

MY BEST FRIEND

An extract from **Javad Mahzadeh's** novel, *Take Away My Laughter*, with an introduction and synopsis by **Azar Mahloujian**

Writers have never been secure in Iran – censorship, bans on publishing, detention, arrest and murder await those whose words penetrate the surface, disclosing what is false and pointing out the lack of political and civil liberties in the country. The regime feels itself targeted, exposed and insulted – and demands obedience or silence. When that does not work it punishes the writers, censures their work and puts them behind bars. That is the price that writers in dictatorships pay in order to retain their own voice.

*Javad Mahzadeh is a journalist and literary critic. On 22 October 2009, he was arrested on his way to work on the orders of the Revolutionary Court's prosecutor's office. No formal charges have been brought against him – and the grounds of his detention are therefore unknown. The extract below is from his first novel, *Take Away My Laughter*. It was published two years ago and has been nominated for a literary award in Iran. The novel is set in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war and is the story of Amir, a 13-year-old boy. Although he lives far from the war front, in the small city of Karaj outside Tehran, his life is affected by the general war atmosphere in the country.*

Missiles brighten the sky over Karaj at night and set fire to inhabited buildings and even cinemas, killing civilians.

The story opens with Amir's mother in tears. She fears for the life of her brother who is at the war front. The lives of Amir and his friend Mehdi change when Ali, a Kurdish boy of the same age, moves into the neighbourhood with his family. Ali's uncle was a communist and has been executed; his 10-year-old sister, Atieh, has been shot on the street and is paralysed. She now spends her days in a wheelchair. Ali's parents are teachers who have been dismissed from their jobs. The family has left the horrors of Kurdistan to find refuge in the city, but people are suspicious of them. The neighbours call them communists, anti-revolutionary and guerrillas. They forbid their children from playing with Ali. But the three boys become close friends. Atieh follows the boys' games, conversations and jokes from her wheelchair and Amir enjoys hearing her laugh. He likes her 'sweet Kurdish accent' and notices that she has a flowery fragrance when she talks or laughs. He can smell her scent whenever he is reminded of her. 'As soon as she opened her mouth, a scent filled the air ... It was not a dream, when her lips opened to say a word or to smile there was truly a scent.'

Amir's heart aches when he thinks of the cruel men who shot Atieh. He prays to God and asks him why a small child like her should not stand on her feet and walk like everybody else. 'God, couldn't you hide Atieh away somewhere among all those bullets and dead and wounded – and save her? How is it possible, dear God, that you couldn't stop just one small bullet? Are you not going to compensate this? This girl has the fragrance of paradise.'

Amir never tells her of his love for her, he keeps it for a day when she is more grown up and he is no longer shy. The book ends when Ali and his family leave the country for Japan to seek treatment for Atieh or, more probably, to escape from the social pressures and the endless accusations from the neighbours. This is a simple story of love, friendship and the hardship of life in a country afflicted by war and hostilities, discrimination and deep social gaps.

Azar Mahloujian

It couldn't be true. Ekrami must have just said something without meaning it. Dad sometimes talked about packing up and leaving too. Mr Foroughi himself was the biggest moaner in the neighbourhood, but there was no way he'd ever leave. He'd even applied to the municipality for a permit to add another floor to his house. But still, when I heard Dad say those words, it made my head spin. It made me feel down in the dumps. I waited, to let the conversation move on a bit. I didn't want Dad to think I'd lost my head and rushed out of the house again. I tried to wait as long as I could. Dad was saying: 'I feel really sorry for them. They've barely been here a year. Can't people ever stop poking their noses in other people's affairs? They've been talking so much behind their backs that they've just decided to quietly pack up their bags and go.'

Ali hadn't told me anything. Why? When were they going? Where to? Was it definite? Had the neighbours been talking rubbish again? What had Ali's Dad ever done to that son-of-a-bitch Foroughi to make him wreck their lives? Hadn't their relations with the neighbours improved? Hadn't the poor guy gone to the mosque and slaughtered a sheep? If he was against religion, he wouldn't have prayed in the mosque, would he? Ali always said his prayers every day. It was Mehdi and me who'd skip every other line when we said our prayers.

