

## **Author's Note**

The characters in this book have been given pseudonyms in order to protect them.

*They were going to print Ahmadinejad's face on a stamp, but the people were confused. They didn't know which side to spit on.*

# Prologue

Mohsen was freed at 2 a.m. on August 29, 2009. They flung him out of a moving van at one of the big roundabouts south of Tehran, wearing a pair of pyjama pants and the T-shirt he was arrested in. He picked himself up and stood at the side of the road until an off-duty taxi-driver stopped and asked him if he needed help. Mohsen went back to the taxi-driver's house, where he was given a shower and some clean clothes. Then he asked to be taken home.

It was past 4 a.m. when Mohsen finally got back to the apartment, and the instinctive reaction of his parents to the sound of the buzzer was to assume it was the Intelligence Ministry again. After deliberating with his wife, Mohsen's father asked who it was.

When the elevator door opened and the taxi-driver emerged with Mohsen, Mr and Mrs Abbaspour barely recognised their son. He was emaciated and grey. He stared at them through lifeless eyes. The taxi-driver refused to take any money. Wiping a tear, he got back into the elevator.

After entering the apartment, Mohsen didn't say much. His mother fussed and stroked his hair and her questions came rushing out, but Mr Abbaspour calmed her, saying, 'There will be plenty of time for questions. Let the boy rest a while.' Mohsen had tea and dates while leaning against the kitchen counter. Then he

yawned and his mother took him into his room, which she had tidied immaculately, and she had to run out again in order not to sob in front of him. After composing herself, she came back in and asked if he wanted her to undress him. Mohsen got into bed still wearing the taxi-driver's clothes and immediately fell asleep.

Mohsen's parents did not sleep for the rest of that night. Mrs Abbaspour fluttered around the place, arranging things neatly, getting the breakfast things ready, soaking kidney beans for a *ghormeh sabzi* – a herb stew. 'He loves his mother's *ghormeh sabzi*,' she said, but her husband warned, 'Massi! Don't expect too much of him. And don't tell anyone he's out until he's ready. Do you understand?'

The following day Mohsen was quiet. He slept a lot and said very little. He preferred to lie on the sofa, on his side, rather than sit, and watch DVDs. He didn't touch his mother's *ghormeh sabzi*, though she kept it simmering all day.

Mrs Abbaspour poured her love into Mohsen's feet. The soles of his feet were red and black and covered in welts. Mrs Abbaspour prepared footbaths and balms. She went out to buy him a pair of soft slippers. She clipped his filthy toenails as he watched his DVDs. Every now and then she would be overcome with emotion and murmur, 'I am your sacrifice!' Out in the corridor she whispered to her husband, 'He lost three toenails. Two of his teeth are wobbly. Have you seen the state of his wrists?' Then she clapped her hand over her mouth and said, 'Let them die, please God. Please God, let them all die.'

The next day Mohsen told his mother that he needed to go to a doctor. Not the family doctor. He wanted a doctor he didn't know. After lunch Mrs Abbaspour sent her husband down to the basement parking lot. 'No one down here,' he whispered into his cellphone, before sending the elevator up to the third floor. 'You can come down.'

Mrs Abbaspour drove her son to a hospital quite far from home, where several doctors had afternoon surgeries. Mohsen hobbled into the doctor's room and stayed there for a very long

time. When he and the doctor came out, Mrs Abbaspour saw that the doctor's eyes were red. Mohsen crossed the waiting hall to have some water from a drinking fountain, and the doctor said to her, 'I need to speak to you. Come and see me after my surgery closes.'

That evening Mrs Abbaspour left Mohsen with his father and went back to the hospital. The surgery was over and the doctor was getting ready to go home. He invited Mrs Abbaspour into his office and they sat in silence as he composed himself. At length, looking at the picture on the wall behind her, he asked Mrs Abbaspour what she knew of Mohsen's incarceration.

'Only what I see,' she replied.

'Mrs Abbaspour,' the doctor went on, 'I'm afraid your son has suffered a great deal. At present he doesn't want to talk, and this is entirely natural. It was with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded him to agree that I should speak with you.'

