UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

# Anexo B

Digitalização dos capítulos II, XIV, XV e Epílogo de:

***The Wind in my Hair***

***My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran***

(Masih Alinejad)

Pertencente ao Projeto:

A TRADUÇÃO DE NARRATIVAS AUTOBIOGRÁFICAS E O ATIVISMO POLÍTICO

Projeto apresentado à Universidade Católica Portuguesa para obtenção do grau de Mestre em Tradução

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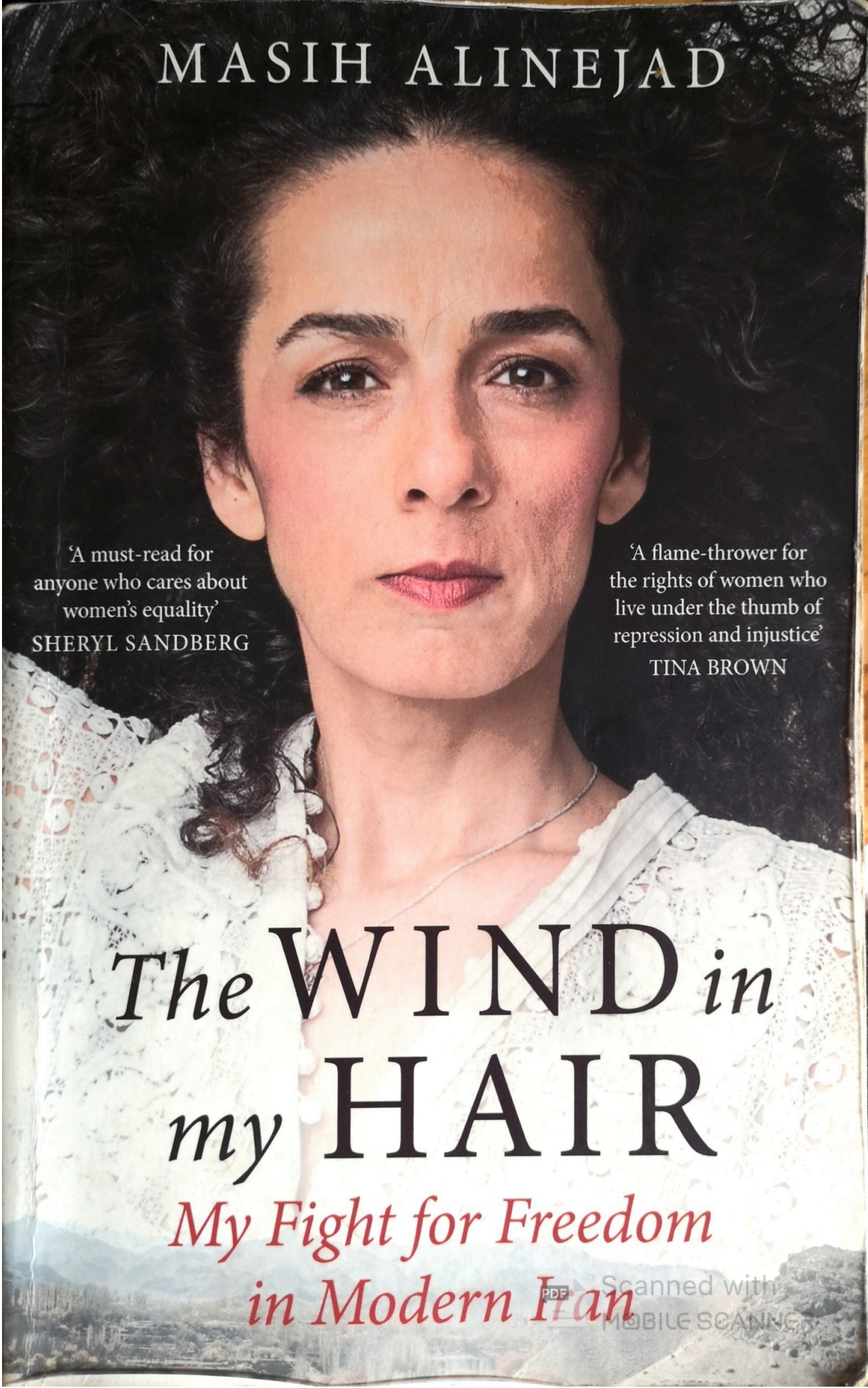

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fake fur inside. I had seen them in a store in Babol, but Mother shook her head when I pleaded with her.

As the first snowflakes arrived, Mother found a solution. She and my aunt bought a pair to be shared between my cousin and myself.

I was not happy with the sharing arrangement. "Is it too much to have a pair of boots all to myself?"

"You either share or you get nothing," Mother retorted.

So I had the boots for one week before handing them over to my cousin, who kept them for a week before handing them back. This was the arrangement that had been made by the grown-ups, but I hated the idea of parting with the boots.

One night, a month or so later, AghaJan came home holding a brown paper bag, out of which he took a pair of red boots exactly like the ones I had been sharing with my cousin.

"These are yours. You don't have to share anymore," he said.

I jumped with joy. I kissed his hand repeatedly. I had a brand-new pair of boots all to myself and no more sharing with my cousin. I unwrapped the plastic coverings and tried the boots on. Almost immediately something felt wrong.

"They don't feel right," I said. "They're too loose."

AghaJan looked away. I was struck with a dreadful thought.

"Did you give these to my cousin first?" I cried. The ones I had been sharing with my cousin felt tight and snug. These felt worn-in.

AghaJan folded the brown paper bag that had contained the boots.

"The boots are a gift from a family that doesn't need them anymore," he said, without looking me in the eye. "We'll stuff some newspaper inside to make them fit better."

That night I told Ali about my not-so-new pair of boots.

"I think all our new clothes are donated," Ali said. "What if we bump into the previous owners on the street and they demand we hand the things back?"

It didn't happen, but in our minds there was always that fear of being confronted with the person whose discarded clothes we were now wearing.



# CHAPTER TWO

I was born on September 11, 1976, and was just a babbling two-year-old toddler when the Islamic Revolution overthrew Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, ending more than two millennia of rule by Persian kings.

The cataclysmic events are the most dramatic in the history of modern Iran. I am a child of that Islamic Revolution and have lived nearly all my life under its shadow. My story is the story of modern Iran, the tension between the secular tendencies of its population and the forced Islamification of the society, and the struggle of women, especially young women, for their rights against the introduction of Sharia law, against violations of human rights and civil liberties.

The revolution changed much, but for women it was many steps backward. In the Islamic Republic, being born a woman is like having a disability.

Even to this day, almost forty years after the revolution, there are debates within many Iranian families about whether my father's generation made a mistake in overthrowing the Shah and his Western-inspired ideas to modernize the country to bring in a regime that looked to the seventh century for moral and legal guidance. Of course, the picture is not black-and-white, and although many

conservative and religious families favored the new regime, many others were not so favorably disposed.

Growing up, we talked about politics all the time in my family. As a teenager, I had loud arguments with AghaJan over politics. When the whole family got together during the weekends, Mohsen and Ali would be on my side against AghaJan, who had Hamid and Mina supporting him. Often, AghaJan would end the discussion with a rueful shake of his head and say: "You still don't know what you don't know."

The revolution was supposed to benefit families like ours, the downtrodden, the meek, and the poor. I'm a product of that revolution, which my parents supported, but I and many millions of Iranians have rebelled against the Islamic Republic.

One day many years later, hunting through family photographs, I discovered a batch of old pictures of my parents. It's always jarring seeing younger versions of your mother and father, but these photographs made a big impression on me for a different reason. In one, which must have been taken soon after their marriage, Mother is wearing a colorful scarf and a fashionable coat. Next to her is AghaJan, with a fierce black mustache; he's wearing a suit and a tie. Before seeing that photograph, I had never seen him in a tie. He never wore a tie after the revolution.

In another photograph, which must have been taken a decade later, the family is standing dolefully in a field. My mother, beautiful as ever, holds my brother Hamid in her arms as Mina and Mohsen stare sullenly at the camera. The children look as if they've missed their afternoon nap. AghaJan sports the same mustache as in the earlier photograph but is otherwise clean-shaven; he's wearing a dapper jacket and a pair of brogues totally unsuitable for walking around the countryside. I was in shock when I found those photographs—the only ones of my father without a beard. I rubbed my fingertips over the photographs as if I could touch his unblemished face.

There was something else that was out of place. In that photograph, we appear to be thriving: Everyone is wearing store-bought





clothes rather than those sewn or patched by Mother. We don't look like farmers living in a tiny village. We look like city folks.

What happened to us? I wondered. How could the relative prosperity of my family in these photographs be explained?

I was too young to follow the nuances of the political upheaval in the country, but the transformation was obvious in our little patch of Iran. Even in the first decade after the revolution, there were divided loyalties in many families, including my own. AghaJan was all in favor of the Islamic government, whereas my uncle Valiollah was a Shah supporter, and every time we had a family gathering the two of them would bicker and snipe at each other. My father called him Shah Doost (Shah supporter), and Valiollah reciprocated by calling my father Khomeini Doost.

I remember one particular row clearly. It was a hot summer weekend and all the family sat on the *sofreh* together on the terrace. As dishes of rice and kebabs were being passed around, one of my cousins cleared his throat and addressed my father.

"Uncle, was life better during the Shah's time?" he asked. He tried his best to look innocent, but I could see that he was just trying to rile up AghaJan. "Uncle Valiollah says we had bigger harvests and more money back then."

My father always said he was willing to give his life for the revolution. He wasn't going to let that comment go unchallenged.

"No. No and no. We had more money, but we didn't have God's government. The Shah"—he made a face as if he'd just eaten a rancid piece of meat—"the Shah spent all the wealth on himself and his family. He was corrupt. We have an Islamic government and we follow the Quran."

AghaJan looked pleased with himself. Until he saw Valiollah walk over to him. Valiollah bent down and slowly scooped up a fistful of rice from the serving plate and started eating it from his cupped hand. Grains of rice fell through his fingers.

"If you say the Shah was corrupt, I guess you know better than the rest of us," Valiollah said sarcastically. "But at least when he ate

he let the crumbs fall down to the people. Your *akhonds*"—an old-fashioned and derogatory term for clerics—"are just as corrupt." He now clenched his fist tight.

"But they eat with their hands closed, and still they take and take from us. The Shah never did me any harm."

Valiollah was a simple farmer, didn't take life too seriously, and always had a stick of gum or a piece of candy to hand out when he visited. Maybe that's why I liked him.

AghaJan craned his neck to address Mother. "I told you not to invite this Shah Doost." Then, addressing Valiollah, he said, "One day, you'll get it through your thick head that you still don't know anything. The Shah was giving our oil to the Americans."

"Who do you think is buying our oil now? American companies," Valiollah said triumphantly.

Usually it was up to the women in the family to bring peace to these gatherings. This time, Mother had had enough. "Why do you have to fight all the time?" she asked. "We had the Shah, now we have Khomeini. Who knows what tomorrow will bring."

AghaJan was willing to give his life for the Islamic Revolution, but even he couldn't deny that the Shah's father, who founded the Pahlavi regime, saved Iran from total collapse.

