PROLOGUE

Vali Asr Street

From above, Tehran has an ethereal glow. An orange mist hangs over the city, refracting sunrays: a thick, noxious haze that stubbornly clings to every corner, burning the nose and stinging the eyes. Every street is clogged with cars coughing out the black clouds that gently rise and sit, unmoving, overhead. The fumes even creep up the caramel Alborz mountains in the north. Here, clusters of high-rise buildings look down across the city, like imams standing over a prostrating congregation. A mass of humanity fills the valley below them. Every inch is covered, with no discernible style, logic or reason. Old neighbourhoods are crudely carved open by spaghetti junctions, and ugly post-modern buildings rear up over manor houses.

In the middle of the city, cutting straight through the chaos and slicing Tehran in half, is one long, wide road lined on either side by thousands of tall sycamore trees. Vali Asr Street runs from the north of Tehran to the south, pumping life through it and spitting it out into the deepest corners of the city. Vali Asr is the single road that sums up Tehran for all Tehranis. For decades Iranians have come here to celebrate, to protest, to march, to commemorate, to mourn. One of my clearest childhood memories from Tehran

is journeying along the street by car; I can still remember the feeling of being cocooned by the trees, tenderly bowing towards each other, protecting us below with their green canopy.

Alongside the trees' aged, overgrown roots, twisting and protruding from the cracked concrete, deep gutters known as *joobs* carry icy water that gushes out of the mountains in the north. The farther south the water flows, the murkier and darker it becomes. Just past the middle of Vali Asr is downtown, a bubbling, densely packed concentration of the city, where thousands of motorbikes and cars and people roar along and across it. Squeezed between the apartment blocks, the dying remains of a few grand old houses can still be found, clinging on to life. Farther south, the buildings become smaller and more decrepit: houses of raw cement and crumbling brick with broken windows and corrugated iron shacks set up on rooftops. Rusting gas flues and air conditioning units hang from walls, like metal guts pushed outside. Here the colour is sucked from the streets, into the shadows of conservatism and poverty. Black shrouds of women's chadors weave silently among the dark suits and headscarves: the shades of mourning that all bear the Islamic stamp of approval, broken only by lurid murals of war heroes, religious martyrs and political propaganda. At the very southern end, Vali Asr opens its mouth onto Rah Ahan Square, Tehran's main railway station, where travellers arrive from all over the country: the Lors, the Kurds, the Azeris, the Turkmens, the Tajiks, the Arabs, the Baluchis, the Bakhtiyaris, the Qashqa'is and Afghans.

Vali Asr Street and the hundreds of roads that run off it is a microcosm of the city. Just over eleven miles from top to bottom, it connects the rich and the poor, the religious and the secular, tradition and modernity. Yet the lives of the people at either end seem centuries apart.

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The road was built by Reza Shah, although when work first began on it in 1921, he was not yet King. After a military coup that ousted Ahmad Shah, the last Qajar monarch, the road really began to take shape. Orchards and exquisite landscaped gardens belonging to aristocrats, statesmen and royal Qajar princes were destroyed to make way for it, with Reza Shah saving the best plots of land for himself and his family. It took another eight years for the road to be completed as it was stretched further north, through the countryside, connecting the Shah's palaces; the winter residences in the warmer south of the city and the summer residences nestled in the cooler mountains in the north. The road was part of Reza Shah's programme of massive expansion, as he attempted to drag Iran into the modern world. It was to be the envy of the Middle East; magnificent and awe-inducing, with the refinement and beauty of French tree-lined boulevards and the majesty of a great, big Roman road. Reza Shah personally oversaw the planting of about 18,000 sycamore trees. He named the road after himself: Pahlavi.