Mrs Abbaspour wept silently as the doctor told her that Mohsen had been raped while he was in custody. Not once: many times. He had been terribly and repeatedly beaten. The indications were that Mohsen's internal bleeding had stopped, but there remained a risk of infection around the anus, where the tissue had been severely torn. 'He was stitched up while in custody,' the doctor went on, 'but I removed the stitches when I saw him this afternoon, and this should make him more comfortable. I disinfected him thoroughly, but he is still sore and should observe a strict regime of potty-baths. And of course there are his antibiotics.' The doctor handed Mrs Abbaspour a prescription.

He asked Mrs Abbaspour to bring Mohsen to see him again in a couple of days. He ordered an MRI scan to determine the extent of the injuries in the rectum. 'It's very important that he continues to check his urine and faeces for blood, as any recurrence of the internal bleeding would be dangerous.' He paused. 'I'm afraid it's going to be painful for him to defecate.'

Mrs Abbaspour was sobbing freely now – sobbing for her son, sobbing for herself, sitting and being told these things by a stranger.

When it was time to go, the doctor said, 'I advise you to monitor Mohsen's psychological condition closely, even after he improves physically. I have heard of other young people who have suffered like this and have not been able to face life after their experiences – the most recent instance came to my attention yesterday.'

As she left the room, the doctor said, 'May God help you, Mrs Abbaspour.'

Little by little, over the next couple of weeks, Mohsen got stronger. His wounds began to heal and his appetite returned.

Mrs Abbaspour shielded her son from the other stories and reports that were coming out of the detention centres. She kept her husband's newspapers out of sight and insisted that he watch TV only when Mohsen was in his room.

Mohsen was only vaguely aware of the big show trial of opposition politicians and their supporters that had gotten under way. He only learned much later of the dozens of unmarked graves that had recently been dug at the main Tehran cemetery – the graves of other protesters and other detainees, who were not so lucky.

Mohsen was physically present, nothing more. His gaze was neutral. He didn't play his *setar* or read his books of poetry. On the rare occasions when he went out, to see the doctor or take a medical test, his mother went to elaborate lengths to ensure they weren't seen by friends or acquaintances. Mohsen would scream at night and his mother would rush in and cradle him. She tried not to leave him alone. To neighbours and family members who telephoned or rang the buzzer as they passed, she said that she had come down with something and wouldn't see anyone until she was better. She sent her husband out to do the shopping.

One day Mrs Abbaspour could stand it no longer and asked Mohsen to tell her what had happened when he was inside, and he shouted at her and she got upset. She would have liked to turn to someone – a wise older member of the family, a mullah, a shrink – but Mohsen forbade her from doing so. Again and

again Mr Abbaspour repeated that time is a great healer, but he didn't believe his own words. He knew people from the Left who were still soft in the head even though they were released twenty-five years ago.

About two weeks after Mohsen was released, Shadi rang the buzzer. Shadi had done this several times since the news spread that Mohsen had been arrested, but she had never received an answer. She had asked around and learned that Mohsen's family had not gone away. She had assumed they were screening visitors.

On this occasion, as she waited, the door of the apartment block opened and Mrs Abbaspour came outside. She was going to the drugstore for Mohsen and didn't recognise Shadi standing on the step. But Shadi recognised her and introduced herself as a friend of Mohsen.

In normal circumstances Mrs Abbaspour would have felt affronted at being approached in this way, by a woman whose relationship with Mohsen was ambiguous. But Mrs Abbaspour felt terribly alone, and Shadi's face was persuasive as well as kind. When Shadi asked if there was news of Mohsen, Mrs Abbaspour started crying – there on the step, tears rolling down her cheeks. Shadi thought Mohsen's mother was crying because she had no news. She was astonished when Mrs Abbaspour mumbled, 'He's at home right now.'

The two women entered the apartment and Shadi knocked on Mohsen's door. There was no answer, so she said, 'It's me: Shadi. Can I come in?' She opened the door. Mohsen was lying on his bed. She shut the door behind her. '*Salaam*, Mohsen.'

After a while of sitting with Shadi and hearing some bits of news, Mohsen raised his hand to shush her. He wanted to speak, but couldn't. He rocked on his haunches and he cried and cried. Each time he opened his mouth to say something, he was prevented by a fresh spasm. He began to convulse. He looked around wildly. He went down on his knees.

