

Spared

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By

Nastaran Akhavan

A MEMOIR

A True Story of Courage, Struggle and Spiritual Healing

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Iran's Map



Location of Iran on the world map



Preface

The purpose of writing this book is not intended to be the history of Iranian revolution or Iran's history in general. It is merely to put in words my own history, recollection, and involvement in the event of Black Friday that took place on September 8, 1978 as I remember it, and without any judgment. This is a story of true struggle and courage, and undeniable testament to the power of surrendering to god. This story is true in content, but the names of the characters other than me have been changed to protect their identity from any discrimination and prejudice. It is not the intention of the author to condone, demean, insult or promote the Pahlavi dynasty, or the Islamic republic of Iran.

It took me 30 years to finally write this book. It took a lot of encouragement from many different people to be able to finally put words on paper about the massacre that happened on Black Friday. It took me another 30 years to get the courage to write about it, including 3 years of intensive therapy with one of the world's greatest therapist, Mili Naugle MFT.

I strongly feel that it was god's will to have me there in the first place to experience what I needed, to become the person I am today. As Elisabeth Kubler-Ross puts in to perspective **“Know that everything in life has purpose. There are no mistakes, no coincidences, all events are blessings given to us to learn from.”** I have no doubt, god spared me from certain death so one day I can be the voice of the victims who lost their lives in the Black Friday massacre. They certainly did not have a chance to tell their tale and their side of the story. As far as I

know, I am the only survivor. I feel the responsibility as well as the compassion to be the voice of approximately 8000 innocent people who died that day. Many of the families were never informed about what happened to their loved ones or their whereabouts. Most of the families still don't know where their loved ones are buried due to the fact that many of them were buried in mass graves. The families of the victims also never had the chance to say goodbye. I also deeply hope that upon reading my story, perhaps the families will have the closure they so desperately need and help answer the questions they may have had.

- **Nastaran Akhavan**, San Diego, California

Prologue

As my eyes adjusted going from absolute darkness to the bright lighted street corner, I can see the silhouettes of several soldiers around me. I can feel myself being dragged backwards. The sound of gravel is grinding together underneath me and I can feel the pain of my skin being ripped off. The soldier is easily dragging my tiny body behind him. His hand is holding one end of the handcuff to drag me along the gravel road and the other end is squeezing both my wrist together behind my back. I let out a scream from the bottom of my lungs from the pain in both of my shoulders. If the soldier does not let up, I fear that both my shoulders and arms will break very soon. The soldier stopped, turned around and kicked me really hard in my ribs, taking my breath away, and he said “Oh, so you can scream but you can’t talk? I see what kind of game you are playing”. The soldier continued to drag me to what seemed like an eternity. I cried and coughed uncontrollably but couldn’t get any words out of my mouth. He stopped at a light post, grabbed me by my hair and stood me up, and tied me to the light post. Ah what a relief that my arms are not being stretched backwards anymore. I would take the pain of beatings and hair pulling over that anytime. I could see through my swollen, watery eyes that I was at the end of a street. Not a residential street but a street full of shops, stores, and offices. I have walked in front of these stores many times to get to school every day, and sad that this time may be my last. I looked around I saw large amounts of fresh blood on the ground, and suddenly the gravity of the situation weighed heavily on my mind. My level of fear went up another gear when I saw the

fresh blood, because I knew that they must have killed someone in that very spot just earlier, tied to the same light pole I am tied to, and I am next. I felt my stomach tie up into a knot and I got physically ill. I tried hard to hold myself back from throwing up but I am unable to. Ten to fifteen soldiers swarmed around me staring at me, as if looking at a hunted animal. Like a flash they all walked back and lined up in front of me with their rifles pointing right at me with such precision that I could tell they had done many times before. I could feel the end was coming soon, this is it, and this is where I will be executed. The gravity of what will be happening hits me, and I am hyperventilating and crying. How can this be happening? My tears are pouring down, and my heart is beating so fast that it makes breathing difficult. I was cold and shivering and my teeth are chattering. As my impending death nears, a feeling of calmness came over me. I am not worried about myself or my death, all I can think about is my mother, how sad she will be to find out I was executed. I always thought execution was for murderers, revolutionaries, or criminals, so why am I being executed, it just didn't make any sense. The countdown starts, and it snaps me back to reality. I can hear the voice of an authoritative and powerful man outside the firing squad telling his men:

“Get ready....get set..... “I can hear all the rifles being cocked and the noise echoing in my ears. I close my eyes and brace myself for the moment of impact.

