

HONEYMOON IN TEHRAN

**Two Years of Love
and Danger in Iran**

Azadeh Moaveni

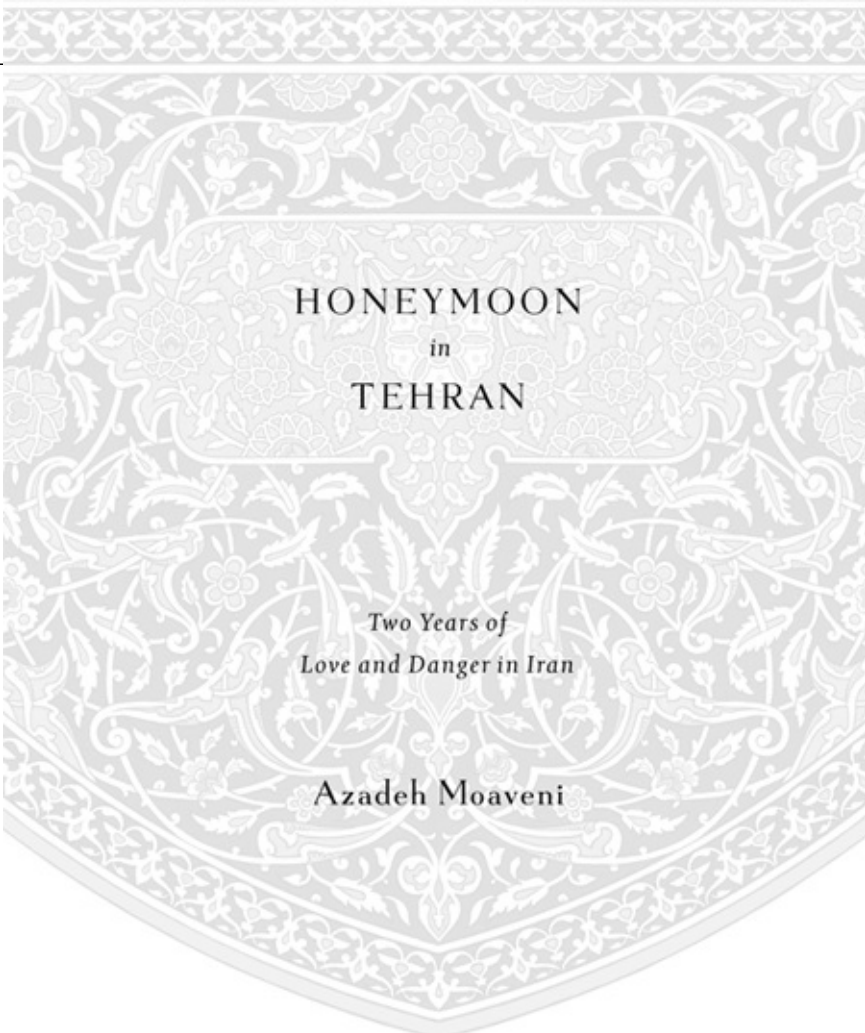


R A N D O M H O U S E

Also by Azadeh Moaveni

Lipstick Jihad

Iran Awakening (with Shirin Ebadi)



HONEYMOON
in
TEHRAN

*Two Years of
Love and Danger in Iran*

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Why cling to one life
till it is soiled and ragged?

The sun dies and dies
squandering a hundred lives
every instant

God has decreed life for you
and He will give
another and another and another.

—*Mowlana Jalaleddin Rumi*

Tell Them We Are Democrats

In the late spring of 2005, I returned to Iran to report on the country's presidential election. My career as a journalist for *Time* magazine had begun with an Iranian election in 2000, and though in the intervening years my reporting took me across the Middle East, it was covering Iranian elections that I felt most at home. My real home, of course, was in northern California, where my parents still lived and where I had been born and raised, in a community of superlatively successful Iranian-Americans—doctors, lawyers, bankers, and venture capitalists—afflicted with émigré nostalgia. I visited California occasionally to attend friends' weddings, see my relatives, and fill a suitcase with Whole Foods products I could not find in Beirut, where I had lived since 2003. Situated on a glorious stretch of the Mediterranean, Lebanon for me was at the perfect geographic and existential distance from Iran. The proximity meant I could take a quick flight to Tehran for a few days of reporting and then retreat to my calm, westernized life of Pilates classes and cocktail bars.

When I arrived in Tehran that spring, everyone in all my disparate worlds—from California to Beirut to Tehran—sent e-mails asking me to keep them abreast of my reporting. This itself was unusual, as Iranian politics and its conclaves of mullahs did not typically elicit interest. But even the outside world understood that the upcoming election was of enormous import: it would indicate whether a crucial land of seventy million sitting atop one of the world's deepest oil reserves would ascend to the ranks of respectable nations, or would stagnate and mire in the radicalism that had defined its past three decades.

As important as the election was, though, it was not my only reason for going back. My ulterior motive was to discover whether I could return at all. In the two years that had passed since my last visit, I had published a book about Iran that was, effectively, a portrait of how the mullahs had tyrannized Iranian society and given rise to a generation of rebellious young people desperate for change. *Lipstick Jihad* included depictions of drug-soaked underground parties, clerical hypocrisy, and the sort of criticism that had, in the mouths of other Iranians, led to prosecution and imprisonment. It was, in short, the sort of book that dictatorships never welcome and that one writes on the eve of permanent departure, a final cathartic clanging of the door on the way out.

But being young and foolish, I had every intention of going back. I so desperately wanted Iran to be a place where you could speak truth to power that I decided to test reality. How wonderful it would be, I reasoned, if I could return unscathed. Then I could present myself back in the United States and say, "See, you were wrong. Iran is not such a dictatorship, after all. Unlike America's Arab allies, it tolerates criticism." And so I wrote breezy e-mails to friends saying things like "If I don't emerge from the airport, you can have all my shoes," and boarded the plane to spend two weeks in Tehran.

The portraits of the dour ayatollahs that hung above the arrival hall were so familiar to me that I didn't even look up. With enough time, I had simply stopped seeing them, their beards

blending into the yellowing walls. It seemed entirely normal for a capital city in the twentieth century to be covered with oversize images of turbaned clerics. For the briefest second before I handed my passport over to the yawning female clerk in black chador, the nonchalance my therapist would call denial faltered, and I felt a flash of dread.

“Ms. Moaveni.” She peered down at my passport. “This is highly irregular.”

I said nothing. Perhaps I would be interrogated. Or maybe they would just confiscate my passport, a form of soft hostage taking. I began to feel nervous about what might happen to me, and about how foolish I would seem for having invited it.

“The stamp marking your last exit from Mehrabad is so light it is unreadable. In the future please check and ask the passport official to use a fresh ink pad, if necessary.”

