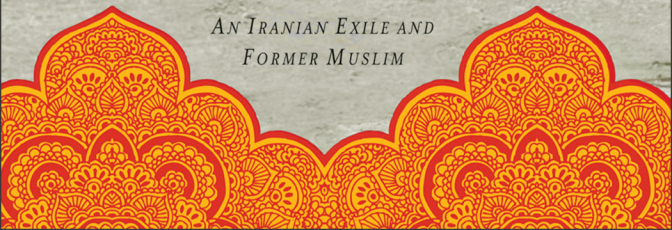
A young boy in a military-style uniform is captured mid-jump in a desert landscape. He has his arms outstretched and a determined expression. The background shows a simple building and a clear sky.

THE GRIPPING STORY *of*  
ONE MAN'S ESCAPE  
*from* REVOLUTION *to*  
REDEMPTION

# Jumping through fires

DAVID NASSER

AN IRANIAN EXILE AND  
FORMER MUSLIM



# Jumping through Fires

THE GRIPPING STORY

*of* ONE MAN'S ESCAPE

*from* REVOLUTION

*to* REDEMPTION

DAVID NASSER



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# THE DAY THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

The whole world was on fire.  
Watching my young son stare wide-eyed into the flames on a cool March evening, I remembered how huge and awesome the same sight seemed to me when I was his age. The whole world looked like one giant inferno. My father stood beside him in the driveway, the light flickering on their faces. Dad is not a tall man, but his military bearing makes him seem taller than he is. When I was my son's age, I thought Dad was a giant. His gray moustache and dark eyes emphasized his Iranian features ("Not Iranian," he would

say, “Persian!”). I expect that night reminded him of many others like it when he celebrated a cultural tradition going back more than three thousand years.

“Jump, Rudy! Jump!” Dad said. Rudy wanted to do it, but hesitated and held his hand up, arm extended, fingers outstretched.

“Hold my hand, Papa.”

With a wide smile my dad reached down and grabbed his grandson’s hand. Another world ago, I held that same hand and jumped over a small bonfire like this one, shouting the same ancient Zoroastrian chant Rudy was now yelling as he leaped into the air: *Sorkhie to az man, zardie man az to.* (“Your redness is mine, my yellowness is yours.”) The tradition holds that when you jump through the flames, they burn away all the bad things that have happened during the past year, all the sickness and misfortune, and replace them with good health and the promise of new beginnings.

There are hundreds of Middle Eastern families in Birmingham, but we were probably the only family crazy enough to keep the tradition alive in this part of the world. Each of us wore at least one article of clothing that was red, set up a row of bonfires on our middle-class suburban driveway, and ran toward the flames.

What must the neighbors have thought? “Honey, come look! The Iranians are out on their driveway again. Are they trying to set their kids on fire?” In all the years we’ve done this, it’s a wonder the police or homeland security have yet to be called.

Celebrating *Chaharshambe Suri*, or Red Wednesday, by jumping through fires marks the Persian New Year. It happens the night before the first day of spring on the Western calendar. Around the world, hundreds of millions in the Middle East and elsewhere—Muslims, Jews, Turks, Kurds, and others—light bonfires at dusk and feed them all night, welcoming the new year and celebrating the revival of nature. The next day they dump the ashes in a river or at a crossroads, symbolizing the removal of all the sickness and bad stuff the fire had absorbed from everybody who jumped through it the night before.

Our condensed celebration did not include the usual dancing or fireworks. This was the little league version—the most we could do without frightening the soccer moms who drove by in their minivans. This was an adventure, deeply rooted in heritage. Our festivities were for Rudy and our daughter, Grace, and the rest of the family, even if they didn't think much about what it represented—jumping from the old year into the new.

When you're a child like Rudy, or like I was, you can't see through the flame. You jump on faith that there's something safe and solid on the other side. You jump because others have jumped before you and made it, and, most importantly, you jump holding on to a hand you trust, knowing that as long as you hang on, everything will be all right. That hand has always led you to safety, so it wouldn't possibly lead you to harm now. Watching Rudy and thinking about my own nights of jumping through a row of fires seemed a lot like

the trials of revolution, religion, and redemption that I have journeyed through in life. They have all been scary, but in reflection, I see now that I was never alone. Through it all I have always been held.

The story I know best begins in Iran, where my father was an officer in the army of the Shah of Iran (*shah* meaning “king”), and my mother came from a long line of distinguished public officials. That’s where I first remember the bonfires—men and women dancing together in the street, a rare sight in Muslim Iran—and my father’s warm, calloused hand holding tight to mine as he yelled, “Jump, David! Jump!”