If they were really against God's religion, they wouldn't stay so quietly in their house day and night, would they? Maybe we can talk them out of it. I really hope Dad tried to change Ekrami's mind. Why isn't Ali saying anything? He's just using the exams as an excuse to stay at home and study. I hadn't been able to see him for a couple of days. I had to tell Mehdi no matter what. But what could I do? What could Mehdi do? What could Dad do? I listened a bit more. Mum said: 'The way things are, if they go back, who knows what'll happen to them. They might not have any family left over there. They might not be prepared to take them in anyway. Will he be able to find a job? And, who knows, if there's some bad blood, some bad feelings or something, who knows what they'll do to them. You were right to tell him to wait. They shouldn't rush into anything. This war can't go on much longer. If they wait a bit, things are bound to change. He's bound to find a job sooner or later. Tell him just to move a few streets away if he's dead set on it. They could move to Mehrshahr or Golshahr or Hesarak. Why should they go all the way back to Sardasht?'

It seems like Ekrami had found a sympathetic ear in Dad, because Ali hadn't told us anything. I still remember the day when Atieh had got back her lab results. They were all so upset. Ali came over to our house and we

went down to the basement and sat there and cried. After everything we'd been through, could Ali really have just stopped trusting Mehdi and me? Maybe their Dad hadn't told Ali and Atieh yet. Maybe he's just going to tell them at the very last minute. Maybe he's waiting till their exams are over before he tells them. It's a good thing I realised it. I might have run to Ekrami's house and dragged Ali out to discuss it with him. This must be why I hadn't heard about it from Ali. Otherwise, I would have known about it sooner than Dad.

But what difference would it have made if I'd heard about it first and not Dad? Ekrami had made his decision anyway. This was what was hard to believe. Why should it be dads who make the decisions? We'd just finished planning everything with Ali. The summer ahead was all set. We'd organised our team and we'd sent Ja'far packing. How could I keep living and breathing in our street without Ali? Breathing? Oh, no. What about Atieh? If they go, they'll take away her scent too. It's not as if I can ask Ali to leave me a drop of Atieh's scent as if she is a bit of perfume in a bottle. It'll take a lot of practice before I can bear their absence. We've gotten used to each other. He's my mate. I don't want him to leave us and go off to Sardasht like Sepehri. Why do all our mates end up in Sardasht? Why couldn't Ali be a local boy? Would I be able to talk Ali and, more importantly, his Dad out of it? I had no idea what I was eating or if I ate at all. Dad was laughing as he ate. He kept holding up Mum's X-rays against the light bulb and pointing to bits of it. He was saying some things, but I wasn't listening. Mum was eating too. She'd squint a bit at the X-ray but not show whether she was pleased and optimistic like Dad about her lab tests or not.

I turned my head towards the garden. The garden lamp was on. The gnats were swarming around it and taking turns to crash into it. I concentrated a bit until I could hear the cricket over the sound of the TV and Hanieh's squealing. The cricket had kept up its singing all the way through the evening prayers on TV. I said to myself maybe I should bring Ali over to our house, sit with him by our little fishpond and try to worm things out of him. Does he know about it or not? If he doesn't, it's a disaster. How is he going to come to terms with this? I'm sure he won't be able to find mates as upfront and true as Mehdi and me. The point is that the three of us are like one. If Ali goes, we go too, but how? If they separate us by force, if they tear our joint body into three pieces and take one of the pieces far away from here, all three – not just one – will die. I have to remember how we felt when Sepehri went away. How did we manage to survive? Does that mean that we'll survive this time too and forget everything? But Ali isn't Sepehri.



Iraqis fleeing violence, Safwan, Iraq, April 1991

Credit: Peter Dejong/AP/Press Association

Sepehri was only with us at school, but Ali is with us all day. Not just Ali. It wasn't just Ali for me. It was Atieh too. It was that lovely scent too. I wish Uncle was here. He could step in and sort things out. I can't even tell Mehdi all that much. It's Atieh that makes it all too much. Not that Ali is all that little, but when you add Atieh to it, the disaster becomes even more of a disaster. How can I possibly explain this to Mehdi?

'I'm going over to Mehdi's,' I said and I heard no reply. I stood up and left the house ...

Mehdi and I jumped off and went to sit on the grass. We left the bicycle leaning against a tree. I couldn't keep Mehdi in suspense any longer, nor could I bear to keep the news to myself for another second. I grabbed a fistful of grass and just spilled out the words without raising my head: 'Ali and them are going to leave. I don't know where. They'll be going after the exams. I think Ali himself doesn't know. His Dad told my Dad today. He was going to Tehran when he saw Mum and Dad in the street. He gave them a lift all the

way to the hospital. There, he told Dad: 'We're really tired of all the things that the neighbours are saying and all their snide remarks. We'd prefer to have fire and bombs over our heads than to have people rummaging through our lives.' They're really going. Can you believe it? That's what he told my Dad. I think Ali and Atieh don't know. If Atieh knew, I know she would have told Ali. But maybe their mother knows.

