Café Tehran

A journal

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EXIT THEATRE

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Dedicated to Shirin

“Always go too far, because that's where you'll find the truth”
— Albert Camus

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Chapter One

Iran 2013 - 2025

Breaking the Silence

In the summer of 2012, I called my mother in Iran from Norway.

"I want to do something groundbreaking–an all-women performance in Tehran. Are you in?"

Without hesitation, she said, "Of course! But what about your father?"

"Do what you've been doing for the last 40 years–don't tell him anything."

We laughed. And just like that, the plan was set in motion.

The play? The Vagina Monologues by Eve Ensler.

I had performed it across Norway and Germany, but I knew that all my advocacy for women's rights meant nothing if I didn't have the courage to stage it in Iran.

I needed three more women.

First, I reached out to an Iranian actress I had met in Brussels. She was in Tehran at the time and agreed instantly.
"Just tell me when you're coming," she said.

Then, through a friend studying in India, I was introduced to Shirin, a master's student in international law. She was on board, as long as rehearsals didn't interfere with her exams. She even brought another friend into the project.

Now, I just needed permission from the playwright.

I wrote to Eve Ensler, explaining everything. The very next day, she responded—not only with official permission, but with her full support, sending a letter of encouragement and blessings from the global women's movement[1].

With that, I flew to Tehran, and we began rehearsals.

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[1] V-Day is a global activist movement founded by playwright Eve Ensler in 1998 to end violence against women and girls. The movement was inspired by Ensler's groundbreaking play, The Vagina Monologues, which explores women's experiences with sexuality, body image, oppression, and empowerment.
Since its inception, V-Day has used performances of The Vagina Monologues as a tool for awareness, fundraising, and activism. Each year, around February 14th (V-Day), thousands of benefit performances are staged worldwide, with proceeds supporting local anti-violence organizations, rape crisis centers, and shelters.

On February 14, 2013, we performed for our first audience—a group of psychologists and social workers who worked with survivors of violence. Their reaction? Shock.

But our next audience was different. We performed for women who had experienced violence themselves. Unlike the professionals, they embraced the performance without hesitation.
They weren't afraid. They were ready.
The performance was followed by a discussion panel and here too, they were already ahead of the experts.

From there, we performed in private homes, each show followed by deep, unfiltered discussions.

And through it all, my mother was the beating heart of it all.
A fearless, outspoken woman.
A shield for all of us.

Foreigners

We decided to translate a play into Persian, and to get as close as possible to the reality of the language and culture. So we thought living in a rural village might help. A farming family in Gilan[2] province rented us a single room on their property. They owned a cattle farm, and like most northern villages, their yard was filled with chickens and roosters. Some uninvited guests–like jackals and wild cats–also visited us at night.

Our hosts, Kobra Khanom and her husband, Hossein Agha, were the epitome of generosity. They set aside a share of their eggs, milk, cream, and other homemade products for us. If she saw we were deeply engaged in our work, she would bring over a portion of whatever she had cooked. Whenever we

[2] Gilan Province is a lush, green region in northern Iran, located along the Caspian Sea and bordering Azerbaijan. It is known for its humid climate, dense forests, and stunning landscapes, making it one of Iran's most beautiful provinces. The Alborz Mountains run through Gilan, adding to its scenic beauty with misty hills and waterfalls.

thanked her, she would simply say, "It has a smell! I always make extra. You're working! Work is good."

Kobra Khanom's son was an electrical engineering student at Gilan University. His curiosity about our work led him to ask endless questions, and soon, we were having long discussions about writing. He was a talented writer himself. Eventually, he took us to the village library and suggested we hold theater classes for the locals. Before we knew it, we were surrounded by a group of excited teenagers, rehearsing scenes together.

Everything was going well until we started working on a project with some colleagues abroad, which required a high-speed internet connection for video conferences with our colleagues. With the help of the neighbor's son, we set up an internet connection in our home, and everyone in the household shared it.

But things changed after our first Skype call with our foreign colleagues.

Hearing an unfamiliar, strange language in her home, Kobra Khanom became suspicious. Probebly she was thinking, is it possible that we were spies? Are we hiding here? She never confronted us directly, but through her son's questions and her subtle change in behavior and, no matter how much we explained, we sensed her deep concern. So, we left—peacefully.

Leaving her house, however, didn't mean leaving the young theater enthusiasts behind. We continued

working with them, and soon, the passionate stories of Shakespeare and Ibsen made their way into villegers home–including Kobra Khanom and Hossein Agha's.

Over time, she realized that foreign languages weren't just for espionage. When we dedicated our translated play to her and the village–and her son read it to her, she recognized parts of their own lives in it. She sent us a message: with the help of her husband, Hossein Agha, we could build a separate room in the corner of their orchard and live with them.

Perhaps this was the best reward a "foreign" writer could receive.

Marx, Hamlet and a Sandwich

In summer 2015, Shirin and I translated Marx in Soho by Howard Zinn and Hamlet in the Village of Lower Mrdusa by Ivo Breshan into Persian. Throughout the translation, there wasn't a moment when we didn't dream of staging them for the first time in Iran. So we planned to perform both plays, simultaneously, in two different locations in Tehran.
There were plenty of quiet, unofficial theater spaces scattered across Tehran–venues hidden within cultural centers, libraries, and museums. We proposed Marx in Soho for the Ezzatollah Entezami Museum and Hamlet for the Qasr Museum (formerly Qasr Prison).

The Hamlet production had twelve actors, while Marx was a monologue. One of Hamlet's more experienced actresses, who played Ophelia, also prepared to play Marx, with a backup actress on standby.
For Hamlet's censorship review, they sent an actor who knew most of our cast. Over half the performance took place outdoors, in the courtyard

behind the venue. It was midday in June, and it was clear he was suffering in the heat, though he pretended otherwise. The play ran for two hours. At the end, he asked, “What does the key around the neck of waitress symbolize?”
“It symbolizes nothing,” I said. “It’s just the key to her café.”
“To avoid any confusion she should keep it in her pocket.”
With that “problem” solved, he approved our performing permit.

The next morning, Marx’s censorship review was at 11 a.m. at the Entezami Museum. The censor person was a university theater lecturer. He simply said, “Come tomorrow and collect your permit.”
So both plays were approved.
Marx was at 6 p.m. in Entezami, and Hamlet was at 8 p.m. in Qasr. As soon as Marx ended, the lead actor had to race across the city with Shirin to make it in time for Hamlet. For a month, we staged both plays without a single minute of delay.

But the best part came around 9 p.m for us, when Hamlet’s third act began. At that point, Shirin and I had nothing left to do until the play ended. She would rush across the street to buy two falafel sandwiches with sodas, and we’d sit under a tree in the garden, in the dark. The view before us behind the audience, far in the background, was the stage.

We devoured our sandwiches, and we wrapped each other in an embrace and savored the moment.

Bread and Salt

Mr. Bahman is from Kermanshah[3] and a longtime resident of Tehran. For over thirty years, my father had his hair cut at his barbershop. Tucked away in a narrow alley, "Bahman's Barbershop" was more than just a place for haircuts–it was a familiar gathering spot for old friends and loyal customers. Everything about it spoke of its history, from the worn-out chairs to the large framed photo of Gholamreza Takhti, the legendary Iranian wrestler, on the faded wall. I used to go to a different barber, and every time my father saw me, he would shake his head. "Where did you get your hair cut this time? They did a terrible job. Why don't you go to Bahman?" He kept saying it

[3] Kermanshah is a city in western Iran, known for its rich history, diverse culture, and stunning natural landscapes. It has deep historical roots, with archaeological sites like Taq-e Bostan and Bisotun, both of which feature ancient inscriptions and carvings dating back to the Achaemenid and Sassanid eras.
The city is also famous for its vibrant Kurdish culture, delicious cuisine, and traditional music.

until, one day, when it was time for him to get a haircut, we went together.

My father entered with warm greetings, and Mr. Bahman embraced me like a long-lost relative. “Your father always talks about you. I was eager to meet you,” he said.

He cut my father’s hair first, then mine. The entire time, the two of them never ran out of things to talk about–from world politics to complaints about the ever-growing crowds in the neighborhood. When it was time to pay, I watched my father put a ten-thousand-toman bill into Mr. Bahman’s palm for both of us. At the time, the standard price for a haircut was at least thirty thousand per person. I said nothing. Once we left, I asked my father, “Why did you pay so little?”

“I didn’t pay little,” he replied. “Five-thousand-toman each. Like always.”

My father’s like always stretched back decades–to the time of the Allied invasion of Iran in September 1941.

Curious, I dropped him off at home and returned to see Mr. Bahman. Another round of warm greetings, then I asked about the five-thousand-toman payment. That’s when I realized my father had been paying the same rate for years, and Mr. Bahman had never said a word.

With a humble smile, he said, “This isn’t about money. Your father is like my own. We’ve shared

bread and salt. Honestly, I feel embarrassed taking anything from him."

It's been years now since my father passed, but I've become a loyal customer of Bahman's Barbershop. Every month, I return—if only to make up for my father's unpaid dues. Bahman still has no fixed rate for old acquaintances; his earnings come from friendship, community, and the tradition of breaking bread together.

And, as always, we discuss world politics and everything in between.

Bread and salt—it's no small thing.

Note: Sharing bread and salt is an ancient custom, prevalent in the Middle East as well as parts of Europe. The act of eating together signifies a bond between two sides, expressing gratitude, friendship, and trust.

Moonlight Drips

In 2019, we had no public space for rehearsals or performances. We didn't want to involve anyone outside our group—everyone working with us knew exactly what they were risking. So we met in the four walls of our homes, planning, rehearsing, dreaming up the next project.

Shirin adapted The Teachers, a play by Mohsen Yalfani, originally staged in 1970 by Saeed Soltanpour and the Iranian Theater Association. That production was swiftly shut down, and both the playwright and director were imprisoned. In Shirin's version, time blurred—you could see the 1970s, but you could feel 2019. Teachers were organizing, their protests gaining strength across the country.

We decided to film The Teachers inside our home. For three months, we rehearsed in our living room, and when the time came, we put up plasterboards, transforming the space into a makeshift television studio for a tele-theater production.

