
HOO MAN MAJD

(author of)

**THE AYATOLLAH
BEGS TO DIFFER**

**THE MINISTRY
OF GUIDANCE
INVITES YOU TO**

NOT STAY

**AN AMERICAN FAMILY
IN IRAN**





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In memoriam Nasser Mo

(1928–201

The inhabitants of Tehran are invited to keep quiet.

—ATTRIBUTED TO SHAH REZA KHAN PAHLAVI

If I sit in silence, I have sinned.

—MOHAMMAD MOSSADEQ

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“Hello?” I didn’t recognize the number of the incoming call on my cell phone, but it was from Washington, D.C., so I answered, standing on a deserted stretch of the waterfront at Greenpoint, Brooklyn, on a September day in 2010.

“*Agha-ye Majd?*”

“*Baleh?*” I answered, yes—in Farsi, since the caller was obviously Persian.

“I’m calling from the Iranian consulate, and I have a question about your applications for your wife and child.”

“Yes?” I said.

“You were married, it seems, after your child was born,” the lady said. My longtime girlfriend and I had had a son a few months prior, and we had finally gotten married in a civil ceremony a month before he was born. Realizing that in order to get them Iranian citizenship and passports, we had to be married in an Islamic ceremony—even before the Islamic Revolution, the only marriage Iran recognized was a religiously sanctioned one—we had done exactly that, three months later, at the Islamic Institute of New York, which shares a building with the Razi School (“Academic Excellence in a Distinctive Islamic Environment”!) in Queens. My wife was instantly converted to Islam, Shia Islam, as required. The mullah had patiently explained then, in Farsi while begging me to translate, that converting didn’t mean rejecting Christianity or Jesus Christ; it only meant that my wife was accepting Mohammad as the last in line of the holy Abrahamic prophets.

Yeah, whatever, let’s do this. That was what my wife’s expression had communicated from under a hastily improvised head scarf consisting of our son’s monkey-print blanket. I hadn’t realized that scarves were mandatory, although I should have checked the Razi School Website, where the uniform for girls is listed as “navy overcoat, white scarf.” Meanwhile, our son, now deprived of his blanket, screamed and farted in what sounded to me like pretentious good harmony. “How about Buddha?” my wife wondered. She told me to tell the mullah she accepted *him*, too. I nodded and ignored her request.

The lady calling me now was from the Iranian Interests Section at the Embassy of Pakistan in Washington, D.C., the office that handles the consular affairs of Iranians in the United States in the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries. She was technically incorrect in identifying herself as “from the consulate,” since there is actually no such thing as an Iranian embassy or consulate on American soil, but it was a minor technicality; the Interests Section was authorized to issue citizenship papers for Iranians born in the United States and to issue passports to American wives of Iranian citizens—but not to American husbands of Iranian wives, or to children of those unions, who are not considered Iranian by virtue of marriage or birth to an Iranian woman.

“Well,” I said, “we were married before my son’s birth, but if you mean our Islamic marriage—”

“No,” she interrupted me, “it’s no problem really, but it seems you were married in 2011 and that was after—”

“No,” I said, my turn to interrupt. “We were married a month *before* he was born.”

“It’s no problem,” she repeated, “but I mean, umm, you were married *after* he was, umm, conceived.” She sounded embarrassed. “Was he adopted?”

“No!” I replied, taken aback by the question. “If he was adopted, we wouldn’t have been identified as his birth parents on his birth certificate, would we?” What I wanted to say to her was that it *is*, perhaps contrary to her beliefs, actually possible for a man and woman to have a child out of wedlock, that conception doesn’t happen only if the man and woman are married, but I bit my tongue. I knew that in the Islamic Republic authorities have to maintain the appearance, at least, that men and women do not—perhaps even *cannot*—have sex before marriage. Just the appearance, mind you, for no one is that naïve in Iran, not even employees of the Islamic state.

“Well,” she said, “it *is* possible to have you listed as the father if you adopted, but it’s not a problem. We just ask you to fax us a letter saying that your son is not adopted, and Tehran will be able to issue his birth certificate, and then we can issue a passport.” It seems she still didn’t believe that I was the biological father, perhaps not just because of the premarital sex that may have offended her sensibilities, but also because of my age, which she must have thought far too old. Iranians my age tend to be grandfathers. But there was another element at play, too: this passive-aggressive (and very Persian) behavior in social intercourse really meant that she wanted me to agree and declare, to her and the Iranian bureaucratic world, that my son was conceived out of wedlock. *Gotcha!*

Getting citizenship papers for my family was actually much easier while we were still in the United States (or anywhere else outside Iran) than it would have been in Iran, and it had been something I was eager to do, since I was confident that a time would come when I would want to visit Iran with my wife and son. My wife had expressed her desire to travel to Iran with me in the past, when it was a practical impossibility, but now that we were married, her having an Iranian passport meant there would be no obstacles to her accompanying me on one of my trips, with our son if we wanted, even a trip that came up at the very last minute, as had often happened for me before. Appearances aside, paperwork is something the Iranian bureaucracy, the single largest employer of Iranians, excels in, even in the age of paperless communication and record keeping. “You know,” one Iranian official at the Interests Section, a longtime resident of Washington, mentioned to me when I told him I was sending in my applications, “Tehran won’t return the original American birth certificate of your son or your wife.” When I expressed surprise and was a little hesitant to just hand over these precious documents to the Iranian government, never to be recovered, he said, “Well, America is not like Iran, is it? It’s not like you have to jump through hoops to get a replacement birth certificate—you just ask for one in any U.S. state, and they’ll send it to you!”

