

SIAVASH SAADLOU

The Enemy

*Martyrs, my friend, have to choose between being forgotten, mocked, or used.
As for being understood—never.*
—Albert Camus, *The Fall*

Note: This story contains a depiction of psychological and physical abuse. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

THE FIRST THING YOU SHOULD KNOW about Reza is that he was the toughest thirteen-year-old among us. Even his beauty was fierce, a rare breed in our middle school's gene pool of predominantly black-haired, dark-eyed, olive-skinned boys. His eyes were hazel, his skin smooth as silk, his hair blonde and delightfully dishevelled. He told us that he took after his dad who—like my dad and Mohsen's and Mohammad's and Pouya's and just about everyone else's—had died as a “martyr” in the Iran–Iraq War.

Finding myself in front of the school one January morning, I saw Reza's distinctive frame emerging in the forlorn alley, reminding me that I wasn't the only one running late. By the time I arrived, Tehran's wintry fog had died down, throwing into stark relief the letters on the lintel above the door: *Imam's Disciples*. Watching the 7:00 a.m. news earlier after my mom had already left for work, I had hoped to hear the same words as I had the day before — *the schools are closed today due to heavy snow* — words that had prompted every kid in the neighbourhood to pour out into our alley and partake of joyous snowball fights.

"Why are you late?" I asked Reza.

"I overslept," he said nonchalantly.

I was relieved that Reza didn't ask me the same question because I would have felt embarrassed telling him the truth. I had decided that day to take the half-hour walk to school instead of the school bus, just because I was in love with the snow.

"Let's hope to God Mr. Azimi won't catch us," I said as we crept through the schoolyard's wide-open door.

My first memory of Mr. Azimi reached back to the opening day of school when I had been shamed into a corner by senior students, their collective stares and tongue-clicking weighing me down. *Oh, oh, you're wearing jeans?* I heard one say. I was standing motionless like some museum item until a man brushed aside the mob, grabbed my arm, and hauled me to his office. He was five foot eight, his beard so full it almost covered his cheekbones. He was wearing black combat boots, the same boots that later prompted us students to call him a loony. It wasn't until I laid eyes on his office door that I realized his name was Mr. Azimi. He picked a pair of rumpled, ragged, dust-covered jogging pants from a drawer and threw them in my direction, declaring that a boy whose father had died in the war should never wear jeans. "Jeans represent the West," he said. "You'll wear these today to serve as an object lesson for everyone else."

Now I was back on the same turf where Mr. Azimi had humiliated me, but this time with Reza by my side, the only person who had given a stern warning to my classmates about sniggering at me for the ridiculous jogging pants.

Reza had no fears. He often said that he had grown a thick skin because one of his brothers was a semi-professional boxer who had toughened him up over the years. He was also so much fun. With Reza around, you were always in for a good laugh. I mean, who else could get away with making silly noises in the middle of mandatory afternoon prayers while the dreaded "squealer squad" kept a close watch on us like prison guards, ready to tattle on anyone who might mock

the rituals, consigning them to a good beating at the hands of Mr. Azimi? Who else dared sleep through the Islamic Principles class and then claim he had been communicating with God in some trance-like state when caught? Reza even had the temerity to talk about masturbation at school when the rest of us were too afraid even to dream about sex. He was full of life—the antidote to the stench of rose-water filling your nose in the corridors of our school, a stench that reminded us of cemetery visits on which we would pour bottlefuls of it over our dads’ gravestones.

Like me, Reza had been less than a year old when his dad died. He lived with his mother and two older brothers in bare-minimum social housing, the family relying on meagre state subsidies. Their mother had never remarried because Reza and his brothers wouldn’t let any man near her. Reza loved to speculate how his childhood might have differed had his dad continued working as an automotive assembler instead of volunteering for the war. “My mom says that my dad could have made a lot of money, if only he had never gone to war,” he would say. “Our life would’ve been completely different.”

Once we entered the vast schoolyard, Reza and I scurried towards the white monolithic building that stood in the distance. The first class for the day was History. To commemorate our fathers, and to “renew the pledge of allegiance to Imam’s cause,” whatever the hell that meant, we’d been asked to bring to school a photo of our dads, some kind of written communication, or an excerpt from their wills. I put a small, framed photo of my dad in my backpack and what was believed to be his last telegram, dated July 30th, 1988, hours before he sustained fatal shrapnel wounds—exactly ninety-two days after I was born and fifty-seven days before his twenty-fifth birthday, numbers that mean absolutely nothing, except that one of us is alive and the other is dead. The telegram was a taupe and tattered piece of paper, bearing a plainly worded message: “My dear wife, hi, I’m fine.” I’d never know if this was really written by my dad, but I’d like to think it was, because I’d been told by my older cousin, who happens to have vivid memories of my dad, that my dad was in fact a very romantic person, and here was this telegram prefaced with the phrase “my dear wife.” When I inquired about my dad’s will, my mom told me there was none. “Your dad had promised to come back from his last mission because you’d just been born,” she said, handing me the official letter from the Veterans Affairs office delivering the news of my father’s death: “Congratulations and condolences; Mahmoud Saadlou has now gladly drunk the elixir of martyrdom,” read the letter’s opening, after which was cited a verse from the Qur’an: *Think not of those who are slain in Allah’s way as dead.*

No; they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord; they rejoice in the bounty provided by Allah. My perception of the word “congratulations” was tainted for good after reading that letter.