My mother, who lived with us, had suffered a stroke a few years earlier. She could no longer walk unassisted and spent most of the day lying in her room. But she had always been a fierce, passionate woman, and the presence of actors, the voices, the movement–it brought her to life.

I had given her a copy of the script so she could follow along, to feel part of it. She struggled to read, but she pretended it was easy. Years earlier, she had been one of the first members of the Exit theater group in Iran, rehearsing in this very house with Shirin and the others. Now, she didn't want anyone to see her in her weakened state. Whenever we checked on her during breaks, she would wave us away, saying, "Don't worry about me–go back to work."

Then, the day of filming arrived. My mother listened in silence from her room.

I stepped inside.
"Are you alright?" I asked.
"Yes, my dear, I'm fine. How's the work going? Are the kids doing well?" she said.

The next scene was about to begin. The male actor entered the house, placed an old vinyl record on the

gramophone, and as the voice of Ahmad Shamloo[4] filled the room, he whispered along with the poetry of Nima Yooshij[5]:

"The moonlight drips
The night-glow shines
No one stirs from sleep, yet
The sorrow of these few dreamers
Breaks within my tearful eyes..."

The female actress (his wife) appeared in the doorway.
Together, they continued, their voices merging with Shamlou's:

"The dawn stands beside me, watching with worry.

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[4] Ahmad Shamloo was a renowned Iranian poet, writer, and journalist, widely regarded as one of the most influential contemporary Persian poets. His works are known for their deep philosophical themes, humanism, and social activism. Shamloo's poetry blends modern free verse with classical Persian literary influences, often addressing themes of freedom, love, and resistance against oppression.
He was also a translator and researcher, contributing significantly to Persian literature through his translations and linguistic studies. One of his major projects was the "Book of the Alley", an extensive collection of Persian colloquial expressions and folklore.

[5] Nima Yooshij was a revolutionary Iranian poet, often credited as the father of modern Persian poetry. Born in 1897 in the village of Yush, he broke away from the rigid structures of classical Persian poetry and introduced a freer, more natural style known as New Poetry. His innovative approach focused on everyday language, varied line lengths, and new rhythmic patterns, marking a major departure from traditional Persian verse.
His most famous poem, "The Myth", published in 1922, was a groundbreaking work that laid the foundation for modern Persian poetry. He later developed his unique poetic style, which influenced generations of poets, including Ahmad Shamloo.

It asks of me–
That with its blessed breath,
I may bring news to these soul-weary people..."

And then–

From the next room, my mother's voice rose.

Soft, trembling, yet certain:

"O delicate-bodied rose,
Which I nurtured with my soul,
And watered with my life–
Alas!
Now it breaks in my arms..."

We froze.

Her voice, fragile yet full of something deeper than memory, filled the space.

No one spoke. No one could.

Our throats tightened.

–Cut.

An Emotional Atmosphere

We got in touch with A.A. through an old friend in Tehran. He's a leftist farmer in Gilan with a passion for poetry and literature—something he eagerly brought up the moment we met.

A.A: I've loved literature since school. I failed every subject, but literature? Fifteen, sixteen. Once, I even got a seventeen.

He had a peculiar insistence on speaking fluent, accent-free Persian, without any traces of Gilaki language. As we reached Rudsar, he pointed to a doctor's office sign.

A.A: This doctor is excellent. He prescribes beyond his own knowledge. There's also a self-taught doctor here—people come from all over Gilan to see him.

He led us toward the place where we'd be staying, reminding us one last time:

A.A: Let me do the talking. I'll create an emotional atmosphere. It's better this way.

We entered a cobblestone alley, at the end of which stood our destination.

M.G. was the principal of an elementary school and a farmer. He had worked the land with his father since childhood, built his own house, and rented out its upper floor to help support his family.

We shook hands—his large, rough palm gripped mine firmly. He cast a shy glance at Shirin.

M.G: Welcome, sister. Please, come in. We're colleagues—no need for formalities.

The place was perfect for us—mountains on one side, the sea on the other, and an educated family as our neighbors. We told him we were looking for a long-term rental. M.G. seemed to like us and agreed to let us stay. We settled on a price verbally.

M.G: Stay as long as you like. Think of this house as your own.

A.A. had successfully created the "emotional atmosphere" he wanted. Every time he passed by, he would visit, eagerly reciting his latest poems. After much insistence, I even convinced him to share his Gilaki poetry with us.

Eleven years have passed since then. Much has changed in this country.

But M.G. has kept his word.

The Flames of the Sun

In a small town in Gilan, Bijan Pira runs a tiny shop with his father, selling Abgoosht (Iranian traditional dish) and homemade pickles. Every time Shirin and I visit his shop, he first warmly greets Shirin and says, "Sister, it's good to see you! This guy (pointing at me) isn't giving you a hard time, is he?" (laughs) "Anyway, if you ever have trouble, we're at your service."

He says all this at lightning speed, then immediately grabs my hand, gives it a firm squeeze, and continues, "Where have you been?"

He doesn't wait for my response. Instead, heads to the back of the shop, where rows of abgoosht pots are lined up. In a plastic basket, he neatly arranges two portions of abgoosht, two bottles of Soda, two whole onions, two deep metal bowls, a metal meat masher, two sets of spoons and forks, and, finally, a fresh Sangak bread on top of everything.

Turning to Shirin, he says, "Sister, I put in extra bread for you. It's fresh—don't buy more today."

I say, "Bijan jan, you're too kind."

He replies, "I gave extra bread for my sister because I know you don't like standing in line for it. Wouldn't want you to be without bread tonight!" (laughs heartily)
When I try to pay, he forces my hand back into my pocket.
"Come on, brother! Bring the dishes back, then we'll talk about money."
At the shop entrance, we chat briefly with his father. The old man looks tired. We say our goodbyes and as we pass I hear him softly humming an old melody, though slightly off-key:
"Tell Mihan[6] that Bijan's[7] blood became a star,
And how it blazed like a flame..."[8]
Shirin hasn't caught on to Bijan's subtle singing. I explain.
Shirin: (surprised) "No way! Bijan?"
We reach home.

[6] Mihan (which also means homeland) is the name of Bijan Jazani's wife.

[7] Bijan Jazani (January 9, 1938 – April 19, 1975), Iranian revolutionary and Marxist theorist. Jazani was one of the founders of the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas.

[8] "The Twilight's Silk" is the name of a revolutionary song published by the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas in 1979, featured in an album titled "The Flames of the Sun". The song carries strong political and revolutionary themes, reflecting the struggles and sacrifices of activists, particularly in the context of resistance movements.

Coffee & Rosa

A young woman was sitting inside a small wooden stall, one of those typical in the north of Iran, surrounded by sacks of dried fruits, with an old espresso machine. She was reading a book while waiting for customers. I stepped in and ordered a coffee. Curious about the antique machine, I asked her about it. She spoke eloquently about her love for different types of coffee, all while skillfully drawing a floral design on the foam of a latte before serving it to me.
Then, we moved on to the real topic–books. She spoke of her deep love for reading and complained about the high prices that made acquiring books difficult.

After that first meeting, visiting her stall became a weekly ritual. I always brought her a book, and warm conversations followed. Over time she, along with her brother and husband, managed to open a small café.

In this modern café, the first thing that caught the eye was the bookshelf. Then, the paintings on the walls. Then, the array of homemade cakes–from Japanese cheesecake to mochi. And finally, the beautifully crafted latte art. Every detail reflected her personal taste and perspective on life.

Poetry nights, book readings, and discussion circles became part of the café's regular events.

We suggested adding a film section where customers could borrow movies for free. She eagerly accepted, and we gifted her a carefully curated collection of DVDs–including our own works such as Rosa Luxemburg, Emma Goldman, The Theachers ...

One day, I gently warned her, "All of this is wonderful, but if word gets out about these gatherings, what if they shut down the café? after all this hard work..."
She cut me off and said with quiet determination:
"I was, I am, I shall be."[9]

[9] ORDER PREVAILS IN BERLIN by Rosa Luxemburg
January 14, 1919

Black Coffee

The best gas heater repairman in our town is Mr. Saber. He wants nothing to do with modern technology. He doesn't have a mobile phone or social media account. To make an appointment, you have to go to his shop and talk to him in person. Then he might come over. He is very picky about his customers. He also charges in cash.
Today we were lucky. At the request of several friends, he came to our house to repair our gas heaters for the winter.

Shirin, as the handy one around the house, was asking him various technical questions. Enjoying her curiousity, Mr. Saber answered them patiently in deatails. I was also helping him with the physical tasks. It turned out that Saber studied law. He and Shirin started discussing civil law, and he said: "I loved civil law, but it had one flaw." Shirin replied: "Our civil law has many flaws." Saber said: "That's true, but I didn't pursue a legal career because I don't accept (he gestured around his head, meaning

clergey) being above the law. I was at the front during the war for 36 months; I was an artillery mechanic. My father was martyred in the war; I could have fit in anywhere, but as long as they (he gestures again around his head) are sitting above, never."

He continued: "Then we were kids, we thought what they say is all true! Well, there was nothing true in what they said. I was in several combats and operations. Oh dear, how many bodies we collected, all young kids... (he fell silent). If it was now, I wouldn't go. He turns to Shirin: 'Miss Shirin, come and look at this! This part is broken. Learn how to fix this yourself next time!'

I asked: "Should I bring some tea?" Saber says: "I am like the Japanese, work first, then rest." An hour later, he hands us the heaters back as good as new. I say: "Thank you for your hard work; shall we have some tea now? There's coffee too." He says: "Oh, I would love to have a cup of coffee, black please."

Red Wine

Mohammad is a young man who runs a poultry shop. He was always polite. Every time we visited his shop, a neatly wrapped book sat on the counter, and if there were no customers, we'd find him lost in its pages.

It was Yalda night[10]. He was closing his shop early. We exchanged a few words, and he wished me a happy Yalda.
I replied, "Till the dawn of Yalda night!"
He smiled and recited:
"O Sayeh! The early risers worry for the sun,

[10] Yaldā Night is the longest and darkest night of the year. In Iran is a time when friends and family gather together to eat, drink and read poetry (especially Hafez) until well after midnight. Fruits and nuts are eaten and pomegranates and watermelons are particularly significant. The red colour in these fruits symbolizes the crimson hues of dawn and the glow of life. Shab-e Yalda was officially added to UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists in December 2022.

