



**"THIS BOOK WILL CHANGE THE WAY YOU
UNDERSTAND THE WORLD."
-CLAIRE MESSUD**

REMEMBERING AKBAR
INSIDE THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

BEHROOZ GHAMARI

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To Golrokh

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PRELUDE

I died at 7:30 in the morning on December 31, 1984. I do not say this as a metaphor, but in a real existential sense. At that exact moment, I set foot into another world with a reluctant signature at the bottom of a page, a release form. The blurry lines from under my blindfold apparently granted me a medical parole with the proviso, as the guard clarified it, that my body had to be returned to prison for an official identification. It took me a few years to realize that I had actually died in that early morning. That had nothing to do either with survivors' guilt, or with the weight of life's banalities. I left behind the self I knew without any worldly means of retrieving it.

Death happens piecemeal. It devours one small part of life at a time. By signing that release form, I simply acknowledged that I had spent too many pieces of my life—a threshold was crossed. After three years on death row, with a body enfeebled by cancer, I was to leave Tehran's infamous Evin prison. The euphoric leaders of the revolution had stood at its gates only a few years earlier, pledging to turn it into a museum bearing witness to atrocities of the past. "In

Iran,” they declared on that frigid evening in February 1979, “there will be no more political prisoners.”

That was not meant to be.

The boisterous voices that called in unison for the end of monarchy now only sang in dissonance. Communists, socialists, liberals, nationalists, women, workers, university students, ethnic and religious minorities, young revolutionary clerics, and grand cautious ayatollahs claimed with injudicious certainty the true meaning of the revolution. The thirst for power turned friends into foes, revolutionaries into security officers, prisoners into interrogators, community leaders into spies, urban guerilla fighters into assassins, teachers into morality police, students into snitches, friendly chats into insoluble quarrels, and family gatherings into political disputes. In less than two years, we saw with sober eyes that the prison walls grew taller and behind them atrocity thrived virulently.

“I am not accepting any conditions for my release,” I said, thrusting the words painfully out of my closed throat.

“Bastard!” A guard smacked me in the head. “You’re done.”

They resumed the banter they’d begun the previous evening.

Twelve hours earlier, two guards had come to the infirmary room that I shared with another prisoner, Mohammad, and asked me to pack my belongings. “Pack your belongings” had become the most dreaded expression of my death row years, and usually had only one meaning.

“You’re going to be freed,” one of the guards announced without trying to hide the self-congratulatory smirk on his face. He turned around and repeated the word “freed,” seeking recognition from the other guard of his ingenious exploitation of the double meaning it evoked.

“You came in vertically, and you’ll leave here horizontally.”

He wanted to make sure that Mohammad and I appreciated his pun.

“But you’ll be crawling,” he added, laughing. “Like the animal that you are.”

I put the few items I owned in a tiny brown bag without engaging the guards. I put my blindfold on without being asked. I knew the routine and only wished to be spared hearing the grating voice of the guard. They took me to the main hallway of prosecutors’ offices and asked me to sit there until someone called me.

I had another, much better incentive for putting my blindfold on without being asked. I wanted to make sure that I used the one I had owned for a couple of years. The one from the middle of which I had carefully pulled out a few threads to make the outside world visible, no matter how shadowy it seemed.

I scouted the crowded hallway, knowing that I was not the only one with the secret see-through blindfold. Majid spotted me first. He inched his way over slowly and finally reached my corner.

“You’re still alive,” he said.

I wasn’t sure whether it was a question or a statement of fact.

“Everyone thinks you’re dead.”

Majid had been sixteen at the time of his arrest in 1981. I had witnessed how the soft line above his upper lip turned dark and coarse into a real moustache during the period we spent together in a death row cell.

“Tonight is the night, Majid,” I told him. Although I did not want to sound pathetic, my wobbly voice suggested otherwise. “They’re setting me free.” I repeated the guard’s words almost involuntarily.

I had been retried for the fourth time a few days earlier. The judge had told me that all options were exhausted and my sentence was going to be carried out soon. “Unless,” he blurted out like an after-thought, “you agree to recant in public.”

Weary of these ultimatums, I’d told the judge that I was already dead and his threats were meaningless.

The judge asked me to take my blindfold off.

“Hajj Agha!?” the courtroom guard protested. For fear of reprisal, the judges and interrogators never allowed prisoners to see their faces.

“That’s all right,” the judge assured the guard. “The protocol is irrelevant here.”

The judge had asked me again to remove my blindfold. He too must have thought that I was already dead and thus seeing his face would do no harm.

“When you stand before your Maker on the Day of Judgment, He will ask you the same thing,” the judge warned me. “Why did you not recant? You were given so many chances.”

His face looked tense despite the calm and concerned tone of his voice. He did not look like any of the faces I had imagined him to have. A brownish copious beard, light skin, and dark blue eyes gave away his northern origins. How unusual for an obdurate judge to come from the shores of the Caspian Sea. I thought I should sometime tell mother, who always blamed my father’s obstinate character on his Azeri roots.

“Tonight is the night, Majid.”

I pulled out a few pieces of handicrafts I had made, two prayer beads—though I had no faith in prayer—made with date pits, and a miniature picture frame put together with rolled-up paper.

“This is all I have.”

He refused to accept them.

“You’re going to be fine,” he told me, which was the kind thing to say.

“Take it.” I insisted, and he did.

In exchange, he gave me his precious volume of Hafez’s *Divan*. “Remember our poetry nights?” Majid whispered as he put the book on my bag. “Drink,” he said, reminding me of how we used to find reading Hafez intoxicating.

I closed my eyes and made a wish. Opening the book somewhere in the middle, I silently asked Hafez to tell me without ambiguity what would happen to me. That was asking for too much. The poet never spoke unambiguously. I opened the book repeatedly with no resolution. I read page after page of the most beautiful words, strung together for the sole purpose of evoking infinite possibilities. I do not know why at the center of such certitude, knowing my fate, I needed Hafez to speak to me with clarity. He refused.

When they called my name, I kissed the book and put it next to Majid’s bag. Even the screeching voice of the guard who called me did not wake him up. I did not realize that almost twelve hours had passed since I’d started reading the poetry.

That was how I died, by stepping out of an inconceivable world and entering another universe of perplexing banalities. I left my former self behind in a place that exists only in incommensurable terms.

For many years, I tried to open a conduit to the world I left behind—to the moment of death, to the humor that preceded it, to the horror that defined it. I tried to describe the unfathomable.

Every New Year’s Eve, I still try to relive the last day of my previous life. I vacate the present at 7:30 in the morning on December

31st and do not return until a new year has begun. Every December 31st gives birth to a story. I write for twelve hours, exactly the same number of hours I spent with the poet Hafez during the last day of my previous life. Sometimes I write five pages, sometimes twenty, and other times only a few lines. I never know what will come when I sit to write. I only know that I should let my body feel the coldness of the hard floor on which I sat for those last twelve hours.

NASROLLAH

I like to travel early in the morning. To me, driving during those early hours feels like what my devout friends describe as the transcending pleasures of prayers each day before the first light. It gives me a sensation that I am the only soul in this world, and yet also an urge to share that world with others. The six-lane Eisenhower Street seems so submissive. Its ancient trees on both sides look oblivious to the frigid air, despite being completely naked. I know that it is a long stretch to give the vulgarity of driving a car a spiritual character, but somehow this is the only explanation that comes to mind. Strange, given the fact that I have never been religious or experienced what others tell me about spirituality. But this must be it: Feeling the distinction of simply being alive and an inexplicable call for generosity. That is the double pleasure of driving before the dawn. You feel that Eisenhower was built for you and you want to share it with others, instead of fighting for every little inch of it during rush hour.

Today is the first day of the Spring Equinox: twelve hours of daylight, twelve hours of night—a plain cosmological justice. So

now you know why I chose this particular day for our travel. (I have to confess that in addition to issues of spirituality and justice, we are traveling today, this early in the morning, for the more mundane reason of taking full advantage of the *Norouz* seven-day national holiday.) I have told everyone that I will be shuttling around to pick them up from their homes, with the exception of Hassan. He always acts strangely whenever the topic of where he lives comes up. It is either because he wants to hide his working-class family or because he is simply secretive.

First on the list is Mr. Gilani. You can't leave Mr. Gilani behind if you plan a trip to Gilan, his home region on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. Others dislike him, as do I, for his obnoxious personality. He is an enemy-making machine, turning friends to foes with a slight twist of his tongue. His excuse for his insensitivity is always the same. Being a poet, he believes, makes him *too* sensitive. To him, the slightest disagreements register as great acts of hostility. If he hurts others it is because they have hurt him first without even recognizing it. Ridicule is not the only way he is capable of wounding others. His boxing career has also made his punches quite potent. I have seen him in action. When he was young, he became Gilan's lightweight state champion. But in the end, he chose a career in journalism and literature, rather than in a ring. I always tell others that whenever you see him playing with his Stalinist moustache, chances are that he is going to hurt you with his words. When he rubs his aging muscular arms, chances are that you will soon become a victim of his right uppercut. Truth be told, the second scenario seldom happened. I also know that when I am around, he behaves well. He feels an affinity toward me because his son was my high school classmate and somehow that gives me an exclusive passage to his world of fatherly love.

Gilani sits in the front seat of the car with a broad smile that exposes, not so pleasantly, his decaying teeth—drinking, smoking, fighting. “Who’s next?” he says covering his mouth while letting his laughter escape.

Mohsen Shirkuh lives nearby. He is the most serious of our bunch. I always tell him that he reminds me of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer trademark lion, particularly when he lets his hair grow into a round bushy mess. He is a man of few words, shy and dignified. That has been my experience with many students in our college who come from non-Farsi-speaking regions. They try to cover their accent by talking parsimoniously. Accent of course turns from a liability to a significant privilege the moment the speaker becomes political. In our world of politics, the language of justice and freedom was spoken with an accent, either of working class slang or off-center dialects. Mohsen grew up speaking Azeri in Urumiyeh. Farsi is his language of education and it still brings more red to his already crimson cheeks whenever he speaks it. He is a bit skeptical of the whole idea of this trip. I have assured him that I am going to take him to places in Gilan he could never imagine visiting.

Nasrollah is next on the way out of city. We will learn more about him later.

Hassan, the youngest of the bunch, is standing on the western side of the Freedom Square. It is still dark. I have no idea how he has gotten here from his neighborhood, which I suspect to be somewhere around the main railway station at the southern edge of the city. One should never be deceived by his small build. He is strong and fierce. He sarcastically calls himself Beria, after the infamous chief of NKVD, who carried out the Great Purge in the late 1930s in the Soviet Union. Hassan is a man of action. He doesn’t like unfinished business. You never see him standing still. Even as he waits

for us under a flickering light, he jumps up and down to fight the cold and to calm his restless body. He gets into the car with a loud “you’re late” followed by his signature shrill laughter. “Do you have all the stuff?” Hassan emphasizes the “stuff” to make our trip sound more adventurous. “If you’re talking about my diet crackers,” Mr. Gilani snaps at Hassan, “you should know that joking about that is off-limits.”

The moment we have everyone aboard, a little fight breaks out. Hassan lashes back, “I don’t care who you are, here we are all equals.” I don’t want to start our trip with a fight. There is enough of everything here. Just focus on the road and the sunrise. I know this road like the alleys in my neighborhood. Every turn, every roadside shop, every green valley on our way to Rasht, the capital city of the province, is a familiar site. I wanted to be on the road before sunrise because I wanted all of us to see the morning mist on the moss-covered rocks of the mountains. Roll down the windows and smell the wet soil. Take a deep breath, deeper breath, through your nose and exhale from your mouth. Feel the pure oxygen and the scent of the mountains filling your lungs. Do you see the dense forests on your far right? “Dazzling,” Gilani adds to the poetics of the scenery.

*O rain,
O dewdrop,
Messengers of the sea,
Harbingers of dreams,
O rocks,
O Mountains,
Signs of eternity,
Bearers of pain, witnesses of gain.*

Mr. Gilani's third-rate poetry is really not a part of my trip, but we need to indulge this defeated man. Beautiful, beautiful! Everyone agrees. "Mr. Gilani," Nasrollah exclaims, "did you just come up with this, or is this an old poem that this scene reminded you of?" "You know Nasrollah," the poet non-laureate explains, "poetry for me is like breathing. I inhale the life around me and exhale the words that give meaning to those inner experiences." This is exactly where Mr. Gilani would like to be, in front of an audience who knows nothing about poetry and is dumbfounded by the genius of his words. Thank you Mr. Gilani. Thank you for adding to the splendor of this road to *your* Caspian Sea with your poignant words.

I love this café near the summit. Tucked in between two giant rocks, with the best breakfast in the entire world. Don't let the small entrance with the tiny sweaty windows fool you. If you care for nice furniture, or fancy service, this is not the place for you. But for an out-of-this-world cheese omelet you come here. What do they feed their chicken to lay these heavenly eggs, with their bright orange yolks, that taste so good? The cheese is from the neighboring village, the bread baked right here in the café's own clay oven, the tea comes from the plantation right behind this mountain, herbs are grown and dried for winter use every year in the same village. This is the secret to these omelets. No, I shouldn't say anything else about the art of making these omelets. Mohsen, Hassan, Nasrollah, please dig in. I'll bring Mr. Gilani's special crackers so he won't have cramps later.

"I didn't realize how hungry I was," Mohsen says, breaking his silence.

"Hey, Nasrollah," Hassan says loudly, "what are *you* waiting for? You must eat this while it is still blistering hot. You need to burn your tongue if you want to taste the real thing."

It takes us three more hours before we get to our main destination. I want to take you to this remote beach on which no tourist ever sets foot. I park the car near a little shack whose owner I've known for many years. Locals refer to him simply as the sturgeon guy. Rumor has it that his father learned the art of making sturgeon kebab from a Russian soldier when the Soviets occupied Gilan during the Second World War. He learned it from his father. What possibly is there to learn about putting pieces of a fish on a skewer? you might wonder. But let's think about this after you taste your kebab. The sturgeon man also never reveals the source of his sturgeons, but that too is an open secret. He has contacts at the Department of Fish and Wildlife who supply him with the fish after they extract the caviar from them.

"Forget the kebab, let's get some of that caviar," says Mr. Gilani, drooling.

"It might not be good for your stomach," counters Hassan, who remains on his case.

I want you to appreciate the science behind the magical cuts when you look at these glorious fatty cubes of fish. Let's throw our blanket on the beach and wait for our sizzling sturgeon. Just smell this, Nasrollah, smell it, take a bite and let the taste take you to the clouds. Ride on the clouds over the Caspian Sea. Just close your eyes and try it.

"No, No," Nasrollah insists. "Sturgeon is not halal." He refuses to try it.

"Don't you listen to the news, brother Nasrollah?" Hassan asks with an unusually calm voice.

"Have you not heard about the imam's *fatwa* last week?"

"I listen to and obey every single word the imam utters."

"Then how come you haven't heard that he has declared that sturgeon indeed has scales and its consumption is absolutely halal?"

“I don’t like to joke about these matters. Sturgeon has been *haram* for as long as Islam has existed.”

“But not anymore, brother Nasrollah. The imam has seen the scales and has given you permission to enjoy this kebab.”

Nasrollah looks inquisitively at me. “Is this true?” he asks.

A sense of contentment fills me as I wear the robe of the final arbiter of this urgent religio-culinary matter.

“Yes,” I say, attempting to assure him that Hassan is not trying to undermine his convictions. “The imam halal-ized sturgeon last week.”

I don’t tell him about the kind of haram things in which the sturgeon man marinates the fish, but there is no need for that here.

“The only thing I don’t like about this is the way it drips down your sleeves,” Mohsen jumps in. “Mmm, juicy, juicy, juicy! This is the way the fish should be, burned outside, juicy inside.”

Licking his fingers, Mr. Gilani mocks Mohsen. “Since when have you become an expert? Ask a man from Gilan what a fish should taste like. Even a cockroach won’t survive in your salty lake in Urumiyeh.”

By now everybody realizes that they should not take Mr. Gilani seriously.

“So where is the *real* stuff,” Gilani continues. “Didn’t you say that you brought everything? How can one have this kebab without the reason for kebab?”

I ask Hassan to get the big bottle of vodka from the ice chest hidden in the trunk of the car under the spare tire. He brings the bottle and places it in the middle of our circle. I pour the poison into five little shot glasses and offer it to Mr. Gilani first as our elder drinking man, then Mohsen, followed by Hassan. The moment I extend my arm toward Nasrollah, he slaps the back of my hand in anger.

“No, I refuse. I played your game with sturgeon, there is no way that I will touch this filthy drink.”

“But the imam,” Hassan tries again, but Nasrollah doesn’t allow him to go any further.

“Fuck the imam,” he says, surprising himself. “Don’t give me this shit. You told me that this is a trip to the coast, not a journey into the forbidden.” He stands up, but has nowhere to go in the crowded cell.

I try to calm him.

“Listen Nasrollah, this is only a game of pretend. We would never ever ask you to do anything against your faith.”

“It is the temptation that you offer,” he replies, now agitated and angry.

“But there is no kebab, no vodka, no cars, no beaches here.”

“You are planting a seed and you think I don’t understand what you are up to.”

Well, this was not part of the plan. We have taken many trips to all parts of the country and have never experienced a fight over a make-believe shot of vodka.

Nasrollah came to our cell a few weeks ago in the middle of the night. I remember his horrified face when the guard opened the door to push him into the overflowing cell. There was not a single inch of floor for him to step onto. Whenever they opened the door in the middle of the night we spilled over to the hallway making it unthinkable to add another soul to the crammed space. I rolled halfway out into the hallway only to be stopped by Nasrollah’s feet. “Where do you want to put him?” I asked the guard. Nasrollah looked even bigger than his giant body from where I lay on the floor. The guard thrust him in like the last

passenger on a commuter train during rush hour and forced the door closed.

How long till the morning prayer? was Nasrollah's first question. In a cell of wall-to-wall communists, his inquiry bounced off the sleepy faces of the nonbelievers without traction.

Finding a space for Nasrollah in the packed cell was not easy. He stood there without trying to discern where he was. He just watched us struggling to dig a hole in the solid mass of flesh and bone that covered the entire floor. His thick hair with short sideburns made his young face look boyish. He looked frozen, poised for a moment on the verge of bursting into tears. Repeated involuntary breathy utterances of thank you were the only thing that connected him to the cell. We could tell from his clean shave that he had not spent much time in the chambers of light, as they called the interrogation rooms in prison. There they could open a window for you to see the light while pounding the soles of your feet with thick electrical cables. He was taken from home, with a short stop for processing, to our cell. But why to *our* cell? A man concerned with the morning prayer does not belong here in the congress of condemned heretics.

He sat next to the door and concentrated on how to avoid touching anything that could inflict impurity on him.

He missed the morning prayer the first day he joined us.

The next day when the warden of our cell block came to register him, he asked the warden to transfer him to another cell. "I don't belong here," he pleaded.

"No one does," the warden mocked him. "Charges?" he continued to fill out a form on his clipboard.

"I am innocent."

"You are innocent of what?"

“I don’t know why I was arrested.”

“I don’t have time for this nonsense. I can get all the information from the office.”

“I work for the Imam Rescue Committee.”

“So, you were a spy?”

“No, I am a trusted accountant at the Gisha branch.”

“I don’t have time for this fucking game,” the warden slapped him hard with his clipboard. “Why were you arrested? And don’t bullshit me.”

“They came for my sister. She was not home and they took me. I have nothing to do with my sister. I haven’t seen her for months.” He tried to cram as much information as he could in one breath. He didn’t realize that this interview merely had statistical significance, and nothing to do with his fate in prison.

“Who is she?”

“You mean you want my sister’s name?”

“Yeah, because I want to send suitors to your home and marry the bitch. I swear to God that I am going to break your bloody neck if you keep on messing with me.”

I went to Nasrollah’s rescue. The warden’s already short supply of patience was nearing its end. “To which organization did they say your sister belongs?” I asked Nasrollah, helping the warden to fill out his form. “The armed guerilla group *Fedayeen*,” he said reluctantly, as if he let a family secret out. He looked embarrassed on behalf of his sister, the only member of their large family who had abandoned her faith and became a communist fighting to overthrow the government.

“You will remember soon where your sister is, you dirty spy,” said the warden, and then asked one of the guards to shut the door.

That was the moment of my bonding with Nasrollah. He realized, I hoped, that the infidels were not strangers to compassion. I grabbed a little cotton ball from our makeshift first aid box and cleaned the small cut on his cheekbone left by the clipboard assault.

The first thing he said after he saw the bloodied cotton was: “Ah blood, I need a new ablution for my prayer.”

You could not fake that. *He really is a devout man*, I thought to myself.

I don’t want Nasrollah to lose trust in me, in us. After the incident on the beach, I apologize and tell him that the imam has indeed made sturgeon halal, but that I didn’t think that he would take the imagined vodka shot as tempting him to a real sin.

“I’m sorry, Nasrollah. We just wanted to have a good time, the way friends do. I know that you feel that they’ve put you in a cell and forced you to breathe unclean air. I recognize that.”

He looks at me with teary eyes. “It is my sister’s fault,” he says. “She . . .” He stops and changes the direction of his sentence. “She is my sister and it is my divine duty to love her. No, it is not a duty. I do love her, though I never understood why she betrayed us like that. You know that when the revolution happened she was only seventeen. I took her to all the demonstrations, I taught her how to love the imam and the revolution. Then she comes one day and tells me that she is a *Fedayee*. All those years, I protected her from the lustful eyes of boys in the neighborhood. And I lost her to the evil thoughts of the communists.”

“You think we are evil, Nasrollah?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. She was part of my family. I don’t know your family. You are a good person. And I pray that God would forgive all your wrongdoings in this world, if you’ve had any.”

The guard opens the door to announce our fifteen-minute sprint bathroom break.

“Nasrollah, you can wash out all the vodka you’ve touched now and cleanse yourself for your evening prayer.”

“I understand the difference between the real and the imaginary,” he reassures me. His anger earlier told a different story.

The guards know that he is allowed to stay away from the unclean infidels during the bathroom break. You can somehow justify dry contact with the unclean person, but a wet encounter complicates things. Nasrollah stays away until our fifteen minutes for one hundred people is over and then he gets a whole one minute extra while others are going back to the cell. It is the rule now that no one touches Nasrollah during the break and after he walks back to the cell. His ablution expires by the infidels’ touch. He holds his arm away from his body and walks with great care toward the cell. He looks genuinely happy after a fresh ablution. He comes in and stands in the direction of Mecca to pray to God for what I do not know, maybe for his sister’s safety, maybe for his own sanity in this jungle of atrocities and uncleanness, maybe, who knows, for us, his new unlikely friends who take him to unlikely places to test his faith against what he considers real temptations.

Before he is done with his prayer, the guard comes to fetch him. He is praying, I tell the guard. After the prayer, I tell Nasrollah that they are taking him for interrogation. All the signs of the divine touch disappear from his face. The guard comes back in a short ten minutes and takes him away. I notice for the first time how thin his legs are for his big round trunk.

He comes back in two or three hours, before we have dinner. The door opens and he takes off his blindfold and kneels on the floor. Behind him the guard screams that he should pack his stuff

in two minutes, otherwise he would be staying here for another night.

“Thank God, Nasrollah, you are free!”

He does not move and the guard closes the door.

He collapses onto the floor. I bring a wet towel to wipe his forehead and the palms of his hands. He sobs.

“It’s wet, Nasrollah, can I still do this? Is it OK?”

He does not hear me and just sighs.

“You are really free,” I promise him without being sure of it myself.

Everybody gathers around him.

“I didn’t realize you loved us so much,” I say in a futile attempt to tease him. “We’ll be fine, don’t worry about us.”

“They asked me to identify her,” he cries. Have they arrested her? I am so sorry.

“She’s dead. I saw her mutilated body. She blew herself up to avoid arrest. That’s what they told me.”

Nasrollah is freed a few minutes later.

AKBAR

“Oh, by the way,” my inquisitor said nonchalantly on his way out of the room, “your alias is Akbar.”

I sat frozen on a classroom chair facing the wall in the opposite corner of the room. He closed the door quietly and took every last smidgen of the stale air in the room with him.

They know.

Earlier, we had talked for more than two hours about my views of the revolution and his. He told me how disappointed he was by the turn of events after the revolution. I tried to assure him that all revolutions face the same challenges.

“You shouldn’t blame yourselves,” I consoled him. “You can’t control everything. Things are going to work out in the end.”

I tested on him the best clichés available in that small windowless room.

“But why have *you* questioned every single decision of the imam in the past two years?” he asked, playing along. “I know mistakes were made, but don’t you think that you should have exercised more patience?” His young voice did not allow him to assume the fatherly pitch he was striving for.

“Yes,” I confessed, “but at the time, we couldn’t appreciate the imam’s wisdom in appointing a Prime Minister who was self-admittedly weak in advancing our anti-imperialist cause. We wanted the revolution to march ahead and obliterate all remnants of the old regime and its western supporters.”

“What *was* the imam’s wisdom?” He pressed me to add substance to my empty sympathetic gesture. I replied quickly, almost as if I had rehearsed the scene before.

“Don’t you think he wanted the to expose the flaws of liberals by appointing one of them to the position of power? He wanted them to reveal their weaknesses on their own. And that actually is what happened. But we couldn’t appreciate the imam’s foresight. It was a brilliant strategy, wasn’t it?”

“No! I think the imam made a terrible mistake and held the revolution back for no good reason. All these troubles we have now, the bloody war with Iraq and dealing with counterrevolutionaries, resulted from that first mistake.”

“But what was the alternative? I don’t think the war had anything to do with the imam’s decision. The entire world wanted to contain the revolution and used Saddam Hussein to carry out that plan. I don’t think it mattered who the president or the prime minister was at the time. The war was an act of aggression against the revolution ...”

We continued on that absurd note, my interrogator criticizing the imam and I trying to persuade him of the imam’s hidden wisdom!

“You see,” the interrogator concluded, sounding so amicable but with a voice too sweet to be genuine, “this is what we need: a good conversation!”

“Yes, of course,” I agreed. Our “conversation” did in fact seem friendlier than the heated internal debates we used to have in my own organization.

We kept testing the boundaries between the interrogator and the interrogated. I faced the wall and he walked back and forth behind me. That was the only indisputable sign that situated each of us in our actual places.

I had been arrested three months earlier, in September 1981, and had already gone through a grueling weeklong interrogation at Evin prison. At that time, the end of interrogation meant two things: Either they thought that you were guilty beyond redemption and deserved to be executed, or they believed you were insignificant and must remain in prison till further notice. I was deemed to be a part of the second batch. Although it injured my vanity, to be written off as insignificant had never felt so good. My secrets remained with me, despite the demands of the whip.

I waited for a few days in the hallways of the interrogation offices before being transferred to a cell. I sat on a frigid floor next to the door that opened to the chambers of Branch 6, the division for “nonbelievers.” The mandatory blindfold divided my world with a straight line, above it total darkness and below it a sea of feet, the prisoners’ engorged and battered, and the guards’ in military boots. A young boy with a foot infection that had already spread to his legs advised me not to let them place me in the “injured” cell. “You will die of infection there.” How was I supposed to not let them take me anywhere?

I was sent to cell number 6 on the lower level of the two-story Cell Block 2.

When the guard called my name after three months and followed it by “with all belongings,” a cheer of relief rang out in my

cell. Kak Reza, the Kurdish smuggler, advised me on how to cross the border to Turkey from the Kurdistan mountains. Faraj stood silently at a distance playing with his long moustache as if aware that he would be executed less than a year later. I knew him as Fariborz from earlier days of the revolution. His real political identity was yet to be discovered in prison.

Mr. Hassani, a member of the tailors' union, whispered in my ear the address of his shop and a message to his wife. He knew my shoemaker uncle Hossein from a distance. He believed because he had known my uncle, it created a special bond between the two of us in a crowded cell of strangers. I never told him anything about my uncle, for there was not much to tell. Most of Uncle Hossein's life remained a mystery, not only to others, but also to himself.

UNCLE HOSSEIN

“They’ve declared martial law!” Uncle Hossein had shouted as he rushed into the courtyard, his hair disheveled and bushier than usual. A full dose of anger and fear had wiped all color out of his face.

“They’re killing people on the streets!”

He went back outside to make sure that he had locked his silver Vespa.

“They’ve declared martial law,” he repeated as he came inside. “Nobody can fucking stay outside after nine.”

He scratched his head nervously with his stocky fingers.

“How are we supposed to meet at nights?” he mumbled almost involuntarily, unmindful of others who were anxious to hear more about the catastrophe looming on the streets. “We can’t start them before dark, it’s impossible. People have work to do. We need to get together somewhere to talk about our work, our miserable lives, our damn needs. What are these bastards doing? We can’t survive like this!”

He punched the wall as he used to do whenever his anger overtook his sensation of pain. “They’ll destroy the shoemakers’ union!”

He went back outside, started his Vespa, and disappeared as my mother let out a frightened shriek.

It was a Friday in 1978, at the end of long summer of unrest. The city had seen the largest demonstrations in its history, millions had protested during the previous week, in the capital as well as other cities, large and small, throughout the country. Prior to September 8, the Black Friday, the large rallies happened in a festive air, the masses delivering their strong messages with flowers and smiles. *That* Friday changed everything. Hundreds were murdered, thousands wounded, millions radicalized, and the Monarch realized that his time had come to an end.

Uncle Hossein was not a political man. He was a shoemaker, a good one. He didn't care for the union, other workers, Monarchy, or socialism. The only thing in this world that aroused a passion in him intense enough to punch a hole in the wall was drinking, either too much or the lack of it. Nobody knew what he talked about or what nestled in his mind while sitting in a bar drinking with his shoemaker buddies, all card-carrying members of the union. His pockmarked face made his appearance unsympathetic, though when he smiled, not at all a rare occasion, his crooked front teeth gave him an attractive naïveté which could easily make one overlook those signs of childhood neglect on his face.

In the case of Uncle Hossein, the childhood neglect had been all too severe. When his mother died at the age of twenty-six, he had just celebrated his first birthday. In reality, nobody knew when exactly he was born or why that day should have been a cause for celebration. Instead of mourning his wife's death or the tragedy of the boy's becoming motherless at the age of one, his father brought home a new bride soon thereafter to produce even more little brothers and sisters for my mother, Hossein, and their siblings. The

new home became crowded so fast with the newcomers that young Hossein decided at the age of nine that the time had come to commence life on his own. He ran away.

When my mother took him in, my father made sure that Hossein would not grow up without knowing a trade, and thus Uncle Hossein became a shoemaker.

“The first time I knew that I had become a real man,” he used to boast, “was when I cut my finger with the razor-sharp knife that we used for cutting leather in *ousta*’s workshop. When the blood gushed out of my finger, *ousta* grabbed my hand and without hesitating thrust my finger into a can of glue sitting next to his bench.”

For every single shoemaker, there is an *ousta* who teaches him that the glue has to patch up his cuts and his blood has to make the glue thick and strong. Overcoming the fear of the knife defined the shoemaker’s passage to manhood.

But as soon as Hussein turned sixteen, he had to move on, for as a man he could not bear living under his sister’s roof. He went as far west as he could before reaching the border. He sent occasional messages through the network of shoemakers to his older brother, another shoemaker who married at the young age of eighteen, and was already making a name in the guild for his clean cuts and invisible stitches. There were no pictures to be found of Uncle Hossein, short and skinny in middle age, to show how he looked as a youth. He was vulnerable to the whims of his masters and, like all other apprentices, he slept in the shop with nobody in a strange town to look after him.

When we heard that he was in the South with a burgeoning business, making shoes for wealthy Arab sheikhs and foreign engineers who worked at the refinery, my parents decided to visit him—the kids needed to know that they had a successful, though absent,

Uncle Hossein. The South was another universe, home to thousands of foreign workers, their managers, oil engineers, and investors that shopped in boutiques, young couples in expensive cafés, shoe shops like Uncle Hossein's, and nightclubs catering to everyone's whims. A perfect world for the male fantasy of transient life. It did not look like any other part of the country. Uncle Hossein felt right at home.

But the time had come to bring him to his real home, near the family. He was thirty-five, unmarried, well known in the guild, but always a stranger, even to his own brother and sister, to his nephews and a niece he adored. Now a sought-after master, the news of *ousta* Hossein coming back to Tehran preceded his arrival. Shop owners fought over hiring him. Rumor had it that he made comfortable dress shoes for the Americans. The prospect of hiring somebody who knew what pleased American feet only added to the frenzy. For the shop owners, Uncle Hossein not only held the flag of conquering the American shoe market, but was said to speak English, albeit with a thick accent, and to be fluent in Arabic as well. In fact, he knew only the words for a few numbers in English to measure Anglo-American feet; and although he savored the dark voice of the legendary Egyptian diva Umm Kulthoum over a bottle of vodka, to be beguiled by that voice one did not need to know a word of Arabic.

He came back to Tehran with two tapes of Umm Kulthoum, his razor-sharp knives, and his favorite hammer that "flattened stitches like no other." He soon accepted a job on shoemakers' row, nearly three years before the Friday when they declared martial law. But during that short time, he had become a member of a devoted group of shoemaker unionists who got together every single night after work and drank their brains dead with vodka. One should not of course forget that it was Uncle Hossein's older brother who made sure that he was welcomed into the group, the same brother who

teased him constantly for his poor taste in food and his bachelor life.

“People think you don’t have it in you,” his brother taunted, gulping a big shot of vodka and embarrassing him in front of the half-conscious fellow workers. “Get married, maybe your wife will teach you a thing or two.” Mocking Hossein’s culinary illiteracy, he carried on, “maybe you’ll finally learn the difference between a marinated tenderloin kebab and a rib shack BBQ.”

Uncle Hossein’s older brother was brutal, but his hostility came from the fact that he had never forgiven Hossein for leaving town years earlier and becoming a stranger to his niece and nephews, to his own brother and sister, and to himself. He could never forgive Uncle Hossein for denying him the sense of accomplishment that the tutelage of a younger brother would have afforded him. And now Hossein was back, with no shared memories or significant plan for life, being merely a guild member—another shoemaker on shoemakers’ row.

On the surface, the curfew ended all that mattered to Uncle Hossein. But in the absence of drinking nights with his fellow shoemakers, he was forced to find something else to look forward to when he returned home. Now each day he had to dash back home on his Vespa, trying to beat the traffic that could barely respond to the terrified masses’ rush to reach their homes before dark. He got married. Quietly, as always. Without letting anybody in the family know, he found a woman and married her. He told his sister and brother weeks later that he had found a good wife, a loyal housekeeper, and that she was pregnant. He said everything about his marriage and his wife with little emotion. But the news about the pregnancy was a different story. He wanted to show his brother how wrong he had been to mock him by saying that he might not

have it in him. He certainly did, and he had his wife's gradually ballooning belly to prove it.

Soon after he got married, Uncle Hossein realized that something far more hideous would soon devastate his daily life. Angry groups of protesters began to attack all the perceived symbols of corruption and vice: liquor stores, movie theaters, bars, clubs, and of course the banks. These were not looters; they attacked banks, but did not steal a penny, they destroyed bars and liquor stores, but did not drink. And *that* devastated Uncle Hossein and his older brother, who was now more and more dependent on Hossein's ventures into the city on his Vespa in search of their booze. The emerging revolution empowered Uncle Hossein; the decrepit silver Vespa became his white horse of liberation.

Every day, Uncle Hossein would pick up his older brother from his workshop, going through, as he used to proudly proclaim, "blood and fire" to get their vodka. He became the bearer of all the news from around the city: which banks were attacked, which movie theaters burned down, which bars no longer existed. Still, despite the military's control of all major intersections, demonstrators gathered in small groups, burned tires in the middle of the streets, played daredevil with exhausted soldiers. Suddenly, people found fear an archaic concept and became generous in what they were willing to offer in order to realize what they desired. Uncle Hossein was no exception. With the help of his older brother, he found the best vodka till the very day when the Monarchy collapsed. The two brothers, sitting tight on the Vespa, only a bottle of vodka in a brown bag separating them as they braved the smoke and the bullets, became closer than ever.

Uncle Hossein, not known for his valor, now had stories to tell. He turned the drinking parties of the shoemakers into a stage

for sharing the stories of his own courage. The stories offered him a chance to stand taller than his taller, more handsome, older brother, whose cynicism was increasingly becoming pale in contrast to the boldness of the revolutionary movement. The revolution, inadvertently, gave Uncle Hossein something very important: dignity. He grew sympathetic to a revolution that was to deny him pleasure—not all the pleasures, but the only one he cared for. He became strangely curious and excited.

One day a large number of people demonstrated on the street where his workshop was. When he went outside to see what was happening, the crowd saw a worker who seemed to have stepped out of an October Revolution propaganda poster: hammer in hand, black leather apron and matching wristband, threadbare black-stained T-shirt, and a face that at a glance told the story of exploitation.

“Heroic worker,” the crowd shouted, “our lives depend on your labor.” Before he knew which worker they were addressing, Uncle Hossein found himself sitting on the shoulders of a young student in the middle of the square, surrounded by soldiers armed with machine guns. He waved his hammer reluctantly, unsure of his exit strategy.

“Bullets, tanks, and mortars...cannot defeat our workers,” the crowd began their usual chant, this time with Uncle Hossein held aloft. He failed to hide the trembling in his body or the horror on his face. Only the thought of the stories he would later share with his buddies made him endure it. Uncle Hossein measured the distance between the soldiers and the crowd, hoping that the bullets would not reach him. He became pale and weak, feeling drops of sweat running under his black leather apron from his chest down to his belly, despite the fact that it was a cold day at the beginning

of winter. When the crowd grew in number, and began to stick carnation stems into the barrels of the soldiers' machine guns, color returned to his face. The young students put him back down, kissed him on his head, and thanked him for all he had done for the cause.

The revolution closed the book on Monarchy and with it came celebrations, joy, and a sense of deep awe—of the vast power of the masses and the unfathomable hollowness of the *ancien regime*. Uncle Hossein celebrated the birth of a new nation, along with, but away from, millions of others in the country. He was drinking at home, alone. The public consumption of alcohol was banned, bars never reopened, liquor stores became the headquarters of the revolutionary militia. But he celebrated nonetheless.

“These things won’t last,” he said, sharing his wisdom with other shoemakers. “How else can a man rid himself of the burdens of life?”

That indeed was *the* question for the shoemakers and millions of others who found ridding themselves of the burdens of life an increasingly arduous task. For a short period, Uncle Hossein thought that he had discovered a not-so-novel solution—babies. Had that not been his father’s discovery? After the first girl, the new babies kept coming. He named his first daughter after his late mother, Khorshid, meaning Sunshine, “the most thoughtful thing he had ever done,” my mother once exclaimed.

The “counter-revolutionaries” used motorcycles to ambush the revolutionary militia and Uncle Hossein gave in to his wife’s pressure to quit riding his Vespa.

“They’ll shoot you by mistake,” she’d told him. “You have a family and need to think of them.”

How was he supposed to alleviate the pain of these words without a bottle of vodka, saying good-bye to the Vespa and facing

the responsibilities of fatherhood and marriage? To be fair, Uncle Hossein was a caring provider. He fed his family well, though not according to his older brother, who still insisted that Uncle Hossein was no food and drink connoisseur. He clothed them nicely, gave all control of household finances to his wife, and became the envy of his in-laws. The only problem was that after all these years of escapades, running away, building a reputation as a respected shoemaker, taking part in a revolution (at least that was the way he remembered those days), he had nothing to speak about to his family.

Now without the Vespa, and no bars or liquor stores, he faced a more perilous task than crossing through blood and fire to find his drink. He bought a two-cylinder Citroën, the closest car to a Vespa, and learned the art of driving sober while searching for good homemade vodka. “Driving is the easiest thing when you’re drunk,” he would tell his sister, who reprimanded him often for his recklessness. “The car knows its way around pretty well,” he’d add, tormenting her further. “Why should I mess with it? I bought a car with a brain.”

As the quality of alcohol deteriorated, so did the well-being of the country. Handmade men’s shoes quickly turned into a once-in-a-lifetime purchase. One after another, the shoe stores on shoemakers’ row closed their shops and turned their retail businesses into wholesale productions. The distinction between the *oustas* and apprentices dissolved, one becoming the exploiter and the other the exploited, while quality shoes became a rarity only the elite could afford. Invisible stitches and masterful cuts did not stand a chance when they had to compete with a piece of meat or a hot meal. And all that happened with no place to drink with fellow workers to assuage the burdens of life.

The more shoes arrived from abroad, the less charming Uncle Hossein appeared in his drunken state. The less he offered material comfort at home, the more his remote presence and his inability to converse defined him for his wife and children. When the time came to fire Uncle Hossein, the *ousta* of *oustas*, the self-made shoemaker of more than fifty years, he had already lost the sympathy and love of his wife. His four children saw him as the burden of their lives. He would scare off possible suitors for their daughters, his wife believed. A drunkard is better to be hidden. Uncle Hossein became homeless and lived on the mercy of a dying guild.

Nobody knew from where he was getting his alcohol anymore—why would that matter? The venomous, cheap stuff burned the tip of his tongue all the way down to the hole it was digging in his liver. The shoemakers showed him kindness and care; he slept in their workshops, and they fed him. The unspoken wisdom was that Uncle Hossein could not outlive his guild. And he did not. The last day he gasped for air, the day that life with all its burdens departed from his beleaguered body, his soul rode a shiny new silver Vespa to the heavens, where the best vodka is served, where one can drink forever without talking about anything to anyone.

THIS TOO SHALL PASS!

Hamzeh, who had spent six years in Evin before the revolution, cautioned others against too much exuberance. “Let the man collect his stuff,” he said, trying to clear some space between my cellmates and me. “The world will survive without your messages,” he shouted with an exaggerated Azeri accent, something he used to do whenever he wanted to lighten up a situation. “But don’t forget about *my* message!” he whispered in my ear.

His message was an important one. Just a day earlier, he had confided in me an incredible story of revolutionary betrayal. In the preceding years of the revolution, martyrdom had become an ideology that propelled the wheels of the revolution. It had itself become a goal both for those who believed in the hereafter and those who did not. Without martyrdom there could be no revolution. One of those martyrs whose pictures one could see at many rallies was Samad Behrangi, a writer of children’s literature. Samad, as he was known to the Leftist revolutionaries, was *the* voice of the downtrodden. An army officer was thought to have killed him at age twenty-eight, for the officer was seen running away from the

river in which Samad had drowned. Another martyr for the cause of the revolution, so everyone thought. Hamzeh confided in me another story:

“I was the one who was seen leaving the scene of Samad’s drowning. I was one of Samad’s best friends and his death was just a tragic accident. I was a veterinarian serving in the military. I did my best to save him. The news of a military officer killing Samad traveled to my comrades before I could reach them. By the time I did and explained to them that he was not killed, Samad had already become a martyr whose path needed to be followed. Although that fact made me a murderer, no one, including myself, intended to shed any doubts on Samad’s martyrdom. That secret needed to be kept. We all believed that his martyrdom was a taller order than my reputation. So, I had to remain the silenced Judas of the revolution. Now, I can’t bear that burden anymore. I know I won’t survive this prison. I just don’t want to die before clearing my name.”

I had so many messages to deliver, but I knew I was not going to be released. So then where were they taking me?

Blindfolded, cramped in the back of a cargo van with eight other prisoners, I was driven away from Evin. I had heard that a few weeks earlier, they had relocated the site of executions from Evin to an old military shooting range outside the city. The unremitting car horns in the congested traffic told me that we were headed toward downtown, away from the execution field. From a tiny hole in my blindfold I saw that the two small windows at the back of the van had been covered hastily with pieces of newspaper. I needed to get to those windows. I rolled over at a sharp turn and traded a quick look outside for a bloody punch to my face. We were in Ferdowsi Square heading south.

Komiteh Moshtarek, the atrocious prison containing so many tortured bodies, was supposed to have been razed after the revolution.

The old structure was irrevocably tainted with the blood of thousands during the reign of the Shah and his father. The whole nation believed that no one would have the audacity to keep its doors open and its torture chambers running. Now, it operated clandestinely.

“Why are you taking us to Komiteh Moshtarek?” I said, inviting another blow to my head. I wanted to make sure that others were aware of our destination. Knowing you are in the most feared prison is less frightening than not knowing where you are.

I was taken to the third floor. “Sit,” said a guard, in a barely audible voice. “Don’t touch your blindfold.”

I sat down on a worn out blanket.

The guard gave me a red plastic cup, one more blanket, and a three-part piece of advice. “Don’t move, don’t make any noises, don’t try to look . . . Your vacation is over.”

I had never considered Cell Block 2, cell number 6, to be a luxury accommodation. But from where I was sitting then, it surely felt like I was away from my Evin home.

I peeped from under my blindfold without drawing any attention. Six prisoners on one side and five on the other dwelled on this floor. The one next to me was eager to open a channel, but I was tired. He gestured that he had been there for three months. I pretended that I didn’t see him. The thought of being there for months, blindfolded, was not something that I wanted to think about. The guard came and saved me from feeling guilty that I did not want to communicate with my neighbor. He took me down to the interrogation room, where for the first time I “met” the interrogator who knew my underground name was Akbar.

He knows your pseudonym. It can't simply be a bluff.

Surviving your interrogation required much more than overcoming your fears, or transcending the unbearable pain of torture. It was also a game of chess. With a bad strategy you lose, with a good one, you might still lose. But losing or winning often materialized as an amorphous state whose parameters ceaselessly changed. So long as you could justify in your own mind what you had done, or what you had said, you were winning. You lost the moment your deeds became unjustifiable to yourself.

The guard took me into a room and asked me to sit on a chair facing the wall.

The interrogator showed up immediately, saying hello very politely and adding, “We should take care of your case very quickly.”

Considering how common executions were at the time, taking care of a case quickly did not have an optimistic ring to it. He put a piece of paper in front of me with simple questions and left the room. I stared at the paper, unable to answer anything.

Name: . . .

Last Name: . . .

Address: . . .

All assumed names: . . .

Political activities: . . .

Names and ranks of other members of the organization: . . .

How much does he know?

Who is his source?

In my head, I began to list the names of all those who could possibly know my pseudonym. Now for the first time since I was arrested I felt truly blindfolded. I hesitated to repeat the names in my mind.

I wrote down my full name.

. . . Sometimes, friends call me Akbar.

I left the space for address blank. I had not yet given them my home address. So, I pretended that it was left out unintentionally. I needed time to learn more about what they knew.

. . . No political activities since the universities were closed a year earlier.

. . . I severed contact with all friends since then because I was tired of politics.

Yes, plausible, I thought. I stood up and began pacing the room—twelve feet by nine. The spattered drops and smudges of blood on the wall only caught my attention after a few rounds of walking back and forth. Presumably, they left the stains on the walls as a reminder of all other languages that were spoken there. There were a few lines of writing on the walls. I felt little interest in reading them.

How long ago was it that he left the room? He expected me to write a book, I only wrote three sentences. I needed to go to the bathroom, but I didn't want to call anybody. I was secretly hoping that they had forgotten about me. Maybe that was a fluke. He just threw a name and wanted to see my reaction. No. Maybe they knew that there was an *Akbar* but they didn't necessarily know that I was that person. I crossed out the line "Sometimes, friends call me Akbar." But it looked worse. Then, he would know that I am trying to find the best lie. I can't say that I was also known by that name and then take it back. I rewrote the sentence, revealing my utter confusion.

Now I was hungry. How many hours was it since I had last eaten? There was no need to remind them of my whereabouts

simply because I was hungry. The more I was left unattended, the easier it became to persuade myself that they knew nothing about my involvement. Should I again cross out the part about Akbar? I needed to make them believe that I was telling the truth. I can't show this piece of paper to them with all those hesitation marks. I folded the paper very carefully to the tiniest possible size and put it inside my underwear. I needed to relieve myself. I let myself be remembered again and called the guard.

Now I sat there with no paper in front of me, but just a note carved out on the wooden chair: *This too shall pass!* I wished I could erase that. I had a pen and I could write something on the wall. Carve something on the wooden chair. I had nothing to say. Maybe they have a hidden camera somewhere. If that is the case, then they already know that I had destroyed the paper. They see me. That's why they don't come in. They are watching me. No. There are no cameras in the room. Why would they need a camera in a sealed room?

"Get back to your seat," I heard a voice shout from behind the door.

I sat down and faced the wall. Then I heard the door open.