I hadn’t thought of it, but of course he was right. It’s not that hard to get a birth certificate, a driver’s license, or even a passport in America or Europe. It’s not that hard to open a bank account, rent an apartment, register a child for school, or get a doctor’s appointment if you can afford it or have insurance. I may be Iranian by birth, and I may have traveled there often enough, and I may have friends and relatives and connections there across the political

spectrum, but I hadn't lived there as an adult, and only barely as a child. I was aware, second hand, of what living in Tehran entails and understood Iranian bureaucracy, but if I ever wanted to live there myself, with a family no less, it was going to be another thing altogether. Doing anything concerning Iran is generally impossible, as a bureaucrat usually explains with a regretful shaking of the head, and the occasional tut-tut. But with passports in hand, I realized, if we ever decided we *did* want to live there, whatever the reason, it would be a simple matter of buying airplane tickets.

My wife, who comes from a small farming town in rural Wisconsin, was as eager to become an Iranian citizen (and secure her son's dual citizenship) as I was, which was why she had readily converted to Islam. Before we had a child, she had expressed interest in traveling with me to my country of birth, mainly out of curiosity, I thought, but also because, she told me, she worried that if I ever got into trouble in Iran—and she had read reports of American and Iranian Americans who had been arrested there—she wanted to be able to get on the first plane to Tehran as easily as an Iranian could.

We had met years ago, and I would talk to her about Iran, well before I visited the country for the first time in adulthood, and she continually urged me to go there, to not let anything stand in the way of my reconnecting to the land of my birth. "You need to go home!" she once said, after I described my grandfather's house to her. "You'll never be happy with your life until you do." She was right, I realized after I finally set foot in Iran. That was reason enough for me to want to take her there, too—to let her actually see why she was right. When it came to converting to Islam, she also understood well that for Iranians, the appearance of belief is paramount, not belief itself, so she humored the mullah who married us, and he seemingly understood the same, given his relaxed attitude, humor, and the almost dismissive manner in which he converted Karri to submission to Allah.

For years it has been extremely difficult for Americans to travel to Iran as tourists, obtaining a visa being the single biggest obstacle, but Karri, to my surprise, was keen on spending an extended period of time there—well, perhaps a month or two. In a way, it shouldn't have been surprising, given what I knew about her. She wanted our son to see, feel, smell, and touch where her family had lived since the eighteenth century from an early age. We had taken him to Wisconsin and the family farm as an infant, and her sense of fair play and her insistence that we all have a sense of our roots, made her want him to experience his father's birthplace, too. It was her willingness, even eagerness, to travel to Iran, as well as the newly minted Iranian passports that showed up via FedEx not long after I sent in the applications, that persuaded me to look at the idea of actually moving to Iran for a year or more or less, to give me an opportunity to properly reconnect with my history, and to give Karri and our young son a proper introduction to my culture, but also to chronicle our lives as insider/outsiders in a land so few know very much about.

I imagined my story as one that could illustrate and illuminate the larger culture, not so much in the "gee whiz isn't this fascinating" way that often prevails among memoirs of expatriates living abroad, or in the politicized form that most writing, even travel writing, of Iran has taken, but more as an account of what is to *be* an Iranian in Iran. Of course, as an Iranian who is also fully American, or at least that's how I, and my friends, imagine me to be. My wife warmed to the idea, even if it meant leaving her family, friends, and work behind, and she understood that the opportunity might never present itself again, especially now that

we had a child who would, before we knew it, be in school and have a life that would be difficult to interrupt for any long period of time. Karri, who had over the years spent months alone in India on intensive yoga programs (and had lived alone in Italy, modeling and studying Italian after college), was still adventurous and even fearless, and a year, she reasoned, was not very long in the scheme of things. Our son would, if we went to Iran, be about the same age as I had been when I left it, less than a year old (I had accompanied my diplomatic family on my father's first posting abroad, to London), and he would spend his first birthday in the country of his father's birth. That probably mattered mostly to me, certainly not to him and by nature less to my wife, but I was happy that she was as keen on exposing our son to the culture of his father and his father's father, even if he didn't quite understand yet, early in his life. That Karri would finally see what she had heard about for so many years, and that I could show her something of my country of birth that might explain me better, was equally, if not more, appealing.

Like most Americans and Europeans, my wife had an image of Iran (and of Iranians) that was shaped by the headlines, and the headlines have not been kind to Iran or Iranians for over thirty years. Unlike most non-Iranians, however, her life was intertwined with that of an Iranian; and Persian culture, even Islamic Persian culture, to which she had been exposed through meeting the religious members of my family and which she recognized was quite different from Arab culture, was not completely unfamiliar to her. It is a culture that has been described to Westerners mostly by Iranians, but it is still very much hidden behind veils of modesty, furtiveness, and suspicion. We have an idea of what it is to be French or Italian or to live in Paris or in Florence, based on a certain familiarity with those cultures and the writings of English-speakers who've lived there, but we have little idea of what it is to be Persian or what Iranian society is really like. The idea of trying to discover that, both for myself and for potential readers, began to hold greater and greater appeal.

“You don't know, you don't know, how life can be *shameful*.” Those are lyrics from a song, a piece of music in the classical Iranian form, written by playwright Bijan Mofid in the early 1970s and recorded by many different artists over the years. The song, “Dota cheshm seeyah daree” (“You Have Two Black Eyes”), can be searched today on Google, in Finglish, the term Iranians use to signify Farsi words written in the Latin alphabet, and an important tool in the days before most computers came with Arabic fonts installed. I often think of the song when I'm thinking of Iran and Iranians, of what defines our behavior and our view of life. (Unlike Western classical music, Iranian classical music coexists—and is equally popular—among all age groups—with contemporary pop.) I think of the song because it had struck a chord with Iranians well before the revolution—when I was a teenager, my father would listen to it while drinking his whiskey—and it continues to be relevant to Iranians today.