Mrs Abbaspour was standing on the other side of the closed door. When she heard Mohsen sobbing, she was tempted to

burst in and demand that Shadi stop tormenting her son and leave the house. Then she heard Shadi murmuring and Mohsen's breathing became more regular, and eventually he had used up all his sobbing for now.

Mrs Abbaspour went softly to the kitchen and came back with tea and sweets. Shadi opened the door at her knock, smiled encouragingly and took the tray. Shadi mouthed the word 'alone!' and Mrs Abbaspour nodded. She said, 'I'm going out for a few minutes.' Shadi and Mohsen heard the door of the apartment slam shut and drank their tea in silence.

'Tell,' she said, stroking his hand.

'I can't remember a lot,' he replied.

'It doesn't matter. Just tell.'

# 1

It's June 8, 2009, a few days before the election, and Mohsen Abbaspour is walking down the hill towards Vali-ye Asr Street. The oriental planes bowing over the street were planted by Reza, the last Shah's father. Reza was a doer. He did development and railways and a modern army. He did horse-whippings and larceny. Now there is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He does Big Lies and nuclear centrifuges. He thinks he was crowned with a divine halo.

For the past four years Mohsen has laughed at him. He and his friends made up jokes about him and sent them by text to each other. The nation's children laughed because Ahmadinejad looked like the monkey on the Cheetos packet. But inside they were sad, because they were ashamed. They were ashamed that he represented Iran.

The Iranians are a cultured people, a people with a past. Did they not give the world Avicenna, squinches, the divine right of kings? Did Cyrus the Great not author the first declaration of human rights? Wasn't Goethe enthralled by the verse of Hafez, Emerson by that of Sa'adi? Now Iran is represented by a midget with lethal, half-asleep eyes. He prances on the international stage – with Hugo Chávez and the President of Belarus. If he is not a mass murderer, not yet, this is because he is not alone at the top of Iran's pyramid of power. Make no mistake: he wouldn't hesitate.

Ahmadinejad must share with Ali Khamenei. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is the Supreme Leader of Iran. He should not be mistaken for Khomeini, even if their names sound alike. Khomeini was the father of the revolution. Love him or hate him (some did both), you couldn't but admire his courage and integrity. Such was his presence and authority that the people called him the Imam. When Khomeini died in 1989, there was no obvious replacement. Khamenei got the nod, a startled apparatchik who admitted to his unfitness for the job of being God's representative on Earth.

On the contrary, the oilers and greasers whispered, the position suits you very well. You are truly an historical eminence, the merest of steps away from divinity. In time, Khamenei started to like the sound of all this. Now he inclines his head graciously when they say that obedience to Khamenei is as important as saying your prayers. Don't forget to smile, your Grace the Ayatollah! The posters of the Supreme Leader used to show him in a bad mood. Now they show him grinning, above reminders that this year is the year of reforming patterns of consumption.

Khomeini never smiled. He was too big, too awesome, to smile.

In theory Khamenei and his president are great friends. Khamenei helped Ahmadinejad come to power in 2005. Did Ahmadinejad show his gratitude? Like hell he did. Ahmadinejad is dissimilar to Khamenei. He doesn't lack confidence, doesn't need puffing up. Ahmadinejad believes he enjoys the favour of the Hidden Imam, whose re-emergence among us will begin a period of justice and truth, and the Hidden Imam, as everyone knows, is closer to God than the Supreme Leader is. During his first term, Ahmadinejad professed undying loyalty to Khamenei, but in fact did his own thing. Sometimes Khamenei approved, sometimes he didn't. To Ahmadinejad, crowned by his halo, it didn't much matter either way.

Iran's electorate knows they will never get the chance to sack his Grace the Ayatollah. The constitution doesn't give them that privilege. Even if they could, there's a strong chance they would

choose not to, for where's the guarantee they wouldn't get someone worse? There are rumours, which periodically gust and die, to the effect that Khamenei suffers from an advanced form of cancer, or that he and the opium pipe are inseparable. Then comes another, contradictory rumour; Khamenei's as fit as a fiddle. So the people don't occupy themselves with thoughts of dumping Khamenei. The Supreme Leader is supreme for life. Amen.

But, the president . . . that's a different matter. The constitution allows the people to vote for a president and a parliament. Granted, this only happens after the candidates have been vetted by the Council of Guardians for their adherence to Islamic tenets and their aptitude for office. This means that the vast majority of candidates get weeded out, but a certain number get through, and a certain number of this certain number are reformists.

