

THEN THEY CAME FOR ME

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THEN THEY CAME FOR ME

A Story of Injustice and Survival in
Iran's Most Notorious Prison

Maziar Bahari

with Aimee Molloy



O N E W O R L D

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*To Mooloojoon, Baba Akbar, Maryam,
Paola, and Marianna*

*They smell your breath
lest you have said: I love you,
They smell your heart:*

These are strange times, my dear. . . .

*They chop smiles off lips,
and songs off the mouth. . . .*

These are strange times, my dear.

—AHMAD SHAMLU, 1979

CONTENTS

Prologue xi

PART I

The Tunnel at the End of the Light 1

PART II

Neither Departed Nor Gone 97

PART III

Survival 281

Epilogue 309

Acknowledgments 329

Who's Who 333

Time Line 335

Glossary of Terms 349

Further Reading, Listening, and Watching 355

PROLOGUE

I could smell him before I saw him. His scent was a mixture of sweat and rosewater, and it reminded me of my youth.

When I was six years old, I would often accompany my aunts to a shrine in the holy city of Qom. It was customary to remove your shoes before entering the shrine, and the caretakers of the shrine would sprinkle rosewater everywhere, to mask the odor of perspiration and leather.

That morning in June 2009, when they came for me, I was in the delicate space between sleep and wakefulness, taking in his scent. I didn't realize that I was a man of forty-two in my bedroom in Tehran; I thought, instead, that I was six years old again, and back in that shrine with my aunts.

"Mazi *jaan*, wake up," my mother said. "There are four gentlemen here. They say they are from the prosecutor's office. They want to take you away." I opened my eyes. It was a few minutes before eight, and my mother was standing beside my bed—her small eighty-three-year-old frame protecting me from the four men behind her.

I sleep without clothes, and in my half-awake state, my first thought wasn't that I was in danger, but that I was naked in a shrine. I felt ashamed and reached down to make sure the sheets were covering my body.

Mr. Rosewater was standing directly behind my mother. I

would later come to learn a lot about him.

He was thirty-one years old and had earned a master's degree in political science from Tehran University. While at university, he had joined the Revolutionary Guards, a vast and increasingly powerful fundamentalist military conglomerate formed in the wake of the 1979 Iranian revolution. I would come to know that his punches were the hardest when he felt stupid. But when he appeared in my bedroom early that morning, the only things I understood about him were that he was in charge, and that he had a very large head. It was alarmingly big, like the rest of his body. He was at least six foot two and fat, with thick glasses. Later, his glasses would confuse me. I had associated glasses with academics, intellectuals. Not torturers.

I wrapped the sheet tightly around my body and sat up. "Put some clothes on," Rosewater said, motioning to the three men behind him to leave the room so that I could get dressed. I found comfort in this: whatever their reason was for barging into my house, he was still respectful, still behaving with a modicum of courtesy.

They kept the door slightly ajar, and I walked to my closet. Things were beginning to come into clearer focus, but his rosewater scent lingered and my thoughts, still confused, remained back in the past, at the shrine. What does one wear in a shrine? What's the best way to present oneself? I had just finished putting on a blue collared shirt and a pair of jeans when the men pushed their way back into my room: Rosewater and another man, who wore a shiny silver sports jacket and a cap.

They circled the room, surveying everything. I had been spending most of my time over the last two years with my fiancée, Paola, in London. We had got engaged six months earlier, and had been preparing for the birth of our child in four months' time, and I had never really settled in at my mother's house. I could sense their frustration as they took stock of the mess in

my small room. Heaps of books sat on the floor beside stacks of videotapes and DVDs and an untidy pile of laundry. I had not organized my desk for months, and it was covered with old newspapers and notebooks. All journalists working in Iran have to be accredited by Ershad—the name is shorthand for the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance—and I had given my mother’s address as my place of work. They’d thought they were going to find an office at my mother’s house. Instead, they were picking through piles of underwear.

“If you want, I can organize things and you can come back tomorrow,” I said with an apologetic smile.