In 1921, with Iran under the thumb of superpowers Britain and Russia, Reza Mirpanj, the powerfully built commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade, marched with his four thousand men to Tehran to impose order. Eventually he ousted the previous king and proclaimed himself Shah, as the first Pahlavi king. Though illiterate, Reza Shah planned to modernize Iran, and as part of that, he built railroads and highways, established schools and a health care system, and sent thousands of Iranian students to study abroad. He dragged Iran into the twentieth century, even promoting the idea of men wearing modern Western clothing and calling for women to remove their hijab. With his urging, in 1936, came Kashf-e hijab (the unveiling), a law making it obligatory for women to remove their veil or head scarf in public.





More than eighty years ago, there was a law that banned the wearing of the hijab. If I had been alive then, I'd have opposed that law not because I believe in the hijab but because I believe in freedom of choice. Women should have the right to choose what they wear.

Reza Shah's reign came to an end after Soviet and British forces occupied the country in August 1941 to ease the shipment of weapons to Russia, then fighting Nazi Germany. Reza Shah had hired hundreds of German technicians to help on various projects, and the British demanded their expulsion. The presence of these technicians was the justification that Britain needed to invade Iran. Reza Shah abdicated in favor of his twenty-two-year-old son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The new king pursued his father's program of modernization and introduced secular education and a legal system, imported Western technology and industry, and spent heavily on his armed forces. Thanks to the Pahlavis, Iran became a modern country.

This was the peak of women's rights. Under the Pahlavis, women made substantial gains, especially in matters of family law and divorce. They drove cars, worked outside the home, voted in elections, ran for political office, and were appointed to cabinet positions.

Until then, the hijab was not a contentious issue, at least not in the cities. In urban centers, you could find women without hijab working and living alongside religious women who wore the full hijab.

In 1978, the Shah was hit by the perfect storm of protests when liberal opponents who wanted more political freedom joined forces with the clerics, who complained about lax morals, and the radical left, which wanted a worker's paradise. The combined opposition under the leadership of Khomeini proved too much, and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi left Iran in January 1979, never to return.

He was the third king in a row to be forced into exile. A more democratic freedom beckoned, but instead Iran turned toward religious authoritarianism. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, exiled for more than fifteen years, mostly in Iraq and then in France, returned to a hero's welcome, greeted by millions of Iranians as if he were the Messiah. The unsmiling Khomeini, then in his late seventies, didn't look heroic

at all. Even on the day of his triumphant return, Khomeini had the look of a coldhearted man: There was no sign of elation or joy. He promised harsh justice. Within ten days, the regime left behind by the Shah collapsed and the Islamic militants took over.

As the revolution took on a more Islamic hue, the question of the hijab and women's rights came up more and more. The trouble was that at the dawn of revolutionary Iran, women's concerns were an afterthought. In the beginning, Khomeini had spoken of his respect for democracy, human rights, and freedom of religion. It was only after the triumph of the revolution that many women realized that they had willingly ceded their rights and brought about a regime that demanded their subjugation.

On March 8, 1979, one hundred thousand women turned up for International Women's Day to protest laws to introduce compulsory hijab and other Islamic restrictions. Until then, Women's Day had passed unnoticed in Iran. Shadowing the demonstration were mobs of zealots and paramilitary forces armed with knives, broken glass, bricks, and stones. They attacked and injured many women while security forces watched passively.

The huge demonstration certainly had some results—one leading cleric, Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, declared that "women cannot be forced to wear the hijab." His was a minority voice.

The Islamists were undeterred. In 1979, Hassan Rouhani, a junior cleric who in 2013 became Iran's seventh president, oversaw the reorganization of the armed forces. He was the first to order the women who worked for him to wear the hijab or be fired. In ministry after ministry, women were given a choice: Wear the hijab or don't come to work. Soon after, even those entering a government building had to wear the hijab. By 1983, compulsory hijab was the law.

Over a number of years, the Islamic government made life worse for women. The law in the Islamic Republic put the value of a woman's life and the value of her testimony at half of a man's. Women were barred from becoming judges, in accordance with Islamic tradition. Beaches were segregated, as were cinemas and many





public spaces, including sports stadiums. Under the Shah, family law was based on Sharia law but was reformed to allow women the right to divorce and retain custody of children. After the revolution, those reforms were reversed. The changes didn't happen overnight, and the women resisted and put up a fight, especially over the issue of compulsory hijab, which set the tone for how women's rights would shape up.

Iran's first revolutionary decade was traumatic and bloody. First came revolutionary terror, as the new regime executed hundreds of former political leaders and military commanders, often without trial. Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein took advantage of the turmoil to invade Iran. The war started days after my fourth birthday.

Even as the bombs were falling, the regime went about eliminating all internal opposition, from Islamic Marxist groups like the Mojahedin-e Khalq to the Fedayin and the communist party, the Tudeh. Executions, forced confessions, and torture were common.

But the Islamic Revolution had also brought about changes in village life. In the fields, men and women worked together and the women, including my mother, aunts, cousins, and nieces, would roll their trousers up to their knees and wade into the rice paddies. They'd put on a loose head scarf, and if it slipped off, no one complained.

The new regime tried to ban laughter and fun. For a while, chess and pop music were banned. Women singers were particularly hated and most of the stars, among them Haydeh, Mahasti, and Sousan, left the country or were forced to stay hidden from view—a fate that befell the country's biggest pop star, Googoosh, before she too left Iran, in 2000. Wedding parties were segregated, with men and women sitting in different rooms or in the same room but separated by a rope and blankets so no one could see the other side.

My father was more than just committed to the Islamic Republic. He enlisted in the Basij, a paramilitary group used as an auxiliary security force, and part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, created to protect the regime. In the early days of the revolution, he and other basijis would set up roadblocks at night stopping cars coming

from Babol to search for music tapes and alcohol, both of which were forbidden.

He'd delight in smashing cassette tapes, stomping on them or even breaking them with his hands. With his short temper and angry manner, he was known as the "cranky basiji" who lectured the young men he caught. AghaJan was famed for his zeal in lecturing young men about attending the Friday prayers.

As far back as I can remember, all the women in my family slept with our head scarves on. Everyone including Mother, my sister, my grandmother, even cousins and nieces. It sounded strange years later when I tried to explain it to my friends in Tehran, or even later, in London and New York. But the truth of it is that we kept our head scarves on all the time, indoors and outdoors. After sleeping with my head scarf on, every morning before getting up I had to make sure it had not slipped off during the night, as it would upset AghaJan and he'd complain.

My hair was part of my identity, but you couldn't see it. When I was growing up, my hair was no longer part of my body. It had been hijacked and replaced with a head scarf.



# CHAPTER THREE

School was all wrong. For the first three years, the classes were set up so that boys sat on one side of the room, girls on the other. After fourth grade, boys and girls were taught in different classrooms. Before going to school, I had the freedom to run around and play with other boys and girls, but that stopped when I turned seven.

When the recess bell rang, we'd race out of the classroom to the school yard, screaming with pent-up energy and happiness at being let loose. We were as one, boys and girls together. Our freedom lasted for a few fleeting minutes before the supervisor caught up with us with a ruler in his hand and shouted his daily instruction: "Girls . . . girls . . . run to the back of the yard now."

I, too, would retreat, along with the other girls, and could only envy the boys their freedom to run, wrestle, fight, kick a football.

Going to school brought another change to my outfit. I had to wear—over a tunic and baggy pants—a maghnaeh: a combination hooded neck and head scarf that resembled a habit, tightly covering my forehead, chin, and neck and part of my chest as well. Until then, I used to run around with just a head scarf tied tightly with a knot under my chin to keep all my hair in check. Later, in middle school, I wore the manteau—a drab, loose-fitting longish coat—over a long skirt or pants.

the managing editor came out of his office and I was surrounded by colleagues all wanting to hear the story. By then, all the domestic news wires—ILNA, IRNA, ISNA, and the Fars News Agency—had run pieces about my expulsion. The Majlis spokesman had issued a statement in response, saying that Parliament had no issues with *Hambastegi* and ILNA and encouraged them to send a new reporter in my place.

"We will not send a replacement for Ms. Alinejad," the ILNA managing editor told those assembled. "This is censorship."

Battle lines were drawn. ILNA issued an official statement condemning my expulsion. Later, *Hambastegi* followed suit.

On the day of my expulsion, the journalists at ILNA and *Hambastegi* stood with me, challenging the Parliament of the Islamic Republic. It was one of the most daring acts of the Iranian press, which, sadly, had given up all attempts at being a watchdog in recent years and instead had become an echo chamber.

I had been expelled from the one job I really loved. Uppermost in my mind was Mother's advice. They had thrown me out unfairly. Now I needed to find a window.



# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Early the next morning, I was up and ready as if the gut-wrenching experience of the day before had been part of a nightmare. The sun was shining, and I was determined that all was going to be fine with the world. I warmed up a piece of sangak, a flat bread, and wrapped it around a piece of feta cheese to munch on in the car. As usual, I drove to my regular news kiosk to pick up a number of newspapers before heading to Majlis. The day's newspapers were piled in stacks on the ground next to the tea-and-sandwiches stand: The Supreme Leader's face stared up from some of them, others showed Khatami's beaming smile, and four had chosen to put me on the front page. Headlines spoke of "Martyrs," "Resistance," "America," and the "Expelled Journalist."

My expulsion made the front page of *Hambastegi, Etemad,* and *Aftab*. I bought a copy of every daily newspaper I could find and decamped to my car to go through each of them. Another fourteen daily newspapers had covered my story on inside pages.

Repeated in every story was the line "the first journalist to be expelled from the Majlis." I had notched another first. I wasn't sure if I should be happy about the achievement. I threw the newspapers on the backseat, put the car into gear, and took off. Driving relaxed

me, and I sped around the streets of Tehran without a thought in my head about where I was going.

An hour or so later, I found myself in the parking lot behind the Majlis. The young conscript beamed at me. "I've found a good place for you," he said, smiling bashfully and running ahead to show me the spot. "Make sure you roll up the window and lock it, too." He chuckled. "I've got no one helping me today and can't stay by your car all day."

I dangled my keys at him with a big smile and said thank you. He hadn't read the newspapers.

It was a beautiful spring day, and all was well with the world. Maybe today I'd be allowed back in the Majlis, and maybe I'd get an apology, too. After all, I was on the front page of four newspapers. If the Majlis thought they'd avoid bad press by getting rid of me, then they must have gotten a shock with all the coverage. Yes, all was going to be well with the world, I said to myself, as I marched confidently, with long strides, to the Majlis gate. Inside, the guards eyed me curiously. I walked up to the counter.

"Ms. Alinejad?"

I realized by the way they looked at me that I wasn't welcome. I felt very embarrassed about my foolish dreams of returning.

"I need to get in. I need to clear my desk." I was tearing up. "I have a lot of my stuff in the press room."

"Your name is not on the press list," the chief of security said. He sympathized with me, but rules were rules. "But"—he brightened up—"you could go as a member of the public, as long as an MP signs you in."

How embarrassing, I thought. I had to stand by the gate and ask the MPs, many of whom supported my expulsion, to sign me in! It was funny, but I didn't feel like laughing.

A number of deputies did come by, but they all shunned me. Eventually, Nategh-Nouri arrived. He had often warned me that my journalism would get me into trouble. Now he shook his head at me in sadness. "What are you doing here?" he asked in Mazani. He and his family were from the town of Nour, about forty miles or so from my village. "I didn't think you'd show your face here again."