But one day the bonfires of a new year’s hope and renewal went out, and the fires of death and destruction ignited.

The consuming flames of a revolution brought an end to many things, including permission for Red Wednesday ceremonies. In 1979 the ceremonies were cancelled by the new regime that had come to power in our country. Although it was a cultural celebration without any religious meaning, the new leaders banned it on religious grounds. Then they systematically set out to destroy everything and everyone that didn’t meet their standards of a radical Islamic state.

Including me.

One bright winter day, my sister, Nastaran, and I were chauffeured to school as usual. Instead of going through the regular class schedule, however, all the students were called to an assembly. We left our classrooms and tramped down the hallways to the assembly area. I remember feeling grateful



to be out of class. I hoped that whatever we were attending would take as long as it could because the longer the assembly, the less schoolwork we would have to do. So there we stood, the whole student body in uniform, elementary through senior high.

It became apparent this was no ordinary break from class when, as we filed into the assembly area, we saw armed soldiers standing in front of the large auditorium. As soon as we were all in place, one of them yelled “*Attention!*” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a sheet of paper, and read three names aloud. My sister and I were on the list. I knew the other name as well. He was the child of the most influential military officer on our base. His father was a pilot like mine. I hoped our fathers had not been killed in a helicopter accident as we walked to the front.

The soldier who read our names returned the piece of paper to his pocket, and with the same hand pulled his pistol out of the holster. He took a step toward me and leveled the gun at my forehead. All I could see was the underside of his starched shirtsleeve running from wrist to elbow. The pistol hovered inches from my skull, smelling of machine oil and gunpowder. After a couple of seconds, the barrel started to shake. I lifted my eyes and looked into the eyes of the soldier. He looked terrified. I was terrified. Everyone was terrified. The only thing scarier than a man with a gun in his hand is a man who looks unstable enough to use it.

Standing only a few feet away, I heard him whispering prayers from the Qu’ran. And then: “I’m going to end your

life, but it's not because of who you are. Or because of who your father is. It is for the sake of Allah."

Suddenly I felt the principal's hands grip my shoulder, pushing me away. She stood between me and the pistol, turning herself into a human barricade. "Do not do this!" she said to the soldier. Her voice was full of authority. "This is not a day for killing children. This is not the day." The pistol went back in its holster. The assembly was dismissed, and as if nothing had happened, the entire student body was sent back to class. Nastaran took my hand, and without permission we ran home as fast as we could.

Out of breath and still too surprised to be in shock, we burst into our house and told my dad what happened. I knew my father would know what to do. He always knew what to do. I had visions of my father tearing into the soldier who dared come against his son. *Oh, if that soldier only knew whose son he messed with.*

As my words tumbled out, tears welled up in Dad's eyes and ran down his cheeks. It was the first time I had ever seen my father cry. I didn't know he could. When I finished, he pulled my sister and me close. He picked us up, put us on his lap, and said quietly, "That man with the gun is not going to hurt you. We're going to escape. We're getting out of Iran."



## ENDING A LIFE

Up until that moment, being a military brat had always been fun. We were part of a whole community of kids who fell into rank, much like our fathers. Our fathers played real army, and we played pretend army. If your dad was the general, you got to be the general, and if your dad was a lieutenant, you were a lieutenant. That was good for me because my dad was a colonel, a helicopter pilot and trainer, and third in command of the military base. Usually the privilege of my father's rank was the gift that kept on giving, but since the revolution had begun, his high position had nearly cost me my life.

Even as a nine-year-old kid, I knew something unusual had been rumbling around us lately, and my mom and dad had been talking a lot about politics and the government. We had already moved once to a place Dad thought would be safer. My sister and I started riding to school with an armed bodyguard. But until that sobering morning, it hadn't made any real difference to me. The day before, my biggest concern was that my pump was broken and I couldn't put air in my soccer ball. Now, the revolution had arrived, dressed as a soldier who somehow thought killing a nine-year-old boy was an act of worship. Who knew, maybe it was a power play to send a message of what happened to kids whose fathers served the shah. But I thought we were *supposed* to serve the shah. Everything was changing at light speed, and nobody had any idea what the future would look like—assuming there was a future. And as far as I could tell, religion was to blame for it all.