Back at the beginning, the reformists were disciples of Khomeini. They were hostage-takers and, in the manner of ideologues everywhere, advocates of death for anyone who didn't agree with them. Now they have changed. They are democrats, supporters of women's rights, they love music and books. They won't say sorry for the past; Iranians don't really go in for apologies. But they are definitely preferable to the hardliners, the conservatives – the 'Principalists', in their own jargon – who swarm around Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. Come election time, the only question for Mohsen is whether to vote for the reformists, or not at all.

Mohsen has been debating this question with his friend Amin. Khamenei and some of the other mullahs emphasise the importance of a really high turnout. The enemy, Khamenei says, is working night and day to ensure this won't happen. Everyone agrees that a high turnout would be read as a popular legitimisation of the Islamic Republic. Mohsen and Amin could live with this, so long as someone better than Ahmadinejad gets in. They don't like the Islamic Republic, this jackbooted kleptocracy with its chorus-line of seers and charlatans. They despise its bullying, its dirty fingers touching their beliefs and private lives. But they

are prepared to accept it on condition that it reforms itself, adheres to those bits of the constitution that promise freedom, and repairs the country's terribly damaged image abroad.

The reason is simple. Mohsen and Amin don't want another revolution. Their parents made the last one and look where that got them. Mohsen and Amin don't want bloodshed and upheaval. They want reform. Perhaps they are yellow, these children of the revolution. Or perhaps they are smart.

There was a time before Ahmadinejad, during Iran's first and only reformist government, when the bearer of an Iranian passport was not automatically regarded with suspicion and fear. The president was Muhammad Khatami, and he was a good-looking, well-dressed mullah. No matter that Khatami was ineffective at home, or that the conservatives wouldn't let him carry out his reforms; he repaired Iran's image abroad, with his white teeth and his call for a dialogue among civilisations. During his tenure it happened, every now and then, that an Iranian travelling to Europe was not treated as the carrier of a dangerous bacillus.

'Ah,' the customs official smiled, 'Khatami! Nice man! Nice hat!'

Since Ahmadinejad came to power and got the Israelis' backs up, things have changed again, the other way. Iran's fellow pariahs, the Iraqis, the Libyans and the Syrians, have been let back into the gang – they are now acceptable members of the community of nations. The North Koreans don't often let their citizens out; the passport issue doesn't arise. That leaves Iran.

The Iranian passport is the least-cool passport in circulation today. When it falls with a slap on the immigration-hall counter, it elicits the same reaction as a warm, dead bird. Nostrils wrinkle.

Get rid of it!

Earlier this year Mohsen decided to go for a short trip. It would be his first trip abroad. He would go to Italy, where his cousin lives. This cousin has a job. He shares a small apartment with several other Iranians.

Italy, the home of Dante, Levi, Fo. The home of hot Italian

girls. Mohsen had an invitation. He would go to the embassy and get a visa.

One morning Mohsen joined a forlorn ribbon of people. They were respectable people, giants in their fields, some of them, but they held themselves shoddy and bent. They knew, all of them, what would happen inside. They would be insulted and humiliated by the visa officer who interviewed them. This officer would not be Italian. She would be an Iranian, a member of the embassy's local staff, a quisling whose long years at the embassy had taught her to regard her own people with warm, dead-bird disdain. If, by any chance, she did not humiliate them, they would feel pathetically grateful.

In his hands Mohsen had his forms (in triplicate), his photographs, his fee, and a deed to his parents' apartment made out in his name, forged that very morning – evidence that he would not do a runner in Italy and become an illegal. Sweating, feeling sick, he stood before the bulletproof glass that walled him from the quisling, and the noise of his anger rose in his ears as he tried to explain away some alleged error in the forms that he had filled out in triplicate, an error that rendered them utterly worthless, worse than worthless; and then, as he pleaded and stammered, the quisling started examining the nail she had broken that very morning, tilting it in the halogen light.

‘Rejected.’

