrong prescription.”

## Helen shook her head at her husband. “You’re an American citizen. And you still say *teeng.*”

## Mo pressed the number for Walgreens, which Ali had programmed into the phone when he was showing his father how to use it. He looked at Helen. “And after so long you do not understand my accent?”

## Ali could not recall a time when his mother was not after his father to improve his pronunciation. “*Teeng,*” Ali said, “is actually a better word for poetry because it has a richer sound than *thing.* It’s a more resonant word.”

## His mother glared at him.

## His father had the pharmacist on the phone. “Why are you giving me Nifedipine SR and not Nifedipine ER?”

## The doorbell rang.

## Mo raised his voice. “I know it’s the same medication—slow release, extended release, it’s all nonsense. SR is like a horse pill. Who can swallow such a *teeng?* ER is one-tenth the size.”

## Ali let in the cable man, who put on surgical booties so he wouldn’t track in dirt. He smiled at Mo from the foyer.

## “Must go,” Mo said to the pharmacist. “I want ER. No more SR. Have it ready. This afternoon my son will pick it up.”

## “Isn’t the phone great, Dad?”

## “I told you. It’s too small. And you have to plug it in.”

## Ali thought about explaining again that the phone was only plugged in because it had not been charged, but he knew his father’s mind was made up.

## “Hello, Dr. Alavi,” the cable man said, following Ali into the kitchen.

## Mo got up from the table. “I know you?”

## “We met several years ago,” the man said. “You saved my father’s life.”

## “What was his problem?”

## “A ruptured aortic aneurysm. Nobody in the emergency room knew what was going on. You came in and figured it out and rushed him to surgery.”

## “Name?”

## “Toselli. My dad is Anthony Toselli.”

## “Toselli. We gave him sixteen units of blood in the OR. I remember.” Buoyed by this recognition, Mo offered the cable man some coffee. “Espresso. It’s good.”

## “That sounds really nice,” he said. “As long as you’re making some for yourself.”

## “Of course,” Mo said.

## Helen stayed seated at the table as Ali showed the cable man around. He explained that initially the wireless had worked perfectly.

## “When did you stop getting a signal?” the cable man asked.

## “We’ll have to ask my parents.”

## In the kitchen Mo was again grinding coffee, and the noise was so loud that neither he nor Helen knew Ali was asking them a question. Ali finally blinked the lights.

## Mo immediately stopped his grinding. “Have we lost the electric?”

## “No, Dad. That was just me trying to get your attention.”

## “What kind of absurd question is that?” Helen asked. “How could you be making all that racket if we had lost power?”

## Ali put his hands on his hips and looked at his father. “ ‘Silence is the language of God, all else is poor translation.’ That’s from Rūmī.”

## “Rūmī is not always the smartest man in the room,” Mo said.

## “Who’s Rūmī?” asked the cable man.

## Mo swept the back of his right hand over his left palm, blowing in the direction of the man. “He’s dead.”

## The cable man stared blankly. “I was just wondering when you folks lost the Internet connection.”

## “It was fine until Maria came.”

## “Why can’t you buy pre-ground coffee?” Helen asked. “Why do you insist on the beans?”

## “It must be fresh,” Mo said. “You don’t like fresh?”

## “Who’s Maria?” the cable man asked.

## “The cleaning lady. She comes Wednesdays,” Mo replied.

## “Maria is a lovely Polish woman,” Helen said. “She’s been with us for more than twenty years.”

## Mo resumed his coffee grinding.

## “So you haven’t had Internet for about five days?”

## “What did you say?” Helen asked, cupping her right ear with her hand.

## “Did Maria disconnect anything?” the man asked.

## “Yes, I think the cable television is out because the Internet overloaded the circuit,” Helen said in a loud voice above the noise from the machine.

## “The coffee will be done in a couple of minutes,” Mo yelled with a smile.

## The cable man looked at Ali. “The TV’s out too?”

## “This is the first I’m hearing about it.”

## “Where do you keep the wireless Internet router?”

## “I think it’s in my father’s study upstairs.”

## **The two men stood staring** down at the wire, which was disconnected from the wall. The cable man plugged it in. They went back downstairs.