And now I don't even know how we got to be sitting here. I don't know how I ran out of the house and came to knock on your door. Mehdi, I feel like smoking a fag. Just think, if Ali goes, what are we going to do? Do you think his Dad will laugh at us if we tell him how we feel? Maybe he'll be cross with us. Maybe he'll say, 'You two are even worse than our nosy neighbours.' I really don't know what to do. There's nothing we can do if they've made up their minds. I just thought I better tell you so that – we have to do something. We'd just found each other. I just can't believe it. Didn't he tell us just a few days ago that he'd persuaded his Dad to move him to our school?'

I turned to look at him. He was stunned and confused. I must have looked like this when I heard the news from my Dad. He swallowed hard and his Adam's apple moved up and down. He moved his neck a bit to loosen out some of the shock. He ran a hand over the bicycle's front wheel and said, nearly in a whisper: 'Yes, that's what he told us.'

Then, his mood changed. He was really cross.

'Look. If this whole business is true, if Ali and them pack up and leave, I'll teach that bastard Foroughi a lesson he won't soon forget. I'll blacken his name in the whole neighbourhood. Everything is that bastard's fault. Who ever rattled his cage for him to be snooping about in other people's lives? They haven't done anyone any harm. What's it to him what part of the country they've come from? I swear to you, whether Ali and them leave or stay, I'm going to turn Foroughi inside out. I'll make sure he leaves and never darkens this neighbourhood again. I'll go and shit a heap in front of their house every night.'

Mehdi had become more emotional than me. Instead of worrying about whether or not Ali and Atieh were leaving, his mind was on taking revenge from Foroughi. I said: 'You can count on me for that. But the problem is something else right now. Can you believe that Ali will just leave and we'll never see him again?'

He'd really blown his fuse. He even started shouting at me: 'Come on, you're really laying it on too thick. What do you mean we'll never see him again? We'll ask for his address. We'll give him our address. We'll exchange telephone numbers. We're not just going to abandon him like that. Now, look,

are you sure they're leaving? Maybe his Dad just flipped his lid. Maybe he's sick of everyone and he just said something off the top of his head.'

Mehdi was as confused as I was. In a way, I seemed to have been able to keep my head more than him. I loosened my fist and let the grass fall out.

'Look, there's one other thing. Why should he have told my Dad? I reckon it's because he wants my Dad to give Foroughi and the neighbours a piece of his mind. He knows my Dad isn't like the others. But what I don't know is: does Ali know about it or not?'

Mehdi jumped up suddenly and brushed the grass off his back.

'Well, it's easy to find out. We'll go and ask him. Come on.'

He grabbed me hard under my arms. Pain seared through my arm for a moment and I had to get up.

'That would really be putting a foot in it. If he doesn't know, then he'll tell his Dad and it'll be so embarrassing.'

But he'd made up his mind. There was no talking him out of it.

'We're not going to talk to his Dad, we're going to talk to him. We just want to find out whether he knows or not.'

'Well, if his Dad hasn't told them yet, it's probably because he wants them to concentrate on their revisions and their exams. Otherwise, he could have told them himself. I don't think it's a good idea.'

'Don't be such a cry baby. We'll do as I said. We know. Does that mean we're going to fuck up our revisions and exams? I have to know where I stand with Foroughi.'

He forced me to get on his bike again. On the way back, I tried to calm him down. I said it wasn't up to us whether they stayed or left. I said his Dad might get upset with my Dad. I said: 'You and I are together, but if Ali realises he's leaving, he may become distracted and do badly in his exams.' I said that the whole thing may have just been Ekrami's way of warning the neighbours so that they'd back off a bit. Mehdi kept pedalling and didn't say a word. He was feeling the way I'd been feeling when I'd got to his house. He was hearing nothing and saying nothing. We got to our street and he braked in front of Ekrami's house. As he was leaning his bicycle against the wall, I said:

'What time is it? It might be late.'

Without hesitating, he pressed the doorbell.

'Can't you see their lights are on?'