I breathed in relief, and thanked her warmly. From there, it took scant minutes to collect my suitcase and sail through customs. This in itself signaled how much Iran had changed since the late 1990s. In previous years, the process of extricating oneself from Mehrabad airport had been a trauma in itself. When I visited Iran for the first time as an adult in 1998, customs officials roughly pried apart layers of my luggage. They triumphantly held up a dry academic book of Middle Eastern history and told me it could not enter the country without being vetted by official censors. They levied an outrageous sum of duty on a phone I had brought as a gift for my aunt, and left me to hastily repack the contents of my suitcase, struggling to keep bras and other such intimate belongings out of sight. By the time I reached the point where I would be inspected for proper Islamic dress—a headscarf that suitably covered my hair, long sleeves, and a coat that reached my knees—I was a sweaty, enraged mess eager to reboard the first plane to the civilized world.

But this time, I found Iran treated its returning citizens with less arbitrary abuse than ever before. Mehrabad bustled with crowds of excited relatives greeting their kin, the acrid smell of sweat mingling with the perfume of giant bouquets. In the past six years, Iranians living abroad had begun returning in significant numbers for the first time since the 1979 revolution. The homecomings overwhelmed the modest capacity of Mehrabad, built in the late 1940s, and on nights like this, everyone ended up pressed up against everyone else, an intimate, jostling throng in which men and women embraced and veils slipped off entirely.

I reminded myself to e-mail my father later and describe to him how comfortably I had made it through the airport. Like many Iranian residents of the United States, my parents traveled to Iran infrequently and had little sense of how much had changed in the past six years. They came to the United States in the late 1960s to attend university, back when the Iranian government was closely allied with Washington and believed it needed a generation of western-trained professionals to modernize the nation. They returned to Tehran with their American degrees, got married, and went about applying their expertise until the mid-1970s when they followed my grandmother to California, intending to keep her company for a few short years while she received cardiac treatment at Stanford.

The revolution of 1979 dashed any hopes of return to Iran, and my family ended up, along with the great influx of Iranians who fled on the eve of the uprising, as immigrants to America. For years they did not visit Iran, save one short trip when I was five, and I grew up with the émigré child’s ambivalent yearning for homeland. I encountered the real Iran only as a young adult, when I visited in 1998 during a Fulbright year in Cairo. During that brief trip

I discovered the fascinating debates over Islam and democracy that were under way in Iran and concluded the country had more to offer than just pistachios and Islamic militancy. I packed up and moved there in 2000, to report for *Time*, convinced that Iran was somehow part of my destiny. I had imagined I could teach journalism, helping young Iranian reporters write clean, coherent news stories instead of the wordy, obscure, overlong prose that filled newspapers, which still often functioned as mouthpieces for political factions. As I pursued such idealistic dreams, I recounted all my experiences to my parents, encouraging them to visit Iran and find out for themselves how dramatically the country had changed.

Outside the arrival hall I found a taxi, rolled down the creaky window, and lit a cigarette, gazing at the enormous, sloping white marble façades of Azadi Tower. The Shah had built the monument to commemorate the twenty-five-hundredth anniversary of the Persian empire, but like everything else in Tehran it had been renamed after the revolution—fortunately though not after a martyr.

These late-night taxi rides from the airport were particularly special to me, a wordless journey during which the city felt as intimate as my own skin. I had spent most of my adult years in Tehran—it was my home from 2000 to 2002, and the place I spent most of my time in the years that followed—and, though I had never anticipated it (New York, Cairo, other cities had always seemed more likely), Tehran had become the backdrop of my life. I was a single woman, and Tehran provided all the sparkling memories a young person could want: summer parties where brilliant musicians played under the stars until dawn; sophisticated dinners where the country's premier intellectuals debated Iran's past and future; and a diverse, lovable array of friends, from Spanish diplomats to the rebellious children of high-ranking clerics. No matter its shabby murals of ayatollahs, no matter that it was run by inhospitable ideologues who preferred to keep women at home—the city, I believed, had eluded their grasp.

As the taxi sped north toward my aunt's house in the neighborhood of Elahieh, I gazed at the billboards advertising Teflon rice cookers, which vied for attention with murals glorifying the Iran-Iraq War. The unsightly profusion of squat apartment blocks abated only when we swung into Elahieh's narrow streets, turning around corners that still contained magnificent, faded examples of classic Persian architecture canopied by the slender branches of sycamore trees. Not far from my aunt's house, we passed a columned villa that stood reclusively at the back of a vast, overgrown garden, behind high gates of lacy wrought iron. I could hear the clang of workmen from the construction site across the street, laboring illegally at this late hour on what would surely be a tacky "luxury" apartment tower built without regard for earthquake safety—a common practice of the "build quick and sell quick" developers, who ignored the fact that at least a hundred known fault lines ran under Tehran. Such late construction was taking over the city, its aesthetic chaos and structural weakness suggesting Tehran was stumbling toward an ill-understood, inferior future.

I rang my aunt's bell and was admitted to the quiet courtyard of her building, the familiar figure of the Afghan doorman emerging from the shadows to help me with my bag. "Welcome back," he said softly. "Inshallah this time you will stay with us long."

I still can't believe you're here," my friend Nasrine said, tapping her nails against a bowl of carrot jam. She was also a journalist, and we'd worked together often during my trips in the past three years, crossing the city for press conferences and demonstrations. Sometimes we held conversations of great seriousness, discussing how the Islamic Republic cultivated the loyalty of its citizens through networks of subsidies, low-interest loans, and mercurial dispensed social freedoms. More often, we holed up with a refrigerator full of chicken schnitzel and watched Merchant Ivory films, comparing nineteenth-century and Persian styles of courtship (the two bore marked similarities, chiefly in the pursuit of the advantageous marriage). Together we also indulged in a secret pastime, which we called, rather sheepishly, our portable disco. This meant piling into Nasrine's Korean hatchback, turning the music up loud, and cruising Vali Asr Boulevard—the wide, tree-lined artery that runs north-south through the city—listening to the Tehrangeles-based pop duo Kamran and Houman. This activity was deeply shameful, considering our age (we should have been at dinner parties with other thirtyish professionals, making polished remarks about Iranian cinema and the government), but it was how thousands of young Iranians entertained themselves, and made us feel at one with Tehran's Thursday nights, which belonged to the city's youth.

The phone rang, interrupting our breakfast chatter.