When the Islamic Revolution toppled Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah, in 1979, anti-Shah nationalists renamed the road Mossadegh Street, in honour of the former Iranian Prime Minister, Dr Mohammad Mossadegh, an eccentric, European-educated lawyer who was ousted in a CIA-backed coup when he attempted to nationalize the country's oil, propelling him to hero status. The name lasted almost as long as his incumbency – just over a year. The godfather of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was never going to allow the country's most famous road to remain named after a man who stood for Persian nationalism rather than Islam, and whose popularity he envied. Khomeini commanded the road be called Vali Asr, after the revered Imam Mahdi, also known as Imam Zaman, the last

of the twelve Shia imams and the man who many Shias believe will be the Last Saviour of the world. The messiah's reappearance will herald a new era of peace and Islamic perfection, but until then the Last Saviour will be in hiding. A fitting name for a road that symbolizes a city whose real life force is so suppressed under Islamic rule.

It happens in the middle of the night. No one knows exactly what time, nor how many men are involved. But the next morning, everybody is talking about it. The evidence is dotted along stretches of Vali Asr Street: dozens of tree stumps protrude from the concrete. Municipal workers with chainsaws have cut down over forty of the road's sycamore trees. Tehranis complain. They write letters, call the mayor's office, take photos. They tweet and start a Facebook page. The story makes headlines. A well-known human rights group claims many more trees have been cut. A cultural heritage group calls the slaying of the 'innocent' trees a 'devastating' act. Radio Farhang, a national radio station, is inundated with calls on its live discussion show. 'Every tree is a memory for me. If the trees are cut, my memories will die. It's as though they're cutting my very soul,' says one tearful woman, with typical Iranian passion and drama. Tehranis are angry.

A war veteran with no legs takes up his usual spot on the pavement near Park-e Mellat on the north of Vali Asr. He places his dirty crutches next to him and spreads out his goods on the ground: batteries of different sizes and colours. A giant rat scampers across the gutter behind him. A music student, with his violin slung over his shoulders, has heard about the cutting of the trees and has come to see for himself.

'At least I went to war, what did that poor tree do to deserve the same fate as me?' jokes the veteran. The young man smiles

and walks north to Bagh Ferdows, a public garden in front of an elegant Qajar palace. This is where he comes to think and watch the world on Vali Asr. He sits on a bench and opens his laptop; on it he plays a live performance of Mozart's Requiem. An old man in a three-piece suit joins him, sitting at the other end of the bench so he can hear the sublime music above the sounds of the city.

Where Vali Asr careers towards downtown, near Jomhouri Street, a bearded man in green trainers and a red shirt is busking on his accordion, playing mournful Persian classics for commuters stuck in their cars. When someone hands him a note, he fishes out a strip of paper from his bumbag directing people to his Internet page, a blog about the evils of the world: the devil, materialism and our obsession with sex.

Near the southernmost tip of Vali Asr, the road has come to a standstill. But this is not rush-hour traffic. Thousands are gathered in the cold, on the pavement and on the street outside a mosque; there is no room inside. It is a funeral. Men carry seven-foot-high displays of white gladioli tied with black ribbon. Inside the mosque, a *ghaari*, religious reader, is reciting from the Koran. Afterwards he leads the eulogy about the dead woman: 'She was from a generation who knew the true meaning of honour. She turned to God and never looked back,' he says. 'She was an honest woman.'

ONE

DARIUSH

Mehrabad Airport, Tehran, March 2001

'You've been away a while.' The young officer did not look up as he flicked through the passport. 'And now you've decided to come back.' Still flicking. 'After all these years.' He picked the plastic corner of the first page.

Dariush could not remember being this scared since he was a little boy. He slid his tongue along the hard plastic side of the cyanide pill lodged between his gum and cheek. They had told him the regime had a list of all their names, a blacklist of dissidents wanted by the state. They had said that prison would mean torture and a slow death.

The officer was staring at him. 'Why did you leave?'

'My parents left because of the war, I wish I'd stayed but they took me.' He had answered too quickly.

'Why are you back?' The man scanned his passport. It had cost 20,000 US dollars from a Shia militant in Baghdad who had supplied passports for some big names. It was a work of art; you could not buy a better fake.

'I've come to see some relatives. I – I miss my country,' his voice was trembling. The officer leant over his desk and pressed his hand on Dariush's chest.

'Your heart's beating like a little sparrow,' he said. Then he burst out laughing and tossed Dariush's passport across the counter.

