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# TEHRAN

**Imagine a gaudy boulevard** descending a hill, like a swath of icing dripping down the inside of a coarse earthen bowl. The broad street is lined with department stores and little shops; it pulses with neon signs shouting the brand names of cell phones and airlines and fast-food restaurants. But the commercial thoroughfare is grimly punctuated every few blocks with hand-painted banners commemorating the blood of the martyrs.

This is Vali Asr Avenue, the spine of North Tehran. The avenue rises in the burly districts of downtown, where rage against the unbelievers is nurtured and sustained every Friday at prayers, and it ascends mile by mile till it reaches the heights of Jamaran, where one might think, to look at the Parisian fashions and big German cars, that the unbelievers are everywhere. But that is wrong: atop these hills are the secrets of modern Iran, a nation whose very identity is in some ways a fabric of lies. Nothing along this avenue is quite what it appears to be. That is the warning, and the temptation. Even the name of the street is elusive: officially

it is Vali Asr, but the smart set like to call it by its prerevolutionary name, Pahlavi Avenue.

Tehran plays tricks this way. It is the cockpit of the Islamic revolution and the capital of a nation that lives by reckless taunts, yet the police here insist that drivers wear their seat belts. The mullahs summon pilgrims to the holy city of Qom, but not too hastily; the highway patrol have radar guns to catch speeders. It is forbidden, of course, to watch the foreign television channels of the infidels. So everyone pays a small bribe to the local militiamen known as the *basiji* not to notice the satellite dish atop the roof. The spine of this noble city is pliable; like the nation, Tehran bends so that it will not break.

Our story begins along Vali Asr Avenue, with a young scientist who lived in an apartment down near the bottom of the street, in the neighborhood known as Yoosef Abad, but who was blessed to work up at the magisterial summit in Jamaran. He spent his days shuttling between these two worlds, a child of privilege and also of anger—not at the unbelievers, but at the people who presumed to rule over them. This is the story of his decision to abandon one idea of what is right and good in favor of another. Like all accounts of young men struggling to find their paths in the world, it is a story of fathers and sons. You could say that it is a story of betrayal, and also of fidelity.

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**On the morning the** young Iranian scientist made his decision, he awoke to find the sheets wet under his body. He had sweated through the night once again in his anxiety, and he was ashamed as if he had pissed in his bed. That was the moment he knew he must act. He could not continue waking up with the feeling that he was a coward. It would be better to step across the boundary and embrace his fear than to tremble before it any longer. It was like

any other decisive break—a divorce, or leaving home, or refusing to pray. You did it, really, because you had no choice. If there were another way, less painful, who would not take it?

The young man had been reading the night before from a book of poems by Simin Behbehani, an Iranian woman who was his nation's most beloved modern writer. His father claimed he had known her when he was a professor at Tehran University and she a student, and maybe it was true. Like his father, Behbehani had never left Iran for long, even in the worst days, but there was in her poems an anguish, and a yearning for escape. The young man had left the volume open beside his bed, to a poem called "My Country, I Will Build You Again," and now in the morning he read the words again:

*My country, I will build you again,*
*if need be, with bricks made from my life.*
*I will build columns to support your roof,*
*if need be, with my bones.*
*I will inhale again the perfume of flowers*
*favored by your youth.*
*I will wash again the blood off your body*
*with torrents of my tears.*

It should not only be the poets who tell the truth, the young man thought. The Islamic Republic of Iran was not his country. He had secretly become one of the *doshmand,* the enemy. He had wanted to disappear into the shadows of his work and enjoy his privileges, like any other hypocrite, but that had become impossible. That was what frightened him: he could not escape from himself. His father had told him that he must listen to his own voice, and not to those who impiously claimed to speak for God. He had said it the night before he died, and the scientist had answered, "Yes, Baba, I understand," which made it a promise. He didn't

want to be a betrayer, but the promise was already inside him; it had taken root. It was crowding out the other voices, so that he heard only his own.

When he awoke that morning, he had the nub of a plan: he would drop a pebble into the pond. That was all. The pebble would be information, the smallest bit of the truth about what he was doing in his laboratory. And then he would let the water ripple where it would. No one would see him do it, or trace cause and effect. Something had come into his hand, and he would let it fall. That was what he thought was possible in the beginning.

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**The young scientist traveled** that morning to a white office block in Jamaran. The windows were tinted, and there was no marking on the façade to suggest what work was done there. There were laboratories inside, with exotic equipment that had been acquired secretly from the West. But the real asset was the people, like the young scientist and his friends. At the side of the building was a door, halfway down an alleyway that curved like a crescent moon, and above this door was a surveillance camera that monitored every movement in or out. The building was part of a secret archipelago in this neighborhood and several others in the city, a string of addresses that couldn't be found on any map or in any public directory. You had to be part of the network to know that it existed. It was a condition of membership that you were always watched, and that you didn't know who the watchers were.