"Take your food."

The door was shut and a small bowl of cold bean soup appeared on the floor. I had some more time to rehearse my possible responses. Not really. I didn't have that many other options. Blame it on the interrogator. After all, he was the one who had left me here for hours without checking in. He forgot to give me his questions. I didn't see any piece of paper here. How many hours ago was it? After several hours, time began to lose any reference point. I could have been there for five hours or eight. If lunch was a marker, it would make it somewhere between twelve and two in the afternoon. But

how long ago did I finish my exactly eighty-three half-cooked pinto beans, a few pieces of floating onions, and a few reddish threads of what could have been the skin of finely chopped tomatoes? How long had I been trying to figure out the time?

“Sorry, something came up and I had to leave.”

I was hungry again, but this time it was not food delivery that broke the silence.

“Did you get a chance to answer the questions?”

“What questions?”

“The ones I gave you this morning.”

“I really appreciated our chat this morning. I actually learned a lot. But you just left and didn’t leave anything for me to answer.”

“You know that those questions can be asked differently, right? I am not one of those people who jump to a conclusion without weighing in all sides of a story. So, don’t force me to . . .”

“That’s exactly why I said that I enjoyed our conversation this morning.” I didn’t let him finish his sentence.

“Let me tell you this. We really don’t need you to tell us anything. The question for us is to see whether you are ready to accept responsibility for what you have done and show remorse. Information is not what we want. What we need is to determine where you stand now. It is up to you. Think about it.”

He left the room again without pushing the matter about the missing piece of paper. I was summoning my strength back to wait for another god-knows-how-many-more hours. But the wait was brief.

“Put your blindfold back on.”

I did not know to which chamber we were heading. I wanted to ask, but held back my tongue as I suddenly recalled the story Agha Nosrat had told me earlier when I was in Evin. When they were

transferring him to the cell blocks from the prosecutor's office, he had asked the guard: "Brother," as they wished to be called, "are you taking us to the torture chambers now?" He was given a good beating without knowing exactly why, so he said. He told the guard he was just repeating what Evin was known for during the revolution. "How should we call it now?" he had asked the angry guard.

I remained quiet and soon found myself back on my third floor home.

The neighbor who had spent three months there was gone.

"Have you eaten?" the guard asked quietly.

"Yes . . . No! What time is it?"

I guess he got his answer, for he showed up with a big plate of rice and two big pieces of chicken. What was I being rewarded for?

I took two big bites of the chicken leg and before I finished the rice, the guard came back.

"Get up and take your stuff . . . leave the food."

He opened a cell door right across from where I stood and pushed me in. The moment I took the blindfold off, I realized that I had awakened five people in the cell. They all lifted their heads and took a brief look at me.

"Come on in," an old man with a thick white beard said pleasantly. "Darvish, my name is Darvish."

He got up and made a cozy spot for me with two blankets. "Rest, soon it's time for the morning prayer." Then he went back to his spot and the others pulled their blankets back up without uttering a word.

"What time is it?" I couldn't shake my obsession.

“Almost four.”

“In the morning?”

“In the morning.”

I fell asleep uncharacteristically fast. I heard the noisy door open, but had no energy to move. I was not ready to get up even for a hot breakfast.

“Wake him up,” I heard the guard tell someone.

“But you just brought him in,” I heard Darvish respond.

“Wake him up. We’ll let you know when we need your help in scheduling.”

I sat up as Darvish continued his objection to the guard, saying “It’s five in the morning.”

“Put your blindfold on, leave your stuff.”

“Good morning,” my interrogator said as he walked in. “Do you pray in the morning?” he asked with a half-genuine tone.

“No, not now, maybe sometime soon.”

“OK then. Here are the same questions I gave you yesterday. Try not to lose it this time.”

“But I . . .”

“That’s OK,” he cut me off before I began to plead innocent.

This time, the first part was already filled in. Name, last name, assumed name(s).

“We don’t have your address.”

I was not sure whether that was meant as a question or a statement of fact.

“Well,” I said, repeating what I’d told the interrogators in Evin, “I’ve been living with my cousin in Rasht, my mom’s hometown. I can give you his address, but that is not really my residence. I’ve

been trying to figure out what I should be doing since the closing of the university.”

He was not interested.

“Write down whatever address you have, don’t leave it blank.”

He left.

I sat there paralyzed. I knew at that moment that there would be no winning strategy in the cards for me. I left the part about the address blank.

I needed to come up with some names of people I knew who were involved in oppositional politics. I knew Mohammad, known as *Mammad Khers*, Mohammad the Bear, from a distance. Neither did we have any political connection nor were we close personally. I knew that he was drowned in the Sepidrood a few months earlier during a trip to the north. I just pretended that I did not know of his demise.

I wrote: . . . Mohammad Shafi, known as the Khers, was the one who recruited me into politics. He remained my main contact until the universities closed. After that I lost touch with him. They called him the Khers not because of his fearlessness or strength, though he was quite stocky and intrepid. He was known as the Bear because in one of our mountaineering trips before the revolution he mistook the shadow of a fellow student outside his tent for a bear. He screamed “bear, bear, bear” and created a stampede in the tent ...

I tried to appear as if I were doing my best to remember every minute detail. I just needed to fill out the paper. But after all the stories of the bear, the tent, and the mountaineers, I only had one pathetic paragraph. I stopped writing. I read the names on the walls, some I knew, some I had heard of. Why did they leave them there to be seen? Was that also a test? Did they already know that

it didn't matter whether I saw these names there? I felt no yearning to leave my mark on those walls. I felt despondent, having no affinity with those names, even those I knew.

What time is it? How long has it been since he left? Walking back and forth was making me dizzy.

What do they know? Who is telling them what? Why does he leave me here for hours? He wants to drive you mad. Say nothing . . . Say nothing . . . Say nothing. Don't think about the questions.

How could I not? What else was there to think about?

You have to think about the questions. You know what's going to happen to you if you refuse to answer. Are you ready for it? What is that "it"? I don't know. Am I ready for what? Pain? Death? Betrayal?

What time is it?

I heard the door being unlocked. "Go back to your seat." I heard the quiet sound of a bowl of soup being set on the floor. It was sometime around noon. *They are messing with your sense of time. Is it really noontime? What does it matter? I need to know how long I have been here.* I finished the soup despite my doubts about whether it was lunch or dinner.

. . . I don't know of Mohammad Shafi's whereabouts. Since the universities closed, I have lost my interest in politics. A number of people that I knew . . . *No you shouldn't say that because then he's going to ask you what their names are . . . I can't only know one person . . . I need other names . . . I will think of some later . . .* The people I knew all disappeared. Mohammad had told me that if he didn't contact me, I should not try to find him. But honestly, I had no interest in finding him anyway . . .

This was not going to get me off the hook, but it could afford me some time to figure out where the source of his information was. I knew that the source had nothing to do with my student life. None knew me there as Akbar. I needed to go to the bathroom. I was told not to knock on the door, but I had to. No one answered. Now I could think of nothing but trying not to pee in my pants. That was a good distraction. I knocked again. Again. “Shut up, or I’ll break your arm.”

“I can’t hold it anymore.”

The bathroom was right across the narrow hall, but still I had to put the blindfold on to step out of my room. “Make it quick.” I couldn’t see even without my blindfold. What is the connection between an overflowing bladder and one’s eyesight? It was only after I relieved myself that I saw two wobbly columns of books sitting side by side in the bathroom. On top of one sat Lenin’s *Selected Works*, all 964 pages of it.

This is a trick. Don’t touch it.

I picked up the book and looked at a few pages from *What Is to Be Done?* It made me think of Hossein Amoli and my first encounter with the book. I wondered whether he was alive or dead. Suddenly I felt a guilt-free desire that he were dead so that I could use him as another name to add a few more lines to my responses. I tried so hard to persuade myself that he was dead, or had already left the country.

I now had a history of bathroom encounters with *What Is to Be Done?* Seeing it in the bathroom during the interrogation that day reminded me of the first time I had encountered the text.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The phone rang twice. Before my other family members could answer, I picked it up.

“Is he on call all the time?” I could hear my mother mumbling as I answered the phone.

“Hello . . . ?”

The telephone that we had acquired a few years earlier had always been a source of irritation to my parents. We owned one of the two telephones in our neighborhood of over fifty homes. With that came the responsibility of delivering messages to a good number of them in urgent situations. My father’s rigid definition of emergency included only occasions of death and, with a little stretch, birth—anything else could wait. He used to reprimand my mother, saying “Once we let them use our phone for every trivial thing, they’ll turn us and our four children into their delivery boys.” However, he would shift gears deftly whenever he greeted our neighbors, insisting “Our phone is yours,” and leaving all the responsibility of saying “No” to my mother.

I rushed to the phone every time it rang, not because I expected a call, but because I was covering for my sister. I delivered messages

between her and her boyfriend, a sin that no brother with the least Persian masculine pride would ever commit and no respected parent would ever tolerate. The responsibility of a good brother was to protect his sister from the evil eyes of decadent boys. Parents needed to make sure that nothing could ever cast doubt on the chastity of their daughter. My sister's boyfriend knew quite well that he was not supposed to call her at home, but my willingness to act as an accomplice made his occasional infractions possible.

However, it turned out instead to be Hossein Amoli.

Although I had never heard his voice over the phone, the moment I heard this long *hello* with his thick Northern accent, I recognized him.

"I need to see you right away in ten minutes." The words sprinted out of his mouth without a pause. He did not ask whether I could see him. It sounded urgent, even by my father's measures.

"Where are you?"

Ignoring my question, he gave me instructions how and where to meet up.

"I'm driving my father's car, the Peugeot. Come out on the street in ten, no, fifteen minutes, and pretend you're looking for a cab. When you see me, just wave and howl an address, let's say Shahyad Square, and I'll pick you up."

I vaguely remembered his father's car, but was not confident that I could recognize it on a busy street.

"What color is the car?" I asked apologetically.

"Metallic pistachio green, it's a 504 hatchback. Don't forget. Fifteen minutes and you are hiring a cab for Shahyad Square." He hung up.

The New Year holidays had already begun. Everybody from college was back home or busy with family. What was Hossein

Amoli doing in Tehran? He had told me that his family went to their village of Polour every chance they got. What was he doing in the city four days before Norouz? The winter was almost over and the roads could not have been that bad for traveling. Hadn't he even invited me to visit during the holidays? "Make a left at the Polour exit onto Polour Road. It's a dirt road," I remembered him telling me, "Our place is right across from the giant turquoise 1955 Dodge Royal parked on the left side of the road." I remembered this because I had never heard anybody giving directions with reference to a parked car.

What was he doing in Tehran? He had never called me before. What could be so urgent? Drowned in my unanswered questions, I began to get ready to leave. My mother struggled to hold her tongue and not ask who called or where I was going. But finally she surrendered to her motherly urges.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"I'll be back soon. Before dinner." I had earned the freedom to evade answers since I was admitted to one of the most prestigious engineering universities in the country in the fall of 1977. That was my declaration of independence without in reality being independent. She did not pursue the matter and quietly went to the kitchen to prepare dinner. I could not tell her that I needed to see a friend. I was afraid of the follow-up questions to which I did not have any answers.

I left home around 5:30. The snowfall had already turned into an icy drizzle. The gloom of late afternoon was giving way to the darkness of night. The kids crowded the narrow passage to the street, throwing slushy snowballs and sliding down a number of makeshift six-foot-high crackled ski slopes they had made on the plowed snow mounded up in the middle of the alley. Their frosty

noses, frozen hands, and crimson cheeks only bothered their mothers, whose calls to bring them back inside splintered in the biting air before reaching their ears.

The only adult outside was Mr. Khakpour, who was walking toward his home, the fifth house after ours. A few steps behind him was little eight-year-old Asghar, crying fiercely, repeating with all the force he could muster from his gut, “I don’t want it! I don’t like it!”

Other kids started throwing snowballs at Asghar, who seemed impervious to the pelting at his back.

I greeted Mr. Khakpour.

“*You* tell him something,” Khakpour responded. “What’s the difference between this,” he fluttered a shopping bag in front of my face, “and any other clothes?”

I wasn’t sure whether he expected to hear my opinion or just wanted to vent.

“What’s the problem, Asghar?” I asked gently, placing my hand on his icy ear, pulling him toward me.

“I hate the color!” He gathered more steam and repeated his motto, “I don’t like it!”

“Since when,” Khakpour objected, “do kids have a say in what kind of clothes they should wear? Am I to spend all my holidays looking for whatever this little goat wants for his New Year’s outfit? And if I do this for Asghar, won’t the other kids want the same thing? Forget the time, where is the money going to come from? Which treasure chest do they think I am sitting on?”

The more furious his father became, the tighter Asghar’s grip on my leg.

“Your mother still wipes your ass,” he said, poking Asghar’s head, “and you want me to buy you fancy clothes?”

It was getting late. Hossein's punctual instructions did not leave any room for delay.

"Go try them on at home," I said, pushing poor Asghar away. "I'm sure you'll like them . . . Happy New Year, Mr. Khakpour."

"How is the university?" he asked in a fatherly voice as he grabbed Asghar's hand.

"Good," I said, embarrassed on behalf of Asghar.

"Your parents should be proud. We all are proud of you." He turned and resumed walking towards their home, dragging his son behind.

"This is the last time I am buying you new clothes." His coarse voice had returned. "Now cry until you choke, you spoiled rotten dog!"

During the few minutes it took me to get to the street corner, night had settled in. All the shops had hung bright lights outside and the bustling street looked more festive than usual. Noticing that traffic was barely moving, I figured that Hossein was not going to show up anytime soon. I walked to the next intersection. My toes could not bear standing still and my rubber boots proved once again that they were the wrong answer to Tehran winters. To keep warm, I went inside one of the most crowded shops, hoping that nobody would notice me.

"How can we help you?"

A boy approached me before the steam from my breath had disappeared. If you weren't a customer, you weren't welcome, particularly in that season of dense crowds in minuscule spaces.

I walked out without bothering to respond to the boy, who had already read in my face that I was seeking shelter, not looking for goods.

After a few minutes, I saw Hossein walking up the street. He wanted me to follow him. His Chaplinesque walk made it difficult for our college activists to take this flatfooted comrade seriously.

His broad head looked like a mismatch for his frail constitution. He made sure with his body language that I followed him without drawing attention.

He got into his parked Peugeot 504. At that point, I did not know what I was supposed to do. Was I supposed to carry on the original plan of hiring a cab? Or could I just get in the damn car? I was cold and wet, and my patience for Hossein's Bond-action was at its end. I walked to his car and got in.

"What are you doing?" he protested. "I told you . . ."

"Just drive and make a right turn at the first light," I said.

He did not scold me, but continued his mysterious act.

"I think we're all right," he said, glancing at the rearview mirror, "I made sure that nobody was following me."

"I've found something," he told me, finally ending the suspense. "I think it's a Lenin pamphlet." He fine-tuned the rearview mirror again.

I forgave him. Instantly, I felt a revolutionary warmth flowing in my toes. The car heater might have been responsible for this, but finding a Lenin treatise in a place where merely mentioning his name was prohibited was enough to make one sweat.

"How did you come about it?" I asked, now checking the rearview mirror myself.

"I was visiting a friend near the railway station. After I left, I realized that I had left my thermodynamics book at his place. You know, I really wanted to study during the break and catch up. Somehow, I couldn't get my head around the Second Law. The First Law is quite clear to me, but when it gets to the Second Law, particularly to Carnot efficiency, I'm lost."

"What about Lenin?" I snapped. "Hossein, tell me about the pamphlet."

“I stopped at a pay phone to call him and ask about the book, the thermodynamics text. I walked into the phone booth and realized that a pamphlet was shoved behind the phone. I pulled it out and in the dark I saw Lenin’s name on it. That’s when I called you. I made sure that nobody was following me. It might be trap. I thought they might follow anyone who picked it up. But I was extremely careful. There is no way I was followed.”

The more he insisted that he took precautions, the deeper my anxiety grew. It seemed like he had carefully planned everything till the moment he picked me up, but what would happen after that was all up to me. He passed on the torch of trepidation. Now I had to make a decision about whether it was safe to stop somewhere and take a look at the pamphlet. We could go back to my home, but what if they were following us? Going back to either of our homes was out of the question. But if it *were* a trap, Hossein had already bitten the bait. They could easily find his home address from the license plate. If they had not arrested him on the spot, they wanted to see whom he would contact. That would be me. But they would not have *my* home address. I was getting lost meandering through our security options. The most logical alternative was to go to Hossein’s home, something I could not suggest. It would have sounded cowardly to say that we should go to *his* parents’ home. Sometimes it is more important to do the wrong thing than to be perceived a coward. *That* nobody wanted on their revolutionary resume.

We could park the car somewhere and take a look at the thing, but the danger was that if they *were* following us, we would be caught red-handed.

“A crowd is our best protection,” I told Hossein calmly, as if I knew exactly what I was talking about. “Chances are, nobody is following us, but let’s do another couple of rounds and park near my

street. We'll just take it and walk to a shop and look around under the light and see what we have."

Hossein could not disguise his skepticism, but my authoritative voice did not leave much room for discussion.

We got out of the car and walked toward Salsabil's impenetrably crowded sidewalks. The icy rain had stopped and the thin cold air felt pleasing on my overheated face. I told Hossein that we would just walk over to the pastry shop and buy some nuts. We could take a look at the pamphlet while we were waiting for a clerk to help us. There would be at least fifteen people ahead of us, which would give us enough time to inspect it without rushing.

"Shall I take it out now?" Hossein asked nervously once we got there, pretending to look at some dried figs sitting in a big basket in front of the store.

"Where is it?" I said, smiling.

He had tucked it in the back of his pants, making it hard for him to recover it. I reached under his thick military jacket and pulled out the pamphlet. We looked at it under the bright light of the shop.

"What is this?" Hossein's lisp sounded funnier than ever.

"How can I help you?" a boy asked us.

"A pound of dried figs and . . ." Hossein couldn't stop laughing.

"Are you going to buy anything here?" asked the boy, issuing an ultimatum.

"A pound of dried figs and another pound of mixed nuts."

The big, bold letters "V," "I," and "L" dominated the crumpled cover page of the pamphlet. The rain and snow had made the faded smaller letters illegible. Hossein took V.I.L. as the abbreviation for Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and that was enough evidence in that dim light of the phone booth to invite us into this agony. In the bright light of the shop, the letters stood for the Virtues of the Immaculate

Lord, a treatise far from anything that could have come out of the mind of the godless Lenin. I shoved the leaflet in between baskets of figs and dried pineapples, hoping that the right person would eventually pick it up.

“So, you were telling me about the Second Law of Thermodynamics?”

He asked me to promise not to divulge this story for at least thirty years.

What I did not tell Hossein Amoli was that I had actually found a copy of Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* I had known Hossein for only one semester and still needed to build a stronger foundation for trusting him. That night changed our camaraderie, but an unjustified suspicion still nagged at me.

During the exam week in early March, the library and the teahouses on campus were packed with students going through their books and class notes once more before finals. I had seldom attended my first semester classes, had no notes to go through, and did not know of any classmates to study with. My only preoccupation was to find a way to earn a “C.” To *earn* might not be the right word, to *get* a “C” *by any means necessary*. I hung out mostly at a student-run teahouse at the College of Textile and Polymer Engineering, my own alleged major. I poured myself one cup of tea after another from the boiling *samovar* with a giant teapot nestled on top. I watched others reading their textbooks frantically, while I sat there calmly reading any possible interesting book I could get a hold of from the student-run library. At times I felt excluded from heated discussions of a chemical puzzle or a problem in optics. But I inhabited a different plane, struggling to resolve complex problems of justice while my classmates argued over mathematical equations.

Reading in the teahouse put both my brain and kidneys to work. Late afternoon, after everybody else was gone, I left with a full bladder and the unresolved predicament of a calculus exam the next morning. The College was deserted. I went to the bathroom on the first floor. Singing loudly in the stall and trying to perfect my aim, I noticed a piece of carefully folded paper sticking out from behind the water tank above the toilet. After I finished, I pulled the paper out and opened it. I was taken aback by the red hammer and sickle with a small picture of Lenin on the top, and a curved calligraphic *What Is to Be Done?* crowning his head. It was a large piece of fine paper, with thumbnail pages printed on both sides—an entire book on a single sheet. The only part, the most important part, I needed to read was the cover page. The other tiny pages were not legible.

My head grew heavier and my knees began to fail. I felt embarrassed by my recklessness, unfolding the paper without regard to the noise it generated in the bathroom. Now anybody who had planted it would know that I had found it. I was losing my calm to a painfully growing fear. I felt like a desperate murderer trying to dispose of the body of his victim. I stayed in the stall, pretending that my number one had turned into a number two. I even crouched to make the scenario more believable to myself. I folded the paper and slid it back where it was before. I flushed twice, whistled and walked out nonchalantly. As I washed my hands, I looked in the mirror to make sure I was alone. Nobody was there, but still the thought of being caught by the Shah's secret police, the infamous SAVAK, frightened me. Although I put the pamphlet back, they could still suspect me.

Nobody was outside. It was already dark and the campus looked empty. I walked slowly to the library and checked carefully to see

whether I was followed. I could wait till tomorrow, but I would then lose my chance of taking the book. My caution lasted only a few minutes and quickly faded. I walked back to the empty bathroom and, like an experienced shoplifter, did not hesitate. I took the leaflet and shoved it inside my sock. I acted as if I had been practicing this for years. I knew I had to be decisive, check my fear, and act like a genuine revolutionary.

The exam week ended and with it my hopes to muster a 2.0 grade average. With a couple of Ds, I managed to get on the probation list, the only student in my class, after my first semester with a dismal GPA of 0.8.

Rather than the GPA, my preoccupation was to find a way to read my newfound jewel. I needed a good magnifying glass and a place where I could read it without being noticed. The unbearable urge to share what I possessed was making me fidgety. A copy of *What Is to Be Done?* sat in my closet, and I could not read it. At the time, for a young revolutionary, that felt tantamount to torture.

On the first day of school after the break, I approached my best friend Kaveh, a third-year student at the College of Mining, and told him the story of how I came to possess the pamphlet. He twitched his thick moustache and listened intently. When I was done he remained silent for a devastatingly long few seconds.

“I don’t know,” he muttered almost involuntarily as a way of asking for more time to think.

I could feel the energy of the neurons in his brain sending frantic messages to his judgment cells asking for a sound response.

“Hum,” he rumbled without a resolution. How could *he*, an experienced comrade who had already paid the toll with a six-month stint in a SAVAK jail for the dumb mistake of writing about

his admiration for the communist guerillas in a letter to a friend, trust *me*, a newcomer?

I told him that I had waited all this time to make sure that the piece was not planted. I had taken all possible precautions—this was for real.

I dreaded his response without knowing why. I could read it on my own and did not need him or anybody else to help me.

“How big is it?” he asked with a buyer’s intonation.

I told him about the size and how tiny the print was and how impossible it was to read unaided.

“Do you have a good magnifying glass?”

We read each other’s mind. It would be impossible to peruse my prize at home without my parents noticing and nowhere else in this damn country could we spread open this large subversive page and devour those tiny words and their weighty significance.

By the end of the week, Kaveh came up with a solution. I knew he would. He was everything Hossein Amoli was not. He would never display reluctance or reservation, even if he were unsure of his actions. His Stalinesque moustache and expanding forehead projected the kind of certainty I badly sought at that moment. Hesitance never entered his being. He had asked around and learned that pamphlets in that format had been appearing around campus. Others also had been struggling with the same predicament: how to read them without attracting attention. He was told of a device perfect for our purpose: a magnifying glass–flashlight combination. “You can read it under the blanket at night,” he said checking his excitement. “Others had done it with ease, and the battery lasts more than four hours.”

I immediately forgot that I was on academic probation, and realized that the new semester was not going to be the one that

would raise my GPA. With other pamphlets in circulation, I imagined an entrancing semester of sleepless nights in the company of the prophets of revolution.

Kaveh shook me out of my reverie by raising the problem of how to buy a couple of those special reading devices. “Sooner or later,” he predicted, “they’re going to get suspicious about all this new interest in these magnifying glasses.” Suddenly, buying a flashlight became a most pressing matter of security. I asked him how and from where others had bought it. But he did not need to answer my question, as I realized promptly that a response would reveal resources that had to be guarded with extreme confidentiality.

The only classes I enjoyed in the engineering curriculum were the industrial workshops and labs. I picked textile engineering as my major not for any particular love of the field, but specifically because I knew that textile and garment workers had spearheaded working-class struggles from Bombay to Manchester, St. Petersburg, New York, and Chicago. (For the sake of honesty, I need to disclose that a love connection, which must remain concealed for now, also influenced my decision.) Being a textile engineer could offer me an “organic” cover to be a part of this movement in my own country. The pedagogy of our campus was that a good engineer was first and foremost a good worker. As one of my shop instructors once told us, “No worker would ever take any engineer seriously if he couldn’t weld two pieces of pipe together.”

That semester, I signed up for the Chemistry of Colors lab, despite the fact that I had not passed the prerequisite, Chemistry I. During the second week, Ms. Kumar, an Indian lab technician, explained that some synthetic yarns would lose their consistency and color if they were exposed to light during the process of dyeing. I have no recollection of what else she said in the lab that day, but I

knew that I had found the perfect cover for purchasing our magnifying flashlights.

I told Kaveh that I needed to buy a magnifying glass with a flashlight for my Chemistry of Colors lab. And it was the truth! “I am a textile engineering student,” I practiced my line, “and I need something to use in a dark lab to see very closely the color and the consistency of the yarn while it is being dyed.” To play along, Kaveh told me that he needed the exact same thing when he inspected the tunnels in mines. My first inclination was to go to a remote arts and engineering supplies shop and ask for our device. But Kaveh persuaded me that going to a place out of our way would raise suspicions. If we have a legitimate use for them, why shouldn’t we purchase them at a store near campus? He was absolutely right. Did the SAVAK require engineering supply shops to report the sales of such tools to the secret police?

On the same day, we went to the big store near our bus stop on Hafez Avenue. I told the clerk my dilemma in the lab. He told us that he had the perfect device made exactly for those kinds of purposes. I put my textbook on the counter in plain view before examining it. As we looked at the one he handed over, he told us that they had other kinds with a more powerful lens and a stronger light. But we were already sold. The beautiful magnifying glass with a tiny halogen lamp nestled under its rim was the weapon we were searching for. I picked it up by its black handle and turned its yellow switch on and off to check its bright light that promised many sleepless nights of clandestine reading.

“Is there a student discount?” I asked, trying to make sure that he wouldn’t forget our purpose.

“Unfortunately,” he apologized, “it is already deeply discounted.”

We were ready to pay our entire month of student aid for it in any case.

Kaveh told me that we shouldn't keep the pamphlet too long, not only for safety reasons, but to make sure that others would get a chance to read it.

"*They* have said that we will receive other books in the same format."

I just shook my head approvingly, without divulging my incurable desire to keep the one I found to myself.

"How many pages is it?" Kaveh was already planning his reading.

I had no idea, since the page numbers were too tiny to see, but I thought it could have been somewhere between 150 and 160 pages. I told him that I needed a week to read it.

That night when all the lights were off in our home, I pulled the blanket over my head, turned the magic light on, folded the pamphlet in such a way to have the first twenty pages on one surface, and began reading. Under the magnifying glass, the cover page looked like a giant poster, with its picture of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin at the center and its title arcing over his head demanding . . . *What Is to Be Done?*

A THEORY OF PRAXIS

It's OK to use Hossein Amoli's name! He was not that active after the revolution anyway. Most likely he'd gone abroad. Don't you remember how serious he was about finishing his degree? How many cases do you know of students who were both committed to the revolution and to getting their degrees? None. He is gone.

But I decided that it could wait. For now, Mohammad Shafi was plenty. I put the book back carefully, exactly the way it was. I feared that it was left there to tempt me to take it. It seemed like *What Is to Be Done?* and temptation were always linked.

I had nothing more to write. The interrogator came back after some unknown hours.

“Do you need anything?”

“No, I'm fine.” That was the only question he asked.

“Good! Let me know if you need anything.” He left showing no interest in what I had written in response to his questions. I thought that I needed to reciprocate his patience. What could I add to what was already on the page?

Why do I feel like I owe him something?

Every time I looked closely at the walls, I saw new names. Now even those I did not know seemed familiar. I knew that all those people were dead. I just knew. I did not want my name to appear next to any of them. But almost involuntarily, I began to write my name carefully next to Mehri, a woman I knew who was deserving of the meaning of her name, kindness. Then, with the same care, I scratched it off.

Are they watching you? I hope they are. You are acting like a crazy man. It's good for you—if they think you've gone mad. Maybe you have. No, I haven't. I know what I am doing. Do you?

“Go back to your seat.”

I braced myself for the disaster that awaited me. I had nothing to show to the interrogator, just a few lines that looked, even to me, like an infantile attempt to buy time. Reaching over my shoulder, he grabbed the paper. Blowing the air of frustration out of his nose, he studied it for a few seconds.

“You didn't say anything about the treatises you've written.”

“What treatise would that be?”

“I thought you wrote *Theory and Praxis*. Did you not?”

Before I could come up with another denial, he asked me to put my blindfold on.

“That's all right. We'll talk about it tomorrow. I am really curious to hear what your argument was in it. But it's too late now. Let's talk about it tomorrow.”

Again, everyone had already fallen asleep when I was pushed into my cell. This time a man with a sad face welcomed me back quietly. “We've saved some dinner for you.” I could not eat. The

interrogator's knowledge of *Theory and Praxis* was all my stomach could handle that night. "No, thank you. I am not hungry."

"Eat my friend, eat. It will help you think more clearly."

"I'm OK."

He rolled a piece of stale bread around a tiny piece of cheese and handed it to me. "I am Farhad."

I chewed the hardened bread and tried to push it down my throat. Knowing what exactly was going on in my mind and in my mouth, Farhad handed me water in a worn-out plastic cup. "Sorry the bread is not fresh and the cheese is stale. But it is good for you. It would open the knot in your mind and in your stomach." I didn't want to talk, and Farhad showed no curiosity either. I needed to lie down and think. I swallowed the bread with a smidgen of the cheese on it and I crawled onto my blanket, indifferent toward Farhad and my other cellmates.

Only a few people knew that I was the author of *Theory and Praxis*. Now I realized that my pseudonym was not the only thing my interrogator knew about me. Even a dead Hossein Amoli could not help me to compose a plausible narrative for my activities before and after the closure of the universities. I thought of all possible suspects and how they were connected to me. What each of them knew about me and how in each case I could devise a credible story not only to shelter myself but also to save them.

I woke up with the sound of the key turning in the lock. I did not move. Farhad, who slept next to me, shook me gently while talking to the guard. "You just brought him back." I sat up and saw the guard motion with his hand to rush me to get ready to go. Others also woke up, thinking this was their predawn bathroom ration.

“Bathroom?” I asked the guard.

“Not for you. The rest can go to the bathroom,” he looked to the other side of the cell, “and make it quick.”

We all put on our blindfolds and stepped out. I waited on the right side while the guard took the rest toward the bathroom at the other end of the hall. Although I had not yet met the rest of my five cellmates, I wished I could go with them.

It was sometime between four and five in the morning. I had been in my cell for perhaps one or two hours when my interrogator summoned me back. Peeking from below my blindfold, I saw a line of prisoners lying on both sides of the hall under coarse grey blankets. They all pulled the blankets over their faces so they could take the blindfolds off and rest their weary eyes. The guard held my arm and I walked half a step behind him. Although I moved steadily, I felt like the command center in my brain was disconnected from my legs. They moved involuntarily.

I entered the same interrogation room and sat on the same chair with the motto, *this too shall pass!* I used to resent those carved words. To me it represented a death sentence. That was the only way I had imagined my circumstance would pass. But now it offered me some sense of continuity and comfort. I knew I was in the same room and in that disorienting universe it offered me a compass.

“Good morning!” My interrogator entered the room.

“How did you sleep?” . . . “Did you have some time to think about the questions?” . . . “Is there anything you need?”

“Bathroom, can I go to the bathroom?”

The books were still in the bathroom. Lenin was no longer on top. There were so many novels, mostly of the Soviet social realist type. Sholokhov’s *And Quiet Flows the Don*, a favorite of Stalin’s

I was once told, multiple copies of it, and his other popular novel *Virgin Soil Upturned*. Each provided a solid foundation for a column of books. Marx's first volume of *Das Kapital*, the white cover version that every book vendor on the sidewalks across from Tehran University sold around the time of the revolution, sat on the top this time. A heavy load for the column to bear. Ignazio Silone's anti-fascist and anti-Stalinist novel, one of my favorites, *Bread and Wine*, and his elegiac *Fontamara* suggested that they had confiscated the books from someone with eclectic taste. Two columns of who's who and what's what of communist currents: Mao Tse-tung's tiny volumes on the sinification of Marxism; Milovan Djilas' two-volume autobiography *Land without Justice* and *Memoir of a Revolutionary*, and also his anti-Soviet manifesto *The New Class* . . .

"What kind of shit are you eating in there?" the guard yelled.

My visit to the library gave me a chance to think about *Theory and Praxis*.

What does he know about it? You should admit that you were the author of the monograph. But then he wants to know more. There is more. Some of it is even more incriminating. If you deny it, you simply add to his animosity and make it harder for him to believe anything you say. Why do I need him to believe anything I say? You don't have a strategy. That is the problem. I don't know whether I should refuse to speak at all and prepare to be killed under torture, or if I must find a way to navigate the boundaries of what he knows and what I am willing to share. But you don't know how to navigate the outer edges of those boundaries. Don't say anything for now.

I sat in the interrogation room for what it felt like another few hours before someone remembered that there was a person in the room.

“Go to your corner.” This time it was breakfast. A cup of colorless hot tea, a piece of bread, and a minuscule piece of cheese on an aluminum tray landed on the floor. The steaming tea was somehow not as hot as it appeared. Here they could even make a lukewarm cup of tea steam like a boiling pot. Things and people did strange things there. I had heard many times from different interrogators that they could make a prisoner sing like a nightingale. I had never actually heard nightingales singing, neither had any of those interrogators, but it was understood between us what kind of singing they had in mind.

Before I finished my breakfast, the interrogator showed up. “How is everything?” he asked cheerfully. He apologized for being late. “Let me take your tray.” I pushed the last bite of the bread into my mouth and forced it down with the remaining drops of tea. He took the tray and put another piece of paper with new questions on it in front of me. “We’re being very patient with you, you know.” This was the first time he used a threatening tone.

“I really don’t need you to tell me anything. We already have your full record in our file. We know whom you worked with, what you’ve written, how many rallies you’ve organized, how many reading groups you’ve led, you name it. But I want to give *you* a chance to come clean. Forget about giving me the names of dead people, that’s old. I actually don’t need you to give me any names. Again, this is all about you. We need to make a decision about whether you’ve changed and are genuinely willing to fix the damage you and your comrades have done to the revolution, or if you intend to carry on with your plots and sedition. I tell you, I asked to be in charge of this case because I saw a glimmer of hope here. Don’t disappoint me.”

He left the room without soliciting a response. The new questions dealt with exactly the same issues he had said earlier that he already knew about.

What was your official rank in your organization? . . .

What were your responsibilities? . . .

How many people did you regularly meet in your reading cells?

...

Provide their full name and addresses: . . .

To whom did you report your activities in the organization? . . .

Provide names, addresses, ranks: . . .

List the titles and occasions of all pamphlets, treatises, and other publications you have authored: . . .

The piece of paper in front of me suddenly reminded me that this wasn't a job application but a real interrogation. I felt exposed, without a haven. Shame engulfed me. I expected to feel anger or fear, but instead a deep sensation of shame permeated my bones. I was embarrassed at my simplemindedness, humiliated by my weakness and by how fast I was losing this game of chess to the interrogator. Although I thought his intellect inferior to mine, he was beating me gleefully and effortlessly, simply by asking a series of questions. I could not touch the pen. I placed it on top of the thin stack of papers he had left in anticipation of my detailed responses.

There is nothing you can say. Face it, you either confess or you die. It is not all that complex. Are you afraid of dying? No, I am not afraid of dying. Honestly, I am not afraid of dying. Is it pain then? No, it is not pain. I am not afraid of pain. You are afraid of pain. They will break your bones. They will split open the soles of your feet with their whip. I know all that, but honestly, that is not what horrifies me.

I needed to say something. There was no way that I could stand on the same ground as my interrogator. I decided to accept any specific charges he would disclose without volunteering any additional information. He knew about *Theory and Praxis*, so I would tell him about it. I wrote:

I am the author of *Theory and Praxis*. It was a treatise written in response to an intellectual crisis, which had alienated us, the Left, from the masses we allegedly represented . . .

I filled more than two pages, in which I tried to exaggerate the instances when I had advanced a critique of the Left. I hoped to use this earlier criticism as a sign that I had already been disillusioned by the kind of politics I was engaged in. I thought I could exploit his uneducated perception of the Left and show him that I was indeed retired from politics voluntarily. But after interrogating hundreds and hundreds of prisoners, could he still be that uninformed about the state of the Left? As far as I knew, all copies of the treatise were destroyed. I hoped that they had dug up a copy from somewhere. I knew it would be difficult for them to ascertain the difference between the kind of self-criticism I intended and the disillusionment that one might detect from my writing.

That was the first time after a few days that I felt I could think straight. It did not last long. I had nothing to say about the rest of the questions. I just wrote down some random names and addresses without even memorizing them in order to be able to reproduce them if asked. I couldn't memorize anything in that state of sleeplessness anyway. But I did not even try. I knew that it looked so overtly made up that he would not take it seriously. I hoped that it would force *him* to tell *me* what names he knew.

I had two more meals there, three more visits to the bathroom (the books were gone), and miles of walking back and forth in the room. And he still hadn't come back. He was gone.

The next day the usually quiet hallways were raucous. Loud calls of inquiry could be heard through the otherwise muted corridors.

"Which room?"

"Is she in 23?"

"Keep him there."

"23 is already occupied."

"What about 12?"

"*Hajji* wants them each in a different cell block."

The commotion suggested that they had arrested a large group that required all their attention. Shamelessly, I felt happy that they were now busy with some other captured "counter-revolutionaries." That gave me more time. But buying time was getting increasingly costly.

I did not go back to my cell that night. I was still in the interrogation room when I heard the morning *Azan*, the call for prayer. Every last part of my body ached. Walking was becoming difficult and so was the passing of time. I would count my steps when I walked. The repetition of counting added a particular rhythm to my otherwise dreary hours. But that comfort was dissipating fast.

Finally I lay down on the cold, dusty floor and fell asleep.

"This is not a hotel, you son of a bitch." The guard who brought lunch kicked the bottom of my feet. Many of the guards resented the fact that they were forced to feed and, in their mind, shelter criminals. "You chose to rise against the revolution," a guard once

told me, “and you deserve to die. With the money we spend on you,” he chastised me, “we could afford thousands of decent housing units for the masses.” Serving food to the condemned was far from the kind of revolutionary duty they had signed up for.

The bedlam outside my room continued. I had never seen chaos of the magnitude I was hearing in the hallways of interrogation chambers. My secret jubilation gave way to a weighty fear. Was I irrelevant?

Isn't that what you wanted? That they don't care about you and let you be? It is simple. You have nothing of significance to offer them. But that is good. No? What do you mean by good? Good means that you are no longer responsible for whatever happens to your comrades. Good also means no torture. Earlier you said that you were not afraid of torture. I am mostly afraid of its consequences. Betrayal is what I am afraid of—that kind of pain. I am afraid of shame—the kind I could bring upon myself. I am also afraid that if they leave any mark of torture on my body, I will never ever be released.

The interrogator came a few hours later. He took my response and read it while standing behind me. “If you need to discuss your positions, we can do that, too. But as you can hear we have so many other matters to take care of. You need to cooperate and the time for that is now.” He put the paper back in front of me. “Names and addresses. Write about Sassan and Yusef.” He left the room.

Pseudonyms of two members of our group's leadership. I had another clue. Earlier I thought having more clues would make this easier to solve. Now I realized that more pieces only enlarged the puzzle. I also realized all the clamor outside had nothing to do with my case. But it did not matter. The newcomers could not save me. I

did not write anything about Yusef or Sassan. I knew them well but tried not to admit that fact even to myself.

I was beyond sleep. My brain refused to shut down, though it was past the point of exhaustion. I could not reach the neurons that were supposed to deliver my messages to various outposts in my body, which seemed to have declared independence and resisted my commands. I was not asking for much, but they subscribed to a literal interpretation of the right of self-determination. I hoped that all that information I had deposited in my memory bank would remain under my control and safe from the subversive attitudes of those neurons.

He came back not long after he left me with those names.

“Have you finished?”

“I am not feeling well.”

“You’ll be feeling much worse if you don’t write.”

“I don’t remember anything. I am tired and can’t think.”

“Do you need memory pills? You know that we have effective treatments for memory loss. Yes? Do you think you need treatment? Have you met Sayyed? You know that Sayyed is deaf and mute. He only knows one language, a universal one. He speaks a language that everyone understands. He is mute, but he has the extraordinary ability to unlock the tongue of those who have forgotten how to speak.”

He asked me to put my blindfold back on and took me outside to the cold courtyard. “Wait here.”

It’s over. Now you must face the reality that you can’t save yourself. But that I already knew, the question is how can I save others. You don’t trust yourself? No. I don’t know.

I felt like my brain had turned into a sieve. All thoughts would drain out faster than I could make sense of them. I noticed a small half-frozen pool in the middle of the round courtyard.

Don't let them drown you in the thought of drowning. You'll freeze to death before you drown. You should confess to everything and release yourself from this unnecessary suffering. Whoever their source is has already given them whatever they need to know. What are you trying to prove? I am not trying to prove anything. I can't risk falling into a trap. If they know everything, why do they bother with this charade? Do you really buy this crap that he wants to save you from yourself? Why? If he knows everything, what difference does it make to him whether you confess?

I saw a line of prisoners walking through the courtyard. "Take him, too." I heard the voice of my interrogator. "Do you want to take a shower?" a guard asked me. I was still thinking about the pool and believed that taking a shower was a poor metaphor for pushing my head under that icy water. "No," I said, "I'd rather stay dry and go back inside."

"And then go complain that we call you filthy untouchables." He pushed me toward the end of the line.

We walked into a large warehouse space with ten or twelve shower stalls. There I realized that I had taken a shower only once since I was arrested, two months ago, for exactly three minutes with Evin's glacial water. Standing under that water was not humanly possible for more than three minutes anyway. I just hoped that the water here would not cause my heart to race as fast as it did in Evin.

They gave each of us a big bag to put our clothes in. Only once inside the shower stalls were we allowed to take our blindfolds off.

The water was cold and the cold air from the outside blew on my head from the broken windows near the tall ceiling.

“You have ten minutes,” a guard shouted so we could set our mental timers.

“Brother,” someone shouted, reminding me of the absurdity of our relationship with our jailers, “the water is really cold.”

“Shut up! No talking in the shower. If I hear one more word from anyone, the shower is over.”

But that prisoner’s voice was unmistakably Touraj’s. This was the third time our paths had crossed in captivity. First, I’d seen him at the secret prison I was taken to the day I was arrested. He had been arrested a day earlier. The second time, I’d ended up in the same cell with him at Evin right before my first round of interrogation. And now, he was right across from me in another shower stall. I had known Touraj since my first year of college, a hardheaded revolutionary with little patience for the intricacies of the conceptual world. Although we were good friends, we’d never ended up on the same side of theoretical arguments and political strategies. But those differences now were pale as his voice helped me to find a sense of continuity and cohesion in my soul.

“The water is cold,” I said in an attempt to signal that I was there, too. But my voice lacked the high-pitched distinction that made his so recognizable.

They turned off the cold water. In a few seconds, boiling-hot water blasted out of the showerheads. In fear of blisters, we all jumped out of our stalls. The naked prisoners and the nervous guards mingled for a few chaotic seconds in the thick steam.

“Go back in, go back in,” the guards screamed.

I ran toward Touraj and held his hand for just a second. He continued to rant about hot and cold water.

THE SAFE HOUSE

It was three months earlier in early fall of 1981 when I heard Touraj's voice in that makeshift jail. "Pull your blindfold a bit higher," he whispered loudly. "You can peek from underneath." I had just been arrested and was sitting blindfolded on the hard floor of the basement of an old building with an oppressive stench of mold and sweat. I pulled my blindfold a bit higher and saw him on the other side of the crowded room. "It seems like there is no one left to be arrested," he said.

Since the early summer of 1981, the new government had responded to the wave of assassinations of its high-ranking officials with mass executions. Safe houses had become a misnomer. Two or three young people without roots in a neighborhood, living in small dwellings, invited too much attention. In ordinary times, when the names of those assassinated and those executed did not pile up on the pages of the newspapers, the safe houses were often mistaken for houses of debauchery. Migrant laborers were the only transient residents of Tehran's working-class neighborhoods. We raised

suspicious because none of us resembled migrant workers. To make matters worse, in some cases, young women comrades frequented these houses, which added to the neighbors' suspicions. In their minds, how could women visiting young men in the middle of the night not be prostitutes? The dignity of the neighborhood was at stake. It had to be defended against the wickedness of youthful sinners.

One of our safe houses was a small studio rented by two comrades in the neighborhood near the city's main slaughterhouse. I used to visit them every Monday around ten at night for our weekly meeting. I dreaded these meetings, not only for the anxiety they evoked, but also for the unbearable reek of cows' guts and congealed blood that permeated the neighborhood. Mohammad worked at a cement factory and Mehdi's mission was to infiltrate the neighborhood and look for likely recruits for when the time came. In their presence, to avoid incriminating myself as being yet another young intellectual distant from the everyday lives of the downtrodden, I forced myself to ignore the splitting headache brought on by the repellent odor.

In the meetings, I discussed the positions of our group, *Razmandegan*, answered their questions about strategy, listened to their suggestions, and, most importantly, discussed theoretical texts from Marxist-Leninist literature. We often stayed up till two or two-thirty in the morning, rested for a short while and then rose with Mohammad, who needed to be at work at six a.m. My Tuesday meetings began at ten in the morning, which gave me enough time to take a bus to my favorite teahouse on the second floor of a blacksmith shop near Revolution Square. I would order a loaf of steaming fresh bread with butter and cheese, and watch how the proletariat sipped their tea, saturated with sugar, while trying to

soften the giant ball of bread crammed into one side of their cheeks. I watched them emptying their tiny teacups, leaving thick rims of sugar. I found tea with that much sugar disgusting, but I could hear Mohammad saying, “Load a truck with bricks and then tell me you like your tea unsweetened.”

One late spring evening, a few weeks before the beginning of mass arrests and executions, I arrived at their safe house a little early. The Central Committee had made some crucial decisions and I wanted to make sure that I had enough time to clarify our new strategies. Around midnight, the door was pushed open and two young men broke in. “We know what you’ve been up to,” one of them whispered loudly. Before he finished his sentence, Mohammad had shoved all the papers under the bedding. “Who said you could barge in like that?” he stood up to block their view. “Don’t worry,” the second one put his hand on Mohammad’s shoulder. “We won’t report you.” “Go report to anyone you want and we’ll see which one of us they’re going to believe,” Mohammad retorted. He could not hide his panic.

“We are not going to report anyone,” the first one said, “we just want to play, too.” He pulled a fresh deck of cards out of his back pocket and the other waved a few worn-out bills in the air to make sure that we understood they meant business. “You should be ashamed of yourselves,” Mohammad said, pushing them back toward the door. “You gamblers! Shame on you!” He shut the door. He was too aggressive, I thought.

We lost that house as we did so many others. The summer began with bloody demonstrations and killings that would continue for an entire year. But now, in the eyes of the neighborhoods and the security forces, two or three single young men who shared

a room were not seeking the delights of the flesh but the bliss of another assassination.

The time had come for me to return to my family home. My parents had just rented a new apartment after my siblings and I insisted that they had to move out of our old place without leaving a trace of where they were moving to. The university had the address of the old house and I was easily traceable. But the new place was on no one's map. A new safe house.

My parents' new apartment was on the first floor of a two-and-a-half story building located between Revolution Square and Tulip Park. Formerly named Queen Farah Park after the Shah's wife, the park's name had been changed to Tulip, the symbol of revolution. It was not the best location by any security consideration. But location was my secondary concern, since I planned to stay indoors and limit my contacts. I knew that the revolutionary guards, aided by hundreds of fervent pro-government students, were ceaselessly patrolling the streets, snatching student activists. I stood no chance of breathing the outside air.