My brother and I used to fight every morning over who got to this bowl first, filled as it was with warm milk my mother got from our cow. We loved to scrape the cream off the side of the enamel with pieces of bread.

My mother was the tailor for the village, and she made me this beautiful skirt. I was so proud. I felt as if I was the prettiest, and the most blessed, girl in the world.

Nanch (my grandmother), mother, sister Mina, brother Ali, and me at age around six. My older brother Mohsen had bought a camera, and we were all dressed up and excited to have our picture taken.

A recent photograph of my father and mother at our home in the village. These days, I can no longer visit them and have to rely on my siblings to send their pictures to me.

All the women in my family always wore hijabs at home. From an early age, I rebelled against this tradition. Here I was already an established journalist in Tehran on a home visit. Pouyan is next to my mother.

The long path to the outhouse. Can you imagine walking along that path in the dark, with only a lantern? My mother used to say, "If you're scared of the dark, open your eyes wider."

This is where only the women would come to talk and gather water for the household. During my childhood, this stream was the source of drinking water for the entire village. I didn't know this was to be my last visit to my village.

My father and I often argued over politics. It was one of our favorite pastimes. This is one of my favorite photos from my last visit, in 2009. He would often say, "One day you'll understand that you don't understand anything." To this day his words make me smile.

Welcome to my mother's "office." She could always be found working hard in this little patch. My mother is a true feminist because she worked as hard as my father and earned her own money—she was able to defend herself and her children when she needed to.

My fight for freedom started in the kitchen—a place where you could take off your head scarf because it was not a space for men. The kitchens in the village are designed for women, with low counters to accommodate their height. I insisted my brother be supportive of my feminist ideology by helping in the kitchen. When he complained that the counters were too low, I got him his own chair. Here he is washing the dishes using a chair. He was the first male feminist in my life.

After my divorce, I got to see Pouyan on weekends at my house. I always say that Pouyan and I grew up together. We were big fans of hats and loved to dress up and be silly.

As Pouyan grew older, I came to rely on him more. He liked to make sure I got enough sleep. This was from my last visit to see him in Iran.

My last day at Majlis, Tehran, 2005. I faced angry MPs livid with my exposés of their corrupt practices. I was banned from the Parliament as a journalist.

Interviewing former president Khatami for a book project on the lives of politicians, Tehran, 2008.

I would rush to these phone booths at Parliament to send breaking-news headlines to my editors at ILNA news agency. Officially, the booths were reserved for MPs, but I had to get my story out, so I disregarded their rules.

It was customary for women reporters at Parliament to wear black, but I wore jean jackets and bright-red shoes to my job there. All the women looked the same, but there was no dress code for the men, and they could wear whatever they wanted. That didn't seem fair.

I was not allowed to study in Iran after my prison sentence. But in the UK, I graduated from Oxford Brookes University, where the rest of the students were the same age as my son!

In Iran, schoolchildren are forced to cut their hair to the minimum. Pouyan was so excited that he wasn't forced to shave his head in Oxford, and I didn't have to cover mine. It was all about our hair!

This is my true nature when I let my inner child take over. © Toby Melville / Reuters 2013

"I have too much hair, too much voice, and I'm too much of a woman." Being interviewed by Tina Brown at the Women in the World Conference, New York, 2016. © Getty Images

This is Shahnaz. Her son was killed during the 2009 fraudulent presidential elections in Iran. Shahnaz bravely campaigned on social media to give voice to the victims of those violent times and refused to be silent in her demands for justice.

Shima Babaei was repeatedly arrested for participating in my #WhiteWednesdays campaign. "By arresting me, you cannot keep me silent. I will continue to protest compulsory hijab," she told the court. A fearless and inspirational warrior.

One of the brave women who contributed their photos to the White Wednesday campaign, which I launched to protest compulsory hijab.

Another brave woman protesting compulsory hijab, from Azadi Square (Freedom Square) in Tehran. Women in Iran want to be free to choose and are engaged in a civil disobedience campaign the likes of which has never been seen before.

January 2018. Iranian women protested against compulsory hijab on the streets of Tehran and other cities by putting their head scarves on sticks. After almost four years, #WhiteWednesdays is the most recognized civil disobedience campaign for women's rights in Iran.

Vida Movahed ignited a new wave of protests when she climbed a utility box on a Wednesday and stuck her white head scarf on a stick on the busy Enqelab Street (Revolution Street). She was arrested and detained but later released. Other women took to the streets to emulate her act.

فتخار می کنم که رابطه نامشروع داشته ام

مسیح علی نژاد

An Iranian hard-line conservative website posted this picture of Kambiz and me. They labeled me a prostitute for appearing with Kambiz without a hijab. Ironically, the photo went viral, and my unveiled image was seen on all Iranian websites.

I told you my mother is a true feminist! She is driving a machine made for men. She's a strong believer that women can do anything men can do.

A street sign in Ghomikola. I am proud to be a village girl, and wish I could go back and visit one more time.

Two different passport photos from two different times in my life. Taking the veil off brought to the surface a younger and more beautiful me. The true me.



"I still have my stuff inside," I said in a pleading voice. "I'm not going to cause trouble or make a scene, but I have lots of notepads, cassette tapes of interviews, lots of stuff in my desk."

Nategh-Nouri walked me in. It felt strange to be inside the Majlis corridors. I quickly packed my bag and said my good-byes to the reporters in the press room. I walked into the press gallery, a balcony overlooking the Majlis floor, for a final look. The Majlis was in session and I looked for familiar faces below.

"You should stay for a bit—they're bound to be discussing your expulsion," one of my colleagues said.

My heart skipped a beat. I dared to dream: What if the deputies voted to have me back?

Eshrat Shaegh, a conservative with a seminary education, a hard-liner and no friend of mine, asked to speak. This didn't look too encouraging. Shaegh, with her thick, dark eyebrows that bobbed up and down as she spoke, was in a state of perpetual disgust. Only a few months earlier she had called for all prostitutes to be publicly hanged.

"This reporter is immoral," she declared, when the subject of my expulsion was raised. She looked scary in her black chador, which covered her from head to toe. "She is depraved. I have confidential information that she was jailed in Babol for political activities against the Islamic Republic. How is it possible that she became a Majlis reporter?"

There was a sharp intake of breath in the press gallery, as all the reporters turned and stared at me. Only a handful of people knew about my prison sentence, but now it had become part of the public record, broadcast on the radio. I kept my eyes focused on the Majlis floor.

Another deputy followed. "Good riddance to her, because she was also a thief. She stole those pay slips, and I've got a lot of complaints from my constituents about my bonus payments because of her."

Now Shojapourian signaled that he wanted to speak. My heart sank. Was he also going to denounce me?

"She is not a thief, because I am her source. I was the one who gave her the pay slips, because I don't like the hypocrisy of the new deputies. She did not steal my pay slip."

There was an uproar in the Majlis. Lots of deputies started speaking all at once, shouting at each other and at Shojapourian. In the press gallery, I smiled broadly, feeling I had been vindicated. The deputies below had no idea I was watching the proceedings.

"She was flirtatious, and everyone knows that she got the pay slips by her immoral acts," shouted a cleric in a long brown robe reaching almost to his ankles. "That's how she got her stories."

My face turned red with shame. I had spurned the sexual advances of some of the same deputies over the past three years.

Deputy speaker Mohammad Reza Bahonar banged his gavel to bring order.

"Even if some deputy gave her the pay slips, that doesn't change matters. She was rude, and many members complained about her."

"We can't expel a reporter for doing her job," another deputy said in my defense. "A reporter is like the thermometer—we can't blame the thermometer if we don't like the weather."

"This thermometer is *kharabe,*" Bahonar shot back quickly as he banged the gavel once again, pleased with himself. The word means "broken," but when it is used for a woman, it means she is a prostitute. "Good riddance to her," he repeated.

The giant television screen in the Majlis was positioned behind the Speaker's chair and projected onto the screen was the image of whoever was speaking. No matter how far back you sat, you could always see the person speaking. The Majlis had at least three camera crews to monitor the floor and make sure they covered everyone.

Absorbed in the debate, I forgot myself and leaned slightly over the balcony to get a better look. The noise from the floor intensified. I looked around and realized that I had been discovered. One of the cameramen had focused on my face in the balcony and my features now filled up the TV screen. I felt like a cornered animal, staring at my own image just as all the eyes from the floor below turned toward me. A low chorus of boos and hisses rang out. It grew and grew.

"Booooo . . . Boooo . . . Get out . . ."





I wanted to run away, but my legs would not obey. Defiantly, I stood up. I didn't dare look down at the deputies. Instead I looked straight ahead at some distant pillars. Bahonar again hammered his gavel to bring order. I was shaking on the inside but held on firmly to the edge of the balcony. I was not going to run away. I stood and stood for what seemed like an eternity and then turned around and walked out slowly. The deputies had spent an hour debating my expulsion.

I didn't care anymore. I left the Majlis on April 4, 2005, and never set foot in there again.

Both ILNA and *Hambastegi* once again issued public statements against my expulsion. My colleagues had thought that the Majlis would rescind the decision and that I'd be allowed back, but the day's hostile reaction convinced me that Majlis was closed to me. The BBC website reported that eighty conservative deputies had signed a letter demanding my expulsion. The news received international coverage.

The next morning, as usual, I went to my favorite newsstand. Three newspapers put the Majlis confrontation on their front pages. Almost every newspaper in Iran covered the story. Even old adversaries now came to my aid. Just six months earlier, Vice President Abtahi had berated me as an uneducated yokel for challenging Khatami over the Nobel Peace Prize. Now, on his personal blog, he blasted the Majlis: "285 Deputies Against One Journalist."

He wasn't the only one. A week after my expulsion was confirmed, eleven reformist papers boycotted Majlis coverage and published a blank page instead of their regular coverage of Parliament.

Rather than demoting or firing me, ILNA promoted me, making me a Majlis editor, essentially overseeing all parliamentary news coverage. Now I was in charge of setting the agenda, assigning stories, and managing a team of reporters. I didn't need to go to Majlis to do my job. But management was not for me, I decided. I wanted to write a book about my expulsion. Writing is my therapy. After the Majlis debacle, all I wanted to do was telll my side of the story. I wanted to tell the story of my son, Pouyan, and my divorce, and the pressures

that women face every day. Soon, my living room floor was covered in stacks of notes and newspaper clips. I wanted to write while the memories were still painfully fresh in my mind. Memories can fade, and in the end, nothing endures but words. I already had a title in mind: *Taj-e Khar* (*Crown of Thorns*). I had been crucified, figuratively, in the Majlis. Now I needed my own crown.

"You have more than enough material to write a book," Ali said one evening, carefully stepping over the stacks. He was carrying a plastic bag full of homemade food. "Now you have to get it out quickly."

The publicity I received worked both ways. The articles about my expulsion could create momentum for book sales, but Ershad (Ministry of Islamic Guidance) would not issue a permit for the book to be published for the same reason. I was too controversial.

"This is your chance to tell your side of the events," Ali said. He had gotten a job as an editor, and he saw the potential for such a book. "Don't blow it."

Words poured out of me as I wrote *Crown of Thorns*. I had to get my Majlis experiences out of my system and show everyone that I was not "flirtatious" or *kharabe*. I was an investigative journalist punished for documenting corruption.