But life is *shameful*? Yes. The idea that life in this world can be (or even is) shameful resonates with Iranians, a Shia people who, regardless of their piety or lack of it, are culturally programmed to imagine human behavior as ignoble: as ignoble as the prophet's successors' murder of his offspring, and as ignoble as the tyranny that they suffer no matter what leaders rule them. There's certainly an element of self-loathing to it, although not quite the self-loathing that Western psychology analyzes. The pizza deliveryman in Tehran believes it, as does the pizza restaurant owner, and so does the customer ordering from the comfort of

his high-rise apartment, worth millions of dollars (yes, dollars). The Iranian government officials who wanted to know if my son was adopted believe it, as does the mullah who married my wife and me in New York while sheepishly acknowledging the greatness, but not the divinity, of Jesus Christ. Living in Iran, I knew, would mean confronting that conceit head-on, something few non-Iranians have done in recent times, and writing about Iranian and Iranian culture, even if only about one's own experiences, would mean understanding it. In Iran, life isn't necessarily ugly or difficult, but regardless of one's standing—whether one is rich or poor, a success or a failure in love—the idea that life is somehow shameful and powerful and one that I wanted to explore.

Iran, the country once known to Westerners as Persia, its name evoking exotic images of *Thousand and One Nights* and bejeweled kings ruling over adoring masses, fully burst into the American consciousness in 1979 with the Islamic Revolution essentially reversing the image we had, if we had any at all, of the country that American politicians had usually described as our “staunchest ally in the Middle East.” After Israel, of course, which happened to be an ally of Iran then, too, albeit unofficially. Naturally, as long as Iran was America's “staunchest ally,” ordinary Western folk had little interest in the country beyond the occasional news item related to oil or concerning some intriguing event in the royal family, say a marriage, divorce, or a coronation. Iran was a curiosity at best, and although there were at one time some forty thousand Americans living there, most were expats in what we now think of as a colonial sense: they lived insulated and isolated from the native population, attended their own schools and clubs, and undertook tourist jaunts to famous sites while rarely experiencing the culture of the land. Practically no Americans or Europeans moved to Iran simply to experience the Persian life. Although the shah once proclaimed, in his vainglory years, that Tehran would soon become the “Paris of the Middle East,” Tehran of the 1970s was certainly not Paris of the 1920s, and Iran held no attraction for artists and intellectuals looking for inspiration away from home. That was equally true for Iranian artists, most of whom, including one of my uncles who ran away from home to become a painter in Paris, at that time looked for inspiration in the cities of Europe.

The modernizing and Francophile shah of Iran (or as some Americans occasionally mistakenly wrote, the “Shah of Iran,” unintentionally ascribing to him perhaps the oratorical talent, playwright, that he *didn't* claim) seemed to symbolize Iran, at least until the day he unceremoniously departed Tehran, and throngs of bearded men and chador-clad women flocked to the streets to celebrate his departure, along with whatever dreams he had of a Westernized Iran. When the revolution took hold and Ayatollah Khomeini became Iran's new *de facto* “shah”—unlike the shah, he actually did compose, in his case poetry—Americans moved on: How interesting could Iran be, now that its rulers wore robes and turbans, sat on the floor, and ate dates and yogurt for lunch? As long as the oil flowed, another backward country regressing even further wasn't going to hold anyone's attention for very long, and the culture was seemingly irrelevant to Western civilization in the twentieth century.

Indeed, interest in Iran faded until the new Persian royalty and the masses of angry Iranians who worshipped them stormed the U.S. embassy and took American diplomats hostage, in contravention of international law and all notions of international relations, to say nothing of civilized behavior or common decency. Iran was not only no longer the charmingly exotic East we once imagined it to be; it was an implacable enemy forever at odds with the

just us but the community of nations at large. Iran, Khomeini proclaimed, needn't recognize international law since she hadn't been consulted on its various aspects. The impudence of the world's nations! Not only that, his declaration that "America cannot do a damn thing" about its hostages was proven true in the end, much to Americans' dismay, and the revolutionary government extended that ideal to *anything* America wanted to do vis-à-vis Iran—Khomeini's slogan is still emblazoned on the walls of the former U.S. embassy in Tehran, more than thirty years later. If the nuclear issue and Iran's growing influence and power in the region (in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, or even in Gaza) and beyond (in Africa and South America) are any indicators, Khomeini's wish is still coming true, much to the chagrin of President Obama—the sixth American president to have to deal with a worrisome Iran.

Thirty-plus years. Years marked by indifference, enmity, accusations, and recrimination, occasional flare-ups, and for the past few, deep disagreements over a nuclear program that appears to be leading inexorably to a nuclear-capable Iran at best and a nuclear-armed Iran at worst. What's been happening in Iran in our absence? The population has more than tripled and industry has grown to the point where Iran can be virtually self-sufficient in many ways, including militarily (albeit on a crude and somewhat outdated level), partly because unilateral (U.S.) and multilateral (UN) sanctions have *forced* Iranian industry to adapt in order to survive with little, if any, outside help. Superhighways crisscross the country, dotted with technical schools and universities, and Iranians have the greatest rate of higher education as well as Internet penetration in the region. Iranian artists sell their works in European and Persian Gulf cities' auctions for millions of dollars, Iranian cinema is the *nouvelle vague*, and Iranian literature is slowly being recognized outside Farsi-speaking countries. Iranian cuisine is even making inroads in Western countries. "What's the best Persian rice cooker?" a WASPy American customer asked the clerk at an international food store on Lexington Avenue in New York, not long after my experience with the Iranian Interests Section. I nosily volunteered a brand I own, whereupon he asked me, "Does it make good *tahdig* [crisped rice]?"