'You new ones, you're always so scared. Don't believe what you read mate, we won't eat you. You'll see life is better for people like you here. You'll never leave.'

It was as easy as that, returning to the country that had haunted his every day since he had fled the revolution with his mother over twenty years ago. It seemed almost too easy. He should be cautious, as they might still be onto him. Dariush knew Iranians were masters of double-bluffing.

As the Group had forewarned him, his bags had to be X-rayed before he was allowed out. The tightened security wasn't just regime paranoia or fear of separatist movements. It was also fear of people like him, it was fear of the MEK, the Mojahedin-e-Khalq, the Warriors of the People.

It had been just over a year since Dariush had officially joined the MEK. His mother, a primary school teacher, had reacted angrily when he had first started to talk about them. The MEK had played a crucial role in the 1979 Islamic Revolution that brought down the Shah and Dariush's mother blamed them as much as the Islamists for having ruined her life. She had hoped he was going through a phase; the MEK were Iran's first modern Islamic Revolutionaries and she remembered how, as a student, some of her own friends had been impressed by their talk of socialist values and equality. But she began to start to notice more serious changes in Dariush; he began praying, and even though she practised her faith, her son's new-found religiosity unsettled her. He had started lecturing everyone around him about the *sazman*, the organization – the Group – showing photographs of MEK prisoners of conscience. She argued back, reeling off anecdotes about family friends who had become involved and been brainwashed and separated from their loved ones. His mother had been proud of his American education and of their

new life in a small town near Washington, DC. She could not abide watching him pouring all his savings and earnings into the Group's bank account. Dariush did not accept a word of what she said. He started spending less and less time visiting home until he stopped calling her. She begged him to leave the MEK. Instead, he cut her out of his life.

Dariush stepped out into the early-morning spring sky, breathing in the dusty smell of Tehran. It was the smell of his childhood: mothballs, dried herbs, earth and petrol. He was home.

Walking to the taxi queue he savoured every small step, his head jolting around like a pigeon scanning for food. The familiarity was almost overbearing; everywhere he looked it was as if he were surrounded by relatives. He had never felt such a strong sense of belonging, not even with the Group.

'Listen, we haven't got all day, get in the car or out the queue.' A man in a bib and a clipboard was staring at him.

'Sorry, deep in thought. Vali Asr Street, Parkway, please.'

Dariush had been surprised when the instructions came to meet in north Tehran, but the Group had learnt from bitter experience that there are few places in the city where they could blend in. People are less interested in your business on the streets of north Tehran; too involved in their own conversations and recoiling at anything that may prick the bubble in which they live. In the early days, first meetings between an operative and his handler used to happen in secluded downtown parks, but now those were full of drug addicts, dealers and cops. Even when there appears to be no one around, in every alley and corner in downtown Tehran there are hidden eyes and ears. Once, a meeting of comrades near the bazaar had gone disastrously wrong. Whispers of a hushed conversation spread through the area. Two group members saw the police coming and ran for their lives. They lived in hiding

for three months before they were smuggled out on donkeys over freezing mountains by outlaw Kurds, having persuaded them that they were student protesters, for the Kurds would never have taken them if they had known they were MEK members. They still remember how the MEK helped the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein battle Kurdish uprisings. Under the Shah, most political prisoners and those executed on political grounds were members of the MEK and that had helped swell their support. Just two years after the revolution, the MEK had half a million active followers. Feeling threatened by its burgeoning power, the real men behind the Islamic Revolution – the clerics and the fundamentalists – did what they would repeatedly do when faced with a threat from within: they turned against their own. Calling MEK members *monafeqin*, hypocrites colluding with imperialist Western powers to wage an unholy war, the revolutionaries hanged or shot thousands as part of a systematic cleansing. Survivors escaped to Iraq, where Saddam gave them protection and installed them in Camp Ashraf, a stretch of land north of Baghdad where he armed and trained them. The MEK had even joined the Iraqi army to fight against Iranian soldiers during the Iran–Iraq war, killing many of their own countrymen. That is when attitudes towards them shifted.

'God, you haven't been here for a while, where d'you get that accent from? Sorry sir, I don't mean to be rude, but that accent's thicker than George Bush's – it's got to be America?'