I needed a place to complete my third monograph of the last two years. The first one was on the student movements and the necessity for their independence from party politics; it became the rough blueprint for a new student group, *The Organization of Militant Students*. The second, to which I gave the generic title of *Marxian Conception of Theory and Praxis*, was a critical examination of the Left's anti-intellectualism and the failure to connect its abstract ideals to the concrete realities of the Iranian society. I had heard from different sources that it actually generated serious questions among the leadership of many Marxist groups. My latest work, which I was eager to finish, sketched out pragmatic issues of "agitation" and "propaganda." I had already written more than a hundred

pages, and had stacks of index cards with quotations from various Leftist sources, but desperately needed a place to spread them out and make sense of them.

While my return home comforted my parents, my work on these subversive texts terrified them. They hid their disapproval tactfully, fearing that an overt protest might drive me back onto the streets to wander from one “safe” house to another. The best feature of the new apartment was a large, dry basement with white tile walls. It just needed some bleach and fresh air to turn it into an agreeable office. With a nice rug, a desk, and some bookshelves, I could easily work there for months. My mother took charge of the whole family and transformed the basement into my working quarters. We all labored with rags and bleach except my father, whose subscription to the separation of male authority from household chores did not expire until the end of his life.

The war with Iraq gave us the best disguise for the work we did in the basement. Since it had begun more than a year ago, the Iraqis had found ways to bomb Tehran with planes and missiles. Our basement now was the building’s bomb shelter. Whenever the sirens warned of an oncoming attack, we saw through the frosted glass door to our apartment the silhouettes of the Yadegars, the Assyrian family who lived on the second floor, and the old bachelor Mr. Akhavan from the third floor. “We might end up spending long hours down there,” my mother told them. “I thought it would be nice to make the basement homier.” The Yadegars even offered to help out with the cleaning. That forced me to keep my working space orderly. I put my books in our old armoire, kept its doors locked, and stored the index cards and other writing materials in shoeboxes beneath it.

I had met my first Yadegar, their younger daughter, three months earlier. I had been helping my mother carry her favorite potted plants, red and pink geraniums, from the old place in Salsabil, to the new one, just north of the Revolution Square. Mother forgot the key and rang the second-floor bell. The girl opened the window and said hello loudly and cheerfully. She had a pale but attractive face. "I'll be down in a second," she called out. She had already met my mother.

"Hi, I'm Odette," she smiled at me, her white face seeming noticeably pinker, and her glossy red lipstick competing with the color of the geraniums. The mystery of this magical transformation, which took place while running down a flight of stairs and passing through a beautification gate, would never be revealed to me. I felt awkward and acted clumsily. I had been a part of clandestine political environments that made even a formal introduction a matter for caution. I needed to overcome that quickly before the neighbors suspected the political roots of my social ineptitude.

"Very nice meeting you," I said, forgetting to mention my own name. "Sorry for the trouble," I added, and focused on the geraniums.

Throughout the summer, Odette managed to maintain the contrast between her own pink cheerfulness and her older sister's spiritless gaze. After each warning of a pending attack, my race to hide my documents in the basement became as instinctive as Odette's rush to beautify herself before running downstairs.

Mr. Akhavan, from the third floor, had a long pockmarked face, a floppy nose that looked more like a trunk, spotty yellow teeth, and beady eyes with sparse eyelashes. He was a retiree (of what, nobody knew), in his late fifties and was one of the ugliest men I had ever seen up close. Rumor had it that he was now a street vendor

or possibly even a beggar who exploited people's sympathy for his disfigured right arm. The midnight raids brought our three families closer. We sat in the basement in flickering candlelight and listened to Mr. Akhavan's grievances. Dying was not his greatest fear in life, he reminded us on every occasion, but to die without leaving an heir. "The moment I know that a son will continue my legacy, at that moment I shall shake the hands of the Angel of Death and say good-bye to this world." Then, he would invariably burst into tears and confide in a trembling voice, "But alas, my dear ones, *there is no fire in my oven*. How could I have a child?" The sound of explosions, at times close enough to shake our shelter, gave the matter of legacy a sense of urgency.

I had my own legacy to worry about. The monograph appeared less and less appealing to me. I did not know where to take it, what it was good for, and who was going to read it. Would anybody be left after this latest onslaught was over? Never had I felt so irrelevant. It chewed away at me bit by bit and made my body ache. A throbbing pain, in my joints, in my stomach, and in my head reminded me of my fate, which seemed to oscillate between oblivion and execution.

Mrs. Yadegar, a former nurse, noticed that I often walked with my hand pressing against the lower right side of my belly.

"Does it hurt there?" she finally asked me one day.

I shrugged. "No, just an old habit."

I had no other symptoms, just a mysterious pain everywhere in my body that intensified with the mounting numbers of arrests and executions. Soon I abandoned the monograph and felt increasingly claustrophobic and restless. I found Mr. Akhavan's openness about his impotence less and less amusing. I lost all interest in the Yadegar sisters' giggles.

In a few months, everybody in the building stopped paying attention to the sirens. Midnight strikes turned into spectacles worth watching rather than raids that killed. Mr. Akhavan spread an old rug on the rooftop, set up a couple of folding chairs, and insisted that we join him up there to watch the sparkling lights of anti-aircraft fire.

I developed a fever, which made the psychosomatic explanation of my pain less plausible. Mrs. Yadegar planted the possibility of appendicitis in my mother's head and she insisted that I needed to see a doctor.

"We'll take you right from the front door to the doctor's office and back," my mother promised. "Nobody is going to see you."

My face could be easily spotted. I had spoken at many rallies, negotiated with opposition groups, traveled across the country giving talks and leading discussions. I was not paranoid. I was an easy prey.

My cousin Amir, at my mother's insistence, came by on an early fall day, driving his blue VW Bug. He promised me that he would take me to a relative, a surgeon, who worked at a hospital a half-hour away. He would drop me in front of the entrance, park the car, and meet me inside.

"There is zero risk involved," he assured me.

Seeing the streets added to my pain. From inside of my bunker, I imagined a changed world. I thought that the scars of the mass killings, the war, the assassinations, the executions, would be visible on the face of the city. But things looked normal. People waited for cabs, stood on bus lines, walked and chatted; street vendors looked for customers. I wished I had seen an expression of despair on people's faces. Amir was telling me something about his relative's credentials, but I could not hear.

The revolution was over.

I went inside the hospital and waited for Amir to park. There were scores of revolutionary guards inside the hospital checking bags and quizzing patients. I suddenly realized that one of the last safe places for rendezvous had been exposed. With the increasing state surveillance, we met our contacts in emergency room lobbies. We could sit and talk quietly without raising suspicions. Amir noticed the guards as he walked in nervously. He took hold of my arm and I leaned on him in order to appear sicker. He asked the receptionist for Dr. Mofid.

“He is not in today,” she smiled. “Did you have an appointment?”

Before Amir could suggest that we wait and see another doctor, I told him I wanted to go home.

“He said he’ll be here,” Amir tried to explain. But I couldn’t risk hanging around in the waiting room to be seen later by an emergency doctor.

“That’s fine, Amir, let’s go home.”

He ran outside to get the car. I liked my cousin tremendously and didn’t want to make him feel responsible if by any chance I was spotted by the police. We had grown up together and had always been good friends. Unfortunately, my outburst had troubled him. As soon as we were back in the car, Amir began apologizing *ad nauseam*.

As we approached the intersection of Farmers Boulevard and Workers Avenue, a place we used to call hammer and sickle junction, I felt the sudden urge to walk outside. Maybe fresh air was what I needed. We were just a few blocks from home. Amir made a left turn before Workers Avenue and stopped in the middle of the Boulevard at a red light.

“I need to walk,” I blurted out. I opened the door slightly to watch for cars coming from the other side.

“This is crazy!” Amir protested. “It’s the worst possible place for you to walk!”

I ignored him, peering at the traffic behind us. I spotted Massud Kavakebi, who was sitting in the front seat of the car right behind us. He had earned the reputation of being the most vicious instrument for silencing student groups on campus. He was an unlikely character to earn that distinction, as he was a latecomer to the revolutionary movement that toppled the old regime. During the Shah’s reign, neither was he a revolutionary nor a devout Muslim. After the revolution, he had become a fiery proponent of the Islamic regime and had risen rapidly in the ranks of the Islamic student association.

Amir was still talking and I had to make a decision before the light turned green. Had Kavakebi seen me too? Should I close the door and pretend nothing happened? Should I get out and walk nonchalantly across the street? Should I run? I got out of the car and walked slowly to the other side.

I had just stepped onto the sidewalk when I felt a tap and heard a voice saying, “Excuse me.” Glancing over my shoulder I saw a very young but well-built man smiling wryly. I knew that I had been found.

I ran.

“Stop!” he shouted, “Stop!”

I continued running, but felt like I wasn’t moving.

“I’ll shoot!”

I was still running, but the entire city block was moving with me.

“Stop!”

I knew I could not get far. Right before I reached Workers Avenue, two other guards appeared in front of me, already kneeling, with Uzi machine guns pressed against their cheeks.

“Stop!” they said, echoing the shouts behind me.

I did, and immediately felt the barrel of a pistol on the back of my head. “Hands up,” the man behind me ordered. He locked his fingers across my face, pushing on my jaw to keep my mouth open.

“Spit it out,” the two in front of me screamed. I was choking and could not respond. They had learned from the old regime’s security forces not to allow suspects to commit suicide by cracking open a cyanide capsule in their mouth while they were being arrested.

A crowd encircled us. They cuffed my hands behind me and pulled me by my collar back toward the car.

“Move, move,” the guards ordered, trying to disperse the onlookers.

Traffic had come to a halt. A patrol car had cut in front of Amir’s VW and I saw him being pushed face down onto the front of the car. People stood outside their cars and watched. Hundreds of spectators stood in silence.

I thought of Mr. Akhavan’s delight in the anti-aircraft fireworks.

“What’s going on?” I could hear Amir shouting. As we neared his car a guard blindfolded me. They operated like workers on an assembly line of mass arrest, so well-practiced and efficient. I had no intention of resisting. They pushed me inside the patrol car, stuffed me between the front and back seats, and lay a coarse blanket on top of me. Then they pushed Amir in from the other side.

“Are you OK?” he whispered.

Somebody smacked him to shut up.

His question reminded me of my fever. I pressed my head against his, and felt no pain.

FARHAD

They took me back to the interrogation room.

“How was the shower?” said Mr. Interrogator as he entered the room with a suffocating scent of rosewater.

“It was good,” I said. I wanted to tell him that it seemed like he had taken a rosewater shower, but did not have the guts.

“Listen, now you are clean and ready for a cleaner start. I have given you all the opportunities you could have asked for and so far you have shown no sign of appreciation. It seems to me that you don’t understand the gravity of your situation. People with much less serious charges . . .” He held himself back and did not finish his sentence. But the gesture was clear and I could easily complete his sentence for him: People with much less serious charges are executed.

“Arash is here, so is Ismael. They have told us everything we need to know. For the last time I am giving you an opportunity to come clean. I know that Kaveh organized the rallies and ran the operation for the distribution of your publications. I know that Iraji worked with the students, I know he reported to Arash. I know everyone’s real name, I know . . .”

I stopped listening.

“So, you know everything. What do you want from me? Why don’t you prepare a confession and I’ll sign it. Isn’t that what you want?”

“You think that we are just another bloodthirsty bunch of animals who take joy in others’ suffering? You look at your own deeds and tell me which one of us is the animal. How many people have your comrades killed in Kurdistan? How many have they assassinated? How many have they betrayed?”

“I know nothing about the war in Kurdistan, I have never defended armed struggle of any kind. So, you have your own war to fight. I have nothing to do with any of this.”

“I will give you one more day. Then our conversation is over.”

I do not know how many hours later they took me back to my cell. Late at night, I entered a room whose occupants had only seen me for a few hours in the past few days, only with their half-asleep eyes.

Farhad remained the only one who attempted to stay awake till I showed up. He was already tried and sentenced to death. But he never talked about it. “One should remain positive,” he repeated, putting “positive” in air quotes to make sure that I knew he had no hope. He really did not need the quotation marks. The sadness in his eyes was so profound it could not be concealed despite his efforts to be cheerful and carefree.

“Do you remember the guy in the hallway who constantly moaned of pain?” Farhad asked me. I did remember hearing it, but never paid any particular attention to it. “Do you know who he was? His name was Arzhang, a law student who was very instrumental in mobilizing workers during the revolution. Have you heard of

him?” The dark thought of Farhad being a snitch pained me. I did not want to go through another interrogation in my own cell.

They know your connection with Arzhang. But that was a long time ago. I haven't even seen him since the closing of the universities. But they are on to you. They're trying to tell you that they've dug out information about you from way back. Call it chess, call it whatever you wish, you've lost. Accept it. But this might just be a coincidence that Arzhang ended up lying right outside my cell door. You still believe in coincidences?

“No, I don't know who Arzhang is.”

“He was in a terrible condition. We could smell his wounds from here. Anyway, it doesn't matter, I thought you might have known him.”

Now I was curious. “So, whatever happened to him?”

“He was executed last night.”

ARZHANG

I had actually noticed him, without knowing who he was. He was lying on the floor of the corridor outside our cell, moaning, involuntarily it seemed. When the stench dissipated and the moaning stopped, one could only conclude the inevitable. I showed not a speck of emotion when Farhad told me that the soul outside our cell was Arzhang and that he was no more. I felt an overpowering shame after I told Farhad that I didn't know him.

I met Arzhang toward the end of the tumultuous fall of 1978.

For weeks, fliers and pamphlets had covered the cold sidewalks in front of Tehran University. Garbagemen had given up collecting the piles of papers documenting frictions among student groups. The front gate of the university had always been the most intense scene of the revolutionary struggle: soldiers enforcing martial law against the most intrepid students; students of different political persuasions, oblivious to the soldiers' presence, competing to shape the leadership of the revolution; students

of the Left fighting amongst themselves over the authenticity of their own brand of Marxism; passersby taking sides; more pamphlets strewn over the sidewalk, and skirmishes breaking out between Muslims and Marxists. All the universities around the country had been kept open as arenas of struggle, but no classes were being held, no lectures given, no degrees issued. Academic life had ceased.

Since school opened in the fall, I had been struggling to figure out the role students should assume in advancing the revolutionary cause. Long meetings on campus had already proved worthless in generating consensus among the different factions. The Muslim students saw no reason to create a particular student-centered movement—they simply followed their leader, who was already in power. Leftist students, influential on university campuses, were determined to translate that influence into a meaningful presence in the revolution. Some of them believed that universities had to remain at the center of political struggle; others, myself included, hoped to use the campus as a platform toward launching a *proletarian* uprising.

One thing, however, was clear: *Everyone* believed that attending classes or yielding to a return of normalcy in campus life would be tantamount to betraying the revolution. That is, *almost* everyone believed this. A newly established group called “Independent Students” was boycotting all the meetings, declaring that they cared simply about a quality education and respected only the true mission of the university. They announced that they were “proudly apolitical” and intended to give priority to their education inside the classroom, rather than “nonsensical claims about the educational value of marching on the streets.”

Independent Students had good reason to be skeptical of these meetings and debates. Earlier that year, after one of those meetings to decide whether to boycott classes, a poster had been put up outside the administration building enumerating ten reasons why classes should be boycotted. The only problem was that in the meeting students had failed to reach an agreement on any of those points. Decisions, it became apparent, were always made outside these supposedly democratic gatherings. After the meeting, I approached Anna, Edna (even their names betrayed their *westoxicated* upbringing) and Fakhri, the three leaders of the Independents. I encouraged them to participate in the process. As we stood in front of the steamy student-run teahouse outside the Textile Engineering building, Fakhri told me that they saw no reason to do so.

“Your poster resolved this issue, these meetings are irrelevant. You only hold them to legitimize decisions that are already made.”

Fakhri was the mastermind of the Independent Students. Last year, a number of my own comrades threw raw eggs and rotten tomatoes at her for dressing “provocatively” and wearing heavy makeup. They accused her of spreading western decadence on campus. She remained undeterred and continued to wear heavy makeup and high-heeled shoes, dressing however she pleased. Talking to her was not painless, for one easily felt crushed by her harsh words.

“Can you deliver a message for me?” she asked me, pulling me by the arm closer to her plump body, making me feel smaller and less significant. “Tell your boss,” she said without a hint of irony, “that we will attend your stinky meetings if three conditions are met. One, if you take a shower beforehand. Two, if you don’t have raw onion with your lunch before the meeting. We need to be able to breathe, you know. Three, if you write the resolution *after* and

not *before* the meeting.” By the way she screamed “after,” I knew that the Independents would never show up at our meetings.

Fakhri would soon become a successful and wealthy engineer. But, as fate would have it, she was electrocuted twenty years later in her bathtub, apparently due to faulty wiring in the newly built mansion she had designed herself.

Although classes were cancelled, no one knew how we were supposed to translate that into an opportunity to lead the revolution. My attempt to draw an analogy between our present situation and the Chinese students’ movement of May 4th, 1919, got traction only in a very small student circle. I insisted that students could shape the events only by uniting with industrial workers. But so far, everyone appeared to be content with advancing the fight right up to and around the university’s gates, not beyond them.

In those days, I had inexhaustible energy. I would leave home around 6:30 in the morning to meet up with my trusted comrades to plan the day. It was becoming increasingly difficult to do so, however, since we needed to have a clear sense of the soldiers’ movements throughout the city, the number of casualties from the previous day, and other groups’ plans before making a decision about the day’s action. The fall had been exceptionally cold and colorful, and we would often begin the day by opening our Textile Engineering teahouse—a good excuse for being on campus so early in the morning. There we’d disappear behind the sweaty windows of the teahouse to huddle around the table over a freshly brewed cup of tea and a thick fog of cigarette smoke. Afterward, we’d emerge with more or less the same plan: distributing flyers among high school students calling upon them

to join the crowds on the streets. Since we'd made good contacts with a number of high school students, we could now rely on them to organize small demonstrations in front of their respective schools. This strategy had been quite successful in wearing down the already exhausted troops and disrupting their routine of enforcing martial law. Before noon, we'd all congregate around Tehran University to exchange news and think up new plans.

One day, as we were doing so, something different happened.

"You're a bunch of *sissies*," I heard a man shouting in the midst of the crowd. "The *real* men are fighting on factory floors."

He climbed up the fence separating the campus from the street and held onto the green iron bars.

"The true leaders of this revolution are the workers who labor day and night to build this country!" He was pushing his hoarse voice to its limits. "You need the workers more than the workers need you!" he added, raising his fist for added emphasis, his look of determination accentuating the premature wrinkles on his face.

"Today you need to make a decision!"

His tanned skin and high forehead somehow made his rough appearance more sympathetic. Before him, no one had been able to quiet the crowd and force this mass of revolution enthusiasts to listen to a lone voice.

"Why do you waste your revolutionary zeal in front of an institution whose only purpose is to perpetuate capitalism?" he shouted. "I know why," he went on, waving his thick index finger in the air. "Do you want to know?" he asked, taunting his captive audience.

His big eyes became wider, seemingly too big for his narrow face as he tried to zoom in on single individuals in that crowd of hundreds. He began his sermon.

“You need to have the courage to change yourselves before changing the world. I speak to you on behalf of my fellow toilers who clean up your mess on the streets after you go back to your bourgeois homes.” His voice cracked. “The same toilers who make your lives possible, your privileges possible, your intellectual bullshitting possible.”

He pulled out a large handkerchief from his pants pocket, wiped the sweat off his forehead and unshaven cheeks, and blew his small nose loudly to make it clear that he cared little for university etiquette.

“*Purify* your ranks,” he concluded, “by joining the struggles of the working class!”

I had been saying the same thing for months to no avail. This muscular man was saying nothing new, yet the fact that he could carry on for that long lecturing the lecturers amazed every single person there. He was a *worker* who spoke about the ills of capitalism and proletarian consciousness! He needed to be taken seriously!

I had to find a way to speak to him in a quiet place and let him know that there were others like me who genuinely believed in what he was saying. If this man was not a secret police agent, he might be the thread that could finally bind our movement to labor strikes. A flock of curious students was surrounding him, making it impossible for me to approach him. A few chided him for his arrogance; others, trying to fathom where he was coming from, asked about his credentials.

After a few minutes the burly man climbed the fence again.

“I don’t mean to disrespect anyone,” he began, as the students closest to him quieted the crowd. “We are all tired of empty gestures and feel that the time has come to join the proletariat in its struggle for freedom. Let’s all gather tomorrow at Tehran’s Cement Factory to join its workers in their fight for back pay and fair contracts.”

Someone handed him a tatty red flag that looked like something from an Eisenstein movie.

“At ten in the morning!” he concluded, waving the flag, then quickly disappeared into the crowd before I got a chance to talk to him.

By the time I showed up at 9:30 the next day, there were already hundreds of people congregated at the main entrance to the Cement Factory at the southern edge of Tehran on the way to the city of Ray. The workers inside seemed as puzzled as their supervisors while all waited outside chanting:

The workers' back pay must be paid!

The truth about capitalism must be said!

By ten o'clock the group had doubled in size, with still more arriving. I searched for my own comrades in the middle of the increasingly agitated crowd.

“We will wait for Ahmad,” said Arzhang, a student from Tehran University’s School of Law, as he assembled a small bullhorn he had brought.

“Who’s Ahmad?” I asked.

“Weren’t you there yesterday?” Arzhang snapped in his usual manner, asking a question instead of answering. It slowly became clear to me that Ahmad’s appearance in front of the university gate might not have been spontaneous. A few students already knew him or knew of him, and were referring to him as Ahmad *karegar*, Ahmad *the worker*.

The Muslim students had steered clear of this, remaining confident that the revolutionary movement was theirs—they did not need to claim it.

Ahmad appeared at the heart of the crowd. Once again he did his fence climbing and delivered a speech.

“We will not leave,” he concluded, “till every worker is paid his rightful earnings.”

Ahmad led the indignant crowd of young men and women toward the main entrance. The chain holding the rusting iron gate locked was a poor match against our boisterous strength. The gate burst open and before we stepped inside the plant, a shower of flyers and pamphlets was covering the ground.

Down with US Imperialism!

The Tudeh Party of Iranian Workers

Down with Soviet and US Imperialism!

The Party of Iranian Toilers

Long Live the Armed Struggle!

The Guerrilla Fedayeen of the Iranian People

Long Live the Proletarian Revolution!

The Party of Vanguard Revolutionaries

The workers stood still trying to comprehend what exactly was happening: a bunch of students had broken into the plant and were shouting about the end of capitalism, the doctrine of peaceful coexistence, the true nature of democratic revolution, proletarian dictatorship and democracy, the Soviet Union’s betrayal of Iranian communists, Maoism as the only feasible alternative for the Iranian left, the true meaning of the atrocities committed during Mao’s Cultural Revolution, Islam as a part of the superstructure and thus a form of false consciousness, and so on.

I managed to find Ahmad standing alone under a giant cement mill that was sitting idle in the feeble sun. I introduced myself. He was shaking his head in disbelief as he looked at the tall smokestack on his right. He did not make any eye contact with me.

“I successfully transplanted this hopeless crowd from the gates of Tehran University to the courtyard of the Tehran Cement Factory.”

By two in the afternoon, the rampant debate was still raging as the workers were going home, leaving students with nobody to defend. Ahmad disappeared. Evidently this was not an event that historians would be citing as the beginning of student-worker unity. It would soon be forgotten.

With his legalistic mind and argumentative demeanor, Arzhang was already planning a gathering to discuss what went wrong. Word of mouth had it that a group of students were going to get together to draw up some guidelines about how to behave on factory floors. It seemed we needed a framework to avoid the chaos that had left hundreds of pieces of paper strewn outside the Cement Factory, but there was no mention of the workers whose interests we intended to represent.

By six p.m., in the main auditorium of Tehran University’s Department of Economics, Arzhang was already strategizing with Ahmad. All three hundred seats of the auditorium were filled. Through his thick, dark glasses, Arzhang read a handful of paper strips, pausing after each one to either scratch his thin curly hair or play with his imposing moustache. He tried to hide his pale, plump hand from Ahmad, who looked like he wouldn’t lose the chance to humiliate students for their bourgeois attributes. In many ways Arzhang seemed the student version of Ahmad; both were small-built, one a bit chubby and round, the other hefty. Both were

aggressive in their discourse, one by inexhaustible logical arguments, the other by making all arguments irrelevant.

Ali, an economics student, opened the meeting, simply because it was taking place in his building. I took a front-row seat to avoid seeing the full ugliness of that damp, low-ceilinged lecture hall. The flickering fluorescent lights added to the oppressive feeling of that packed place as Ali started enumerating the problems with the day's events.

Ahmad showed no patience for his long-winded introduction and promptly interrupted.

"The problem is, you failed to leave your own interests at home. Nobody cares what party you belong to," he began. "You go to the factories to *learn* from the workers, not to teach them."

With each attack he launched against the students, one more cigarette of frustration was lit in the already smoke-filled hall. Arzhang lit his quietly and the smoke struggled through his dense moustache and away from his big nostrils. Ahmad continued his anti-intellectual rant and the students nodded their reluctant heads in approval. The crowd standing outside couldn't hear what was being said inside, but they could see from the number of people lined up to speak that, yet again, this meeting was nowhere near a resolution.

We made a decision, finally. My proposal that no flyers of any kind be distributed during these actions was approved. We also decided to form three committees to organize future events: *the search committee*, responsible for finding possible sites for worker-student action; *the logistics committee*, responsible for contacting workers and arranging a date for joint action; *the event committee*, responsible for planning the speeches making long-term contacts with workers in each plant.

We soon put the new arrangement to the test on a rainy day at Khavar Trucks, a Mercedes assembly plant in central Tehran. This had seemed a good opportunity because the plant was located inside the city and as a result we hoped to attract more support from people in the neighborhood. But contrary to what I expected, the plant turned out to be small and insignificant. There were no assembly lines and no sophisticated machinery on the floor. It was just a big warehouse with broken windows and a dozen or so workstations for assembling various pre-made parts of the trucks. A dozen or so lift trucks were parked inside covered with clear dusty tarps, clear evidence that they had been retired for some time. The leaky roof generously allowed the rain to drip onto the cracked, uneven cement floor. Everything appeared to be on the verge of collapse.

By that time, everybody knew that Arzhang was fervently attracted to his bullhorn. Every time I heard him, I would imagine him in a courtroom making a final argument before a jury.

“We understand,” he said, addressing the three hundred workers of Khavar, “that today your livelihood is threatened by your employers’ refusal to pay your rightful wages.” He paused. “But we also understand,” he said, raising his voice to deliver his message with full lungpower, “that the source of all this unhappiness is capitalist exploitation.”

*The Capitalists Build Mansions,
Laborers Lose Pensions!*

*Laborers Uniting,
Capitalists Hiding!*

Unity, Struggle, Victory!

The loudest voice was Arzhang's through the bullhorn. I signaled to him that I needed to say a few words, but my quiet signals had no chance of registering amid his ecstatic performance. Finally he started to lose his voice and was forced to cede the bullhorn to me.

Down with Capitalism!

Long Live Socialism!

The Workers United Will Never Be Defeated!

I tried to calm the crowd, believing that it was time to add substance to the slogans.

"My fellow workers," I began diffidently, "we need to recognize that we are not alone in this struggle."

My words failed to linger in the air and fell swiftly to the cement floor.

"What's been taken away from you," I added, my lips now glued to the bullhorn as I shouted from my gut, "is more than your wages, it's your dignity."

It was the first time I had ever spoken to a crowd of workers and I was trying hard to force my entire meager knowledge of capitalism into their unwilling ears. I attempted to be more forceful.

"The capitalists have the support of the police, the army, and the government. But they are no match against our bare hands when we hold them together in solidarity . . ." They were now clapping and whistling, ". . . when we clench our fists in protest!"

Arzhang lasted less than five minutes standing still under the makeshift podium away from his bullhorn. Then he began tugging at the bottom of my pants to make it clear that he needed to get back up on the stage.

“Our struggle is long and arduous,” I went on, as Arzhang kept pulling at my pants increasingly harder, seemingly deaf to my words. At this point, it was no longer clear to my audience which struggle I had in mind.

“We must not forget,” I continued to hold on to the bullhorn with one hand and my pants with the other, “that our aim is to liberate the whole of humanity.”

Arzhang was relentless. I lost a button and needed both hands to hold on to my pants and my dignity. Arzhang won.

“Workers don’t care for *the whole of humanity*,” Ahmad chastised me after I surrendered the bullhorn to Arzhang. “They need to feed their family,” he screamed. “An empty stomach does not do soul-searching.”

It seemed like nothing we did could satisfy Ahmad *karegar*. We were inherently bourgeois and that was that.

No one knew how to end the event. After hours of fiery speeches and listening to the workers’ grievances, even Arzhang was depleted and showed no interest in reclaiming the stage. I asked Ahmad what we should do.

“You started it,” he shrugged, “you finish it.” He started walking away but turned back after a few steps. “Don’t worry,” he said, sounding almost like he had forgiven us for our sinful student lives, “they’re going to leave after five o’clock anyway.” He was right. After five, only a handful of workers remained, for reasons that had nothing to do with the revolution and I preferred not to think about.

Our next project was the most ambitious so far. The news had spread that students had visited factories and were helping the workers to win their back pay. We had contacted workers from four different factories in the same industrial complex that belonged to Lajevardi brothers, a famous industrialist family. When we got

there early in the morning, the workers had already been waiting inside, in two orderly lines of more than two thousand people. Two workers opened the gate and invited us in.

The bread we have—is from your labor!

The home we live in—is from your labor!

The education we get—is from your labor!

The country we've built—is from your labor!

The cheerful workers were standing inside as we entered, marching between the two lines they had formed. They applauded and we chanted. I felt out of place. Although outside I was raucous, inside I felt distant and quiet. Rather than a revolutionary, I seemed to myself more like a bureaucrat from the social welfare office who was there to negotiate with management on behalf of the workers. When earlier I had imagined that someday we would join the workers' movement, this scene was not what I had in mind. I thought that we would be standing in lines and applauding *them* for keeping the flame of the revolution alive. Our actions had instead made the workers dependent on us, which was not what we envisioned. This is not, I suspect, what Ahmad *le prolétaire* had in mind when he asked us to join the workers' struggle.

Hundreds of workers gathered in the main warehouse situated in the middle of the factory grounds. Arzhang made his pitch. This short young man with his animated homilies had gradually overshadowed Ahmad as the preferred speaker for these events. We got the news that one of the owners was in his office on the third floor of the main building. I collected three other students to go with the worker who was our contact there to the owner's office. "We just need to talk to Mr. Lajevardi," I said, in an attempt

to persuade the two bodyguards blocking our way that we meant no harm.

They didn't budge.

"We're here to help," I tried lamely.

"Get the fuck out of here!" said one of the guards, livid. He pushed me and the other three students aside. Anticipating their fury, our worker guide had stayed on the second floor. The other guard remained in front of the office door, letting us know with a ghastly smirk that only one of them could easily take out the four of us. Evidently our bony revolutionary bodies didn't stand a chance.

"You're making the situation worse," I tried again, hoping that Lajevardi could hear me. He did, and emerged from his office.

"You have no business being here," he told us, pushing past his guards.

"The workers are getting very edgy," one of my comrades said in an attempt to make him believe that we were nothing but neutral mediators. The shouts of "we want justice" from the hall helped to convey the gravity of the situation.

"I think," one of my comrades offered, to stoke Lajevardi's fear, "talking to the workers would help to calm the situation."

Without a word Lajevardi returned to his office with one of his guards. "Let's go," he said a few moments later, when he reappeared arranging his bright red tie.

We walked down the stairs and he followed behind, surrounded by his guards. He remained composed but his guards looked jittery, unsure of what to anticipate.

Arzhang was still delivering his indictment.

"The capitalists are leeches like this man," he said, increasing his volume as he pointed to Mr. Lajevardi. "They suck the blood of the workers, they suck the blood of the nation, they suck the blood

of our peasants, they suck the blood of our children by forcing them to work before they reach the age of twelve, they suck the blood of our mothers and fathers by denying them a life with dignity in their old age. We shall not have mercy. We shall not forgive them. We shall raze their palaces and hunt them in their safe havens.”

Not only was Arzhang’s fierce discourse rattling Lajevardi, it was puzzling the rest of us.

“This man is crazy,” Ahmad whispered to me, alarmed about the consequences of Arzhang’s inflammatory tirade. “He has no idea what these workers are thirsty for.”

Before Lajevardi reached the foreman’s deck where Arzhang had tried and convicted him, the workers had prepared a noose, calling for his hanging. “He needs to pay back with his life,” yelled one of them, swinging the rope before tossing it up around an iron beam. “We don’t care for money, we want blood!”

Ahmad pushed Arzhang aside.

“Brothers,” he implored, trying to dampen the frenzy Arzhang had produced. “We do not kill. We are not like them. We want what is just for ourselves *and* for others. Our adversary is a class, not a person.”

As always, the bullhorn had pushed Arzhang into a trance. He seemed unaware of the pending disaster he had created.

“You need to shut up,” Ahmad said, shoving him aside. “They’re going to kill the man!”

With the help of the bodyguards and a number of workers, we ended up escorting Lajevardi out of the factory. Outside, after he was rescued, Lajevardi sat sobbing in the back seat of his Mercedes.

Incidentally, the revolutionary prosecutor who would sign off Arzhang’s death sentence was named Lajevardi. But this one had

no relation with the man whom Arzhang inadvertently called for his hanging on the factory floor.

After the incident at the factory, Ahmad lost hope in the ability of his bourgeois comrades and no longer showed up at any other event. He went on to found a workers' revolutionary party, and would be executed three years later by the orders of the same prosecutor.

I remained confident that despite our mishaps, we were on the right path. We just needed to learn patience. We could not convert the workers into revolutionary operatives based on just one event. We had to overcome our temptation for speedy results.

My resolve was tested again in our next action at the General Electric plant, fifteen kilometers west of Tehran. We learned that the workers had not been paid for over four months. With more than five thousand workers and a recognizable name, the plant would be the ideal place to make our cause known. If unity between the student and labor movements was to happen, this would surely be its defining moment.

We arrived around noon and waited for the other students to join in before we approached the factory gates, which were guarded by armed soldiers. As soon as we reached a critical mass of four hundred to five hundred people, we marched toward the entrance. The weary soldiers did not even bother to give us a warning or to engage us in any way. The workers opened the gate from the inside while the soldiers leaned on their guns nonchalantly. The workers did their ritual applauding while the students waved their fists in the air:

Workers, Workers, Your Labor Gives Us Life!

Workers, Workers, You Feed the Nation!

I soon realized that this time we had entered an arena that might require much more organization than we were prepared for. The workers were all determined to stay until their dispute was resolved. Our earlier actions were designed for a one-day rally, but this time, the workers had planned a sit-in until their demands were met. The temperature on that cold winter day remained below freezing and the factory floor felt more frigid than the outside air, because the plant's power was cut off. We needed food and blankets. And, more importantly, we need to figure out how to sustain the interest of thousands of workers for days before they dwindled in number. A committee of seven, four students and three workers, was formed to plan the activities for each day.

The news of the General Electric sit-in spread rapidly. At the end of the second day, we received messages of support from the striking oil workers in the south, as well as workers at the Tehran refinery, and the Society of Militant Clergy, the main organization of the clerical leadership of the revolution. The latter not only sent messages, but more crucially, blankets and food. We were concerned, because all our furious rhetoric against capitalism did not stand a chance of attracting the workers compared to the hot meals the clerics promised to supply. We feared that the workers would appreciate the clergy's tangible contribution much more than our promises of golden socialism.

The highlight of the third day was the performance of Brecht's play *Die Mutter*, which he based on Gorky's novel *The Mother*. Students from the School of Drama had recently performed the play and were ready to stage it on a short notice. The large cast of characters, its radical message, its story of strikes and sacrifices, I hoped, would show to the workers that

their struggle was significant and had repercussions beyond the walls of an industrial plant on the outskirts of Tehran. I wanted them to see the optimism and the humor with which Brecht delivered his revolutionary message, how in the course of the play, he transforms grievances of hunger and misery into a pungent indictment of capitalism. The workers thoroughly enjoyed the play, applauding and whistling after each passionate monologue, particularly if a woman delivered it.

“How was the play?” I asked a young worker at the end.

“Are all those girls married?” he replied.

Truckloads of hot meals kept coming, courtesy of the Society of Militant Clergy.

We planned the fourth day around a performance of revolutionary songs by the choir of the Technical University of Aryamehr. The workers asked for popular songs, and the choir delivered. The girls remained the most popular vanguard revolutionaries. Our consciousness-raising took a different direction, but we managed to sustain the rally and maintain a respectable degree of enthusiasm.

On the fifth day, the clergy sent a representative to deliver a message.

“A mullah is here,” announced Mohammad, a student from my own campus who was perhaps the most devoted among us to the labor movement, as he approached me in a panic.

“We must not allow this to happen,” he added, his distress causing him to stutter. “We’ve worked hard for this, now they’re coming to brand their own name on it.”

Even when Mohammad was excited he spoke so softly that I needed to concentrate to hear him. He was precisely the kind of student Ahmad *karegar* was searching for, someone patient who

takes workers' interests seriously for their own sake, not merely as a means to generate solidarity or to emancipate humanity. But he could never fill the role of students such as Arzhang. His slender physique, tall and wobbly, blue eyes, scanty moustache and unkempt light brown hair, *all* his attributes denied him the stage presence of an authoritative leader. If you wanted to lead, you had to be decisive, rough-looking, dismissive of others, and a smoker. Mohammad was none of the above.

"God bless you, brother," the cheerful young cleric said, extending his hand toward me and later toward Mohammad. "We want to support the workers and show our warm appreciation for what you have been doing here."

His black turban seemed too large for his head and his long black garb made him look taller than his actual height.

"May I address the workers?" he asked, caressing his beard with his left hand, while holding on to Mohammad's hand.

"I will come back to you . . ." said Mohammad, trying to buy time, ". . . soon, after talking to my friends."

Our seven-member planning committee held an emergency session. "There is no harm," we concluded, "in allowing him to speak."

"Please keep it short," Mohammad asked the young cleric. "How should I introduce you?"

"Ali Khamenei," he murmured.

"We only have one condition," I cautioned Mr. Khamenei. "Do not create divisions, don't try to turn them against us, do not bring religion into this. We are here to support the workers, not to fight over our differences."

"If I Remain Silent'," Khamenei began, prefacing his address with a poem by Hamid Mosaddeq, a contemporary poet:

*Ay!
All this silence,
With you, now,
All that forgetfulness.
Who wants,
You and me,
Not to become “us”?
His home, I wish, destroyed.
If I fail to become “we,”
I will remain in solitude,
If you fail,
You will remain lost.
If I do not rise,
If you do not rise,
Who will?
If I rise,
If you do,
We all will.*

The workers rose and cheered. Khamenei raised his fist and called for unity. The roaring sound of five thousand voices shook the building: *Unity, Struggle, Victory!* As he stepped out, more food arrived.

Khamenei would become the President of the new republic and ten years later, in 1989, its Supreme Leader.

The news comes that in Tehran people have taken up arms and are taking over all the government buildings, including the state radio and television. They are storming the prisons and letting the political prisoners out along with thieves and murderers. Dark smoke is

rising in different parts of the city. We gather outside along the road to Tehran and listen to a portable radio.

“Citizens of Tehran,” the announcer reads the Military Governor’s latest declaration, “a curfew will be enforced from four o’clock this afternoon.”

It is already past four p.m.

“In order to protect your lives and property, our brave troops are under strict orders to shoot without consideration subversive elements who defy this directive.” The radio played military marches and repeated the declaration. The workers at the General Electric plant were still demanding their back pay. News came that gun battles had erupted throughout the city. We could see the smoke of burning buildings from miles away.

The planning committee could not agree on a plan. Mohammad insisted that we had to stay there with the workers.

“The revolution will triumph,” he pleaded, “with or without us. No matter who rules the country, these workers will demand the same things.”

I was sympathetic to Mohammad, but could not ignore the bloodshed in the city. “We need to be there,” I said. “What will we say when people later ask where were we during the uprising? What prison doors did we break? What military base did we conquer? What government building did we take over?”

Mohammad realized that he could not win this quarrel. He remained, while the rest of us headed back to the city to rejoice in the final triumph of the revolution.

Mohammad would be executed three years later.

Around the same time, Arzhang would die of torture wounds outside my cell and I could not acknowledge his passing.

THINGS FALL APART

I could not afford to think of Farhad as a snitch. Not that I was that close to him, but he was all I had left of my shrinking world outside the interrogation chamber.

After several days of sleeplessness, I could not fall asleep. I did not know whether it was fear, anxiety, exhaustion, pain, dysfunctional electrolytes, or any other physiological or psychological reasons that did not allow me to rest. I did not care; I just wanted to sleep. I felt my brain was shrinking like a drying prune.

The door opened not long after I was back in the cell. They did not need to say anything anymore. I knew that when the door opened, I needed to jump up and get ready to go. Now, I didn't need the guard's assistance to walk out of the cell block. I stepped out but before I could begin walking downstairs, the guard held me back.

"Did you get some sleep?" I heard my interrogator ask. What was he doing on my turf?

"No, of course not! Isn't that the whole point?"

"You talk too much when you shouldn't and you don't when you must. I just wanted to remind you that we have a deadline

today. You need to make a decision. Don't let me make that decision for you."

I was tired of his ultimatums. I thought he was overplaying his hand. But still I could not fathom what his strategy was. He knew so many things, so many people from the organization, so much about my work. Yet, he insisted that I should confess to things he already knew.

Maybe he really wants to save you?

But why? He couldn't care less about me.

Maybe you're mistaken about what these people are all about.

I think you're going mad. I don't have any misgivings about who these people are. They are a bunch of murderers. Haven't you seen them in Evin?

But how do you know they are all the same? Maybe they're not.

I don't want to hear this.

"I also wanted to tell you that we know Ismael is your brother."

His self-righteous voice reverberated in the air. Every organ in my body was trembling. My knees gave in and I slid down with my back to the wall behind me.

The guard kicked me as hard as he could. "Get up, you cowardly dog."

"Let him be," the interrogator told the guard calmly. Then he sat next to me for a few second and began his sermon again. "You see how hard my job is. I feel exactly the same kind of anger that this brother has toward you. We want to push the revolution forward. We have much bigger responsibilities than dealing with a fistful of counter-revolutionaries. We have goals that are sacred.

And we certainly know that sooner or later we will achieve them. Every single day that this brother spends standing here guarding you and your comrades, his anger grows deeper and his resentment expands wider. And you sit here in comfort and think that you have duped us. You despise us and think that you are smarter than every single hardworking person here. You think that the gods of history are on your side. I know you. I know how weak and despicable you are. I can just walk away right now and let my brothers here show you what the punishment for deception is.”

“I am not deceiving anybody.”

“So, then tell us. Where is your brother?”

At some time after midnight and before sunrise, after many unknown days and nights of interrogation, I could not think of a lie. I could not think.

Tell them. They will find out one way or another. Tell them.

But he is my brother.

What difference does that make? Everyone is someone's brother, sister, whatever. Tell them.

“I know, but I won't tell you. Now, you can't tell me that I am deceiving you. Isn't that what you believe is the truth? That I know but I won't say? OK. You win, I know and I will not say. Didn't you say that you don't torture people here? You just punish them for lying? Now, I am telling you the truth. I know and I will keep it to myself.”

“You think you're cute.” He left me alone with the guard.

I went back to my cell this time, after perhaps two days. My cellmates huddled on the floor around a small *sofreh*, on which they shared their dinner. Farhad was absent. I had no interest in chatting. As if

knowing that my eyes were searching for Farhad, Colonel Sayrafi looked directly at me and said, “Farhad was executed last night.” He dipped a big piece of bread in his watery soup and shoved it in his mouth. “He knew and was ready,” the Colonel carried on with his mouth full.

“Let the poor man sit for a second,” Darvish snapped at him. I walked to my corner without saying a word. “You should eat,” Sayrafi said, ignoring Darvish. “You don’t want to die of starvation. If they kill us, they kill us. That’s my philosophy.”

“At least we know that your years of military service have not been wasted. They made a philosopher out of you.” Darvish was the only one who could say whatever he wished. “If instead of philosophical wisdom, you had some balls, maybe we would have been in a better place now.”

“I’ve been very respectful,” the Colonel shouted back, “but you’re making it harder for me every day. What do you want from me?”

Others sat quietly while the two exchanged a couple more rounds of insults. Later, I would learn that the source of Darvish’s animosity toward Sayrafi was the fact that the latter was responsible for turning the former’s brother in. The Colonel was one of the leaders of a botched coup attempt. He was apparently responsible for singing like a nightingale, as my interrogator would say, and giving names of every single soul who had participated in planning of the failed coup. Although Darvish served as an economic advisor to the first president of the republic, his brother’s arrest cast suspicion on him, and ended his political career and cost him his freedom. So, the exchange that night had nothing to do with me or Farhad.

The interrogation routine continued early next morning. The others went for their predawn bathroom visit, and I was blindfolded

and led down the staircase. I could no longer remember what the questions were, and still worse, what answers I had given.

My migraine came back.

Keeping track of time became harder with each day. I was convinced that if I gave up knowing what day or what time it was, I would lose my sanity. Now that they had decided to move me around various interrogation chambers, I had already lost the sense of continuity from that chair with the carving *this too shall pass*. I knew they would have changed my cell every day if they could have.

“So, let’s find some common ground,” the interrogator insisted. “I will show you a nice photo album and you just write under each picture whether you recognize them, and add if you know any of their pseudonyms. That should be simple.”

He left a bulky book of pictures on the chair. As usual, he disappeared.

I did not open the book. Instead, I began to pace the room, trying to focus on something else. My mind went back to my university days, and I remembered when Cyrus and I had organized certain musical events on the campus. Everybody thought we were crazy to ask a bunch of students to sit in a room and listen to classical music. *How odd, that Cyrus was a fan of Sibelius. This child of Langeroud was mesmerized by the polar music of the Finnish composer.*

He claimed that the connection was nature: the trees, and springs, the mountains, the sea. So what difference does it make if his nature was snowy, frozen, and evergreen and mine the four seasons of the Caspian Sea?

How about the time that he wanted to include En Saga as the opening piece for our series? He thought the first few bars were just like a delightful stroll in the woods—mysterious, fresh, and joyous.

But you wanted a more familiar piece and as usual you had it your way.

But I was right. A bunch of students who had never heard a single note of classical music, could relate to many sagas but not En Saga, not Sibelius.

You just didn't trust anybody else's musical taste.

No, I liked Cyrus's taste. I, too, was a fan of Sibelius. Hadn't I asked him to write the program notes?

Yes, and then you changed every single word.

No, that is not true. He wrote a beautiful piece about Fikret Amirov's Shur.

He worked on it for two weeks. "Shur," I remember him writing in his program note, "a marvel of the classical music of the Soviet Azerbaijan."

Remember that you added the "Soviet" to the text. You wanted to insert a nod toward socialism and make sure to give some of the credit for Amirov's creativity to his socialist upbringing.

Can't I just enjoy this without interruptions?

"Go back to your seat. Face the wall."

The door opened and a tray landed on the floor. Breakfast. A cup of lukewarm, colorless tea, two big pieces of dates, crumbs of cheese, two cubes of sugar. The dates were the novelty of today's tray. They were soft and fresh.

So, where were we?

Shur is a symphonic mugham, rather a contradiction in terms, coming together of an improvisational art with the structural rigidity of symphonic forms. But that is the beauty of this work. It is full of unfinished potentials, leads, suggestions, and moments that are fully developed, yet remain incomplete.

It does have a story, apparently, according to Cyrus. A shepherd searching to find his lost flock. I have no idea where Cyrus found this narrative, but it made perfect sense. A bass clarinet begins the story on a poignant line of loneliness and loss. A faint pulse of the timpani gives the clarinet a sense of motion, searching, looking. The orchestra portrays one tableau after another of the shepherd's search. It draws difference scenes from his life, some with filled with simple passages of joy, others packed with complex dissonances of anguish. But the clarinet is resilient; it plays with a sense of purpose. The familiar folk tunes appear and disappear and give the listener fleeting moments of delight. The familiarity of these enchanted moments adds to a deep sense of anticipation, of turning a page. But that at the end is not what the shepherd finds. The only thing that remains with him is the timpani's pulse; the rest fades into the background. Is that an ending, or is it an ongoing search?