We're certainly much more aware of Iran today than ever before, I've discovered. Just about every American and European can identify the country on a map, even if they cannot identify their own neighboring states and countries or principalities, and as awareness has increased, so, for many, has curiosity. Iran's cultural influence—political and otherwise—seems to be on the rise, certainly in places we worry about, such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan; but can Iran, like China and to some degree India, become an influential economic and military power? One whose culture, from food to literature, from art to spiritual values, permeates Western civilization the way Chinese and Indian culture do. Today there are over one million Iranian Americans, and hundreds of thousands of Iranians in Europe and all over the Western world, and their influence (good and bad, admittedly) is already being felt. Iran hawks, both in the United States and Europe, as well as in Israel, certainly believe Iran can become a power to be reckoned with and advocate confronting Iranian ambitions before it's too late; others claim that Iran's power and influence, even in its nuclear capability, are greatly exaggerated. But if Iran does achieve what it seems to be striving for—a reborn empire of sorts—and if it remains an independent Islamic force allied with "neither West nor East," as it declares on the walls of its Foreign Ministry, what will

that mean?

Almost certainly Iran, regardless of whether its future government is fairly elected or otherwise, will continue along the path it forged in the early days of the Islamic Revolution. That path, one of modernity fused with religion—with very mixed results—is unique in the world today, but in the minds of the country’s leadership and of Iranians who believe at least half of its story, this path is the only one that can guarantee progress for Iranians. The Islamic Republic has raised the literacy rate to over 90 percent, educates far more women than men in its universities, and has made great strides in medicine, science, and the arts, all while insisting on a veneer of Shia Islam. A veneer? Yes, but not always a false front. Former president Mohammad Khatami, who served two terms, from 1997 to 2005, once said in a speech—at a time when he was under fire from progressives for not bringing about “change fast enough; President Obama might relate—that in Iran, democracy would come about only if it were Islamic; otherwise, the country would be a dictatorship much like its neighbors. Perhaps he was right, or maybe over time Iran will become a democracy stripped of its religious veneer. Either way, Iran today is still mostly in the dark, much as China was until the 1990s, both in terms of opening up to the West and in terms of Western understanding of its culture. But Iranians are prepared to turn the lights back on at a moment’s notice. Until then, I hope that this book, born in Iran, might cast some light on their still-clouded story.

At a few minutes before midnight on January 13, 2011, I strolled off a Lufthansa plane and into the one terminal of Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport. The place was familiar enough to me, since it had finally opened to European airlines in 2008, after years of delays—at one point it had been shut down and then taken over by the Revolutionary Guards, the military force answerable exclusively to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the ultimate authority in Iran. I was accompanying correspondent Richard Engel and an NBC News crew, who had short-term entry visas to interview Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Saied Jalili, the following morning. Or, this being Iran, the day after that, or whatever day his office decided would be appropriate. I had been to Iran many times in the previous few years; as a journalist on assignment for U.S. magazines, as a writer researching for my books, and as a consultant to, and sometime interviewee on, various NBC News programs. As the next morning was a Friday, the Muslim Sabbath, I had told Richard to expect at least a one-day postponement.

Richard, his two cameramen, and I stood in line at immigration: the Americans in the foreigners' line, and I, with my Iranian passport, in the much longer line for nationals. Iran is probably the only country in the world where the lines at immigration are much longer for citizens than for foreigners; just as airplanes flying to Tehran, no matter their place of origin, are mostly filled with Iranians who are less put off by the thought of traveling to the strict Islamic Republic than most Westerners are. As expected, the NBC crew were whisked off for further processing (all Americans are subject to fingerprinting, in the same way Iranians are at American ports of entry), and I expected to have a long wait at baggage claim while my colleagues were being slowly and methodically—in a purposefully drawn-out procedure—checked over. Even when Iranian immigration officials have nothing further to do, after they've done every procedure and cleared Americans to enter, they seem to hold them back a little longer, making me wonder if they are basing the timing on the latest information about how long it takes Iranian citizens to get through U.S. immigration at busy airports.

When it was my turn to approach the immigration officer, I handed my passport to him; he nonchalantly scanned and closed it, then got up from his chair and told me to wait one minute. A sudden fear came over me, the fear all Iranians who suspect that they are disliked (or worse) by the authorities in the Islamic Republic feel whenever they cross the border. I had reported enthusiastically on the Green Movement and the antigovernment protests in 2009 for a number of publications, including the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Financial Times*, and *The New Republic*, but after a year's absence had returned to Iran in May 2010 for a short visit without any problems. In the interval, however, I had published a book that was

critical of the hard-liners in Tehran who had brutally crushed dissent, and supportive of reformist, even liberal presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who were now under virtual house arrest. (They subsequently were put under official house arrest.) I was still, as the authorities well knew, related to former president Khatami, who had been under surveillance and barred from travel since the presidential election of 2001. But I was traveling with an NBC News crew, and the Iranian mission to the UN had secured their visas and the interview with one of Iran's top leaders (Jalili was also the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, the powerful body reporting to the Supreme Leader), so the government was aware of my work with NBC on what was intended to be a short trip. Clearly, the government had been looking for me at the airport. I was perplexed: had there been any issues with my welcome in Tehran, surely the UN mission would have told me before I boarded my flight. It was the first time I hadn't breezed through immigration in Tehran, and thoughts of arrest and interrogation, as had happened to other Iranians, swam through my head. *This is a good start, I thought, to moving to Iran with my family in a few weeks.*

The immigration official returned after a few minutes and told me to sit down in an area off to the side, in full view of the passengers making their way through passport control and who, being Iranians, couldn't help but stare at me, either in pity or perhaps in fear that because of the grace of Allah, they too would be subject to uneasy detention at their country's border. I waited for what seemed a long time, but checking my watch as a tall, bearded man walked purposefully toward me, I realized that less than ten minutes had passed. The man was wearing light gray pants and a nubby gray sweater, and as he approached, his shoes, the hard plastic sandals many Iranians wear at home, clip-clopped loudly on the marble floor. I was certain he enjoyed making the sound, and equally certain that he enjoyed looking like a disheveled working-class stiff—in contrast to the well-manicured and well-coiffed ladies in their designer head scarves and the men in the latest Western fashions who were still waiting to pass through immigration—and although he didn't look around, I could sense his smugness at the enormous power he wielded over these “westoxified” Iranians who only hours before had surely been cavorting in a Western capital. *Not here, I imagined him thinking. No, you're in my country now, the country of the mostazafin, the oppressed.*

“Hooman Majd?” he asked as he stood over me, my passport open to the photograph.