The driver stretched his neck as he laughed and gave him the once-over in his rear-view mirror. Dariush winced.

'Yes, America, near Washington. But we never wanted to leave Iran, we had no choice.' He was apologizing.

'Twenty years! You've earned that accent, not like these rich kids who go on holiday for a week and come back pretending

they've forgotten their Farsi. Ah, the Great Satan, what I'd give to go and live with that devil. My girlfriend spent three days queuing up at the US consulate in Istanbul and they practically laughed in her face. We're all terrorists you know.' He turned up the tinny Euro-techno that was softly thudding away. When Dariush had fled, Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive' had been a taxi favourite.

Even though the windows were all shut, cold streams of wind blew through the cracks and gaps of the white Peykan, Iran's improvised version of the 1960s Hillman Hunter, as it thundered along, full-throttle.

There is only one driving speed in Tehran: the fastest your machine will go. The battered old Peykans can still manage a lurching eighty miles an hour with a new engine, nearly as good as any Peugeot, the middle-class car of choice. The Group had joked it was more likely Dariush would die on Tehran's roads than at the hands of the regime, and they were probably right. Mangled cars, bloodied passengers and even dead ones lying on the tarmac are familiar sights in Tehran. Of course the traffic was also a major concern for the Group; they had decided on using a motorbike as the getaway vehicle, as a car would get stuck. But at this time of day the freeway was eerily clear. Dariush watched Tehran unfold from his window, his eyes tracking the rise and fall of houses, apartment blocks, offices, hospitals and schools.

He had not remembered Tehran being so ugly. His memories were of old stately homes, winding alleys, elegant French-built apartments; villas and orchards and gardens; a clean city with no traffic. But now all he could see was an unsightly mash of grey concrete slabs, gaudy blocks of flecked marble, towering mock-Grecian pillars and primary-coloured plastic piping for good

measure. They had pissed all over it. Dariush clenched his teeth shut as the hate convulsed him. The anger was always a relief. There were moments when he could feel the rage dissipating from his body, it was a physical sensation; his muscles would loosen and his chest would rise. He would panic in anticipation of losing his motivation, of giving up the struggle. But not now. They had taken over his city, and he was ready.

The taxi turned into Vali Asr Street, the road that reminds all Tehranis of home. At first glance Vali Asr looked more or less the same. There were still the greengrocers, the boutiques, the cafés and restaurants, the glitzy shop fronts and the hawkers. Only the bars were gone, the whisky joints his parents loved, the smoky billiard halls open all night, the discos with their queues outside. It pained him to admit that Tehran was better off without all these things – the pernicious, corrupting influence of the West that had taken root in his country and cracked the foundations of his land. It pained him because this was the time his parents had been happiest, dancing and drinking up and down Pahlavi Street. But it also hurt Dariush to think his parents had indulged in a culture that was so louche. He had tried to exonerate them in his mind; they had simply embraced the aspirations of any young middle-class Tehrani in the 1970s. But he had turned his back on all that. The Group had shown him the way and he knew God was watching.

The roads were not so empty now, the city slowly crawling out of its slumber. An old, bent man pushing a wheelbarrow stacked with oranges edged past the car. Despite a full head of hair, he looked 100 years old, and sounded even older, his frail croaks muffled by the engines and snatched by the spring breeze.

'Poor old thing. OI, GRANDDAD, HOW MUCH?' The driver beckoned him over.

'Three hundred tomans for a kilo of oranges my son, they're fresh today, picked from the sweet soil of Mosha,' whispered the old man, lifting his small eyes, shimmering with cataracts, from under his hunched back. Even his clothes looked ancient: a threadbare, stained shirt with incongruously starched collar and cuffs hung from his little emaciated body, the worn folds of his peasant trousers billowing towards the ground.

'Granddad, you've got more hair than me and him put together – keep the change.'

'It's the only thing I've got more of than anyone else,' the old man's smiling gums glistened, 'may God give you a long life.' The taxi rattled forward and the driver shook his head at the image of the old farmer in his rear-view mirror. 'Even if he sells all the fruit from his village, that guy still won't have enough to feed a family. This ain't living, it ain't even surviving. This city's fucked.'