Inside the bubble of a little boy's world, things were suddenly falling apart. Outside the bubble, the crisis had been simmering for years. As in most matters of history, it's all incredibly complicated. But the short of it is that back in 1941, our king, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was put in power by the British and the Russians at the beginning of World War II to keep the Iranian oil fields away from Hitler's Germany. Years later, the shah was ousted briefly when the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammed Mosaddeq, nationalized the oil fields, triggering an international trade embargo by angry foreign powers who had developed

and had run our oil industry. That's when the CIA and British secret intelligence funded a coup that returned Shah Pahlavi to power, and oil production resumed under foreign control as before. A price tag for a barrel of oil was agreed upon, but to many in Iran, it felt like the West was selling a nation's birthright for pennies. Some believed our king, indebted to those who gave him back his throne, had become a puppet whose strings were pulled by the West.

The shah was especially unpopular with conservative Muslims, who saw his pro-West policies not only as a way to fleece a nation of its oil, but also as a way to spit in the face of Islamic law. Iran was on shaky ground; the gap between rich and poor was getting wider, and the middle class was disappearing. Pahlavi replaced the Islamic calendar with an imperial calendar based on the founding of the Persian Empire. To religious leaders in mosques, this was even more affirmation that something drastic had to be done.

Meanwhile, Ayatollah Khomeini (*ayatollah* meaning "a high-ranking Shiite Muslim religious cleric") was stirring up the people with a message of Islamic fundamentalism. From Iraq, where he lived in exile, he was encouraging revolt against the shah. When the Iranian government arranged to have him kicked out of Iraq, Khomeini moved to Paris and continued the battle from there.

It was the perfect storm. Angry people, a shaky economy, and religious opportunists who were ready for action.

By 1979 the shah had begun to lose all control. On January 16, dying of cancer, he left Iran for what was officially

called “an extended vacation” in Egypt, and put the Supreme Military Council and his prime minister, Shapour Bakhtiar, in charge. He secretly asked for asylum in the United States, since he had been a loyal ally for more than thirty years. But fearing reprisals and a loss of oil imports from Iran, the administration of President Jimmy Carter turned him down.

Sixteen days later, on February 1, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Tehran aboard a chartered airliner from Paris.

We were glued to the television set that day. The announcer was declaring Khomeini’s return as a triumphant homecoming, but my mother and father saw it as a nightmare that none of us would be able to wake up from. Delirious citizens flooded the city streets to welcome the ayatollah back. I could sense the intensity pouring out of our thirteen-inch black-and-white TV. There was such a mob to greet him that he couldn’t get his car through the crowd, so he traveled into the city by helicopter to make his speech. He was a short man with a perpetual frown, dark eyebrows, and a long white beard framed by a severe black turban. This is what Napoleon would have looked like if his mother had hooked up with a Middle Easterner. I remember thinking how, for someone who was finally returning home, he sure didn’t seem happy. Pictures of him were everywhere, posted on walls, held up by the crowds. Tens of thousands of people pressed shoulder to shoulder, hands in the air, chanting and waving their fists in rhythm, shouting, “Allah is great! Allah is great!” And then, over and over,

Independence! Liberty! Islamic Republic!

Independence! Liberty! Islamic Republic!

Independence! Liberty! Islamic Republic!

By now, soldiers loyal to the revolution, along with many others caught up in the emotion of the moment, were tearing down every statue of the shah they could find.

The ayatollah set up headquarters at a school in central Tehran and demanded formation of an Islamic state. This action would make him the top religious leader and the head of state as well. It was a power grab, pure and simple, but Prime Minister Bakhtiar refused to back down at first. Three days later, Khomeini appointed his own prime minister and declared the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Now Iran had two competing governments: the caretaker government of Bakhtiar and his Supreme Military Council empowered by the shah, versus the new revolutionary regime, empowered by the ayatollah.

Who would the people follow? More importantly, who would the army obey? Less than a week later, fighting broke out between the loyalist Immortal Guards and the pro-Khomeini Homafaru of the Iranian Air Force. Khomeini declared *jihad*—holy war—against soldiers who refused to surrender. The Islamic forces started taking over radio and TV stations, police stations, and military posts, and handing out weapons to the public. Bakhtiar went into hiding and later escaped to Paris. Leaders and military officers loyal to the shah started disappearing. The streets were filled with oceans of demonstrators, setting mountains of rubble ablaze.

My whole world was on fire.