"*Salaam*, welcome back," a familiar voice greeted me. It was Mr. X, I realized uneasily. I pointed to the receiver dramatically, trying to communicate to Nasrine who was calling. I had called his mobile the previous day, the first day of my arrival, wishing to hurry along our inevitable contact. He had not picked up, but had likely deduced from the number who was calling. As reluctant as I was to see him, I did not want to begin working without his permission. As my official government minder, Mr. X was perhaps the most important person in my Iranian life. The regime charged him with maintaining a file of my conduct as a journalist, alerting me to the red lines of coverage (marking subjects as taboo or discouraged), and attempting to secure my "cooperation." This euphemism meant that during times when the security-obsessed regime felt particularly vulnerable, I would, so it was hoped, report the opinions and behavior of journalist and diplomat friends to the government, and disclose the identities of anonymous sources.

Though Mr. X occupied such a central place in my work life, the institution ostensibly charged with dealing with foreign reporters belonged to an entirely different branch of government. The foreign press office of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance issued journalists' credentials and handled the numerous bureaucratic details involved in writing even the simplest story. If I wanted to visit a seminary, meet the foreign minister, or travel to a sensitive border region, I would need the press office's approval and assistance. During especially busy times, reporting an election or a cover story, for example, I might call its staff as many as ten times in one day. But although the press office—run by sensible, hardworking people who understood the news business—nominally handled journalists' affairs, it was really Mr. X and his employer, the Ministry of Intelligence, who had final say over whether a reporter was permitted to work. Even I had a hard time understanding the balance of power between the two, and perhaps they did as well.

When I lived in Tehran during 2000 and 2001, my relationship with Mr. X was a complicated dance of avoidance, in which I would refuse to do any of the things covered by

“cooperation,” and he would try through alternating tactics of intimidation and persuasion to bring me over to his side. We met quite regularly, perhaps every two months, and for a long while he behaved like a controlling husband. He wanted to know every last detail of my life—where I went, who I met, what I heard and said—and grew suspicious and nasty when I could not recall (or would not disclose) information with sufficient accuracy. He knew a lot about my friends, and would sometimes drop their names casually (“Wasn’t it Jon who introduced you to Simon?”) to convey just how much he knew about my social life. Once, for no particular reason I can remember, he went so far as to make a macabre joke about me committing suicide. I was stunned. I hadn’t expected such malice from Mr. X, whose immaculate plaid shirts and close-cropped hair made him look harmlessly preppy.

The physical locales of our meetings—secluded, anonymous apartments, empty hotel rooms in unmarked establishments—created the theater of intimidation Mr. X so cunningly used to his advantage. He knew that it frightened me to meet in such places, and also that I could not refuse to go. If I screamed, no one would hear; if I called on my mobile phone for help, he would take forever to describe where I was. I could easily be transported elsewhere against my will without anyone noticing. The first time one of my journalist friends met Mr. X in an unoccupied, furnished apartment, she arrived before him and, terrified, rushed about finding all the kitchen knives and hiding them under the furniture, so that she would be prepared once he arrived.

Though his presence was undeniably creepy, Mr. X strove to be more than just a menace. Sometimes he behaved almost sociably, softening the expression in his brown eyes and asking politely after my family. He had on occasion actively facilitated my reporting, going out of his way to clear some bureaucratic obstacle to a trip, or authorizing an outing whose permissibility seemed in doubt. If anything went wrong, he said, I could always call him. Once he even suggested I help him assess foreign correspondents who applied for visas to Iran, blackballing those whose work I considered biased. I demurred, of course. The chance to keep my journalistic rivals out of the country was bait, a message that I could stand to gain if I put my scruples aside.

In late 2001, in the aftermath of September 11 and President Bush’s labeling Iran as part of an “axis of evil,” Mr. X demanded to vet my stories before publication and insisted on knowing the identities of my anonymous sources. He threatened to revoke my press credentials if I refused. Unable to elude him any longer, I chose to stop reporting from Iran and move to New York.

I had written openly about Mr. X in my book, violating many taboos at once: I revealed that such meetings took place (most journalists in Iran had a government minder, though they never admitted it), disclosed their content, and, perhaps worst of all, described in a book of nonfiction the secret thoughts I imagined he harbored. Part of me felt relief at having exposed him, voiding the insistent admonitions that “*no one* must know of our meetings.” Mr. X now existed on the page, and this somehow took away the power of secrecy he had always cultivated. But surely he would be furious and seek to avenge himself.

“Yes, this afternoon is convenient for me.” I hoped that my dread didn’t show in my voice.

We spoke only long enough to plan our meeting. Nasrine volunteered to take me, and she coached her in the code that I had used with my former driver, Ali, who had taken me to see

many of these meetings. After ten minutes, she was to call my cell phone. If I answered “Yes, I’ll be back in time for lunch,” it meant there was no cause for alarm. “I’m going to be late, don’t wait for me,” meant something had gone terribly wrong, and that she should immediately start making emergency calls and try to rescue me.

Nasrine stopped the car at the top of the street, and pressed my hand before I stepped out. My heart beat swiftly as I searched for the hotel Mr. X had described, and my mind whirled with grim possibilities—Mr. X could permanently ban me from reporting in Iran; he could confiscate my passport and bar me from leaving the country (even the state equated an overlong stay in Iran with incarceration); send me to a court that might then send me to prison; or, in my direst imaginings, immure me in the room and inflict unspeakable punishments.

I passed up and down the street’s length twice more, and even asked two passersby, but no one had heard of the apartment hotel. Suddenly I remembered that Mr. X had given me a building number as well as the hotel’s name, and with that I quickly found it—six stories of unmarked white cement. What sort of hotel was this, unknown to the neighborhood and mysteriously unlabeled? Its anonymity seemed to confirm my most hysterical suspicions. My hands began to shake, and before I summoned the courage to climb the stone steps, I breathed deeply and told myself young women from California were not typically victims of political murder.

Someone buzzed the door open from inside, and I entered a small lobby presided over by a young man in sandals. I never knew what to say in such situations. In the past, Mr. X had often summoned me to meet him at secluded (though clearly marked) hotels, with instructions no more precise than “Be there at two P.M.” The truth—“Hello, my name is Azadeh and I’m here to meet a government minder whose name I’ve been told never to repeat aloud, although we all know it’s a pseudonym anyway”—sounded awkward.

“They’re waiting for you in apartment five on the second floor,” the young man said, sparing me. I said thank you and gazed at him with a winning expression, one that I hoped radiated innocence and established me as a productive, indispensable member of the global community, the type of person he should definitely try to help, should he hear screams from apartment five.

The elevator door opened onto the second floor, and I adjusted my headscarf before looking in a hallway mirror, tucking strands of hair away, as though such attentions might somehow influence what would happen to me. Mr. X opened the door and ushered me inside. Such empty, furnished apartments—the type of place where Japanese businessmen would stay to negotiate oil deals that Washington would later veto—lent a bizarre, corporate coziness to the setting.