Let me unlock this prison of the Yalda night and escape!”[11]

He handed me the bag of chicken. I gave him my debit card and said:
"Yalda without red wine is meaningless. Enjoy the night!”[12]
He chuckled and continued:
"Drink wine, for the sheikh, Hafez, the mufti, and the judge
If you look closely, all are but hypocrites!”[13]
Then he added, “It’s nothing, really. Be my guest!”
I paid and left.

Around five in the evening, my phone rang. It was Mohammad.
“Sir, can you step outside?”
Curious, I went to the door.
He handed me a bag and said, “Here’s your red wine. I made it myself.”
Still in disbelief, I thanked him and asked, “How much?”

[11] Amir Hushang Ebtehaj (25 February 1928 - 10 August 2022), also known by his pen name H. E. Sayeh (Shadow), was an Iranian poet of the 20th century, whose life and work spans many of Iran's political, cultural and literary upheavals.

[12] According to the Islamic law of Iran, the sale and consumption of alcohol are strictly prohibited.

[13] Hafez (1325-1390), was a Persian lyric poet whose collected works are regarded by many Iranians as one of the highest pinnacles of Persian literature.

He smiled and replied, “Just a Hafez reading. Enjoy your night!”

You Never Know

The fear that came with the threat of COVID-19 wasn't just about the disease itself. The pandemic separated people for so long that it felt endless. As we struggled to keep our small artistic circle alive amid both suffocating repression and the political plague surrounding us, suddenly, all ties were severed. At best, we became virtual beings, shadows of ourselves. The simple, everyday human connections–where true artistic expression is born–were cut off. It was as if everything conspired to deepen the silence of death over this land.

In 2020, during one of our online conversations with playwright, Mohsen Yalfani, speaking from Paris, he mentioned his monologue The Girl with the Red Ribbon. In this piece, he had captured the perspective of one of the victims of the 1980s mass executions of political dissidents in Iran, weaving an intensely personal narrative of that era. He emailed me the script.

His deeply human approach was astonishing. Each line conjured vivid images in my mind. Almost instinctively, I imagined Shirin in the role of the young girl. I knew exactly how it had to be performed. Even the editing of visuals and text fell into place naturally.

This was it. This was our escape from the prison of COVID-19.

Shirin embraced the idea immediately. I suggested she rehearse the text directly with Yalfani himself. From that moment on, life stirred back into our days. Every online session with the playwright, every week of intense practice, became the highlight of our existence.

Four months passed in the blink of an eye. Our cinematographer was ready. We had exactly two hours to record the performance while adhering to strict health protocols. In those two hours, three cameras captured every detail of Shirin's performance.

In November 2020, The Girl with the Red Ribbon was released in memory of all the political prisoners massacred in the summer of 1988 in Iran.

Neither of us escaped COVID-19. The virus took hold, and we battled its effects for months. But it never managed to imprison us.

Even now, on certain days, I hear Shirin whispering lines from the play:

"I told her not to think about the clouds–think about what's behind them. Think about a sky filled with stars. About those nights when the light crashes down so fiercely, it feels like the heavens are collapsing over your head. Think about Suha, that star you once told me about–the one near the tail of Ursa Major, second to last... so close to its end."

The Accountant

I first met him during the public performances of Exit Theatre Group in Tehran. Since I always keep an eye on the audience, I quickly noticed that this young man kept coming back, watching our plays night after night.

One day, between two performances, I approached him and, without any introduction, said:

"Look, I know I'm no artistic genius worthy of all the time and money you're spending here. But this is my profession. What about you? Don't you have anything better to do in this city? What is it about this damn play that makes you watch it ten times?"

He was caught off guard—and then burst into laughter.

That's how our friendship began.

A few days later, after one of the shows, he came up to me and said, "If there's anything I can do to help, just let me know."

Not missing a beat, I said, "I was just about to mop the stage floor. If you want, go ahead and do it."

I wanted to see if he was genuinely interested or just looking for a way to hang around. Without hesitation, he asked where the mop was and got to work. I busied myself with other tasks. When he finished, he turned to me and asked, "Anything else?"

I told him, "If you're serious, come back tomorrow before the show at 5 PM. I'll introduce you to the team, and you can talk to Shirin (our assistant director) about how you can help."

The next day, when we arrived at 4:30 PM, he was already standing at the entrance, waiting. I went to soak the mop, but he jumped ahead of me. I said, "Nope, today it’s my turn. You can mop at night."

And just like that, he became part of Exit Theatre Group.

By profession, he’s an accountant and a full-time employee. Slowly, he took over all the financial matters of the group. His precision is remarkable, his

sense of responsibility unmatched. He became both our stage manager and accountant. Soon, he was also in charge of Exit Conversations–planning our discussion series a full year in advance, with a new event every two weeks. A true mastermind.

Then came the day when one of our members was arrested on May Day. Since he was the only full-time employee in the group, he used his official payslip to post bail and got our comrade out.

In all these years of working together, we've never once discussed politics–yet we both know exactly where we stand.

Stand by Me

In 2015, we issued a public call to perform A Memory, A Monologue, A Rant, and A Prayer in solidarity with the global movement to stop violence against women (V- Day). Tehran with this theatrical act of resistance joined sixty-three other locations worldwide. It didn't matter whether the participants were actors or had any prior connection to theatre– what mattered was their commitment to the cause.

On the day we met with volunteers, a young man walked in–around twenty-five, tall and thin, with a light beard. His appearance fit the stereotype of a "hardcore Muslim." When he performed his piece, it was overacted, full of exaggerated gestures and unnecessary theatrics. I told him honestly, "You're putting so much effort into overacting that I can't even focus on the text."

He didn't flinch. Instead, he asked, "Tell me sir what I'm doing wrong, and I'll practice. If I don't fix it by next time, I'll step aside and take on another task." I pointed out his flaws. The next time he performed, every issue had been corrected. He stayed.

From that moment, he became a core member of our group, acting in The Little Black Fish by Samad Behrangi, Hamlet by Ivo Brešan, The Scarecrow by Bahram Beyzai, The Little Prince by Exupéry, The Teachers by Mohsen Yalfani, Honeymoon by Saedi, and more.

On the surface, there was nothing particularly unusual about an actor finding his place in a theatre group. But Exit Group isn't just about theater. Ninety percent of those who collaborate with us do so because of the group's leftist intellectual nature. There's no financial gain—if anything, involvement often brings political risk. And yet, this young man, fully aware of our precarious position, never hesitated. He never engaged in political discussions, never wavered in his responsibilities.

Over time, I realized he was deeply religious—he never missed prayers, never broke his fasts, never drank alcohol. During Muharram, he participated in mourning rituals alongside his family.

A few years later, when we finally began rehearsing The Teachers, he came down with severe chickenpox just a week before filming. He could barely move. I told him I had no choice but to replace him. He simply said, "Okay, sir. But if I can stand on the day of filming, can I still come?"

I agreed, though I knew it wasn't that simple—his illness was contagious. But Shirin, was firm: "If my kid can stand, I'll set up a quarantine room with masks and gloves. He's coming."

The day before filming, he showed up for the final rehearsal, pale, covered in sores, but determined. I whispered to Shirin, "He can't go in front of the camera like this." She said, "I'll talk to the makeup artist. Don't worry about the rest."

Luckily, we were filming at our own home. Shirin prepared a separate room where he could rest between takes. And somehow, with the collective support of the group, he made it through.

I tell this story because I learned from him that a person's worth isn't in their words but in their actions. It's not in their appearance but in their essence. I've shared all this to say that I learned from this young man that a person's character isn't in their words but in their actions. It's not in their appearance but in their essence. And no matter what beliefs he holds for himself, I stand by this man.

Sprouts

She was 17 years old, a high school senior. Petite, intelligent, disciplined, and persistent girl, she joined our group in late September 2014. She was assigned executive responsibilities. She was the assistant stage manager. She tirelessly welcomed every responsibility. At first, she would make her way to the performance venue three days a week despite all the difficulties of commuting and her family's disapproval.

After a while she decided to quit. She wrote to me: "This work is boring for me, and I have decided to quit." But it wasn't long before she returned and wrote: "I realized that theater is the only means that allows me to detach from the outside world and all its concerns for a few hours. I can stop thinking about them and be calm, and this is a feeling I have only experienced here. I realized that theater is turning me as a lazy person into a responsible one. It helps me connect with people I might never have been able to talk to or relate to otherwise ."

Later, she also attended acting exercises and would sneak a peek to see if I was noticing her. I noticed that she was asking actors and the acting coach questions on acting techniques during her free time. She had also memorized the lines for actors' parts. I started casting her for minor roles. From one performance to the next, she learned diligently and progressed. Her performance of the monologue "My Dear Mother" by Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy was her masterpiece.

Later, we put a play by Ivo Breshan on the stage in which she played Hamlet. One night, early in the second act we noticed that something was off. She was in a state of nervous shock. She was trembling, and her fingers were frozen. This was something only we could notice because it all somehow fit the act. I was ready to stop the performance at any moment.

But she stayed on stage and carried on until the end. Her colleagues backstage had burst into tears by the end of the fifth scene. She showed that being professional is not about age and experience, but about commitment to principles and love for the work. She wrote to me: "Theater proved many things to me and made me see that everything can change, and so can I..."

Chapter Two

Poems 2019 - 2025

We Are There

Tear through the skin of the night.
Do not say, I am alone.

We are there,
Right where you know,
Where we have promised to meet again.

Not here, in the darkness–
There, in the light.
Where we can see each other's faces,
Hold each other's hands,
Touch each other's shoulders,
Side by side.

Cry out!
Break the walls of silence.
Do not say, No one is here.

We are there,
Voices joined as one.
Not here, in silence–
There.

Arm yourself–
With love,
With knowledge,
With hope.

Do not say, “My hands are empty”.

We are there,
Waiting for your arrival.
For victory,
For tomorrow.

I'm Happy And Free

You are gone, Navid[14]–
But I know,
There are many like you
In my homeland,
On its restless streets,
Beneath its shattered roofs,
In the grip of its merciless poverty,
Beating within its vast and wounded heart.