Fire.....

Suddenly I woke up drenched in sweat from head to toe, and found myself in the fetal position under my living room table in my house. I realize once again, that I was having another terrible nightmare, another night terror. How would I ever heal or forget about what had happened to me on September 8th, 1978 that has come to be known as “Black Friday”. When will I ever stop having these flashbacks?

First I was so happy the nightmare was over, but I slowly realized that it was not a nightmare, only a twisted recollection of the intense terror I had hidden and put away in the dark corners of my consciousness to protect myself from the cruel and disabling truth I had lived through. Very confused about what I was doing under the table, I crawled out and walked back to my bed. Night after night I found myself having night mares about running and hiding from soldiers. I had numerous bruises and cuts from running in to the walls and furniture, as I ran aimlessly through the house reliving the dark forgotten memories I was now remembering. My memory was finally coming back to me, with all the ugly details of my past. The memories of that dark and bloody day, September 8 1978, or Black Friday, were all coming back to me. My brain had done a very good job of blocking them for 30 years to protect me from these terrorizing and scarring details. Before that day, I had a general idea of what had happened, but never in such graphic details, and vivid colors. My memory had a lot of holes in it, and I could never make out how I made it home or how I survived. I know I had asked for it when I asked for help from my counselor/spiritual mentor/best friend, Mili Naugle, to help me recover all my memories of that dark day. She was and still is a beautiful middle aged lady from India, who also happened

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to be a Marriage/Family Therapist or an MFT. She is one of the kindest people I have ever known. She is selfless, giving, and very connected to god, spirituality through meditation. She saved my life, and nursed all my emotional and psychological wounds. She warned me that there was a good reason why I blocked the memories of them, and perhaps it is best if I don't remember. I insisted and begged her to help me, and tried to convince her I am ready and I want to know every detail. Within a month or so, with the help of Mili, my full memory of Black Friday came to me through many night terrors. She helped me to remember them through meditation, surrendering to god, and allowing myself to regain those memories. She always told me that god would not give you more than you can handle. So surrender yourself and if you are truly ready you will remember them. After 30 years and months of therapy and meditation, I finally learned why I was spared.

Chapter 1 - Neglected Childhood

“Should you shield the canyons from the windstorms you would never see the true beauty of their carvings”

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

Early Years

I always wondered why I have lived such a different life from anyone else I know. Nothing about my life was ever ordinary, not even my birth. Even to Iranian culture standards. I was born in Iran, Tehran in my own home. Our home was a very beautiful and large house that my dad built from the ground up. It was a 2 story home with the largest balcony in the neighborhood. All single family homes in Iran had balconies, some small and some very large. The yard was filled with fruit and flowering trees, a basement, and a small shallow pool. Tehran is the capital of Iran, a beautiful town with a lot of modernization, but still keeps its unique Middle Eastern charm. My mom's name was Mehri, and she was from a city in the North of Iran close the Caspian Sea, called Gorgan. My father's name was *Javid*, and he was from a city called Kashan which is located in the center of Iran. *Kashan* is famous for their beautiful Persian rugs. My mother was married away to a peasant farmer at the age of 13 against her will, and had a son from that marriage. She was used and abused like a slave, and forced to do heavy hard labor dawn till dusk. Her son was ripped away from her and raised by the mother-in-law. She eventually escaped and never returned to the family. She reunited with her son later in life but not until he was a teenager.