“*Zerto pert nakon*,” Rosewater said sharply. “Stop talking shit. Sit down and shut up. One more word, and I’ll beat you so badly, I’ll make your mother mourn for you.” He scratched his side under his jacket, revealing the gun strapped to his body. I sat down, feeling my body grow heavy with fear. I, like most Iranians, knew of far too many people—writers, artists, activists—who had been woken up like this, then taken somewhere and murdered. I thought of my father and my sister, each arrested and imprisoned by previous regimes; I thought of my mother, who had been forced to live through all this twice before. I could hear my mother’s voice in the kitchen, and my fear was joined by an overwhelming sense of guilt. How could my mother go through this again? Why hadn’t I been more careful? Why hadn’t I left Iran sooner?

“Would you like some tea?” I heard her ask one of the men in the kitchen.

“No, thank you.”

“Why not? It seems that you are going to be here for a while. You should have some tea,” she said.

“No, really. I don’t want to impose.”

I heard my mother laugh. “You arrived at my house at eight A.M. You are going through my son’s personal belongings. I am going to have to put everything back in order after you leave.

What do you mean you do not want to impose?”

The man ignored the question. “Madam, please put on your scarf,” he said.

Though I could not see my mother’s face, I could imagine the condescending look she was giving him at that moment.

My mother’s unveiled hair was illegal under Islamic law. I knew that her halfhearted obeying of the Revolutionary Guards’ order was her attempt at defiance. She was telling them that while they might be able to control her body, they could never control her mind. The Guards rightly thought of my mother and me as parts of the “other Iran,” those citizens who did not want to be the subjects of an Islamic ruler and would have preferred to determine our own destinies.

“I am eighty-three years old. Why should I put on my scarf?”

My mother’s name is Molook. Growing up, we called her Molook *joon*, which in Persian means “dear Molook.” Because my older brother, Babak, couldn’t pronounce the *k*, he called her Moloojoon. The name stuck, and it was this name I used as I called out to her, doing my best to keep my voice from trembling: “Please, Moloojoon. Don’t argue with them.”

I heard her quick steps, and a few moments later she walked past my room, a blue floral scarf covering just half of her hair.

“Fine,” I heard her say with polite disdain.

My room had a large bookshelf full of Western novels and music, with volumes signed by prominent Iranian reformists on one side and HBO DVD box sets and copies of *The Economist*, *The New Yorker*, and *Newsweek* stacked sloppily on the other. It was surely foreign territory to Rosewater. He continued to thumb through my papers and books, despite the look of obvious bewilderment on his face.

I sat on the bed watching him until, a while later, he told me I could go to the kitchen and eat breakfast while they continued to search my room. In the kitchen, my mother poured me a cup of tea and placed a few dates on a small china saucer. She then

took a seat across from me at the breakfast table and silently pushed the dates toward me. “*Bokhor*,” she said with a smile—“Have some”—hoping, I knew, to assure me that I would find the strength to survive this ordeal, whatever was to come.

I was humbled by her courage, though it didn’t surprise me. My mother’s strength has been a source of inspiration throughout my life. But I felt guilty as I thought about how painful it would be for her to watch yet another member of her family being carted off to prison for defying an Iranian regime.

* * *

It had been December 1954 when they came for my father. At the time, Iran was ruled by the shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a pro-Western autocrat. Of course, my mother didn’t like to speak of the experience—of what it was like for her on that cold winter night when the shah’s secret police and soldiers of the Royal Iranian Army raided their house. She was twenty-nine and my father twenty-seven, and they had been married for just two years. They lived in my mother’s family home in the Sangalaj neighborhood of south Tehran with their first child, my older brother, Babak, who was then only ten months old, and two of my aunts. I was told that while my father’s future interrogator, a thuggish man named Rezvani, insulted my father in front of his wife, child, and sisters-in-law, the soldiers ransacked the house, taking whatever they wanted for themselves. “They even went through your father’s clothes,” my mother remembered with her unfaltering sense of humor. “I caught one of them stealing some of his underwear.”

For many years, my father had been a member of the Tudeh Party, the communist party of Iran. The party had been banned a few years earlier, after one of its members had been accused of an assassination attempt against the shah. But my father had continued his party work, organizing strikes and demonstrations against the government on behalf of the Union of Metal

Workers of Iran, and finding hideouts for persecuted party leaders. After being held for many months, during which he endured solitary confinement and torture, he was charged with belonging to a treasonous organization and sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

Each week of my father's incarceration, my mother carried my brother, Babak, to one of two prisons, Ghezel Qal'eh or Qasr, and waited outside for hours to find out if she would be allowed inside to visit her husband. Very often, she and the family members of other political prisoners were turned away. Meanwhile, as she raised Babak on her own and worked as a primary school teacher, she fought tirelessly for his release, using every connection she could. Eventually, it worked. My father's sentence was reduced from fifteen years to two. The man who came home to her was even stronger than the one who had left.