On the afternoon of February 11, the Supreme Military Council declared itself neutral in the conflict, and so came the end of the resistance. Khomeini assumed power the next day and declared an Islamic state. Rules were everything, and people who didn't obey them were imprisoned, tortured, or killed. The ayatollah banned alcohol and pop-music broadcasts, shut down dozens of publications, and vowed to rid the nation of non-Muslim influence. "There is no room for play in Islam," he declared. "It is dead serious about everything. We want *mujaheds* [crusaders], not drunken revelers." *Time* magazine described the Islamic coup as a "forced march backward on the treacherous road to an Islamic theocracy" (October 1, 1979).

Khomeini and his council obviously relished their new-found power. When a *New York Times Magazine* interviewer asked him what he thought about the mobs chanting his name and the adoring crowds that followed him everywhere, Khomeini said, "I enjoy it. . . . The people must remain fired up, ready to march and attack again. In addition, this is love, an intelligent love. It is impossible not to enjoy it" (October 7, 1979). Known officers of the shah's army were rounded up faster than ever, tried without defense attorneys, juries, or a chance to defend themselves in court, and executed. The first to go were loyalist generals and senior civilian officials. Somewhere in the middle of all this occurred my involuntary confrontation with a converted soldier. A man who was ready to show his allegiance to the ayatollah one late February morning. His weapon: a gun. His target: me.



Needless to say, our escape could not have happened soon enough. As we thought about what to do and how to do it, time was running out for my father faster than we realized.

In early March, one Sunday morning, soldiers burst into our house and dragged my father away. Dad had too much pride to ask for mercy, but my mother fell to the ground and wrapped her arms around my father's legs. This was why my father was dragged out. He couldn't walk because of a wife who loved him too much to let go of his legs. That image will always be seared into my memory. She was crying, screaming, pleading over and over, "Just kill him quickly! Kill him quickly!" I wondered why she was begging these men to turn her into a widow.

After the intruders left, Mom grabbed my sister's hand and mine and told us to pray that our father would be killed quickly. She looked up toward the ceiling and said, "God, let him die quickly." That's the first memory I have of prayer. I knew that I was supposed to bow my head and close both eyes, but I couldn't.

I didn't want to pray to a god who had sent his religious soldiers to my school to terrorize me, and I hated him even more for taking my father away. I was nine years old, but I had already seen enough to know that I wanted nothing more to do with this god and his holy *jihad*.

After her prayer, Mom began to explain why she wanted a quick death for our father. She revealed that Khomeini's soldiers were taking Dad to a nearby park outside the base. There, military men who were still in allegiance to the shah

were publicly humiliated, beaten, and in some instances tortured to death. One man was slowly picked apart, piece by piece. It took them six hours to kill him. “This is why we must ask god for a quick death for your father,” she said.

That afternoon, miraculously, my dad came back. The soldiers had taken him to the park to kill him, but one of the men in charge there had served under him. There’d been a time when the soldier’s wife was bedridden during a pregnancy. Dad had brought him into his office and said, “I know your wife needs you and I know you don’t have any more sick days. But you need to go.” He had given the soldier a week with his family that the soldier didn’t deserve. Dad didn’t remember that specific incident because he did that sort of thing all the time. But this soldier said, “You gave me one week with my family, so I’m going to give you one week with yours.” He made the others un-handcuff and release my father. The disorganized and chaotic shift of power allowed for such spontaneous changes of mind. It was unprofessional, but Dad wasn’t complaining. Just as abruptly as he had been taken, he was released to go.

When Dad returned home two hours later, he found us sitting right where he left us. He and Mom fell crying into each other’s arms, and my sister and I hugged him as if he had been resurrected from the dead. Like any good parent, he seized the moment to teach his children a lesson about how no good gesture will return void. As he told us the story about the man who had given him one more week, he leaned in and whispered.

“We’ve got a week before they come back,” he said. “And when that week’s up, we’re not going to be here.”



## THE GREAT PRETENDERS

Escaping was no easy task. Military personnel who had served under the shah were not allowed to leave Iran. The civilian airport on the other side of Tehran had gone into lockdown, filled with revolutionary officers whose job it was to stop families like ours from escaping.

With the commercial flight option looking bleak, my parents looked elsewhere. At first Dad wanted to steal a helicopter from the army base and fly us all out of the country. A flight to neighboring Turkey was only a few hours away. He felt sure they would give us asylum. The helicopter would have to be loaded down with canisters for refueling, so absolutely no luggage could be taken. It was a gamble, but Dad felt sure

we could pull it off. This was my father, the optimist, who saw the plan of somehow sneaking his family on a chopper, getting past the border, refueling in the middle of a desert, and getting permission to land in Turkey as a no-brainer. My mom, however, wouldn't hear of it. In her opinion, there were too many uncertainties with this plan, and besides, someone could shoot us down. She also didn't want to steal. "How would we get the helicopter back?" she asked. This was my mother. Even in the midst of a life-threatening crisis, she stood stubbornly by her morals. If stealing is wrong, it's wrong no matter what the circumstances.