Mohsen and Amin were born in the war. Saddam was firing Scuds at Tehran, and anyone who could get away, anyone with relations outside Tehran, fled the game of chance. Mohsen's father was a junior government official. He told Mohsen's mother to take the boy and get away to her sister's place near Tabriz, but she refused to leave him. Amin's father had walked on a mine at the front and was laid up. He needed medical attention and couldn't go far from the hospital. Amin and Mohsen were both born in Tehran after the city had emptied. It was the height of the air war, and some of their earliest memories are of sheltering underground with their respective families, in an old cistern.

Another of the neighbours had a good voice and she sang to keep spirits up – love songs by Marzieh, Delkash, Ghamar.

Mohsen and Amin grew up in the same street. In those days, before the construction boom, there were few apartment blocks, just small houses with small yards. Mohsen and Amin climbed over the walls and stole from the yards – quinces, mulberries white and black, persimmons. Amin and Mohsen went through school together. They played truant, went to the cinema, smoked cigarettes, read anything they could get their hands on. They tried alcohol, marijuana. Mohsen wanted to buy some crack, but Amin persuaded him to come camping and he forgot about it. They grew up, did their military service, were admitted to university. Amin got in to study computers, and Mohsen, Persian literature.

‘What are you going to do with a degree in Persian literature?’ his father demanded. ‘It won’t help you get a job.’ After a couple of years he bowed to his father’s pressure and changed to engineering, but he hated engineering and spent his time buried in politics and literature. He read Soroush, Popper, Paine. He got hold of some banned copies of Solzhenitsyn. Mohsen’s father had been a Communist at the time of the revolution, a member of the outlawed *Tudeh* Party; he had saved himself by becoming a Khomeinist, growing a beard and giving up the booze, but many of his friends had been to jail. Don’t get too close to politics, he told Mohsen. Remember Icarus in the old Greek story; he flew too close to the sun and his wings melted.

Mohsen was thirteen when Khatami presented himself for election. He and Amin were too young to vote, but they watched with excitement all the same. Khatami represented New Religious Thought and his opponent represented More of the Same. Khatami was an ally of Soroush, and Soroush argued that, although religion is immutable, religious knowledge is not; it evolves according to time and place. Khatami was offering to spring-clean the Islamic Republic, to change repressive and anachronistic laws.

The next four years were first a time of hope, then of disappointment, and finally of cynicism and despair. Khatami’s culture

minister unbanned hundreds of banned books and films and music albums. He allowed dozens of newspapers to open. But the conservatives bullied and threatened him and ended up driving him from office. The newspapers were closed down and their owners dragged to court, while the Council of Guardians vetoed every piece of reformist legislation that was passed by parliament.

‘Iran cannot be reformed,’ Mohsen said. ‘Khamenei won’t let it happen. The mullahs won’t let it happen.’ But he and Amin voted for Khatami when they had the chance, in 2001, the president’s re-election year. Khatami’s second term was a big non-event and the two friends were glad to get shot of him when he stepped down, in 2005. Ahmadinejad was elected after skilfully exploiting a mood of lassitude among many voters and appealing to the conservative instincts of traditional and provincial Iranians. Pretty soon Khatami’s tenure started to seem like a golden age.

Mohsen and Amin didn’t bother voting in the election that brought Ahmadinejad to power. They turned completely off politics and religion, and even off Soroush – these things only led to disappointment.

After military service Mohsen got a job in a small steel factory east of Tehran. Its owner was a distant relation of Ahmadinejad. He depicted his factory as the acme of modern business practice. In fact it was a sweatshop. The workers had to swipe in at 7.00 in the morning and no one was allowed home before 6 p.m. Some of them lived in Karaj, an hour west of Tehran, so their day began at 4.30 a.m. If they arrived ten minutes late the boss would dock their wages. Mohsen said to his boss, ‘If this is the way you treat your workers, they won’t feel any loyalty to you or the company and they’ll steal from you at the first opportunity.’ Mohsen’s boss laughed and said, ‘First rule of business: know your workers. Don’t let them get above themselves . . .’

At the factory the workers cursed the president. ‘Son of a whore!’ Then one day he came to the factory to open a new unit and it was like the coming of the Hidden Imam, with the workers crying and pressing chits into his hands, and he smiled sleepily

and praised the virtue and industry of the Iranian toiler, before getting into his helicopter and flying off again.