My mom and dad met in *Babolsar* which was also a city by the Caspian Sea where my father was on a work assignment as a civil engineer building the tunnel that went through the Alborz Mountain. His specialty was buildings, tunnels, and roads. My mom's family had moved to Babolsar after she ran away from her ex-husband, due to the shame it created for her family. My mom

and dad were married the arranged marriage way. Her step father was not happy about having my mother back living in his house again, and wanted her out of his house, and married off again. My father was 32 years older than my mother, and surprisingly the age difference was not considered a problem. At the time of marriage my mom was only 16 and my father was 48. It was not unusual for a man to be 15-20 years older than a woman at the time of marriage, but 32 years age difference was excessive even to Iran's standards in 1950's. They lived in *Babolsar* for a year before they decided to move back to Tehran and settle down. My father preferred to live in a small town like *Babolsar*, but my mom was very anxious to see what it was like to live in the capital. My father bought a large piece of land from my uncle who was a real estate tycoon, and built a house on top of it from the ground up. Being a civil engineer, he designed the house himself. At the time he built that house, other than my uncle's mansion, there were barely any other homes around, but soon after that the neighborhood grew, and it became a populated part of town. Soon after moving to the house my mom got pregnant, and gave birth to my sister Neda in 1959. My father had his heart set on a son, but was OK with having a daughter as long as he gets his son next time around. 2 years after Neda's birth, my mom got pregnant again.

I was born in 1961, the same year Kennedy became president in United States. My birth was premature and unexpected when my mother just turned 7 months pregnant and delivered me in our home without any help. As a result, my mother hemorrhaged heavily, and I never spent a day in an incubator. My mom never lactated due to premature delivery, and hemorrhaging

complications and I was being fed cow's milk. At times I was fed by the gypsy's who would come through our neighborhood. It was very common for Gypsy's to come through the town, and take odd jobs such as cleaning, or washing clothes, to make extra money. Especially if there was a Gypsy who was breast feeding her own baby, would offer to breast feed other people's babies as well for a small amount of money, to give mom a break, or if mom was too ill or tired to breast feed her own baby. By word of mouth they knew very quickly which doors to knock on, to get what the work they want. My mom hired nursing Gypsy's as many times as she could afford, to breast feed me. If there was a nursing gypsy available, I would be breast fed, otherwise cow's milk had to do. I was breast fed by 2 dozen Gypsy women approximately. I wonder at times if having had so many Gypsy women's breast milk, helped shaped my personality or thoughts, or directions in life. Ironically I have always been fascinated and attracted to long gypsy skirts, and chandelier gypsy earrings! Most Halloween's my costume is be a gypsy!

Divorce

After discovering that my mother gave birth to another girl, my father left town in anger and resentment of not getting a son he wished for. My father was married once before to a German woman, and had a son. They both died in a tragic car accident, leaving my dad with strong yearning to have another son. In those days it was common belief that some women are capable of having boys, while other women were unfortunate in that aspect, and can only produce girls. It was of extreme importance that a man has a son to carry and restore the family's name. Iran was a male dominated society as was the rest of Middle East, and some families really believed that it had to do with the woman's genes that determined if she can produce male infants. If that tendency was demonstrated by her family history, meaning if women in a given family have had higher number of boy to girl ratio, then that girl was a lucky girl and presumed to be a good wife to obtain. This was a big deal, and unforgiving offense for a woman to not be able to produce a male offspring, and number one cause for divorce. Even the king of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah, divorced his first wife Fawzia, who was a stunningly beautiful Egyptian princess, because she failed to give him a son. All of her beauty, love, and status were not enough to save the marriage, if she could not give him a son. He eventually divorced her and married his second wife, Farah Diba, a Persian woman, who gave him 2 sons and 3 daughters.

My father left without a trace and never told anyone where he was going and how long he will be gone. Just imagine my mother going through all this with no money, and no one to help her. She had sold all her jewelry, to help raise small amount of money to

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