

MORTEZA BARZEGAR

# MISTAKE

*Translated from Farsi by AJ Javaheri*

I.

**I WAS BORN** by mistake. Even from the very beginning, I wasn't supposed to be in this world. We all—save one—vowed to be among those who accomplish nothing, those who get nowhere. That's why we held an election. I hadn't been a candidate for being born, I didn't even vote. I don't know what happened, I don't know who tossed a banana peel under my feet, so that I slid down, head first. We had agreed that Mojtaba should become the most ruthless among us, the most dishonorable. The one who would become Mojtaba should not have his heart broken easily, should not fall in love, should not be deceived, and no one should be able to push him around. Now, who's going to answer for what happened? Who will accept that I was born by mistake? Who believes I don't belong here?

Ever since my mom died, I've been having this dream. A dream in which I keep explaining to people that I'm not the Mojtaba they think I am. I was born by mistake. Someone else was supposed to become Mojtaba. But even in my dream, nobody believes me.

When the iron door of the house slammed shut, I startled awake. The sound of his shoes on the tiles shook every bone in my body. He wouldn't let go. He kept coming and going until he got what he wanted. If needed, he could even fabricate all kinds of verses and Hadiths and books. He could bring all sorts of reasons and witnesses. He would say that a certain religious authority had also done this; it's even written in the Quran.

Once, I opened my pocket Quran in front of him and said, "Here, show me the verse."

"It's not in these little ones," he said, "you'll find it in those big Qurans in the mosque." But he never showed them to me.

He knew everything about me. He knew everything I'd done and everything I hadn't done; we grew up together. Aside from being my cousin, he was first and foremost my friend. He even knew I was falling for Samaneh but that I didn't dare tell my father because I hadn't even grown a mustache yet. He knew that my dad hated sin. He knew that I'd sinned. He'd caught me red-handed.

"You committed a sin, and now you have to take responsibility. My suggestion is the only solution. You will be rewarded, and they say it even cleans every sin a human has committed. You become like a baby who's just been born. If you don't do it, a crow might carry the news to your father. It's up to you. But I think if your father hears that his prince broke his fast, you're going to catch hell from him."

I was afraid of my dad. Not exactly fear, it was more like deference. I didn't want my problems to become a burden to him on top of his own griefs and debts and loneliness. I didn't want the three-months-seventeen-days-old lump of my mother's passing in his throat to turn into a stream in his gray eyes and add one more day to his desolation. I didn't want him to twist my ear again and say, "Your poor mother recited every verse in Mafatih for nine months, she wrote Quran verses all over her stomach, she didn't dine at strangers' tables, and she didn't spend a minute without ablution just so you would end up a righteous person, so that you would grow up accustomed to prayers and fasting and become a Quran reciter. Now that this world is out of her reach, don't embarrass her in front of all the Imams and Prophets, Agha Mojtaba."

He used to say this final "Agha Mojtaba" in a certain way. As if he were cursing and giving advice and being kind all at the same time.

"Just for ten minutes! For the sake of your mother's soul!"

Even thinking of it made my entire body tremble, and I felt the urge to pee. I said no again. Mohammad Taha was the definition of Waswas-il-Khannas, a whispering prompter who returns again and again.

"Forget about your dad—what about Uncle Mash Akbar? You think if he finds out that Agha Mojtaba is not exactly *Agha* and has an evil streak, he'll still give him his daughter? He'll go and give Samaneh to Reza—he's a man of prayer and fasting, and he also wears new suits on New Year's Day. He's not like you, always going around with pants torn at the knees or crotch!"

At the mention of Reza's name, my heart would skip a beat. He was the only boy in the family who dared talk to Samaneh. They talked about school and homework, and I'd even seen them playing house a few times. But my heart would beat faster when I saw her, and I might become a guest in their game at the most. Just to sit and drink fake tea from colorful teacups, nothing more. Or maybe pretend that the tea had burnt my tongue, but in reality, it was my heart that was burning. Then I would go, and Samaneh would be left alone with Reza and their game!

II.