One day Mohsen asked permission to take a week's holiday and his boss laughed and said, 'Maybe next year.' That was the last day Mohsen turned up for work at the steel factory.

Mohsen and Amin, who was also unemployed, started talking about going abroad. They would go to Malaysia on student visas and find work. They would go to Istanbul and throw themselves on the mercies of the UN, pretending they were Christian converts, or gay, or both. 'If you send us back to Iran, you'll be condemning us to death!' They would win the lottery for Green Cards and go to America. But Mohsen made excuses for not carrying out these plans. He found that he actually didn't want to leave Iran. He would be lonely and homesick. He dressed up his reluctance as political principle. He told Amin, 'That would be exactly what they want – a nice empty country to run, free of potential troublemakers. A bit like the Shah when he told the opposition, 'Leave, or go to jail!'

At the beginning of May 2009, when Ahmadinejad looked like a shoo-in, Amin said to Mohsen, 'I don't know about you, but if he gets re-elected, I'm out of here. I can't take another four years. So I'm going to vote. Not only am I going to vote; I'm going to campaign for the reformists. That way, if the reformists lose, I'll know that I did my best. I won't carry it around with me for the rest of my life. What do you think? Are you with me?'

Mohsen nodded uneasily. There was another factor. Amin had a new girlfriend, Solmaz. She wore dark lipstick, somewhere between apricot and tobacco. She almost became Mohsen's girlfriend, but then Amin was given a car by his father and she became his. Every now and then Solmaz gave Mohsen a knotted look, a look that seemed to say, 'If you had a car, I would be yours.'

Mohsen thought, 'If Ahmadinejad wins and Amin emigrates, Solmaz will need consoling. I'll emigrate a bit later on, once Amin is settled.'

Mohsen and Amin discussed whom they should support. Apart from Ahmadinejad himself, three candidates had been cleared to run by the Council of Guardians: Mohsen Rezai, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi. Rezai had been in charge of the Revolutionary Guard during the war. He stood no chance of winning, but he might take a few votes off Ahmadinejad. The real choice, therefore, was between Mousavi and Karrubi.

Mir-Hossein Mousavi was a soft, pale man. He had a flowery nose and thick lenses and a white beard.

Mohsen's father said, 'He's a nonentity.'

Mohsen said, 'But he was prime minister during the war! He steered the country through economic peril!'

His father replied, 'At least he's clean. But he didn't raise a peep when they were busy executing dissidents in jail. Not a peep.'

Since Khomeini's death and the abolition of the post of prime minister, Mousavi had pretty much stayed out of politics; his withdrawal from public life denoted disapproval of the way the country was being run. The reformists had begged Mousavi to run in 2005. He had refused. This time, however, he felt the state of the country was so bad that he had no choice. Inflation and unemployment were high; Ahmadinejad had squandered the country's massive oil revenues on handouts. The Revolutionary Guard had spread its tentacles into all areas of Iranian life: politics, the economy, even sport. Many older Iranians remembered Mousavi with gratitude and affection, for keeping the country on its feet at a time of hardship. And he enjoyed Khatami's support.

Young Iranians knew the cleric Mehdi Karrubi much better. He had been parliamentary speaker when Khatami was president. After standing unsuccessfully for the presidency in 2005, Karrubi had publicly accused Mojtaba Khamenei, the Supreme Leader's son, of committing electoral fraud in Ahmadinejad's favour. Karrubi was blunt, even brave, but there were doubts over his probity.

‘Show me a mullah,’ Mohsen’s father said, ‘and I’ll show you a thief.’

Solmaz joined the discussion. Solmaz was a women’s-rights activist. She was part of the One Million Signatures Campaign, an initiative aimed at gathering signatures for an improvement in women’s rights. Some of Solmaz’s friends in the movement had met Karrubi, and he had committed himself to radical reforms in favour of women’s rights. Mousavi, by contrast, had made much vaguer promises. He had not received the activists in person.

‘I agree with Solmaz that in some ways Karrubi is the better candidate,’ said Mohsen. ‘But a split in the reformist vote can only benefit Ahmadinejad. Mousavi has been endorsed by Khatami and stands a much better chance than Karrubi of beating Ahmadinejad, so we are obliged to support Mousavi.’

In this way, Mohsen, Amin and Solmaz endorsed Mir-Hossein Mousavi for the post of president.