The whole commemoration assignment was one I knew all too well because of the visits from the Foundation of Martyrs at our previous home. Two men from the organization would show up and ask my mother if she needed any help, and my mother would put on a stoic face and say that she was just fine. On one occasion, when we used to live with my grandparents, I opened my big six-year-old mouth and blabbed about how much we loved Michael Jackson’s music. Ever since we moved to our own apartment, my mom refused to disclose the change of address to the Foundation of Martyrs.

When we reached the main building, Reza and I hurried up the small flight of stairs that led to the threshold.

“Look who’s here,” Mr. Azimi called out as soon as we set foot in the building. “Mr. Saadlou and Mr. Bagheri.”

Reza and I froze by the office door, across from which notice boards adorned with innumerable pictures of young men jumped out at you, their faces looking too alive to be dead. The school stopped at nothing to remind us of our fathers, a nudge to the memory that they had been “the chosen few,” and now we had to be “grateful” for their martyrdom.

Attired in black trousers and a ragged, brown pullover, Mr. Azimi was standing by the door, his bow-legged stance familiar to us. Besides wearing his prized combat boots, he carried a chronometer affixed to a lanyard and a *tasbeih* with him the entire time. Whenever you spotted him alone, he would be moving his fingers on the prayers beads while whispering under his breath in Arabic—*Allahu Akbar* (God is Great) thirty-four times, *Alhamdulillah* (Praise be to God) thirty-three times, *Subhan Allah* (Glory be to God) thirty-three times. He also jumped at every opportunity to remind us that the eight-year war, which had claimed half a million Iranian lives, was far from over, and that the enemy had not stopped but had only changed their tactics. He never quite explained who the enemy was or what their motives may have been.

“Hello, sir,” Reza and I monotoned in unison.

“What’s your first class for the day?”

I was reminded of the punishment that awaited me with our history teacher, who always asked the students to write a one-page recap of the lesson from the week before. If you didn’t write the assignment, if you partially wrote it, or if it came to light that you’d written the assignment on the day of the class just before the morning assembly, he would first crumple the paper and press it hard against your nose,

then pull at your earlobe, before slapping you with his forefingers as your gaze dropped off to the ground. I had only half-written mine because I'd spent the entirety of the previous day taking part in snowball fights and visiting a park near the new neighbourhood where, for the first time in my life, I had plucked up the courage to exchange a few words with some girls.

"History, sir," I stammered out.

"Oh, is that so?" said Mr. Azimi. "Where in the book are you?"

"Sir, we are early into the chapter about the war."

"What year did the war with Iraq start?"

"1980, sir."

"And why did the war start?"

"Because Saddam Hossein attacked the south of Iran, sir."

"How many casualties did Iran suffer?"

"About 500,000, sir."

"Okay. Go back to the schoolyard," Mr. Azimi ordered. "I'll be there in a minute."

Reza and I stood in the middle of the schoolyard, waiting for Mr. Azimi like two prisoners.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"He's trying to rattle us; that's all."

Reza was undaunted by the prospect of punishment. After all, he was the same Reza who, with a cheeky smile on his face, had once taken a violent beating from our math teacher, a smile that egged the teacher on to hit him harder—and so the teacher did—a smile that said, *I must live forever with the ghost of a father I will never know; what more can you do to me? Go ahead. Pummel me with your fists.* After this incident, it was Mohsen who once suggested that Reza probably had a warped affinity for physical punishment.

As Mr. Azimi calmly strode towards us, Reza fixed an unflinching stare on him.

"What kind of punishment should I give you for being ten minutes late to your class?" he asked.

"We promise this'll never happen again," I said.

"Of course, it'll never happen again," retorted Mr. Azimi. "Because I'm going to make sure of that."

Reza stood by my side wordlessly as I turned to him for backup.

"Whatever punishment you give us is fine," he volunteered.

"Bunny hopping around the entire yard," declared Mr. Azimi—"ten minutes."

Reza and I took off our backpacks and set them down by the flagpole. We clasped our hands, placed them behind our heads, bent our knees, and, with Reza leading the way, began bunny hopping

around the yard, as though doing a military warm-up. Mr. Azimi pushed the start button on his beloved chronometer. With the freezing air hitting our cheeks like splashes of cold water, we jumped forward again and again, our lungs straining, the sound of our panting punctuating the silence. I struggled to maintain my balance with each hop, but Reza's presence told me that we were going to pull through. After only the third lap, though, Reza stopped in his tracks. He stood up straight, catching his breath.