You are gone, Navid–
But you left to remind us
That the future
Belongs only to those like you.
With your unwavering voice,
Your untarnished soul,
Your boundless kindness,

[14] Navid Afkari (July 1993 - 12 September 2020) was an Iranian wrestler who was executed on September 12, 2020, by the Iranian government.
His story became a symbol of resistance against oppression, and his last words before execution, reportedly "I'm Happy And Free" continue to resonate with many who fight for justice in Iran.

You stood shoulder to shoulder with truth
Until your last breath–
A warrior's farewell:
"I am happy and free",
You said.

You are gone, Navid–
To show us
How far we are from you.
Each day, we cry your name,
Turn your image into an emblem,
Your farewell into a lament.

But if only–
We could learn from your courage,
And speak the truth:
That we understand nothing.
That we are strangers to the people.
That we have read politics in books,
Shouted slogans for spectacle,
And failed you in action.
That we are selfish,
That we are divided,
That we lie,
That we weep for you with borrowed tears.

If we had truly stood with you,
We would have held your hand in the streets.
Held the hands of the people.

Deathhouse

Piercing voice,
Like a familiar lament,
"Like the cold autumn wind,"
Lingers around your lifeless body.[15]

– You rejected solitude.
So did I.

"I despise your pity, for I am my own solace..."

– You believed in work.
So did I.
You embraced humanity beyond borders, beyond faith.

---

[15] Behnam Mahjoubi was a member of the Gonabadi Dervishes, a persecuted Sufi order in Iran. He was killed in prison on February 16, 2021. On February 22, in accordance with his will, he was laid to rest in his hometown of Hojjatabad, Kerman, as the voices of Hayedeh and Mahasti filled the air.
Hayedeh (1942–1990) and Mahasti (1946–2007) were two of Iran's most iconic singers, known for their powerful voices and songs of longing, love, and resistance.
The Gonabadi Dervishes are followers of the Nimatullahi Gonabadi Sufi Order, one of the largest and most well-known Sufi orders in Iran. Despite their peaceful nature, Gonabadi Dervishes have faced systematic persecution in Iran, especially in recent decades. The Iranian government sees them as a threat to the clerical establishment, accusing them of spreading beliefs that challenge state-sponsored religious ideology.

So did I.

"This is a bitter elegy..."

– You longed for peace and justice.
So did I.

"My roots have turned black..."

– They killed you in prison.
They killed my comrades too.
You stood against oppression.
So did they.

"But I will stand tall,"
"I will live on in my songs."

– Your friends will rise.
So will mine.
We will stand, side by side.
We will not kneel.
Together, we rise–free and equal.

Excavating a Dream

A safe mine.
Fresh air.
A child's laughter.
A wife at ease.
A warm meal on the table.
A fair wage.
A quiet life.

Insurance, retirement,
Eight-hour shifts,
A union,
A contract that lasts.

A trip up north–
The sea, the sea, the sea.
Salt on the breeze,
Waves against his feet,
A holiday without worry.

The first of autumn,
A schoolbag, a classroom,

A future bright with promise.

And then–
In a flash, it all passed before his eyes.

The miner's dream.
A heartbeat before the blast[16].

[16] The Tabas coal mine explosion was the deadliest mining accident in Iran, occurring on September 21, 2024. The incident, caused by a methane gas leak, led to an explosion in Block C of the mine. At the time of the explosion, more than 17 workers were present at the site. The accident took place around 9:00 PM.

Seashell

Comrade!
When you step into the streets today,
fill your pockets with seashells.

Wherever they seize you,
scatter a handful on the ground.

For every comrade struck by bullets,
press seashells to their wounds.

For every fallen friend,
place a shell in their hand.

And when you cry out in unity,
cast seashells into the sky.

Seashells–
carry the scent of the sea.
Seashells–
hold the boundless horizon of tomorrow.

Seashells–
mark the unmarked graves of comrades[17].

[17] In Khavaran*, sometimes, where a comrade is believed to be buried, seashells are found–perhaps placed there by a mother, or by others who loved them, as a silent marker of remembrance.

* Khavaran is a burial site on the outskirts of Tehran, Iran, where victims of state executions–political prisoners–were secretly buried. The site is most notably associated with the 1988 mass executions of political prisoners in Iran, during which thousands of members of opposition groups were executed following summary trials. For decades, families of the victims, human rights activists, and dissidents have visited Khavaran to mourn and mark the graves of their loved ones. However, the Iranian government has consistently attempted to erase traces of the executions, including leveling parts of the site and preventing public gatherings. Despite this, families–especially the Mothers of Khavaran–have continued to place markers such as flowers, stones, and seashells on the unmarked graves.

Phalangist

We know you.
Back then,
Your shirt hung loose over your pants,
You never bathed,
Never shaved,
A scowl carved into your face,
An empty mind,
A clenched fist.
You came–
Bringing terror.
We spoke.
You answered with brass knuckles.
Pathetic.
We called you Phalangist.
You pulled a gun.
You killed.
You killed.
You killed.
And now–
You've learned to act.
You slip into new roles,

Shave clean,
Bathe often,
Dress well,
Win awards,
Smile for the cameras.
But beneath the suit,
Beneath the stage lights,
Beneath the charm–
You are still a Phalangist.
And still,
You kill.
We know you.

December Poem

The poem must be written on a December evening
When the temperature is below zero
But the snow does not fall
There is no electricity
No gas
Your lungs wheeze from breathing in the filth
Everything is shut down
People are fed up
Cursing in every corner
And
In the last moments of your phone's battery
You listen to Vocalise
As if everything depends
On these final minutes
What a magnificent moment it is
To be in the depths of filth
And to find solace in Rachmaninoff
Poets explore filth
And always, in its depths
They find a gem
To remind us

That life is not just one thing
Filth is not everything
There is poetry, there is music, there is love
There is always a flicker of light
A candle that is passed from hand to hand
Across the city
So that in darkness and cold
Something remains–
So that people do not grow numb
So that a note is played–
So that people do not grow silent
So they can whisper to one another:
"Did you see?"
"Did you hear?"
"Such courage!"
Poetry exists to capture these moments
For if tomorrow brings light
How terrifying it would be
If only the corpses bear witness to what went on.

His Gaze

You, through Deleuze's eyes,
Have reached the belief in rhizome.

He, through his gaze,
Sees only the longing of his child.

You, sip your drink with Foucault
And play the logic game with Žižek.

He, in the pouring rain,
Beside a half-burnt stove,
Learns the anthem of unity.

You, remembering Bijan[18], Taqi[19], and Mostafa[20],

---

[18] Bijan Jazani (January 9, 1938 - April 19, 1975), Iranian revolutionary and a Marxist theorist, he is a significant figure among modern Iranian Socialist intellectuals. Jazani was one of the founders of the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas.

[19] Taghi Shahram was an Iranian Marxist revolutionary (1947-1980)

[20] Mostafa Shoaiyan (March 1, 1936 - February 4 , 1976) was an Iranian revolutionary, Marxist, urban guerrilla, author of a number of theoretical works.

Rise the battle in your heart.

He, in the struggle of a weary day,
Chasing a morsel of bread,
Cries out, "Damn this life!”[21]

You, at the crossroads of seeking justice,
Return to the interpretation of Capital[22].

He, on the wall of his cell,
Paints his daughter’s smile
As a gift to the future.

[21] "Damn this life" - A phrase by Esmail Bakhshi, a labor activist and representative of the Independent Workers Council in the Haft-Tappeh Workers Syndicate.
He played a role in organizing the Haft-Tappeh workers protests against privatization and advocated for collective management.

[22] Das Kapital by Karl Marx

VERDICT

The verdicts have been issued:

prison–20 years.
Prison–10 years.
Prison–5 years.

Years have lost their meaning.
Here, everyone is sentenced.
You, too, are imprisoned.

Perhaps the lucky ones,
died for freedom,
with bullets in their eyes,
with blows to their heads,
under torture,
with a pill in their grief.

They have issued my sentence, too.
Execution.

“Don't tell mum!”[23]

[23] Mohammad Mehdi Karami (1 November 2001 – 7 January 2023) a 21-year-old Iranian karate champion executed for his involvement in the Mahsa Amini protests. In his final call tells to his father: “Don't tell mum I'm being executed”.

Head Trauma

A violent blow to my head[24].
I am in the hospital.
Cold water in my both ears.
My eyes do not move.
A thin tube down to my throat.
I do not cough.
A pinch on my nose.
A strike to my forehead.
A beam of light into my eyes.
Nothing.
They disconnect me from the ventilator.
I do not breathe.
Brain death.

A violent blow to my head.
“Where?”

[24] Armita Geravand (April 6, 2006 – October 28, 2023) was an Iranian schoolgirl who lost consciousness on October 1, 2023, after suffering a head injury in the Tehran metro inflicted by morality police because of her outfit. She was hospitalized due to a brain hemorrhage and skull bleeding, fell into a coma, and passed away after 28 days. She was an 11th-grade art school student in Tehran.

In the subway.
“Who are you?”
A student.
“Why?”
For "the law of their faith."
They tell my mother: Stay silent!
They tell my father: Stay silent!

I tell you:
If silence
Leads to an explosion–
Then be silent.

Numbing the Pain

We numb the pain.
One in the workshop,
One in the school,
One in the street,
One in the metro,
One in the prison[25].

After days, weeks, months, years–
Sleepless nights,
Fever,
Shivers,
Sweat.

For having nothing,
No freedom,
No comfort,

[25] Toumaj Salehi, the imprisoned rap singer from Evin Prison in Tehran: "After six months of reporting tooth pain, after weeks of sleepless nights, fever, chills, and sweating from the pain, with no tools available, I performed a root canal on myself using a mask wire and salt, enduring unbearable pain." October 4, 2023

No justice.

With wire,
With salt,
With masks,
With rage,
With blood,

We numb the pain.
And we know–
A rotten tooth,
Sooner or later,
Must be pulled.

Freedom

Fourteen Years? No, Eighteen Years–
I think of you
in narrow hallways,
in the presence of silent, lightless walls.

Eighteen years? No, twenty years–
I wait for you
when the sun, at rest,
leans against my face,
when I mock my own pain.

Twenty years? No, thirty years–
I stare at you
through the tiniest crack in the wall,
the one that promises collapse.