I realized that I could play the entire piece in my mind, from the beginning to the very last note, in exactly twenty minutes. I found a perfect way of tracking time. I played *Shur* in my head, over and over again, every three times equaled one hour.

But playing *Shur* in my head could not get me out of finding a solution to the problem of the photo album. There were hundreds of pictures in the thick book, including a headshot from my university ID. Under my picture the name "Akbar" was handwritten in front of "other names." There was not much I could add to what they had already discovered. Strangely, I was comforted that the burden of revealing those names was not on my shoulders. I felt dishonorably relieved.

The book also gave me some false sense of safety. I began to believe what the interrogator had been hammering in my head that he knew much more than what he admitted. It made him more

believable to me. I thought that little by little I could share some information that I considered to be already “burned.” I thought I could give him a few old addresses, the ones I was confident had been already abandoned, and earn his trust.

I gave him four addresses, each on a separate day. I wanted to make sure that if any of those were still in use, at least the others would be protected. They played this game much better than I ever could.

They held on to the addresses and planned to raid them all at once. They also took me with them. They shoved me blindfolded in between the front and back seats. I was hoping that I could at least see some city life on the streets. But that was too much to ask. I was right for the first three. People I knew were long gone. The last stop was different. Someone suspicious to them opened the door. They asked me to take off the blindfold, put a ski mask on, and sit up on the backseat. They drove closer to the house while talking to the man who had opened the door. “Look at him,” a guard pushed a handgun on my temple, hard. “Do you know him?” My eyes were blurry from the pressure of the blindfold, my migraine, and now this reckless barrel of a gun. “I need a minute to see.” They drove me down the street, making sure that the man who opened the door would not see me. We got closer to the building again and from the backseat of the car I recognized Jamshid.

What is his thinking? Why is he still here?

This is a trap. He was already arrested and they’re trying to test your sincerity. Tell them you know him. They already know . . . you are not betraying anything.

You’re wrong. This can’t be a trap. He is just an idiot who is still living in a place that should have been abandoned months ago.

“Do you know him?” The guard hit me in the head with the gun.

“No. I’ve never seen this man.”

“I’ll shoot your brain out right here. What’s his name?”

“I don’t know. I told you. I have never seen this man in my entire life.”

“You think you can mess with us like that? You think you can get away with this?” He put the gun under my chin and pushed it in with all his might. I managed to get the words *I don’t know him* once more.

“You’re killing him,” the driver tried to calm the guard down.

“So what? I should let him fuck with us like that?” The driver reached back and pushed him away from me. There was another guard in the front passenger seat. He remained quiet and just watched the two others quarrel over how to deal with me.

“One last time take a look and see if you recognize him.” He pushed my face against the car window. I did not even open my eyes. Then the guard next to me got out and our car took off.

I wanted to sob. But I could not show any sign of fear, weakness, regret, or any other possible emotion to the people who were taking me back to detention. The unbearable thought of Jamshid being arrested did not allow me to realize that I was sitting in the back of the car without my blindfold. I could see the quiet city, but it did not matter.

This disastrous strategy, I thought, led to the arrest of another comrade. That intensified my migraine and further blinded me.

“Can we stop at a pharmacy?” I was desperate.

“What do you need?” the driver responded as if we were on a late night excursion.

“I need some painkillers for my head . . . I have a bad migraine.”

“Don’t they give you painkillers in the infirmary?”

“They do, but they only have aspirin. I am allergic to it.”

“So, what happens if you take aspirin?”

“I go into an anaphylactic shock.”

“Isn’t that good,” the other guard spoke for the first time. “You mean you die, right?”

“Yes, I might.”

“My daughter is like that,” the driver interjected. “We give her acetaminophen. Is that what you want?”

“That’s what I take.” It is not that strong, but it is better than nothing.

“OK. I’ll stop at a pharmacy. There is a twenty-four-hour one nearby.”

I did not only want a painkiller. I had heard from others who had been outside on these hunting missions, that it provides one with the best opportunity to break out. The more stops we have, the greater the opportunity. But I had no idea how any stop in the middle of the night on these quiet streets could possibly realize my great escape.

Before stopping the car, he asked me to put my blindfold back on and crouch between the front and back seats. He pulled over and asked the other guard to get the medicine while we waited in the car. He told him to make sure to get some non-aspirin painkiller.

This is your chance. Just get up and strangle him with your handcuff. It would take only a minute. Choke him and take the car. You can drive with handcuffs. Before the other guard comes back you’ll be blocks away.

I tried to collect all my strength to kill a man. I was drenched in sweat.

I can't kill a man. Plus, where do I go from here?

Are you afraid that he is going to overpower you? So what if he does? Are you going to be any worse off than this?

No, it is not cowardice. Maybe it is. But I don't have it in me to kill. "It's going to be fine, inshallah." The driver said without making it clear whether he was talking to me or to himself. "I am surprised how busy the pharmacy is at this time of night," he carried on.

I am telling you, this is your chance. You can just drive straight out of the city and find a way to cross the border. Remember Kak Reza's message. You can leave the country in a couple of days.

"Do you want me to put the heater back on?"

He did not know how much heat the thought of killing him had already generated in the backseat.

"I am good," I managed to get a few words out. The other guard returned a few minutes later. He threw the pills on the backseat and cursed under his breath.

I would learn a few months later that they never arrested Jamshid. I thought that I had gained some credibility pointing to some old footprints. By riding in a car and seeing the city at night, I also gained a new momentum. This was an unforeseen thrust that prepared me to face the interrogator's wrath for that failed attempt in sweeping arrests.

My cellmates received the news of my city expedition with deep skepticism. They knew all too well about these excursions and their disastrous consequences. I could not tell them that I knew that these raids would almost certainly bear no fruit. I had to pretend that I had reached the outer limits of my endurance. I hoped that

one of them would be a good antenna and report to my interrogator that I was broken, for good. But that did not happen.

The next day, I had breakfast in the cell. No one uttered a word, except the Colonel, who saw in me a justification for absolution from his own deeds. “This is your first breakfast with us.” He stuffed his mouth with a big piece of stale bread. It seemed like he overcame his anxiety by speaking with his mouth full. “We all have our ups and downs . . .”

“Leave him alone,” Darvish didn’t allow him to finish his sentence. “You’ll kill his appetite.” I thought that Darvish recognized that I did not deserve to be subjected to the kind of affinity that the Colonel was just about to devise with me. Others observed without entering the conversation. I would get to know them better later, but for now, their presence remained incidental.

“So, you had quite an adventure last night,” my interrogator greeted me with his usual calm. Then he stopped talking and paced the room behind me as if he was thinking about his next move. I sat silently.

“I think the time has come for me to let you know who is here and how we know all about your clandestine activities. You know Kaveh, right? You were close friends and did many things together, before and after the revolution. Right? I don’t want you to think ill of him, he is still your friend and knows that the kind of mistakes both of you have made is not beyond redemption. He thinks that given more time, all of you would have been able to see where your faults were. But it so happened that you were arrested and denied that opportunity to rethink your past on your own terms. I agree that this is unfortunate. Because now whatever you say about your past wrongdoings is not going to help your and your comrades’

cases. I am being very honest with you. I am not saying that there is no hope, but that hope is quite dim and fading fast.

“I don’t even want you to say anything about yourself. That is done. Your file is closed and whatever we needed to know, we already do. I just want to run some information about Kaveh by you. We need to move forward fast. We have tons of backlogged files . . .”

“I’ve already told you whatever I knew . . .”

“Listen, I am not here to argue with you about anything. We are done. Just tie a few loose ends and you won’t hear my voice ever again.”

Take that chance. Are you not tired of hearing the voice of this smug son of a bitch? How many days has it been? It is over, just give him what he wants and then you will never ever hear him again.

But won’t they kill me right after I tell them what they want to hear?

So what? They are going to kill you no matter what. Why don’t you end it quicker? You want a miracle? That won’t happen. Be realistic.

But if I am going to be killed anyway, why should I bother talking? I will keep my mouth shut.

You can keep your mouth shut, but they can open it for you. You don’t want that to happen. If they open it, you don’t know what kind of incriminating words would pour out of it. You shouldn’t take that risk. Let them think that you have seen the light.

“I don’t even need you to tell us anything. Kaveh has told us every single detail about your activities and I don’t need any confirmation from you. I just need to know whether you can add anything to what he has confessed about himself.”

I knew that Kaveh could not be the only source of what he knew. But I had convinced myself that much of what he knew about me came from Kaveh.

What are you waiting for? Wasn't Kaveh the last person you thought would betray you? Remember what he always said so proudly: that a revolutionary must fly like an eagle, always high, with sharp eyes and a determined will. The reluctant revolutionaries are like crows. They fly low and feed themselves from the crumbs of others. Now he is flying very low. Why do you need to protect him?

But how do I know that the interrogator is telling the truth? Isn't this another trap?

Who else knows all this about you? Do you think he is guessing?

He read over his almost comprehensive list of my activities. I admitted to all of them, there was no use denying any of it. Then he read a series of charges against Kaveh. Every sentence began with "He says, that he has . . ." Every single charge was true. I also confirmed what he said about Kaveh without adding anything to the list. Whatever he knew was precise and correct.

He left the room and came back after a short while. He took me outside the room and asked me to follow him. We entered a different room and he asked me to look from under my blindfold. I saw Kaveh sitting facing the wall. Then he asked me to say my full name and alias out loud. I did. "Did you not say that Kaveh was in charge of organizing neighborhood rallies?"

My world crumbled.

"No!" I said.

“Did you not say that Kaveh was in charge of gathering news items to be published in your paper?”

“No!” I repeated.

“Did you not say that he was in charge of three study groups?”

“I said nothing of the sort.”

“I am done with you.” He pulled me out of the room and pushed me against the wall with his hand on my throat. “I’ll show you what cooperation means. You’ll be back begging for mercy. You’ll see.”

As I gasped for air, he threw me on the floor and called Sayyed, the deaf-mute torture meister, to collect me. He went back to the room where Kaveh was. I could hear them arguing. I ruined his plan, but I didn’t know how much damage I had already caused.

You were not made for this. You are weak and only think of yourself. Why didn’t you listen to me when I told you that the only way out of this with dignity was to remain silent? Keep your mouth shut, you idiot.

But I thought that I could save myself and protect others by pretending that I was broken and ready to cooperate.

Yes, you’re right you wanted to save yourself. Don’t fool yourself by imagining that you were protecting anyone.

I knew I could not save myself. I knew that I was finished the day I was arrested.

A kick to my forehead snapped me out of my useless debates. “I told him that he was wasting his time.” Two people dragged me on the floor.

“How do we answer to our fallen brothers, wave after wave martyred every day on the war front and on the streets in the hands of these assassins? I am ashamed of myself. I won’t be able to look in the eyes of those martyrs, when I see them *inshallah* in heaven, and

tell them that I was feeding the infidels when they were fighting a holy war.”

“Sayyed, let me know if you needed anything.” The guard left me in the room at the mercy of Sayyed.

Two days later I was sent back to my cell.

The same guard who took me back asked the Colonel to collect his stuff. “Your lucky day,” Colonel told me, “You would be needing my stuff much more than I.” I was surprised how calm he sounded. I thought that he would be down on his knees begging for one more chance. But he remained composed. “Darvish, I am sorry. I am not a good gambler.” His voice cracked, but he recovered quickly. “Ask forgiveness from God.” Darvish hugged him.

“Look at you,” the Colonel pulled out his old khakis from his sack, “you are a total mess.” All my clothes were bloodied and torn. I stank of a mixture of whatever rotten odors one’s body can generate. He couldn’t bring himself to come closer to me, but left the pants on the floor. “They might be a bit short, but such is life.”

The Colonel was executed along with twelve others, including Darvish’s brother.

My very own interrogator was absent from the next two meetings. They were more like review sessions. “The faster we complete this,” said the new interrogator, who sounded much older than the previous one, “the earlier you’ll be tried.” I was not sure whether I had to be thankful or aghast at the possibility of an earlier trial.

Two days later, after my last interrogation, I appeared in the court.

A JOURNEY TO CHALOUS

On my way down to my first trial, I noticed Cyrus on the staircase from underneath my blindfold. I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently, without knowing whether he had seen me. We wouldn't have been able to exchange words in any case.

There had been no mention of him in my interrogations, but I had often thought of him and his love of music.

I hummed a few bars of *En Saga* now as quietly as possible, a favorite of both of us. He loved Sibelius as much as I did Mahler. He had once asked me, "Do you see the mysterious forest in the opening bars? And how it baffles Sibelius by its weighty silence?"

He didn't move.

I tried humming a phrase from the string section a bit louder. His finger touched mine.

From the moment I had first met him, everything in his body and in his demeanor gave away his Caspian origins: the hooked nose, flat head, stocky build, short quick steps; the excited rush to get words out of his mouth. All bore unmistakable signs of his heritage. One

day in early winter of 1978, as he came down the broken stairs of their crumbling colonial house in Langeroud, Cyrus' plump cheek seemed more crimson than ever. I could hear the withered voice of his mother coming from one of the seven damp rooms in that once-elegant villa.

"Be careful on those stairs," she muttered, "and don't get close to those snakes, let them be . . ." Her quavering voice trailed off amid the sound of raindrops.

Oblivious to his mother's plea, Cyrus hurried down. "Come here," he said with a juvenile thrill, "I want to show you something."

I had remained fascinated by that old house and the large garden enveloping it. Mindless of the rain, Cyrus stood in front of the house, waving his hand above his head.

"Come on down," he said, his eyes fixed on the crawl space under the house. "Have you ever seen a snake nest?" he asked in an agitated voice, trying to hide his trepidation. "Actually, there's nothing to be scared of, you just have to be careful around snakes when they lay their eggs, they become uncharacteristically aggressive." He tried to establish his superior authority on snake behavior to the city boy that I was. "You see," he said, grabbing a tree branch from the ground and holding it in front of him, "this is nature's call, the motherly instinct to protect a child. Exactly like my own mom, didn't you just hear her plea? If, only she had her old stamina . . ." For a split second he turned his head toward his mother's room.

His mother looked fragile and much older than the mother of a twenty-year-old man. Although we spent an enormous amount of time together, we had never talked about our own lives, only politics. We were dear comrades, but not close friends. Was she his stepmother? And what was the story regarding his unmarried sister, with whom he lived in Tehran, who was some thirty years

older than us? And this old mansion? Was it his father's estate? Did he come from landed gentry? I was more eager to find answers to these questions than to see a couple of snake eggs. Yes, I was curious and a bit nervous, but the crumbling, half-empty mansion with its vast front porch hidden behind the overbearing carved columns seemed like a bigger mystery to me. I did not dare to ask him.

Moving carefully among the exposed bricks, I took ten carefully counted and hesitant steps down the stairs. "It's a little dark now and we might not be able to see them," he said, putting his expert face back on as he began to throw some pebbles toward the nest. Before I stepped onto the yard, he began to jump up and down, "Hurry up, she's here!"

He extended his arm and without uttering a word, sheltering me behind, since after all he was the one who knew what he was dealing with. A large snake poked its head out of the dark, gently slithered out for a brief and cautious wriggling ritual that created a wavy line on the ground, and crawled back into the dark of its nest.

"Oh well" Cyrus said as he threw the tree branch away. "I still think you shouldn't go to Chalous, it's getting late and you won't make it there before dark."

I had never been to Chalous. I think somewhere in my mind I was aware of the stupidity of what I was doing. It was four o'clock and I figured that the four-hour ride to Chalous would get me there around eight. It would be dark, but the town would not be deserted and I could always find somebody to help me locate Aziz's brother's fabric shop. Before leaving Tehran, Aziz had told me that the store was a short walk from the bus terminal and that anyone in the neighborhood could direct me to Momtaz Fabrics.

"It's too late to argue," I snapped at Cyrus, "I've decided, and Aziz is expecting me."

He did not anticipate this. His expert, self-assured expression now reflected an uneasy and genuine concern.

I told him gently, "I don't want to make him worried."

"But it's not safe," Cyrus insisted. "Staying out after dark is risky, they suspect everyone these days. You know better than I do. I just hope that you know what the hell you're doing."

Usually, when he disagreed with you, he always started his disagreement with *I agree, or you're right, but . . .*

Cyrus surprised himself with his own petulance. "I mean it's dangerous," he continued softly. "You can go early in the morning, he'll know that you were stuck somewhere."

I understood his problem with my recklessness. I was also troubled by my own crazy plan—to deliver clandestine pamphlets to Aziz. But I had promised him that I would be there and there was nothing I could change at that point. I had made up my mind and did not appreciate Cyrus' insistence that I postpone my trip. I grabbed my small backpack, took out our latest clandestine pamphlets, and placed them in the deep pockets of the inner layer of my bulky winter coat. Then I started walking towards the house.

"Where are you going?" Cyrus wondered aloud.

"To say good-bye to your mom," I said.

"Don't bother, she won't remember anyway. Let's go, I'll walk you to the terminal."

The rain was pouring faster now and the four o'clock daylight was quickly dissipating. "You shouldn't go," he pleaded once more. This time I just gave him a look, and that ended it.

The terminal was packed with hundreds of people, all anxious to climb onto a bus. The moment a vehicle opened its door, an agitated crowd stormed it and forcefully cleared their way to get in. It required a certain aggressiveness, which I lacked, to compete. A

half-hour passed and I still was unable to secure a seat. In that shoving and pushing contest, I stood no chance. Still, I was too stubborn to admit that this was a stupid plan.

Had it been Cyrus, by this time, he would have been halfway to Chalous. Behind his low-key disposition, he was always resourceful, as he was this time. After he disappeared for a short while, he came back, grabbed my wrist, and pulled me toward the terminal office. We walked in and a young man, casually wiping his greasy hands with a dirty rag, approached us. “Just go to the back of the garage and wait for the brown mini-bus with pink lines on both sides,” he muttered. “Tell the driver *Yadi sent me*.”

“They charge triple,” Cyrus whispered in my ear, “but it’s all taken care of.”

Anxious, I followed Cyrus to the back of the garage, where before long, the ride appeared. We gave each other a last good-bye kind of embrace. After a quick squeeze, I boarded the minibus heading for Chalous, along with nine other men and two women. People sat as far as possible from one another and tried to overcome their shivering by rubbing their arms and lowering their necks into their coats.

“Mr. Driver,” a woman begged, “can you turn the heat a bit higher, please?”

The driver fixed his front mirror right on her face. “It’s broken, lady. But it’s warmer in here than standing outside with frozen toes!”

The pamphlets I was carrying, tucked into my pants under my shirt, made sitting down quite uncomfortable, not only physically, but also because they constantly reminded me of my mission. I had not seen Aziz for more than six months, since he left the shantytown of Zoor-Abad on the western outskirts of Tehran for fear that

his cover might have been compromised after the first riots broke out in the neighborhood.

I'd met him two years prior through my older brother. The son of a well-digger father and a weaver mother from the mountains of Talesh, Aziz had put himself through school by working odd jobs and by helping his father. He developed an early sympathy for issues of social justice, particularly those close to home relating to rural areas and urban seasonal laborers. Most intellectuals showed no sympathy for his cause and considered such a romantic nostalgia for the demise of village life a futile hope in the face of capitalist expansion. For this reason, Aziz never hesitated to assert his deep suspicion of intellectuals—Right or Left. “You need to question the sincerity of those whose veins bulge in their neck when they talk about justice, but neglect the pain of the great majority of the people, the peasants.” He adamantly believed that one could not talk about suffering without experiencing it. “You don't *talk* about justice,” he used to say, “you *practice* it!” He was a Maoist before knowing who Mao Tse-Tung was.

Even during the most heated arguments, Aziz never raised his voice and rarely sounded forceful. His dark cheeks would remain unchanged, and a puzzling grin would often appear on his face. Was it a condescending smirk, a kindly smile, or a disarming strategy for winning debates? Whatever the case, he thought that I was redeemable and that my eighteen-year-old urban intellectualism had not reached a chronic stage, yet. He was only four years older than I, but in every sense he seemed prematurely aged—in the way he dressed and talked, as well as his manner of interacting with others, myself included.

He had moved to Zoor-Abad after I started my first year of college. Despite the fact that he knew very well I had enrolled in

college in search of better political connections to participate in the movement, he considered that moment in our friendship to be an apparent divergence in our paths—one joined the real people, the other became infatuated with the loud, infantile student protests.

Zoor-Abad contained the soul of his people, having been built outside the city limits by seasonal migrant workers, mostly from rural Kurdistan and Azerbaijan. The hives fashioned out of mud and aluminum cans on the two hills sprang up literally overnight in defiance of city development planning ordinances, hence its name, Zoor-Abad, *built by force*. No electricity, no running water, no sewer system. Their worst enemy, aside from the mayor's office, was the rain, which often caused landslides and washed away many homes. Nobody could leave their place vacant, even for one night, for anybody could claim it, since there were no deeds or ownership. More than a burden on city resources, the rapid mushrooming of Zoor-Abads outside the perimeter of Tehran created a constant embarrassment for a regime that prided itself on having crossed, as the Shah use to brag, the *Gates of the Great Civilization*.

Together with a cousin, Aziz built himself a cabin in two nights and immediately became active in water distribution in the neighborhood. He made sure that when the water tankers arrived every Thursday evening, the water was distributed fairly among the dwellers. They lined up, children and adults, with plastic, copper, and tin containers of various sizes for their share, each time frustrated, irritable, fearful that there might not be enough for everybody. Aziz was a magician with the crowd, but even he found his patience tested. The only time I had seen him screaming out his guts was at his own people.

When inhabitants would begin fighting with one another over space or suffocating from the density of the shacks, neither Aziz nor

anyone else could prevent riots and attacks on the city police. When the news of riots began to make headlines, matters would then be taken up by the secret police, who would try to root out the *provocateurs*.

I had told Aziz earlier that the time had come for him to leave Zoor-Abad. “Many fingers will point at you,” I said.

He had listened to me attentively, his chin in the palm of his hand as he scratched his cheek nervously with his long finger. His grin had disappeared and for the first time since I had known him he looked fearful.

“They’ll never do that,” he lashed out.

“Then what are you afraid of?”

“Many others know what I am doing there! Those are the ones I’m afraid of. Plus, we never wanted to resort to violence, not now . . . not now, it was too early . . .”

Was he talking about me? Was he worried that I, or some other students he knew, would betray him? We were, after all, intellectuals—weak, self-serving, and unpredictable.

The minibus grew increasingly cold as the water from the rain and sleet leaked through the windows. By now, it was completely dark, but the faint light of the village houses on both sides of the road and the piercing headlights of passing cars comforted me. So long as there were people on the road, it would be fine. Except for the woman who complained about the cold—who fell asleep shortly after we started our journey—nobody had uttered a single word.

“How much longer till Chalous?” I asked the guy in front of me, not only to break the silence, but because I badly needed to use a toilet. I had begun to hear loud growling and felt tight knots in my belly. The question was whether I could wait till we got to Chalous.

“About two more hours,” he said in a way that communicated clearly that this was not an overture to a conversation. He turned back around and leaned his forehead against the window, staring at the road.

I had my answer, but knew I could not wait that long.

As much as rain offers a sensation of tranquility, it can make life miserable. That last time for Aziz, rain had been the greatest of all saviors. Only five days after the first riots broke out, the police were tipped off and fingers were indeed pointed at the cousins who lived near the top of the hill. Zoor-Abad was nocturnal. Houses were built and destroyed overnight, people went to work before dawn and came back after dusk, and the police made arrests under cover of darkness.

Five armed secret police showed up before midnight to arrest Aziz and his poor cousin, an innocent victim of his agenda, as he used to say regretfully. Aziz told me later that he had gotten hold of a copy of the Farsi translation of Mao's *Red Book* and in fact that night was the very first time that he tried to have a crack at his holy manuscript. When his cousin went outside to reinforce the tin can makeshift alarm system around their house, he realized men with flashlights were trying to climb up the hill. Any local person would have known that rain turned this path into a mud river in minutes. Clearly these people were not from Zoor-Abad. Aziz's God-sent saviors: the rain, the mud, and the quick-thinking cousin. They left their home almost faster than they had built it.

I was sweating in that freezing minibuss. I could not hold myself anymore. What had I eaten?

“Is it possible to have a short stop somewhere for a second?” I asked the driver sheepishly. “I need to use the toilet.”

“Where do you want me to stop? Right here in the middle of nowhere?”

Too embarrassed, I could not bring myself to say yes, please yes, I will do it anywhere, actually it might happen right on the damn backseat of your fucking minibus.

Before I could open my mouth, other sleepy passengers got involved. “We’re almost there, just hold it a bit longer.”

“We all need to use the bathroom.”

“Let’s get there on time . . .”

The odds were against me. Neither the driver nor the passengers would give in, they wanted to get to Chalous nonstop, period.

“Well . . .” I could not even continue. The pressure of talking was too much. I wanted to let the damn thing go, but I was worried about the pamphlets.

“I can stop,” the driver joked, “but I won’t wait for you.”

The guy in front of me turned around and saw big drops of sweat on my forehead. “Are you OK?” he asked.

I just shook my head.

“We’re very close to Shahsavar, why don’t you get off there in front of a restaurant or something?” Before he even finished his sentence, out of the corner of my eye I saw the road sign “Welcome to Shahsavar.”

I was faced with a critical decision, let the shit loose right there and then, or get off in Shahsavar, knowing that the macho driver might leave me behind. Then again, what about the pamphlets, they might find them. I went back and forth between the two options: whenever the pressure was relieved, I thought I could stay on till we reached Chalous; whenever the muscles in my rectum appeared to

be failing, I wanted to terminate my trip and find a safe and certain place to defecate.

Very few shops were still open in Shahsavari and we were fast approaching the end of the main street. I saw the light ahead of us on the last intersection in the town turn yellow and quickly red. In a matter of seconds, I found myself standing on the sidewalk, my back hunched from the excruciating pain in my intestines. I do not remember what I asked the driver and how I got off the minibus, but there I was, in a strange town, under freezing rain, no soul in sight, no shops open. I leaned against a wall for a few seconds and pulled myself together. The pamphlets, the revolution, diarrhea, Aziz, Momtaz Fabrics, Chalous, Cyrus, the pressure was too much to think straight.

I walked down the side street and knocked on the first door I saw, an old wooden gate, no rings. I knocked violently. A large yard stood between my desperate plea and a sympathetic ear inside the house. The voice of an old man broke the monotony of the falling rain.

“Who is it?” he yelled in a low hoarse voice with a thick local accent.

“I need to use a toilet,” I begged, “would you let me in, please?”

I heard the clink and clang of a lock opening and the screechy sound of a door handle being turned.

“That way,” he said, pointing toward the right corner of the garden without asking any questions.

I ran inside a small outhouse, took off my jacket with all the pamphlets in it, squatted, and . . .

It was after I saw the results of my abominable assault on the unsoiled little toilet that I realized that there was no running water inside. A gentle knock on the door answered my question of how I was to clean up.

“You have diarrhea,” he said as he reached inside, his hand wobbling with a big copper pitcher of water, too heavy for him to handle. “You need to drink a lot of strong black tea,” he continued while I tried my best to rinse off my mess. “If you wait a second . . .” he said, his voice trailing off as he moved away toward the main house, “I’ll get you a cup right now.”

The torrential rain forced me to wait inside for his return. He handed me a steaming cup of black tea, saying, “No sugar in it though, you should drink it bitter, it’s good for you.”

We walked toward the covered space right behind the door and stood there without exchanging any words. The old man was more concerned with the quality of his tea than who I was, where I was coming from, where was I heading.

“Do you have any relatives in town?” he finally inquired.

“I am going to Chalous to visit my cousin.”

“But there are no more buses to Chalous at this hour,” he assured me. “You shouldn’t stay out this late, it’s very dangerous these days.”

I would have spent the night there, had he invited me to do so. But even kindness had its limits.

“There’s a motel right across from our house,” he advised me. “Just in case you decide to spend the night.”

I left the house a new man. I felt I could walk to Chalous and not be afraid of anything. The motel’s sign reassured me that if I did not find a ride to Chalous, I would not be stranded. The sporadic passing of cars on the street made the motel alternative more and more attractive. Half an hour passed; hitchhiking seemed fruitless. Then two flashing headlights approached from down the road. I waved both arms above my head and moved almost to the middle of the street. The minibus slowed down and a young boy rolled down the

passenger-side window, stuck his head out and shouted: “Chalous?” We did not negotiate the price. I sat in the back in the same position as on the earlier bus. Before we left Shahsavar, the boy came down the aisle and asked for the fare.

By the time we reached Chalous, the city was shut down. Streetlights were out, stores were closed, and everybody on that minibus knew where they were going, except me.

“Where shall I drop you off?” the driver asked.

“Can you leave me in front of a motel?”

“I’m not from Chalous, I don’t know any motels around here,” he said. “I’ll hit the brakes if I see one before we get to the terminal. There are a couple of them around there, but I don’t think they’d be the kind of place you’re looking for.”

He did not stop until we had almost reached the terminal.

“You see that dim light across the street? That’s the only place I know.” He dropped me off before turning left to proceed to the terminal.

Between a long row of closed shops, a small doorway led to a dark narrow staircase illuminated at the top by a barely visible lantern. I took firm, noisy steps to announce my presence to whoever might be there, trying not to dwell on the surroundings, for I knew I had no other options that night. Being fearless is much easier when you persuade yourself that there is only one path available to you. I walked into the hostel’s small, smoke-filled office where two men were sipping tea quietly under the light of two lanterns and several dripping candles.

“One bed?” the man muttered between swigs of tea from a small cup. “We only have three left.”

“Yes,” I replied with composure, as if I knew exactly what I was requesting and was a frequenter of truck drivers’ hostels.

He showed no curiosity in my circumstances and the way I plainly appeared out of place.

“Fill this out,” he said, placing a form on the sticky table. “It’s required by the police.”

Name, permanent address, occupation, purpose of visit . . . deposit.

“How much is the deposit?” I asked.

“Do you have a driver’s license?”

“Yes!”

“Then, don’t worry about that, just leave it with me.”

With reluctance, I attached my brand new license to the form and returned it to the man, who seemed to be the owner of what was aptly enough called “The Chalous Inn.”

He grabbed a candle and I followed him. Oblivious to the wax dripping on his fingers, he pointed to a bed in a large room containing eight of them, each only five or six feet apart. Two people were already in bed, covered from head to toe with coarse military blankets.

“That one,” the man of few words whispered. My heart was tight, my mouth was dry, and my entire body was shivering from fear, from the cold, and from diarrhea, but I remained, or felt like I did, calm and self-possessed.

“Can I have a glass of water, please?”

“On your right . . . before you get to the staircase.”

I followed him back into the hallway. He pointed to a cooler and, without slowing down or turning back his head, returned to his office. I reached in the dark for the big tin cup that was hanging from a small chain on the side. I filled it all the way to the top and gulped down two cups before my thirst was satisfied and my fear calmed.

After returning to the room, I placed the flyers under my pillow and climbed quietly into bed with all my clothes on. I tossed and turned for more than an hour, shivering uncontrollably, both from anxiety and hunger. I tried to transcend the situation by thinking about the broader meaning of what I was doing there. I failed. The uncertainty of time and place, darkness, cold, hunger, and the worst, two strangers in the room, crippled my ability to think of the movement rather than my own miserable circumstances. Finally, I got up and I walked to the office where the two men, caught in a time warp, without exchanging a word, were still sipping their hot tea in a smoke-filled office.

“Is there any place I can get something to eat around here?”

I had evidently disturbed their peace.

“No!” said one of the men, gazed fleetingly at me through the steam that was rising from the cup. “Nothing’s open at this hour. The city cuts off the fucking power to force the businesses to close early. They say they want to save energy. For what? Go fuck yourselves. Save your goddamn energy for after I’m dead.”

I could not bear the thought of returning to my bed. I walked out, hoping that I could find something to put in my stomach. The rain had stopped, which gave me a chance to walk around the block, off the main street. There was more life in the alleys and narrow streets. I could see a few people standing in their doorways talking and sporadic passersby saying hello. A stranger’s greeting had never felt so good. Before long, I heard the muffled voice of a peddler. I walked closer to the sound.

“Fresh-baked, sweet, red-hot beets,” he chanted from the end of the alley. He was walking my way.

I rushed to get to him as quickly as possible. A young man of my own age, he rhythmically collected with his long ladle a thick

syrup from the bottom of his big baking pot and poured it on top of a steaming stock of glazed beets. “So, what are you selling?” I asked jokingly. “Everywhere is closed early tonight, isn’t it?”

“We’re always open, sir, always,” he smiled proudly. “Best beets in town are served here,” as if I needed any additional spur to eat as much as I could.

“Can I get a big one from the bottom?”

“They’re all good, they come from our own farm.”

With a carving knife he pulled out a giant beet and put it carefully on a small plastic plate. He cut it effortlessly into small pieces before handing it to me.

“Enjoy.”

The air was warm around his cart. I asked him all kinds of aimless questions about who he was and what he did when the season for beets was over. He did not ask me a single question, just walked slowly, continuing to ladle syrup over the beets. I wonder whether he knew how important he was to me. With him, my feet touched the ground again, I snapped out of the world of Dickens and Gorky and a sensation of life came back to my body—with some help from my plate of beets.

I was on the last bite when the distant shouts of a crowd interrupted our one-sided conversation. Without hesitation, he turned his portable stove off, put the lantern out, and started running away from the crowd. Disoriented, I followed him. The voices became louder before they were shattered by the sound of gunshots. Suddenly, the shouting and gunshots seemed to be coming from every direction. I kept following the beet man and helped him to push the cart faster on the unpaved surface of narrow alleys. I had no other recourse. The beet syrup splashed out of the pot onto our faces and jackets. Cars honked, sirens blared, fire brightened the sky.

Where is he going? Is it better to keep moving or take shelter somewhere?

I was an experienced protester, but I felt unnerved. My instinct told me to follow him until the noises subsided. After a few minutes of running scared, he parked his wheelbarrow in a dead end alley and hid behind it, something that is strictly unadvised in any guidebook to urban riots. I was not in a position to teach him the rules. I crouched next to him and asked him reluctantly whether he would back me up and tell the police, if they came, that we worked together? Everything in his frightened look told me he was thinking that I must be crazy. He held his head between his hands, exhaling loudly.

We waited for a long ten minutes in the same position without exchanging a word. Then he got up and straightened his tousled cart.

“I’m going home,” he mumbled.

I wanted to reciprocate somehow, to pay him for his lost beets. But he disappeared in the dark. I was lost, in more ways than one. I did not know how to get back to Chalous Inn. It was quiet again and the only difference was that the smell of mist was supplanted by the odor of burned tire and gunpowder. Although I didn’t see the protesters, I knew exactly what was happening. These flash mob protests were becoming increasingly common.

I tried to find my way back to the hostel by retracing our escape route. I had to be extra cautious not to encounter the police or soldiers. A student from Tehran, with no plausible story of why he was there, covered with red stains of beet syrup on his face and on his jacket—what more evidence did they need to conclude that I was a saboteur? As I walked I contemplated several remotely credible scenarios to offer the police, if I indeed encountered them. How I finally found the inn, I still don’t know.

I woke up before dawn at the sound of the man next to me putting on his boots. But I pretended to be still asleep, not wanting to engage in another conversation with a stranger. I got out of bed right after he left the room. The office was closed and I could not check out. I thought there must be a nice teahouse for drivers close to the terminal. I walked in that direction and found an already packed place with fogged windows. I was ready for a big traditional breakfast of *halim*, overnight-crock-pot-cooked barley and shredded turkey with cinnamon and sugar, made for those who survive on a one meal a day. I found a counter seat and ordered the halim. With the first bite blood rushed back into my cheeks, reminding me why I had come all the way to Chalous. I sat like that for a long time, as the crowd thinned, drinking several cups of strong black tea, before returning to the motel to find the manager in his office still in his pajamas. He took a sleepy look at me and handed back my driver's license.

"Am I done?" I asked politely.

"Yes," he said, sifting through papers on his desk.

I did not even bother asking him whether he knew where Momtaz Fabrics was.

Instead, I asked several people in the terminal, but nobody knew where Momtaz was. Finally a driver told me that it ought to be in the fabric merchants bazaar, which was fifteen to twenty blocks down the main road.

"It's walking distance?" I asked.

"If you're up for it. It's easily a half-hour walk."

It sounds like it was the right place, I thought. Walking seemed like a good idea. I would get there by the time they opened the shop.

As I approached the bazaar, I saw the police had blocked the roads.

“What’s going on?” I asked a passerby.

“Another funeral, perhaps,” he replied without stopping.

I distanced myself from the crowd and unloaded the pamphlets in a garbage can. This was not the place to be discovered with a load of incriminating flyers. I made my way through the crowd, which was becoming increasingly dense and agitated. From a distance, I could make out the blue neon sign of Momtaz Fabrics. On the other side of the plaza, a body wrapped in a white shroud was being carried away. People in the crowd threw their fists into the air, bemoaning their loss and demanding justice.

Aziz was standing in front of the store. Although he noticed me from afar, he remained nonchalant. He moved his head slightly to acknowledge me. I knew what was going on in his mind. I went up to him in the same lukewarm manner. We shook hands, tighter than ever, as he looked straight into my eyes and said, “It has begun, and it’s not up to me or you anymore. It has a life of its own.”

THE TRIAL

The court convened in the same building, on the same interrogation floor, at Komiteh Moshtarek. I walked in blindfolded. My interrogator read the charges. Another voice, presumably the judge's, asked me:

“Are these true?”

“Yes.”

“You wanted to topple the revolutionary regime?”

“Not because it was revolutionary, but because, I thought at the time, it had turned its back against the revolution.”

“Did you write all these pamphlets, these shameful propaganda fliers, these deceitful articles against the revolution?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Have you also contributed financially to this organization of yours?”

“No.”

“Tell me the truth, or else I will send you back to the chambers next door until they get the truth out of you.”

“I have confessed,” I laughed, “to far more incriminating charges than financial support.”

This reminded me of my father. He used to look at the page in our publication on which we printed the code names of those who had contributed money to the organization. We wanted them to know that the money they sent reached through proper channels to the leadership. He always said that we shouldn't waste our money on these organizations. "These things would lead to nowhere," he used to advise me. "Take care of your education and build a real career for yourself. I have seen many things in my life. When the situation gets tough, these leaders will leave you out to dry. They'll find a nice haven for themselves and you'll pay the price." The price for him had both a literal and an allegorical meaning, for he thought that I paid money to the organization. Finally, I told him that the organization paid me, not the other way around; that I was one of those whom he thought would find a safe haven with the money contributed by the party's sympathizers.

Some safe haven I'd found.

"You think this is funny?"

"I do not. But those who could not or did not want to be actively involved contributed financially."

"But did you or did you not at some point contribute financially to your organization?"

"Yes, I have." I didn't want to get him angry on a point which was absolutely irrelevant in determining my fate.

"OK, now you see, if you cooperate, we might find common ground. But unfortunately, this comes very late. The path you have chosen, leads only to . . ."

Before he could finish his sentence, I jumped in and said "The potters' field," referring to where they buried the "infidels."

“So, you are a smart young man. You know all too well what you have done and the price you have to pay for it.”

That was supposed to be the end of the trial. These trials often took five to ten minutes. “Do you regret what you have done?” Someone lit a cigarette. I suspected it was the judge, no one else would dare to smoke in the courtroom.

“Can I also get a cigarette?” This for certain was the best question I had ever asked in my life.

“Light him a cigarette,” the judge asked the guard.

“I do have regrets,” I said. I inhaled the smoke for the first time after almost four months. “I think I’ve made many mistakes in my political career. But none of those mistakes should call into question my intentions.”

“Which was what? To overthrow the revolutionary regime?”

“No, to defend the downtrodden, to fight on behalf of the working class. What I regret is that I did not have a clear vision of how that struggle is fought. I will not accept any charges that question my intentions.”

“OK. Please, brother, would you stand up for a second,” he asked someone in the courtroom, perhaps one of the guards. “I ask you, did you know this young man before he was arrested?”

“No,” the guard responded.

“Do you consider yourself to be a working man? Does your family belong to what they call . . . what was that again . . . the *proletariat*?”

“Yes, your honor,” the guard followed his lead.

“Has this young fellow ever fought on your behalf or defended your rights in any shape or form?”

“Absolutely not.” I could feel the smirk on their faces. But I decided just to enjoy my cigarette.

“See, this is the working class testifying against you. You fought for your own ego. You wanted to sell the country to your masters. It doesn’t matter whether your masters are from the East or the West, you are just puppets in their shows. You wanted to serve the poor, why didn’t you go a build a road, build a bridge, or build a house for them? But no! You wanted to topple the only government in our history that represents the downtrodden. And you call that your fight on behalf of the working class?”

“As I said, I do not defend all the things we have done. But my intentions were pure. Didn’t Ayatollah Motahhari say in his *Divine Justice* that God is kind toward those who work for the well-being of others? Didn’t he say that working for justice is like prayer?” I did my best to bring my meager knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence into the conversation through references to one of the most influential ideologues of the revolution. “Didn’t he say that those with the love of the downtrodden in their hearts belong in one of the circles of heaven?”

“Ayatollah Motahhari is not sitting here and frankly, I don’t give a shit about what he has to say about the rights of infidels. Was he facing the destruction of the Islamic state when he said all that nonsense? Would he have said the same thing had he known that he would be murdered by one of those same assassins who claimed that he was working on behalf of the people? Different times, different predicaments, different exegeses. This is no defense and it does not justify your crimes.”

“I am not trying to defend myself. I do realize that I cannot persuade you or anyone else that my intention was and is pure. This is a matter of the heart and inexplicable.” Neither was he buying my sentimental attempt to generate some sympathy, nor was he impressed by my amateur effort to show off what little I knew of

Motahhari's theory of Islamic justice. "As I have told my interrogator, I am ready for my punishment, but only if that punishment is not for vengeance."

"That is a matter of our heart and, as you say, inexplicable. We don't punish out of vengeance. We fulfill God's will."

I went on telling him about the cases I knew of people who were executed without being given the possibility to reconsider their deeds. He listened without interruption and offered me another cigarette. It was getting hard to breathe in the small room. Somehow, the blindfold also makes breathing harder.

"Do you know Farideh Hemasi?" I asked the judge.

"You don't ask me questions, but I am sure you have another story about her to tell me."

"She was a sixteen-year-old who was sentenced to death for facilitating the assassination of three revolutionary guards. But because of her parents' influence, her execution was delayed for two months. During those months, she had a change of heart and began cooperating with the authorities against the same organization that was responsible for those acts of atrocity. So, I ask you, how many Farideh Hemasis have been executed?"

"I told you: You can't ask me questions and I am getting late for my evening prayer."

"I only hope that if I am executed, rather than perpetuating violence and destruction, it would serve as a means of enlightening others to think deeper and harder about their actions. I am ready."

"Well, we have not made a decision, yet." For the first time, a softening was detectable in his voice. "If you think you were honest and not at the service of foreign powers, and you did not act out of enmity with God, then your punishment in this world will bring you closer to absolution. God have mercy on you in the hereafter."

With all the smoking and storytelling, we had spent more than three hours in that suffocating room. When I emerged from it, the prosecutors' offices were closed for the day. So, my sentence had to be processed the next morning.

It was after dinner when I went back to my cell. A strange sense of content shrouded me. "Execution!" No one said anything. They executed the condemned often right after the trial, if the trial happened in Evin. But from here, it normally took up to a week before the transfer to Evin happened.

A few weeks later in Evin, I read in an old newspaper that the law was changed on the very same day I was tried. Now all sentences of execution had to be reviewed by the Supreme Court. Had my trial ended before 5:30 that afternoon, I would have been executed.

Smoking cigarettes saved my life.

MR. AMIN SALEHI'S FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY

“Today we are gathered in honor of a man who lives only for Iran. His being is synonymous with the homeland. Every part of his tormented body reminds us of the scars of history on our beloved motherland. His silver hair is the snow of Damavand peak. The meandering lines on his wrinkled face call to mind the parched soil of the Lute Desert under the summer sun. His languished soul tells the tale of the suffering that his beloved Iran has endured. Yes, I am talking about Mr. Amin Salehi, the symbol of Iranian pride and emblem of Persian honor.”

With a Nazi salute, the crowd of four cellmates shout cheerfully:
“Heil Salehi, Heil Salehi!”

“For him, *self* has no meaning. He demands nothing but the good of the nation. Trusts no one but the true patriots. In captivity and freedom, at this very moment and forever, in reality and in his dreams, only one desire, *only one*, has given meaning to his life: the return of Iran to its fourteenth century Seljuk borders—the return of Afghanistan, Yerevan and the entire Caucasus, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Bahrain, Iraq, and Pakistan to the motherland.”

The four prisoners shout: "Heil! Heil Salehi!"

"And now, I proudly invite our honorable guest, the champion of Persia, to enlighten us with a few words of his eternal wisdom."

Mr. Salehi enters the stage as the crowd rises to welcome him with cheers.

After a short salute, with teary eyes, Salehi speaks.

"How can I respond to this inspiring display of love?"

"Heil Salehi! Heil Salehi!"

"Please, my friends, please. You, I am sure, are aware that I, an insignificant servant of Iran, have been recently freed from prison. Ah, how could I even say *freed*? In reality I was transferred from one prison to another. For, in a time that our proud Zoroastrian heritage is mercilessly assaulted, freedom is just another empty word. We have witnessed once again that our proud Empire is reduced into a small nation with a forgotten past and an uncertain future. I want you to know that it was my deep and sincere Aryan faith in *das Vaterland* that kept my body strong and my fighting soul alive under the cruelest tortures. I screamed, as loud as I could, under barbarian tortures, to which no pure Persian should be subjected, that I will not rest until I see the three colors of our beloved flag rising above the whole Iranian plateau. What hard days and painful nights. But I don't want to disturb you by talking about myself. I am sure there are others amongst you who've experienced the same kind of agony.

"Heil Salehi! Heil Salehi!"

"But when they realized that they could not deter me, that my heart would not stop beating for Iran, they released me. The Alborz Mountains will remain tall; no wind from any direction can break their back. I will speak out today, tomorrow, and forever. My young friends, you must draw your strength from Alborz, your depth

from the Caspian, and flow forever like Karoun. They released me because my resolve was unshakable.”

Members of the crowd look at each other hesitantly before cheering, “Heil Salehi!”

A revolutionary guard suddenly enters the scene and with an angry laugh says, “You are using words bigger than your mouth again, Mr. Salehi! You talk too much! Didn’t we tell you that we don’t want to see you making up stories about your Persian bullshit?”

The guard moves toward Mr. Salehi to drag him offstage.

With tearful eyes and a trembling voice Salehi begs: “My dear brother, I didn’t say anything wrong. I was just telling this crowd how I used to think and how prison helped me to see the light. I was telling them how in this God-given land our Persian body would rot if it fails to connect with the soul of Islam. I was telling them how in one afternoon in prison my eyes were opened to this Truth to which they were closed my entire life.”

Waving his hand above his head, the Revolutionary Guard shouts, “I don’t understand this nonsense. I am going to let you go this time, but God forbid, if I see you having these meetings again . . . you know the rest.”

Bowing as low as he could, almost kissing the guard’s foot, Salehi mutters, “You can’t find such Islamic compassion in any Arab.”

Salehi exits the scene and returns with the birthday cake.

The cake was made from old bread crumbs, mashed dates, soaked dried figs, milk powder, a touch of toothpaste to give the appearance of icing, and five burned matches for Mr. Amin Salehi’s fiftieth birthday.

Crying hard, Salehi rushed over to hug me, telling me how much he enjoyed my impersonation of him. He kept kissing me on the cheeks and forehead, repeating that this was the best

birthday party he'd ever had, as others came forward to congratulate him.

Eventually, we succeeded in calming Mr. Salehi down and bringing his fervid thrill under control. We forced him to sit down so we could light the candles and start eating the cake, which we had made miraculously without his knowledge in this tiny cell.

Salehi jumped up again and said, "Wait, wait, don't light it yet. I have some small thing I would like to share with all of you."