Finally, after exhausting every possible avenue, my parents hatched a plan. The year before the revolution, Mom had gone to the doctor several times due to concerns about her heart. She had been pregnant with my brother Benjamin at that time, and she wanted to make sure her heart was going to be able to bear the strains of labor. The prognosis was that she was fine—it was nothing life-threatening—but it was enough to give her a convincing medical paper trail. Little did we know that her medical history would be our ticket out. Dad knew her two doctors and felt he could make them an offer they couldn't refuse. They were more than doctors, they were profiteers: men who knew that their position and authority could be a way to make money in times of chaos. They were looking to get rich, and we were looking to get out of there. It was a perfect match. We bribed them with a pile of cash to swap my mother's records and X-rays with those of someone else who had serious heart issues. Yes, the same lady who

wouldn't "take a helicopter" was now acting deathly ill. Oh, the sacrifices and compromises a mother makes in order to get her children out of harm's way. Next came the passport switch. Dad had to swap his military passport for a civilian one. He used the papers from the doctor to bluff the passport office into thinking he was a steel industry tycoon with a wife in need of emergency surgery in Europe. He also convinced them that the whole family had to go because his fragile wife wouldn't leave them behind to make the trip. The passport office was not to be bribed, but merely "thanked" with gifts and gratuity for their quick service.

Next came the liquidation of our possessions. Most of what we had was quickly and quietly given away to family. We did however, have a need for as much currency as we could subversively carry. We decided to sell our cars, our home, some leftover possessions; but all of it had to happen on the down-low. Anything that was not given away was for sale. Cash only, of course. And exclusively to buyers who could keep our little secret.

You know the feeling of pity you get for the people whose stuff you rummage through in a garage sale? Looking at a pair of shoes that originally cost a hundred dollars, but now has a piece of masking tape attached with twenty-five cents written on it? That's how it felt. No, we didn't throw a garage sale, but many of the items that my father had payed a premium for were now being virtuality gifted away to strangers. This was more than just our leftover junk; it was our life. From the wedding silver to the chandelier that was imported from France,

from my dad's extensive book collection to my sister's brand new bicycle, from the pots and pans that held our favorite meals to the Persian carpets that kept our feet warm. This was the perfect moment to buy the Nasser's microwave—the one we shipped in from America to wow people with its ability to zap a potato in two minutes. Now instead of jealousy, you could come and buy it out of charity and compassion. You could help the Nassers out, paying them cash for the things you couldn't afford at full price.

What I most remember losing were my toys.

“Why are we giving my toys away?” I asked. “You know why,” they said. And I did know why. “Why should strange soldiers ransack our home and give your toys to their kids when you can give them to your friends?” I knew little about the political landscape of the revolution. All I knew was that I had a great Lego collection, a Six Million Dollar Man, and plenty of other stuff no one else had because we bought it on our shopping trips to Paris. Giving it up was a very big deal. It represented status, and everything that was familiar, comfortable, and safe. Plus, losing it wasn't fair. I hadn't done anything to deserve having my personal treasures taken away.

For the hundredth time, I asked my parents, “Why do we have to escape? Why are people trying to kill us?”

“It's these religious fanatics, the Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers. They're taking over our country.” Religion again. I hated religion. We had to escape from it and get to a safe place.

A childhood friend of my dad's must have overheard one of my rants. Out of kindness, he walked toward me, knelt down, and said, "Man, I really like that jacket," pointing to the one I had in the giveaway pile. "I need some toys, do you have any I can buy?" I knew he didn't have any kids, so what did he need kids' clothes and toys for? "I'll give you one thousand *tomans* for your clothes and your Legos." That was way too much. Much more than it was worth, but my father allowed it. It wasn't the money; this man was helping his friend's son let go of his coveted treasures.

One by one, we watched so much disappear. Traded for a pile of cash.

The Persian currency had to be converted. Some was converted to dollars. By the time the banker was paid off to keep the money conversion hush-hush, we were left with roughly seventy-five thousand dollars in cash. I can still remember seeing the stacks of money on our dining room table.