“Would you like tea or coffee?” Mr. X asked, busying himself in the kitchen. He poured me both tea, and then took a seat at the dinner table across from a plate of cream puffs. Eating pastry under duress was another hallmark of my meetings with Mr. X. During our initial encounters I had refused to eat anything, reluctant to provoke the nausea I usually felt. But this caused him offense, and I began to accept whatever I found on the table, eager to win his good humor.

His shirt was buttoned to the top, and his hands, hairy and blunt, fiddled with a pen.

"I have read your book," he began. "And the question I have is this: what is this *ash gooshvareh* [earring stew] of which you write? We have no such stew."

It was a dish I had mentioned my grandmother once made while visiting California. Like so many Iranians, perhaps a third of the country, she belonged to the Azeri ethnic group, whose cuisine included many unusual, laborious recipes distinct from Persian cooking.

"It's Azerbaijani," I replied.

"Okay." He looked unconvinced.

Someone knocked at the door, and Mr. X opened it to admit his partner, whom I had described in my book as Mr. Sleepy. In our meetings he was usually either asleep or menacing, the bad-cop foil to Mr. X's slithery inducements and intimidations.

We spoke very briefly about my book tour. Mr. X offered me a cream puff. And then he made a gesture of wrapping up his papers.

"We would like you to know that we consider your book worthy of appreciation," he said.

I sipped tea silently, waiting for the condemnation that would surely follow. But Mr. X and Mr. Sleepy began smiling openly, as though they were having tea with a favorite aunt.

"So didn't people ask you, if Iran is so repressive, then how do you write these critical articles and travel back and forth?"

"Yes, I was asked this all the time. And I told people that Iran tolerates some measure of dissent, that this is what makes Iran so special." I went on to describe Iran as an island of Persian practicality in a sea of brutal Arab dictatorships.

I could tell from their expressions I had replied well. It occurred to me that just perhaps they both enjoyed appearing in a book, albeit as henchmen of a repressive regime.

"It is true, we are enlightened people, and we believe in democracy, freedom of expression."

"Of course."

"So do not be worried. Go back to America, and tell them we are democrats." He leaned forward, and began gathering his papers in a sign that we were finished. "You are your own proof."

"Thank you," I said, picking up my bag. Then I said goodbye, walked out the door, and ran out into the sunny street. I inhaled the diesel fumes, the waft of fried herbs in the breeze, and felt triumphant. This country, my sad, troublesome homeland, perhaps it wasn't altogether as bad as everyone thought.

On the way back to the car I stopped at a headscarf shop and bought Nasrine and me prettily cotton veils in celebration. As I recounted the conversation to her, though, it sounded entirely too easy. Perhaps Mr. X really was as accepting as he'd seemed. Or perhaps my book had angered him, and he would punish me in time. For the moment, I simply accepted his approval as a blessing. When I got home, I phoned everyone I knew to gloat.

That evening, I shared my good news with my aunt's neighbors Lily and Ramin Maleki. Mr. Maleki was Iran's most accomplished translator of English literature, a gentle, erudite man who in the fantasy Iran of my imagination would hold the post of minister of culture. Lily

his beautiful wife, was a publisher and writer of considerable charm. Their home was a saloon for writers, directors, and intellectuals, as well as a place where you could discuss Samuel Beckett, smoke indoors, and be offered all manner of delicious sweets, from fresh macarons to walnut-studded nougat. They were as excited about my nonpariah status as I was.

They invited me to stay to dinner, one of the quick, delectable meals Lily fashioned out of a quintessentially Iranian cookbook, *Ashpazi az Sir ta Piaz*, an exhaustive collection of recipes—from Indian curries to Persian puddings—compiled by an Iranian writer who cooked his way through a long prison sentence under the Shah.

Our dinner conversation touched on the upcoming election, but just barely, for although the outside world was interested in its outcome, the race had generated little excitement among Iranians. In the two previous presidential elections, 1997 and 2001, the moderate cleric Mohammad Khatami drew Iranians to the polls with his cheerful magnetism and broadly attractive promises of political and social liberalization. His landslide victories were widely interpreted by Iranian analysts and the outside world as mandates by the people of Iran for building a more democratic society, one more at peace with and accepted by the international community. But the conservative establishment—fundamentalist clerics and bureaucrats influential within the regime's myriad institutions—blocked Khatami's liberal policies. People grew disillusioned with the regime as a whole, and with the electoral process as a means of reform. By now, many Iranians had come to view elections as a ceremonial act, an empty practice that lent a veneer of democratic consent to the mullahs' absolutism. By boycotting the race altogether, many believed, Iranians could reject the entire system of Islamic rule.

The lackluster ballot also contributed to this widespread apathy. The three top candidates were equally lacking in personal charisma and fresh vision: Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, former two-term president, was a graying mullah notorious for his personal corruption, as well as for institutionalizing graft within the regime; Mohammad Ghali baf, the former national police chief, came across as untested and vaguely junior; Mostafa Moin, a former minister of education, reminded most people of a librarian.

Although I opposed a boycott—the differences between the candidates were meaningful enough, I felt, to warrant making a choice—I understood the lure of opting out. The reformists, mired in internal squabbles, had failed to agree on a single candidate, and were fielding two, equally gray and uninspiring. The presumed leader, Moin, though outspoken on human rights and democracy, was worryingly silent on economic matters. Rafsanjani, a crook with a record of failure as president, was a catastrophe wrapped in a disaster. To understand how Iranians felt about him, you must imagine him as the equivalent of a Richard Nixon who also happened to sink the American economy. And the conservative—well, hardly anyone took him, or any conservative candidate for that matter, seriously. Khatami's 2001 landslide in which he took 80 percent of the vote, was interpreted by most Iranians as a loud rejection of Islamic conservatism in politics. Public support for his policies—dialogue with the United States, democratic governance, and cultural and social reform—indicated that the majority of Iranians wanted an open society run by a secular government. As one prominent conservative told me that year, “We need to go out into the wilderness for a long time, and figure out how we can one day return.”

This was the disappointing array of choices Iranians faced in the spring of 2005, which why that evening, rather than discussing the future of our country, we talked about novels. Before long, we were engrossed in a discussion popular in Iranian literary circles: had Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa crushed or kindled Salman Rushdie's talent?

"*Azi jan*, what would you like to do this Friday night?" My aunt Farzi poured me coffee at breakfast, and began her attempt to fill my precious two weeks in Iran with social activities. My reporting trips in the past had often lasted a month or longer, and she was accustomed to planning multiple dinners for me with all her friends.

"I'm going to be very busy this time, so please don't make any plans for me," I said. I hurried my way through a chewy piece of *barbari* bread, and went to dress.