Thirty years? No, fifty years–
with your scent,
in every spring,
I am young again.

Fifty years? No, a hundred years–
you remain the same.
Time will never change you.

Freedom…

No

A woman shouted, "No."
A "man" shouted back, "Whore."
Women shouted, "No."
And "men" shouted back, "Whores."

Women, cloaked in the garb of "whoredom,"
sang the anthem of "No" louder with the wind.

The "men" of the tribe of violation,
seed of ignorance,
chieftains of dark history,
banned "No" in their laws.

Yet in every spring, the flower of “No” bloomed everywhere.
Lovers gifted each other the branch of "No."
"No" became the first word on the tongues of newborns,
"No" became the last message on the lips of the condemned,
"No" became the steadfast poem of the free,
"No" became the heroic stand of the oppressed.

"No" was the secret name of woman.

R.I.P

“Rest in Peace”

I am writing.

For the death of the teenage son of a colleague,

For the neighbor's wife,

For family,

For a friend,

For the worker who committed suicide,

For the artist who was murdered,

For the ones who ressisted in the street demonstrations,

And were condemned to death.

And I drink coffee.

And I distract myself by focusing on unrelated topics.

And I try not to argue with anyone for no good reason.

And I try to resolve past resentments.

And I try to be kind.

And I try to be sincere.

And I hold the scream in my chest,

To use it again,

In the right place,

In the right time,

When our sorrows unite.

I try to extend my hand of friendship to those who are not enemies.

Because I don't know

Tomorrow when I wake up

Who will remain?

And whose memory should I honor?

Is it possible to sail alone in the sea?

Is it possible to remain alone with hope?

Can freedom be celebrated alone?

Falafel Sandwich

I am hungry[26]
I have been hungry for two days
I sell myself
I am on sale
To three men
I sell myself
For a falafel sandwich
I sell cheaply

I am hungry
I have been hungry for two days
I have no place
In an empty grave
I sell myself
The grave of your honor
The grave of your justice
The grave of your conscience

[26] "A homeless woman who was extremely hungry went into a dark grave in exchange for a falafel sandwich and surrendered herself to three men." December 17, 2019 - Rokna News and Information Agency

The grave of your society
I sell you
Cheaply
I am on sale
For a falafel sandwich

To Vladimir Mayakovsky

“
In this life
it's not difficult to die.
To make life
is more difficult by far.”[27]
You said

But
what can one say
when
the very essence of death
is a song of life here?
When the echo of the call to join the 'river'
is the end of the terror of the executioner
with the last breaths of existence
and the first brick of life's construction.

when death
is the only right of your own 'choice'
when death

[27] To Sergei Esenin by Vladimir Mayakovsky

is the last arrow of 'justice'
on the triggers of tomorrow
roaring...

Vladimir!
Your death is an end
but here
death
is the beginning
and
continuation
of life
until the final battle.

Revenge

I don't want water
I don't want a home
I will never be sick
I am not hungry
I will not fall in love
I do not love my child
I have given you everything
Water
Health
Bread
Love
Child
But I have kept one thing for myself
Anger
For the day of revenge

Execution

They execute us every day
Every day we are thrown in mass graves
Every day our mothers pull out pieces of our clothes from unmarked graves

We are hungry every day
Every day we search for bread
Like an army in the garbage

We are beaten every day
When they force us to put hijab on our heads
and we refuse to comply

We are collectively arrested
They put us in a line every day

We are raped
In safe houses, in dark corridors, in classrooms, in broad daylight every day

We repeat history every day
Murder
Poverty

Oppression
Assault

We repeat our condemnation every day
Because we do not know
We are executed together every day

Love Reborn

I speak of you,
still standing strong,
with your childlike laughter
and kind, knowing eyes.

I speak of you,
of how gracefully
you veil your sorrow
while offering others hope–
as if the weight of your own loss
were not already enough,
you have become their refuge.

For a moment of their joy,
you weave plans.
For a single smile,
you search the whole city,
as if you desired nothing for yourself.

Who was it that once
sang of love in vain–

Khosrow and Shirin[28],
Bijan and Manijeh[29],
Romeo and Juliet[30]?

You are the story of a comrade's love,
a love reborn for a new generation.

[28] Love story from Khamseh by Nizami Ganjavi

[29] Love story from Shahnameh by Ferdowsi Tousi

[30] Love Story by William Shakespeare

Chapter Three

Tehran 1978 - 1984

Wedding

When my aunt was getting married, I was given the important task of scattering rose petals in front of the bride and groom. The other children in the family also had their roles alongside them. It felt as though, next to the two main figures of the ceremony, the children were the most significant participants.

At that time, my aunt was an English teacher, and as children, we didn't fully understand why we were so important to her on one of the most significant days of her life.

As the years passed, she demonstrated her deep belief in the importance of children in the way she raised her own. She always stood by her children, defending them in any situation. Unlike other family members, who would often scold their own kids with a sense of politeness that made the children feel embarrassed, my aunt took a completely different approach. She believed that children had the right to be mischievous, to play, and to make a mess. When

the adults objected, she would defend the children firmly, saying: “A child cannot just sit quietly in a corner with a bow tie, talking about politics or philosophy. A child’s role is to be playful.”

Personally, I had never seen such a level of respect for children in any Iranian family. It was only years later, in a country like Norway, that I truly understood how children's rights and their natural behavior were an inherent part of their social rights.

For her wedding, they had a special brown velvet suit made for me, and the other girls were dressed in matching dresses. My aunt and I practiced my role for days to make sure my small steps didn’t fall behind the others. On the big day, I truly believed that one of the most important tasks in the ceremony rested on my shoulders–if I didn’t guide the bride and groom properly, everything would fall apart.

I carried out my duty with care, and as soon as I finished, I found the first child my age and spent the rest of the evening wrestling in my velvet suit.

Love 1

When I was 12, right after my June exams in school, my parents put me on a plane and sent me alone to Switzerland. At Zurich airport, a blond young man named Steve picked me up and took me to the place where I was to stay for next three months. He showed me around and told me to get ready for dinner so he could introduce me to the others. Then, he left me in a wooden house in the middle of the forest and went on his way.

Not even half an hour had passed before I wandered outside and got lost in the dark, foggy forest–on my very first night. I was on the verge of panic when Steve found me. The moment I saw him, I threw myself into his arms and burst into tears. He comforted me, and I quickly calmed down. From that night on, I felt a special attachment to him. Steve took me to the main center of our residence, a place filled with everything imaginable–restaurants, a disco, a game room, classrooms–bustling with kids my age from all over the world. Suddenly, I found myself in a thrilling new world, and all my earlier

worries faded away. He introduced me to my group: two Americans, one Spanish, and one Kuwaiti. I soon learned that the wooden house was where the five of us lived and that Steve was our group leader. We ate together, played sports, traveled, and spent nearly every moment as a team.

One of the American boys, Mike, started teasing me from day one. At first, feeling like an outsider, I ignored him. But by the end of the first week, I realized he wasn't going to stop. Mike, like any classic bully, was looking for someone to pick on. Based on my experience from school back home, I knew exactly how to handle him. One foggy afternoon, I caught Mike alone in the forest and gave him such a beating that he forgot all about his bullying tendencies. To his credit, though, he wasn't a sore loser–he never told Steve.

Everything was going well in Switzerland–until, unfortunately, I fell in love. With whom? An American girl named Janet, a group leader just like Steve and the same age as him. But love doesn't follow logic. Though she towered over me, I imagined us walking hand in hand through the forest, laughing and talking. The problem was, I wasn't just daydreaming–I was determined to find a way to get close to her.

Word spread quickly, and soon everyone knew about my infatuation. Naturally, Mike seized the new opportunity to tease me. But I was so caught up in my own world that I had no patience for his antics.

Then, one night at the disco, while everyone—including Janet—was dancing, my groupmates started egging me on. "If you've got the guts, go ask Janet to dance," they dared me.

I hadn't planned for this. My heart was pounding. In my mind, the entire scene turned into a slow-motion sequence from They Shoot Horses, Don't They? by Sydney Pollack.

Suddenly, the music slowed down. I thought, It's now or never.

I walked up to Janet and asked, "Would you like to dance with me?"

She gave me a warm smile and said, "Yes, sure!"

I took her hand and led her to the dance floor. Wrapping my arms around her waist, we swayed to the music. With each turn, I stole glances at Mike and the others, feeling triumphant. When the dance ended, I kissed Janet's hand and said, "Thank you!" She smiled and replied, "You are a gentleman," then kissed my cheek. I felt my heart melt.

And just like that, as Janet left the dance floor, my feelings for her disappeared too. I spent the rest of the night happily playing foosball.

Love 2

Leili and I were the same age, and under the guise of studying, we did everything but. We spent long hours in each other's homes, exploring everything from our first stolen kisses to the meaning of “no” – that boundary she always set, and I too often tried to cross.

I, of course, was on a mission – a self-declared messenger of my freshly lit dreams for a socialist Iran. I used our closeness as a stage, never missing a chance to turn affection into propaganda.

We were at that threshold – no longer children, not yet adults – when thoughts of the future begin to take root. Whenever she’d ask, “What will we do after high school?” I’d dodge the question with dark poetry. I’d recite that line by Houshang Ebtehaj, “It’s late, Gallia – this is no time for kisses or love poems,” and she would collapse into my arms, sobbing. That, in my mind, was revolutionary work. I dreamed of us painting slogans on alley walls, selling underground newspapers, marching side by side –

and when the baton-wielding thugs came, I'd stand in front of her like a shield.

But these were only the daydreams of a boy. They withered each time her monarchist father played his hand – always through her. Whenever things got too real, she'd parrot his lines: the revolution is a joke, the people are sheep, the Shah is brilliant, and it's all the fault of foreign plots. And so, the only victories I claimed were the brief moments I made her cry – a kind of emotional triumph over the royalists in our street. I held on to those moments as if they were medals.

Then, one night, I realized my true enemy wasn't Leili. It was her damn father – and all the monarchist ghosts in that neighborhood. That night, I made my move. Armed with my red marker, I crept to their pristine marble wall and poured my heart out in sweeping nastaliq. Every inch of space I filled – with words, with symbols of revolution: the hammer, the sickle, the star.