“Yes.” I stood up.

“Follow me,” he said sternly. Holding my passport in one hand, he led me down a long corridor. He turned at one point and said, rather than asked, “You're a journalist.”

“Yes,” I said, “but I'm not here to work as a journalist.”

“You're a journalist,” he repeated, saying the words as an accusation rather than a statement of fact.

We reached an area of the airport I'd not seen in previous visits, a corridor with a number of offices with the doors open and white plastic chairs lined up outside.

“Sit here,” he commanded, pointing to a chair, and disappeared into one of the offices and closed the door.

I sat down and wondered how long I would be held up, or if I would be sent to a different place, perhaps even a prison, for interrogation. What would NBC do? Would they wait for me until they realized I had disappeared and then try to find out what had happened to me? C

would they carry on with their assignment? They had only forty-eight-hour visas, after all, maybe they'd just carry on. It wasn't as if I was their employee, I reasoned, just a consultant. And I was their consultant in part because of my access to Iranian officialdom—to Khatam naturally, but even to the administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whom I had met a number of times and with whose Foreign Ministry I had cordial relations. If, with my access I got into trouble, how could I expect NBC to think it might help?

I didn't have long to ponder my fate, though, as the man soon came out of the office and approached me, still holding my passport. "You are to report to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance on Saturday at nine a.m. At the foreign journalists' division. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes," I said, standing up, familiar with the Orwellian-sounding ministry that is responsible for culture but also the kind of "guidance" that most journalists, Iranians and foreign, and artists seeking permission to film, exhibit their art, record or play music, or put on a play abhor. "But who do I ask for?"

"They're expecting you," he replied with a smirk.

"Just the accreditation department?"

"Yes. Be sure to be there, or else you'll have a problem leaving the country," he said, a little menacingly. "Let's go."

I followed him as he shuffled back along the corridor, his sandals as loud as before, maybe louder, on the marble floor. At passport control, he handed my passport to a bored official who stamped it, and as he turned to leave, he said, "Don't miss the appointment."

I still got out of the airport before Richard and the NBC crew did, and found the waiting van hired by NBC. Suddenly my plan to move to Iran with my wife and son, and to spend a year living among my countrymen, seemed rather too optimistic, if not downright stupid. I was certain I wouldn't be jailed on Saturday—surely if they wanted to imprison me, they would have led me out of the airport in handcuffs—but the Ministry of Intelligence might not look as kindly on my next trip. I felt an antipathy for the man who had seemingly derived pleasure from making me sweat. If living among my countrymen meant living among the likes of him, I thought, then perhaps I wouldn't, after all, want to expose my family to my people.

As I waited for Richard and his crew to clear customs, I contemplated the irony of having to confront simultaneously the two fears I have harbored since the Islamic Revolution toppled my father's employer from power and drove my family into exile: that I would never again see the country of my birth, and that if I did, I would never be allowed to leave. Even after I started to travel to Iran regularly, these fears never completely left me: from the moment I stood in line to board a flight to Tehran from the safety of a foreign airport, to the moment I'd hand over my passport at immigration, to the hours I'd spend at Tehran's airport waiting to leave, I never quite felt safe, for I knew (and my father and other family members constantly reminded me) that Iranian administrations—indeed, the country's entire political climate—could be capricious no matter who, king or cleric, was in charge. Yes, the fear has subsided over the years, as I made numerous uneventful trips back and forth, but I now realized that whatever allowances the bureaucracy made for West-based Iranians (including

for a son born out of wedlock), they did not extend to writers who might publish something the state viewed as not just uncomplimentary but actually treasonous. Not in post-2000 elections Iran. I had already decided not to tell any intelligence officers, or officials of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, that my extended stay in Iran might involve writing a book on my experiences. Although such a plan was not technically illegal or even a reason to secure advance permission, I knew that telling them about it might cause them to monitor my activities with greater zeal than they might otherwise have done.

My traveling companions finally made it to the van, and as we rode into town, I reflected on what I would say to my interrogators when I met with them in less than forty-eight hours. The signs weren't good for a friendly meeting over a cup of tea: NBC in Tehran (the only U.S. network with a full-time bureau in the Islamic Republic) informed me that the hotel we were booked at, the Laleh, had refused to take my reservation at first, under orders from the ministry, and had finally relented only after back-and-forth phone calls and discussions.

Signs that my appearance in Tehran was more than a little unwelcome grew the next morning. The Laleh, like Soviet-era Moscow hotels, was essentially a spying apparatus for the state, but I had failed to realize before (perhaps because of the relative ease with which I had traveled to and from Iran) just how good that apparatus actually could be. I was sitting in the lobby lounge having coffee with the American news crew and discussing the best tack to ensure a productive interview, as well as how to get Dr. Jalili to agree to let NBC into a nuclear facility, when one of the doormen (who had not been present when we checked in) approached us. "Mr. Majd," he said, "may I have a word?"

I rose from my chair and followed him a short distance, out of earshot of the rest of the party, wondering how he knew my name. Could it be that the hotel's shabbiness masked a level of customer service more common at Claridge's or the Ritz? Certainly not. So what could he possibly want?

"Mr. Majd," the doorman repeated. "I advise you not to hang around the Americans very much."

I was a little shocked, immediately realizing that he was an informer, presumably for the Ministry of Intelligence but perhaps for one of the other intelligence services. "Well, I'm here with them, working. I can't exactly avoid them."