Certain I would be pressed for time, I had begun scheduling appointments the first day of my arrival, assuming I could keep or cancel them pending the outcome of my encounter with Mr. X. That foresight meant I already had two full days of interviews arranged and could start working immediately. My editor at *Time* had assigned me only one piece, a long essay illustrating how young Iranians lived and how they saw their futures on the eve of the important election. Given the striking apathy I had already encountered, this kind of article seemed to me the real story, a gritty look at what young Iranians actually cared about, since they didn't care about politics at all. I would spend two or three days talking with young people, and then stitch their stories together.

I rifled through my suitcase and pulled out a wrap dress, which I pulled on over a pair of jeans. I slid on a pair of sandals, kissed my aunt goodbye, and ran out to the waiting taxi, arranging my headscarf in traffic. The Khatami government had eased restrictions on women's dress so thoroughly that I gave little thought to what I should wear. When I first visited Iran as an adult, back in 1998, I spent the entire stay in a shapeless black manteau (literally, a coat, after the French word for the same) that reached my knees. I was twenty-one at the time, and wearing baggy folds of black made me keenly unhappy. By 2001, however, the women on the streets of Tehran had shed their dark robes for slim, fitted manteaus in brilliant colors and chic styles, simple tunics, and clingy ensembles of halter dresses worn over turtlenecks. This development, though perhaps superficial, brightened my spirits considerably. It was one of the myriad small things that when stacked together made daily life lighter and more livable. Back in 1979, Khomeini had urged Iranians to procreate wildly to bolster the revolutionary nation, creating a demographic bulge; the millions of young Iranian women in their late teens and early twenties shared my sentiments. That was one reason why they reelected Khatami in 2001 with such a wide majority.

Although the permissiveness mattered deeply, Iranian women were concerned about far more than their head covering. Not a single one of my Iranian girlfriends would have said her life was more meaningful simply because she enjoyed more flexibility in matters of fashion. The loosening of strictures on dress, however, reflected the Khatami government's tolerance of women pushing for equitable legal rights and access to public space. Women had begun doing aerobics in parks, petitioning for equitable legal rights in parliament, and organizing around issues from polygamy to domestic abuse. In short, the government that tolerated the

pink veil also tolerated a grassroots women's movement of considerable vigor. It was that women cared about, rather than whether their veils were now brighter, transparent, pushed back on the head, or designer.

But I, like so many women, took for granted what had changed under Khatami. This was for two simple reasons: I didn't know Iran at the height of the revolution's repression, in the 1980s; and it was not nearly enough. It was not enough for a society with 90 percent female literacy, whose women received 60 percent of the college degrees awarded each year. They considered themselves entitled to all the freedom and opportunity women enjoyed in the world's most advanced countries. The gap between their expectations and reality still loomed so great that a few millimeters of progress, on most days, hardly seemed to merit notice. When I arrived at Café Naderi in downtown Tehran for my appointment that day, for example, I sat by myself in the central room, lit a cigarette, and leafed through an independent newspaper that provided a reasonably balanced window onto both Iran and the world. Back in 1998, when I first tried the café's Turkish coffee, a girlfriend and I, dressed in our black sacks, were relegated to the back room, reserved for women unaccompanied by men.

Now I sipped my coffee and scanned the room. Bookish young men with goatees occupied nearly half the tables, but nowhere did I see the student activist I was there to meet. The café, situated on a crowded stretch of Revolution Street, still attracted artists, professors, émigrés, and freelance intellectuals, drawn to its rose-colored walls, vaulted ceilings, and leafy garden, as well as its literary legacy: Sadegh Hedayat, Iran's foremost modern novelist, had frequented the place in the 1940s, back when they served perfectly thick Turkish coffee and the United States had an embassy nearby.

"Ms. Moaveni, I'm sorry I'm late." Mr. Amini sat down opposite me, arranging his hands formally on the table, and assumed a resolute expression.

We ordered slices of buttery tea cake, and talked about how the student movement—once influential enough to spark the student riots of 1999, the most serious wave of unrest since the revolution—had fizzled out, its leaders terrorized by the security apparatus in abandoning their activities, or going abroad. Mr. Amini, like my relatives and so many other Iranians, had passed through the cycle of hope, anger, and boredom that these days characterized people's attitude toward politics.

He described friends who had spent time in prison, how they endured solitary confinement and modern forms of torture—weeks' worth of sleep deprivation, mock executions, heads stuck in vats of sewage, fake newspapers that reported the arrest of Khatami himself.

"I'm not voting," he said flatly, stubbing out a thin Bahman cigarette, named after the Iranian month in which the revolution "became victorious," in the regime's parlance. "I want to give a signal to the reformists. I want to tell them that they no longer reflect what people want. Not voting shows that I don't accept a system where the president doesn't even have the power to direct a budget."

As we stepped out into the street, pausing near a tree where a hawker sold contraband DVDs of American and pre-revolutionary films, Mr. Amini turned to look at me. "Do you realize how impossible it is to compete in Iran, in a place with no rules? Everything in the country is based on connections, on your relationship to people in power. People like me, w

can't even compete in this game. Do you realize that at the current salary of a university graduate, it would take me eighty years to buy a flat in a decent part of town?"

I didn't know what to say. I only wished that I had paid for our coffee, though he had refused. Mr. Amini was right about his prospects. A modest flat was now beyond the budget of the average middle-class couple; only Iranians supported by their parents, or those few who belonged to the upper middle class, could afford to own their own place before the forties. I wished we had spent more time discussing this, a matter that most young people thought about every day and that was surely more pressing than the question of Islamic reform.

Mr. Amini waved goodbye and disappeared into the bustle of Revolution Street, a yawning thoroughfare north of Islamic Republic Avenue. In the ten minutes it took to find a taxi, the polluted air seemed to coat my contact lenses with a grainy, oily film. As we drove north, I could scarcely see the Alborz Mountains before me, for the city, as usual, was trapped beneath a noxious brown haze. The Alborz range runs like a wall across the north of the country, and its lofty peaks include the world's fifth highest ski resort, complete with gondola lift and rustic stone hotel. While the mountains mitigate the ugliness of the endless expanse of low-rise apartment blocks, they also block the Caspian winds blowing from the north, producing a thermal inversion of pollution that annually kills thousands of Iranians from respiratory diseases.

We idled in traffic near Argentine Square, whose adjoining boulevards reflected the worst of Tehran's haphazard, lowbrow architecture—buildings modeled after the Parthenon s awkwardly alongside business complexes that resembled Transformer toy robots. The taxi sped through a tunnel that had just opened after years of construction, its impressive Persepolis motifs capped by an overwrought tribute to the Prophet Mohammad's daughter. "Would that my heart had a route to hers! Would that Fatemeh too had a shrine of her own!"