In one month I finished the first draft of the book. All that remained was to get a permit. As it happened, a few days after I finished the manuscript, President Khatami opened the Tehran International Book Fair, in which hundreds of Iranian and foreign publishers from fifty-one countries took part. Mohsen had a stand promoting the academic books from his company, and I made sure I was with him on the first day. From the podium, Khatami, looking serene in his cream-colored robe, cited verses from the Persian poet Hafez and then launched into a lengthy address about freedom of expression and the need to have a critical press. He didn't know I was in the audience.

As is the custom, after he had officially opened the fair he went on a tour of the different book stands, accompanied by the Ershad





minister. At each stand, he exchanged a few pleasantries with the publisher. When he reached Mohsen's stand, I jumped on a chair so he could see me above the throng of men who had formed a cordon around him.

"Hello, Mr. President. I hope you haven't forgotten me. *I* am the expelled journalist."

Khatami did a double take. He clearly hadn't expected to see me.

"Of course I remember you. I was just speaking about you. We need to protect the rights of journalists."

"Mr. President, I appreciate your kind words. But I need action. Can you tell your Ershad minister to green-light my book? I need a permit to publish my new book."

"Of course, of course, just go and talk to the ministry and they'll sort it out."

"It'd be easier if you gave him an order"

Khatami just wanted to get away from Mohsen's stand, but the throng of onlookers made it almost impossible. There was no guarantee that the minister would honor a verbal recommendation by Khatami. I pushed a piece of paper and a pen toward the president.

"Can you write a note for the minister?" I asked. "If you write an order, then it will be done."

Khatami looked very uncomfortable. He turned around, looking for an aide to come and rescue him.

"It's not an official piece of paper," he said, trying to wriggle away. "It needs to be a proper presidential paper with letterhead. I can't just sign anything."

"A note from you to expedite matters," I said, persisting. "Not an official order but a friendly reminder."

Grumpily he took the paper and wrote a one-line note to the Ershad minister to issue me a book permit.

I didn't tell Khatami that I had finished my book already. Almost immediately, Mohsen got to work, managing to get the book into print in just four days. He rushed a dozen copies to the book fair to be displayed on his company's stand. Within a day, Ershad officials

dropped by the stall and asked him to pack the books away because he didn't have a permit to sell the book! Having a permit to publish the book was not enough, we were told; he had to apply for another permit. That process took another four days, but on the last day of the book fair, we could finally display the book legally.

After my book was published, a number of strange things happened. I now lived on the sixth floor of a high-rise, having moved yet again. One evening, I heard the sound of pebbles bouncing against my window. When I looked out, my neighbor signaled that I should meet her downstairs. Puzzled, I raced down the stairs and waited for her in the lobby. She grabbed my arm and dragged me outside to the street, and after the usual greetings told me that my apartment might be bugged.

"*Lebas-shakhsis* went to your place," she said, nervously looking back at the entrance to the apartment block. She meant undercover agents.

"My apartment? How did they get in?"

"They came to my place. First they asked for the building manager, but he wouldn't give them keys, and so they came to my apartment to see if I had spare keys." She wasn't that much older than me. I had seen her around with two kids and sometimes a husband. "The building manager called the police, and two uniformed policemen showed up to check their story."

"Why didn't anyone call me?"

"The policemen said the undercover agents had a special permit to enter your apartment," my neighbor said, looking sheepish. "We were warned not to tell you. You don't look like you are one of those antirevolutionary types."

"I'm a journalist," I said.

"Yeah, one of the neighbors said. I don't follow the news, but I wanted to tell you not to say anything, you know, bad in your place."

I called Ali, and the two of us went through the apartment inch by inch examining every nook and cranny for bugs and other alien electronic devices. Even though we didn't find anything, I didn't want to spend much time in my place. Every time I took a shower, I worried someone was spying on me. Soon I moved again.





I became very watchful of my surroundings from then on, and became convinced I was being followed. I thought I saw the same cars in my rearview mirror following me. One evening, as I met with two activists from Jebhe Mosharekat, a reformist political faction, to arrange a book reading at one of their events, I shared my fears. I wanted help but couldn't go to the police.

"My apartment's been bugged, I'm being followed, and I'm going to get killed," I told the activists.

"Why would anyone follow you?" one of the men said, exchanging looks with his colleague, a former adviser to the president.

I told them that a silver Samand, a make of car ubiquitous in Iran, where it is made, had been following me all day. "And it was there yesterday and the day before," I added.

"Let's see if anyone follows you now," the former adviser said. "We'll go for a ride and see who shows up."

We got into my car and took off. A silver Samand soon showed up. The adviser turned around to monitor the other car.

"Take a left," he barked sharply.

I braked and turned into a quiet street.

"Speed up," he said, looking through the rear window. The silver Samand also turned and followed us.

"Turn right... now another right... now a left..."

Every turn I made, the Samand followed. After driving for a while, the activists told me to pull over. The Samand stopped about fifty yards behind us. Without saying a word, one of the activists left the car and walked purposefully toward the Samand. He bent down to talk to the driver.

"Who do you think you are?" he said, loudly enough for us to hear. "Let me see some papers."

The Samand took off.

"Congratulations, the security services have taken an interest in you," he said when he returned to my car. "And I think I'd better drive," he added, looking at my trembling hands.

I still visited Pouyan on a regular basis, but the trips had become

more difficult because of the attention surrounding my expulsion. I told Pouyan as simply as I could about the challenges I was facing. I knew that others would try to turn his mind against me.

"I want to punch all those who called you a thief," Pouyan said during one of my visits to Babol. He was ten years old, and we'd go into the fields and run and play. I wasn't like other mothers, he said. I climbed trees with him and took him for rides in my car. I missed him terribly, but I couldn't do my job and look after him, even if I had won custody. On the days we spent together, it took an hour or two for him to warm up to me, and by the time I had to leave, the pain of separation would haunt me for the next day.

At ILNA one day I received a strange phone call.

"Khanom Shirin Ebadi, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, wants to talk to you," the voice at the other end said.

This must be a joke, I thought. Probably a prank to embarrass me.

"Salam," Ebadi said in her distinctive voice. "I want to represent you. The Majlis slandered you, and I think you have a case. I don't want to talk on the phone. Come to my office."

How could Ebadi help me? Although she specialized in labor and children's law, there was no harm in seeing her. She worked out of the basement of her apartment in north Tehran. In person, Ebadi was blunt and to the point and didn't waste time with pleasantries.

"I think we can file a case against Bahonar and Kouhkan," she said. "By saying you had loose morals and that you were flirtatious, they damaged your professional reputation. We have a good case."

Of course, Ebadi had heard, and read, about my confrontation with President Khatami over her Nobel Prize, and we had a good laugh about it. The news stories surrounding the incident galvanized nationwide support for her in the face of official hostility and apathy.

Ebadi's assistant, Leila Alikarami, another lawyer, took responsibility for preparing the case. We didn't know it then, but Leila and I would become best friends over my case, and our paths would cross again five years later when we were forced into exile in Britain.





After my expulsion, I also became more interested in learning about women's rights activists. Feminism was taboo in Iran. As a parliamentary journalist, I couldn't risk being seen to be involved in feminism and women's rights activism. To be honest, I didn't have the time; nor did I want to risk another black mark against my name.

But soon after my book was published, Shahla Sherkat, the founding editor of the influential *Zanan* (*Women*), Iran's first feminist magazine in the years after the revolution, called me. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of *Zanan*, founded in 1991, and the role of Sherkat, in shaping the debate over women's rights. Some of the country's most important feminists, including Mehrangiz Kar and Shahla Lahiji, had also written for the magazine.

Sherkat and I both came from traditional families, and we understood each other. She had obtained a degree in psychology before becoming a journalist. Now, as she started the interview, I could see that Sherkat didn't wear the chador, but she had a habit of fidgeting with the folds of her scarf over her forehead. I knew exactly how she felt. All women journalists constantly check their scarves for rebellious strands of hair stealthily popping out. Our constant checking was a tick—a habit to protect against suffering the admonition "First fix your hijab." Like me, her tiny frame was often covered by an oversized black manteau, except that I ached to be free. I didn't know if she felt the same.

The interview became a *Zanan* cover story. I wish I could say that my face stared out from the cover, but all you can see is my large northern nose and my mouth, wide-open. I am laughing, under the headline "The Ugly Duckling of Majlis."

Sherkat was deliberately playing up the nickname that the conservatives had given me. It was a badge of honor, I told Sherkat. I would not be intimidated.

Two journalists from the *Financial Times* interviewed me in May 2005, when the book was published. I hadn't heard of the *Financial Times* before then and was rather surprised that anyone in the West was interested in my story.

Away from my personal troubles, dark clouds were gathering. I needed to keep my eyes wide open. In June 2005, Iran held its wildest presidential elections ever. During the campaign season, it seemed as if the normal rules governing Iran were suspended. The morality police stayed away from the streets, men and women mingled, and women's scarves could slip back and reveal lots of hair. Women walked around wearing the tightest manteaux ever, revealing their curves.

The Guardian Council vetted seven candidates, all regime insiders, as acceptable. The best financed was the former president, Hashemi Rafsanjani—Rafsanjani, who drove everywhere in a bulletproof Mercedes-Benz and rarely traveled outside of Tehran. "Everyone knows me," he once said, dismissing calls to reach out to rural voters. Outside his campaign headquarters, young women wearing headbands with the word HASHEMI in English handed out campaign material to passing motorists. Barely observing hijab rules, they caused traffic accidents as drivers ogled their shapely bodies.

Election month felt like one long festival across the country. It was unlikely that any candidate would win outright, and all the political pundits predicted a runoff election between Rafsanjani and Mehdi Karroubi, former Speaker of the Parliament. As the results began coming in, city by city and state by state, that outcome looked more and more likely. Rafsanjani was comfortably ahead and Karroubi was second. With most of the vote counted, Karroubi headed to bed to get an hour of sleep. When he woke up, he had finished third and was effectively out of the race, bested by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the least-known candidate, who had squeezed into second place. Karroubi cried foul. He complained about voter fraud. To no avail.

A week later, Ahmadinejad, the son of a blacksmith, crushed Rafsanjani to become Iran's sixth and most controversial president. Ahmadinejad promised to produce plenty of drama for people in Iran and for me.



# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As a native of Lorestan, Mehdi Karroubi arrived at his worldview far from cosmopolitan Tehran. I learned this when the white-turbaned populist cleric and I traded stories of being rural outsiders and he helped me get my press accreditation. The Lors are famous for their simplicity, their stubbornness, and their bravery. Karroubi was convinced he had been cheated. Being headstrong, he appealed to the Supreme Leader, but that only got him a reprimand and a warning to keep quiet.

In protest, Karroubi immediately resigned his official posts and launched his own political party and his own newspaper, both called *Etemad Melli* (*National Trust*). Soon after the paper was up and running, the editor called to see if I wanted to join as a twice-weekly columnist. I missed writing, and said yes before he had even finished speaking. I named the column Damasanj (Thermometer).

Before the handover of power, Khatami gave his final press conference, in July 2005. About three hundred reporters crammed into the presidential offices for the occasion. Khatami was immaculately dressed in a fine-woven gray robe. He defended his policies and voiced his hope that the next president would respect the reforms he had initiated. The mood was somber; we all expected Ahmadinejad

to tear up most of Khatami's policies. At the end of the meeting, journalists mobbed Khatami and took selfies with the president. I didn't bother with a selfie and headed outside. I was on the steps as his official car pulled up, and at that moment Mother called my mobile. When I told her that I had just witnessed Khatami's last press conference, she demanded to speak with him.