The next day, after school, Leili rang our bell. I stood tall, waiting for her to marvel at my rebellious masterpiece. But instead, she stepped in with a bucket of soapy water and a rag. Her first words were: "Come on. My father says we have to clean the wall. Together." The certainty in her voice left no room for protest. And so we went. For hours we scrubbed, until the white marble gleamed, spotless once more.

When we were done, we collapsed into each other's arms, exhausted. I never made her cry again. I never uttered another word of politics to her.
Instead of Ebtehaj's mournful 'Gallia', I recited Shamloo:
"Your lips, fine as poetry,
Turn the fiercest kisses
Into a gentleness so deep
That even a beast in a cave
Could rise to become human."

She'd melt inside. And smile.

Love 3

Falling in love in the late ’70s and early ’80s had its own universe – especially for a generation just stepping into adolescence in those turbulent years. For me, the very idea of love began around the age of 12 or 13, when I read Jean-Christophe by Romain Rolland. I imagined women as powerful, unreachable beings – full of mystery, and commanding awe.

A little later, when I found my way into the circles of political activists, I met a comrade – a girl – who, from the very start, handed me a stack of books with kindness in her eyes. I remember those books clearly, and even the scent of the room where she gave them to me. Do you remember the smell of books from that era? If you happen to find one today, it still carries that same scent – the aroma of longing and awakening.

I still have a few of those books on my shelf. Sometimes, I open them just to inhale that fragrance – and I’m hurled back through time. How Man Became a Giant, Dalgha, Critique of Political Economy, The Mortal Voice, Thirty Years of History,

On Tactics... I devoured that long, feverish reading list with such hunger – just to finish quickly and return the books, to see her again. Her face is blurry now in my memory, but her voice – that youthful ring – still echoes clearly.

Later, I found myself again beside fierce, female comrades at street corners – their fire burned hotter than mine. They shouted forbidden truths with fearless conviction. Standing next to them made me feel strong. I fell for one of them. When she raised her voice to cry out the title of her underground paper, I raised mine to respond. At the intersection, we sang a proud duet from the opera of our revolution-born generation. We'd steal glances. Exchange a smile. And that was enough. We both knew: this was how we made love – our kind of love – and it would go no further than this political chorus.

Later still, love took on a new meaning – the ones who left in love, and the ones who stayed to preserve the memory of that love.

And now, for no clear reason, whenever I hear the poem by Shamloo:

“Become a cry –
so the rain may fall,
or else –
be the dead!”

I remember that duet at the crossroads.

And my heart races.

Brave

One day, my mother took my hand and led me to Tehran University – she wanted to see a photo exhibition at the Faculty of Engineering. But fate had other plans. That very day, the Shah's Imperial Guard attacked the campus.

I still remember the soldiers – their rifles, the sharp hiss of tear gas, the unbearable sting in my eyes. But more vividly than anything: the terrified face of my mother, gripping my hand tightly as we ran through chaos. She kept whispering, "It's nothing, don't be scared." But I knew – something frightening was happening. Wanting to ease her fear, I replied, "I'm not scared. I'm okay." I tried hard not to cry, but the tears came anyway – not ordinary tears, but the kind that burn, that wrench.

"I'm not crying," I told her. "My eyes just sting a little."

She said, "It'll pass. I'll take you to wash your face."

The crack of gunfire echoed from a little further away.

We fell silent. She held me close. We crouched behind a low wall.

That was the first time I heard the chant: “Unity, Struggle, Victory.”
When things calmed, we finally made it to the Faculty’s restroom – I still remember the elegance of the calligraphy above the entrance. I washed my face and we went to the exhibition.
Among the photographs, my mother paused in front of one. She stared at it for a long time.
“Who is that?” I asked.
She said, “That’s our [31]‘Shojaa’ – the brave one. He was our friend from Rasht. His mother’s treasure. Brilliant. He came first in the university entrance exams.”
The fear I’d seen in her eyes earlier had transformed into pride.
Curious, I asked, “What happened to him?”
She said, “These bastards killed him.”
I pointed outside, shocked. “Here?”
“No,” she said. “In Siahkal. In Lahijan – where we go swimming, remember? Where we buy cookies.”
And then it all made sense – the “bastards” were the ones who scared my mother, made my eyes burn, and killed the ones who came first in class.
On the way home, she told me, “Don’t tell your father what happened today. He’ll be upset.”

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[31] Shojaa Moshayedi was born in 1942 in Rasht. In 1961, he ranked at the top of the national university entrance exams and entered Tehran Polytechnic, where he graduated in electrical engineering in 1965. During his studies, he was a student representative in campus affairs. In 1967, he joined the political movement led by Bijan Jazani. He was arrested on February 1, 1971, and executed by firing squad on March 17, 1971, in Chitgar, Tehran.

I asked, “Nothing at all?”
She said, “Just say we went to the photo exhibition at the Engineering Faculty.”
I asked, “Can I tell him about that top student – your friend?”
She said, “Yes.”
I asked, “Can we get cookies on the way?”
She said, “Of course, my love,” and burst out laughing.

My Nani

My nani was a woman from a village in province Khorasan–the first person who told me love stories and painted vivid images of people's lives.

Her presence in our family was essential. Both my parents were government employees; my mother was continuing her higher education alongside her job, and my father, in addition to his government position, worked in two or three private companies in the afternoons. Since I was an only child, someone had to look after me.

But nani's job was not just about cooking and feeding me. She was my serious playmate in two-player soccer, wrestling, and hide-and-seek. Every day after school, we played together. Once, while playing hide-and-seek, she twisted her finger so badly that she had to keep it bandaged for days. Eventually, my mother noticed, but she firmly defended me: the poor child is alone; if he doesn't play, he'll go mad. He hasn't done anything wrong!

On nights when I would secretly sneak into her room out of childhood fears, she would tell me about her

love for her late husband, Ali Akbar, who had passed away years ago. She recounted how Ali Akbar would follow her on horseback just to carry the water bucket she drew from the well. Despite her fear that her older brother might catch them together–something she said would cause blood to be spilled–she waited for him every day and took the risk. The well was their meeting place. Until one day, Ali Akbar asked for her permission to propose. In response, she simply said: Ali Akbar, take me and end my suffering!
Her love stories always ended in tears. No matter how much I insisted that she continue, she would fall silent. Gently, she would wipe her tears with the floral handkerchief she always kept in her pocket and whisper: Nematnom... (I can't.)

She also spoke about her arduous work on the land and how they never had enough money to make ends meet. Ali-Akbar had to go to the city for most of the year to work as a laborer and earn their livelihood. Of the nine children she had given birth to, only two had survived–her daughter, Kabotar, and her son, Ali-Asghar.
Being ever-curious, I would insist that she recount the story of each child's death. What struck me as strange was that, unlike when she told romantic stories about Ali-Akbar and broke into tears, she remained completely composed and simply said, "God didn't will it."

Sometimes, her behavior was amusing. For example, even as a child, I noticed that whenever the television was on, she would put on her chador (traditional veil) and cover herself. One day, I asked her, Naneh-jan, why do you cover yourself? She replied very seriously: In front of strange men... Astaghfurullah! (and she pointed at the television). It turned out that nani thought that just as we could see the people on TV, they could see us too! For days, I tried to explain to her that this wasn't the case, but she wouldn't believe me. Eventually, I unscrewed the back of the television with a screwdriver to show her that no one was inside. She was finally convinced and kept repeating: God forgive me! What kind of marvel is this?

During the 1979 revolution and student protests, nani was more worried about me than anyone else. Every day, I excitedly told her about the events, unaware of how anxious she was. One day, she even went to my school and asked the principal: Didn't I entrust my child to you? How does he end up in the streets? She was so upset that even my parents couldn't calm her down. In the end, she brought out the Quran and made me swear that I wouldn't join the protests again.

As I grew older, I bought a poster of Khosrow Golesorkhi[32] from a vendor near the University of Tehran. The poster featured a quote:
"Your chest was struck by the deep, fatal wound of the enemy,
Yet, oh standing cypress, you did not fall.
It is your way to die standing."
As I was putting up the poster in my room, nani walked in and curiously asked, Who is this? I told her the story of Golesorkhi. She sighed and said, May God, for the sake of the Five Holy Ones, rid the world of foreigners.
I replied, Naneh-jan, I want to be like him too.
Alarmed, she said, What are you up to now? Don't cause trouble!
I said, No, I just want a world where you don't have to work for us for years, where you can be with Kabutar and Ali-Asghar, where Ali Akbar doesn't have to leave for the city every year and leave you alone, where your children don't die, where you can be educated.

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[32] Khosrow Golesorkhi was an Iranian poet, journalist, and political activist known for his Marxist and revolutionary views. Born in 1944, he became a prominent intellectual figure in Iran, advocating for social justice and resistance against the monarchy during the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. His poetry often reflected themes of struggle, resistance, and the plight of the oppressed.
In 1973, Golesorkhi was arrested along with a group accused of plotting to kidnap the Shah's son. During his trial, he delivered a famous speech in defense of Marxist ideology and the working class, openly condemning the regime. Despite the theatrical nature of the trial, he remained steadfast in his beliefs. He was ultimately sentenced to death and executed by firing squad in 1974.
Golesorkhi remains a symbol of resistance in Iranian history.

She looked at me, sighed deeply, The past is the past. You are like a son to me. Where could be better than being with a son like you? Then she pulled me into an embrace and kissed me firmly.

The First Man

"Hello, First Man!" – this was the greeting that our neighborhood cobbler, Fahim Agha, an asylum seeker from Afghanistan, would say every time we met.

In the beginning, his workspace was no more than a small box under the shade of a tree. When our school shoes got torn from too much football, he would cheerfully fix them within minutes, charging only what we could afford from our pocket money. He always had a surprising solution for every problem. He would save us from the noise and scolding at home: "You've only had those shoes for a month!"

Whether you were his customer or not, if your eyes met his, Fahim would smile and offer a blessing for your journey. As I grew older, I would sit and chat with him while waiting for my shoes. He'd pour me tea and talk about Herat, the city of his birth in Afghanistan–about its beauty, his family, the war, his displacement, and the master cobbler to whom he owed his craft.