The tunnel knit a major expressway into a busy central avenue, and I wondered whether the roads I was traveling on were those mapped by my paternal uncle Khosrow and his cousin Mansour. They were among the chief architects of modern Tehran, responsible for the city's master plan before the revolution; the roadwork constructed later followed their original lines, which were intended for a population of 6.5 million, not the over twelve million who inhabited the city today. The modern, western city my relatives designed, with wide avenues and properly located and zoned residential, commercial, and industrial areas, had been transformed after the revolution into a haphazard sprawl of unappealing suburbs.

On a secluded side street just south of the new tunnel, I found the office of Emadeddin Baghi, a former pro-reform journalist and prominent dissident who had spent time in prison for his political writing. That experience had convinced him that Iran needed basic respect for human rights before it could benefit from political journalism. As the author of some twenty books and innumerable articles that advocated secularism and revealed the regime's brutal treatment of its opponents, Baghi considered himself a "religious intellectual;" this meant he was devoted to Islam, but believed the faith could accommodate democracy and should be removed from politics.

In 2000, when I had last seen Baghi, he was lying prostrate in a hospital bed. During his trial for apostasy, the judge had kept Baghi on his feet for long hours, which worsened

preexisting condition he delicately avoided naming. I remembered the sweaty evening vividly, how a young woman in chador, a student activist, found her way into Baghi's hospital room and pressed a bouquet of flowers into his hands. Student organizers considered him a hero, and the emotional young woman asked him, "Why do you write these articles when you know it is like holding a gun to your chest?"

"If Iran takes one step in the direction of democracy, isn't that a precious thing? Precious enough that my ceasing to exist is a very small price in comparison," he told her. The young woman choked up and ran out of the room. It occurred to me that in 2005—only five years later—you surely would not find college students loitering outside the hospital rooms of political dissidents. That short, breathless period during which change seemed possible and Tehran felt as intellectually and politically animated as Prague in the spring of 1968, was resoundingly over.

"I can't believe how apathetic young people are these days," I said. Baghi agreed that the Tehran spring had petered out, and that most Iranians now coveted Bosch vacuum cleaners more than freedom. "Politics has become like a soccer game: people just watch and applaud from the sidelines. They don't actually do anything." He looked dejected, running a hand across his black seminarian's beard.

In the past, Baghi and I had often discussed his mentor, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, once Khomeini's favorite and designated successor, who was cast aside by the revolutionary leadership for speaking out against its human rights abuses. The octogenarian cleric lived under virtual house arrest in the holy city of Qom, but remained a guide and inspiration for Islamic intellectuals like Baghi. His name did not come up once that day. Instead, we talked about home appliances. I asked him what he thought preoccupied young people these days, and he said getting married. He told me about the government's marriage loan scheme, a low-interest advance of about \$1,000 that covered a wedding dress and a middle-class wedding party.

Just as it had transformed so much of Iranian life, the revolution had changed how and when Iranians married. Inflation and the lack of viable jobs had pushed the marriage age up by nearly a decade. Now couples found it took until at least their thirtieth birthdays before they could approach financial independence. Young people tended to blame their leaders for the economic straits that put early marriage out of reach, and the government's marriage payment was designed to curb this resentment. "Lots of couples use the loan to buy appliances for their new life, or the first month of rent for an apartment.

"Are you following this pyramid scheme business?" he continued. "The newspapers are full of stories warning people to stay away from them. Parliament is trying to outlaw them altogether. This just shows how desperate people are to get rich without effort, because making money legally requires connections."

The clock on the wall announced I needed to leave for my next interview, so I gathered my things. Baghi asked whether I could help him submit an "opeedee" to some American newspapers, and it took me a second to realize he meant an "op-ed." I corrected him gently and promised to try. We exchanged e-mail addresses and I rushed off to find a taxi and sit in the stagnant traffic.

I arrived a few minutes late at Café Shoka, a coffee shop where the ex-student activist Am

Balali had suggested we meet. But Amir sent a text message to say he would be late, too, so I ordered a milk shake and watched young couples whisper over banana splits, as the speaker purred French lounge music. At least two couples had their heads bent closely over the table, whispering intimately and oblivious to their surroundings. Young people desperate to be alone together often resorted to spending time in coffee shops, among the few public places where they could sit tête-à-tête without drawing attention or being harassed by police. In fact, a whole genre of dimly lighted coffee shops tucked away in the city's numerous mini-malls catered exclusively to this young clientele.

Amir strode in half an hour later, dropped his mobile phone on the table, and sat down with arms crossed across his Umbro soccer jersey. Most student activists were painfully shy young men from the provinces who could barely look a woman in the eye, but Amir was clearly more urbane. He explained that he was semiretired, and that activism no longer interested him very much. This was not, he insisted, because of his 2002 imprisonment during which he was kept standing—sleepless, facing a wall—for seventy-two hours straight and beaten. I must have looked very grave as he described this horrific experience, for he looked up from his latte and said, “They didn’t pull out my nails or anything.” Nor, he said, was the imprisonment the reason for his withdrawal from political life. He did not say what the reason was; I inferred, from his other comments, that he saw no use in trying to reform a system that needed to be rebuilt from scratch.

Earlier he had called Iranian society a “social catastrophe,” so I asked him what he thought was the greatest social challenge facing young Iranians.

“This sick double life we lead,” he said. “Everyone wears masks, and no one trusts each other. This whole society is a lie. You realize, I can buy liquor at the pharmacy or get tabs of Ecstasy at the juice stand.”

I knew pharmacies sold a mysteriously expensive brand of rubbing alcohol that was intended as a base for drinks, but I was slightly scandalized to hear a popular chain of juice stands might also vend a party drug. “You mean Juice Javad sells Ecstasy?”

He nodded knowingly. My ignorance of this important fact apparently signaled a lack of information about the degenerate ways of Iranian youth, and Amir wearily set about enlightening me.

“At this very moment, there are thousands of *garçonnières* [bachelors’ flats] across Tehran. Young men save up their money, pool their resources, and share the keys. The marriage age has gone up, and no one can afford to get married. Young people have needs, of course. The regime has no answer to this crisis, so young people find solutions themselves.”

Given how busy they must be coordinating their *garçonnières* and buying illicit drugs from Juice Javad, I wondered if the young people he knew were going to vote. “Nah, not really interested. I thought about organizing around one of the opposition candidates, though maybe we could pull a sort of Ukraine-style thing here. But then I decided against it. No one cares about anything besides their own prospects right now. Their idol isn’t Che Guevara anymore, it’s Bill Gates.”

We chatted a while longer about this new self-centeredness, and then headed our separate ways. It was nearly six o’clock, and it would take me an hour to get back to my aunt’s house.

in traffic. That would leave me just enough time to shower and change before her dinner guests arrived. As I stood on the crowded street shouting out my destination to passing taxis, disjointed thoughts flitted through my mind—why were Tehran buses painted in such peculiar sanatorium shades of powder blue, buttercup, and tea rose pink? When had young Iranians started to care more about home appliances than freedom of speech?