When his mother realised who it was, she tried to send us away and told us to come back tomorrow. But Mehdi said we'd only be five minutes and we didn't even need to go into the house. After a couple of minutes, Ali



came to the doorstep. We hadn't seen him for a couple of days. We shook hands with him and Ali asked us politely if we'd like to come in. Mehdi was in a foul mood by then. He behaved as if Ali owed him something. He stared into his eyes and said:

'Ali, I want to ask you a question and I want you to tell me the truth. Promise?'

Ali didn't know what to say. His mouth formed a weak smile and he took a few steps away so that we had to follow him and move away from the doorstep.

'Sure. What's up?'

I took Ali's elbow. It felt really soft. I looked into his puzzled eyes and knew that if he answered us, he couldn't possibly lie. I said:

'Your Dad was with my Mum and Dad all the way to Tehran today. I mean my Mum and Dad were with your Dad.'

His eyebrows knit together.

'I know. He gave them a lift to the hospital. Anything wrong?'

Mehdi blew his cool. He tapped Ali on the shoulder and said:

'Come on. Come on. There's nothing wrong with us. There seems to be something wrong with you. Is it true that you're leaving this place?'

For a moment, it was as if Ali couldn't hear us. He was staring at our mouths as if he was trying to lip read. Now that Mehdi had jumped in with both his feet, I backed him up.

'I don't care about the why and how. Your Dad told my Dad that you're going to leave this place.'

He was surrounded now. I was holding his elbow and Mehdi was blocking him from the other side. He asked – as if he was trying to think of a way out: 'My Dad said that? I don't know. What's the matter with you two?'

Mehdi got the same message as me from Ali's words.

'Ali, do I have to make you swear on the Quran?' I said. 'I want you to tell the truth, whatever it is. Don't lie. Either don't say anything and go home or tell us the truth.'

We hadn't practised what we'd do once he'd answered us. Afterwards – both with Mehdi and in my own mind – we went over his words, front to back and back to front, a dozen times. But none of them bore Ali's voice or Atieh's scent. My whole body broke out into a cold sweat. Even Mehdi was bruised that night. I wished I hadn't learnt about it sooner rather than later, that Dad hadn't gone to Tehran with Ekrami. I wished that the news had stayed behind the walls of their house. Then, one day, we would have rung their doorbell and the sound would have echoed

around and bounced off the walls of the empty rooms and made its way back into the doorbell. And the door would have remained closed. That way we wouldn't have known until they were gone and we wouldn't have had to watch them go.

If only Ekrami had held his tongue and if he hadn't unburdened himself to Dad. If Dad was like the rest of the neighbours and if Mehdi and me were asleep in bed right now and didn't know anything. If we hadn't heard anything from Ali or anyone else. If he hadn't become our mate. If he'd ignored us on the day when we first met. If he'd just turned his back on us and walked away. Then, Mehdi wouldn't be bruised and speechless, I wouldn't be dazed and sleepy, and he wouldn't be helpless and stunned.

How soon you left us, Ali. You'd barely arrived before you left. You lifted us halfway to the sky with you and then, suddenly, you let us drop. We'd gotten used to having a couple of mates who were just like us. You came from I-don't-know-where, with a scent that accompanied you and no one else. You came and you became my mate and Atieh became my mate's sister, which is very meaningful. There are many secrets left in my heart which, after you and Atieh are gone, I won't even tell Mehdi about. I'll keep them all in my heart. Until when, I don't know.

Do you think you can just leave like that? Mehdi had pedalled quickly to come and hear from a mate whether the news was true or not, but I needed to know where I stood with you. Where were you going? How far? How close? To where and until when? I've grown up, Ali. I grew up with you and Atieh. I got my laughter and my moods from you. How can I be expected to make friends again, with someone without your decency and without Atieh's voice?

After you, our street will never be a street again. I know, now, I'll never amount to anything. I'll stay in these same clothes and I'll always look like I do today. I won't turn into the person I wanted to become after I met you and Atieh. Just tell me where you're going to. What's its name and where does it lie? Should Mehdi come along or not? Should I tell him or not? Should I ask my Dad for permission or not? Wherever you are, I'll come and ring your doorbell. And whether you keep me on the doorstep or ask me in or not, I'll make my way into your room and sit and look at you, until you turn into your sister. So that, whether she wants it or not, she'll be there too and she'll pour some of her scent into my hand and, then, send me on my way. Back to our street in Karaj, where I can sit by the little fishpond and listen to the cricket sing, without telling anyone about you and without sharing your sister's scent with anyone else.

Ali told us where he was going. It's a far away country. It's so far away that people look different there and he's bound to miss us.

My head spins and I can't see Ali standing in front of me any more. □

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