He went over to get his jacket, which hung on a small nail on the thick plastered brick wall. The chimney happened to go through the wall right behind where Mr. Salehi's towel and jacket were hung, keeping them warm and allowing him to use his jacket like a heating pad.

He searched his pockets nervously and rushed back to where he had been sitting.

"Here, I was saving it for a night like this."

He proudly waved a pack of Winstons before us.

"But how, where did you get them from?"

"Don't worry about the details, just enjoy it," he replied quietly.

I grabbed the pack from his hands and divided it equally among the smokers.

Mr. Salehi, who apparently was not quite happy with my socialist approach to his pack of Winstons, smiled wryly and said, "Well, Mr. Director, light the *candles*." He burst into laughter.

We finished our cigarettes after the first four or five puffs and lit the second ones with the first so we could conserve our matches. Cigarettes were something rare, particularly Winstons. Of course, if we couldn't get our hands on cigarettes, anything smokable, from old used tea leaves to grated date pits, would do. I won't, however, go into the complex technology of how to grate a date pit in a prison

cell. Even more intriguing, I knew someone who used to smoke antibiotics, and believed that by doing so he would not only satisfy his craving to smoke, but also strengthen his body against infections. That is where I drew the line, unable to convince myself to smoke antibiotics with their sewage-like stench.

The birthday party continued with Mr. Salehi's dull stories, which I'd heard many times and could easily recite by heart. I wondered how he found it possible to tell them over and over again with the same enthusiasm. There were, of course, many variations and revisions to the stories. We played along, for after all, tonight was Mr. Salehi's night. Let him share his youthful adventures with us. I pitied him, although the others found him absolutely unsympathetic. Even though everybody in our cell resented him, it hadn't been too difficult to persuade them to play a part in his birthday party. Everybody loved the idea of making a comical skit in which we could say whatever we thought of him lightly.

Mr. Darvish finally came to the rescue.

"Ay baba," he protested, "we can't just talk all night, what about singing or dancing?"

"But please, please keep it quiet, you know . . . Are you sure this is a good idea?" Mr. Salehi asked.

Knowing full well that Salehi would never give in to singing or dancing, Mr. Darvish then asked, "How about playing cities? I say the name of a city and the next person says another name that starts with the last letter of the one I said. Easy enough and everybody can play, and, yes, we'll keep it quiet."

"Hamadan," Mr. Darvish began.

"N,' I need an 'N.' N . . . N," Salehi repeated, "Nuremberg."

My turn: "Gorgan."

"Another N?" Asghar says quickly: "Natanz."

After a round, it was Salehi's turn again, and he needed a D.

"How about Dusseldorf?"

The third time Mr. Salehi offered Berlin for "B" and the fourth time Munich for "M." At this point everybody was furious; why was he choosing only German cities?

Mr. Darvish was the elder of the cell and his silver beard had earned him the right of free use of his tongue. "*Hajj agha*, we don't need the addresses of your rug shops in Germany," he smiled. "Just playing a game here, you can go outside Germany. We'll accept it."

I don't know why Mr. Darvish called him *hajj agha*, the one who has fulfilled his Islamic obligation of pilgrimage to Mecca. But Mr. Salehi appreciated it, evidently believing that anyone who is called *hajj agha* would be looked upon favorably at the prison. But I seriously doubted that Mr. Salehi had ever stopped over in Saudi Arabia on his way to Europe. To understand the source of my doubt, you needed to hear his pornographic stories about German women and his encounters with women who knew how to get laid in a thousand different ways, the XXX cinemas, and showgirls of Reeperbahn. With gleaming eyes he would mention a friend who went "window shopping" in Hamburg ("Over there, everyone knows what it means," he would say) and kept ejaculating before getting inside. "Just imagine!" he exclaimed. His lurid smile and leering face led one to believe that the only holy land this man had ever set foot in was St. Pauli.

The room was filling with Winston smoke. "We're making a gas chamber," Mr. Salehi said in a feeble attempt at humor. I began having second thoughts about having the party for him.

The birthday cake was delicious. Or was it just that we'd forgotten how a cake was supposed to taste?

Hamid Koochikeh asked Mr. Salehi how he liked his cake.

“The best, it is the best cake I’ve ever had in my whole life!”

Did he think that we poor young communists had never tasted cake before? Maybe it was true that this was the best birthday party he had ever had, but the best cake? I decided I shouldn’t be cynical about our cake because under the circumstances, it *was* the best cake. It looked good, the colors were right, it was sweet in the middle, and overall it had three-fourths of what a good cake needed.

Just when we were becoming tired and bored, the lights went out and the whole prison, it seemed, lost power. We were in complete darkness, unable to see our own bodies. It wasn’t the first time it had happened, but the fear it generated was quite new. The whisper of Mr. Salehi’s prayer was the only sound we could hear. Because our cell did not have any opening to the outside world, when the lights went out, it meant total darkness. We did have two little windows to the outside courtyard, but they had been filled in by three-foot-thick concrete.

After the initial shock, the darkness didn’t feel all that bad. It gave me a chance to see things that were kept out by the walls around us. When I couldn’t see, I could feel with my eyes. God was at hand to answer Mr. Salehi’s prayer and we got the emergency power in a few minutes. But they only turned on the lights in the hallway and our share of this divine intervention was merely the thin yellow beam of light that entered our cell through cracks in the iron door. Everything inside became visible again.

Before we changed into our threadbare pajamas, the door opened. In the glaring light another man entered the cell. The door closed and the disoriented man stood still. As usual, to show off his devotion, Mr. Salehi rushed toward him and with the softest, kindest voice imaginable says, “*As-Salaam-Alaikum*, brother, welcome.”

Mr. Salehi suspected that all newcomers were antennas, installed in our cell for better reception of what was happening inside. He thought that the newcomer was one of them, here to get to the bottom of what kind of person Mr. Amin Salehi really was.

A devilish thought crossed my mind.

“Let’s complete our party tonight,” I whispered in the others’ ears. I went over to Mr. Salehi and told him to just play along and not spoil the bonus fun.

“Why are you here?” I asked the man.

“I don’t have any idea.”

“How come?”

“I just don’t know. They brought me here and told me that soon they were going to clear up my case. How about you guys?”

“We are exactly in the same situation. They have accused each of us with absolutely baseless charges. Mr. Salehi here, for example, is charged with child molestation and sodomy, Asghar with car-theft, and Hamid Koochikeh with black-marketing refrigerators and other appliances. I don’t want to talk about myself. You know as well as us that these are all fabricated charges which have nothing to do with reality.”

He rubbed his hands nervously and said, “Oh, I know, I know.”

Mr. Darvish jumped in.

“Have you just been arrested, or are you just being transferred?”

“No,” he answered politely, respecting Mr. Darvish’s silver beard, “I was in another cell downstairs.”

Mr. Darvish, enjoying the new game, continued.

“How were the conditions there?”

The newcomer seemed puzzled by the question. “In what sense?” he asked.

“You know,” Mr. Darvish asserted matter-of-factly, “space, food, sleeping conditions, that sort of thing.”

Feeling under pressure, the newcomer responded, “I was in solitary and the food, well, the food was everything others get, I guess.”

Deeply enjoying himself, Mr. Darvish blinked at me and asked him, “You mean they gave you chicken kabob, soup, and salad with Coke and everything? And those bastards keep telling us that we’re the only ones getting the special deal here?”

This could blow everything up, I thought. Too obviously a lie, which will ruin our fun.

“You must be joking,” the newcomer says.

I knew it, the party was over. And then he looked at us, still dressed up for our party. A rare scene in prison to see prisoners dressed up in the cell. Maybe he was thinking that we *were* different, and maybe they did give us kebab and salad with Coke.

Mr. Salehi took advantage of his confusion and inquired, “What about cigarettes, did they give you cigarettes?”

“Yes, of course,” the man said, thinking that at last he had scored a point. “But what kind?” Mr. Salehi was dying to show his pack of Winstons. “Crappy domestic or imported?”

“Domestic of course,” the man said, sounding irritated. “Zar and occasionally Zarrin.”

“What?” Mr. Salehi had sharpened his soft tone. “Poor soul, I am surprised that you are still breathing. You’re very lucky, you know. The domestics are all poison. Five years, that’s what I’ve heard, you smoke them for five years, then you can forget that you ever had a pair of lungs.”

Ambushed by Mr. Salehi’s sarcasm, the newcomer asked, “What do they give you?”

“Winston.” Mr. Salehi waved his pack of Winstons triumphantly in front of the newcomer’s big round eyes. “We always get Winstons. But, wait a minute,” Mr. Salehi continued. “You’re not one of those political ones, are you?” Not waiting for the newcomer’s answer, he warned us, “I guess he is. Whenever they bring one of them to our cell things get worse. We have to pay for their stupidity. Why should we lose our privileges because of them? I can’t smoke anything else.”

Confused, angry, and with a tight throat, the newcomer growled to himself, “Why did they bring me here?”

I approached him and asked his name.

“Samad,” he replied. I whispered in his ear, “Dear Samad, if Mr. Salehi asks you to sleep next to him, next to the warm and cozy wall, you know . . . Everybody here is innocent of any wrongdoing, all these charges are baseless, all that is true, but we need to protect ourselves. Let’s stay on the safe side. Come and lie down with the rest of us on the other side of the room.”

That was the last straw. Repeating anxiously, “Why did they bring me here?” Samad rushed towards the door.

I jumped and grabbed his arm, saying, “Wait, forget it.” I gave him a big hug and two big kisses on both sides of his rough cheeks. “Welcome to our cell.” Knowing that he must have been thinking that this is a madhouse, not a cell, I told him all about our little birthday party and how the devil possessed us when he entered the cell.

The lights flickered back on and for the first time we got a better look at our new cellmate.

Still shaking his head, Samad told us, “I’ve had my leg pulled before, but this was a good one. I can’t believe I fell for it.”

Mr. Salehi interrupted. “The bigger the lie, the more believable it sounds!”

“Is he,” he said, rolling his eyes toward Mr. Salehi, “religious?”

I was sure that Mr. Salehi would have been flattered to know that Samad thought he was a devout Muslim. Alas, as it would turn out, Samad was not an antenna to broadcast Mr. Salehi’s devotion to the warden.

“How so?” I asked Samad.

“Just the way he looks.”

He was right. Mr. Salehi looked very different to a stranger. We were used to the way he looked, and knew who he was, so the question never crossed our minds. His short gray beard, the little callus on his forehead, and his over-use of the word “brother” should have left no doubt that he had ever stepped out of the triangle of home, mosque, and work. A faithful husband and exemplary father who had never missed a single prayer in the thirty-six years since his puberty.

When I first met him, he did not have any pious callus on his forehead. He spent many hours each day reading the Qur’an and praying, which must have been a new ritual for him, through which he hoped to prove his innocence. As part of this ritual, he would sit in his corner, kneeling and bowing his forehead down on a piece of clay lying on the floor. I hadn’t realized that rubbing his forehead on that piece of clay had been part of a grand conspiracy to create a thirty-year old callus in less than two months. He had secretly sharpened the edges of the clay so that when he prayed the clay made tiny cuts on his forehead that soon resembled a callus. He had been so clever that we had never seen a drop of blood on his forehead.

I told Samad that Mr. Salehi was not what he seemed to be, that he should just wait a couple of days and he would find out. Samad and I were pacing back and forth in our three-by-four-meter cell

while the others were busy cleaning up after our wild party. Mr. Salehi's loud recitation of the Qur'an had begun. He raised his hand in front of his face and with teary eyes looked up at the high ceiling of the cell. Maybe he was praying for Samad to be an informer. He wanted to make sure that the newcomer knew how pious he was.

I began to wish that one of us *was* an antenna. I hated to see those prayers go unanswered.

"Are you done with interrogation?" I asked Samad.

"I think I am," he replied in an uncertain voice. "How about you and the others?"

A couple of weeks had passed since my trial.

Should I tell him? Wouldn't that ruin the party? I asked myself.

After a short pause I said, "I was tried recently."

"And?"

"Nothing, nothing unexpected, just like others, I was sentenced to death. Farhad was executed a week before that. Asghar has been on death row for three months now. Mr. Darvish's brother was executed a few weeks ago and his case doesn't seem so promising either. It's not clear what Mr. Salehi's situation is. The pants I'm wearing now used to belong to Colonel Sayrafi, who gave them to me before he was taken."

I put my hands around his shoulders, trying to comfort him. "You're not disappointed that they brought you here, are you?"

Trying to avoid my eyes, he focused on the floor.

"No, of course not," he said. Then asked: "But are the Winston cigarettes real?"

THE CONFESSION

The dinner came early, around four. This time, the inimitable clatter of giant tin pots hitting the floor of the long cell block was sprinkled with cheerful banter. Prisoners sat behind their closed doors, their grumbling stomachs lightening the anxiety provoked by an early dinner. Change was never for the better, we knew. It was easy to feel content with the oppressive routine of daily life: three morsels of food, three two-minute bathroom breaks, and ten minutes of fresh air. If nobody was called for interrogation, if no transfers were made, if nobody was asked to collect his belongings, if the guards didn't feel suddenly too friendly or too hostile, if the food remained meager and cold, then we knew that things were fine. We wanted to remain still, for nothing good could ever result from any change.

They began the food distribution from cell number 7 at the end of the L-shaped hall on the second floor. The smell of rice preceded the scraping sound of the big pot being dragged along the floor. One hundred hungry young men in an eighteen-by-eighteen foot cell wondered how to settle the conflict between the delight of a rare rice dish and the disaster it might herald. Outside the cell,

blindfolded Mohsen was back from another interrogation session, waiting for the guards to open the door.

“Move over, move over,” the two guards ordered him in unison. “Why aren’t you happy?”

Mohsen stood quietly as the guards taunted him.

“You will be, very soon,” one of the guards said gleefully as he unlocked the door.

Mohsen took his blindfold off and, oblivious to the jubilant guards, walked in.

“Take your dinner,” the guards ordered us. “Be ready by six o’clock for tonight’s show.”

Mohsen crept over to his corner, hid his face between his knees. Hungry cellmates lined up to have a peek at the steaming rice with tiny spots of what seemed like pieces of chicken. Food partners regrouped in clusters of four to devour the dinner before it was cold. Mohsen did not eat.

With every trace of rice and chicken gone, we began speculating about the six o’clock show.

“I know what it’s about,” Mohsen said, forcing the words out of his tight throat. “My interrogator told me Hossein Rohani has recanted. I thought he was bluffing, but it’s true. The festive air outside is proof.” He stared at the floor, blinking incessantly to contain his tears.

The cellmates’ reactions varied. Some were distraught, while others did not feel obliged to hide their exultation. Many fell in between. Political allegiances proved to be hardier than the camaraderie of prisoners. Those who rejected the militant platform of the communist organization *Paykar*—whose spokesperson was Rohani—felt triumphant. They thought that tonight’s event would prove once again that communism was nothing

but an infantile disorder. It would inevitably lead, they gloated, either to nihilism or to infamy. For others, Rohani represented a generation of radical revolutionaries with unwavering commitment to social justice. He embodied the soul of Revolution, both under the tyranny of the Shah and under the present reign of terror.

“We must refuse to attend this show,” someone said.

“We are all going to be punished for that kind of decision,” another objected.

“Why should it shock anyone?” an anti-Paykar cellmate asked. “From the beginning, we knew that type of radicalism was doomed.”

“Where has supporting the regime taken *you*, my good friend?” the furious Paykar supporter responded. “We’re sharing the same cell, aren’t we?”

“Maybe not, maybe they get some extra privileges we’re not aware of for their amicability. Do we know where they go when they are supposedly called for interrogation?”

“At least Rohani gave in under torture, what about you?”

“You better watch your mouth!” A fistfight was in the making. “We’re no snitches. Don’t blame us for your damn leader eating his own shit.”

Without Mansour’s intervention the badgering could have escalated into an all out fight. “Stop!” he screamed.

The two sides paused reluctantly.

“The only sure thing so far is the rice we just ate,” he said in an attempt to lighten the mood. “And we also know with certainty that a chicken had flown over the rice pot.”

Nobody was in the mood for silly jokes. A loud “Shut up!” brought him back to reality.

“We don’t know if it’s true or not. Has he recanted? Maybe, maybe not! We don’t know what he’s going to say, or whether he’ll show up.”

The reverberating of iron doors opening and closing finally ended the quarrel.

“Any communists here?” The guards were inspecting others cells. Cell number 2 was designated for communists, so no questions were asked. “Put your blindfolds on and step out.”

The guards took turns expressing their juvenile amusement.

“What a party.”

“Who wants to sit in the front row?”

“They should pay more to take a good look at their ‘Supreme Leader!’”

“He’s going to say ‘Oh I didn’t know what I was doing. Have mercy. Forgive me. I was duped!’ Yes, the master of deception is going to say that he was deceived and ask for forgiveness.”

They made faces and stuck their tongues out at us, trying childishly to provoke a response. Hundreds of blindfolded communist prisoners marched quietly through the frozen prison grounds toward the lecture hall that had been built expressly for occasions such as this. The subzero gust did little to smother the unfinished wrangling. A sudden roar of slogans made it evident that my cell, number 2, Upper Cell Block 2, was by no means exceptional in reminding us of the Left’s appetite for infighting.

“Radicalism’s Depleted . . . Militants Must Be Defeated!” hundreds shouted in concert.

“Shut up!” a guard screamed.

“No let them fight,” another guard laughed.

“Shame on you! Shame on you! One Day They Will Turn on You! Turn on You!” hundreds of others responded in unison.

Everything seemed planned even though it wasn't. The guards believed communists all belong to the same species of impiety and decadence. Perhaps they were watching a much better show than what they anticipated.

A low black curtain divided the packed hall into two sections, one for men and the other for women. In front there was a large stage from which they had occasionally broadcast important trials on national television. After the prisoners settled in, Asadollah Lajevardi, the notorious revolutionary prosecutor who was simply known as Hajj Agha, arrived amid the piercing cheers of the guards. Walking gently along the divider, he revealed no perceptible emotion on his face. He wore dark glasses to hide his disfigured eyes, one of which bulged leftward, as if trying to watch his back, while the other was sunken and barely visible. His unshaven face did nothing to mitigate his hideous deformities. Yet his voice was young, soft, and tender. He seldom lost his temper: all the death sentences he demanded were delivered calmly. He was doing the same thing, he believed with conviction, that the other side would have done had *they* led the revolution. No, he was not just doing his job; he was living his dream.

"Hajj Agha," his bodyguard approached him, "shall we begin?" He pointed to the stage and shook his head to permit the proceedings to open. "All rise for the evening prayer," a muezzin announced before beginning his call. A majority of prisoners sat defiantly. The muezzin turned his head discreetly toward the silent crowd and realized that with few exceptions, the prisoners remained seated. Raising his arm and with his index finger pointed to heaven, reminding the sinners of a vengeful God, he recited the call again with all his might. No one moved. This was the first time that prisoners refused to obey *collectively* in a prison where life had become cheaper than the stamp at the bottom of an execution order.

The imam began the prayer.

“You know,” Hajj Agha addressed the imam, cutting off the prayer, “that your prayer is not accepted if the line of worshipers behind you is broken.”

“Maybe,” the imam responded to Hajj Agha naïvely, “they did not have a chance for ablution before coming here.” He proceeded to advise the godless communists on the virtues of cleanliness. “Try this,” he said, taking advantage of the opportunity to lecture. “Be clean and ready for prayer all the time for forty days and you will see how that will change your lives.”

“That is enough,” Hajj Agha ridiculed him. “I have done that for forty *years* and nothing has changed in my life. Dear imam, go back to where you belong, you don’t know these bastards.”

Hajj Agha looked behind him and with another fleeting head signal ordered the guards to deliver Mr. Rohani to the stage.

Rohani looked dazed. Nonetheless, he tried to appear composed in this longest walk of his life. He stood next to Hajj Agha, who allowed all the guards’ death chants to be aired first.

“Death to the counter-revolutionaries!”

“Death to Paykar!”

“Death to American spies!”

“Death to Rohani!”

“Death! Death! Death!”

Rohani seemed distant.

Hajj Agha asked him politely: “Shall we begin?”

Rohani had been an exceptionally important leader. He had joined the ranks of the revolutionaries twenty years earlier as a Muslim student from a devout family. At the time, rather than ideological divisions, what stood between Che Guevara and Imam Hossein was the passage of time. Islam preached socialism and

socialism gave new meaning to Islam. Today's wretched of the earth were yesterday's Israelites condemned to Pharaoh's bondage, the Christians persecuted under the Romans, and the disinherited Muslims betrayed by the Caliphate. Rohani became a Muslim urban guerrilla, overcame the temptations of conformity and supported his brethren, who assassinated American military advisers and intelligence officers. They hoped that their resistance would inspire the rest of the nation to rise up. The nation did rise up, but not in response to their call.

Five years before his arrest, Rohani had participated in an organizational coup which he and his comrades called "ideological transformation." They abandoned Islam, adopted Marxism, and took over the leadership of the organization. Then they issued an ultimatum to the rest of the membership: either accept the principles of Marxism-Leninism or be "cleansed" from the organization as enemies of the people. Stories abounded on how the leadership forced the members at gunpoint to read *What Is to Be Done?* It remained unclear which proved more persuasive in this ideological transformation—Lenin's powerful arguments or the fear of the gun. It also remained unclear whether Rohani was one of those who held a gun to the back of cadres' heads or whether he had read and understood the book. But through whatever means, the ideological transformation of the organization was successful. They murdered those who refused to convert to Marxism.

A few months before the triumph of the revolution, Paykar announced its existence and released an apology for the mistakes its leadership had made during the painful time of the ideological transformation. They confessed that those members killed a few years earlier had not been assassinated by the secret police,

but rather had been eliminated in what was meant at the time to be a revolutionary cleansing. Rohani belonged to the group who authored the public admission.

Sitting next to an empty chair on the stage behind a coffee table he began his confession: "I am here at my own request, without coercion or any form of ill treatment." Then he drank an entire glass of water, as if his confession had come to an end. "I would like to thank all of you for coming and affording me this opportunity,"

It was an awkward moment for those of us who'd had no choice but to be there.

"I want to share with you my current views on my past activities." He was barely audible.

Hajj Agha twirled his finger up in the air, asking for maximum volume. A sudden hum drowned Rohani's voice, as if the loudspeakers had anticipated the audience's desire.

Rohani pulled the microphone closer. His body bore no sign of torture. Even his bare feet, which were crossed under a coffee table, looked unscathed from the introductory whipping that accompanied any interrogation.

"I am here at my own request," he repeated in the same monotone, bending forward toward the microphone.

Rohani confessed that he had been wrong to oppose the new regime. His face gradually displayed marks of trauma. His closely shaved beard did little to enliven his dark complexion. "Without realizing," the scripted words trotted out of his dried mouth, "our policies, many of which I had authored, were used at the service of the nation's enemies." The confessional clichés, the familiar scenario, the customary foes, the expected acts of treason, and the standard plea for forgiveness were all so predictable as to be ineffectual. He spoke, but his voice vanished from my ears.

Rohani had been arrested a few weeks after he had been deposed as chairman of Paykar's Central Committee. After his faction had lost an internal debate on the future of the organization, the majority decided to suspend his membership and deny him access to the organization's resources. He had been given a few weeks' notice to vacate the safe house Paykar had maintained for him. He was given a sum of money with the promise of no further financial support, a light truck that could be used as a source of income, and permission for his wife to accompany him on his new journey. He was a known target. The Revolutionary Guards were patrolling the streets of every major city, searching for recognizable "counter-revolutionary" faces. It was *given* that Mr. Rohani would be spotted sooner or later. Without the organizational means, he could not go far without being detected by the police. His wife was also arrested, though nobody knew anything about her fate.

Later, I would discover that Rohani and I shared the same team of interrogators, and that the racket I heard during in the hallways during one of my interrogation sessions was when they had arrested entire cadres of Paykar's leadership. When his interrogator told him that his comrades had already revealed whatever they needed to know about him, Mr. Rohani had no difficulty believing him. In his mind, his comrades had already handed him over to the authorities even before he had been arrested.

Everyone in the hall knew the predictable narrative that Paykar had betrayed the revolution and sabotaged production in the factories, that Paykar allegedly followed their American masters, that Paykar was a CIA front. Yes, yes, now what time is it? Isn't this over yet? His long-winded sentences and repetitious jargon tired even Hajj Agha, who, like the rest of us, couldn't wait for the

show to be over, but could not resist squeezing the last bit of juice out of Rohani's dignity. Then a miracle happened.

"One of our sisters," said the gloating Hajj Agha as he held up a piece of paper to halt Rohani's tedious confession, "has requested a hearing to expose Mr. Rohani's crimes."

Hajj Agha was a confident man and not afraid of risks. So, he welcomed the unknown prisoner and invited her onstage.

She lifted her emaciated body up onto the stage, her shoulder bones protruding from under the black *chador* that covered her body. Her gaunt face seemed to move Hajj Agha.

She began quickly before they could drag her back down.

"My name is Manijeh Hoda'ei," she announced with a voice that contradicted her fragility.

"I am here to apologize to my comrades who have shown today that resistance is not dead. Dead are people like me who were not strong enough to remain true to themselves and to their ideals. I am here to apologize to my brother who was executed last month, because he did not want to be dead before his death." She spoke without breathing and left no air for others to do so either.

"Down to the wretched woman!" the guards roared violently.

A commanding, spontaneous "HISS!" silenced the hall.

The guards became jittery. A riot was brewing, they thought.

Hajj Agha felt betrayed, but remained calm as half the guards left the hall and locked the doors from the outside.

"Dead are the likes of Rohani and myself," she continued with more conviction, "who wore the mantle of leadership to cloak our weaknesses. I am here to confess that I have betrayed my comrades and ask for your forgiveness. I am not here to justify my actions. I am not here to deliver a sermon. I am here to tell you that your leaders are dead, long live resistance!"

Nobody uttered a word. Either a massacre was about to happen, or . . . there was no “or”—a massacre was going to happen.

“I feel the same!” Rohani shouted, and grabbed the microphone. “I ask for your forgiveness, too. I was weak. What I have done is unforgivable. Only my blood can wash my sins.”

Even in his theatrical resurrection, he could only think in clichés. “I was going to tell you this was how I felt when she interrupted me.”

The main question in everybody’s mind was not who was dead or who was alive, but whether any of the prisoners would be sent back to their cells. Was this a plot for mass murder?

Hajj Agha ended the disastrous show, ordering Manijeh and Rohani to step down from the stage as he left the hall to consider the situation and plan his next move.

Guards lined up outside the hall, against the prison policy, with their loaded guns. Inside, the guards forced all the prisoners to huddle at the four corners of the auditorium. Then they asked us to march slowly toward the only exit door in a single line. The armed guards stayed back while a group of club-wielding repentant prisoners formed a gauntlet through which we had to walk and be beaten.

An agonizing procession took us back to Upper Cell Block 2, cell number 2. No one looked at anyone. An unknown feeling, a blend of horror, relief, happiness, sorrow, and uncertainty blanketed our cell.

Mansour dutifully delivered his line.

“When’s the next show?”

“We’ll be there, won’t we?” said Mohsen, gently smiling despite a bloody nose. It was not quite evident to whom he posed the question. Himself?

Manijeh Hoda'ei was executed two months later after refusing to recant the recantation of her recantation. Hossein Rohani delivered twelve more sermons: three times as a born-again Marxist defending his Paykar years; three more times as a Marxist who rejected Paykar's political agenda, but defended its revolutionary ideology. During his last six lectures he advanced an Islamic critique of Marxism and declared that he had now genuinely found the Almighty.

He was executed shortly thereafter.

MAHLER'S SYMPHONY NO. 1

I was whistling the first oboe section of the third movement of Mahler's first symphony. I always found the parodic effect of the oboe's countermelody intriguing. It comes right after the few solemn bars of the double bass crying the sorrowful melody of a funeral march. In the background you can still hear the mourners' quiet steps in the soft beating of two notes of the timpani opening the movement when the oboe begins. Mahler is the master of parody. He gets you at the right moment, or perhaps the wrong moment, just before you drown in a romantic attachment or sink deep in a dreamy detachment. The oboe is a slap in the face, calling on the mourners to party in the middle of the funeral. And suddenly everyone follows the oboe, the mischievous child of the orchestra, which now sounds more like a Klezmer band than a symphony orchestra, especially with the accompaniment of the euphoric Turkish cymbals and the bass drum. The oboe is the devil.

I had read somewhere an interview with Leonard Bernstein who was trying to explain this unfathomable irony in the third movement to a young conductor. The conductor was wondering how

one can simultaneously reside in these conflicting emotional moods, sympathizing with the mourners while taking your shoes off and dancing blithely. *Have you ever been to a Jewish wedding?* Bernstein asked him. *That's how: The mother is crying in one corner, the bridegroom is drunk, the bride is dancing, the father is anxious, because he has paid for everything. Why can't we have that in a concert hall?*

I whistled as I strolled back and forth. Mahler's lines are fleeting, like sadness, joy, pain, relief, success, failure. They are all parts of a universe utterly incomprehensible to us. Did Mahler care about all this? I have no idea. Was he conscious of the profound message hidden in his music? I don't know, I just kept whistling.

When I switched to humming the cello section, I began hearing a clarinet trying to imitate the ironic oboe with a perfect pitch. I turned around to make sure that madness had not yet engulfed my entire brain. But I was not hearing voices. Right behind me stood young Nasser with his immense smile, bigger than his entire slight body.

"This is when the clarinet enters, right at the beginning of bar 29," he said, before continuing to play.

I was still trying to determine whether my mind was playing a trick or young Nasser was truly speaking.

"Of course you realize Mahler is using an E-flat clarinet. That's why it generates a parody within the parody. It both reinforces the oboe and counters it."

This couldn't be real. "Of course I realize . . . what?" I hadn't even known there was a difference between one clarinet and another. I was just content that I knew the difference between a clarinet and an oboe.

"The oboe changes the mood abruptly, but it is the clarinet that turns that change into a dancing mood."

The same Nasser I had seen day in and day out since I was transferred back to Evin after my first trial was now lecturing *me* about Mahler. Not any Mahler piece, but my favorite symphony, his first. I used to feel culturally refined when I talked to others about symphonies and superior when I explained the difference between an English horn and a French one. But now little Nasser was telling me that *of course* the first clarinet in Mahler's first is an E-flat one. *How many are there?* I was too proud to ask.

"So you like Mahler, too?" I inquired sheepishly.

"I love Mahler and was so happy to hear you whistling the First."

I allowed him to praise me first before swallowing my pride and asking him about his knowledge about Mahler.

"You know," he added, "you whistle pretty well, but you need to connect the first A to the second D without a pause." Then he went on to whistle it the correct way while I was still wondering where the first A was and how to connect it without a pause to the second D. I did not read music. I merely listened to it, and by the grace of God, or whoever was looking after me in this earthly world, I was able to memorize it.

It took me a few seconds to turn my feelings of annoyance at Nasser into those of gratitude.

"How come you know Mahler so well?" I finally brought myself to ask.

"I don't know Mahler that well, I just play the clarinet," he replied, with all the humility he could muster. "I played in a youth orchestra and last year we performed Mahler's First. I've never had a chance to listen to much of his other symphonies though." I wasn't sure whether he was trying to leave some room for my vanity or just being honest about his knowledge of Mahler.

“Oh, after knowing his First nothing else matters,” I said to reciprocate. By no means did I think that Mahler’s first was his best symphony. He doesn’t have *one* best symphony.

I asked Nasser about his favorite recording.

“The only one I’ve heard,” he told me, “is Bruno Walter’s. Our conductor told us after hearing that anybody else’s interpretation would be irrelevant. For him Mahler existed only through Bruno Walter.”

Why such rigidity? I wondered. I told him I liked Mahler exactly because of these kinds of interpretive puzzles that he posed. Closing that door seemed to me to be quite counter-Mahlerian. How could you not have a debate over how quiet the opening bars of his first symphony must be? *Silence*. Don’t you love the way he composes silence? How beautifully those distant muted trumpets and the screechy violins depict a cold nothingness. How those clarinets (I don’t know which ones, definitely not the E-flat one, according to Nasser) drop in and out as he draws a picture of being emerging out of nothingness to become full-blown life. How he brings a smile to your face after the beginning’s anxious moments. He is a painter, he is a poet, he is a storyteller, he is . . .

“Which performance do *you* prefer?” Nasser asked, pulling me out of my rhapsody. I had only listened to three different versions, Rafael Kubelik, Bernstein, and Bruno Walter. Of those three, I liked Kubelik’s the most. I thought that the tempo was just right, though I had no idea what the written tempo was, and the ironies were captured so brilliantly. I liked the fact that Bernstein sounded less polished, but I liked Kubelik more. Perhaps only because his name sounded more exotic to me.

The other reason I liked Mahler, which I shared with Nasser, was that he reminded me of my favorite poet, Ahmad Shamlou. I

thought that Mahler does with notes what Shamlou crafts with words. I liked the fact that one never knew when a Shamlou poem would come to an end. His poems lacked narrative, and concluded abruptly. Every line depicted a scene that drew you in and then left you standing alone on a plane without knowing what direction to go or which steps to take. “Do you see how they do the same thing?” I asked Nasser who seemed even more lost than I was.

I offered Nasser an example of a Shamlou poem, to add some sense to my nonsense.

“The Moment of Execution”

*A key turned in the padlock.
A smile quivered on his lips,
Like the dance of water waves on the ceiling,
From the reflection of the sunbeam.*

A key turned in the padlock.

*Outside,
The joyful color of the dawn,
Like a lost lonely note,
Was searching on the holes of the bamboo flute,
For its home . . .*

A key turned in the padlock.

*A smile danced on his lips,
Like the dance of water waves on the ceiling,
From the reflection of the sunbeam.*

*A key
turned,
in the
padlock.*

A teardrop gathered at the corner of Nasser's left eye, waiting to drip from the edge of his lower eyelid. He stood motionless, fearing that tears might flow. "My brother . . ." He wiped his eyes without finishing his sentence. "I have never read Shamlou, but I see the resemblance. Those conflicting senses that pull you in many directions . . . Don't you find it fearful?"

"What do you think we should do for the new year?" I tried to change the subject. That was the worst poem I could have chosen from Shamlou's vast oeuvre. There were only a few days left to Norouz, the beginning of Spring and the start of the new year.

"Are we allowed to celebrate?"

"I don't know."

It was everyone's first Norouz in prison and no one knew whether we were allowed to celebrate it. Spring was to begin around four a.m. Could we defy the 10:30 p.m. blackout and stay up till the *Sāl Tahvil*? I thought there was only one way to find out, and that was to celebrate.

In our crowded cell, persuading over a hundred cellmates who constantly debated on how to divide up that smidgen of space between ourselves—for sleeping, for walking, for sitting, for breathing—to dive collectively into the unknown could not be easy.

"Let's do something with Shamlou and Mahler, let's make a song." Nasser was new and did not know the ins and outs of cell politics. "Let's work on this together, Mahler's dancing funeral march

and Shamlou's . . . I don't know how to describe it . . . let's say defiant moment of execution."

His bony fingers moved quickly up and down his chest on imaginary holes of his instrument, trying to match the right notes with the perfect words. Then he grabbed my hand and squeezed it hard, saying, "Let's do this."

"What about our Norouz celebration?"

"We'll sing the song to everyone, you and me. I can write it for two voices, you sing one line and I sing the other. It will be great."

"They'll kill us."

"They're going to anyway, right?"

Why wasn't he afraid? I knew nothing about his case. A newcomer, not even graduated from high school, a clarinet player, and what else?

I told him that I would talk to others to see whether we could plan a celebration. These were delicate matters from which he needed to steer clear. The warden considered any simple conversation about *planning* something to be a conspiracy. A note of conspiracy in your file would be literally the difference between life and death.

The prison had not announced any particular policy about Norouz festivities. It seemed that the Spring Equinox did not even appear in their calendar. So how could a celebration be against prison regulations? I practiced my lines in presenting the case to the movers and shakers of the cell. Each person in that group represented different political lines, some militant, others accommodating, and the majority undefined, arrested inexplicably, awaiting their day in the interrogation chambers, the only place in the world, as the interrogators used to say, where words come out of the soles of your feet. Nasser belonged to that undefined majority and we all tried to keep it that way for as long as possible.

Though usually every collective decision required hours of negotiations, there was an unfamiliar accord in the cell that Norouz had to be celebrated. *That's not a crime* was the general consensus. How far we could push our celebratory cause was to be determined in action. I agreed to organize the entertainment part. Others planned to improvise a *Haft Sin* table, a spread of seven things each beginning with the letter "S" that symbolize purity, health, prosperity, wealth, happiness, clarity, and love. That, without a doubt, would be the most ironic Mahlerian Haft Sin in the entire history of the Persian Empire. We also planned to beautify the cell, clean the walls, wash the windows, and dust every little corner in the spirit of spring cleaning. Ideas floated, teams were formed, fears were shelved, and factional quarrels were suspended.

Nasser and I went to work on our song. I told him that we needed to involve others in the project, since the more general the participation the better protected we were from future punishments. I put together an a cappella group of ten to hum a few songs in addition to their part in our song. Nasser was skeptical of the ability of a tone-deaf group to accompany us. But risks had to be taken.

We agreed that their voices would only sound the two notes of the timpani at the beginning and just repeat the same two notes for the entire song.

"You mean the D and the A *ostinato* in isolation?" Nasser asked, asserting his musical authority.

I offered him a clueless *yes*.

We began the festivities around the time of blackout. Our Mahler-Shamlou song about the moment of execution was a disaster. My voice cracked in the middle and Nasser forgot a line of the poem, no

one could relate to the song, and I'd better not say anything about the choir, which could not even sing two simple precious notes in harmony. Whose idea had this been? No one cared about the music or the poem, no parody was detected, no irony registered. It was all a dissonant assault on everyone's ears. But the folk songs that were performed by a number of people with good voices turned out to be big hits. And great laughter greeted the satirical play I had written and directed about the adventures of our cell.

We stayed up till four a.m., eating bottomless imaginary sweets and the traditional herb rice and whitefish. For a fleeting evening, political divisions were washed away and genuine feelings of camaraderie bloomed.

At five a.m., the cell door was knocked open by the angry boots of two guards. Disoriented, we sat up in daze on a floor of bones and flesh, worn out sweaty undershirts, and old blankets.

"Get up," said the guards, kicking the prisoners near the door with all their might. "We brought you *Eidi*."

Terrible timing for delivering our Norouz presents! They dragged the people out to the hallway, then kicked others and forced them to move out quickly. A good number of guards were waiting to greet us in the hallway, making us form a line and march down the stairs out to the frigid courtyard.

"You like to imagine things, I hear," the warden screamed while we shivered. The ground was frozen under a thin sheet of freshly fallen snow. "Now imagine that you are warm and cozy, because you need to stay here until you turn blue."

We all started jumping up and down to avoid freezing.

"No jumping, no movement. If you move, you'll be beaten." He held up a short piece of a plastic hose then asked us to take the "chair position." "You like to imagine? Imagine you're sitting on a chair."

Anybody who fell or stood up was beaten. Nasser passed out. They carried him out after beating him good to make sure that he was not faking it. I wished I could faint. Snow picked up. The guards moved inside to keep warm and observed us through the open door to our cell block.

There were only a few of us left when I finally fainted of exposure. I opened my eyes to Nasser's face. You know that you are a prisoner when your cell feels like home.

The door opened again with the good news of more Eidi for a selected few. "Here is additional proof of our generosity."

Then a guard read a list of ten or twelve names including Nasser and me and asked us to step outside. My toes were still frozen but none of us had the luxury of asking for extra time. We lined up in the corridor and put our blindfolds on. I stood behind Nasser and placed my hand on his frail shoulder. I felt responsible for whatever was going to happen to him, since he'd had no idea about Shamlou, writing a song, or planning to celebrate Norouz. What a dreadful lapse of judgment that was. I debated whether I should approach the guard and tell him that Nasser had no role in this. But I thought that I should perhaps wait and see what punishment awaited us. The more we walked blindfolded the darker the prospects became. I knew we were going toward the prosecutor's office. A destination toward which no one wished to be headed.

"When was your last visit from your family?" Someone whispered in my ear.

"I've had no visits since I was arrested."

"When was that?"

"More than five months ago."

"No visits?"

“No.”

“Why?”

That was an awkward question. Was I supposed to know why I had no visitation rights while others could see their immediate family once a month?

“I don’t know.”

“You do.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re messing with me.” His whisper turned into an abrasive muted shout. “You do know. You’re a fucking counter-revolutionary and fucking bastards like you don’t have any visitation rights.”

Then he moved on to other prisoners.

Later he came back and pushed Nasser and me into an office. When I walked in, one of the interrogators was already talking on the phone to someone about me.

“He is guilty as sin,” I heard him saying repeatedly. “Yes ma’am, we know he is a university student and we also know he’s getting his master’s in trickery. Apparently, you know nothing about his treacherous life. God have mercy on him.” And he handed the phone to me.

“How are you, my dear son?” My mother was calm and unfazed. “We’ve been worried sick since you just vanished. Why have they arrested you? Where are you now?”

I struggled to maintain my composure. I could not utter a word. I felt that there was a race between the words coming out of my mouth and the tears flowing down my face. I could not cry.

“I am good, Mama, don’t worry.”

“We are worried, I looked for you everywhere. For five months, I was looking. Where are you now?”

“I’m told that I can’t talk about that. But I am OK.”

I did not know where this conversation could go. I also thought this might be the last time I heard my mother's voice. I didn't know what to say.

Nasser was still sitting in front of the other desk. The second interrogator kept dialing and saying that there was no answer. I wished there had been no answer on my phone. But no, I wanted to hear my mother's voice.

"Mama, I need to tell you something." I had decided to tell her what my situation was, since I might not be able to speak to her again.

"Tell me, no matter what is, we will take care of it. I just don't want you to worry about us."

"Mama, I was tried last month."

"That's a good thing, no?"

"I am afraid not," I hesitated a moment. "I was sentenced to death."

"That's nonsense. For what crime? You are my son and you belong to me. They cannot snatch you away from me."

"A higher court needs to approve the sentence before they carry it out. Maybe we will have some luck there."

"That's enough," the interrogator grabbed the phone and hung it up.

It took me a second to realize that they hadn't been able to contact anyone in Nasser's family.

We put our blindfolds back on and walked out of the room. This time Nasser stood behind me. He put his chin on my shoulder and whispered in my ear: "My brother was executed last month."

THE TROTSKYIST

He certainly was the most clean-shaven, well-dressed, and contented prisoner who had ever walked into our cell. He thanked the guards, three of them, in very formal language as they closed the door behind him.

“I have just filed a report,” he said, speaking with loud conviction, perhaps to drown out the guards’ mocking laughter beyond the door. “I have just filed a report,” he repeated, “against the unlawful arrests and summary trials.”

He put his small suitcase down, and readjusted his expensive-looking ivory jacket, smoothing it down over his freshly pressed pants.

“This whole atrocity will end soon.”

It was not just his pale skin, brownish hair, nearly blond moustache, and hazel eyes that gave him a foreigner’s look, but the way he spoke and his bearing. He used all the right terms and correct sentences but with incomprehensible gestures and construction.

He removed his jacket and looked for a place to hang it. I took it from him, folded it with care, and handed it back to him to allow him to realize the preciousness of space in our crowded cell.

“Do you want to change?” I asked.

“Yes, that would be nice,” he responded reticently. “It’s crowded here,” he added, as though he had just noticed the congestion.

Opening his tiny suitcase, packed for a short visit, he took out a pair of velveteen sweatpants. He looked around, wondering, I assumed, where he was supposed to change. No one considered the entrance of a new prisoner an event worth pondering for long. Most of the people in the cell had already resumed their daily routines, whether pacing the cell, which was becoming harder than getting on a city bus at rush hour, or reading in some corner, or staring aimlessly at the ceiling, trying not to inhale the heavy air.

He changed his pants and put his folded outfit in the suitcase. I placed it on top of the scruffy bags of the others.

“It is crowded here,” he repeated in a whisper, perhaps to himself or perhaps to me.

“You are number 103,” I told him. “The more the merrier,” I added in a lame attempt to make him feel welcome.

He found a small space to sit, but after only a few minutes the door opened and a guard asked him to stand up.

“Hey you, the British one, come closer to the door.”

“I am not British,” he exclaimed. “I refuse to be intimidated by you or any other authority in this prison.”

“Shut the fuck up and come over,” the guard yelled. “Anyone the BBC interviews is a British agent. Your bosses should swallow the fact that their empire is no more. What a sorry state, the great motherland now depends on these pathetic fools.”

Suddenly, five other guards appeared in front of the door.

“It’s him,” the first guard said, pointing to the new prisoner.

“Does he speak Persian?” another guard asked sarcastically.

“I speak four different languages, as fluently as my mother tongue. And with the same mother tongue I have filed a complaint against you and your bosses.”

“He does speak Persian,” another guard said, joining the exchange. “So you speak to all your masters in their own languages. That is really impressive. We thought that you only speak English. The CIA needs more agents like you.”

“I refuse to talk to you. I will only talk to your superiors and higher officials in the prosecutor’s office. You need to start looking for other jobs, for you have failed so miserably at this one.”

The first guard walked in and slapped him in the face in a flash so hard that he tumbled to the floor, hitting his cheekbone to the coarse thin carpet.

“Now you can go and file a complaint. We’re all ears.”

The guards closed the door and laughed raucously as they walked away.

The newcomer remained undeterred. Pulling himself together, he shouted defiantly at the closed door, “We shall see!”

Now everyone seemed interested in his case. No one had ever had an entire shift of guards gather in front of the cell to taunt their latest prey. In their eyes, we were all British agents and the CIA operatives. There was nothing new there. But why did this one arouse so much curiosity? Usually they did not bring the most wanted to regular cell blocks immediately after arrest. There were many unresolved questions, to which he would soon furnish answers.

After his arrest four months ago, he had witnessed countless instances of torture and executions. Since he was a member of the central committee of one of the two Trotskyist parties that was, up to that point, defending the revolutionary regime, he was released

after two months. At the time, very few prisoners had actually emerged from the prison to speak of the horrors they had left behind. Somehow, the BBC Persian Services had located him and conducted a thirty-minute interview about the situation in the Iranian prisons.

In his interview, he said he had blamed the Evin Prison atrocities on a militant splinter group that had hijacked the revolution. By instituting a reign of terror, he had told the BBC, this group, led by the Chief Revolutionary Prosecutor, had tarnished the reputation of the regime. This aberration could not last. This group and their cronies would not withstand the rule of law and the sound judgment of the Supreme Leader. Civility would eventually prevail, he had said in his interview, and those responsible for tainting the pure spirit of the revolution will be held accountable for their crimes. So he thought.

After the interview, the revolutionary court had issued a warrant for his arrest. Rather than paying the traffickers to smuggle him out of the country, he had visited a lawyer the morning after the warrant was issued, saying that he intended to turn himself in. He had documented all the instances he had mentioned in his BBC interview and would submit them to court. He had nothing to apologize for. *He* was the one who was saving the revolution from the escapades of a few. He packed a small bag and put his nice outfit on and walked to Evin, perhaps the only person to do so of his own volition in the prison's entire history.

At first he amused us, just as he must have amused the courts, the prosecutor, and the guards. I thought how astonishing it was for someone to believe in his theory so deeply as to be willing to put it into this ghastly test—walking into one of the most feared prisons on the planet and hoping that he would get out unscathed.

After the initial processing, he was transferred to our cell without being interrogated. A few days later, Hajj Agha, the chief revolutionary prosecutor, came to see how he was. He opened the slot and called his name. The tone of our indigenous Torquemada was familiar to us. The soft voice that stood in high contrast with his rough appearance. The sound was familiar because it was the voice we heard behind the cameras that recorded the ritual of public confessions, asking the condemned questions about their crimes and soliciting repentance and pleas of mercy. The guard opened the door and the grand inquisitor appeared at the threshold.

“How are they treating you here?” he asked the Trotskyist. “Is there anything you need to tell the BBC about it?”

Hajj Agha did not seem like someone who had been perturbed by his accuser. He also wanted to see who this person was. The prosecutor’s face was always hard to read, more so this time, a simultaneous display of contempt, amusement, ridicule, but not much anger.

“You just need to wait for your turn to be interrogated,” he said calmly. “It is pretty crowded here, as you reported accurately to your masters. You just need to wait. It might take a while.”