"I'm just saying, it's better that you don't associate with them."

"That's not possible—we're traveling together," I repeated, "and I'm here to work with them."

"Friendly advice, that's all." He nodded, then turned away. Friendly advice indeed, from a Tehran hotel doorman, no less.

"I'll try," I said to his back, "but I wonder if you could answer a question no one else at the hotel seems to be able to."

"What is it?" he said, stopping.

"Why are all the electrical outlets in the hotel British-style ones?" I asked. "I mean, no traveler brings British plugs to Iran. *British* plugs."

"We have converters."

"I know, but why are the outlets three-pronged to begin with?" I couldn't resist making the dig, partly because of my anger and frustration with the authorities but also because I wanted

to throw something at them that they couldn't defend. Iranians in general and the revolutionaries in particular hate the British government more than any other.

He shook his head and returned to his station at the door, probably aware that I was needling him but refusing to acknowledge it.

It was Friday, the Sabbath, and my meeting with my interrogators was still a full day away. I wondered what I should do, knowing that I was being watched in the hotel, and that my movements outside would probably also be monitored. Since the NBC crew were allowed only to conduct the interview with Jalili—which had by now been rescheduled for Saturday morning—and had no authority to work anywhere else in the city, they were going to stay in the hotel all day. I decided to go out and visit friends.

Getting around sprawling and densely populated Tehran, with its paralyzing traffic and lack of order, is a feat even on daytime Fridays, and I spent much of the day, and into the evening, in taxis. Pollution, which only goes from bad to worse in Tehran, was headache-inducing that winter, due to an inversion layer common in cities surrounded by mountains but was the throbbing in my temples due solely to the fumes and caustic air, or was the prospect of an interrogation by infamously ill-tempered intelligence officials the following morning causing my brain to object? That morning I had spoken to Ali Khatami, former president Mohammad Khatami's brother and chief of staff, and I planned to meet him and our mutual friend Sadegh Kharrazi, another former official, later in the evening. That visit, I was sure, would be duly recorded as a mark against me by the intelligence community—Ali and Sadegh were notoriously liberal reformists. But Ali was also a relative, I reasoned, so they couldn't possibly be too disturbed by my seeing him and Sadegh, who was untouchable due to his incongruously close relationship, familial and otherwise, with the Supreme Leader.

When I told them that I had been summoned, Sadegh gave me a knowing smile. "Welcome to Iran," he said. "This isn't Switzerland." *No kidding*, I thought. Ali wanted me to call him as soon as my interrogation was over, to be sure that everything was okay, and I told him I would. I also told him I didn't think, under the circumstances, that it would be wise for me to pay ex-president Khatami a visit on this short trip, either for him or for me. Ali agreed, and I wondered whether he was more worried about me or his brother. I suspect it was both.

The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the overseer of all cultural activities in the Islamic Republic (and always known to Iranians simply as Ershad, or "guidance"), including news media activities, keeps its foreign media offices on Eighth Street and Ghaem Maghamesh across from the Tehran Clinic, a famous hospital in central Tehran. I had made many visits to Ershad in the past, but today for the first time the Tehran Clinic's proximity struck me as convenient in case of a serious medical emergency following a summons to the ministry. From the taxi window I looked out at the bustle of the city, wondering how ordinary Tehranis could appear to be so completely unconcerned with what Iran had become since the elections of 2009: a police state behind a veneer of freedom—"Islamic" freedom, that is—the regime claimed to offer its citizens. A police state had long existed in Iran, of course, but now it had taken on a malicious and bellicose form unseen or felt since the early 1990s.

I arrived a few minutes before nine, and I was indeed expected. The guards in the lobby

took my Iranian national ID card and told me to go upstairs to the journalists' office. So even the guards—who normally would ask with suspicion what I was there for and whom I wanted to see—knew I had been summoned. Were they intelligence ministry informers, too? I took the stairs to the second floor and stepped into the office I had visited on previous trips to obtain my press passes. The young male secretary was also expecting me, it seemed, and politely asked me to take a seat. Tea arrived out of nowhere.

After about half an hour, the deputy head of the foreign reporters' bureau, the gentle and ever polite Mohammad Shiravi, walked in and said hello. Holding a glass of tea himself and wearing an Ahmadinejad-style windbreaker, he wandered in and out of the reception area looking a bit uncomfortable, then finally told me that I should wait in his office. I had known Shiravi to be a liberal—by Islamic Republic standards—and I wondered if his choice of jacket had shielded him from the purges at the ministry after the 2009 elections and the appointment of the president's arch-conservative ally Mohammad Hosseini to the post of minister. (Mohammad Javad Aghajari, Shiravi's immediate boss and the man ultimately responsible for foreign correspondent activity in Iran, was a reliable conservative with no suspicious liberal leanings.)

I followed Shiravi into his office and sat down on a sofa. He left, closing the door firmly behind him. Again, a glass of tea appeared, this time with a plate of biscuits. He was not going to be the one to interview me, and whoever was had to be important enough in the intelligence services to kick him out of his own office. I waited another fifteen or twenty minutes, staring at the large jug of ice water on the coffee table before me: large droplets formed on its outside surface in the overheated room, trickled slowly down the side, and plunged into the saucer under the jug. Sweat.

The door opened and two men walked in, an older one with a full beard and a younger one almost clean-shaven, both wearing badly mismatched gray jackets and trousers that seemed to be the uniform of choice for government employees below the rank of minister (and sometimes minister, too, depending on how much he wanted to associate himself with the downtrodden of society). I rose to shake their hands and noticed the younger one had a deformity on one hand. Injured in the Iran-Iraq War? I wondered automatically. Nah—he was too young to have fought. They sat down in armchairs across from me without introducing themselves, not even with a fake name like Mohammadi or some other commonplace but very Islamic name of the sort that intelligence officers seem to favor. Both held thick files on their laps.