## “Coffee’s ready,” Mo said. “Cream or sugar?”

## “No, I take it black, thank you,” the cable man said. “Turns out the router was unplugged.”

## “Let’s see if we can get online with your laptop, Mom.”

## “Your father was up there vacuuming the other day.”

## “Maria vacuumed, not me.”

## “Yes, you vacuumed your study because you said she did a poor job.”

## “She never gets the spidercobs in the corners.”

## Helen shook her head. “How many times do I have to tell you? The word is *cobwebs.*”

## “Maybe I unplugged it for a minute, but I plugged it in after.”

## “The Internet’s back up,” Ali said.

## “What about the TV?” Helen asked. “Ever since we got the Internet we haven’t had all the cable channels.”

## “Where is your main cable box?” the man asked.

## “In the basement,” Mo said, setting a single cup of espresso on the table. “Here’s the coffee.”

## “Thank you, sir. Why don’t you drink that one? I’ll check the cable connection and have a cup when I finish.”

## Ali and the cable man went down to the basement. They found that there were two lines coming into the house, one for the Internet and one for the cable TV, but only a single wire was being used, and a splitter had been connected to the end of it.

## “Here’s your problem. You’re not using both lines so the strength of the signal is cut in half.”

## “So it’s a simple fix?”

## “A one-minute job. Just need to get rid of the splitter.”

## They heard the muffled noise of Mo’s coffee grinder from above. Ali’s parents yelled back and forth. The home phone started ringing, and nobody was picking up. Ali climbed the stairs.

## “Why don’t you guys answer the phone?”

## Neither heard him. Out of breath, Ali answered it.

## “This is ADT Security Systems,” a man said. “We have reason to believe there has been an intrusion.”

## Mo was still grinding. Ali put his finger in one ear and held the receiver to the other. “No, there is no intrusion here. Thank you for calling.”

## “What’s going on?” asked Helen.

## With his hand over the phone, Ali mouthed, “The burglar-alarm people.”

## “Sir, are you Dr. Mohammed Alavi?”

## “No, I’m his son.”

## “You must provide the password or we will need to send the police.”

## “It’s my fault. I opened the door without entering the code.”

## “Sir, if you don’t know the password, then you must answer some questions.”

## “No problem,” Ali said as he tried to signal to his father to stop grinding.

## “Why are the burglar-alarm people calling?” Helen asked.

## “All set,” the cable man said, closing the door to the basement. The grinding stopped.

## “What is your mother’s maiden name?” the voice on the phone asked.

## “Golan.”

## “That is the wrong response, sir. We are sending a squad car.”

## “No, I’m sorry. That’s *my*mother’s maiden name. I’m visiting my parents. You want my grandmother’s maiden name. Let me ask them.”

## “Mom, Grandma’s maiden name was Paige, right?”

## “That’s correct, honey. Why are you asking?”

## “Paige!” Ali said into the phone.

## “That is incorrect, sir.”

## Mo approached with two coffees. “Who are you talking to, son?”

## “Dad, what was your mother’s maiden name?”

## “What?”

## “I have to give it to the guy on the phone.”

## “No, we don’t give personal information to telemarketers.”

## “It’s not a telemarketer,” Ali said. “I forgot to have you key in the code for the burglar alarm before we went down.”

## “This is excellent coffee, Dr. Alavi.”

## “It better be,” said Helen. “He spent fifteen minutes grinding it.”

## “The process is simple. You grind until the coffee becomes powder.”

## “Dad! What was your mother’s maiden name?”

## “Back home, women have many names.”

## “Dad, please.”

## “I think my mother went by Memarbashi,” Mo said.

## “Memarbashi?”

## “No, sir, that is not correct. What are the last four digits of your social?”

## “Mom, what’s your social?”

## “Good heavens,” she said, laughing. “I’ve never committed it to memory.”

## “Dad?”

## “What do you mean, *social?*”

## “Sir, you sound panicked,” the voice said. “I’m going to ask you a simple yes-or-no question. Is your life in danger?”

## “Forget it,” Ali said, exasperated. “Here’s my father, Dr. Mohammed Alavi.” He handed the phone to his father.

## “Yes, the code is 7371007. First pet’s name was Mamooshi, a fat Persian cat. Father’s birthplace was Esfahan—we call it Half the World in my country.”

## “I don’t know why he has to go into all that detail,” Helen said to Ali and the cable man.

## “That’s just his way, Mom. You know that.”

## “Okay, sir,” Mo said. “Yes, we’re all good here.” He hung up the phone and took a sip of espresso. “Ali-Jon, you must learn it’s no good to panic when you’re feeling stress, especially when we’re all fine here. You want me to make you some coffee