“You know,” he added, turning to the rest of us, “being ignored is the worst kind of torture for a neurotic creature. It was conceit that killed the cat.”

I was amazed, not only because it was the first time I heard him using the term torture, but also because he knew the meaning of the word neurotic. I always vacillated between thinking of him as a brute megalomaniac and a calculating strategist. Later, I would realize that he was both.

Weeks passed and no one came to see the Trotskyist. Bit by bit, after we were able to pass beyond our initial amusement, he found

friends in the cell. He insisted that he was the victim of a comprehensive CIA conspiracy, mirroring his accusers' charges. Some cellmates believed his hypotheses, some remained skeptical. I stood firmly with the latter group, especially after one day I overheard him telling the story of how the CIA directly was involved in sabotaging the Trotskyists' first party convention at Tehran Polytechnic after the revolution.

"We have obtained irrefutable evidence," he told a group of young, awestruck cellmates, "that the CIA planned and executed it."

Hearing my own campus's name made me more curious.

"We know when they met their agents and where," he went on. "They paid each person the equivalent of one hundred and fifty American dollars to spread rumors that the meeting was cancelled. When that didn't work, they added another two hundred dollars to their pay to get them to attack members of the party who were attending the meeting."

I told him the real story of that day, which had no spy subplot. He did not believe me.

Thousands of expatriates had returned to the country in the spring of 1979 after the triumph of the revolution: The Shah was gone, his notorious SAVAK was dismantled, new publications of old banned books and papers appeared, and political parties sprouted. Among those returned were hundreds of young Trotskyists who had come of age in Europe and the US or had spent decades abroad. For many, the revolution offered the first opportunity to end their lives of exile and return home to a place in which they would soon find themselves even more estranged than the one they were leaving behind.

Soon after the revolution when the universities reopened, everyone was allowed to enter the campus, unlike earlier, when only registered students, faculty, and staff could enter campus premises. The university became the home of the masses. But with it, we would find those young “returned-from-the-foreign-land,” as we used to call them: women lying on the lawn sunbathing in the university quad, men and women chatting intimately on campus, and strolling hand-in-hand as if the revolution was granting them freedom, so we thought, to manifest decadence. We who had remained in the country and toiled for the revolution resented these arrogant cosmopolitans who only returned home after all seemed safe. We thought that they grossly violated the revolutionary ethos that we had shared with our Muslim brethren and guarded tightly all those years. Their lax demeanor disturbed our serious revolutionary sensibilities. And we were afraid that their slack behavior would marginalize the homegrown Left further away from the political milieu in which the post-revolutionary power struggles were fought.

All the competing factions of the Left on campuses blamed the Trotskyists for tarnishing the age-old ethical principles that helped the movement advance with uncompromising priorities. We found them too “westoxicated,” easily influenced by western cultures that had plagued ours, and estranged from, or worse, hostile to our mores.

So, when the news came that the Socialist Labor Party, the main Trotskyist organization, was to hold its first convention on our campus, the cradle of the student movement, the home of countless martyrs of the Left, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Polytechnic had to be defended.

My friend Mahmoud, whose judgment I always trusted, had told me that he knew who had sponsored the event, a Civil Engineering

professor with Trotskyist sympathies, whose name must remain unmentioned. So, two days before the event, Mahmoud, another comrade, and I walked into his office unannounced.

“You cannot hold this meeting on this campus,” our chorus of three told him.

“And why not? Isn’t that why we had the revolution?” the professor replied gently.

“No, absolutely not.”

“But do we not want to be free?”

“This is not freedom, this is debauchery.”

“Who then should determine the limits of freedom?”

“We’re not here for a philosophical debate. We just wanted to warn you that either you cancel the meeting or we won’t allow the Trotskyists to enter *our* campus. The responsibility for what happens would fall directly on your shoulders.”

The three of us agreed that we had communicated the message very clearly. We were certain that the convention would not materialize. We were wrong.

The meeting was supposed to begin on Friday at ten in the morning. We contacted all the different Leftist organizations and asked them to come full force to campus around eight to shut all the gates with chains and padlocks. By ten o’clock, hundreds of Trotskyist sympathizers were gathered outside trying to break into the campus. Inside, in addition to the chains and padlocks, a human chain of comrades was ready to defend against the invasion of the “foreigners.”

Inside we shouted “No to Decadence!” Outside they screamed “Death to Stalinism!”

The police arrived and with loudspeakers and called on the crowd of bystanders not to get involved in this communist infighting.

“Please stay clear of it,” we heard in the midst of the sirens. “This is not our fight. Let those communists kill themselves.”

Now we had to choose between pleasing the police or swallowing our pride and allowing the Trotskyists to enter the campus and hold their convention. We chose the latter.

Inside the gym, hundreds gathered to celebrate the first convention of the Socialist Labor Party. The party’s leadership approached us and asked for a truce. We rejected it. We thought that there were many workers in the crowd who were there not for the party’s platform, but for the seductive women with sexy dresses. “You recruit workers by objectifying women’s bodies,” the ever-militant Nemat told one of the party leaders.

“But what is your objection to us?”

“You were not a part of the revolution, and so you can’t come back to claim its fruits.”

“We’ll give you as much time you want to address the crowd. Tell them what you think of us and let us have our meeting.”

That indeed was a generous offer. We accepted. But that acceptance was also a painful moment of truth for us. We had nothing to say about them. The fact that they were a Trotskyist party in itself could not be a point of contention. They never had hidden that fact. We asked for fifteen minutes to prepare a statement.

Five of us went back to our student organization office and tried to put together an expose. We had nothing. Nemat said that the Trotskyists did not support the anti-Vietnam war protests in the US. There was no time for accuracy. Another one said that they were against revolution in one country, and thus were hypocritical in supporting our revolution. They were simply reformists. They were for women’s liberation without class struggle. Etc., etc. We had a statement.

Nemat, our spokesperson, was their most vociferous critic. He stood behind the microphone and read our half-baked statement. At the end he improvised.

“We ask all those who were not aware of the true intentions of these anti-revolutionaries to join us and walk out of this meeting right now.”

No one moved.

We had failed, and Nemat was furious. He grabbed a long banner hanging on top of the podium and ripped it from the ceiling. They tried to stop him. That is what he wanted, a scuffle. Fists flew in the air and shouts of death to this and that shook the building. In the midst of the fray, the pushing and shoving, the party leadership was smuggled out of the building and the convention did not materialize. Nemat’s nose was broken that day.

Nemat was executed a year or so later, around the same time that our Trotskyist-in-residence was arrested for the first time.

“Do you expect me to believe this absurd story?” he asked me.

“I’m not expecting you to do anything. For me, this is more shameful than being hired by the CIA. And at least the CIA would have paid us.”

“You were duped like many others, my friend. You were young and inexperienced and the CIA turned you into unwitting instruments of its will.”

I had no desire to continue the conversation. I had only needed to get that whole experience off of my chest and liberate my soul from its earlier infantile revolutionary zeal.

Two months later, up until the day I left that cell to appear at my second trial, he still hadn’t been interrogated. It seemed like his record had been lost among the many files of indicted anti-revolutionaries. They wanted him to feel forgotten. He was.

My death sentence was upheld in the second trial. I was transferred to another cell to await my sentence to be carried out.

Almost three years later, I saw him in the visitation hall in Evin as I was being escorted to stand behind a curtain to wait for my turn. He looked gaunt with light-brown beard. He was having a special visit with his American wife, to whom he spoke in Persian with passing phrases in English. His voice cracked and he sounded feeble. After a few short minutes they brought him back to where I was standing. By that time I had lost half of my former weight. His steps were shaky and his eyes teary. He did not recognize me.

VENOM

No one ever liked to hear his name followed by “collect your stuff and step outside.” At the time, that could only have two meanings: Either they were transferring you to another cell, or, for those condemned to death, they were taking you to face the firing squad. Whenever the guards called my name followed by the dreaded phrase, a heavy silence descended upon the cell. The call also forced me to offer my last words to my cellmates. I often thought about what my last words would be. I prepared for it but never said what I planned to say in all the seven times that it happened during my imprisonment.

This time, in Cell Block 4, cell number 47, a year after I was sentenced, the guard called my name and asked me collect my belongings. I grabbed my bag but left the blanket my mother had send from home, thinking that I won't have any use for it. The guard left the door open and I stood in front of it thinking about what I was supposed to say. At the same time the words of Hafez came to mind. I recited them loudly:

I will not relinquish what I desire until it comes true without recoil,

*Till my soul reaches the heavens, and my body buried in the soil.
When I am dead and buried, open my grave and see
Smoke rising from my shroud, my inner fire still alive under the foil.*

No one said anything. I left not for the gallows but to spend another year in a cell of fellow death row prisoners euphemistically called the “Quarantine,” with Ali and eighty-five others, sixty of whom would eventually be executed.

As Ali walked frugally with a gentle distant gaze, the circles around his eyes gradually grew darker. He paused in front of the barred window and gasped for fresh air. His eyes sank deeper between his black eyebrows and broad hairy cheek. His beard covered his entire face from just below his eyes to the tip of his collarbone, where it gave his skin some breathing room before meeting the matted curly hair of his chest.

When his knees began to falter, no longer capable of supporting his heavy body, he sat in a corner ready, as he would say, to release his venom. He grabbed a piece of paper and started to write a new poem.

*Without you,
This cage is desolate.
In the sky,
 Above the burial grounds of songs,
The tears of skylarks flow.*

*The cruel claws of vengeance
Ripped you away from our arms,
They feared that with the sparks from your lips,
 Whispering in the ear of your beloved's poem*

*In praise of Spring,
You would set fire to the roots of Fall.*

*From my longing gaze, a sparrow flew away.
Be warned that my eyes*

*—Each a wide open window, facing the horizon—
From each breaking dawn till night’s darkest sorrow,
Will not blink.*

He folded the paper hastily and tucked it in his underwear. He could hide the piece of paper, but in a crowded cell, it was not easy to cloak his facial expression of ecstasy when the poems entered his soul. He earnestly believed that these words possessed him, turning the simple task of breathing into a tormenting ordeal.

The venom was extricated, for now. The intensity in his face vanished. He grew younger and lighter. He mingled with others, all death row prisoners, trying to appear like his normal self. This time, however, the venom was out, but the burden of the words remained. It made his lips tight, and his jaw rusty, making his usually effortless buoyancy tedious. He feared that with the execution of Asad, his secret passage to the world of words would collapse.

It was only hours ago that they had taken Asad away. And he already had written his homage to him. He suspected that this poem would be his last, for it had been Asad who had originally told him that words in his mind were poisonous and that he needed to “cough it up” on a piece of paper. “It will choke you if you don’t.” Asad was the one who convinced him that in his prodigious body, inside that hairy chest was a tender heart with infinite scars. It was like a riverbed in which his words were caught, waiting for a chance to flow out. If they stayed in, they would stagnate and rot,

turning venomous, then they would get into his blood and cause him anguish. Too exhausted and unmotivated to feign his gregarious role, he returned to his corner. He excavated the piece of paper from his underwear and read the poem once more. A devilish satisfaction tingled his stomach, because Asad was not there to critique his poem. Chagrined, he read the poem one last time and memorized it. He could not fathom what Asad would have said about his own eulogy, a fatuous thought. It was not far-fetched, of course: he himself had thought about how others would feel and what they would say for his own eulogy. He wrote in the tiny space at the top of the paper "To Asad." Then he tore it up carefully into hundreds of pieces and flushed it down the toilet.

Others already had started their lazy afternoon of lying on the floor staring at the ceiling with eyes wide open. Some pretended to be asleep, some really were. It made it easier for him to come back from *his journey into the deep winding riverbed of words in his heart* and all those fancy ways that Asad used to describe his poetic fits.

There were eighty people in the cell. Asad had said that there were three groups of death row prisoners: those who slept in the afternoon, those who pretended to be sleeping, and those who kept their eyes wide open. The first group were those who thought that it could never happen to them and never even used the word "execution." The second group were those who hoped that they would not be executed, but considered its possibility. And the last group knew that they were going to be executed. Since Ali could never situate himself in any of these groups, he thus came up with a fourth group, the undecided, of which Ali was the only member. Of course, one could altogether omit its psychology and find the real reason behind the laziness in the extreme heat of those tedious afternoons. Asad was definitely a committed and vocal member of the

third group, intolerant of “foolish optimism,” convinced that they were all going to be executed. (History proved Asad right, with one exception. Asad himself was not executed, although nobody realized that when they took him away. He was transferred to another prison, not to the hereafter.)

Ali had been married at an early age, fathering a son who had just celebrated his fourth birthday, like his third, without him. Recently, he had received a photo of his son, wearing a big Latin cowboy hat and jacket, with a toy guitar pressed against his chest. Ali deeply appreciated the solemn look on the face of the boy, as though he was looking toward the future, Ali thought, to the time that he would avenge his father’s blood. Ali was convinced that the picture was sent to him to convey this subtle message. It could not have been simply that the boy was showing off his birthday presents. The boy had to know. Ali was surprised that the authorities had let the picture go through, and thought that his wife was fortunate not to be arrested for passing on such a bold message of revenge. Could they not see that the picture alluded to the massacre in the football stadium after the 1973 military coup in Chile? The guitar, the hat, the reference to Victor Jara, who sang and played his guitar in the stadium until they cut out his tongue and mutilated his hands? Could they not see how resolutely his son posed for the picture? Although the authorities, along with his other cellmates, had failed to see the transparency of the message in the photograph, he was pleased that they were so blind, for the photo afforded him a consolation that no one in that cell could offer.

A few days ago, after he received it, he had gone through his ritual of releasing the venom of words. However, in that poem, his customary aesthetic was overtaken by his urge for revenge. He concluded it with these lines:

*On a high pitched note,
Do not play songs of separation.
On a low pitched note,
Ride the horses of liberation.
For one day, your small hands,
From the strings of the guitar,
Will fly higher than the heartless sky,
To pull the final trigger of emancipation.*

It gratified him that his son would deny his captors a tranquil life. It made his own death endurable.

Weary of the afternoon silence, he began to walk and kick the sweaty bodies of his cellmates. He brought those motionless souls, from wherever they were in those few hours, back to death row. Those he kicked sat up half asleep and unwillingly half awake, stretching their arms to the opposite sides of their bodies as hard as they could as they leaned back against the wall struggling to regain consciousness. Irritation was their first sensation after shaking off the numbness in their brain and limbs. They could be irritated with him, but nobody would ever express it. It was not apparent whether this restraint was due to his size or to his weighty position in their organization, since he enjoyed enormous respect that allowed him to define the terms of his relationship with others.

He mingled, played silly games, and chatted the time away. He seemed smaller and at ease, his eyes gleaming. A genuine smile returned to his lips, all visible signs that the venom had faded. Asad was right, when there is no venom in your heart, you do not feel pain. But before long the poisonous words will begin to build up again in your heart, constricting it, waiting for the moment to spring forth.

Two months later, Ali was executed.

FOR THE LOVE OF A THERMOS

Shahin was not a typical political prisoner. One who had fought for a cause and was paying the price. He was not there to claim a place in history, like many others. No. He cared for small things. Like his fancy stainless steel thermos. Pumping the colorless tea into the red plastic cup, Shahin looked straight into my eyes with a big nostalgic smile. He seemed about to reminisce, but instead held himself back and finished pouring the tea without uttering a word.

“Do you know where I was?” he asked in a low voice as he carefully handed me the cup. “In Chicago,” he sighed without waiting for my response. “The last time I pumped anything out of this thermos was in Chicago, in my cute apartment in one of those round, lake-view high-rises. It was just a summer ago. You know, summers are terrible in Chicago, not as unbearable as the winters, but almost. You shouldn’t be on the streets in either season unless it’s a matter of life or death. Of course, I’m exaggerating, but if you ask any American about Chicago they’ll all tell you the same thing, ‘great city, terrible weather.’ In summertime, it’s cool inside, but outside . . . the sole of your shoes melt on the sidewalk. I loved to sit

on my hot little balcony, put this gorgeous thermos next to me and pour chilled beer out into my frozen German beer mug—you know those thick ones that never break, even if you throw them out to the street from the fiftieth floor. I'd sip it slowly and watch the crazy crowd down below and the calm lake behind them. I hate warm, flat beer. This thermos kept the beer nice and cold for an entire day. I couldn't drink fast. I mean, I could but I never enjoyed it. Drinking should be in harmony with the rhythm of your life, slow, steady, and sensual. Oh my beautiful thermos, how I love you. Ah, places we've been together!"

He tried in vain to put a satirical spin on his last sentence, but I could see real tears in his eyes when he turned his pensive face away from me and poured more tea out for the others.

"I never bothered to think about the price," he continued, getting sloppy about pouring the tea. "Money was never an issue. I wanted to get the best quality thermos on the market. I wanted to spend my last summer in Chicago in style. 'I can't afford to buy a cheap thing.' That's an American expression," he added as a footnote. "When I was there, most of my friends were American, that's how I learned their slang so well. That's why everybody here loves my English classes. Because I don't teach them only basic survival English, I give them a feeling of being there, how to connect, not just how to get by."

He lowered his voice to a whisper and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Not like his Italian class." He nodded toward Gholam, who had spent more than ten years in Italy and was arrested for membership in the Maoist party *Ranjbaran*.

"I don't know much Italian, but I tell you, this guy has never mingled with Italians. Where were we? Oh yes, the price. I paid

ninety-nine dollars for this little beauty. Just touch its smooth body, look at its curves, and how nicely its neck nestles on its trunk.”

He grabbed my hand and guided it first up and then down on the thermos. “Isn’t it magnificent?”

The sad sound of the last splash of tea cut his romance short.

“Let’s go for a short walk around the lake.” He smiled, allowing his large white teeth to invade his face briefly, and put his hands in the pockets of his shiny silk pajamas, another souvenir from America. Then he began his daily afternoon walk. After a short round, he came back to put socks on his cold boyish feet.

Shahin was a man in his late twenties who had lived in the United States for more than ten years (sometimes I thought that he was still living there). He had pale skin, brown receding hair, and a light brown moustache. His parents were from Fouman, a small Caspian town. From the small windows he had opened to his history, it was evident that he came from a wealthy family. Even without that knowledge, his body language and his obsession with the “finer pleasures of life,” and with “the proper order of things” left no doubt as to his privileged past. Naturally, he never behaved like an aristocrat; he was not reserved or snobbish, as one might expect, but rather affectionate and warm.

His afternoon walks were his inspection tours, when he would carefully monitor how things were organized in the cell, cleaning up any mess, or asking others to be more responsible for their belongings. He would approach anyone wearing a shabby T-shirt, yellowed by the sweat and dirt of prison years, and ask them to put nicer clothing on.

“Pity our eyes,” he would plead, “what has happened to your aesthetic sense?”

Secretly, he believed they had none, and thus he felt responsible for the “beautification” of our cell. It was on his shoulders to

maintain, as he used to put it, “the minimum elegance required for an average educated person.”

Most others considered his obsession with style simply to be neurotic. Why should anybody care for aesthetic refinements in a goddamn cell on death row?

Among the eighty prisoners, nobody exhibited overt signs of panic or fear. Shahin seemed especially distant from his experience as a death row inmate. Was it his naïveté, his essential optimism, or disbelief that made him so different from the others? Did he not understand the magnitude of what he and the others were going through? Was he going to collapse one day into a dark, paralyzing despair?

Each day Shahin woke up with new ideas for his *ItalMode*, the institutional force behind his aesthetic mission. He wanted people to fold their blankets in a particular way and arrange them in a “La-Z-Boy recliner” style one day, another day like a bench, and sometimes like a couch. He insisted that cellmates place their own colorful blankets, which their families had given them, on top of the pile to overcome the insipid color of the coarse prison blankets. “Life without colors,” he reminded everyone, “is just black and white. You might think that I’m merely stating the obvious, but think about the hidden meaning in this apparently superfluous sentence.”

Shahin himself was not the kind of person who would spend a lifetime searching for unfathomed meanings. There was no mystery in his statement. Colors made him happy, they added some pieces of green and orange to the gloom of his heart.

ItalMode was his invention. He was not good with his hands, he always conceded, but he could imagine things.

“I see things before they are built,” he used to brag, “and the moment they are, I’ve already thought about the kind of changes I’d like to see in them.”

One could say that Shahin was a firm believer in the distinction between manual and mental labor. He asked four others to help him in carrying out his projects, such as building bookcases, small tables, a medicine cabinet, picture frames, or other merely decorative *objets d'art*. All these were made of rolled-up newspapers, homemade (cell-made) glue of rice and sugar, and threads recovered from old shirts and socks. Although occasionally the guards raided the cell and destroyed all the ItalMode furniture, Shahin viewed these raids as opportunities for more creative work. During the time we spent together, he got the chance to show off his taste for decoration over and over again.

Three days a week, Shahin devoted two hours to teaching American English to his death row cellmates. He was adamant about the fact that his tutorial was American English, the language and the culture he knew best. He had spent most of his youth there, but nobody knew exactly what he had been doing in America. With all his charm and endless chattering, he never talked about himself, and nobody cared. We were strangers, and we remained strangers. We did not have much in common, except an unspoken sentence of death.

After months of sharing afternoon walks with Shahin, I found out that he had been a student of mathematics at a university in Chicago. He was arrested only a few months after his return to Iran. For what reason, I do not know, except that, like all of us, he was a political prisoner. He was married, but never talked about his wife. He talked about other women in his life, often, but not his wife. He made it clear with many gestures that she was off limits.

Later I learned that she had been executed. Did Shahin ever yearn to cry for her? Was the pain buried so deep in him that even he couldn't excavate it? Was he running away from insanity? Or was he already captured by it? Did it matter?

For months, during every session with his magnificent thermos, Shahin brought to our cell the vivid image of his lake-view apartment, the taste of the chilled imported beer, and the smell of a hot summer in Chicago. The thermos was indeed beautiful and elegant. I grew to love touching its smooth body and its exquisite curves, and I knew that it loved me back, too. Shahin told me so, before he was taken to be executed.

BAHRAM

My father died in the early hours of the morning on a cold day in March 1983. He died on the day of my monthly visitation, just as my mother was bundling up to face the frigid predawn air that cracks the bones of those who waited in line for unending hours to visit their loved ones.

I saw my father only once in the three-and-a-half years I spent in prison. The phones had not yet been installed in the visitation hall at Evin. I stood on one side of the glass partition while my parents remained on the other. My father only cried while my mother tried her best to assure me, through her animated sign language, that everything was going to be all right. I could see she told my father that he should leave if he couldn't stop crying. He stopped crying then, but he never came back. My visitation rights were suspended after the first visit and by the time I was allowed to see them again, he was too sick to endure the long lines outside of prison and the humiliation the guards subjected them to for raising counter-revolutionary children.

Knowing that each time might be the last, she could not give up any opportunity to visit her son. I imagined her sitting on the bed

next to the body of her life companion of more than thirty-three years, weeping silently as she told herself, *I shouldn't cry too much, I can't show the grief in my eyes when I see my son.* My sister and brother encouraged her to go and see me, and I could picture her saying, as much to herself as to them, "I know, I must live for the living."

The thin layer of cheerfulness on her face could hardly hide her deep sorrow. She sat behind the glass partition quietly, fearing that speaking would open the flood of tears. It had been more than a year since I'd seen my father.

"Is he dead?" I asked, trying to contain my tears.

She only smiled and told me that I needed to concentrate on my own situation. "He will be fine," she told me, "you must remain strong."

Neither of us wanted to continue that conversation. We both acknowledged the passing of my father without uttering a word about his demise: how, when, where, who was there, who was not.

When I finally walked out of my little booth looking for a place to shriek, I was greeted by the hallway guard, who asked, "Why was the bitch crying so much today?"

I pushed him so hard that he hit the wall behind him and fell to the floor. Never have I wanted to kill a man so intensely.

Ali the poet had also just finished his visitation with his wife and son and was there next to me. He pulled my arm and ran with me toward our cell. I told him that my father was dead and what the guard told me as we ran. We heard the guard's call for help and the footsteps of other guards following us. Ali put me in front of the cell door and sheltered me with his big body. When the guards caught up with us, Ali screamed that this is not the way to treat someone whose father had just passed away. I was crying.

“I’ll kill you,” shouted the guard whom I had assaulted. I knew he meant it.

The shift supervisor was there so I told him what had happened and how the guard’s insult had clouded my judgment. The number of guards kept increasing as if they were there to suppress a mutiny.

In a surprisingly calm voice, the supervisor scolded me for creating this mayhem. Then he opened the door and asked Ali and me to get in.

Ali had saved my life.

Inside Ali offered me a cigarette, one extra beyond our daily ration of three. He was in charge of distributing our ration in the cell. I finished it with a few puffs. He offered me another one. In the middle of smoking the second cigarette, and the tears, an old song came to me. A song my father had taught me when I was five or six years old. “You can sing it at parties,” he had told me, “and impress your friends.” A group of prisoners encircled me and I sang for them.

*I was the child of a toiling farmer,
In the valleys of Tajikistan,
We had some land,
And tilled the soil,
We planted seeds,
And harvested grain,
We baked the bread,
And counted ourselves happy.*

PICKLED GARLIC

“To me, Beethoven defines what Romanticism was all about. In whatever genre this man wrote—symphonies, piano music, string quartets—he exhibited genius. People might disagree with me, but I think that Romantic music was born sometime between his second and third symphonies.”

My five avid students looked at me blankly, having never listened to classical music or learned about the difference between one school of music and another.

“I wish I knew some Romantic music when I was trying to impress this girl I had a total crush on,” Farid lamented. “She always told me I lacked a *romantic soul*. It’s true, she was more into poetry, but I think making her a tape of Romantic music would have done the trick.”

“But what would you have done with your ugly face?” Javid said and burst into laughter, followed by the others. “What you needed was some nice romantic painting to put over your face so the poor girl couldn’t see what she was in for.”

“I am afraid you’re confusing what I say about Romantic style in music with romance . . .” I began, but my voice was lost in the rowdy

match they launched into about which of them had perfected the ancient art of romance. “What girl can resist a poem like this?” said Keivan, who proceeded to show off his encyclopedic knowledge of contemporary poetry:

*Ah Angel,
Made into flesh,
Your body would not burn,
Except in the flames of deceit,
Your presence is a paradise,
Justifying escape from hell,
It is an ocean, drenching me,
To cleanse me,
Of every deception, every sin.
And the dawn awakens by your hands!*

“You know, Shamlou wrote these eternal lines in admiration of Aida. A poem like this will burn any girl on this planet with the flames of desire. You want a girl’s heart, make her know that her hands *awaken the dawn* . . .”

“Please save the comments for your poetry class,” I said, knowing I was fighting a losing battle. “Let’s go back to Beethoven and his ninth symphony, with its ‘Ode to Joy.’”

As I said the words “Ode to Joy,” we heard Asghar reciting the *Allah O Akbar*, the call to noontime prayer, at the top of his lungs. Thus ended our weekly class on the history of Western music.

For the past three months, Asghar had taken upon himself the responsibility to call out the *Azan*, summoning everyone to daily prayers. Three times a day, first before dawn, second at noon, and third at the sunset, the self-appointed muezzin of the cell stood

next to the door and with all the might in his tiny body shouted the call for prayer in his strident voice. He stood next to the door to make sure the warden and the guards would hear his cry of devotion. It was important to him that they were aware of his newfound faith, just as God would hear the sound of his heart and feel the purity he had finally achieved on death row. None of us could entertain the idea of asking him to hit the right notes, much less to lower his volume. That could have been taken as a hostile move against the *Azan*, instead of a desperate attempt to save our ears from our muezzin's voice.

Asghar was short and sickly thin, with a jaundiced face that seemed sunken in his disproportionately large tube-like head. He seldom smiled, but even on those occasions when he did, it belied the permanent anxiety of his sad black eyes. His wobbly walk undermined his constant effort to be taken seriously. But none of that mattered to us so much as his irksome voice and his utter inability to produce something remotely close to a heavenly call for prayer. Despite that fact, I think he saw himself offering the soundtrack of piety, an evidence of the sincerity of his conversion from an old misguided communist to a new enlightened believer.

Being a muezzin was Asghar's off-duty responsibility. His real occupation was to be one of the five snitches in a cell of eighty-five unrepentant death row prisoners. It was not easy for Asghar. The other four did not have the burden of a communist past, but since he had taken that undesirable detour in his life journey, he now needed to show extra holiness. In a strict sense, Asghar and his informant colleagues were not snitches, as they never hid from us their willingness to report others' "misbehavior." This could be defined as anything from holding and participating in classes on any topic, such as languages, calligraphy, or art history,

to contacting prisoners in other cells. Informants also spied on one another. Turning in another antenna could earn them the unshakable trust of the warden and perhaps, the biggest prize, a reduced sentence.

The few minutes of prayer time allowed each of us to carve out a momentary pause into which one could retreat, both those who prayed and those who did not. A time that one could feel his fears, ponder regrets, and lament losses, without agonizing over what others might think.

Later in the afternoon, on the same day as my Beethoven class, in a very unusual move, Asghar approached me as I was meandering from one side of our large crowded cell to the other.

“Excuse me,” he said, sounding as if he had already betrayed his faith. “Can I ask you a question?”

I gave him a look that let him know he could not.

“No, I’m serious,” he said, following me. “Do you ever talk about Marx in your class?”

I sensed trouble.

“Yes, if Marx were a composer, but is he?” I asked.

He knew very well that I was teaching death row music appreciation and that it, obviously, had nothing to do with Marx.

“Are you going to teach a class on Marxism?”

“Are you out of your fucking mind? Aren’t we in enough trouble already?”

“No, seriously, I want to know. If you ever teach a class on Marxism, I want to participate. I want to understand it better.”

I wondered if he knew something about my file. There were at least twenty other Marxists in the cell. Why was he approaching me? There were others who taught classes. Gholam taught Italian and

Reza taught German. He would actually be the perfect candidate for Asghar's inquiry, as he always claimed that he had read the original Marx, in the only language in which Marx is fully comprehensible. How did Asghar know that Reza was full of it and had nothing to show for his alleged deep knowledge of Marxism?

"Listen, if you need to make something up and report it to the warden, go ahead. I don't care what you tell them. I think nothing you report could change anything for me. You want to tell them that I teach Marxism in my cell? Go fucking ahead."

"I promise you, this has nothing to do with you. I need to know Marxism better in order to strengthen my faith."

"I don't care what your faith is, whether it's weak or strong, just leave me alone."

"But you see . . ."

"No, I don't see."

"Please let me finish. I promise I won't bother you again."

"Your presence bothers me. Can you ask your friends to transfer you to another cell? Can you disappear after you ask your question?"

"I only need to know Marx's theory of value. Where does profit come from, according to Marx?"

"Why don't you keep yourself busy with your own prophet and leave Marx's alone? Marx's theory of value? I think you should get your head examined. You can do that, no? We have to wait months for our turn to visit the infirmary, but for you it's easy. Just ask your buddies to arrange for a doctor to see you. I think there might be a tumor growing in your head and it is making your old and new worlds collide."

I did not want to appear to be too friendly with him. Lines of trust within the cell were too thin as it was. Once a line was broken,

it could take months before you could find yourself on the safe side of the divide.

But he was not easy to shake off.

“I’m not trying to justify my past, but the problem is that I had no idea what Marxism was when I became a communist. Now I think that my faith is strong enough to be able to go back and study it and reject it consciously and deeply. I don’t want the same thing to happen to me now. I mean I don’t want to accept anything blindly, the way I did when I was a communist.”

“Don’t worry, the threat of execution will continue to keep your faith strong and totally sincere. I have no doubt that you have recanted with full consciousness of your sins and an unbreakable commitment to keeping your faith unshakable. So rest assured, with or without knowing Marx’s theory of value, you’ll be fine.”

“You think I converted out of fear, but . . .”

“Listen, I don’t think about you, I don’t care about you, I don’t want to learn about you, I don’t give a damn why you converted, I don’t know you, and I don’t care to change any of the above. Just leave me alone please.”

I tried to move away from him. Every few steps I reversed direction. I walked faster, then slower. Nothing worked. Others had told me before that he was like a louse: he sticks to you and won’t leave.

“I promise you, I won’t bother you if you just explain one thing to me. I’ve been reading a book and there’s this chapter critiquing Marx’s theory of value. I just want to make sure I’m getting it right and the author knows what he’s talking about. I’ll take only a few minutes of your time, I promise.”

How much is the promise of a snitch worth?

“You expect me to tell you Marx’s theory in a few minutes? You already had your few minutes.”

“OK, at least let me tell you what I read and you just tell me whether I understand it right. That way, you have nothing to be afraid of either, since I’ll do all the talking and you just listen.”

“You think I’m afraid of you, you little worm? Fuck you.”

“NO, NO! I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant. What I wanted to say was that if you think that I’m trying to take advantage of you by putting you in a position that you say something and then I report it to the authorities . . . What’s the word? You know, entrapment, yes, I’m not trying to do that. Do you know what I am trying to say?”

I decided it was easier for me to just listen to his question rather than trying to ward him off.

“Okay, tell me what your problem is.”

“All right. But let me thank you first, because it means a lot to me . . .”

“Just shut the fuck up and tell me what you have in mind.”

“Yes. You see, I was reading this chapter and it says that Marx believed that every commodity—you know what he means by commodity, right? OK—has two kinds of value, one use-value and another exchange-value. Is that right?”

“Go on and don’t ask me after every sentence what’s right and what’s wrong. I’ll tell you at the end.”

“Use-value, it says, is about like why we need things. Like, how should I put it, we need a bicycle to go to places.”

“The utility of things . . .”

“Yes, yes, see that’s why I needed to run this by you, the utility of things. They have to satisfy a need, otherwise what are they good for? I think I agree with Marx on this. But that’s the obvious point. The other one, what was it?”

“. . . The exchange-value!” I said, already regretting that I’d gotten myself into some kind of trap.

“Thank you, exchange-value is the tricky one. Marx says that the exchange-value has nothing to do with the use-value, right? OK, I know, I shouldn’t ask you. But it’s about how much labor you put into making something. Like if you spend a certain amount of labor in making something, that thing would be worth the equivalent of how much you spend on the labor. I know I’m not making much sense. But that’s why I need you to tell me if that’s correct or not.”

I was rather impressed by the effort he was putting into this. Maybe he was genuinely trying to learn something. If he was acting, he was doing a good job of it. The anxiety in his face for trying to get it right was so real that for a moment I thought that perhaps talking to him would not terminate my humanity.

“You’re doing just fine. I see what you’re trying to say.”

“OK. We determine the value of a commodity, I mean the exchange-value of a commodity, based on the labor that has gone into making it.”

“So, which book is it that you are reading all this in?”

“Oh, this is all in Ayatollah Motahhari’s *The Historical Causes of the Spread of Materialist Thought*. We have it in our cell, if you’re ever interested in reading it.”

“So, what is his criticism of Marx’s theory?”

“Ayatollah Motahhari says that if it were true that the exchange-value of all commodities were determined by the amount of labor that had gone into producing them, then how would Marx explain the exchange-value of pickled garlic?”

“What? Pickled garlic?”

“Yes, pickled garlic. You see . . . if Marx is right, then how can we explain the amazing value of garlic pickled for seven years in vinegar? As you know, seven-year-old pickled garlic is almost as

expensive as gold, people who love garlic would pay whatever price you ask for this delicacy. But here's the problem. When you pickle garlic you spend some time and labor and some raw material. If you want to sell it right when you make it, you won't make much profit. But, if you let the garlic sit for seven years, without doing any additional labor, suddenly the price would go up ten times! How do we explain this? A jar of pickled garlic sitting in some basement somewhere collecting dust and exchange-value. Isn't that amazing? Doesn't it refute Marx's theory?"

I could see the sparks of triumph-over-Marxism in his eyes. Finally, a complex theory, as tight as the cap that seals a pickled garlic jar, that refutes Marx's theory of value once and for all. He was trying hard to hold back and not reveal his pleasure in seeing my flabbergasted face. He looked like he had once more convinced himself, and perhaps me, that he abandoned Marxism not because of fear, torture, or any other coercive means. He recanted because he saw the scientific foundation of the flaws in Marxian theory. It restored his dignity to know that there was irrefutable empirical evidence, something as common as a jar of seven-year-old pickled garlic, against the validity of Marx's theory. He wanted others to know that there was nothing expedient about his repentance—he was just following what was objectively right.

"You and Ayatollah Motahhari would be totally right if pickled garlic was the foundation of the world economy. Until that day, I'm afraid, we have to come up with a better way of refuting Marx's theory."

"But don't you think . . ."

"No, I don't."

Asghar, determined to prove his point and perhaps make another convert out of someone, said that he "respected" me. He

went on to offer me his life story so I could appreciate his “journey of light” and understand why it was important to him that he believed in something to which he felt connected, not only emotionally, but rationally as well as spiritually.

He was, I learned, the only child of an illiterate father who made ends meet as a day laborer. His paraplegic mother, also illiterate, needed his help from the moment he was able to walk. They used to live in Saveh, a small town near Tehran, but eventually moved to Tehran like hundreds of thousands of other day laborers.

“There was this girl in our neighborhood,” he confided in me, “so beautiful. That is what I thought at the time, of course, but now I realize that God had sent her to tempt me and I surrendered to the temptation. Not that she would show the light of day to me. She was older than me and there were many more qualified boys around than me. No, it wasn’t like that. I surrendered to the temptation because one day I saw her in front of the university with piles of communist pamphlets. I became a communist and made sure to join the same organization she was a member of. Then, she noticed me from the neighborhood. The more she opened her eyes to my presence, in rallies, in meetings, in the neighborhood, the deeper I sank into politics.”

Did he think that I too was an informant and would convey this information to his interrogator? Was he simply tired of being isolated in a death row cell and needed someone to talk to? Was this his infantile attempt to get me to tell him about myself?

“She helped me get a place of my own. First, I thought that it was the first step for the two of us being together. But then, I realized that they needed a place to stash the pamphlets and fliers, and someone who could deliver them to different locations. My parents were devastated. I told my father that I was fighting a battle, one that

he should have fought many years ago. I was fighting on his behalf. At least that's what I thought. It's what she persuaded me to think. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to blame her. I blame myself and my own weakness for all this."

His whole confessional ritual seemed too rehearsed to me. He sounded genuine, but his behavior had made it difficult to muster any sympathy for his plight.

"Then one day she asked me if I could go to Kurdistan and bring back a package of material. I swear on the soul of my mother, who died shortly after I moved out, that this exactly is what she told me, *a package of some material*. Since I always dealt with pamphlets and stuff, I thought that I was bringing back some sensitive documents that they could not trust shipping in any other way. Well, that package turned out to be a big case with rounds of bullets for some kind of light machine gun. You might wonder how I found that out."

I had no intention of asking, but the story was getting interesting. Not so unfamiliar, but nevertheless another variation on the common theme of love and revolution.

"She was arrested a few months later. Before I heard about her arrest, I was sitting here in prison waiting for my own interrogation. One day, I was tied to a metal bed, waiting to be punished for lying to my interrogators about my involvement in the organization."

He was very careful not to call what he went through torture. He repeated the same rhetoric that we were all told, that the prisoners were not subjected to torture, that whipping was only a penalty sanctioned by a judge for the crime of lying.

"They brought her in and asked her, 'So, who brought the bullets from Kurdistan to Tehran?' She told them, 'Asghar.' Then I realized for the first time that this is the price one pays for turning his

back on God. It was not bullets I brought back from Kurdistan, it was the wrath of God.”

His story did not end up changing the way I felt about him, and his scientific refutation of Marx’s theory of value needed some serious work before it could persuade anyone to see the flaws of Marxism, though it did make me crave the homemade, syrupy seven-year-old pickled garlic my grandfather used to sell in his shop.

After that day, Asghar never talked to me about anything. He did not pose any further questions and continued to report about the activities of his unrepentant cellmates.

One day, in the midsummer, just as the sun set, he began his Azan exactly on the same flat and deafening note of Allah O Akbar, at the same spot where he had been delivering it for six months. This time, a guard opened the door, allowing his dreadful voice to reverberate through the halls of the vast prison. After he was done, his eyes glistening, as surely he thought he had finally overcome the barrier.

The guard asked him to collect his belongings and step outside immediately.

He was executed the next day before sunrise.

THE POET

Davoud did not strike one as the poetic type. Silence, deep contemplation, and romantic thoughts about small things did not particularly correspond to his sensibilities. He saw himself as the soul of the cell, not in a metaphysical or heroic sense, but more in the way he buoyed us with his wit. Between his fantastic childhood stories—which he had developed into a nightly soap opera for a devoted few—and highlights of the funniest scenes from death row, he was constantly thinking of how to make the dull, ordinary, ghastly everyday life in our cell humorous. From the outside, it might have seemed garish and awkward, but Davoud transcended his subject matter, transporting us so easily along with him that it was only afterward that one appreciated his magical whimsy.

But Davoud's kingdom of mirth also had its limits. So when he steered toward our small poetry group one day, we all felt the need to protect our turf by erecting a wall between the brute and the refined. After all, how long could one transcend the fear of death through Davoud's childish adventures?

“I know a poem, too,” he announced, inserting himself gleefully among our group. “Actually, I don’t know that many poems,” he added, “but a while ago a guy who spent a few nights with me in Evin asked me to memorize four new quatrains of Shamlou.”

Nobody in our group of three could have imagined we’d hear the name of our greatest living poet coming from Davoud’s mouth. Was he familiar with Shamlou? Had he ever read him?

“Do you want to hear it?” he asked with a smile that cast doubts on his seriousness.

“Sure,” I said, “let’s hear it.”

“Let’s see if I can remember it now . . .” He paused. Suddenly, his cheeks grew pale and his lips begin to tremble while the rest of us looked at each other in awe. “The first one, and my own favorite, goes like this . . .”

*In the final moment,
His bright eyes became a small pond
Where under the expanse of open sky
Densely flocking birds came to rest,
As he closed his eyes
With a smile on his face.*

In trying to digest the first poem, I could not hear the rest of them. Davoud went through them all with a short pause in between to announce their numbers.

“Are they any good?” he asked us nonchalantly.

Was he mocking us? Did he know what treasure he had brought to us?

“So what do you think?” He was insisting on an answer, playing with us, perhaps thinking about his next hilarious story of how

he stunned a small death row poet society. Even Davoud knew that you do not ask such a question about a Beethoven symphony, a Bach cantata, a Dickens novel, or a Van Gogh painting. You just absorb them. You immersed yourself in them, so they became your flesh and blood. They were not merely things to be appreciated, they *defined* you.

The word spread in the cell that Davoud knew the latest Shamlou poems. Lines formed to memorize them; not literally, of course, for security reasons. Davoud generously took some time off from his daily comedy routines to spend patient hours with the enthusiastic fans of Shamlou, reciting the poems over and over again.

“Are they really that good?” he asked me during a memorization session.

“Don’t pull my leg, Davoud,” I said, becoming a bit irritated with his act.

“No, I’m serious.” Seeing that he had my attention, he added, “But, even if they weren’t Shamlou’s, would you still have the same kind of admiration for them?”

Had he pulled a big one over on us? Suddenly, I saw in his gaze an ugly cloud of cynicism rushing toward me. Had he fooled us all? Was he clever enough to make this all up and sell it as counterfeit Shamlou? I was already thinking about the stories he’d be telling about what idiots we were.

“I had no other choice,” he confessed. “These are not Shamlou’s, but had you known that these were written by a cellmate of mine, would you be this excited about memorizing them?”

My tongue suddenly found it difficult to move. We were slobbering over somebody else’s poetry like that?

“They are good no matter who has written them,” I lied, trying desperately to save face. “Whose are they?”

“No, first you need to tell me whether they are as good as Shamlou’s,” he said firmly.

“I don’t know much about poetry, but I think they’re quite good.”

Of course nobody is as good as Shamlou, but since we had all declared that these four quatrains exemplified Shamlou’s genius, anything less than unconditional praise for them would be detrimental to our authority as connoisseurs-in-residence.

“They are as good as Shamlou’s,” I muttered halfheartedly, “but whose poems are they?”

“Last spring . . . was it last spring?” He scratched his head. “Yes, last spring, they brought this old guy, a teacher, to our cell. He was a very strange man, never talked to anybody, and was always lost in his own world. He was much older than the rest of us, you know, and he didn’t participate in any of our activities in the cell like making things and decorating, having a party. One day it was raining and most of my cellmates didn’t want to go out for our ten minutes of fresh air. He asked me, ‘Are you going?’ and I said, ‘Are you kidding, even if rocks fall from the sky I wouldn’t miss my fresh air.’ Only a handful of us went down to the courtyard. He started walking in the drizzle with his face up and eyes closed. I walked next to him and he started reciting these poems. I asked him, ‘Whose are these?’ And he said they were for a ‘fallen comrade.’ He didn’t mention that the poems were his, but it was obvious that they were. I told him that they were nice and I wanted to memorize them. He looked at me in disbelief. ‘Are you sure?’ he asked me. I was a little embarrassed, I don’t know why, but I was. He taught them to me and told me how to recite them. He was very specific about where the accents were and how you need to use a low pitch to recite them.

“I was dying to ask who this ‘fallen comrade’ of his was. So many of them around, you know. I became fond of the poet. The better I knew and liked him the more I became infatuated and somewhat jealous of the ‘fallen comrade.’ He never talked about him and that was driving me crazy. He spoke of him with such affection that I wanted to be that ‘fallen comrade.’ One day finally I asked him, so who was this guy? He told me this long story of how in his early days of prison the fallen comrade rescued him from falling into an absolute abyss. He couldn’t deal with pain, he told me. The pain of torture, of separation from his young wife and son, of the realization of his own weakness, of being humiliated by the guards and by his own cellmates, so many different kinds of pain. He told me, ‘My comrade was my angel. He shared his food with me, made sure that I had enough space to sleep inside that crowded cell, listened to my long stories about my life without ever expecting me to listen to his.’ He said so many things about this guy that made him sound more and more like a saint rather than a simple comrade.”

Was this an extraordinary coincidence? I had known an old teacher with whom I’d spent a short time in Evin. Was he that same man?

“Are you talking about Ahmad Masoudi?” I asked Davoud.

“How do you know?” he replied in amazement.

“He was my cellmate,” I said. “I think he might have been referring to me!”

Davoud burst into laughter, holding his belly, then knelt down and rolled over. He was gasping for air, with tears dripping from his face onto the carpet.

“But you’re not dead!” Davoud exclaimed, barely able to let the words come out.

“And I’m no saint either,” I told him.

“I can’t believe he could have been talking about *you!*” he said, accenting the *you* in a belittling offensive way.

And then I burst out laughing too.

I had already been sentenced to death when I walked into that crowded cell two years earlier. I had been transferred to Evin after my trial, presumably for my sentence to be carried out. It was always disorienting when you took off your blindfold after entering a new cell. You would always bring in with yourself a disturbing silence. Everybody would wonder how they’d get along with a newcomer in this twenty-by-twenty foot space made for only eighteen people, but occupied by more than a hundred. Somebody grabbed my small bag and put it somewhere with the rest of the stuff in the cell. I shook some hands and sat with some others I knew from the outside.

In one corner a man was huddled on the floor hiding his face from the crowd. He remained in that position for a very long time, until the guards brought the food and somebody asked him rudely to get up and get ready for dinner. He was a fragile man, short and extremely thin, with a dark face, not so attractive by any measure. He had puffy eyes with large bags hanging beneath. He looked pitiful and miserable. It was evident that he had gone through the infamous Evin aging program at the beginning of his arrest. But for him, the program did not stop there. His cellmates constantly pushed him around. They despised him, for seeming so obviously weak, gloomy, and forlorn. He was sinking, others thought, and nobody intended to hold his hand for fear that he might drown them, too.

They called him sarcastically Mister Teacher, reminding him that he no longer had anything to teach them. Indeed, two of his

students were in that cell, but even they were unsympathetic. His nickname provided me with my opening line.

“Are you a teacher?” I asked him one day, risking my own sanity to approach him.

“I *was* a teacher,” he replied in a soft, mellifluous voice that sounded like it came from someone years younger than he looked.

“What did you teach?”

“Literature,” he replied, without looking at me.

I searched my mind to find the next line. I could not, and paused.

He walked away.

One day later I told him that I loved literature, especially poetry.

“Aren’t you political?” he asked, unable to disguise his sarcasm. “I thought you guys are all about politics, politics, politics. Everything else is worthless. Aren’t you a revolutionary?” He was becoming agitated and impatient.