"You wrote this article," the younger man said, opening his file and looking over some pages, "and you didn't have a press pass."

"What article?" I asked.

"About your trip here eight months ago. The nuclear conference." He sucked air audibly, biting the tip of his tongue with his front teeth at the end of every sentence—an annoying tic. The article he was referring to was one I had written for *Foreign Policy* magazine, on an international "nuclear conference" that the government had held the prior year to trumpet nuclear advances and to reaffirm that those advances were for peaceful purposes. The conference had been boring, a show of propaganda, and very little of my long article was about the conference itself.

"I did have a press pass," I said. "The Foreign Ministry issued it to me at the conference."

and I was with the media in the press box.”

“The Foreign Ministry does not issue press passes,” he snarled. “You know that.” Hiss.

“I don’t,” I said. “The Iranian mission to the UN told me that I could pick up my press pass at the conference, and I did, the morning I arrived.”

“I just told you the Foreign Ministry has nothing to do with press credentials.” Again, hiss.

“Well, that’s not my fault—I live in New York, and I have to go through them to get credentials.”

“Just because you have an Iranian passport doesn’t mean you can come here and write whatever you want when you leave—”

The older man gestured for him to stop and picked up a paper from his own file. “Listen,” he said, “here you refer to the president as being a part of a ‘circus.’ Why do you make fun of the president of the country? And you even once translated for him at the UN!” He sounded almost hurt. I had indeed translated for Ahmadinejad at the UN, but I wondered if my interrogator understood that it was for a cover story for *The New York Observer* in 2007, complete with unflattering caricatures of the easily caricatured president, and not an expression of admiration or support for the president. This interrogator was softer-spoken, clearly the “good cop” to the other’s “bad cop,” but in truth it was really more a case of “bad cop, worse cop,” and like much else in Iran, the concept had lost something in translation.

He was referring to a piece I had written a few months before, about Ahmadinejad’s 2007 trip to attend the UN General Assembly, in which I had called the yearly presence of the Iranian president in New York, along with the attendant publicity, the “Ahmadinejad circus.” Since exile Iranians sometimes likened Ahmadinejad to a chimp, and since cartoons of opposition Web sites lampooned him as such, I could see why the Intelligence Ministry was sensitive to the word *circus*. I patiently explained that it wasn’t a reference to the president himself, and that in English it wasn’t necessarily pejorative. He seemed unconvinced.

“Here in your second book,” said the worse cop, “you insult the president again.” He read aloud a paragraph in Farsi.

“That’s not my translation,” I said. “I don’t read or write Farsi well enough to write in that language. My book is in English.”

“That’s what I expected you to say,” he snorted. “Typical response—avoid responsibility by saying you wrote in English, or it wasn’t you, that it was your editor who made you write it.”

“It wasn’t my editor,” I said, “but it’s true that I wrote the book in English. Do you have the English copy?”

He clearly didn’t, but instead of saying so, he sucked air rapidly through his teeth and shifted his weight.

The bad cop took over. For the next three hours we went back and forth, as the bad cop and the worse cop accused me of “unpatriotic” writing at best and seditious acts at worst. Almost everything I had written in the past seemed to be at their fingertips; each would pull a sheet out of his file and wave it in the air as if it were a piece of evidence being presented to a judge. I kept glancing at the sweating jug of water, wanting to pour some for myself but refraining from doing so, not wanting the two men to think I was nervous. In my mind, I praised the power of American antiperspirants.

“You Iranians who live abroad think you can say anything, unconcerned with our national security, don’t you?” the worse cop said toward the end. “Have you changed your mind?”

now?"

"About what?" I asked, careful to say it politely.

"About your writing!" He was almost shouting.

"Well, um," I replied, "I change my mind frequently about things as I learn something new yes. But I'm not sure what you mean."

"Oh, so a 'journalist' can change his mind? Really?" He said the word *journalist* mockingly as if he really wanted to say *spy*.

"Well, yes," I said.

He merely grunted, unconvinced.

When they finally closed their files, I knew we were almost at the end of the interrogation and besides, it was past lunchtime and no one in Iran, not even secret policemen on mission, will miss their lunch.

"Who have you seen while you've been here?" asked the worse cop, leaning back and hissing through his teeth again.

"My friends Khosro Etemadi [an old college friend whom I often stay with in Iran] and Mr. Kharrazi [a former diplomat and powerful, albeit reformist, political figure]." I don't know why I didn't mention Ali Khatami—I suppose I thought the name Khatami might send them into convulsions—and I was a little surprised that they didn't bring it up themselves.

"Which Mr. Kharrazi?"

"Sadegh."

He curled his lips, but didn't say anything. He wasn't going to disparage a man close to the Supreme Leader, no matter what his opinion of him was. "And when are you leaving?"

"Tonight. Actually, the flight leaves after midnight, so technically tomorrow."

"Don't miss your flight," he said firmly.

"So this NBC crew you came with," said the bad cop. "They are interviewing Dr. Jalili?"

"Yes, and hoping that they can visit the Tehran nuclear reactor."

"And you want to go with them?"

"Yes, I do, but if it's not possible, then I won't. I'll just see friends and family."

"No, it's okay," he said. "You can go with them." The worse cop, the younger man, was turning into a veritable good cop now.

"Really?"

"Yes, why not?" He squinted at me as if he were sizing me up before a boxing match.

"Okay." I stood up as they did and shook their reluctant hands. "One other thing," I said. "I won't have any trouble at the airport—leaving, I mean—will I?"

"No," they both said, shaking their heads. "It'll be taken care of," added the now-good cop.

"I'm coming back in a few weeks, with my American wife and child, for an extended stay," I said. "I won't have trouble at the airport then, or will I?"