I looked behind me, and there was Khatami, walking toward me. I gently explained to her that this was not the right time, but Mother was insistent. Just as Khatami was about to get into his car, I handed him my mobile.

"Mr. President, my mother wants a word," I told the bemused Khatami.

He pulled back from the car and with a resigned look took the mobile phone.

"Salam, Madar jan" is as far as he got. Listening intently, he gave the phone back.

"I can't understand what she is saying," he said with a shrug.

"I will have to translate," I told him. Mother spoke in Mazani, our northern dialect. "She doesn't get a chance to speak proper Persian."

Awkwardly, with our heads inches away from each other, I held the phone between our two ears so the president and I could both hear, and as Mother spoke, I translated.

"You threw my daughter out of Majlis—you've damaged her name. If any harm comes to one strand of her hair, you'll have me to deal with," she said, and I translated. I had to laugh at her audacity. Here she was, with dodgy knees that needed replacement from years of working in a rice field, threatening the president of Iran.

Khatami, to his credit, mumbled something about how he, too, didn't want any harm to come to me. I don't think he expected to end his last press encounter being lectured by my mother.

With Ahmadinejad as president, Iran needed a Damasanj—Iranian politics was heating up. Change was immediate and obvious. The stylish Khatami and his men had worn tailored robes and suits;





Ahmadinejad's team delighted in their unkempt and scruffy attire. There was something comical about Ahmadinejad's weathered face, with his shiny black hair and absurd grin, as if he saw a joke that no one else saw. He made dubious claims, like the one that there were no gays in Iran and how if we returned to the piety and the zeal of the early revolutionary days we could solve all our problems. During a trip to New York City to attend the United Nations General Assembly, he was invited to address a crowd of students and faculty at Columbia University. Asked about the treatment of gays in Iran, he said: "In Iran, we don't have homosexuals like in your country. In Iran, we do not have this phenomenon." With those comments, he made himself a laughingstock in the eyes of the world.

He played up the fact that he was not part of the elite. His foes mockingly referred to him as Ahmaghinejad—*ahmagh* means "idiot." His doctorate in traffic management was seen as a joke. But he had street cunning: Ahmadinejad was a populist politician who knew that the country was full of people just like him—the lower middle class, those who didn't have the wealth, the education, or the connections to rise to the next level. He played on their sense of victimhood. He knew how to appeal to those who felt they were being pushed to the fringes of the new Iran, the war veterans who had not benefited from the economic boom. His campaign motto was *Mishavad va Mitavanim:* "It's possible—and we can."

He portrayed himself as a man in touch with the people. One campaign video showed him among the poor, and in another, he stood in line at a self-service canteen. Short, with hollow cheeks, he was considered unattractive, and he had no sense of style, unless you considered ill-fitting jackets and a perennial windbreaker an ironic fashion statement. Unlike Khatami, he had no clever turn of phrase and could recite no poetry. Ahmadinejad was an outsider if ever there was one. The political establishment was against him, and yet with nothing or very little going for him, he had won, using revolutionary slogans harking back to the early days of the Islamic Republic.

The country held its breath.

In his first few weeks as president, Ahmadinejad picked fights with the Majlis for rejecting some of his cabinet choices; he even attacked his own economic advisers, and he fired a number of seasoned diplomats because they were leftovers from the previous administration. He acted as if he were still a candidate rather than the elected president. Ahmadinejad was acting like President Trump before there was a President Trump.

Ahmadinejad toured the country, visiting some two thousand towns in two years. He all but threw money into the crowds that greeted him. His officials were churlish and uncouth war veterans with bad suits and rough manners. At the equivalent of town halls, he pledged federal funds on the spot to uproarious applause. He was like a game show host or a faith healer, the miracle worker who came bearing quick fixes and offering instant gratification. He had no strategy apart from dispensing cash and empty slogans.

At *Etemad Melli,* we were clearly in the anti-Ahmadinejad camp. We watched with horror as Ahmadinejad created chaos around the country with his nominations and proposals. I was still learning to be a columnist, rather than a reporter. But I found my voice, commenting on the new president's mishaps, complaining that the election was over but the winner was still in campaign mode.

After noting a few controversies of his tenure, I wrote: "Mr. Ahmadinejad, the whole country has come to terms with the fact that the former president Khatami is gone. We miss him but he is gone. The country knows that we have a new president and that president is you. Isn't it time you believed it, too? It's true. You are the president of Iran. It's time you came to terms with it and acted like a president."

Just months into his presidency, Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be wiped off the face of the earth. It wasn't as if he was initiating a new policy. Before the 1979 revolution, Iran and Israel had enjoyed warm relations, but the Islamic Republic's founder, Khomeini, had called for Israel's destruction. Ahmadinejad was just reiterating the policy. He isolated Iran further by denying the Holocaust. His





statements were disastrous for Iran, I warned in a column, comparing the president to a "loudmouthed street thug" who hangs around street corners yelling at other pedestrians and cars. "Even as other thugs applaud his actions and slap him on the back when he gets back home, a storm has wrecked his house." Ahmadinejad's antics were isolating the country, and ordinary people would pay the price for his belligerence. If Ahmadinejad continued unchecked, a storm would wreck Iran.

Needless to say, I made no friends among Ahmadinejad's conservative fans, but a number of reformist publications, all opposed to Ahmadinejad, sought me out, and I was busier than ever. Some of the president's statements were bewildering, but they were all calculated to appeal to certain sections of the electorate. Ahmadinejad was unpredictable: One day, he even said that the morality police spent too much time monitoring the hijab, and that we should not worry about such affairs. On another occasion, he said that women should be allowed inside sports stadiums to watch football games. It was amazing that Ahmadinejad, with all his shortcomings, was standing up for women's rights. Of course, he was quickly overruled by the clerics in Qom. That was one of the rare occasions on which I praised Ahmadinejad—for tackling an issue that Khatami had ducked. Even though he had been overruled, Ahmadinejad had done the right thing. It is insane that Iranian women cannot attend soccer or volleyball games.

At the same time, Ahmadinejad introduced the Program for Social Safety, which called for morality police vans to be stationed in popular neighborhoods to harass improperly dressed women. He pushed legislation that eroded the status of women in marriage and set quotas limiting the number of women accepted to universities in certain fields.

In my article "The Government of Denial," I lamented how Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust and the existence of gays, and his refusal to acknowledge the equality of women, were shaming all Iranians. Not many were laughing at Ahmadinejad inside Iran. In

another piece, "The Government of Lies," I said that from an early age we are taught not to tell lies. With Ahmadinejad, the lies were so big and outlandish that the people believed them. Ahmadinejad specialized in big lies. All his lies were enormous. My columns won me lots of fans, but not among Ahmadinejad officials.

In May 2006 I visited Beirut as an *Etemad Melli* columnist. The idea was to write a series of articles on the relationship between Iran and Lebanon, and on Hezbollah, but I really wanted to visit another country and experience life beyond our own borders. Foreign travel was a big deal because Iranians were typically denied visas by almost every country—exceptions included Turkey and Afghanistan, and the city-state of Dubai—or given them reluctantly. Europe was out of the question, and we had no relationship with the United States due to the 1979 embassy takeover. Every year, on the anniversary of the event, there are massive demonstrations in Iran, especially in Tehran, to celebrate the takeover, a sign of defiance against the world's only superpower.

I cajoled the editors at *Etemad Melli* and eventually got my letter of accreditation to go to Beirut, regarded as the Paris of the Middle East—the most European city in the region. After obtaining the visa from the Lebanese embassy, I raced back to our office to brag about our good fortune. One of my colleagues quipped, "You're so excited, you'd think you'd got a visa for America." Everyone in the newsroom laughed. I could more easily have imagined traveling to the moon than going to the United States. Even though I didn't believe that the United States was the land of the Great Satan, as the regime propaganda called it, I was apprehensive about the place.

Beirut. That was the first time I felt I had truly left the Islamic Republic and experienced *kharej*. I stared in wonder at all the women; for the first time in my life, I was seeing women in public without the hijab, women without head scarves, women who were not veiled, and women who walked with no head covering of any sort—and no one attacked them or beat them or arrested them. The shock of the first day remains with me still. I was almost thirty years old, and





this was the first time I was seeing women walking, driving, running, shopping, all without head scarves. Along the Corniche, a seaside promenade lined with palm trees, many Beirut residents took brisk walks, women with and without the hijab strolling together without any trouble.

On the first day in Beirut, I kept expecting the screech of brakes to signal the arrival of vans loaded with morality police to arrest these women. I looked for signs of rough-looking men to berate and attack these women without hijab. But no one seemed to care. The Lebanese men had no reaction; they were used to it. I was the only one who was staring. How was it possible that a Muslim-majority country like Lebanon did not enforce compulsory hijab? I asked myself. Iranian media was always telling us about the power and influence of the Shiite political group Hezbollah, with its own armed wing, funded by the Islamic Republic. Yet social freedoms did not seem to be curtailed in Lebanon. Officials in the Islamic Republic insisted, and still do to this day, that the well-being of society demands that women wear the veil. In Beirut, women had a choice; some chose the hijab, but others didn't. And yet the fabric of Lebanese society had not fallen apart. Why can't Iranian women have the same freedom to choose? I asked myself repeatedly.

In Tehran, on a few occasions, when my hair was shorter, I'd dress like a boy, and with a baseball cap firmly pulled down over my forehead I'd go on hikes up the mountain trails. There was always an element of danger, and it was fun sneaking past checkpoints, surrounded by friends. Once I became established as a political journalist, I stopped taking such risks.

It took me a day or two in Beirut before I dared to remove my own head scarf. I worried someone would report me to Iranian officials and I'd face punishment on my return. I kept fidgeting with the knot, trying to decide whether to take the head scarf off or not. I even hoped that a strong wind might come and blow the head scarf away, taking the decision out of my hands. I realized that just by the way I was dressed, with a manteau and head scarf, everyone could tell I came from Iran.

I wanted to blend in and be inconspicuous, but I was racked with guilt that somehow if I removed my head scarf, I was letting my family down. I looked over my shoulder constantly as I wandered around the city, worried that undercover agents were monitoring my every move. It was silly, but I also felt a sense of great responsibility. After all, I was a columnist for *Etemad Melli*, a major newspaper published by a former presidential candidate. I couldn't let the newspaper down, and I didn't want to lose my job.

It was difficult not to be influenced by what I was witnessing. I befriended another Iranian also in my hotel. I could tell she was Iranian just by the way she kept her head scarf on all the time. We debated removing our head scarves. Each of us pushed the other to take the first step. Finally, after two evenings of fretting, we made a momentous decision: We'd remove our head scarves in public the next day. We felt daring and defiant.

We sat on my bed. "This must remain a secret for the rest of our lives," I told her. After wearing a head scarf in public for almost twenty-three years, I was almost feverish with excitement at the thought of walking around the city with my hair uncovered.

"I can keep a secret. It's you that I'm worried about. You are a journalist. You write about everything that happens," my new friend Parastou said.

"I promise." I raised my hand as if making a sacred vow but kept giggling.

"Even if we fall out and have a fight, we should never tell anyone."