I told him that I did not have any idea what he was talking about, but I was very serious about poetry and classical music. I carried on a monologue about music to let him know that my comments were not merely the opening lines of an empty conversation. I wanted to prove to him that there were young revolutionaries whose lives were not reduced to crude and vulgar politics.

He confessed that he was not made for prison life. That of course was not the only thing he confided. He was indeed aware of his ugliness and he told me about his marriage and the fact that his beautiful young wife made him extremely insecure. We sat for hours each day and I listened keenly to him. Everything he said was new to me. His openness about his own weaknesses, particularly when it came to sex, disturbed my puritan morality. Was he telling me all these unspeakable things because he thought I was going to

be executed? Or was it the case that what seemed scandalous to me, a young revolutionary, was something that people talked about all the time?

Ahmad fascinated me. He crisscrossed between poetry and his life story with a language of such beauty that listening to him became a great pleasure. He could recite poetry for hours. How could one memorize all this? Could it be that all those poems were his? He never told me he wrote poems. I felt so inadequate, having nothing to offer him. The only thing I could do was to make his life in the cell easier. I protected him when others ridiculed him, and tried to satisfy his sweet tooth with my share of two sugar cubes a day. That was all I did. He too suffered from migraine headaches, which occasionally were followed by violent seizures (talking about his wife often triggered them). I had a stash of painkillers hidden in my bag and I made sure that he had easy access to them. Soon, I thought, painkillers would lose their utility for me.

So, the day came. On a dreary afternoon, with the ominous turn of the key, the door opened. The guard called my name, and asked me to collect my belongings. I had come there in silence and wanted to leave the same way—different kinds of silence, one probing and the other terrifying. My poet was not going to let this happen. He first grabbed my arms and immediately wrapped me in his own. For the first time, I held him tightly. I realized how grave his frailty was.

“I won’t let you,” he screamed at the guard—luckily for him, it happened to be a nice one that time. He howled “*No, no, no!*” Tears were gushing out of his eyes onto my chest.

Others tried to pull him away, but he became stronger and stronger and held on to me. He was crushing me and I realized that he was going into a convulsion. He let me go, held his head and fell

on the floor, sobbing. The guard ordered two people to carry him outside and told me to pack immediately.

I packed while hearing the echo of his voice in the hallway. When I walked out of the cell, his screaming had already ceased. I stepped out and before I put my blindfold on, I saw him lying on the floor next to the cold staircase. A doctor was standing next to him capping a syringe. The poet's yellowing eyes were wide open, looking at me without blinking, clear tears springing out, but no emotions appeared on his face. That was the last time we saw each other.

BREASTED MEN

Mansour and I became the designated barbers of the Quarantine, albeit with fundamentally different philosophies. Mansour saw cutting hair as an issue of hygiene, and I regarded it as an opportunity for beautification. I cared for hairstyle; he saw hair as an invitation to a lice party. We opened the shop once a week and did magic with our two manual hair clippers. Well, I did magic, Mansour just shaved his customers' hair with impunity.

After Mansour was executed, I became the sole proprietor of the Quarantine barbershop.

I had to work double time. I was not sure whether my growing exhaustion was related to my working hours or something else was happening. One day, after three hours of nonstop work, I sat in a corner trying to massage my stiff neck. I felt a few lumps on my neck and didn't think much of it. The lumps were not painful. They just restricted my head's movement. But then they grew fast in numbers and size. In two months the tumors took over my neck

and armpit. I didn't know what to make of it. No, I did know what to make of it, but did not want to.

For four months, the warden turned down my repeated requests for a medical exam. I sent messages to my mother that I was dying on death row and that she needed to pull whatever strings she could muster from the outside to get the warden to transfer me to the infirmary. She did.

Six months after I spotted the first lumps on my neck, a guard called me to step outside. Four others were waiting for me. We walked toward the warden's office. I asked whether I should put a blindfold on. They said no, "You need to see this procedure." The shift supervisor grabbed my neck and screamed, "We're going to operate on you, right here, right now." I don't remember the rest.

I was lying on the floor in front of the warden's office when I opened my eyes. The warden was standing in front of me. "Who did this to you?" he said with a grin on his face. "We are going to send you to the infirmary." Then he talked to two other guards and told them to make sure that I was admitted.

I never went back to the Quarantine. They delivered my sack and sent me to the infirmary where I met Mr. Rezaei.

"I beg you not to leave me here by myself, I beg you, by the blessed soul of your father . . ."

"My father is not dead, you disgusting piece of shit."

"I have nobody here except you, I'll die here. I beg you . . ."

"Don't touch me, how many times do I need to tell you, dirty pig, not to touch me . . . Move away."

Then there was a screeching cry mixed with a loud laugh, both coming from the gut with a horrific force.

“Brother, I’m bleeding, I won’t survive the night here, who will take care of me? You are the only one I have in this world . . . I’ll kiss your hands. I’ll kiss your feet. Don’t leave me here like this . . . I’ll die.”

“Go kiss your breasted man’s feet, you dirty little worm.”

Up to that point, I hadn’t even opened my eyes. It was late at night; I was struggling in my bed, counting each spot of pain in my body before trying to fall asleep. I had learned not to open my eyes under any circumstances. I abhorred the jaundice color of the room, maintained twenty-four hours a day by a caged pathetic light bulb. Seeing that color made me sicker, intensified the pain, and made me more conscious of my solitude. But the words “breasted man” gave me an unequivocal reason to open my eyes. I needed to know what was going on down the hallway. Somehow having my eyes open helped me to hear better. I got off my bed and pushed my ear against the thick iron door.

“Give him another sheet, he’s making a bloody mess here.”

A low vibration of moaning echoed in the hallway.

“What shall I do with this one?” the sick man sobbed.

“Don’t do anything,” the other yelled angrily, “you’ve done enough . . . Give me that bucket.”

Somebody kicked a bucket from a distance; it rolled over the linoleum floor and came to an abrupt stop with a bang.

“Don’t you have hands? How many times a year do we need to paint these damn walls, you chipped it again.”

“It’s dirty,” another voice complained, “I can’t touch it.”

“Lord, I’m dying, I have no blood left.” The sick man’s voice pulsed with pain.

The two guards were jabbering about which one should get his hand dirty and move the bucket.

“He’s leaking blood out on the floor!”

A loud sound of the plastic bucket hitting the floor signaled that one of them, finally, put it next to the sick man. I could feel the jolt the sound gave to all other ears on the doors of the other twenty rooms in the ward—a midnight ritual of curiosity and trepidation, witnessing with our ears the bleeding to death of a man right outside our doors.

“Put the bloody sheet in here and use this other one to cover yourself, nobody here is interested in your ugly stuff.”

“Look, brother, look, it’s all blood . . . I’ll die here, I know, I’ll die an unknown innocent victim of a mistake . . . I told them, I swear, I didn’t know any of these people, I’m a family man, I came here to work. God!” A wave of energy surged in his feeble voice. “God . . . Brother, don’t leave me here, I beg you.”

“Would you just shut up for a moment so I can finish this stupid paperwork . . . *Now* he’s a family man.”

“I swear, brother, I’m not one of them,” the sick man said. “Why would I lie to you?”

“Save it for the judge,” snapped one of the guards impatiently. “Bastards.”

With the exception of the sound of the sick man’s subdued cry and his occasional begging for help and pleading innocence, the ward went back into its nighttime silence. Ears were lifted from the iron doors and feet took everyone’s aching bodies back to bed. It is rather embarrassing to admit that the sick man’s pleading brought life to the ward. Not that these moments were rare, but this man was different, so shamelessly terrified. And then, there was that *breasted* man! Was it a metaphor? A pseudonym? Or a man with real breasts?

Totally awake, I climbed back to my bed, closed my eyes, and began playing my nightly music in my head. In a few minutes, I

heard them walking down the hallway, the sick man still moaning and pleading. They stopped outside my door.

“This one?” a guard asked.

“Yes, open it.”

As they threw open the door, spears of blue light hurried into my room from around the bodies of two guards standing next to the sick man in a wheelchair. They pushed the wheelchair into the four-bed room and helped him onto a bed, the one after the bed on my left.

“Keep an eye on him,” one guard told me.

“The blind leading the blind,” the other smirked.

“Don’t leave me here,” the sick man cried again, “I’ll die tonight. They’ll bury me in an unmarked grave . . . You’re the only one I have in this world.”

“Shut up, for God’s sake,” one of the guards said as they ushered themselves out of the room and with a sigh of relief closed the iron door.

“Fuckers,” was the first word the sick man muttered after they left. “They think they can leave me here and I’ll die without saying a thing? . . . Those bastards, I’ll show them who they’re dealing with . . . My relatives will burn this place down to the ground . . . You’ll see!”

With the closing of the door and the movement of the faint footsteps away from our room, the defiant sick man overtook the pleading miserable creature whose voice had woken me up earlier.

“I know all their names, I’ll sue the pants off of every single one of them.” He sat up in his bed, shaky but resolute. “From the motherfucker who whipped me to this coward who treated me like shit.”

“Please don’t use curse words here,” I told him gently. “We try to keep it civil at least while we’re inside these four walls. You’ll be surprised, but they actually respond to that.”

He turned around and looked at me as if he just noticed that there was another person in the room. A green pallor made his round bony face look more haggard and broken. Two deep vertical lines on his cheeks competed with his unassuming nose as the focal points of his face. His sunken eyes accentuated the convexity of his forehead.

“You see, if we do that, it makes it easier for all of us to change our prisoner–guard relationship into that of patient–attendant.”

He looked at me shyly without saying a word—as if he did not understand what I was talking about. Tears dripped down his whiskery face and disappeared in his black moustache. “Am I going to die, mister?”

Through the dim light in the room, I struggled to guess his age. He could have been anywhere from thirty to fifty years old. He turned around, collapsed back on his pillow, and covered his face with his hands. I thought he knew that I was trying to guess his age. I could not fathom why I was even curious about his age, when the man’s urgent predicament was how many hours he had left in this world. Regardless of how vulgar and unpleasant he appeared, he needed to be treated with dignity on his deathbed.

“I have nobody in this world,” he said in a trembling voice, “I don’t...”

I jumped in before he finished rehearsing for another episode of misery.

“Let’s start from the beginning. What’s your name?” I asked with controlled impatience.

“Ebrahim, your servant, sir.”

After telling him my own full name, I asked him again with the same tone, “Mr. Ebrahim, what is your last name?”

“Rezaei, Ebrahim Rezaei, from Lorestan, near Boroujerd.”

“Ah . . . Are you from the famous Rezaei family?” I asked. “That’s why they arrested you?”

“I don’t know why they arrested me, I swear I’m innocent, I’ve done nothing wrong in my entire life. God be my witness, break my foot if I take a single step in the wrong direction.”

“Ebrahim Khan, are you related to the famous Rezaei family?”

“My family is not famous, my uncle was the first in our village who opened a shop in Boroujerd, not in Boroujerd proper, but in a nearby town between Boroujerd and Doroud. It’s called Chalan Chulan. Have you ever been there, to Chalan Chulan? They have the best cucumbers in the world.”

He resettled himself in the bed and perked up as he told me about the exact location of his uncle’s shop. His accent became more pronounced and a glimmer of nostalgia brightened his voice.

“So, you’re not one of the famous Rezaei family.”

“Everybody in our village knew my uncle. The famous Rezaeis, I don’t know what you’re talking about. They’re not from my village.”

I was convinced that he knew about the great family of the revolutionaries, the brothers, the sisters, and the parents. Was there any demonstration during the revolution where people were not carrying their pictures—the martyrs of revolution? Was it possible at all that he did not know how the revolution turned against its own martyrs and that there was a bounty on the heads of any activist left in the Rezaei family? Was I blinded by my *Tehranocentric* view and unable to appreciate that the universe was larger than the world of revolution and its martyrs?

“No they’re not from my village. Because I know everybody there.”

I had gotten his mind off of his impending death and transfused some emotional blood to his colorless face.

“I would even say that I’d know all Rezaei families who live on the stretch of the road from Boroujerd to Doroud, even down to Aligudarz, I know them all. None of them ever has done any harm to any soul in this world. Why should they arrest *me*? Oh God . . . Oh God, my innocent children, they’ve become fatherless, they’re orphans now. Oh God, where is your compassion, where is your mercy? What have I done to deserve this fate? Bleeding to death in a prison and buried in an unknown grave. Oh God, show your greatness, show your mercy!”

He went back to his passion play of mercy and revenge, trading roles between asking for forgiveness and fanning the flames of vengeance.

“Aqa Ebrahim, listen to me,” I said, trying to yank him out of that state of hysteria. “Ebrahim, you’re not going to die, I promise you. I’ve seen so many people much worse than you, they all survived and went back to their families.” I don’t know what came over me to tell him such lies, all I had seen there was pain and death. Seldom did people walk out of that infirmary back to the bosom of their loved ones. But nothing at that moment seemed real—his performance along with my matter-of-fact attempt at offering him hope.

I didn’t know how late it was, but neither Ebrahim nor I felt that we could just close our eyes in silence and fall asleep. I still didn’t know why he was bleeding, and from what point in his body blood was oozing. And, most importantly, I had not yet heard a word about the breasted man.

“So, Mr. Rezaei, tell me, do you have any pain now?” For some reason, I felt I needed to talk louder to him after I learned he was from a village and possibly illiterate. “Where are you bleeding from?”

“I have never been sick in my entire life. Just once, once, I had a headache and I took two aspirins. That was it, never ever. Until these mother . . . God bless their mothers’ souls, brought me here. They beat me in my belly and my back. They are not human, these people, they are animals. No! Animals are better than these people. Donkeys, cows, chickens; do you know how wonderful they are? If you walk in front of a donkey it brays hello to you, if you shove a stick up its butt, it’ll kick the life out of you. See, animals are fair, but these people are savages . . .”

How could he have all this energy and be losing so much blood? I was happy that finally the guards found somebody who could tire them out with myriad stories. I felt sorry for his interrogator. No, I did not feel sorry for his interrogator, I felt sorry for him. He didn’t realize that he was sitting in the infirmary bleeding to death, because he couldn’t give a straight answer. Was it so hard for him to say that *I have excruciating cramps and am bleeding from my butt*? Did he really need to pay homage to the village donkey and the neighbor’s chickens every time he wanted to say something?

From our travels that night along the stretch of road from Doroud to Boroujerd and in and out of his village, riding the nice donkey and enjoying the eggs of selfless chickens, this is what I learned of his tale.

More than six months prior to his arrest, he had moved to Tehran in search of work. Life in the village, despite all its romantic promises, particularly after the revolution, was not going that well. He did not have any means to support his wife and two children, a ten-year-old son and an eight-year-old daughter.

“I didn’t want to leave, she pushed me and pushed me. ‘Pari Khanum’s husband went to Boroujerd and is sending her money, Atefeh’s father and husband both went to Tehran and send money.

Why can't you?' I couldn't bear her constant railing and ranting anymore. I wished I had married a donkey . . . You know, donkeys are fair . . ."

He had come to Tehran without knowing anybody, just a bunch of acquaintances from back home. They lived in a hostel for migrant workers in the vicinity of Gomrok Square, where from ancient times black marketers, drug dealers, produce merchants, stolen-goods vendors, whores, and migrant laborers plied their trades and satisfied the pleasures of the flesh. For migrant laborers, the hardest part was surviving their first year of temptation. After that, they could find their way around the city, find a more decent place to live, send money back home, and finally develop a desire to be with their wives again. Ebrahim failed his test. Or, at least he was arrested on those charges.

"I swear on the life of my son that I had nothing to do with these men, women, whatever they were," he repeatedly claimed.

I was not quite clear which part of his own statement triggered the little smile on his face—the part that he was innocent, or his playfulness with the man/woman intrigue of the breasted men. He said that a few weeks before his arrest, the Revolutionary Guards had busted a transsexual and gay prostitution ring. Among them were men who had grown breasts, "the hottest item on their menu," the innocent Mr. Rezaei exclaimed. "They got the breasts in a city called Holland, it is somewhere abroad, in Europe. Big, big bosoms, and they were real, they said. They got an injection of some sort there and they grew these giant breasts," he said, his voice animated. "How disgusting," he caught himself. "When they brought them here with me, I heard that the guards were fighting over who should strip search them, sisters or brothers! Can you believe that? These guards wanted to fuck them, I know. They were beating the

shit out of me, and they didn't lift a finger on them. Why? Who wants to fuck a bloodied whore?"

The breasted men, as they became known in prison (I had received no news of what was happening in prison or outside since I had been admitted to the infirmary), were helping the prosecutor's office capture all the men (and possibly women) who enjoyed their services. Every day, they boarded a bus and navigated the suspected areas in the city, particularly the Gomrok district. The breasted men identified people on the street as their customers. And that was where Mr. Rezaei had been on one of those unfortunate days when he was "just going back home after a hard day of construction work in Vanak Square in the northern part of the city."

I could not figure out from his account why he was tortured and what the interrogators wanted from him. It was unusual to bring common criminals to a prison that by that time was exclusively dedicated to the detention of political foes.

His bleeding remained a mystery. I had seen many people under brutal torture and never a single case of anal bleeding of that severity. He was dying. After a couple of hours, the new sheet that had covered him when he arrived was soaked with blood. He was settling down and feeling at ease with me.

"I have nobody except you," he said calmly, not knowing that I had heard him say the same thing to the guard who brought him here.

"I'll be here for you, no matter what happens, Mr. Rezaei," I played along.

"Not one of the famous ones," he giggled proudly that now we even had our own insiders' joke.

I got out of my bed to change his sheet with a new one from the bed next to mine. He seemed exhausted and compliant. As I tried

to unwrap the sheet from his waist down, he crossed his legs and drew his knees to his belly to hide his genitalia. He grabbed my arm with his stocky, coarse hand and managed a momentary tight grip. Both of us were uncomfortable, especially after talking about his charges and the breasted men. But I had to change him.

“I’m not looking,” I assured him, “*you* don’t have breasts, do you?”

That was not funny to him. “Don’t joke about these things,” he objected, “I just told you that I have a wife and two kids. I am not like them. Why don’t they kill me and get it over with . . .”

Before he finished his rant, I managed to untie the sheet, bundle it, and toss it to the corner of the room, below his bed.

“OK mister. Now we just need to wrap you in a nice clean sheet and wait till we get some help for you in the morning.” He relaxed the muscles of his slim body and I lifted his legs from behind his knee joints, one at a time, to push the new sheet under his hip, and also to find out if there were any wounds from whipping on the soles of his feet. The only visible cracks on his feet were the calluses on his heels. I covered him carefully with the sheet and secured his buttock with it.

“I’ve never been like this ever, except the time that I had that box of cucumbers,” he said nonchalantly.

“What?” I retorted. “I thought you only once had a headache and took a couple of aspirins for it. Now you’re telling me that you’ve been like this before?” I tried to catch my breath after climbing back up to my bed.

“No, just once in my entire life I had experienced bleeding like this. My uncle visited me a couple of months after I came to Tehran. He brought ten boxes of fresh cucumbers: tender, green, thin as a pen, seedless, and sweet as sugar, the best produce in our village.

He wanted to see if he could sell them in Gomrok Square. Maybe in the future he would close his shop down in Lorestan and open some little store here. I love cucumbers. My mistake was that I opened one of the boxes. How could one resist those little baby cucumbers? I had been away for a whole two months from home and there they were sitting right in front of me, those delicious cucumbers grown in the soil of my own home. I ate one, two, three, and couldn't stop myself. Before I knew it the whole box was gone and the stomach-ache settled in. Just like my doctor in Boroujerd had told my wife—that I should avoid fresh fruits and uncooked vegetables.”

As the story of his sickness kept expanding, I realized that I could never get to the bottom of his history. Chances were he had not even been whipped. I did not see scars anywhere on his body. I came to the conclusion that the guards had beaten him, and the beating had aggravated whatever was wrong with his intestines.

In the morning, along with our breakfast of stale bread, a tiny slice of cheese, and lukewarm tea, came a new patient. A young man of eighteen or nineteen, who was not blindfolded, and shook hands with the guards before entering the room thanking them for the “speedy processing of his case.” This was not good news. Without acknowledging either of us, he sat effortlessly on the bed next to Mr. Rezaei's.

“Breakfast?” I asked the newcomer respectfully.

“No thank you,” he replied politely, and his body language made it known that he did not want to continue talking to me. All the signs were there. That this young prisoner *had seen the light*, and, as the package went, operated as an “antenna.”

As I helped Mr. Rezaei to sit up for his breakfast, I whispered in his ear not to say anything about the guards, interrogators, or the judges. “Our new friend is going to tell the guards whatever we say

here,” I warned him. He nodded, indicating that he already knew what was going on.

“So what brought you here, young man?” he asked the antenna as he sipped his tea.

“I’m sick,” the youth responded inattentively.

“You know, you remind me of my son,” Mr. Rezaei began his new narrative, and his voice cracked. “Oh God, I miss him so badly. You know, I think God saved me,” he sighed, “of course with the help of brother Sohrab”—I had not figured out who Sohrab was—“so I can fulfill my only wish in this life. You might think that I am not a worthy person. That’s fine, I’ve committed many sins in my life and I never question God’s will. If God wanted me to be here in this condition, so be it, I accept it. That is the meaning of our religion. Islam means to submit, to what? Do you know?” he asked the young man.

The antenna looked annoyed and did not want to have anything to do with that conversation.

“To the will of God,” Mr. Rezaei offered his wisdom. “That is fine with me. I sit here bleeding and I accept it, because nobody should question God’s will.”

Maybe Ebrahim Rezaei *was* one of the famous Rezaei family. He was so impressive in his fatalistic rendition of Islam. From one who could not resist the baby cucumbers to the one who knew the true meaning of Islam, my friend had journeyed a long distance overnight. I was waiting for the punch line in the sermon.

“But I don’t want to die now. God, do you hear me? This is not a selfish request. I don’t want anything for myself, as I have already accepted my destiny and hopefully I shall appear in front of the Almighty with a clean conscience. God, do not take my life before I take my son to see our Imam Khomeini. I want the imam to touch

his head and bless him with his hands. So that he will grow up as a soldier for this revolution and a servant to our Supreme Leader. This is my dying wish.”

I could not finish my tea. Tears came to my eyes from the pressure of the laughter pushing up from my gut. He turned around and looked into my eyes and gestured with his hand asking how he was doing. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and as he got ready to launch another attack on the poor young man’s ears.

I signaled to him that perhaps that was enough.

“Ebrahim, do you need me to take you to the bathroom? We can also ask the guard to take this bloody sheet out. It is getting quite smelly in here.”

“Whatever you wish, time is passing so quickly for me, but I’ll never lose my faith in God.”

The young man did not say a word and turned his back toward him and pretended to be asleep, motionless with deep, long breaths.

His presence made the room unbearable. My own pain had been getting worse and Mr. Rezaei was falling in and out of consciousness all day.

In the late afternoon, they took the antenna out. I think he asked them to put him in another room when he went to the bathroom after lunch. That was unfortunate. Mr. Rezaei lost the antenna for the broadcast of his sermons in the hallways of the prosecutor’s office.

His situation steadily got worse. By ten o’clock at night, I had changed his sheets two more times. He was struggling to remain conscious and whenever he opened his eyes and saw me, he tendered a little smile.

“Is he gone?” he asked.

I wasn’t sure whom he meant, but I assumed he was talking about the antenna.

“Yes, but don’t worry, you’ll be fine.” I lied now to cover my growing anxiety.

I banged on the door asking for help. The place seemed abandoned. No sound, no sign of any soul outside the room. I banged and yelled until my hands ached and I lost my voice. Nobody came. I hit the door with the garbage can and finally I heard the angry voice of a guard. I never thought I’d appreciate that nasty, growling sound.

“Guard,” I screamed, “we need help!”

He came to the door, still chewing on his food.

“One more knock on the door and I’ll personally teach you a lesson,” he said. He put a finger inside of his mouth, trying to dislodge some stuck food.

“He’s dying, he’s almost dead.”

He walked in and took a quick look at Mr. Rezaei’s failing body. He put his hands in his pocket searching for something, maybe keys to somewhere.

“It’s a holiday,” he shrugged. “There’s nobody to sign the papers to take him to a hospital,” he added matter-of-factly. “Bad night to die, huh?”

Mr. Rezaei opened his eyes without any energy to respond.

“Let me see what I can do,” the guard said before leaving. “Don’t knock on the door, I’ll be back.”

I prepared myself to spend the night with poor Mr. Rezaei’s corpse. Occasionally, he moaned and asked me if I was there.

“Yes, yes,” I assured him. “You’re going to be all right.” The words came out of my mouth almost involuntarily.

Before an hour had passed, the door opened and two guards stood outside while the Hajj Agha himself walked into the room. He took a fleeting look at me from behind dark glasses that magnified his walleyes in such an exaggerated way that they seemed

to be bulging out of their sockets. He came in and with his round body and uncompromising stare stood between my bed and Mr. Rezaei's.

"How are you?" he asked me but did not wait for an answer. "What's his name?"

"Ebrahim Rezaei," I responded.

"How are you, Mr. Rezaei?"

Why do people ask such stupid questions? Did he really need to ask this poor man how he was?

Mr. Rezaei just moaned and mumbled that he was dying.

Hajj Agha stood there without saying a word, weighing the options, a cost-benefit analysis of the situation. Was it better to let him die there and later remove his body, or was it wiser to take him to a hospital now and deal with the consequences later? Seldom did one see a hesitant Hajj Agha. It made him look shorter as he stared at the floor, scratching his nose.

In the midst of his deep thoughts, Hajj Agha turned around and apologized for turning his back on me. Hajj Agha had known me for quite a while by then, he knew all the death row prisoners, and because of my advanced cancer, he was particularly familiar with my case and had advised me on several occasions to take steps toward the "straight path." He was always very polite and respectful, rarely lost his temper and signed the execution orders of thousands without a shred of anger or doubt. He could easily apologize for turning his back to me and for not acknowledging me respectfully while talking to a dying man, but would have no remorse for condemning thousands to death by a firing squad.

"No problem," I told him. "Are you going to do something for him?" I asked sheepishly.

"Yes," he replied, and signaled to the guards that he was done.

After he left, Mr. Rezaei, somewhat aware of all the commotion, asked me, “Who was he?”

“Hajj Agha himself, you are so lucky. He’s going to take care of you right away.”

“Who’s Hajj Agha?”

“The Boss himself, the Chief Revolutionary Prosecutor Asadollah Lajevardi, the one who holds our lives in his hands, Aqa Ebrahim, *the Hajj Agha*.”

“*Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah*.” He sat up, agitated and fearful. “I told them that I was innocent.”

“What’s the matter, why are you suddenly seeking absolution?”

“He’s going to execute me tonight,” he cried as he lost consciousness.

So Hajj Agha’s reputation had also invaded small towns and villages between Doroud and Boroujerd. I wished Hajj Agha knew that uttering his name brought the words of redemption to the lips of the non-famous Mr. Rezaei. A few minutes later they came to take Mr. Rezaei to the hospital. The guard with the greasy mouth told me how lucky this sick man was that Hajj Agha lived in prison, otherwise, there was no way they could have secured a permit to transfer him to a hospital. “Is this you Sohrab? Brother Sohrab? I told you I had nobody in this world, I knew you would come and take care of me . . .” Rezaei’s voice faded.

A few days later, the guards came and asked for Mohammad Panahandeh’s stuff.

“He didn’t bring anything here, he just came in the morning and left a couple of hours later,” I said, thinking they were talking about the antenna.

“No,” the irritated guard said, “the bleeding guy, did he leave any of his belongings here?”

“No.” I told him, smiling. “Mr. Panahandeh did not leave anything here, just a fake name.”

WINTER SOLSTICE

Although he had mentally gone over his escape route countless times, the moment they rang the bell his mind deleted the memory of all those meticulous plans. For some unexplained reason he had always thought that they'd come after him in the middle of the night. Never in all those elaborate planning sessions did he see himself running away in the middle of the day. From his second-floor apartment, he would climb up the stairs to the rooftop on the third floor and jump ten feet or so to the second-story rooftop of the neighboring building, then down to the back alley, which had no opening to his neighborhood block, and out onto the street where he always parked his car and would drive away to safety. The plan was easy, efficient, and feasible, in theory. He'd asked himself what he'd do if they raided the house without warning and caught him in his sleep, what if they arrested him on the street, what if they launched an RPG-7 missile right into his apartment and finished him off just like that, as they were known to do with more dangerous "anti-revolutionaries." But they wouldn't do that to him, he wasn't armed and his knowledge of the ins and outs of

the organization virtually guaranteed his safety until he got to the interrogation chambers.

There was only one ring, but he knew it was them. Everybody was instructed not to visit fellow members at home. He wished that he could crack the curtains open just a tiny bit, but that would have jeopardized his plan. They would know, if indeed it was them, that he was home and they would immediately storm the building. But why was he reluctant to execute his plan? What if it was only a beggar? By jumping on the roof and running he would blow his cover and lose his last safe place. He wasn't ready to leave the country, yet.

They rang the bell for the second time, this time more forcefully: three long buzzes. He rushed barefoot out his apartment door and glanced down the staircase toward the front door. A leaden sense of reluctance slowed him down. His mind became cluttered with existential questions about his involvement in the revolutionary movement, questions that had never arisen when he imagined this moment. A strong man, tall and slim in his late forties, he did not have any trouble running away. His legs were ready but somehow suddenly defiant. Fear constricted his breath into short gasps for air. This could not be happening to a veteran revolutionary of more than twenty years.

As he opened the rooftop door, he heard behind him the shattering of the front door glass. He stepped onto the roof from the dark corridor, but the lazy mid-fall sun was still strong enough to blind him momentarily. As soon as he could see he noticed two armed guards pointing their machine guns at him from the shadows on the rooftop of the neighbor's two-story building. They had outsmarted him. He ran toward the ledge on the other side and jumped without hesitation down to the alley. It was the only possible way he could save himself. Was he trying to kill himself

to avoid being captured alive or was he just trying to escape? He didn't know. It wasn't clear whether shots were fired at him, he couldn't hear.

On the way down, he hit the brick wall of a building on the far side of the alley but still managed to land on his feet. Never had his body felt so gigantic for his legs. Two days later, with both legs crushed, his hip fractured, one arm broken in three places, and his head throbbing, he opened his eyes. He was in the custody of the Revolutionary Guards at a military hospital. He had survived the crash, but not the assault. He spent more than a month at the hospital, where the doctors stopped his internal bleeding and prepared him for his first serious meeting with his interrogators on their turf.

They did not know much about him. An anonymous tip had led the revolutionary guards to his place. A single man who does not work, never has visitors, and was not particularly friendly to his neighbors, raises suspicions. They knew nothing of his activities, only the fact that he'd rather kill himself than be arrested.

On the eve of the winter solstice, two guards carried him on a stretcher into room 15 of the prison infirmary. Both legs up to his lower back, and one arm from shoulder to wrist were in casts. They deposited him on a bed with a rough quick move like a street vendor in Toupkhuneh Square in Tehran flips a lamb kebab on his grill.

This was the very first time I saw my new neighbor, Mohammad. The guards stood inside the room for a few seconds more, looking around aimlessly.

"Take care of *this*," one of them ordered, pointing his finger at me.

I still could not see his face, only his long curly silver hair and a small, barely visible balding spot on top of his head. I managed

to get out of bed and walk over to his bedside. I held his hand and smiled. He looked at me and tears came down freely onto the pillow.

“How bad do I look?” he asked half-jokingly.

“How old are you?” I replied.

“Forty-nine,” he muttered.

“You look awful.”

“Thanks,” he smiled, “how old do I look to you?”

“Fifty, fifty-one,” I said. “I’d love to hear your story,” I told him, “but right now we need to decide about our dinner, because they’re going to take the orders in a few minutes and they never have the patience to wait while we think about what we want. This is the only advantage of being in the infirmary.”

I moved away from him and sat on the vacant bed next to his.

“Have you been in the regular cells yet?”

“No,” he said, shrugging.

“That’s why you need to appreciate this as long as it lasts.”

His skeptical look faded and a more inquisitive one settled in.

“What options do we have?”

“Do you have any dietary restrictions? You know . . . because of the cast . . . you know . . . that you can’t . . . how shall I say it, you can’t do number two, or for that matter even number one.”

“I’ll eat anything. Did they bring me a urinal?”

“Is *it* out?”

“Yeah, it’s not broken.” A smile appeared on his hairy, wrinkled face.

“What about number two, then?”

“Number two is a big hassle and a huge embarrassment.”

“But how do you do it?”

“There’s a hole in the cast . . . Weren’t we talking about our dinner?”

“Well, I just needed to know if you could have soup.”

“Anything is fine, can you take care of it for tonight? I don’t want to think about it now.”

“You need lots of protein . . .” The sound of the cart in the hallway cut my sentence short. The food was arriving and we hadn’t made our final decision yet.

The guard opened the door and asked “How many?” from where he was standing in the hallway.

“Two,” I said softly.

“Who’s the new one?”

He poked his head inside the room and took a probing look at Mohammad. “What’s wrong with *you*?”

That was his basic question for every newcomer. Immediately, he realized the stupidity of his question.

“Here’s your dinner,” he said, placing a half-full bowl of broth on his bed tray. “Can you eat?” he shouted at full volume as if Mohammad were deaf.

“I’ll help him,” I told the guard, a relatively nicer one among the others. “No special treat for winter solstice?”

“We’re not pagans,” he said, hurriedly putting my soup next to Mohammad’s before leaving the room.

Mohammad was puzzled by the whole dinner episode. He looked at me and without mentioning the joke about our dinner orders said, “Do you think we could have some bread with this?”

“He doesn’t like us to bang on the door or call him. Better eat it while it’s still a bit hot.” I raised his head and spoon-fed him his soup. I tried in vain to find a shred of evidence from the bottom of the bowl that this was not just flavored water.

“I like the way they did the carrots,” Mohammad said, winking after his first slurp of soup. “I don’t like it when they make it too

thick, just a hint of this or that is perfect. How do you like yours?" he smiled.

"I had a big lunch today and I'm not that hungry tonight. Would you care to have some of mine?"

"No thanks," he said, "You need to gain some weight and quit being so fashionable."

After dinner, Mohammad told me the story of his arrest over a nice dessert of baklava and hot tea.

"Why did you jump?" I asked him.

"Let's not ruin our solstice. Let's see if Hafez has the answer to that."

Following tradition, I told his fortune through verses of the Persian poet Hafez from his famous *Divan*. We nibbled on the glistening ruby seeds of a juicy pomegranate that sat in a silver bowl between our beds.

"Do you know any poems of Sa'adi?" he said. "I know tonight is Hafez's night, but . . ."

"No problem."

*Ah caravan, go slowly as you take my beloved with you
The heart that once belonged to me, you take away with you
I have heard tales of the soul leaving one's body
I now see with my own eyes how you carry off my soul with you.*

"I don't want to die," Mohammad cried gently.

THE WATCH

A guard noisily unlocked the heavy steel door and kicked it wide open. The door banged against the ivory plaster wall inside, gouging out a piece that flew across the fifteen-foot length of the cell. A fleeting panic coursed through the cell, accompanied by an ominous silence. When the guard appeared, suddenly fear had a face and was not all that frightening anymore.

Wearing an olive uniform and polished boots, the guard took a couple of steps in. In an amplified obtrusive voice, he yelled mockingly, “Mr. *Mohandis!*”

Nobody moved.

Bending over near my ear, he shouted again, “Mr. *Mohandis!*” making it clear whom he was addressing.

“Are you talking to me?” I whispered nervously, avoiding his eyes.

“Are there any other *Mohandises* in this cell? Raise your hands.”

He turned his head around and looked quickly at the other two corners of the cell. His menacing smile disappeared.

“Weren’t you an engineering student?” He moved his face closer to mine.

“Yes I was, but nobody has ever called me *Mohandis* before.”

Two other guards walked in impatiently.

“What was it that you studied? Textile Engineering?”

“What is this all about?”

“What the hell is textile engineering anyway? I thought knitting was a woman’s job.”

“What does textile engineering have to do with knitting?”

“Don’t be smart-ass with me.”

“What is this all about?”

They were not there to discuss textiles or my degree.

“Get up!” he ordered.

Before I could ask any other questions, the fidgety guards realized that it was their turn to assert their presence. They came closer and stood next to me, each on one side. “Hurry up,” they commanded, in voices reflecting their years of experience ordering prisoners around.

The fragility of my body resisted the haste they demanded. I had just been released from the prison infirmary after a two-month hospitalization for a biopsy of an enlarged lymph node in my neck. While the biopsy had soon confirmed that I was suffering from cancer, they had only kept me there due to post-biopsy complications. They had no intention of treating my illness; they had not even informed me what the diagnosis was. I didn’t need to see the biopsy report to know. “We do not waste our beds for prisoners on death row,” I had been told on the day I was discharged and sent back to the regular prison ward.

The guards stood restlessly watching me struggle to lift my body up onto my shaking knees. That was the heaviest hundred pounds I ever had to carry. My threadbare undershirt, once white, was visibly wet and stuck to my concave belly. Unable to stand

straight, I held on to the wall behind me and with a gentle push disconnected my body from its solid support. I turned toward the door and felt a sudden chill as I got closer to the open corridor. A cool draft from the hallway, conspiring with the guards, penetrated my body to make me appear weaker. How desperately I wanted to put on my stoic mask, but my body refused to play its part.

I stepped outside and at their shouted demands took a few hesitant steps forward. “What is this all about?” I don’t recall whether I asked myself quietly or loudly enough so they could hear.

The first guard took a couple of giant steps ahead and with a firm gesture made me stop.

“Which one of us is smarter?” he asked me smugly.

They were not looking for an answer. One of them slapped me and the other kicked me in the stomach, knocking the breath out of me.

I gasped and fell down. I felt no pain though their kicks kept landing on me.

Breathe . . . Breathe.

I delved deeper and deeper for a shred of strength in my body.

Breathe . . . Breathe.

I still felt no pain, just a struggle to get the air in and out of my lungs.

When I opened my eyes, the floor around me was wet and two more guards were anxiously bending over my head.

“Go get your stuff,” one of the newcomers gently said.

I crawled toward the wall, disoriented. I could not remember where my cell was and what exactly were they asking me to do. I just took a few wobbly steps, presumably forward.

Their hostility subsided. I sensed that they actually were concerned. One of them waved a little light brown bag and a large blanket in front of my eyes.

“Are these yours?”

They were.

The guards showed me the way, carrying my belongings, and one of them helped me to keep my balance by holding on to my upper arm.

“Go slowly, there’s no rush . . .”

“Take a deep breath.”

I felt dizzy, and extremely lethargic. I kept thanking them for being so considerate. They were kind to me and suddenly how I got there did not matter. I couldn’t even remember what exactly had happened, only that they were kind at that moment. Was there a mistake? Did they know how sick I was? I hadn’t realized that the wound on the left side of my neck, courtesy of the post-biopsy infection, had opened and was bleeding profusely. The blood on my T-shirt brought that to my attention.

We stopped in front of cell number 76. They unlocked the door quietly, put my stuff inside and ushered me in with a soft push on my back. The crowded room with so many inquisitive looks added to my confusion. Immediately after the door closed, a number of people rushed toward me and helped me to get on the middle tier of a three-berth bunk bed on the right side of the room. They set me up so quickly it was as if they had been rehearsing it. As if they had been told that I was coming and knew how to accommodate me. They cleaned my face with a washcloth, made me drink two glasses of water, put two pillows under my head so I could breathe easier, carefully pressed a towel on my neck wound. After a few minutes I caught my breath and was able to change

my T-shirt with a new one from my bag. Nothing was asked, and nothing needed to be said.

Amidst the hovering crowd, Salah instantly emerged as director of the relief operation. He pushed the others away from the bed and for some reason claimed that this was his territory.

“I know him,” I heard him arguing with his fellow cellmates. That was his license to be in charge.

“I know you,” he told me, smiling and exposing his decaying teeth.

Then he closed his mouth self-consciously and wagged his finger at somebody who was approaching the bed, reasserting his territorial claim.

“Let him rest.”

He turned his head toward me and put his smile back on. Although he was not missing any teeth, there were large spaces between each. They came in all sizes and shapes. He put the palm of his hand affectionately on my cheek, stroked the hair above my ear. I felt the warmth of a wandering teardrop in my eyes.

Nobody asked me who I was or what had just happened. Salah looked joyfully at me, directly into my eyes. Had I forgotten that I knew him?

“Do you need anything, *khalu*?”

He used the Kurdish word for brother, comrade. Although his face suggested otherwise, I would find out later that he was in his early twenties. With prematurely thinning hair, which was rapidly turning silver, his head looked smaller than it actually was. I moved my head a couple of times from side to side to signal that I was fine. He tucked me in my own blanket, went back to his own corner across the cell, relinquished his control and allowed me to be visited by other curious new cellmates. From his corner, he

kept a protective eye on me, making sure that the others were not exhausting me.

There was no room for negotiation that at night I had to sleep next to Salah. The cell, twelve feet by fifteen, did not offer much sleeping space for its forty occupants. Remaining on one side without moving or bending all night was painful. It made breathing difficult and sleeping virtually impossible. Salah spread my large blanket next to the wall in his corner, put his own next to mine, assuring me that he would not allow anybody to infringe upon my space.

Instead of simply sleeping, I was drifting in and out of consciousness. In addition to painful breathing, a certain fear of not waking up again made sleeping increasingly burdensome. Occasionally, Salah woke up and asked whether I needed anything, and after my negative response, he went back to sleep. *Do you need anything?* was a euphemism for *Do you need a glass of water?* There was nothing else anybody could offer inside the cell—except for a soothing backrub.

Salah became my guardian, giving me water when I needed it, backrubs on demand, doing my laundry, helping me in the bathroom, and carrying me on his back, against my own will, to our ten-minute daily fresh air time.

“You need the sun. It will cure you,” he insisted matter-of-factly. He always used short sentences and never articulated any complicated thoughts. He had a clear sense of the insiders and outsiders in his realm; to the insiders he was hesitant and visibly unsure of himself, to the outsiders, he appeared to be confident with a definite sense of right or wrong.

His other passion, next to comforting others, was his watch. He wore a monstrously ugly Citizen electronic watch with a huge dark

green face, two large plastic buttons on each side, and a worn-out black plastic wristband. The watch displayed an image of old-fashioned arms telling the hour, minute, and second.

“They’re not real, you see, I can make them all disappear,” he told me, pressing one of the big black buttons. “You can find out the time in five different locations in the world,” he added, his eyes gleaming. “Do you want to try it, khalu?”

“But why should we live in five different time zones?”

“Aren’t you curious to know what time it is now in London? You see, the world is changing so rapidly! A few years ago a thing like this would have been magic, now it’s here in the palm of my hand, as real as can be.”

He spoke with such enthusiasm that I couldn’t even pretend I didn’t care about what time it was in London or New York. He rubbed the watch on his chest and came closer.

“See, it even has a calculator with two different sets of memory. Let me show you.”

He pushed different buttons with his index finger on one side and his thumb on the other. Then he became a bit impatient, his ears turning red, as he mumbled, “Sometimes . . . uh! Anyway, I’ve forgotten which buttons are for the calculator.”

Then without warning he pulled my blanket over our heads, “But its nicest feature is its night light.” He pushed another button and showed me how easy it was to see the time in complete darkness.

“It’s great if you’re in the mountains in the middle of the night and you don’t want to use a flashlight.”

Since the lights were always on in our cell, the watch’s night light seemed at best redundant. Breathing was becoming difficult for me and I had to stop him before he tried to show me the time

in Paris or New York in complete darkness, or to figure out how the calculator worked under the blanket.

Often, instead of wearing the watch, Salah would hold it in his hand, amusing himself with its features, trying to discover additional functions. I don't remember him discovering anything new, but he remained constantly absorbed by it. Whenever there was a movement in the middle of the night under his blanket, everybody knew that Salah was not masturbating, the usual suspicion, but was checking out the time in the darkness of his mountains.

I told him that he was going to exhaust the battery by checking the time so often in the dark.

"These batteries last forever," he replied confidently. "They never die."

With all the complicated features, the one he cherished most was the button that made everything on the screen disappear.

"See," he told me, "they're all gone, no dates, no numbers, nothing." He flashed the blank face of the watch before me. "I want to live in a country in which watches like this are made."

Then he revealed his revolutionary agenda.

"Why can't we make things like this?" he exclaimed, his voice cracking in a rare moment of seriousness.

The watch had become for him a focal point where his nostalgia for country life, up in the mountains in the dark, fighting injustice, met his utopian society in which every single person would own a watch like the Citizen he owned, manufactured locally and distributed justly.

"It's not about a watch," he once confided in me, "this is a symbol."

"You don't need to explain," I told him.

“No,” he said with a sharp edge I had never heard from him, “let me finish. My brother gave it to me before he left for the mountains.” He paused, and then added, “That was the last time I saw him.”

He began choking up, but immediately regained control.

“What’s important for me is the kind of society that can produce such things, so advanced.”

His voice faded in the background of my thoughts. Suddenly I felt an intense urge to know what time it was in Paris.

One day in the courtyard I was enjoying the bright sun of late spring as others were walking around in circles. Next to me, Salah was doing his routine one hundred pushups. A guard walked into the yard and called out Salah’s name. “Hurry up, go get your stuff.”

Salah’s lips turned blue and his terrified face froze into a pale plaster. He tried to cheat a smile out of his lips, but failed.

“Can I go back up with him?” I begged the guard. “I need his help to go back to our cell.”

A faint pink came back to Salah’s cheek.

“Hurry up,” said the guard, pushing Salah toward me.

“This is it, khalu,” Salah said, grabbing my wrist and lowering his shoulder under my arm to help me stand up.

He was trembling; this time it was not clear which one of us was carrying the other.

“This is it, khalu,” he murmured again, more to himself, as we climbed the first step back up toward our cell.

We went back silently. He had been sentenced to death a few months ago and was awaiting his final verdict from the high court.

When we were back in the cell he turned around, wondering what he needed to take. What did one need? He hastily shoved

some of his clothing into his little bag and I helped him to close the zipper. The color in his cheeks was gone again.

He reopened the bag and pulled out a handmade embroidered hat that I had never seen. He put the hat, a black and white Kurdish yarmulke, on his face for a short second and kissed it before handing it to me.

“Just a little thing for you to remember me by.”

“Cut the crap,” the guard yelled from the hallway. “Time to face your maker,” he added nonchalantly, then ordered other prisoners to get out of the bathroom quickly.

“I want *you* to have this,” Salah told me. He took off his watch, placed it in my hands, and closed my fingers around it.

I said not a word.

He forced himself to make another brief smile and then left.

That night I wanted to hide from everybody. I wanted to go up to the mountains, in complete darkness, to see what time it was. I pushed the big black button, but nothing happened. I emerged from the darkness, and the arms, the numbers, the dates were all gone.

SO POCHT DAS SCHICKSAL AN DIE PFORTE

It was my birthday, June 28, my third as a political prisoner.

During my childhood the date did not have any special significance, since it was not the birthday of any prominent prophet or leader, nor did it mark the beginning of a new year in any calendar that I knew of. But on that date in 1981, a bomb blasted my birthday out of obscurity. A terrorist group had planted a bomb under the speaker's platform at the headquarters of the ruling Islamic Republic party during a national convention, killing more than 150 people, including cabinet ministers, members of parliament, and party leaders. Whoever detonated it seemed not to have anticipated its level of devastation. For rumor had it that when news of the explosion reached the garrisons of the Revolutionary Guards, large numbers deserted their posts, fearing that the bomb had ended the short life of the new regime; that over that long night, military chiefs worked on the terms of their surrender; and that the government, many of whom were murdered, contemplated mass resignation, hoping that they would survive the reign of terror as another revolutionary regime took power.

I am skeptical of rumors, particularly of this one. But rumors often offer some sense of the magnitude of an event. The important thing was the explosion changed the nature of the political game and power struggle. Gone were the days when the government tried various means of intimidation, harassment, and containment of political activities of the opposition. They would no longer just mobilize mob groups to attack political rallies and stab and wound mostly young participants. Now at least one opposition party, *Mojahedin-e Khalq*, The Peoples' Mujahedin, had openly declared war on the regime and had shown that they didn't hesitate to commit mass murder to advance their political agenda. The main target of the bomb was Ayatollah Beheshti, the Head of the Judiciary, known for his vast influence, decisive actions, and piercing rhetoric. It was not the first time that the opposition had assassinated a government dignitary. Beheshti was not just another key figure: he held the master key to many political doors, both inside and outside the country. At the time, many believed that without its political mastermind and shrewd strategist the regime would lose its viability.