Years later, he had built himself a small cobbler's kiosk under the same tree. The hair at his temples had turned white, but his manner hadn't changed a bit.

Fahim gradually became a landmark of our neighborhood. We started using his Dari phrases and began to notice the beauty of the language. Among us locals, when we met, we would greet each other with, "How are you, First Man?" We called money paisa, said metanam instead of "I can," and used beteh instead of "give." All of this was Fahim's influence.

Fahim was my first Afghan friend. With his simplicity, kindness, and mastery of his trade, he stayed in my memory even after I became a migrant myself in different countries. He taught us the right way to live with different cultures and people.

Fahim, the First Man.

Shostakovich Symphony No. 7

1

It was around noon. My friend Javid and I were shouting ourselves hoarse:
"The people of Sanandaj[33], under bombardment by Phantom jets and the brutal massacre of the army, are creating a legend."

We screamed with such energy as if the fate of the war depended on our voices. In the eyes of passersby, I searched for empathy and support, but

[33] Sanandaj is a city in the Kurdistan province of Iran, serving as capital of the province, the county, and the district. With a population of 414,069, it is the second largest Kurdish and 23rd largest city overall in Iran.
Some ancient works found in this historic city date back to 6000 years ago.
About 400 years ago Sanandaj was the centre of Ardalan rule the longest and most powerful local government of Kurds in history. Some very picturesque and historic monuments of the past history of this city have been preserved. Sanandaj has a long history of peaceful coexistence of different religions and deep-rooted cultural tolerance. The city has an area of about 2906 Km2 and is located in the middle reaches of Zagros mountains and plains in western Iran. Sanandaj is an immigrant city and most of its population is in the service sector. In addition handicrafts - including the making of musical instruments - and in villages around the city livestock and crop production are prevalent.

it seemed the shrill voices of two newly pubescent teenagers scared them off more than piqued their curiosity.

After we finished, I parted ways with Javid and went to the house of a friend who lived nearby. He had just returned to Iran after finishing his studies at a university in Moscow.

We talked about the horrifying events that were unfolding. At one point, he got up, pulled a vinyl record from his shelf, carefully cleaned it, and placed it on his gramophone.

It was Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 – the first movement: the German invasion of the Soviet Union - the siege of Leningrad.

The images that came to my mind as I listened to this movement were of the bombings of the cities of Sanandaj, Saqqez, Baneh, and Mariwan. The deaths of defenseless civilians. The same people who not long ago had courageously celebrated the fall of the Shah's regime with their years of resistance and struggle.

2

That first movement haunted me–

a martial dirge, marching alongside me in every street, echoing our daily stand against a new kind of fascism.

Later, when I fell deeper into art, I sought out Shostakovich himself.
I learned he was thirty-five when he wrote this symphony–
in a city gasping under fire and famine,
working through the nights, sculpting sound from sorrow,
summoning from the rubble a music strong enough to hold his people together.
By the time he fled to Kuibyshev (Samara), six hundred thousand had already perished.
And still he composed.
By the time he boarded the train, the third movement was complete.
He was running from ruin, but carrying with him the pulse of a city that would not die.
That became my compass.
Whenever my own path faltered–when doubt whispered its weary tune–
I remembered him.
No sighs. No artistic self-pity.
Only resolve.
That first movement remains my lesson:
what it means to make art in a country under siege.

3

The symphony stretches seventy-eight minutes–

with that first movement alone a thunderous half hour.
It demands an orchestra vast as grief itself:
seven trumpets, six trombones, two harps, a piano,
three kettledrums, and a storm of other instruments.
Because sorrow needs more than strings. Resistance needs volume.
Its first public performance was on March 5, 1942,
in a bunker in Kuibyshev, where the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra—exiled like the composer—played under the baton of Samuel Samosud.
But the sacred moment came months later,
on August 9, 1942,
when, in Leningrad itself—
where people were too starved to stand—
an orchestra, barely breathing, gathered and played.
They played.
And the symphony became not just sound, but symbol—
of defiance, of mourning,
of twenty-seven million Soviet lives swallowed by war.
To this day, that music rises
over the mass graves in what is now Saint Petersburg —
a requiem that refuses to fade.
Shostakovich's Seventh is all the art lessons I will ever need.
He once said:

"My Seventh Symphony is an echo of the terrible year 1941. I dedicate it to our war with fascism, to our coming victory, and to my city – Leningrad."

Comrade in the Fire

In 1980, we had two main duties:
To study and to debate.
Each morning, before school, at six-thirty sharp, we gathered under a tree in Bagh-e Ferdows park, quizzing each other on the political lessons we'd read– testing our minds, sharpening our tongues.
By evening, we'd rush to our usual haunt:
in front of Tehran University.
Between deciphering labor movements, grappling with dense philosophies, and racing to catch the ever-changing tides of daily politics, school itself felt like a distraction– a joke, almost.
We were teenagers, but the revolution had aged us overnight.
One day we rode the top deck of those old double-decker buses, giggling about girls.
The next, we sat in the same seats, draped in olive-green Mao-style uniforms, passing around books and preaching world revolution.

One day, we had plans to meet some comrades from Alborz High School.
Where else but in front of the university gates?
As soon as we gathered, the debate erupted:
“The Non-Capitalist Path to Development.”
My friend Javid and I had prepped hard– we weren’t about to lose ground to the Alborzis.
I was mid-argument, burning with focus and excitement, when suddenly my vision blurred– everything went dark.
The next thing I knew, I was on the ground, trapped in a mob of club-wielding men.
One grabbed my bag, another slammed my head,
a third hurled curses.
We had been ambushed– and I watched Javid’s thick glasses fly into the air. They tore us apart, and one of them grabbed my collar and began to drag me off.
Apparently, we’d been so deep in debate
we hadn’t even noticed the basiji thugs swarming the square– a daily ritual in those days.
As more of them arrived from the bottom of Enghelab Street, they kept shouting to the man dragging me:
"Let us take him, you go on ahead!"
But he clung to me:
“No. This one’s mine. He’s in bad shape.”
I realized then–
he was taking me to the Komiteh (the feared Revolutionary Committee HQ).
But why was my case worse than the others’? I had

no idea.
They argued. He refused.
Eventually, we reached a quieter spot, and suddenly –his tone changed.
He whispered:
“Comrade, don’t make yourself such a target.
That uniform screams who you are from a hundred meters away. And those guys you were talking with? They’re all flagged. Find another place. Don’t burn yourselves for nothing.”
I blinked.
Was this a trick? A new tactic?
Make friends first, then pull the information out?
We reached the main intersection.
He reached into his pocket, slipped 20 tomans into my palm.
“Grab a taxi. Get out of here fast. And don’t come back around here for a few days. Watch yourselves.”
He gripped my hand firmly–
then turned and walked quickly back into the chaos.

That’s when I understood.
This comrade’s job was to pull people like me out of the fire.
To save whoever he could.
No questions asked.
He never asked:
“What group are you with?”
“Do your politics match mine?”
No.

He was just a comrade–
one who walked straight into fire to pull others out.
That day, what I learned from him was more valuable than any book, more lasting than any debate.

To be on the left is not about wearing the uniform.
It is about stepping into the flames and helping others quietly, anonymously, asking nothing in return.

Friday Dusk

Saeed had come from the provinces.
He lived alone in a small room near Toopkhaneh Square in Tehran, working as a laborer, barely making ends meet.
It was clear—Tehran had not embraced him.
Or maybe he hadn't fully stepped into its rhythm.
Every chance he got, he spoke of his hometown, his "velayat," as if each memory were a lifeline, a thread tying him back home.
He was homesick—undeniably.
One day, after work, he said:
"Comrade, will you come for lunch at my place?"
I said, "Why not? You know how to cook?"
He grinned:
"I'll make you something you've never tasted in your life."

We went to his tiny room—bare, just a thin mattress, a worn-out quilt, a nail in the wall where he hung his clothes.
As soon as we arrived, he got to work, cooking local rice, humming revolutionary songs as he stirred.

He fried two eggs, sliced a big onion clean down the middle.
Then we sat and ate.
He ate with such appetite, such pure joy, that just watching him made the food taste better.
No meal in my life has ever felt so satisfying.
That simple lunch sparked something– a tradition.
From then on, we met for lunch every Friday.
We took turns.
One week, I'd bring a container of Northern dishes from my mother's kitchen.
The next, it was Saeed's signature:
smoky rice and fried eggs, and I'd bring a bottle of soda, so I wouldn't show up empty-handed.
One time, I even smuggled a bottle of my father's homemade wine.
We drank, got beautifully drunk, just the two of us– comrades.
Strangely, in these Friday meetings, we never once spoke about politics.
It was as if we'd made an unspoken pact:
to give our minds a break.
Instead, we shared stories.
Dreams. Loves. Little things.
And oh, how much we had to say.
Time would flash by, and with each visit, our friendship deepened.
Saeed's kindness was like water soaking into dry earth– gentle, quiet, and unstoppable.
So pure, it left you defenseless.

Then one day, word came:
Saeed had been arrested.
That was all.
No further news.
He vanished—like smoke.

Until that moment, I had never understood what people meant when they said Friday dusk is sorrowful.
But ever since Saeed, Friday dusk has wept for me.
Always.
Forever.

Falangists

1

The day before, the falangists(Islamists) had taken over Towhid Square and stabbed one of our comrades who was selling books. At that time, Towhid Square had a relatively calm atmosphere compared to other parts of the city, due to the cultural makeup of its residents, and we could sometimes sit for hours discussing various issues with people there. But on this particular day, the atmosphere was extremely tense, and we knew the falangists had plans to wrest the square from the people. Between two and three o'clock, a couple of debates started, and during that time, I noticed a pickup truck parked next to the phone booth. Its cargo was cushions. The driver came up and said: “I was here yesterday – it got really chaotic. They even stabbed a couple of people.”
I said: “Yes, we’re aware.”
He said: “I came to tell you, if it gets chaotic again

today, get in my truck, I'll take you away. I'm a Turkmen."

2

At Jomhouri Square, the traffic light turned red. A motorcyclist braked in front of me. A woman was riding pillion. In a Kurdish accent, he said: "falangists are coming toward you from the lower intersection. Want to get on the back of the bike? I'll take you.

I said: "Thanks, I'm not alone."