"Why did you stop, Mr. Bagheri?" asked Mr. Azimi.

Reza made a beeline for Mr. Azimi and looked him defiantly in the eye.

"Sir, would you please just beat me up?"

"You continue, Mr. Saadlou," Mr. Azimi shouted.

I continued moving forward, my knees starting to hurt as I kept my eyes peeled for Reza.

"Please beat me up," Reza repeated, "but don't make me do all this bunny hopping."

"Are you sure?" asked Mr. Azimi.

"Yes, sir. I am."

"Okay. This is for your own good."

Mr. Azimi removed his glasses and gingerly placed them in his breast pocket, his bushy eyebrows arching as he smiled menacingly at Reza.

"So, you want to get beaten up, huh?"

"Yes, sir, beat me up, but don't make me do this."

He struck Reza on the right cheek with the palm of his hand, knocking him off balance. Reza stumbled to one side, then attempted to regain his footing, but Mr. Azimi attacked him again. This time, his black combat boot landed a sharp kick on Reza's left shin. He knew exactly when and where to strike. Reza put up no resistance. His shoulders remained squared, his spine straight, his clenched fists at his sides. Each strike elicited a slight recoil from him, a ripple through his frame. The blows left their marks, causing bruises and welts, but he didn't yield an inch.

"Have you no shame?" Mr. Azimi mocked Reza as he slapped him on the head. "Your father would have been ashamed of having a son like you." He pulled at Reza's ear before slapping him again, this time across the face.

Through it all, Reza refused to make even a muffled moan in pain—he didn't want to give Mr. Azimi any satisfaction. Instead, he wore a weary smile on his full lips.

Once, when Mr. Azimi's glasses dropped onto the floor, he paused the beating. He bent down and picked up the glasses as Reza was rubbing his face.

"Sir, please," I heard myself say. "Please don't—"

"Mr. Saadlou, you can go in now," Mr. Azimi said calmly.

"Sir, what about Bagheri?" I asked.

"I'm not quite through with Mr. Bagheri yet."

"Sir, I've brought my dad's photograph," I said. "Would you just hear me out, please?"

War was the only thing Mr. Azimi seemed to understand—he revelled in it, glorified it, fetishized it even; and I thought that using my dad's photograph—a photograph extricated from the war—could put a stop to Mr. Azimi's savagery against Reza.

"This is no time for a photograph," said Mr. Azimi.

"Sir, please, will you just look at my dad's photo? Please."

I reached for my backpack, the tears in my eyes almost blurring my vision.

"Toward what end?"

"Sir, sir—"

"Why are you crying?" Reza snapped. "Stop crying."

"Sir, for the sake of—," I tried to catch my breath against the new wave of tears. "For the sake of my father, please—"

"Stop begging," Reza interrupted.

"Will you, sir?" I sobbed weakly.

Mr. Azimi approached me and squinted momentarily at the photograph: a young man with his hair sleekly brushed and meticulously parted to the right, his disciplined beard adding to his handsome demeanour. In the photo, my dad is twenty-two, seated behind a desk wearing a khaki uniform and running shoes, head down, writing something on a single piece of paper rolled out on his desk, oblivious to the presence of a camera. During the war, says my mom, my dad's fellow soldiers would ask him to write letters to their loved ones on their behalf owing to his polished Persian and neat penmanship.

"See? Your dad was killed by *the enemy*," Mr. Azimi emphasized. "This is the same enemy that will feel overjoyed to see you and Mr. Bagheri being late to school. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I hope Mr. Bagheri understands this, too."

Reza remained quiet, averting his eyes from me and Mr. Azimi both.

"Now, get to class," said Mr. Azimi, stowing the glasses in his pocket.

Reza and I picked up our backpacks and walked like spent soldiers. I never told Reza about my stepfather who wasn't even really my

stepfather. I never told him how terrified I was of this middle-aged man who would randomly visit us once or twice a week ever since I was nine, every so often forcibly clipping my fingernails too short, so short that a smidgen of blood would emerge. Never told him that this man had a wife and two children who didn't know about his relationship with my mom — about us — yet we knew their names. Never told him that the week before our encounter with Mr. Azimi, the middle-aged man had taken me to the bedroom in the new apartment, taken off his belt, and begun to beat me with it just because I had ignored my mom's request to go buy bread and instead continued to play soccer in the parking garage with other kids. Never told him the middle-aged man was *my* Mr. Azimi.

As we climbed the small flight of stairs, Reza's luxuriant eyelashes began to grow moist. The sight I never thought possible was unfolding before my eyes: Reza, the toughest boy I knew in all of *Imam's Disciples*, was crying silently, his beauty all but marred by the barbarity of a madman. Still standing in the yard, Mr. Azimi removed the bulky *tasbeih* from his pocket, his fingers methodically sliding the beads as his lips moved. I knew then who the enemy was.