The rest was converted to gold and silver. My parents went shopping for small, valuable items we could take with us. Yet, at the same time, they couldn't raise suspicions by buying too much expensive stuff. It was a life-or-death balancing act. They bought a lot of gold coins that people traditionally gave as gifts at weddings and other special occasions in Iran, but which had just been outlawed due to a portrait of the shah on one side and the imperial flag on the other. Mom got a huge diamond. Dad bought a really gaudy belt made of alternating white and yellow twenty-four-karat gold links studded with diamonds. Then Dad took my baby brother's

diaper bag to a cobbler and had him make a false bottom for it, so we could hide cash and jewels in it. Rest assured, the cobbler was well taken care of for his discretion.

I felt like I was in a movie. My dad requested an armed soldier under his command to escort him everywhere he went. Other soldiers took turns guarding our house all night. They dug a trench in the front yard for protection. Nastaran and I would go out to the trenches and deliver hot tea and sandwiches to these men, partly because they were protecting us, and partly to make sure they didn't suspect anything with all the traffic in and out of our house. I liked these soldiers. They were men my father had hand-selected from his regiment. Men that he knew shared his beliefs about Khomeini. They never discussed such beliefs, but there was a mutual understanding. I wanted to be one of them. "Can I go out to the trench and play with my new friends?" I'd ask my mother. "This is fun!" But the answer was always an emphatic no. Speaking of friends, I noticed certain kids on our street were gone. The alleyway that once hosted a dust bowl of kids chasing after a soccer ball, was now quiet. Where were they, I wondered. I was afraid to ask.

It wasn't all doom and gloom. To a nine-year-old kid, parts of this had its advantages. My parents didn't care if I stayed up late and wasn't getting my homework done. We still had to go to school, but since it was only a matter of time before we left, academics were the least of our worries. We ate junk food and watched a lot of cartoons. Nothing distracts a kid from imminent death like a steady diet of Kit Kats and *Scooby Doo*.



Mom would give me the same speech every day before we left the house. “You *cannot* tell *anybody* at school that we’re leaving.” They didn’t know whom they could trust. The ayatollah’s forces were capturing people and torturing them to get information about their neighbors. Your friends could turn on you at any time. Do you change sides to save your life, or do you go down with the old regime? I didn’t know which kids I could talk to. My sister and I couldn’t confide in anybody, except for a few old friends who came over to the house with their families. We had become the great pretenders. If only they had given Oscars for best performance in secrecy . . .

I’ll never forget the day before we left. I walked through my room, thinking, “This is the last time I’m going to be here.” To a stranger, the room might have appeared full, but I knew all the things that were sold and gone. We had left just enough furniture and clothes to give the illusion of normalcy. My room and the rest of our house had become nothing more than a stage, with props to fool the ayatollah’s men. I sat down and cried as the realization hit. After a while, I wiped my puffy red eyes, blew my nose, and walked into our living room to say goodbye to our closest friends. Surprisingly, this was not an emotional moment. We all pretended again, planning a future get-together that we knew deep inside would never take place. As far as all my other classmates and neighborhood friends were concerned, I would disappear without a trace. None of us would ever know whether the other was dead or alive.

At last the day had come to put our escape plan into action.

My mom started acting like her heart was really bothering her. She was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance where our two doctors examined her. “This woman needs open-heart surgery immediately,” they reported. “We don’t have a second to spare. We don’t have the technology in Iran for what she needs. She must go to Switzerland. As soon as possible.”

It worked; we were allowed to buy round-trip airline tickets. My aunt called our school to get the homework assignments for the following weeks, and Dad arranged for a house sitter. The maid was given a grocery list of all the things we would need in the refrigerator awaiting our return. Mom came home from the hospital to find her children going through the motions. Bags were packed for a two-week stay in Europe. Each of us was allowed one bag. I didn’t care about what made it in as much as I wanted very much for one item to be left out. Even in the midst of this terrifying ordeal, I attempted to leave behind what was, in my opinion, the most ridiculous outfit known to humanity, the dreaded lederhosen. In an act of fashion felony, my parents had once bought me and Nastaran each a pair of matching lederhosen—traditional German shorts and hideous suspenders. Think the Von Trapp children in the *Sound of Music*. I was determined that the lederhosen were *not* going to escape with us. Because I had not included them in my collection of clothes to pack, I assumed my distracted parents would forget all about them. I was wrong. Because I had not packed the lederhosen, my

mother decided they would be the perfect outfit to wear to the airport the next day. After all, who would be suspicious of two children who looked like life-sized Bavarian salt-and-pepper shakers! Then, as if we were well-rehearsed actors in a play, we all got ready for bed, brushed our teeth, and turned off the lights.