Although my father had been tortured so badly by the prison guards that he had lost all of his teeth and his toenails were deformed, the many months he spent in solitary confinement had made him only more resilient and determined. The shah's torturers crushed the Tudeh Party, but not my father. After his release, he was just as large a figure to his friends and relatives as he'd been before. As far as I could tell, he enjoyed this role. He was an impressive man, with large, beautiful eyes and full lips. He had dropped out of school, but he knew hundreds of classic Persian poems by heart and spoke like a university-educated orator. He had tried to shape himself after the heroes of Soviet socialist realist novels: enigmatic proletarian revolutionaries who could have been successful in any profession, but instead chose to dedicate their lives to the ideals of the communist revolution. Helping the helpless and fighting for a better future for Iran had become part of my father's identity.

As my father matured, he realized that revolutions and violence couldn't heal Iran's historical maladies. Despite the tor-

ture he had suffered at the hands of the regime, after he was released from prison, in February 1957, he joined the government of the shah and tried to change the system from within. Through a combination of hard work, charm, and intelligence, he became a high-ranking manager in the Ministry of Industries and Mines and, eventually, the CEO of the government's biggest construction company. As the CEO, my father made the welfare of the workers and their families his top priority. He helped them with housing, health insurance, and pensions. He proudly said that as a CEO, he was achieving what he'd never accomplished as a union activist.

Despite his hatred of the shah's dictatorship, my father, and many other young Iranians of his generation, supported the monarch's efforts to modernize the country. During the two decades that my father worked for the government, new industries were developed, many Iranian students were educated in the West, and Iranian arts and culture were heavily influenced by Europe and America. The shah's Western allies, especially the United States, backed this rush to modernity, as well as the tyrannical rule that came with it. In many ways, the shah was the perfect partner for the West. He supplied Western nations with cheap crude oil and bought their most expensive high-tech military equipment for his ever-expanding army. The shah also allowed the United States to spy on Iran's northern neighbor, the Soviet Union.

Many traditional and religious Iranians were alienated by this process of rash modernization. Even as a child, I could see that many of my relatives who lived in the poorer, more religious parts of the country held a grudge against my family because of my father's position in the shah's regime. They hated the fact that we lived in a big house and had a color television (a big deal in 1970s Iran), and they disapproved of our choices: my sister and mother refused to pray or wear the veil, and my father and his friends went through a few bottles of imported

Scotch during their weekly poker games.

Even though the shah's intelligence agents suppressed his critics, the gap between the religious masses and the shah's pro-Western dictatorship gradually widened, and eventually this triggered an anti-Western, fundamentalist movement led by a high-ranking Shia cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Between 1965 and 1978, Khomeini lived in exile in neighboring Iraq, and from there, he communicated with his followers through photocopied leaflets and audiocassettes, manipulating people's grievances against the shah and his relationship with the United States—claiming, in particular, that the shah and the States were working together to eradicate people's religious beliefs. Khomeini promised to bring justice, independence, and prosperity to Iran. As more Iranians supported Khomeini, the shah became more desperate and insecure. In January 1978, the shah's army opened fire on a gathering of Khomeini adherents, which succeeded only in bringing about greater public support for the Islamic movement. After a year of demonstrations and violent protests, the shah was overthrown, and on February 11, 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran was established. Khomeini returned to Iran and was named the supreme leader—the spiritual leader of the country and the man with the final say in all affairs of the state.

It was not only religious Iranians who had supported Khomeini. Many secular Iranians who believed in the separation of mosque and state had also been in favor of Khomeini's revolution. They simply had had enough of the shah's despotism and kowtowing to the West, and they craved the democratic government and freedom of expression Khomeini promised. Even my father, who had come to hate the idea of a violent revolution and believed that the shah's regime could be reformed from within, was happy about the shah's downfall and the abolishment of American military and intelligence bases in Iran. "I'm

not sure what will happen next,” my father used to say with tears in his eyes. “But I can never forgive the shah and his American patrons for killing dozens of my friends.”