We took sacred vows to keep our act a secret. I wish I could say that what happened in Beirut stayed in Beirut.

Throughout my life I had been told that my virtue, my chastity, my self-worth, all were wrapped up in my head scarf. I was brainwashed to believe that a piece of cloth over my head would protect me from the lusty desires of men. If I went out bareheaded in public, then I was not a moral person. The next morning, my heart was racing as we left our hotel as usual, with our heads covered. After a block or two, we halted and looked at each other. Without saying a word, we yanked





off our head scarves. My mouth was dry. I held my breath, expecting to hear police sirens and loud warnings from the morality police.

Nothing happened. No sirens. No policemen raced to arrest us. Other pedestrians walked past without a second glance in our direction. I looked at Parastou—she had the same excited and nervous look on her face I must have had on mine. We laughed and hugged, relieved that no one had caught us. It was amazing to feel the wind blowing in my hair as I walked around the city, like most other women we saw that day. I constantly touched my hair and my head to remind myself that I was bareheaded. I had a number of meetings and interviews arranged that day, and when my encounters were with Hezbollah officials, I put my head scarf back on out of fear they might report me to the Iranian embassy and cause me trouble. Otherwise I kept my head scarf off.

That night, giddy from our day of freedom, Parastou and I decided to push our luck and investigate a nightclub. We'd only heard about them and had no idea what to expect. It required another vow of silence.

"We should do it," I said. "For research purposes, of course."

"Our trip would not be complete without a full exploration of what Beirut has to offer," Parastou said with a giggle.

"If we go, we must take another holy vow not to breathe a word of our nightclubbing to anyone, even if we fight and fall out," I said.

Parastou nodded in agreement. "May we burn in the fires of hell if we reveal this secret."

Giddy with excitement, we dissolved in laughter. We called acquaintances who had moved to Beirut and beseeched them to take us to a nightclub. Once again, I was amazed at how free the women were to dress as they liked without being harassed or attacked or leered at. We were like social scientists, observing everything and taking mental notes.

That night, my nerves got the better of me, and I'd dressed as conservatively as possible and even prepared a cover story, just in case I was recognized. Even in Beirut I constantly worried about being followed. I put on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved green dress and wrapped a long scarf around my neck that could just as easily serve as a head

scarf. I also took my backpack and carried my notepad and pen. I was a journalist, in case anyone asked! I was gathering material for a story.

The club throbbed with the bone-shuddering beat of the loud music bouncing against the walls. It was terrifying. I had never heard music that loud. The room was dark apart from the flashing colors and the strobe lights, which made my head spin. Men and women were dancing to this deafening music under these lights. These people were crazy, I thought.

The bar served alcohol and I was shocked at how normal it was to drink. When I was married, I had tried *aragh sagi*, a type of homemade vodka made from raisins. I hated the sharp and bitter taste and I never touched alcohol again. All around me young men and women were chatting, laughing, and dancing together, acts that are forbidden in Iran. The image that I had been fed—that there was rampant sex outside Iran, that drug addicts and drunk men preyed on women, and that nightclubs were places of sin—was proving to be wrong. In Iran, we were constantly warned that our hijab protected us from the evil that men do. Having gone to *kharej*, I had expected more lasciviousness; I wanted to see acts of lewdness to regale friends and family with when I returned home, but so far there was nothing like that to tell.

Parastou and I met a lot of people that night, and once they realized we were Iranians, the reactions were mixed. The Shiites were happy with Iran for providing Hezbollah with cash. One woman showed us her locket necklace, which contained a picture of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. I stared at her in shock. "How can you wear that and go to a nightclub? It'd be like finding basijis or hardcore supporters of Khamenei attending illegal underground parties and drinking alcohol. It just doesn't happen." I shook my head at her.

My impressions of Lebanon had come from Iranian TV reports. I associated Lebanon with pain, sadness, and resistance against the Israeli oppressors; but they looked a lot happier than the average Iranian.

We have a saying in Persian: *Ta seh nashe, bazi nashi*—literally, "Until there are three (of something), there won't be play." More poetically, it is better translated as "Third time's the charm" or "Third time lucky."





We had already taken two vows of silence, and then came the third. During my stay I had driven a few times past the U.S. embassy in Beirut, a forbidding and forbidden building. On my penultimate day, with nothing better to do, I persuaded Parastou to go for a visit.

I was just three years old in 1979, when radical students occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran. Today, anti-American graffiti and drawings cover the walls of the embassy. I had seen newsreels about the takeover: Mobs surrounded the compound, which was labeled a "den of spies" by the revolutionaries, and chanted "Death to America," calling the United States the Great Satan as blindfolded career diplomats were paraded—images seen on television around the world. The hostage crisis sealed the enmity between the Islamic Republic and the United States.

I'd never met an American, and here was a chance, I thought. I'd been led to believe that the Americans were the devil and wanted to take over our country. I figured that since Parastou and I had broken two taboos, by taking off our head scarves and going to a nightclub, we might as well meet the enemy.

The next day the two of us headed to the U.S. embassy in Beirut. Lost in our own thoughts, we hardly spoke in the taxi ride to the north of the capital. I was nervous and apprehensive about what might happen. In my backpack, just in case, I had a copy of some of my clips and a photocopy of the *Financial Times* article about me, which I carried everywhere. It was the first article about me in English and one of my most valuable possessions at the time.

Looking back, our visit was rather absurd, but we were too naïve to know any better, and curious to see Americans. Again, if the United States was so bad, why did Hezbollah allow it to operate its den of spies openly? The taxi dropped us outside a building with tall walls and a big metal gate with a small window.

We stood outside the gate debating what to do next. We didn't want a visa, and I couldn't even meet or interview any diplomats, like the consul or the ambassador, because any contact with American officials was strictly forbidden for Iranian journalists.

"Why did you pay the taxi? We have no way of getting back," Parastou said. She had gotten cold feet.

"We can make a call for a taxi from inside the embassy," I joked, but she wasn't in a mood to laugh. "It's too late to back out."

"If word gets out, we'll be questioned for days. We'll lose our jobs and go to Evin," she said.

I reached out and rang the bell. Having come this far, there was no point in going back empty-handed.

"I don't speak any American, so get in front of me in case someone answers," I said firmly.

After a few minutes, a marine opened the door.

"Hello, we are Iranians," Parastou said in English with a heavy Persian accent. "We wanted to see what the American embassy looked like. We don't have an embassy in Iran."

I gave the marine my most winning smile and showed him the *Financial Times* article about me, jabbing at the accompanying photograph and pointing to myself. He looked at us, said a few words, and shut the door.

"He wants us to wait." Parastou shrugged. She was learning English so she could apply to an American university. "He'll fetch someone to give us a tour."

It made no sense at all. Why would the Americans give us a tour of their embassy? I wondered.

After about six or seven minutes, the door opened and two young men in suits and ties came out and examined us. They had big smiles on their faces and looked very friendly.

"They are asking if we need any help," Parastou said. "What do I say now?"

I showed my *Financial Times* article again and held out my Iranian press card. "Tell them that we are famous journalists and are curious to see the American embassy because we don't have one in our country."

One of the men took my ID and the article.

"Also, tell them we're just curious, but it's not a big deal. If we can't see the inside, it doesn't matter."





"You really are Iranians," one of the men said with a laugh. "Wait here." Parastou quickly translated what he had said.

The two went back inside and again left us in the afternoon sun. "I hope they give my ID and the press clip back—that's my only copy. I can't honestly explain to people how I lost my ID," I told Parastou.

The door opened again and we were invited in. The two men showed us a few offices and led us to a conference room and served us tea and cold drinks and some snacks. After a few minutes, they must have realized that they were talking with two innocents abroad on their first trip out of the country. We kept telling them how scary it was for us to meet Americans, and that made them laugh. They handed us some tourist leaflets about the United States.

"You sure you don't want to interview us?" one of the men asked.

"No!" Parastou shouted. "We'd end up in jail."

As I looked for a final time around the conference room, another thought occurred to me. "Imagine if this building was in Iran. All the walls would be covered in 'Death to America,'" I said to Parastou.

"I'm not translating that. Do you always get such crazy thoughts?"

Outside, we walked calmly away from the embassy for a block, in ladylike fashion, in case we were being observed. Then we began running—screaming wildly with joy as if we were little children.

"We just met some Americans."

That evening, our last in Beirut, my friend Mohammad Javad Akbarain, a dissident former cleric, took us out for dinner. We told him about our adventure at the U.S. embassy.

"Don't ever speak of this again," he said urgently. "You'd be treated as spies. I've been here for three years and have never dared to even go near that building."

Parastou and I took our third and final vow of silence that night.

Lebanon opened my eyes to different possibilities. Here was a Muslim country where there was no compulsory hijab and where men and women could mingle without being arrested. There were signs of change in Iran, but we seemed to be decades behind our

neighbors. For every step forward, sometimes we took two steps back.

I returned from Lebanon eager to learn to speak a new language so I could travel to other countries. I told Pouyan I had plans to steal him away, that we'd go and live somewhere far away, where no one could find us. Most weekends I'd race up the winding road north through the mountains to spend time with him.

"But my grandparents could find us," he said with a kid's logic. "They should come with us, too."

Reza had married Nasrin. But he was resentful of my success and unhappy that I had revealed details of our marriage and subsequent divorce in my book. As punishment, he cut my access to Pouyan from once a week to once a month. It pained me to be cut off from my son this way, but the law had given Reza custody of Pouyan. I wept when Reza called to tell me of his decision, but he wouldn't change his mind. It was tough for Pouyan to understand why I couldn't be with him as often.

My own romantic endeavors had not been too successful. I got engaged but left my fiancé after he cheated on me. After that, I focused on work—I wrote for a series of newspapers and magazines, in addition to *Etemad Melli*, and in my free time, I wrote my third book, *Man Azad Hastam* (*I'm Free*). This time Ershad refused to issue the permit necessary for publication. My second book had received critical acclaim but was perceived as too political. Reza wasn't the only one who didn't like the book. Most MPs also hated it.

As my access to Pouyan was now reduced to once a month, I decided to be the fun mother! His grandparents mostly looked after him, so there was no point in worrying about his day-to-day life or offering to help him with homework. Maybe limited access was better, I reasoned with myself. I might not be with Pouyan all the time, but when I was with him, I gave him 100 percent. I was determined to make every occasion as memorable as possible for us. When I arrived to pick him up, I was ready for all kinds of adventures: I'd take





him on hikes in the forests around Babol, clamber up mountains nearby, and sing under the trees.

In late 2007, before Pouyan turned eleven, I left for a short visit to Britain, promising to get him the latest gadgets available only to English kids. I figured I could learn to speak English in a few weeks. The other reason for the trip was that I needed to find a publisher outside Iran to print my book, which I would then ship to Iran and sell privately. Without a permit from Ershad, it was too risky for publishers in Iran to accept the book. London was cold and wet and windy. The people were unfriendly, and I spent most of my time with other Iranians in London, which didn't help me to learn the language. I found a publisher who for a small fee printed my book. I shipped a few boxes back to Iran, hoping that they would not be seized. Soon after, I headed back to Tehran.

I hardly learned any English during my short stay, but I had an idea for a new book.