The Peykan emerged from the tunnel of trees into Parkway, a huge concrete intersection stuffed with people and cars zigzagging in every direction underneath a flyover. The driver stopped at an island in the middle, clipping the side of an office worker's briefcase. The man didn't even bother turning his head as he waded out into the roar. Dariush got out of the taxi and into the middle of the morning mayhem. He realized there would be no lull and he would have to cross the road Iranian style, throwing himself into the oncoming traffic. It took him over five minutes to cross the ten yards to the other side; each time he inched forward a car or a motorbike screamed towards him. Finally an old woman in a chador told him to follow her, and as her hefty body waddled through the onslaught of cars she told him he must have been away a long time. He sighed.

Dariush walked north to a café on the corner of Vali Asr and

Fereshteh Street. It had been open for hours, serving *kalepacheh* breakfasts, an entire sheep's head: tongue, eyes, cheeks and all. It looked more like a laboratory than a café, with shiny white tiles on every wall and surface. The waiters even wore spotless lab coats as they dished out the dissected cuts of soft, slippery meat, the unforgiving glare of the high-voltage strip lights piercing through every slither of fat and muscle on the cheap white china plates. Dariush breathed in the sweet, warm stink of disintegrating flesh, bones and cartilage. His mother had tried to make *kalehpacheh* in America a few times. They had eaten it glumly, in silence, for *kalehpacheh* is a man's dish and it reminded them of his father, who could make it better than anyone. His father, a devout monarchist, had been a civil servant in the Shah's government. When the militia had been roaming the streets and rounding up anyone they could find, he had been taken in for questioning and was never seen again.

Dariush spotted an empty table at the back, near the kitchen counter. He weaved his way through the room and, as he sat down, a small glass of tea was banged on the table by a passing waiter. Behind him, steel pots puffed out streams of steam, the gentle murmur of boiling broth a steady hum underneath clashing plates and voices. He had kept an eye out in the taxi to see if he was being followed. From where he was sitting he had a clear view across the restaurant to outside. Nobody. He was early. He relaxed a little, allowing himself to survey the room.

The diners were a curious mix. Bearded lone workmen and office clerks eating quickly, heads bowed. Old regulars in pressed shirts trading banter across the tables, their breakfast rituals unchanged for decades. Bright-eyed ramblers in windcheaters and woolly socks fuelling themselves after treks in the Alborz mountains, walking sticks and rucksacks propped up against the

tables. They ate the slowest, enjoying every morsel after their dawn summit visits, having beaten the merciless sun and the trails clogged up with the amateurs.

In the middle was a sight that both excited and disgusted him. A group in their teens and early twenties were slumped in their chairs and across the tables, heads resting on each other, feet sprawled out, sunglasses on their heads. They giggled and flirted and in whispers gossiped about their night. The girls were breathtakingly beautiful, even with smudged mascara and backcombed hair falling out of tiny headscarves, stray strands stuck on their sweaty foreheads. Beautiful, despite their improbable upturned noses carved and chiselled by the surgeon's knife. They pouted their juicy lips, pushing out slurred words, throwing heads back and breasts forward as they laughed, showing off slender brown arms. They filled the room with their laughter, their dilated, spaced-out ecstasy-pilled eyes and the sweet smell of vodka moonshine that clung to their party clothes peeking through their *manteaus*, the Islamic regulation overcoats that women are obliged to wear in order to conceal curves. They slurped down the revellers' morning-after favourite, big bowls of brain soup, a perfect hangover cure to soak up the drugs and booze that were still coursing through their bodies.

Dariush was staring so intently at the girls that he did not notice his comrade enter the restaurant.

'Salaam brother. Welcome home.' Dariush had been easy to spot; apart from the agreed set of keys and a packet of red Marlboro cigarettes on the table, he was gawping.

Dariush looked embarrassed. He had taken his eye off the ball.

'Don't worry, it's always a shock to see these young kids behaving like animals while their country goes to shit. And you're the one who's going to be saving us all, right?' He smirked