I wondered whether the authorities had successfully stanching young people's despair by purposefully dispensing more social liberties. After all, the regime had never seemed less able to control young people's lives than it did today. Perhaps this explained why the political rage I chronicled back in 2000—the impulse that brought that young chadori woman to Baghi's hospital bedside—seemed to have evaporated.

My aunt's dinner party that evening did little to illuminate these matters. Her friends were mostly in their fifties, and their twenty-something children had already been dispatched abroad, to western universities. Nearly all Iranian parents—from the affluent to the financially strained working class—shared the ambition of sending their offspring to peaceful societies where they could live meaningful, evolved lives of material ease. Of my aunt's friends, one (an oil executive married to an aristocratic heiress) had managed this with little trouble, another (a documentary filmmaker) with great hardship. I sat on the couch among them, selected a ripe peach from the fruit bowl, and asked whether they planned to vote. Most, convinced that eight years of reform government had failed to improve their lives, said they had no intention of voting at all. Two said they would vote for Rafsanjani, in hopes that he would balance the regime's warring moderate and right-wing factions, and perhaps even improve ties with the West. The discussion petered out rather swiftly, and my aunt summoned us to eat *kookoo*, a sort of frittata dense with herbs, walnuts, and barberries. I took this opportunity to drift away from the living room unnoticed, eager to organize my notes from the day's interviews, and refine what I would ask Iranians, my eternal and unsatisfied people, tomorrow.

To Vote or Not to Vote

On my fourth day in the city, I was sitting in a soundproof room the size of a minivan hidden in the back of a greenhouse. Nasrine had fetched me earlier that morning and escorted me to a rehearsal by the underground band 127. Next to me, a young man in a tasteful plaid shirt and faded Converse sneakers was offering Nasrine a cigarette and explaining how in Iran dictatorship could not quash creativity. “It’s like in Soviet Russia, all the writers just kept writing, right?”

One of the most surprising aspects of Iran in 2005 was its alternative music scene, the explosion of bands like 127 whose music the government considered a symptom of toxic western culture but tacitly tolerated. Of the many cute bands whose music carried tame political undertones, 127 was a particular success. Its members labored to cultivate an audience over the Internet (a difficult feat in a country where YouTube and MySpace were banned), and its inspired act, fusing jazz with Iranian music, was the first in Tehran to attract attention in the West.

The members were most excited over their newest single, “My Sweet Little Terrorist Song” in which the vocalist airs a sentiment perhaps universal in Iran (“Legally I’m nobody, but when I cross the border I’m somebody new”) and complains in English that he should be granted a U.S. visa to visit his pretty cousin in California. He promises that if let in, he won’t “not fly into the Pentagon alive.” Before they began rehearsing, I tried to get Sohrab, the band’s lead singer, to describe how he felt living in Iran. He would not oblige me, though. “Life abroad also seems very sad, and not all that much better,” he said. “People in the West seem to pop Prozac day and night, and it’s not as though we’re entirely cut off here. We’re connected to the world, in our own way.”

The band was composed of art students and the children of moderately well-off Iranian intellectuals. Yet, although they were not fighting off poverty, or shackled to parents who rejected their sideburns and choice of artistic pursuit, their music resonated with a very contemporary Iranian despair, the frustration of living in a nation with the world’s largest brain drain: “As the new sky’s falling, no one’s running. No one’s running but me.”

As the musicians began tuning their instruments, I whispered to Nasrine that she should ask for the guitarist’s phone number. “He looks about eighteen,” she sighed.

“No, he’s twenty-six! I asked all their ages while you were parking the car.”

The theme of Nasrine’s love life, her dire mismanagement of all affairs of the heart, dominated most of our conversations. By the base calculations of the Tehran dating scene, she should have been a highly desirable partner—she had a successful career and was financially independent; she was fluent in two western languages (English and French); and she was willing to date before marriage. Her wide smile, sensuous proportions, and penchant for tight clothing made her appealing to a wide range of men, and I could never understand her catastrophic choices. Partly, I suspected, she believed a sound relationship would mean the

end of her lively youth, of all those Friday nights she spent drunkenly tossing her long black hair around on party dance floors. Partly, she just seemed lost, uncertain of how someone of her middle-class background might negotiate that party scene, dominated as it was by worldly, upper-caste Iranians. Nasrine had recently discovered the phenomenon of Bridget Jones—the novels and films whose protagonist, a female journalist, celebrates her romantic haplessness—and concluded there was no shame in her single plight.

Nasrine wouldn't approach the guitarist, and when the band was done practicing we filed out of the soundproof bunker, blinking in the glare of the midday sun. She headed off to run an errand, and I retired to Café Mint, a coffee shop on Gandhi Street that served "frappuccino," to wait for my next interview. Kambiz Tavana, a hyperverbal young journalist in black wire-rimmed glasses, had worked for the reformist newspaper *Etemad* ("Trust"), which like more than a hundred other publications had been shut down by judicial decree since 2005. While the assault on independent journalism had inspired a would-be democrat like Baghi to dip his toe into "civil society," it seemed to have propelled Tavana into the Rafsanjani camp. I wanted to know how a liberal who reported on student uprisings had ended up serving a heavyweight mullah, despised by most intellectuals for his brutal record of harassing dissidents.

"Let's be realistic here," Tavana said, in the unruffled, confident tone of someone whose boss partly ran the country. "Rafsanjani has a dark history, sure. But he has power, and power can achieve things. What is the lesson of the U.S. invasion of Iraq? That quick change is not possible in the Middle East. We need to adjust our expectations to fit reality. Things have improved here. Ten years ago, you couldn't take a test in jeans. There were no shopping malls in Qom. Now look at how much more open life has become. There are openly gay areas in Mashad, teenagers on the bus listening to rock music on their mp3 players."

When I asked whether this was not just the result of a demographic wave, the regime softening before the pressure of an immense generation of young people, Tavana disagreed. "Rafsanjani is the architect of all this. These changes were a strategy, and just look how it bought everyone's consent. Once, they asked him at a university speech what was wrong with men and women sharing notes. He said, 'Nothing,' and they gave him a standing ovation. Rafsanjani realizes everyone's top priority is himself. Comfort, normalcy, a decent economic life."

Tavana told me he did not see much point in pursuing an open society or holding the powerful ayatollahs accountable for gutting the economy of an oil-rich nation. "Civil society, democracy, human rights, these are all just buzzwords. You can't do human rights unless you teach people what rights are, and right now that's not part of the curriculum."