It was going to be about *Us* and *Them*. How the way our leaders lived differed from how the ordinary people lived. The book would be a series of interviews with current and former officials about how the other half lived. I composed a series of questions, on subjects ranging from hijab to music to the role of women. I chose former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami; the current president, Ahmadinejad; Haddad-Adel; Karroubi; Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani (a former presidential candidate); and former Iranian prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who called himself "the most principled reformist."

I wrote to all seven and hoped for the best.

Karroubi was the easiest to get a response from, since I worked for him. I pulled up to his political offices in downtown Tehran. Everything about his offices screamed he was from the countryside. There was a mishmash of furniture in the waiting area. Vases and carpets and other handicrafts from his home state of Lorestan were randomly placed around the room; his staff wore casual clothes, with shirts

hanging outside their trousers. The men walked around in slippers or just plain socks. I, too, was asked to remove my shoes and once again realized I was wearing unmatched socks. I always have a problem with this—when I'm wearing socks at all, either they have big holes or they're unmatched.

My photographer and I were led into Karroubi's private office, in which almost every flat surface was covered in papers—newspapers, position papers, campaign posters, and charts of all sorts. Karroubi, politically sidelined since the Ahmadinejad victory two years earlier, was already planning to make another presidential run in 2009.

In the middle of the room, Karroubi sat in an armchair with his legs pulled up under him. "Go on, let's see what sort of mischief you have in mind for me this time."

I started with an easy question regarding hijab. France in 2004 had passed a law banning the wearing of head scarves at schools. The issue remained a hot topic, and many Islamic leaders feared Europe would impose more laws restricting what Muslims could wear.

"Imagine you travel with your wife, and upon arriving, your wife is forced to remove her head scarf. What is your reaction?" I asked.

"It's a great insult, because hijab is part of Islamic culture," he said. He talked in a slow and deliberate way, repeating himself and overexplaining. I allowed him free rein to say as much as he liked. Finally, he paused for breath. "The French law takes away my wife's right to choose the hijab. And not just my wife—all the Muslim women in France are denied this basic right, the right to choose."

"Really," I said with mock indignation. "So when the French president and his wife arrive in Tehran, why do you force his wife to wear the hijab? Why must she wear the head scarf? What about her right to choose?"

"You trapped me!" Karroubi screamed, only half joking. "You are being clever. You let me go on and on and on, but you were waiting to snap your trap. Get out! I'll lose my head if I answer your questions." He was smiling now to show his appreciation for my approach.





I tried another question. "Almost all Iranians listen to music, at least in the privacy of their homes. Have you ever listened to the voice of a woman singing?"

Karroubi was not happy about how the questions were shaping up. He laughed, but I could tell that he was beginning to have regrets about agreeing to the interview.

"Here is an easy one," I said. "All revolutions devour their children, so which one are you? The one who gets devoured or the one who devours?"

"Who would dare to devour me? No one," Karroubi thundered, turning serious. "I will not devour anyone or let anyone eat me." He became pensive. He had been imprisoned a number of times under the Shah during the 1970s and served in a number of key positions after the Islamic Revolution. "In every revolution, some people are eliminated."

Khatami was next. He was now based at the International Institute for Dialogue Among Cultures and Civilizations, an organization dedicated to his pet foreign policy project of greater dialogue, as the name suggests, between civilizations. The former president had pushed for greater outreach between Islamic and Western leaders since 2001, in the hope of improved U.S.-Iran relations. Apart from a few academic papers, not much came out of his efforts.

Even after his presidential term had ended, Khatami attracted trouble. In May 2007, he had landed in hot water for shaking the hands of at least two women during a visit to the city of Udine, in Italy, to participate in a seminar on dialogue between cultures. Khatami saw himself as a philosopher rather than a politician, but the conservatives were relentless in hounding him for the handshakes, one of which had been captured on video. He denied the incident and claimed that the video footage had been doctored by the CIA. It was a lie, of course, but Khatami couldn't admit to shaking a woman's hand. It was against the Islamic Republic's laws.

Khatami's neat and orderly offices, in an expensive part of north

Tehran, were in complete contrast to the ramshackle mess of Karroubi's. All his staff wore elegant suits or, if they were clerics, fine woolen robes. Everyone wore shoes indoors, where the floors were covered with handwoven Persian carpets. An Italian coffee table dominated the waiting room.

When my photographer and I were called in, I decided to play a joke on the ex-president.

*"Buongiorno,"* I proclaimed loudly, holding out my hand to him. I wanted to let him know that I didn't believe his denials over the handshake.

Khatami's smile froze on his face, and with icy politeness he invited me to sit on a sofa in front of another elegant coffee table. Of course he did not shake my hand. I started my interview with my question about compulsory hijab for the wives of foreign leaders.

Just like Karroubi, he started to lecture me on Islamic values and how the West must respect the hijab as a right for Muslim women who choose it. The French had no right to ban the hijab, he finally finished.

"What if the French president and his wife came to Iran? Why would you force her to wear the hijab even though, as a Christian woman, hijab is not mandated for her?"

Khatami fidgeted with his prayer beads. He clearly regretted having allowed the interview, and he chose to argue for Iranian exceptionalism. "We have laws that say all women must have their heads covered and be modestly dressed. That's the law. We are an Islamic country, whereas France is a secular country, and there are no such laws."

His argument was that Western countries had to respect Islamic laws and customs, but we didn't have to respect Western laws and customs. Since Western countries were secular, they were not bound to religious edicts, but Iran had to follow its religiously mandated laws.

I plowed on to the next question. Ordinary Iranians listen to pop music, especially by female divas like Googoosh and Haydeh. All you





ad to do was take a taxi in any major Iranian city. Had the president er listened to a female singer?

"No. I've heard women reciting the Holy Quran."

I raised my eyebrows. Surely, as a man of culture, he had listened to some music. "These women are iconic. They are part of the fabric of our society and you say you've never heard any of their songs?"

"I have never had occasion to hear a woman singing," he said, shrugging.

"I have a beautiful voice," I said. "I'll sing for you."

Before Khatami realized what was happening, I started singing a pop classic by Haydeh. He looked panic-stricken and nervously played with his prayer beads. He forgot all about my photographer, who placed her camera on the coffee table between us.

After four short lines, he clapped furiously to make me stop. It was a hilarious image. A former president of Iran nervously trying to silence my singing.

"You are good, but...you should focus on your writing." He leaned toward me, his hands firmly on the coffee table between us. "Don't tell anyone about this."

My next target was Rafsanjani, who held court as the chairman of the Expediency Council, an unelected body appointed by the Supreme Leader to adjudicate disputes between the Majlis and the Guardian Council. It had an advisory role but no real power. Ironically located in one of the former Shah's palaces, it suited Rafsanjani, who was one of the most powerful men in the Islamic Republic. After weeks of silence I received a thirty-minute notice to present myself. With Tehran's traffic, there was no way I could make it by car to the Kakh-e Marmar, or Marble Palace, where the Expediency Council was based.

I walked into an intersection near my home. Cars and taxis sped past, but I had my eye on something else. I raised my hand and hailed a passing motorbike. Usually you had to find someone reliable to be your motorbike taxi, but I had no time.

"Where to, sister?" The rider was young and wore a black leather jacket and jeans.

"The Expediency Council. I'm in a hurry."

He looked at me to see if I was joking. Seeing my stony face, he nodded. "You serious? Oh, God."

I held on tight as we weaved through the traffic. It was my introduction to taxi bikes, and I instantly regretted my decision. My driver constantly revved his engine to speed up and then braked as he zigzagged between cars. I closed my eyes, so I wouldn't see how close we were to getting killed.

At last the young man slowed down and swung sharply into a narrow street closed off by a metal gate. A number of armed guards became interested in us as I gingerly got off the bike. My driver took off without asking for any payment. One of the soldiers walked up to me with an amused look in his eyes.

"I'm here to see Ayatollah Rafsanjani," I said, in the firmest voice I could command after the nail-biting ride I'd just had.

I was escorted to an outer office that retained some of the opulence of the Shah era, even though the Marble Palace had fallen out of favor.

An aide took my notepad, pen, and tape recorder. "All conversations are taped. If it's deemed necessary, we'll provide you with a transcript," he told me.

He led me to a large inner room furnished with Persian carpets and Louis XV chairs. Rafsanjani sat in a large, straight-backed armchair, as if seated on a throne. He was no longer popular with young people, not just because of the allegations of corruption surrounding him and his family but because he had been linked to a terror network responsible for the killing of dissidents. He was then at one of his lowest points of popularity, but you couldn't discount Rafsanjani. He always bounced back.

He got up and took just one step toward me, a token gesture of welcome, and I raised both hands to signal surrender. "I'm entering like a disarmed soldier, without my tape recorder, pen, and notepad," I said with a big smile, hoping to win his favor. "I'm like a cleric without his robe and *imamah*"—turban.





Rafsanjani's face showed no emotion. With his hand, he indicated where I should sit.

"I have a number of questions," I began.

*"Bepors."* Ask. One word. To the point. No extras or polite chitchat. He didn't waste time. Other politicians would have used a politer term, like *Befarmaeed.* Be my guest. He eased himself back into the armchair and looked at me with cold, calculating eyes, almost daring me to take my best shot at him.

"How can I without my tape recorder and notepad?"

"You didn't ask for a press interview. In your letter you said you wanted to meet with the leaders of the country to benefit from their wisdom."

He had obviously read my letter and understood that it was just a way to get in. He was looking more and more like "Akbar Shah," a term used behind his back.

"If I told the truth, I was sure you'd never grant me an interview. Truth is, I'm a journalist." I quickly told him about myself—my career at *Hambastegi* and ILNA, and now at *Etemad Melli.*

"I've read some of your articles," he said. I waited, my heart beating fast.

"You've got a nice writing style. And I followed the news of your expulsion."

That was it for compliments. Please go on, I thought, trying to egg him on inside my head. I was quite flattered that he had read my articles. But that was it. He was done with his press reviews.

"I'm writing a book about leaders and ordinary people. I've got seven questions for seven leaders."

*"Bepors."* Again the one-word reply.

"What is the biggest lie you've told?"

"Next."

I was puzzled. He stared at me impassively. There was nothing for me to do but move to the next question.

"Have you done anything to cause you shame?"

"Next."

I moved on to my other questions, and each time the response was "Next." Until the penultimate question.

"You are on an official visit to France with your family, and the French police ask your wife to take her hijab off. What would you feel?" I half expected him to respond with a terse "next." He surprised me.

"My wife can take care of herself. Next."

"But in the Islamic Republic you force women from other countries to cover up. So why don't other countries do the same to us?"

I wanted to start a conversation, but Rafsanjani wouldn't look at me directly. He played with his worry beads.

"These are not banal, everyday questions. Next."

The issue of compulsory hijab was one of the pillars of the Islamic Republic, and for this reason it was very sensitive.

"Have you listened to women singing? Millions of Iranians have, but what about you? Has the leader of the country listened to the voice of a woman singing?"

He wriggled in his chair. Then he got up and thanked me.

"These are good questions. Please coordinate with my office to come again for a proper interview."

The door opened and an aide came to escort me out.

"But please remember," Rafsanjani said with a half smile, "you asked eight questions, not seven."

He was the only one who had caught on to the fact that I was asking eight questions and not seven, as I had promised. I never got another chance with Rafsanjani.