Since 1981, the country had mourned, or rather *had been forced to* mourn, on June 28. A simple expression of joy, a cheerful smile, a merry face, or a joyful walk could be interpreted as defiance. We soon learned that every year on June 28, we ought to keep our lips together and resist the evil temptations of laughter.

Historically significant or not, my birthday had arrived once again—I was turning 24. Not that I was obsessed with any particular age, but I thought that this particular birthday might be noteworthy, as I believed it would be my last. I didn't feel a sense of gloom as I came to this realization. I am constitutionally pessimistic, though those who know me will almost certainly disagree with this. I understand the discrepancy, but don't see it as a paradox. I think

the truly hopeless are those with exaggerated optimism about the promises of life. To be buoyant inside sets you up for despair.

Thinking of my last birthday did not have anything to do with my pessimism. Except, I had felt the same way about my twenty-second and twenty-third birthdays, too. Ever since I had been sentenced to death, I genuinely felt that all my post-trial birthdays were my last. But this year, on my twenty-fourth birthday, with an advanced cancer that had already spread to my vital organs, I had much firmer grounds for believing so.

Fortunately at that early hour of the morning, everybody, particularly Kamal with his slobbering wide-open mouth, which I only tolerated because it softened the coarse wool of our shared blanket-turned-pillow, was still asleep and unable to observe me as I had my inner conversation on the philosophy of despondency. Kamal always commended me for giving everybody so much hope. How many times had I wanted to tell him that I wished I could do the same to myself. But that would have been too cruel.

A couple other insomniacs and I were the only people who had an all-night view of the sardine sleeping arrangements in the cell. Fitting forty-five men into four rows of tightly packed bodies in a twelve by fifteen feet cell is nothing short of an architectural feat. The other two guys, both sitting in the opposite corner, were new and smiled occasionally. One would hold his head between his hands and try to dampen the sound of his frustration and exhaustion. The other would rest his forehead on his bent knees, and with his eyes closed, seemingly intent on shutting off his mind. Today they seemed more upbeat and both waved at me several times. Did they know it was my birthday? Why should they care?

I was a bit nervous that somebody might bring up the topic and then they'd all get excited and plan a party on this day of mourning.

I didn't want to see anybody punished for my sake. It seemed as if no one shared my anxieties that day. And somehow, despite all the things I told myself about the triviality of my birthday, I was hurt that not a single soul had even mentioned it. At least they could have acknowledged it and said that they were sorry we couldn't celebrate it like everyone else's birthdays. I wondered whether I'd do the same if somebody else's birthday coincided with the commemoration of an official tragedy. I thought I'd be willing to pay the price if I knew that a celebration would make that person happy. Were they so cowardly that they'd sacrifice the joy of a dear comrade to the threat of few lashes of the whip? Didn't they realize that this was the last birthday of my life?

It was strange to think I was getting upset over this. Especially since I didn't like birthdays, finding them embarrassing and fake. I did enjoy celebrating occasions that I had something to do with, but I'd nothing to do with being born. My parents had every right to celebrate my birthday; it was their doing after all. But my friends and comrades? Or me? Why should anybody in his right mind risk punishment for such a thing? It didn't have anything to do with bravery.

It was Friday, a day that perhaps carries more weight for my cellmates than my birthday. Fridays were everybody's birthday. The interrogators' offices were closed, so there was no fear about hearing the guard call your name. Prison wouldn't have been as bad a place if nobody ever called out your full name. It was a universal truth that hearing your full name did not herald a friendly encounter.

On Fridays, the closed-circuit indoctrination TV in our cell turned into an entertainment box from ten in the morning till late at night. The highlight of the day was the weekly movie at the odd time of one in the afternoon. The timing was most inconvenient

because the movie often overlapped with our twenty-minute bathroom break. The noise from the other cells suggested that today was not going to be our lucky Friday. It sounded like our pee-time was going to be around one o'clock, right when the movie started. Nobody wanted to miss the beginning of a movie. The ideal time was to go right in the middle, when you had a good idea of the plot and wouldn't miss the ending.

We always argued for more time in the bathroom—a meager one-minute allowance for a major bowel movement was malicious—but on Fridays during the movie, for the second of our three daily bathroom visits, we could easily take care of business in half the time.

We heard pounding on the door followed by the faint sound of the guard calling, “Bathroom!”

With rolled up pajama bottoms, flip-flops in one hand, and the tip of his penis in the other, each of my cellmates waited for the guard to open the door before their levees broke and flooded the cell.

“Twenty minutes,” the guard said as he opened the door with a lazy, distant Friday afternoon voice.

It was not a hard choice between relieving a bursting bladder and watching the beginning of a movie. The crowd scrambled out of the room in two lines, swiftly but orderly. I lagged behind with Kamal, who helped me inch my way toward the bathroom. I hated these moments that revealed my absolute reliance on my cellmates. Standing up and walking were becoming more demanding. Pain wasn't the main issue; my legs couldn't bear the weight of my body, the entire ninety pounds of what was left of it. Kamal, who was short, was perhaps not the best person to do this, but I imagined that was how he filled up his hope tank—telling himself that life

does not end in prison, you can still contribute to the well-being of others, and all those platitudes that one hated to read but somehow worked miraculously in dire situations.

I had been in this state for over four months by that point, and the guards tolerated my slow procession to the bathroom, even allowing someone to take me back right after I paid my dues, without waiting for others to finish. I was also exempt from the one-minute rule inside the bathroom. Advanced cancer had its own privileges; it elevated me to the aristocracy of prisoners.

After I finished, one of my cellmates, whose name I cannot recall, volunteered to take me back. Nobody objected! I looked around to see if Kamal or anybody else was giving me a signal in which case I'd say, "Thanks, I'll wait." But no, it seemed that a member of a pro-Soviet party was going to be the one to carry me back to the cell. A guy whose name I've forgotten, but could not overlook his party affiliation. I resented that the regime ever put them in cells among us.

The pain of standing had made me reluctantly docile, so without a word, I put my right arm around his neck and rested my body against his, letting him know I was ready.

He knocked on the door gently, revealing his inexperience in calling the guards.

"Harder," I said tersely, showing my displeasure with this arrangement. "Even I can't hear this knocking on the door."

This time he pounded loudly on the door four times. "*So pocht das Schicksal an die Pforte*," he said, smiling.

"What?" I turned toward him, glancing from below at his open nostrils and sparse goatee (how typical).

"Russian?" I didn't know whether I was saying this aloud or still thinking.

“German,” he said.

The door opened before he could continue.

“Do you want the whole ward to know that you’re going back?” shouted the guard, and let the two of us out of the bathroom.

“It’s German for *Thus Fate Knocks at the Door!* Beethoven’s Fifth,” he whispered as we walked slowly back to the cell.

“I thought it was Russian,” I said, confessing my prejudice.

“I’m not surprised,” he said affably, “and I do carry an umbrella on sunny days,” he joked, referring to the way we use to mock their party for its blind submission to the Russians: *If you see a pro-Soviet communist walking with an umbrella on a sunny day in Tehran, you know it must be raining in Moscow.*

It was clear that he did not intend to pick a fight.

“I know today is your birthday and we have a present for you,” he told me right after the guard closed the door.

The moment I heard the “we” it dawned on me that allowing him to carry me back was part of the scheme.

“We know that you love Beethoven and I told the others that I can play the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth as a birthday present for you.”

“But the movie starts pretty soon,” I said, trying to cover my confusion. “You know they all count on me to explain what’s going on there.”

“They’ll figure it out,” he said, looking like an adult telling a child *You don’t know what’s good for you.* “Ready?”

His face was uncomfortably close to mine. I turned my cheek away and nodded “Yes.”

“*Hu hu hu huum, Ba ba ba baaaam . . .*” Thus he began Beethoven’s Fifth.

“Who is your favorite conductor?” he asked suddenly, interrupting the symphony after the two opening bars.

He didn't wait for my response.

"You know, I think von Karajan is overrated, and my absolute favorite version of the Fifth is Carlos Kleiber's 1975 recording with the Wiener Philharmoniker," he said, showing off his German pronunciation.

This guy was crazier than I was.

"You have to make a clear distinction," he continued, "between the way the first three Gs and *E flat* sound from the three Fs and the D of the second phrase."

I couldn't fathom what he was talking about, and just wanted him to play the damn symphony without editorializing it. But it was a gift and I needed to politely accept whatever it entailed.

"I like Kleiber because he makes the distinction between the two opening phrases very clear, the first sounds like four tightly wrapped notes, while in the second, each note has its own discrete presence with this otherworldly doubly sustained D." So, he enunciates the notes in the second phrase by *ba ba ba baaaam* instead of the *hu hu hu huum* of the first.

More curious to me was that he liked Kleiber better than Kondrashin or Rozhdestvensky, and more importantly, that he chose the Vienna over the Moscow Philharmonic. Could it be true that we were wrong and that the pro-Soviets didn't invariably listen to their Kremlin masters?

"What I like about this," he went on, forgetting that this was not supposed to be a music appreciation class, "is that Beethoven shows he's a no-nonsense kind of man. He jumps into his message without any hedging. 'Wake up!' he's warning you."

"I am up," I smiled. "Can I see what today's movie is?"

He couldn't hide his disappointment in me.

“Do you want to hear the rest of it?” He turned the TV on and put it on mute.

“Of course, yes, yes,” I said, trying to display more excitement.

He continued with the symphony, switching between breathy strings, nasal brass, deep-throated timpani, and the treble of woodwinds. This time, he let the music speak for itself, so long as I remembered it was Kleiber’s 1975 rendition.

“And this is the solo oboe right in the middle of the first movement,” he interrupts his performance once again. “Beethoven wrote this little part for a friend of his who was an unemployed oboe player, he wanted to make sure that his friend would have a solo within the orchestra.”

I nodded and gestured that I wanted him to carry on with the music.

He obliged.

I listened to him while having an eye on the TV. An announcement appeared: *Next: Sundays and Cybèle, the story of a relationship between an orphan girl and a shell-shocked veteran.*

“This is where he ascends into the tumultuous finale of the first movement,” he says.

Suddenly the door is kicked wide open.

“What the hell are you two doing in here?” yelled the guard whose shift had just begun.

Sitting in the corner of the room, with my cellmate’s lips almost touching my ear, we both felt caught. What could we tell him, that the cellmate is playing Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in my ear?

“Nothing!” we said simultaneously as he moved away from me. “I’m helping him to lie down,” he added, as a more plausible excuse.

“Isn’t everybody in the bathroom now?” said the guard, walking in to have a closer look. “What are you two doing here in the cell?”

As he came closer, I recognized him from the earlier days in Cell Block 2, cell number 6—a brutal old man infamous for his sadistic fits.

Kleiber explained to him that I was allowed to come back earlier than the others because I was sick, etc.

The guard regarded him dismissively and asked again, “Why are you in here?”

Didn't he just tell you? I kept the thought to myself.

“You’re walking in our room with your shoes on,” I said, trying to distract him. His shoes were muddy and wet and left a print after each step he took closer to us.

“My shoes are cleaner than your big mouth,” he said.

I had been successful in changing his focus.

“We sleep here, we eat here.”

“Shut up,” he shouted, kicking somebody’s little bag toward me. “You’re supposed to pray in here to repent and ask for forgiveness. Have we put you here to fatten you up? You think we’re your servants?”

Somehow Kleiber had disappeared from the scene and the guard and I were going back and forth about his dirty boots.

“Why are you watching TV if you’re sick?” he asked, displaying his flawless logic.

I became more defiant and careless as our argument progressed.

“I do whatever I want in my own cell,” was not what he wanted to hear.

He launched his assault on me, kicking as hard as he could while screaming, “I’ll show you how dirty my shoes are.”

I folded my knees into my chest and put my arms around my head, protecting my face and leaving the rest of my body to the

mercy of his boots. I try to imagine a crash scene, go into a fetal position and embrace myself for impact. *I was* crashing—from Beethoven’s Fifth down to the lower depths of vulgarity.

“Motherfucker . . . Son of a bitch!”

Then he stopped kicking.

“I forgive you this time, but don’t mess with me again.”

He walked away, limping slightly.

“Don’t think you can fool me,” he said, his face red, with veins protruding from his temples and forehead.

I was still gasping as he slammed the door.

The others came back, excited to see how I enjoyed my birthday surprise. “The movie is called *Sundays and Cybèle*,” I told them, struggling to get the words out. “It should be good.”

Kamal turned the TV off.

“We can’t accept this,” Kleiber says.

Suddenly a revisionist thought distracted me from my agonizing pain. Could it be true that we were wrong about the expansionist intentions of our northern neighbors? It would certainly take more than the outrage of a simple party member to persuade me.

“When I was transferred,” said Kleiber, becoming more vociferous, “the warden himself told a bunch of us that prisoners must be treated respectfully. There are punishments, but they have to comply with rules and regulations of the prison.”

Wasn’t the entire problem the fact that their party took the words of the regime so literally and accepted it so wholeheartedly?

“I’ll be fine,” I said, coughing blood. *I should just shut up and let things pass.*

“We should file a complaint,” I heard someone say in the crowded cell.

I didn't want any of them to get into trouble. If that was what they wanted to do, then I should be the one to do it. I asked the cell representative to knock on the door and help me stand behind it.

"Knock four times," I joked, "and enunciate each knock distinctly." I wanted to show Kleiber that I had been listening and appreciated his gift.

"What else do you need?" said the same guard as he opened the door.

"I want to talk to your supervisor," I replied, unable to believe I was actually saying this.

"My what?" he growled. "I only answer to God . . ."

"And the chief warden," I chimed in.

He grabbed my collar, dragged me out and shoved me to the wall with one hand while shutting the door with the other. Then he released me and I slumped to the floor like a piece of dough anticipating the heat of the oven.

He came back before I managed to pull my joints together and resituate myself. He threw a blindfold around my neck and ordered me to put it on. We weren't allowed to leave our ward without being blindfolded, unless that was also against the new regulations—apparently not. I didn't think I'd survive another round of beating.

I had told my cellmates to let it pass; they wouldn't listen. Respect and new regulations? Since when did Soviet drones know how this prison works? Haven't we been here longer? Don't we know these people much better than they do?

I couldn't breathe. I was drenched. It was cold, and I couldn't stop shivering. The world was disappearing.

I opened my eyes, but still could not see. I was blindfolded, lying on a stretcher, as I figured out later, in the warden's office. Was the movie over? I wondered.

“Is this the one?” a voice said.

I heard no response.

“Take him to branch three, and run,” I heard them talking about another prisoner, “his interrogator is waiting.”

A guard walked by me with hurried steps escorting another prisoner.

The thought of a visit to branch three terrified me. Branch three was never good news. It always meant they had a new lead in your case, or may be an old comrade had given in and was offering new information about you. I shamelessly felt relieved that today was somebody else’s bad news. I wondered whether he knew that he was going to taken to the “basement,” as they called it in the lexicon of branch three, to be “re-acclimated.”

I needed to make a gesture so that they knew I was there.

“May I have a glass of water?” I asked.

“So, you’re not dead after all?” someone replied.

A plastic cup of water touched my fingers and a hand helped me struggle to sit up. I gulped down the water and asked for more.

“You wanted to speak to the supervisor?” he asked as he poured more water in my cup.

There was no way of taking it back at this point.

“Yes,” I said sheepishly, hoping he couldn’t hear.

“OK, what’s the problem?”

I needed to know whether the crazy guard was still around, or his shift was over. Was it still Friday?

“What time is it?” I asked to buy time to draw up a strategy. *Should I drop it and say it was just a misunderstanding or should I test the “new” regulations?*

“It’s two o’clock,” he replied patiently, seeming to recognize my need to collect my thoughts.

“Friday?” I asked with more confidence.

“Yes, it’s Friday afternoon.” He spoke very slowly, making sure that I understood what he was saying. “You weren’t out for a long time,” he said, trying to communicate that he cared. “What was the issue?” I recognized the voice of the warden.

I could feel there were others in his office, but couldn’t be certain whether I was about to accuse somebody who was standing right next to me. I was afraid that he’d go off on another rampage; my entire body held back my tongue.

“I’ve been in this ward for months now,” I began cautiously. “Every guard here knows that I need to go back to my cell right after I’m done in the bathroom. I can’t keep standing.”

As I delivered this preamble, I was thinking about how to approach the question of filing a complaint.

“I am aware of your situation and I instructed the guards to respect this arrangement,” the warden said calmly.

I began to breathe easier, figuratively and literally. I felt able to complete my sentences without panting.

“Today,” I launched my offensive, “one of the guards attacked me in the cell because I was not with the rest of my cellmates in the bathroom.”

I told him the details of the assault, and he listened without interrupting. I left Kleiber completely out of the picture. I did not want to open the door for questions about what the two of us were doing. I could hear the ridicule already.

I felt he was still not impressed and was waiting for something further that would move him. Any accounts of violence had lost their novelty once the prisons were reopened a few months after the revolution, putting an end to the fantastic notion of turning prisons into museums.

“And . . .” I said, adding vigor to my voice in the hope of resuscitating my faltering grievance, “. . . he defamed my mother and insulted my father, who has just passed away.”

“God bless his soul,” said the warden, finally showing that he was listening.

“Is he allowed to do that?” I asked, immediately sensing that this had an effect. “What does he know about my mother? What right does he have to speak of my parents in that shamelessly foul language? I am guilty, I accept that, and I am paying for it, too. But then, I just lost my father, perhaps of grief . . .”

My voice was cracking, and I wasn’t sure whether I was just putting on a show or the frog in my throat was real.

“What did he say?” he asked, with increasing interest in the incident.

“I cannot repeat it.”

Kicking me with all his might until I coughed blood appeared to be secondary to the “son of a bitch” the guard had uttered at the end of his rage.

“I cannot repeat it,” I reiterated.

He helped me to walk and sit behind a desk. He placed a form in front of me and asked me to look from below my blindfold and fill it out. *Name . . . Date . . . Cell No . . . Ward . . . etc., etc.* “You need to complete this form for the judge,” he explained. “Then he will decide what the punishment for the guard will be. Nobody is allowed to disrespect another person’s parents. But we cannot do anything about it without a court order.”

Then he began to walk away.

I was dumbfounded. I thought they were waiting to see what kind of idiot I would make of myself.

“The punishment for defamation of parents,” he said turning back for a moment, “is twenty lashes, which needs to be administered by you.”

This had to be a practical joke. The moment I put my pen to the form, whoever else was in the room would surely burst into laughter. I sat there with the pen in my hand thinking how I could end this and get back to my cell with a smidgen of dignity.

“You should forgive him,” said another voice behind me, “he is an old short-tempered man.”

Forgive him! I was indeed interested in that.

“This is his third complaint,” another guard said, raising his voice from the other side, “the judge will not ignore this one.”

Did I have the nerve to whip the guard who attacked me? I needed them to shut up and let me think about what was happening.

“I’m sorry,” said the shaky voice of the old guard. “Nobody had told me about your situation,” he pleaded. “Had I known, I would have never, never, and I swear to the blessed soul of my grandfather who was a holy man, stepped inside your cell.”

His voice had poisoned the air of clemency.

“Isn’t today your birthday?”

Had they talked to Kleiber? Did they know what was going on?

“My birthday?” I played dumb.

“Yes, that’s what your file says, June 28, today.”

“I don’t care about those things anymore,” I lied calmly.

“Be generous on your birthday and forgive the old man. Let’s just say that no harm’s done, all is well and we’ll go back to work.”

The old guard begged once more and another asked him to leave me alone.

“You’re not supposed to talk to him,” he said and pulled him away.

The warden came back and asked whether I had finished the grievance application.

“I decided,” I said, hesitating for a fraction of a second, “not to file.”

The idea of whipping another man disgusted me. I had no sympathy for the old man, I wanted him to suffer, but not by my own hands; he ought to weigh on somebody else’s conscience.

“I have forgiven him,” I said as my honorable ticket out.

“Are you sure?” the warden asked quizzically. “You can’t come back and say that you’ve changed your mind. This file is closed. Take him back.”

When we returned to the cell block, the guard asked me in the hallway to take off my blindfold. I noticed the old guard opening the bathroom door, asking those inside to hurry back to their cell. He ignored me and I him. I waited to let the others stream by me. Then the old guard opened my cell door and I walked in as the final credits of *Sundays and Cybèle* were being displayed on the TV.

All the heads turned back toward the door, tears welling up in their eyes.

Kamal jumped up to lend a hand.

“You missed a great film,” he said.

I looked for Kleiber, whom I found behind the door. I wanted to make sure he didn’t feel responsible. I thanked him for his gift with a fleeting smile, trying to disguise the pain in my chest.

“So, what was the movie about?” I asked Kamal.

“Well, it was about the friendship between a war veteran and a twelve-year-old girl . . .”

I wasn’t interested, but I needed another narrative, of *Cybèle* or some other stranger, to carry the day. Today was my birthday and I wasn’t interested in hearing fate pounding at my door, whether

from Beethoven or the crazy guard. I wanted someone to tell me a story while I pretended to listen, just to hear the words that told me I was still there.

THE AYATOLLAH

I knew I was going to die. I sensed that the cancer had spread to my bones. But what seemed to herald my death was neither pain nor any discernible symptom, but rather an unfathomable feeling of consent. I saw no point in visiting the resident doctor in our cell block. His liberal offering of Valium pills had long been my way of giving something back to my cellmates for tending me. I couldn't sleep at nights. I thought that I *should* not. I didn't want to die in my sleep. Somehow, no matter how banal, I wanted to have a final say. I think we human beings have a propensity for drama; the anticlimactic contradicts our nature.

But I didn't want to die in my cell. I don't know why I found dying embarrassing. As much as I wanted to be with my comrades in my final hour, I didn't want a soulless body to be their last image of me—not that my emaciated self while alive would leave behind a desirable image. I decided that the next time I visited the doctor, I would ask the warden not to send me back to my cell. I'd beg the doctor to transfer me to the infirmary and allow me to die there. I did not come to this decision easily, but

this was the right thing to do. It was the only pain I could at least spare my comrades.

The guards were growing more sympathetic to my plight. Those who were aware of my condition made certain accommodations for me: extra bathroom time, a few more minutes for the daily recess into fresh air, and the luxury of regular visits to the doctor.

One afternoon I asked Mehdi to call for a guard.

“You’re panting,” he said with great tenderness, before quickly shifting gears and pounding on the door.

“Guard . . . guard!” Mehdi shouted, then turned toward me, switching off the fury-button.

“What do you need?” he asked me. Before I could reply, he realized the absurdity of his question and ordered Said: “Rub his back!” Then he called for the guard again.

The guard opened the door and ignored Mehdi’s temper, overlooking the fact that in matters related to my health my cellmates often played loose with the rules.

“I need to see the doctor,” I said, grabbing my blindfold to put on before leaving the cell.

Said pulled my arm around his neck and lifted me up.

The guard asked me to step out of the door and follow him. He walked two steps ahead of me to avoid the taint of my communist impurity. I didn’t need to see my way to the doctor’s office: twenty steps, turn right, go down five stairs, sharp turn left, down five more stairs, turn right and walk all the way to the end of the hallway.

I stopped with the pungent smell of alcohol in front of the doctor’s office. I felt weak, my knees began to tremble, and the blindfold suddenly sucked the air out of my chest. But before I could utter my request, I collapsed.

I opened my eyes in the Evin infirmary, a twelve-by-twelve room with four beds and no other occupants. The yellowing walls and the dim light bulb caged on the ceiling echoed the despair I should have been feeling but didn't.

I didn't know what time it was, or what day. But unlike my earlier days in prison, this did not bother me. They said that losing track of time disorients prisoners and makes them frantic. But I was calm, with no awareness of time but a total consciousness of fate.

"You came back to life?" a guard taunted me through the grating on the door. "Aren't you supposed to kick the bucket?"

He walked in cheerfully, satisfied at his little joke.

Oddly, I was happy to see him, a total stranger.

I had been constantly preoccupied with the question of where I wanted to die. This room looked like a place where people died. I didn't care if I'd be denying my comrades the chance to hear my final wisdom. For them, it will be that I died of terminal cancer when I walked out of Cell Block 3, cell number 53, give or take a few hours or days.

"What day is it?"

I'm not sure whether this was something just I thought, or actually asked the cheerful guard.

"What day is it?" This time I made sure I asked the question.

"You've been in a coma for ten years," he said with amusement. "All your comrades are dead. You're so lucky we took such a good care of you."

It appeared that I'd passed out in front of the doctor's office just a few hours earlier, eventually opening my eyes to this funny Florence Nightingale of the Evin infirmary.

"Get dressed," he said, placing my little bag of belongings, which I had left behind in cell 53, on the bed.

I felt like I had a hangover and was dreadfully thirsty.

“Can I have a glass of water?”

“They’ll give you as much as you want, no charge. The prison will pick up the tab. But get ready fast,” he said, closing the door gently behind himself, not wanting to disturb the already disturbing quiet of the ward.

I put on Colonel Sayrafi’s pants, which I had inherited after he was executed three years ago. They had remained with me despite my long legs and shrinking waistline. Short pants make you look dumb. How vain I remained, despite losing more than fifty pounds and looking like something the hyenas left behind. I sat on the edge of the bed waiting. From my earlier stay in the infirmary, I knew that I shouldn’t call out or bang on the door. So I sat. But sitting was hard, so I lay down.

Another guard walked in with a tray of food, real food. I must have fallen asleep. He then left the food, without saying a word about why I was asked to dress. I couldn’t eat, but it looked tempting.

“Am I being transferred?” I asked.

He ignored my inquiry and locked the door gently from the outside.

I was alone again. Nobody came to claim the dishes. The light remained on, but it felt like the middle of the night. I couldn’t breathe when I lay down and my back hurt when I sat.

Eventually the door opened again.

“You’re still here?”

It was the first guard bringing breakfast.

“I told them you might not want to leave. Why spoil a good party?”

I smiled, not having the strength to do otherwise.

"I'm ready whenever you are," I said, not having a clue where they would be taking me.

I told them that I would faint if they push me to walk fast. I still didn't know where we were going. I had become wary of any unexplained transfer in the three years since I was sentenced to death.

Soon I was ushered into a black Mercedes with three armed guards.

"At least now you can die knowing you finally got a ride in a nice Mercedes," said the guard in the passenger seat, turning around to make sure I appreciated the privilege.

"I'm happy that *you* realized your dream." I couldn't distinguish between the words I said and those that crossed my mind. "It must be so heavenly for you to drive one."

The slap on my face verified that I did utter those words.

After a few short minutes, we arrived at the National University Medical School Hospital. The attendant at the main entry was apparently expecting us. He immediately opened the gate and we proceeded all the way to the stairs in front of the main building. I was hoping they weren't expecting me to climb those fifteen stairs up to the building. But they were.

Once I got out of their beloved Mercedes, I paused for a few moments. I had been asking for months to be transferred to a hospital, but the answer had always been the same: "We don't save the lives of people on death row." I had no idea what had changed. I remained standing there outside the car without holding on to it. I thought that I was standing straight and breathing normally. Even if they were only doing this as a face-saving measure, I felt a certain triumph, for at least they realized that their face was in need of saving. A few months ago, they could not have cared less about what others thought of their actions. Now it mattered to them that

I died in a hospital, so in some sense I had won. I wanted them to be accountable, and now regardless of their brute manners, I felt sure that somebody, somewhere had informed them that they could not let me die without at least the appearance of due process.

The way I climbed up the stairs must have made them wonder whether my sickness was a charade. I imagined that I looked strong, despite my gauntness. The scenario of my last breath began to meander along new lines.

I reached the top of the stairs. Cold sweat dampened my skin and dark wandering dots were appearing before my eyes. I did not want to faint. I was drenched and the guards stayed clear of me for fear of contamination from either the disease or communist impurities.

A hospital orderly rushed toward me with a wheelchair.

“Why are you standing there like wooden sticks?” he sneered at the guards while helping me into the chair.

“Which ward do you need to go to?” he asked as pushed me into the large lobby.

One of the guards took out his walkie-talkie and asked somebody on the other side the same question.

We all hear the answer: “Oncology.”

The guard who drove the Mercedes asked me to get up and walk. I smiled and let him interpret its meaning.

“Are you blind, mister?” demanded the orderly, jeopardizing his livelihood.

He pushed me toward the oncology ward, located to the left of the entrance. The guards seemed not to be in the mood for fighting, still trying to make sense of the peculiar situation in which they found themselves: offering their services to me, and taking orders from a skinny stranger.

“Open the door,” commanded the orderly, and the guards immediately obeyed this man who stood in such stark contrast to them.

He was so short I could feel his chin on my head as he unwaveringly pushed me forward.

As we entered the ward, the guards regained control and asked the man to leave and mind his own business.

“This *is* my business,” he said, not realizing with whom he was messing. One of the guards looked at him with dagger eyes and indicated the exit door with his walkie-talkie.

The orderly got the message.

Two of the guards discussed my situation with the head nurse at the nurses’ station, a good thirty feet away from where I was sitting, under the vigilant eyes of the third guard.

Soon a young doctor arrived in and rushed toward the station.

“We can’t do that,” he told the guards, raising his voice. “You need to leave him here and go.”

He headed for the door and when he reached me he shouted back at them: “I read his biopsy report nine months ago—where has he been since then?”

Then, ignoring my presence, he simply walked out.

The three guards congregated, alternating between talking to their walkie-talkies and amongst themselves. Finally, someone made a decision. They asked the head nurse to call the oncologist while pushing my wheelchair down the hallway.

Dr. Mahdi proceeded to write up my admission papers and ordered a series of tests. The head nurse, Ms. Roshani, introduced herself and inquired about my diet. I didn’t know whether she was simply being sarcastic or truly didn’t know about the prison conditions.

“I’m going to write an exclusive regime of rice and kebab diet for you. Would that be OK?”

She didn't wait for a response.

"We want you to gain some weight and the doctor wants you to eat small meals several times a day."

I couldn't decide on how serious she was about ordering me several courses of kebab each day, but it was certainly making my guards grumble.

"Do you want a bed near the window or one closer to the hallway?" she asked.

This time the guards had the answer.

"It has to be next to the hallway."

That settled it.

I noticed in the distance two medical students were having a tug of war and struggling over a clipboard. The tall one won.

"Which room is he going to be in?" she asked one of the nurses.

"I need to do your physicals and write down your history," the Meryl Streep look-alike, Ms. Rousta, informed me, not realizing that those words have terrifying connotations for a prisoner who has barely survived his interrogations. Things were moving at a dizzying speed. The slow pace of the prison seemed to be more suitable for a decaying body.

Somebody began pushing my wheelchair and turned into room number 6. The bed next to the hallway window was already made. A hospital gown was dropped on my lap.

"Help him to put it on," I heard a woman's voice say.

Ms. Rousta walked in, holding the clipboard tightly against her chest. The guards checked her out and stood next to me. For a moment it became unclear whom they were keeping an eye on.

"I need to ask him some questions," Ms. Rousta said, almost inaudibly. "Some of them are very private."

The guards did not move.

“Excuse me,” she said, adding some volume to her voice, thinking that they didn’t hear her right the first time.

“Miss, do whatever you need to do, we are in a rush.”

I wondered whether I was included in that “we.”

Her face turned red and she tried to bury it in the papers that she was hastily flipping through. Then she marched out without asking any questions and returned a few minutes later to the room with her supervisor, Dr. Mahdi. “There is no need for a case history,” he said matter-of-factly as he felt my swollen neck.

“And you can stay outside,” he told the guards, gently ushering them to the door. “We can’t work with the patient when it’s so crowded in here,” he said, referring to the six beds in the room, four of which were occupied by patients.

“The only thing we need at this point,” the oncologist soon advised the intern, “is a bone marrow biopsy to determine whether it has spread to the bone marrow.”

I was aware that bone marrow involvement meant a late stage, possibly terminal, cancer.

The oncologist asked the other medical students to attend the procedure. They talked to each other and ignored me as well as my guards. The students, residents, and a whole group of white-gowned enthusiasts gathered around my bed, obstructing the guards’ view of me. They put a toolbox on my bed with long, stout, scary needles, gauzes and cotton balls, surgical disinfectants, and forceps of all shapes and sizes. The guards tried to take a peek inside the ring of doctors. I wondered what they were worried about.

Dr. Mahdi asked Ms. Rousta to do the bone marrow biopsy, her first—mine, too. She was a much younger Meryl Streep, with a facial expression that led one to expect her to burst into tears at any moment.

“We need a Jamshidi needle for this, right?” she asked, picking up a spear that was wrongly called a needle.

I wondered which part of my body she would poke with it.

She answered by sterilizing my chest with a dark-orange disinfectant, injecting some anesthetics, and targeting my sternum for the jab.

She pushed as hard as she could, but Jamshidi needle was too thick to penetrate the bone. I could feel her entire weight on my chest, but the needle refused to break through.

“Don’t push,” the oncologist guided her, “make a jerking move, like stabbing.”

The guards stopped looking. I felt that I had to defend the dignity of all political prisoners by pretending I was heroic—the stab of a Jamshidi needle is beneath the level of the pain *we* are capable of enduring.

I rested for a day after the Jamshidi trauma. Then that night I enjoyed my first order of kebab delivered personally by Ms. Roshani, the head nurse. It came with saffron rice, three fire-roasted tomatoes and fresh basil leaves from Shah Abdolazim, the best in the market.

“Ms. Roustá asked me to apologize for the pain of the biopsy, but it had to be done,” she smiled as she put the tray next to my bed.

I later found out that the four other patients in the room were all sick with leukemia and undergoing chemotherapy.

Mr. Azeri, a tall, sturdy man from Maku, a border town a few miles from Turkey, had the best bed, next to the courtyard window. He got plenty of light and enjoyed gazing at the comings and goings of people outside. His broad chest and sunburned face were leftovers from his days as a shepherd. He had joined the

Revolutionary Guards during the war with Iraq. Eventually disillusioned, he'd left to tend his goats in the mountains. That was when he realized that climbing mountains had become arduous and was soon impossible.

Sixteen-year-old Ali Mehri was next to me, with his mother constantly at his bedside. They were from Isfahan and he was hospitalized here for an aggressive last-resort chemotherapy. Mrs. Mehri was in her late forties and had four other children who remained in Isfahan with their father.

When I had first asked the intern about the stage of my cancer, Mrs. Mehri immediately whispered to me that Ali Aqa did not know why he was here. It seemed strange that she called her son Mr. Ali. She asked me to please not mention the word cancer in front of him. It was not clear who was protecting whom by hushing cancer out of the conversation: Ali and others shielding their loved ones from the possibility of their own deaths, or parents and relatives safeguarding the patients from the bleak prognosis.

Next to Ali Aqa was Javad, another sixteen-year-old from the city of Qom. Javad had the other window bed and took complete advantage of the scene outside. He enjoyed describing to us the people he spotted in the courtyard. His sixty-second character sketches were remarkably clever for a sixteen-year-old.

Our wing of sixty beds had only one bathroom.

"Let me know if you see anybody sprinting toward the bathroom at the end of the hallway," was Javad's running joke, "and coming back slowly, legs spread and face pale. It means they pulled out the poor guy's enema too late."

Javad had already been in and out of the hospital for two years. His mother would come to visit him, but Mrs. Mehri also mothered him.

The old man on the other side of the room, Mr. Keshavarz, remained half conscious and without visitors.

It was the month of Muharram, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hossein, the third Shi'i Imam, when millions mourned in the streets and makeshift mosques around the country. Muharram processions are quite a spectacle, with people beating their chests and striking their heads, carrying ornamented flags and colorful signs, crying, laughing, eating free food, and drinking sweet *sharbats* in memory of the parched lips of Hossein in the deserts of Karbala.

On Ashura, the day of Imam Hossein's martyrdom, the first procession entered the hospital courtyard around ten in the morning. Javad stood up on his bed and encouraged others to join him near the window to watch the spectacle. My guards remained uninterested and unresponsive to Javad's invitation, but a number of nurses took advantage of the view, as did Ms. Rousta, Meryl, and the other medical student who had been fighting with her over my case the first day.

The crowd in the room was making the guards edgy.

"Can I watch the ceremony too?" I asked.

One of the guards came in and proceeded to check the window to see if it was sealed. Then with a twist of his head he gave me permission to watch as well.

The next day would have been the day of my monthly visitation in prison. They were sure to exploit my absence to inflict as much pain as possible on my mother. I needed to send her a message to let her know where I was.

I stood before the window leaning against Javad's bed. Between his bed and Ali Agha's there were two rows of people blocking the guards' view.

“Ya Hossein!” the crowd cried. Men were beating their chests with all their might and entering trance states as they repeated fast staccatos of “Hossein, Hossein, Hossein.”

“Is anyone willing to call my home?” I asked, hiding my question in the stream of sound invading the room. “Just let my mother know that I am safe. My home number is 925-825.”

Seven pairs of wide-open eyes searched my face for a reason to put their careers on line by helping a prisoner.

“I will,” said the other student, Ms. Shoja, relieving the others. “925-825. You can’t say no to a number this round.”

She did call later that day.

Javad died.

I was not responding to the chemotherapy. Now, in addition to the misery of cancer, I had to cope with the collapse of every single cell in my body.

Early in the morning, a new oncologist visited me. He wanted me to know that they were going to start a more aggressive and experimental treatment. *More* aggressive sounded absurd to me, but I’d learned during those years that no pain was the worst one could endure. And now, yet again, I was standing at the threshold.

A guard then told me that I would have a visitor.

“Don’t exaggerate your pain,” he advised me, “you don’t want to torment your mother!”

Ten minutes was all I got. My mother walked in so nonchalantly, as if she had been seeing me every day for the past three years or so and I were in the hospital for a nose job (my sunken cheeks now truly exaggerating the size of my already big nose). She sat next to my bed without a single tear in her eyes.

“Have no worries,” she said, holding my hand for the first time after all these years. “God will give you back to me.”

I wanted to just hold her hand and say nothing. The guards stayed clear of us and allowed us to speak freely. They knew better than I did that there was nothing to be said.

My mother wrapped me in her arms. I caressed her hair.

I noticed one of the guards standing in the hallway wiping tears from his cheek.

The only two people not crying were my mother and I.

Half-an-hour passed before the guard politely asked my mother to get ready to leave.

In another fifteen minutes I asked my mother to go before they ruined the visit.

She did so without turning back to see me or I to see her tears.

“We didn’t have a revolution to see mothers and sons like this,” the tearful guard said.

Other patients, visitors, nurses, and all those who have witnessed the scene were now becoming openly hostile to the guards.

“What is going on in Evin prison?” the guard now asked.

I wondered whether this was a rhetorical question or if he genuinely did not realize.

“You know better than I do,” I said, not in the mood for talking.

“But they don’t allow *us* to enter the prison,” he told me. “I work with an investigative committee formed by Ayatollah Montazeri.”

Then he elaborated on who the “us” was. He told me how the infamous revolutionary prosecutor of Tehran, Asadollah Lajevardi, refused access to any member of what is called The Committee for the Investigation of Prison Problems.

“The Ayatollah is very concerned about the situation,” he said, sounding sincere, “but his resources are very limited. That is why we need your input.”

My doubt was not about the credibility of the story about Montazeri. I remembered on a crucial day, three years earlier, he had saved many prisoners’ lives. On that day, only a few hours after we had heard the news of the assassination of the influential Ayatollah Dastgheib, Revolutionary Guards, armed with machine guns, had stormed the cell blocks in Evin prison. No arms were allowed inside the prison. They opened all the cells and ordered us to stay inside, facing the door. We heard cries of *Allah O Akbar* and demands for the annihilation of all “counter-revolutionaries.” As the guards prepared the mass execution, from the loudspeakers they announced that Ayatollah Montazeri would deliver a message on the occasion of the assassination of Dastgheib.

“It is during times of hardship,” the Ayatollah declared, “that Muslims must pass the test of compassion. Being kind and compassionate is a tremendous task when one feels under attack. This is what distinguishes a true Muslim from others, that we never betray our prime principle of justice and fairness.”

This was not what the guards wanted to hear. But since he was the perceived successor to the leader of the revolution, they could not act against the Ayatollah’s wish. We were rescued by a speech.

But did this guard in fact represent him? I needed to think about it.

The next day Mrs. Mehri came in, looking quite joyous. I had given her my home number a few days ago and now she was becoming a regular visitor and a messenger to and from my home. She offered me a beef stew she claimed I would unquestionably love.

“This is *homemade*,” she said, making sure that I know which home she was talking about.

My messenger network was working quite well. Now in every shift among the nurses, the interns, families of visitors, I had a courier. Anything that happened here at the hospital, my family would know about within hours.

“Do you think that a man must necessarily be older than his wife?” Mrs. Mehri asked, surprising me with her question. On a day that my right arm is hooked up to a 500cc-bag of blood transfusion and antibiotics are pumped into the other, I cannot think of age difference in a marriage. But I had to be polite to her. She had been treating me no different from Ali Aqa.

“Absolutely not,” I murmured.

“That’s what I tell my daughter Batul,” she said, a gratified smile taking over her face. “All the good men are either abroad or in prison. She has a degree in Persian literature and no suitors. Her father wants to marry her off to some bazaar merchant. But she is educated. She needs to be able to have an intelligent conversation about poetry or something with somebody who appreciates what she has accomplished.”

I was fighting to keep my eyes open.

“Do you think twenty-six is already too late to find a good husband?”

“Mom, leave him alone,” Ali Aqa objected.

The next day Batul was there, offering me sweets and fruits, which I was not allowed to accept.

I told her thank you without looking at her, fearing that any eye contact might be interpreted as my asking for her hand.

“No sweets?” said Mrs. Mehri, bringing back the box. “She made them herself.”

She wanted to make sure I recognized her daughter's gift of domestic talents in addition to her literary erudition. My suitor looked much less enthusiastic than her mother. Maybe she was thinking that a death row prisoner with terminal cancer in the custody of three armed guards in a public hospital might not be the husband she had always dreamt about.

I had decided to tell the guard all I knew about Evin, about my own case and others I had witnessed. He stood next to my bed without taking notes or showing any expression. I still was not convinced that he was genuine, but I had nothing to lose. So, I went through with it.

"The Ayatollah knows about your case," he interrupted me as I was telling him about the coerced confessions. "He has asked for your unconditional release, but we still need to outwit the revolutionary prosecutor Lajevardi and his prison network."

Mr. Azeri had apparently overheard my conversation with the representative of the Ayatollah.

"Don't wait for these promises," said his younger brother, who visited regularly. He looked like a bodybuilder, and was too tall for any ordinary door. He brought over some chocolate to me. "We can take you from here and out of the country through the Turkish border in less than twenty-four hours." His three cousins also appeared shortly as a show of force. The four of them took up the entire space of the room.

The guards became suspicious. Two of the cousins went out to talk to the guards, obstructing their view.

"Just tell us when," said the third one, holding my hand, then patted my shoulder as a sign of solidarity.

That terrified Mrs. Mehri and me, for different reasons.

"I will, but please do not do anything without my consent."

That was the last thing I needed: bloodshed in the oncology ward.

I had imagined escaping from the hospital from the first day I had learned of my cancer. But now it was too late. I couldn't breathe. My vision was blurry and my legs weak. I thought that it might actually be the scenario my guards envisioned: to kill me during an escape attempt. Justified, clean, no accountability. Maybe they were conspiring with Mr. Azeri's cousins. I needed to stay put and count on Montazeri's efforts and my mother's relentless campaign.

Mr. Azeri died.

After two months of hospitalization, the guards escorted me back to prison, over the objections of the hospital staff, the frenzied cry of Mrs. Mehri, and even the hospital cook, whom I had never seen. Dr. Mahdi finally agreed to sign my discharge from the hospital under the condition that I was brought back every week to receive my chemotherapy. "His immune system is gravely compromised," he told the guards. "You need to make sure that he doesn't get a cold or a flu. He is unable to fight off any infection."

He shouldn't have said that. He gave them a good solution to their predicament. During the next two months I was shuttled back and forth between the prison and the hospital, not in a fancy Mercedes, but riding on the back of a motorcycle in the freezing late fall. For weeks, my everyday routine was to be called out of the prison infirmary and wait blindfolded in the open air, under the rain and sleet from early in the morning till the late afternoon, for my motorcycle ride to take me to the hospital for my next chemo. "Bring him in the morning," Ms. Roshani scolded them every time, "because we need time to run blood tests before his chemo." And

the doctors were already gone by then, too. The guards apologized profusely and promised that the next day they would bring me back first thing in the morning.

No matter how hard they tried to summon the viruses and bacteria to take advantage of my depleted blood cells, none complied. I lost count of how many times I followed them meekly to the later afternoon hospital visits and returned with little temporal consciousness. I just allowed my body to be pliant and embrace pain, exhaustion, and humiliation and not speak of it.

One morning I reached the outer limit of my resolve. When the guard asked me to get ready for my chemo, I refused to get off my bed. I don't know whether I refused or my body did without giving it much thought.

"Are you sure?" the guard exclaimed. I do not remember whether I responded.

Soon the infirmary chief walked in. "I hear that you have decided to refuse treatment," he said with a concerned face. "It is common among cancer patients," he carried on with his expert knowledge, "not to be able to finish their treatment." He was not a doctor, nor was he sympathetic to me, but nevertheless he spoke with a compassionate authority. "There is some paperwork we need to take care of," and he put a clipboard on my bed.

"I can't read anything," I told him. In my months of extreme emaciation, my eyes could barely see others' faces, let alone any text. "What is it?"

He said nonchalantly that it was a consent form stating despite the prison's initiation, I had refused further treatment.

A mysterious energy woke my body up. "I am ready to go," I said, realizing what the plot had all along been. "I was just tired and could not move," I told the chief.

“OK,” he said without a row.

I got my chemotherapy that day, the only one since I was discharged from the hospital two months earlier. “He can’t ride on the back of a motorcycle,” Ms. Roshani told the guards.

“It’s none of your business, you bitch,” the frustrated guard told her. “How many bosses do we have here?” he carried on.

“I’m fine,” I told Ms. Roshani, barely audible and trying to defuse the situation. She burst into tears.

They brought the black Mercedes. I vomited on the backseat the moment I got in, demonstrating the cosmic justice of the chemo side-effect.

Two days later, I was tried for the last time. After the trial, they took me back to the infirmary room where Mohammad was waiting for my return. I told him that I had lost my final appeal.

But the day after, Ayatollah Montazeri ended up winning: I signed the paperwork for my medical parole, and Lajevardi his resignation.

Some fifteen years later, Asadollah Lajevardi was assassinated. No one knows who was responsible for his murder, but one thing is certain: many secrets of his nefarious five-year reign over Evin were buried with him.

Four years later, Ayatollah Montazeri was deposed from his position as the heir apparent of the Leader for his uncompromising defense of the rights of political prisoners. He lived under house arrest for fifteen years, until he died. Hundreds of thousands mourned his passing, despite an official ban.

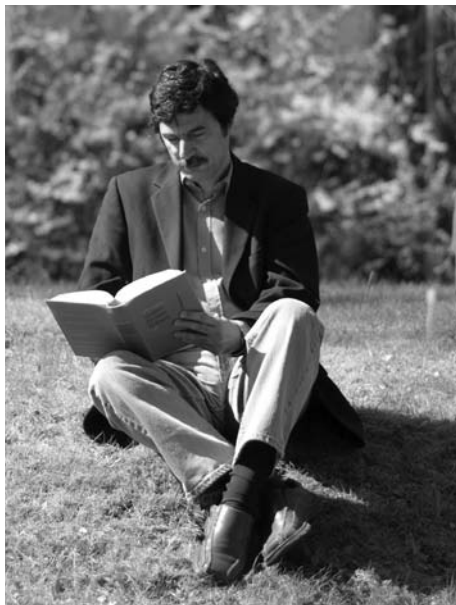
I walked out of Evin on the New Year’s Eve 1984. They dropped me off at a park where the parents of prisoners waited to be called for

their visitation time. A mother approached me as I struggled to keep my back straight.

“How is it in there?” she asked me in a shaky voice.

“We’re OK in there,” I said, and suddenly realized I no longer belonged to that “we.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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