My father and many other Iranians who’d supported Khomeini’s revolution without knowing what would happen next paid a heavy price. Within a short time after coming to power, Khomeini set out to establish a fundamentalist government more repressive than the shah’s. The Islamic government began its systemic repression by summarily trying and executing many leaders of the shah’s army on the rooftop of Khomeini’s residence. Some days, while the revolutionaries were inside, having lunch or dinner with Khomeini, dozens of the shah’s security and military personnel would be murdered on the roof. Deciding that a new military organization was necessary to defend the newly established Islamic government against its enemies, Khomeini established the Revolutionary Guards. With their help, he began to crush opposition groups one by one—members of the shah’s former regime, ethnic minorities, and political dissidents. Many of the very people who’d helped bring Khomeini to power perished during his purges.

The revolution’s violent aftermath disrupted many lives and deeply affected my family; it utterly destroyed others. My father was immediately fired from his job and replaced by a young revolutionary with very little experience. Unable to find a job for years, he eventually had to retire and live on a small pension. That humiliation and shock affected my father far more than the torture he had had to endure in prison. He became a bitter and broken man, exasperated and easily agitated. He started to hate Khomeini and everything he stood for.

* * *

The second member of my family to be imprisoned was my sister, Maryam. In April 1983, when Maryam was twenty-six and

I sixteen, my parents received a phone call saying that Maryam had been arrested in the southern city of Ahvaz. Maryam had supported the Islamic Revolution from the beginning. She'd believed in Khomeini's promise that the end of the shah's reign would usher in an era of greater democratic values and freedoms. Maryam would quickly discover how wrong she had been.

It never surprised me that Maryam so vigorously supported the revolution. Like our father, she put everything she had into her beliefs. She was passionate about people, and wanted to help them. She was also very passionate about the arts. She took ballet lessons and loved to draw and paint. Maryam and I were two different people: she was compassionate and expressive, whereas I have always been reserved. Still, she was my best friend.

Even though Maryam was ten years older than I, we had an uncanny understanding of each other. We were so close that we could communicate with just a look, a sigh, or by a certain movement of our hands. Her taste in music, films, and books influenced me greatly, and our shared love for the arts brought us closer together. Maryam loved Al Pacino, and I have seen every film of his, beginning with *Dog Day Afternoon*, which I saw when I was eight. She loved Stravinsky's music and ballets, and throughout my life, I have tried to see every performance of *The Firebird* and *The Rite of Spring* I could get to.

In 1979, at the age of twenty-three, Maryam followed in my father's footsteps and became a member of the Tudeh Party, which, despite the regime change and Khomeini's promise of tolerance, was still illegal. Two years later, she fell in love with Mohammad Sanadzadeh, an engineer who had recently graduated from Tehran University. They married in 1981 and moved to the city of Ahvaz, in the southern province of Khuzestan, where Mohammad had grown up. Soon after, their son, Khaled, was born. A year earlier, the Iran-Iraq War had begun, after

Saddam Hussein's army attacked Khuzestan. Iraq's border dispute with Iran had started in the shah's time, but in 1975, the shah had forced the Iraqi government to accept an accord, which had brought the dispute to an end. After the revolution, with the Iranian army having, in effect, been destroyed by the Islamic government, Saddam Hussein decided that he could use this opportunity to occupy parts of Iran and settle the border disputes. But within a short time, ordinary Iranians, the remaining members of the army, and the Revolutionary Guards repelled the Iraqi army; they took back most of the Iranian territory by early 1982.

When Maryam and Mohammad moved to Ahvaz, many cities in the region had been ravaged by Saddam's army. Many lives had been ruined, and thousands of people had lost their homes. Maryam and Mohammad had chosen Ahvaz so they could help the refugees of the war. They also worked hard—she as a teacher and he as an engineer—in order to provide for their son, Khaled. Maryam decided to teach in one of the poorest areas in southern Iran, the city of Shadgan; it took her three hours every day to travel there and back by bus. Maryam never complained about the wretched conditions in which she had to live and work. She was proud of what she did, and thought it was her duty to help the people.

In Ahvaz, Maryam and Mohammad both joined the local Tudeh Party cells. They were low-ranking members, responsible only for attending meetings, distributing literature, and helping the refugees. At the time, the Tudeh Party still supported Khomeini, and some of its members even helped the Revolutionary Guards suppress other political groups that were against Khomeini, in the hope of preventing the return of a pro-Western government.