Ahmadinejad had taken one of his trips to a far-flung province, dispensing money and favors like an Indian pasha throwing coins to the impoverished masses. He loved those trips, showing off like a pop star on a nationwide tour. He enjoyed breaking the rules of financial planning and professed not to listen to economists. Behind the scenes, a team of bureaucrats scrambled to ensure that the books were balanced. Sort of.





Watching his performance on television, I was mesmerized by the extravaganza, the crush of people rushing his motorcade, and the applause as he handed out contracts and cheap money. I had grown tired of the television coverage of these visits. I had a vision of him as the trainer who throws fish to the seals or . . .

My next column, "Avaz-e Dolphinha" ("Song of the Dolphins"), was my most controversial ever for *Etemad Melli*. I compared Ahmadinejad to a dolphin trainer who used food to teach new tricks. At each location, the crowd had learned to coalesce around him and perform a "hungry symphony of stretched necks and tears" as they waited to get fed. Except that Ahmadinejad wasn't teaching us any new tricks—just different ways to beg.

The next day, I was at a deli picking up a sandwich for lunch before heading in to the office when I heard a news report from a radio on the counter.

"The article by Masih Alinejad is a huge insult not just to the president but the whole Iranian nation," the newscaster said.

"They are talking about my article," I told the sandwich maker. "I didn't insult anyone."

By now I had developed a thick skin and shrugged off the report as an overreaction on a slow news day. That lasted until I reached my office. Inside, it felt like a wake. Everyone was gloomy and depressed.

"Fars News has published five stories on their website already," one reporter told me. Set up in 2003, the news agency was closely aligned with the Revolutionary Guards and other conservative hard-liners. Fars published slanted news articles and pushed through the agenda of the Ahmadinejad backers. In this case, the position they took was that I had insulted all Iranians and that *Etemad Melli* should take action. "They are demanding that you be fired."

Karroubi was under pressure to act. It was not enough that he punish me; they also wanted to shutter the newspaper. To prevent that, Karroubi himself issued a public apology and distanced himself from me. Some people "didn't know the difference between

criticism and insult," he said. One of his aides appeared on a news show and said that the column was written by an "inexperienced youngster, not even a full employee but a contract worker." The newspaper was going to end its relationship with me.

I was enraged and stunned. Did I just get fired? I wondered. I had not expected to be abandoned by my editors so readily. Parliament had expelled me and I had found my window, but now that looked to be closing, too. Some reporters, fearing the closure of the newspaper, said I had gone too far in my column. But when in doubt, attack. That's one of my core beliefs. "I'm going to Fars," I declared to the reporters assembled in the newsroom. I hurried down the stairs, eager to confront the architect of the negative stories against me. On the way down I bumped into a young woman about my age, on her way up. It was Nahid Siamdoust, a reporter from *Time* magazine. I told her my plan.

"You think I can come?" she asked. She subconsciously checked her maghnaeh to make sure that she was properly covered up for Fars.

"Sure. I can't get into any more trouble," I said, bluffing. I had no idea what I was going to do, but whatever it was, having another reporter along could be useful. Especially since she worked for a foreign publication.

At Fars, a doorman with a receding hairline puffed on a cheap cigarette, blocking our path.

"I want to see the managing director. Your reporters are telling lies about me. I'm here to tell him I never insulted the people."

He whispered into a telephone, keeping a close eye on Nahid and me.

"Sorry, they said they cannot meet with you," he said, grinning triumphantly.

"Let's see if you can stop me." I rushed past him.

He yelled after me but did nothing to stop me. After a beat or two, Nahid followed me. We walked into the newsroom and found our way to the desk of a junior editor. Of course, the doorman had





called, and so the element of surprise was lost. I demanded to be interviewed.

"We don't interview spies," the young editor said.

"I'll wait," I said, and sat at his desk. After some time, the managing editor agreed to meet with me.

"To call someone a dolphin is not an insult," I insisted after the briefest of introductions. "You can call me a dolphin and I wouldn't be insulted. Dolphins are much smarter than humans."

"That's all you have to say?" The managing editor looked at me incredulously.

"I'm not going to apologize. It's Ahmadinejad who should apologize for treating people this way. His gimmicks only turn us into better beggars."

Back at *Etemad Melli*, I was given an ultimatum. Write a new column and apologize, or the newspaper might shut down. I thought of my mother's words: Even if they throw you out, find a way to get back in. The door was shut and the window was barred, but at least if I apologized I might get back in. I was sure that I had done nothing wrong, but I had to swallow my pride and write a mea culpa column. Karroubi was adamant. He also took my column away for two weeks, as a public punishment. Privately, he told me that he had apologized to save me, and that my job was safe.

Around midnight, with the apology written for the next day's paper, I sat at my desk, drained from the day's activities. I still had the sandwich I had bought for lunch, untouched in my bag. As I unwrapped the sandwich, my phone rang.

It was Ali Akbar Javanfekr, Ahmadinejad's media adviser.

"You blew it," he growled into the telephone. "There will be no interview with the president."

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Far from being a disaster for my career, the "Avaz-e Dolphinha" column raised my profile. The piece was widely circulated and discussed, as if I were the first person to claim that the emperor had no clothes. I was acclaimed by reformist activists and politicians. I knew of journalists who had been detained and jailed for doing far less, and I think that my notoriety saved me from arrest.

I didn't belong to any political party or faction. I liked having the freedom to write what I pleased without partisan pressure. Yet I was openly critical of Ahmadinejad, and as much as I chastised the president for his ruinous politics, I was also tough on the reformist politicians, calling on them to promise real political change, to improve conditions for women, and to foster an atmosphere where we could have freedom of the press, without fear that our publications would be shut down. My independence came at a price—reformist politicians whom I had befriended warned me that if I were to be arrested, they'd be powerless to protect me or come to my aid.

Trying to balance my chaotic life and still have a say in Pouyan's life wasn't always easy. I hated the fact that I could see him for only





one weekend every month. My absentmindedness didn't help, either. One evening, I drove to Ghomikola on my way to pick him up. My brother Ali greeted me at the door as I breezed in. He casually asked what present I had gotten for Pouyan.

"Why should I get him a present?" I asked blankly.

"It is his birthday," Ali said, laughing out loud.

Oh God! I had forgotten Pouyan's birthday. It didn't matter that we paid scant attention to birthdays; given how little time I spent with Pouyan, I was overcome with guilt.

"I'm a terrible mother. May God strike me down," I said a little overdramatically.

"Do you know what he likes? You can still get him something in Babol."

I had no idea. I knew by heart the names of every single member of Parliament and all the cabinet appointees and their contact details. But I was clueless as to what toys or games my son liked to play with.

Ali saw the panic in my face.

"Get him a PlayStation."

"What's that?" I had never heard of it.

"You are hopeless." Ali laughed at my befuddled look. "They play games on it. Everyone has it."

As usual, I didn't have enough cash on me and ended up borrowing money from Ali and the rest of the family, who had gathered for Pouyan's birthday party at AghaJan's house. I rushed to the only electronics store in Babol to buy the PlayStation as Ali fetched Pouyan.

Pouyan tore open the gift wrapping and showered me with hugs and kisses. He soon became immersed in the games, forgetting all about us. I didn't care that he wasn't paying me much attention—as long as he was with me, I was happy. The next day a dark cloud of despair descended over me after Ali took Pouyan back to his father. I refused to cry when we separated. At least not until Ali's car had turned the corner. Then I sank to the floor and cried and cried.

women are as brave as previous generations of young women, and that they have opened their eyes wider than ever before to win over the darkness.

I don't know when I will return to Iran. Living in exile has been painful. I've been thrown out of my house. I've managed to sneak back in via social media and satellite television. I'm out of Iran, but it's as if I never left the country.

When I was growing up, I used to watch the clerics, the Friday prayer leaders, and other officials of the Islamic Republic on our fourteen-inch black-and-white television. Now the same clerics hear my voice from satellite TV and on Facebook. They know my name. It is not only my voice they are hearing. It is the voice of millions of Iranian women who are no longer willing to be silent. The women of Iran want to be free to make their own choices.

That's why the struggle will continue... until we all feel the wind in our hair.



# EPILOGUE

On December 27, 2017, a Wednesday, Vida Movahed, a thirty-one-year-old mother dressed in all black, calmly climbed a five-foot-tall utility box in Enqelab Street (Revolution Street), one of Tehran's busiest, removed her head scarf, tied it to a stick, and waved it for all to see. Three different witnesses filmed her short protest against compulsory hijab and sent it to me. She was arrested, but the video of her act of defiance, her resistance, spread through social media with unparalleled speed.

The next day, small street protests in the city of Mashhad over high prices and corruption quickly spilled over into some eighty-five other cities and towns. A police crackdown on protestors and social media ended the unrest, leaving 25 dead and 3,700 arrested. But throughout the protests and for days after, Movahed's single act of defiance captured the attention of many activists.

The protests over the economy ended, but Movahed's fate concerned us. I contacted many organizations and media outlets to publicize her case. At the time, we didn't even know Movahed's name. I created a hashtag in Persian "Where is the girl of Revolution Street?" which was retweeted more than 19,000 times. One of my

key supporters, Shahparak Shajarizadeh, said we should all emulate Movahed's act of defiance, and that prompted other women from the #WhiteWednesdays campaign to stage similar protests in different towns and cities across Iran. On January 24, 2018, Amnesty International, the London-based rights group, called on Iranian authorities to "immediately and unconditionally" release Movahed, who had been "protesting peacefully against the country's mandatory Islamic dress code."

In their statement, Amnesty called on the Rouhani government to "end the persecution of women who speak out against compulsory veiling, and abolish this discriminatory and humiliating practice." United Nations special rapporteur on Iran Asma Jahangir had called on Iran six months earlier to end its compulsory hijab laws. The momentum was building against compulsory hijab.

Two days after Amnesty's statement, Movahed was quietly released.

Then other women took her protest further. On January 29, six women in different parts of Tehran, some carrying white scarves, others green and red, also made the symbolic gesture, removing their head scarves and waving them for all to see. One protester said, "I took my scarf off because I'm tired of our government telling me what to do with my body."

More and more women took to the streets to remove their head scarves in public—on busy street corners, standing tall on utility boxes, platforms, anything that elevated them so they could be seen. The issue of compulsory hijab, a topic that had been taboo for almost forty years, had burst into the open. Everyone was now talking about compulsory hijab, newspaper columns were devoted to the issue; even politicians entered the debate. It was no longer a trivial issue. The law wasn't going to change overnight, but women were not giving up.

The security forces were not as enlightened as the rest of the population. At least thirty anti-hijab activists, including twenty-two-year-old Shima Babaei, were arrested. Some women protesters were





roughed up; at least three suffered broken bones. Shahparak was followed for two weeks before she too was arrested as she took off her head scarf on a busy sidewalk. She was released when her family posted bail.

Every morning, I face the day proud of my sisters who are bravely challenging the antiquated and discriminatory compulsory hijab laws, and at the same time I fear for their safety as I remember my own prison days. And yet the fight goes on, because Iranian women want the freedom to choose. After the arrests, I received a selfie video from a young woman who stood outside the local Basij offices in Tehran and defiantly took off her white head scarf. As she stared into the camera, she loudly said: "Our weapon is a white scarf, and today I'm here to ask why have Shima Babaei and others been arrested. Even if you arrest me, be assured that there will be many more who will come out to protest.

"I'm ready to pay the price if it will bring a free Iran."