When his work was finished that afternoon, the young man opened the alley door and walked slowly toward the street. He was a handsome man in his early thirties, with a big Iranian nose and a shock of black hair that fell naturally in a thick wave. He wore a black suit of tropical wool and a starched white shirt with no collar; it was like the austere costumes worn by most of his colleagues,

but a pair of gold cuff links peeked out beneath the sleeves of his jacket. They had been his father's, and he wore them in memory. There was a softness about his face, perhaps because he didn't wear a beard, and his eyes sparkled with a curiosity he did not try to hide. He walked with a looser gait than many Iranian men, his feet pointed out at a slight angle and his back arched, rather than pitched forward. That was a product of the several years he had spent as a graduate student in physics in Germany, where everyone could walk with that easy posture because they never had to look over their shoulder.

Today the young man was carrying a black valise under his left arm, held close against his side so that it was not visible to the camera as he turned into the alley.

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**It was early summer.** The afternoon heat enfolded the city like a vaporous shawl, woven with the fumes of cars and scooters and gas generators. It was supposed to be cooler up here in the hills, but when the smog settled over the bowl of Tehran, it made the city democratic: everyone suffered in the heat together. A person who dreamed that he might escape was reminded on a day like this that it was impossible, except in the imagination.

From the hills of the Jamaran district, the city seemed to open itself to the world, cascading from the heights of the Alborz Mountains down toward the arid desert of Qom. It was a magnificent sight, this feast bowl of a city: close by were the skyscrapers and grand apartment blocks of North Tehran, mounting the hill so arrogantly. Then came the green spaces with their fountains and gardens—Mellat and Haqqani and Lavizan parks—where people went to escape the heat and dust. But it was the vast beyond that stretched your mind, the city tumbling mile after mile onto the plains, from the covered bazaar all the way south through the

numberless alleyways of South Tehran to the martyrs' cemetery at Behesht-e-Zahra. Here it was—a city too big to take in with your two eyes, a city where nobody could know everything, a city so big that perhaps secrets could be hidden, and no one would see.

But that sense of open space was an illusion, especially in Jamaran. The whole of the district was under constant watch, from the men who sat all day in their cars observing the intersections to the cameras that were mounted on the rooftops of some of the taller buildings. When a taxi took a wrong turn and sped into the area, people made a note, and if the car lingered, they ran a check of the license plate. Even the phones here lacked a private status. If you called some of the numbers by accident, people called you back and asked who you were. The privileged residents of this black box of a neighborhood came and went in limousines with curtains drawn. Even they were not exempt from the watchers and listeners. If they made a mistake, they too were subject to what the authorities called *ershad*, which meant "guidance."

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**The young Iranian put** on his dark glasses against the glint of the afternoon sun. After he had walked a block, he stopped and put a piece of milk chocolate in his mouth. The taste reminded him of Germany. If he was looking at the men on the streets, observing their movements, it was not obvious. He paused again, farther down, outside a shop that sold cell phones, and looked at the storefront display of some of new models that had arrived in the last several weeks. Reflected in the window were the faces of dozens of passersby, but if the man was studying them through his sunglasses, it was impossible to see. He wasn't very good at this, but he wanted to do it right.

He put the buds of his iPod into his ears. A friend had bought the music player for him in Dubai a month ago as a present. He

let it run on "shuffle." The first song was by a Persian rapper from Los Angeles who called himself MEC, for Middle East Connection. The music was very bad. He clicked forward to a song by Lou Reed. "Walk on the Wild Side." That was about right. Nobody could hear the music, and nobody cared what you listened to anyway, but halfway into the song, where Lou Reed was talking about how the colored girls go, do-do-do, the young man worried that he might look subversive, so he switched to a Bach piano recording he had learned to enjoy in Germany. The "Goldberg Variations." Then that made him nervous, too. People might think he was a Jew. He turned off the music altogether and folded the white cord back into his pocket.

The young man walked several more blocks down the hilly streets to a busy intersection, where he found a taxi. He asked the driver to take him to Haft-e-tir Square. The driver's wife was sitting next to him in the front seat of the Paykan, her head cloaked primly in a scarf. She had on thick glasses and sniffed the air like a mole. She looked at the well-dressed man and his gleaming cuff links and nodded deferentially, knowing instinctively that he was one of the *adam hesabi*, the good families.

They made their way down the Modarres Expressway in the slow ooze of rush-hour traffic. When the taxi reached the bustle of Haft-e-tir, decorated with neon signs for Nokia and Hyundai as well as the painted banners of the martyrs, the man got out and found a store that sold electronic products from the West. Here he bought a new memory board for a laptop computer, a thumb drive, and a set of software programs that had been copied in Armenia and trucked over the border. He put these items into his valise and then left the store. He walked two blocks east down Bahar Shiraz Street before catching another cab.