But in early 1983, Khomeini began to arrest and jail Tudeh Party members. Soon the tortured party leaders, some of whom had spent more than twenty years in the shah's prisons and all

of whom had supported the revolution, were paraded on state television, confessing to spying for the Soviet Union and acting against the Islamic government.

Mohammad was picked up by the Revolutionary Guards in the spring of 1983, in the second wave of arrests. A week later, they came for Maryam. She was sentenced to fifteen years in prison (which was eventually reduced to six), in a sham trial before a judge and no jury. She wasn't allowed a lawyer, and when she tried to object to the charges against her, the judge refused to let her speak. Though a six-year sentence was wholly unjust, at the time, my family and I were relieved that her life had been spared. The leaders of the Islamic regime were executing many political prisoners, and my parents knew many people whose children had been killed, including one young man who'd been put to death simply for writing to a friend that he feared the regime was on its way to becoming a fascist government.

With both of his parents incarcerated, Khaled came to live with my mother, my father, and me in Tehran. He was a cute, curly-haired toddler with a lot of energy and big, curious eyes. I was sixteen at the time. Part of me was excited—I had suddenly gained a younger brother. But on the first day he was with us, as my mother led Khaled by the hand through our house, it broke my heart to see how, from one room to the next, Khaled looked in each closet and under every bed for his mummy and daddy. He was not yet two years old.

My mother took Khaled into our home with her usual silent courage. For the next six years, while Maryam served her sentence for the crime of *moharebeh*, acting against Allah, my mother raised Khaled. And just as she had done three decades earlier with her husband, every month she would board a bus with Khaled and travel seventeen hours to visit Maryam in Ahvaz.

Maryam was released in 1989, once the Islamic government had killed most Tudeh leaders and was satisfied that the party

no longer posed a threat. What Maryam told us about the beatings and torture of prisoners horrified even my father. Many of the torturers of the Islamic regime had been prisoners under the shah and knew exactly what methods of interrogation and torture could break a person. “It will take Maryam years to get rid of the prison memories, the nightmares,” my mother told me a week after Maryam was released. I am not sure that Maryam ever fully recovered.

* * *

I thought I had done everything I could to avoid this suffering, and yet now the authorities had come for me. Since I’d first begun reporting in Iran, in 1997, making independent documentaries and writing for *Newsweek* magazine, I had taken every precaution and even censored myself in an attempt to stay below the radar. I’d chosen not to write about such sensitive subjects as separatist movements or ethnic and religious minorities. I’d made every effort to be honest and impartial, but I’d never been too critical of the regime, and certainly never of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who had taken over in 1989, after Ruhollah Khomeini died. I was very careful about whom I socialized with, dealing infrequently with foreigners—whom the government, as a rule, mistrusted. I had rarely dated in Iran to avoid provoking the country’s moral police. I was acutely aware of the government’s level of tolerance for things, and was careful not to cross any lines.

I detested revolutions; I believed, instead, in reconciliation and reform. I accepted the complex—or, perhaps, oppressive—steps I had to take to keep the government from becoming suspicious of me, because the most important thing to me was to be able to continue to do my work as a journalist. Having grown up under the despotic regime of the Islamic Republic—a regime under which information was controlled and severely limited—I understood that a lack of information and communi-

cation among a populace leads only to bigotry, violence, and bloodshed. Conspiracy theories about unknown “others”—the West, multinational companies, and secret organizations—being in charge of Iran’s destiny had stunted my nation’s sense of self-determination and, as a result, its will, leaving generations of Iranians feeling hopeless and helpless. I felt it was my job to provide accurate, well-reported information and, in doing so, help the world to have a better understanding of Iran and in my own way build a gradual path toward a more democratic future.

My loved ones—particularly my mother, my sister, and my fiancée, Paola—had worried for years that I would be the next person in my family to be arrested, but I’d repeatedly assured them that I would not risk my life for any cause. That morning, however, as I sat silently at the breakfast table with my mother and watched Rosewater walk angrily out of my bedroom with a box of my notebooks in his arms, I saw that in the eyes of such men, despite all my caution, I was a danger to the authoritarian rulers of the country and, by extension, to the Islamic Republic itself. I knew then that as much as I had tried to avoid my father’s and sister’s fate, I was about to pay the same price, or perhaps a higher one.