The Rafsanjani strategy of Islamic dictatorship lite—of buying young people's acquiescence by doling out more social freedoms, while hounding pesky critics who demanded political change—did not disturb Tavana. He neatly outlined how the U.S. invasion of Iraq had ended young Iranians' dreams of being rescued by tanned and polite American soldiers, who would deliver a shiny latest-model de mocracy. Forced to accept a grim yet stable future in the arms of their ayatollahs, he said, people were making the best of their disagreeable situation. Tavana's summation depressed me, but he remained in good spirits, energetically poking straw into the dregs of his iced mocha. I could imagine him in ten years' time as the

speechwriter for an Iranian president. Young people like Kambiz Tavana seemed curious about how to mold themselves to the demands of the political moment: one day, a disgruntled liberal democrat; the next, a pragmatic, pro-regime hack. He embodied for me the state's own inability to define its postrevolutionary identity. Was Iran destined to become a model of Islamic democracy? A regional player with superpower ambitions? Or would it just remain a shabby dictatorship stuck between East and West?

On the way to Naziabad, a working-class district in south Tehran where I would finish the day's reporting, I mulled over Tavana's pronouncements. I wondered whether his preoccupation with social freedoms would be echoed in this neighborhood, where young people tended to be poorer and lacked such westernized habits as the afternoon iced espresso drink.

The huddled brown apartment blocks were interspersed with fruit sellers, butcher shops displaying forlorn heaps of raw chickens in their front windows, and kiosks adorned with portraits of the Shia Imam Ali appearing as tanned and handsome as a Brazilian soap opera star. In north Tehran, such kiosks would sell imported European chocolates and Zippo lighters, but here they peddled the Iranian version of Kit-Kat (Tic-Tac), *tasbeek* (prayer beads), and special pillows that murmur the Koran. The murals extolling revolution and martyrdom that adorned the sides of Naziabad's buildings had clearly not been touched up in years, the faded ayatollahs still frowned sternly and the artwork still bore the raw touch of Maoist propaganda. Though the city had yet to deliver its twenty-first-century billboards, Naziabad—central and north Tehran were treated to sleek black-and-white portraits of beaming revolutionaries; gorgeous, graffiti-inspired renderings of Persian calligraphy—the neighborhood's power is still considerable. Its Basij militia commands units across the city. Many of the city's influential politicians have risen to prominence from Naziabad's side streets, and mayors of Tehran, along with senior clerics, often pay visits to its main mosque.

Nasrine and I had agreed to meet at a busy intersection; waiting for her to arrive, I peered into the window of a bridal shop filled with mannequins wearing décolleté gowns adorned with feathers and sequins. Their finery in no way contradicted the black-clad figures of the neighborhood women striding past, plastic bags heaving with summer fruit. The brides from this culturally conservative neighborhood would most likely celebrate in the company of only female relatives, so they could dress as seductively as they pleased. Nasrine handed me a plain veil of navy cotton, which I pulled on in place of my thin scarf, and we set out toward the neighborhood mosque, in search of its mullah. It was three in the afternoon, an hour when many Iranians go home for a siesta. Most shops and doctor's offices close in the mid-afternoon, in the old European style. A gardener spraying enameled tiles till they sparkled in the sun directed us toward the mullah's house.

We rang the mullah's bell, and only when the iron door clicked open did I notice I had forgotten to bring a pair of closed-toed shoes. If the Iranian press corps had had a prize for Most Unsuitably Dressed Reporter, I would have won easily, year in, year out. Most female journalists kept alternative manteaus, headscarves, and shoes in their offices, for reporting trips to more conservative places like mosques and universities. Without an office to speak of, I often ended up as I did that day, suitably modest from head to ankles, with one forgotten detail, in this case a crimson pedicure, ruining the effect.

Hajj Agha (Iranians referred to most clerics over thirty this way; it literally designates a man [“*agha*,” or mister] who has performed the hajj) invited us into his spare living room, empty but for a machine-woven carpet and a few cushions for furniture. He cast a bemused glance at my toes, but said nothing. Nasrine, in her most honeyed voice, addressed him with a string of gracious Farsi formulas: “How is your health? May your hands not hurt from agreeing to see us. I hope we are not disturbing the family, who I hope are well ...” Then she began explaining our reporting needs. She was skilled at eliciting information from men, an indisputable aid to her reporting, and one of the reasons why I had asked her to join me.

Hajj Agha adjusted his blue-gray robes and invited us to sit down. Even he expected little to change with this election, he explained. When he heard that I worked for an American magazine, he stiffened slightly, but said we were welcome to talk to the Basij of his mosque. Like most of the militia, he said, they tended to be underemployed, occasionally borrowing a motor bike to work as messengers outside the Tehran bazaar.

The origin of the Basij as a frontline militia during the Iran-Iraq War is one of the saddest stories of the Islamic regime. Comprising volunteer soldiers too young to serve in the regular army, the Basij were used as human mine sweepers. The government dispatched them on the border plains to certain death, supplied with plastic keys meant to open the doors to heaven. When the war ended, the Basij was transformed into a paramilitary force with the hazy, worrisome mandate of “promoting virtue” among young people, nominally accountable to the country’s chief authority, the Supreme Leader, but run unsystematically out of local mosques. Depending on the bias of the news source, the Basij today are variously described as an Islamic version of the Boy Scouts, a voluntary militia, or a thuggish street gang. Really, they are all these things at once. Basijis carry official cards; some carry weapons (from the classic AK-47 to the more medieval mace, depending on the task at hand); and they operate both independently and in coordination with what human rights groups call the state’s “quasi-official organs of repression.” The murky origins of the Basij’s authority lie in the government’s mix of Islamic and secular law, an unworkable amalgam that produces only lawlessness.

I suppose most Iranians would favor the description that reflects their particular history with the Basij, either as the recipients of its happy largesse or as victims of its unofficial but vicious authority. In the short time I had spent in Iran, my experiences with the Basij included being thrown out of a mosque because a lock of hair peeked out beneath my scarf; being arrested at a checkpoint because I was in the company of a male colleague; being pulled over on the freeway for sleeping in the backseat of the car (I had just traveled overland from Baghdad to Tehran and had nodded off in exhaustion; “Is *sleep* now also illegal?” I asked in exasperation); and being chased with a club for attending a soccer rally. I had endured all those run-ins in the course of just five years, I could only imagine what those who had spent their whole lives in Iran must have suffered.

Western reporters tended to view the Basij only through the lens of social class, writing that they were well received in low-income neighborhoods and shunned in the affluent suburbs of north Tehran. While this captured the element of class frustration in the Basij’s running checkpoints in north Tehran, it missed the dislike of middle-class and working-class Iranians for the Basij’s strong-arm tactics. They often acted like mafia enforcers in ordinary

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