Outside was the street theater of the late afternoon. Women were testing the limits again this summer, flaunting their "bad *hijab*" with scarves that slipped back on their heads to reveal lustrous hair

that sparkled in the sun. There was a new look that season, too, in the manteau: a tighter button at the waist that, with a push-up bra from Turkey, could give a woman a pleasing shape. The young men buzzed past on their motorbikes, in shades and cheap leather jackets, looking but not touching, dreaming of the women they could never have. Pedestrians skittered across the pavement like waterbugs, the onrushing cars missing them by centimeters.

"Would you like to hear some music?" asked the driver. He was looking in the rearview mirror with a solicitous eye toward his passenger. The young scientist did not answer. He did not want to speak; he was somewhere else. The driver's wife was clucking about the impossibility of finding good melons in the market at a reasonable price. The driver began muttering about the poor performance of his favorite soccer team, Esteghlal, hoping for a sympathetic audience from his passenger in the back. Yes, it was terrible, said the scientist. They could not play the game, these young men. They were dogs—no, worse than dogs; they played like women; they played like Arabs.

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**How long had the** young man been thinking about what he was doing now? A year, at least; perhaps his whole adult life. No one could have suspected it from any outward sign, he was quite sure of that. Otherwise they would never have allowed him into the secret precincts of Jamaran, or given him an office in the white building that had no name.

That was their weakness. They suspected everyone, but they had to trust some people even so, and they could never be sure that this trust was well placed. They said they trusted in God, but that was not enough. So they created God's secret party, the conspiracy of God, and the young man was part of it. He had been loyal in every way except one, which was that he had allowed himself to

think of the possibility of disloyalty. That idea had grown until it was a living thing. And then a moment had come when it was the only thing, and the boundary between loyalty and disloyalty had dissolved.

The taxi deposited the young man in Fereshteh Square, a half mile from the Ministry of the Interior. That was his joke. If you are going to defy them, do it in plain sight. He walked with his valise to a villa on Khosravi Street. On the first floor was the office of a small company owned by his uncle Jamshid, which fabricated aluminum siding for residential buildings. The young man helped out with the office paperwork sometimes, as a favor to his uncle. He had installed a computer a few months ago, and arranged for Internet access in his uncle's name. He came by sometimes in the late afternoons to work on the books and send messages to his uncle's suppliers here in Iran and in Dubai and Ankara. One of the Iranian companies had its own Internet server. It wasn't hard to hack into it, and to write code that could make it seem as if a message had originated there when it had really come from somewhere else. The young man was good with computers: he knew how to smooth out the sand, as it were, so that there was no sign that anyone had come or gone.

The young man had his own key and let himself in the door of Uncle Jamshid's office. A secretary was still there, an awkward girl from Isfahan who was a distant relative. She tidied up the wastebaskets and then said good night, leaving him alone. The young man had wanted to give her a few riyals for her trouble, but she left too quickly. Probably it was better this way; she might have remembered the tip. He powered up the computer and slipped a CD-ROM with his new software into the drive. It was cooler outside now. He turned on some music and let himself relax.

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**He was** *posht-e-pardeh.* Behind the curtain. He had a secret. Or rather, he had a secret locked inside many other secrets. That was the Persian way. This was a land where it was bad manners to speak plainly; it was too forward, too disrespectful. If you asked a tradesman how much he wanted for his work, he would refuse payment and tell you it was for free. It wasn't that he didn't expect to be paid, but that he didn't want to name a price. And so it was with this special secret. It was a gift, but it wasn't for free. It told a truth, but not the one that you might at first have anticipated.

Why was he doing it? He couldn't really have answered that, even to himself. It was an emotion more than a word. It was the sting of an insult repeated, the way they were now insulting his cousin Hossein. His cousin had been their faithful servant. He was one of the boys, the *bach-e-ha.* But still they had destroyed him. That was part of it. And there were his father's words, always in his ear, and his example. His father had stood for something, and never wavered. Truly, the young man could not live as the person he had become. He was suffocating. He was losing respect for himself.

His bet was that the people he was contacting would not be stupid. Was that wise, with outsiders? It was like shaking hands; in Iran, the hand was limp and soft—deceptively submissive. But with these foreigners, they sometimes squeezed your hand so hard they might break the little bones—even though they meant it as a sign of friendliness. It had happened so often in Germany, that crushing greeting. It was barbaric, but forgivable. The culture of the West had so much to prove; it did not know how to hide. The young man began to type. If he was careful, and continued with what he had planned and no more, he would remain invisible. He would drop his pebble, and then he would wait.

Would they understand, the people at the other end of the pond who saw the motion in the water? He was frightened, but he tried

to embrace this emotion. Fear can make you strong. His father had told him that, too, before he died. Fear is your master until the day you make a stand, and then it becomes your teacher and guardian. It guides you into the shadows; it instructs you in your lies. It is the cloak you wear as you prepare your revenge and your escape.