"Why should you have trouble?" asked the worse cop, with a sneer. "What are you coming for? To cause trouble? Or maybe to gather information?"

"To spend time here with my family," I said. "Not as a reporter."

"Then you won't have any trouble," he said. "Now, you won't write about our little meeting here, will you? As a journalist?" he added. It wasn't a question. "You won't, because you want to come back with your wife and child." He stared straight into my eyes.

"No, I won't write about it," I lied.

They left the room and closed the door, and for a moment I wasn't sure what to do. My session had been remarkably mild, I thought, compared to what others had gone through, especially the political prisoners who had been interrogated at Evin, the notorious prison, the aftermath of the 2009 elections. But the meeting still spoke to the extreme paranoia the regime felt since those elections. That paranoia brought it a big step closer from being an authoritarian state that made a good pretense of allowing some political discourse to being complete dictatorship that brooked no dissent whatsoever. I walked out the door, saying goodbye to Shiravi—who looked extremely uncomfortable standing outside his door, glass of tea still in his hand—and left the building.

I walked for a while, still wondering if coming back to Iran—with my family—would be a good idea. I believed the intelligence officers when they said it wouldn't be a problem, but they were warning me, too: if I overstepped my bounds—and who knew exactly what those bounds were?—I would be in trouble. Yet this was Iran, thirty-two years after a successful revolution and two years after an arguably unsuccessful one, and not much was new in terms of the ambiguities, the unknowns, and the maddeningly contradictory behavior of government officials. It was still an Iran I could recognize. I believed, as I had for many years, that despite the brutality, the arrests, and the crackdown on civil liberties as well as the press, powerful figures within Iran were working to advance a more democratic future. Perhaps naively, I wanted to be hopeful, rather than—like many of my compatriots who had become apathetic after the Green Movement, even toward the Arab Spring evolving in their own backyard—resigned to the fact that Iran's destiny was to forever be in the grip of tyranny. I was coming back, even if it could end up being my last trip.

The NBC crew was interviewing Jalili, so I was in no hurry to get back to the hotel. But since I had been given permission to visit the Tehran reactor, I did need to contact them and find out if and when they were going. No sooner had I gotten into a taxi than my phone rang. It was NBC's Tehran bureau chief, telling me they had finished their interview and were to go to the reactor the next morning. That meant we'd have to change flights. I said I had been told I could go with them and would see them later at the hotel.

Fifteen minutes later I received a call from an "unknown" caller, who had to be a government official, as no one else is allowed to block his or her number from caller ID recognition in Iran. "Mr. Majd?"

"Yes?" The caller did not introduce himself.

"You are not permitted to visit the Tehran nuclear reactor."

"But I was just told I could," I protested.

"No, you may not."

"If you say so," I said, "but the gentlemen I spoke to this morning specifically said it would be all right—"

"I just told you no," said the man, sounding a little angry. "Just go and visit friends and family, and then go home. Why not just have a good time in Tehran?"

I shook my head as I hung up. What kind of country was this, where you couldn't even trust the intelligence officers interrogating you to say what is permitted and what is not? Ha

they intentionally been fucking with my mind, or had they been overruled afterward? Did someone really suspect that I might be a spy, and that the nuclear reactor—built in the 1970s by Americans, actually—was just too sensitive a location to allow me a peek? *Gee, I thought when did I become so damn important?*

There was no question of my staying an extra day now, nor even of spending much time with NBC, so I had the afternoon and early evening to visit a friend or two and then head to the airport for the long trip back to New York. If I couldn't trust the intelligence officers on the subject of the reactor visit, I wondered, could I trust that I'd be allowed to board my flight in the wee hours of the morning? But they had admonished me to not miss my flight, so after saying my goodbyes at the hotel later that day, I went to visit a friend before heading to the airport.

Snow began falling as dusk arrived, and by the time I was driven to the airport, it had turned into a veritable blizzard. Cars and buses made no allowance for slippery surfaces and poor visibility and sped along, defying traffic regulations and on occasion ending up in a ditch by the side of the unforgiving road or stranded after a pile-up. Just my luck, I thought—the Intelligence Ministry will blame me, and not the storm, if my flight is canceled and I have to return to the hotel. Almost all the international flights that night were indeed canceled except for two: mine to Frankfurt and one to Amsterdam. When the plane took off, two hours late and after a thorough de-icing of the wings, I felt genuine relief: not only had I made it through passport control, but during the three hours that I had waited in the airport before boarding, no one had changed his mind about letting me out of the country. Furthermore, once I was seated, no one had come to drag me off the flight, as had happened to other Iranians on hit lists maintained by the competing security services. As soon as the plane leveled off, still in Iranian airspace, I ordered a scotch. A double.

What is it about Iran and authoritarianism? Why, after so many attempts in the last hundred years or so to advance democratic rule, has Iran always reneged on the promises of people's revolutions and reverted to dictatorship? Perhaps my optimism about the future, my belief that the country is on a circuitous path to an inevitable true democracy, was unfounded after all; perhaps we Iranians will forever simply replace one dictatorship with another; perhaps our very DNA condemns us to living in a society in which the absolute power of the state is accepted as a fact. I thought about it on the long flight from Tehran to New York via Frankfurt. Maybe I was more concerned now because I was about to subject my wife and child to living in an authoritarian state. Given my profession, it would be impossible for me not to be subjected to government scrutiny and perhaps constant observation.

How utterly selfish of me! I had been privileged to live in liberal democracies all my life, first far away from the shah's secret police, who had interrogated some of my student friends and then far from the Islamic Revolution's "guidance"—which was much more about dictation than about suggestion. In my reporting and research trips to Iran prior to the elections of 2009, I had been aware that since I didn't have to live there, whatever discomfort I might feel would always be temporary. I had my escape, my foreign passport and my foreign home, and my stays in Iran were excursions, not a way of life. Although my family and I would still

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