He said: "Alright. Take care of yourself, comrade." And he left.

In the meantime, I quickly stepped aside, and the thugs arrived. That Kurdish comrade, in less than a minute, saved my life.

Just like that.

Javad

From the very first day of entering middle school, when I thought I had stepped into the world of grown-ups, he shattered my illusion with his giant frame. His father was the neighborhood grocer, and he barely made it through school years, constantly burdened with failing grades. Within a year or two, a sudden surge of testosterone changed our behavior. Playing football during recess and the occasional wrestling match were no longer enough to release all that pent-up energy. Javad and the small group of end-of-class giants introduced a new topic into our world: sex.

Then came the revolution. We all belonged to one group or another. Discussions, protests, and all the usual activities of that era consumed our minds. But Javad stuck to his classic style of bullying, and his only form of "resistance" was defending himself under the fists and kicks of the school's psychotic vice-principal. One time, when we got into a clash with the falangists outside school, he jumped into the fray, landed a few solid punches on the other side, grabbed my hand, and pulled me out of the

chaos. In that golden moment, I thought – could it be that our Javad has developed leftist leanings? But right then, with a few juicy insults aimed at my sister and mother, he shattered my illusions and made it clear: it was years of friendship that made him step in.

Things got harder. Longtime friends turned into bitter enemies. Secret denunciations were being collected for the "appointed day" to arrest us. – documents signed by our once-best friends. Everything reeked of death. Places that had been part of your daily life for years, where all your memories had been made, were now forbidden zones.

In one careless moment, passing through the old neighborhood, I saw Javad in a Basij uniform (paramilitary volunteer militia within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), standing under a row of war propaganda posters.

I was hesitant to approach, but something pushed me forward.

I said to him: “What is all this, Javad?”

He just smiled and said nothing.

He didn’t even curse anymore. His look was serious, but still full of warmth.

I asked carefully:“Did you sign those denunciations?”

He gave me a meaningful look and said, “F... the sister and mother of anyone who did.”

Yes, Javad was still the same Javad.

We shook hands and parted ways.

A few months later, I passed by the same place and saw his photo on the wall of our school:
“Martyred on November 16, 1982, in Somar at the age of 18.”

Mother

In the depth of the painting, there were the dark shadows of two people seen from behind, dragging away a bound figure dressed in red. In the center of the painting was a bed, clearly showing the impression of a head that had just been lifted from the pillow. In the foreground stood an old woman, staring directly at us. Her gaze was so intense it made the hair on your neck stand up – a mixture of sorrow, strength, and a silent question.

My mother had given me that painting as a gift, and for years it stood with quiet dignity on the wall of my room – until the day of my arrest they brought me home, hands bound, for a search. One of the officers, spotting the painting, angrily asked, "What does this painting mean?" My mother immediately stepped in and said, "I bought this for him – from in front of the university – years ago," and began explaining the painting. The officer cut her off and said, "So the one in red in the middle is a communist."

In that moment, it was as if my mother felt guilt – guilt for being the one who had first taken my hand

and led me to a protest, for having bought me my first political books and magazines, for always murmuring revolutionary poems under her breath... and now, her only child had embraced those very same beliefs, headed for a fate she feared even to imagine.
At the doorstep, I smiled at her and said goodbye, trying to appear strong. She stopped the officer at the door and said, "Wait, sir, let me tell you something!" She looked him straight in the eye and recited a poem by Saadi Shirazi[34]:
"They say many things about the soul's departure from the body,
But I saw with my own eyes how my soul left me."

It was the same gaze as the mother in the painting – a look so profound it sent chills through you. The officer was taken aback. His stern expression softened. For a moment, it seemed he became human in the face of a mother's emotion, and he said, "Don't worry, mother, he'll be back soon."
And we left.
The officer was silent the whole way.

[34] Saadi of Shiraz (born 1210; died 1291 or 1292), was a Persian poet and prose writer of the medieval period. He is recognized for the quality of his writings and for the depth of his social and moral thoughts.

Hope

Just a month or two after the revolution, we turned our heads and suddenly realized how much our behavior had changed. In school, we started forming student councils. The word mobser (class monitor) disappeared from our vocabulary, replaced by namayandeh (representative), democratically elected by the students themselves once a month. Every morning at 7:30, we gathered in the schoolyard, exercising together – students from all political leanings side by side. Afterwards, we would head to class.

Each day, a different political group led the morning exercises – whether that group had one member or five hundred didn't matter. I remember a comrade from the Rah-e Kargar (Worker's Path) party – it was just him, but he took part in every discussion like a full-fledged organization. During breaks, he would set up his small table and share his ideas with others. Our debates never turned into shouting matches – we searched for answers, for pamphlets and books. By the time we went home, our schoolbags were bursting at the seams with publications. Most

importantly, we were curious – as if we were addicted to knowing.

We had even reached an agreement with most of our teachers: the first or last half-hour of class was dedicated to open discussions on current political topics – from the referendum and constitution to contentious clauses and the new labor law.

Also our teachers seemed to change overnight. Those who used to be stern and bitter became our friends. One would talk about being arrested and tortured by SAVAK for writing an article. Another spoke of his friendship with writer Samad Behrangi. Others treated explaining their political beliefs as a sort of political class. Even the religious studies teachers were progressive. I remember, in our second-term religion exam, I answered each question by writing: "As stated in the book" or "According to what the respected teacher believes and explained in class." I had answered everything correctly. When the teacher returned my paper to the class, he said: "His grade is 20 [perfect], and what's more important is that, despite disagreeing with these questions, he prepared so well that he earned the top grade – and he isn't afraid to express his opinion. This is revolutionary ethics. A revolutionary must be fully aware of what he opposes."

Living in this legendary atmosphere didn't last long.

It started with the teachers. Orders came down for them to stick strictly to teaching their subjects and avoid other discussions.

Members of the school's Islamic Association – who until then had quietly operated like little mice in the prayer room – began to emerge during recess, intimidating students at their tables.

Then came the final nail, on the anniversary of the execution of Khosrow Golsorkhi and Keramatollah Daneshian.

That day, we decided to broadcast the courtroom speeches of the two martyrs during recess. We went to the school office to ask for permission to use the speaker system from that office, which faced the courtyard. They welcomed us warmly.

During the first break, the courtyard echoed with: "He who made my soil mourn…"

Everyone stood silently against the walls, listening.

But just a few minutes later, the school principal stormed into the yard. He came straight at us and shouted angrily, "What's all this ruckus?!"

I said, "It's not a ruckus, sir. It's Golsorkhi's defense statement in court."

He barked, "I don't care who it is. This is a school, not a political rally!"

My friend replied, "We got permission from the office to hold this program during recess to mark their martyrdom anniversary."

He snapped, "They had no right! You're playing the voices of communists here?"

From that day on, all political activity in the school was banned. During breaks, they started broadcasting Quran recitations. Morning exercise was replaced with a formal gym class, which was soon canceled due to lack of interest.
After five years in that school, I was expelled.
But even now, with that experience behind me, I still believe in that line of the anthem:
“The day of crushing tyranny, the day of the Republic and of freedom!”
I believe in it – and I remain hopeful.

Friendship

I entered the world of art in complete secrecy. None of my friends and especially my family knew that I was attending acting classes at Anahita Theatre School. After all the turmoil of the revolution era, and the anxiety and fear that inevitably entangled anyone even slightly connected to political activism, I didn't want to drag anyone into a new story. Everyone seemed to believe, at least on the surface, that I had my head down and was focused on studying for the university entrance exam. It was as if they all breathed a sigh of relief.

But the truth was, on one hand, I was indeed studying hard and preparing for my academic future. On the other hand, that rebellious spirit inside me couldn't be tamed by anything except shouting–albeit staged shouting–on the theater stage.

The first year of my acting classes passed smoothly and joyfully. At home, I had told them I was going to Language Institute on Jam Street, which was a

perfect cover. University entrance exams plus English classes? It couldn't have sounded better.

Until one day, I broke my left leg. Now try explaining that! How could I skip a single class with Mostafa Oskooyi? One time his daughter, Soudabeh, arrived five minutes late to rehearsal, and in front of everyone he told her, "Get out! You're not an actor. You're just shameless!"

I completely forgot the pain in my leg–I was consumed by the pain of Oskooyi's wrath. My parents comforted me, saying, "Don't worry too much about the language class," but I insisted, "No! I have a test–I must go!" It was winter, and there was snow–plenty of snow.

Then my father said, "Don't worry at all. I'll take you there and pick you up." He insisted, and I refused. The complications multiplied. Now I had to get from Jam Street, after being dropped off by my dad, to Fatemi (where Anahita Theater School was), with a broken leg–and then back again in time for pickup.

I realized I couldn't do it alone. I shared the situation with two of my fellow Anahita classmates, and they went above and beyond. For two whole months, they took me from in front of the language school to Anahita and back again at night, so my father could pick me up. And just so you know–I didn't miss a single session. With that broken leg, I completed all my exercises and rehearsals on time–and became one of Oskooyi's favorites.

So much so that one day, he invited me to his office and said, “I wanted to offer you a friendly suggestion: you’re more suited for directing than acting. And now that you’ve gone through the acting training, if you have the chance, definitely pursue a career in this field.”

Meanwhile, the Turkish Embassy in Tehran, for the first and last time during that period, held a university entrance exam in English. I took the test and was accepted into the chemical engineering program at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara. With that, I had a student visa in my right pocket. Oskooyi also gave me a letter—on the official letterhead of the International Institute of Theater—serving as a sort of acting diploma, which I tucked into my left pocket.

No matter how I calculated it, I couldn’t trade the affection and camaraderie of my theater friends for chemistry. In the end, I heeded my acting teacher’s advice.

You can probably guess how my parents felt when, years later, they found out the truth about my life back then.

But I truly believe that, in the grand scheme of this whole story, those two friends who dragged me back and forth for two months played the leading roles.

EXIT THEATRE

Mehrdad Khameneh is an Iranian-Norwegian film and theater director, writer and translator.
He left Iran in 1984 to pursue his studies abroad and returned in 2012, living there until 2025.
This book chronicles his personal journey–both before leaving his homeland and after returning nearly three decades later–offering a deeply human perspective on memory, society, identity and the people who shape us.

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