**WE WERE STANDING** over the graves, two graves beside each other, the bottom of neither visible, as if they were directly connected to the otherworld. We couldn't breathe. The graveyard was creepy enough in broad daylight, let alone at night in the dark. The jackals were howling, and a dog barked after every howl. The city lights were flickering from afar. Mohammad Taha was rubbing his hands together from the cold and staring into the graves. As if he were seeing something that I wasn't.

When the wind blew, the flame of our small lantern would shake. Even our shadows were trembling, just like us. I started to recite the Quran: *"I seek refuge in Allah from the outcast Shaitan, in the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Indeed, we sent the Quran down during the Night of Decree . . ."*

I couldn't remember the rest. I forgot all the Surahs. I kept trying to force it, but nothing. The dogs wouldn't stop barking. Mohammad Taha pushed me into the grave. I was about to piss myself. I struggled to stand upright. I was trembling like a sick dog in a water canal.

"See? It's not so scary. Now lie down toward the Qibla, I'll watch you. May light shine upon your grave."

Saying Bismillah, Bismillah, I lay down on my side in the grave, toward the Qibla. As if the grave had been dug just for me, the soles of my feet touched the end of it and my head brushed against the upper wall. I put my hand under my face so creepy-crawlies wouldn't get into my hair. The soil was wet and cold. I saw a small cockroach climbing up the grave wall. My heart was beating faster and faster, and there was a strange pain in my chest. I was waiting for Munkar and Nakir to come to me any second and bang my head with a blazing hammer and ask me questions, and I would stutter and forget who my Prophet was and who my Imam was and forget that I've cried at Imam Hossein's mourning.

The graveyard was silent. Corpses were not even turning in their graves so one could hear the sound of cracking bones. My forehead was covered in sweat and my vision was blurry. I turned my head toward the opening of the grave. Mohammad Taha wasn't there. He might have gone into his own goddamn grave. I lay on my back. There was a rectangular frame of the navy-blue sky above me, and all the stars were piling up in that small section. Something was squeezing my airway and cutting off my breath. The clouds and the walls of the grave were moving together. The pressure of the grave was shoving my arms into my chest.

Mohammad Taha was sitting above the grave. Small pieces of dirt fell down on my face from under his shoes.

"For God's sake, Mohammad Taha, let's go. Didn't you say ten minutes?"

I heard him from the adjoining grave, "What the hell? Just keep saying some prayers, and then we'll leave."

My mouth dried up. I looked up: No one was there. I got up and pulled myself out of the grave, picked up the lantern, and started to run. I felt like someone was following me.

### III.

**THE FRONT DOOR** slammed shut with a bang. Grandma yelled, "Hoy, donkey! This isn't a stable. The roof is about collapse over our heads!"

It was Mohammad Taha again, but this time he wasn't dragging his feet. Agha Javad had finally taught him to walk like a human being, to lift his foot and put it down again. This way the soles of his shoes wouldn't wear out and tear apart. I pulled the blanket over my head.

"Are you awake?"

I didn't answer. I didn't even breathe. He kicked my back.

"You're not fooling anyone; a sleeping person breathes regularly, they don't just stop breathing."

I didn't move.

"Reza proposed to Samaneh."

I jumped up like I was on fire. I looked Mohammad Taha in the eyes. He wasn't lying. When he lied, his pupils would dart around and his right eyelid would twitch. But now his brown eyes were fixed on my lips.

"That bastard! He thinks he's better than me just because he took a few classes in Islamic school? I'll make him regret it!" I got up, and he snatched my wrist, as if he'd caught a thief or something.

"Uncle Mash Akbar hasn't replied yet. He said he needed to think. Samaneh didn't even serve tea."

That cheered me up. The window was open; a light breeze was blowing into the room, shaking the green leaves of the geranium pot on the shelf. Mohammad Taha leaned against the handmade red and blue cushion and said, "But seriously, you're some kind of vagrant. You have no house, no life, no job. You're just a loner whose dad is feeding him. Even getting your high school diploma was a big hurdle. They won't even let you have a thief, let alone their daughter."

"Their loss," I said. As if I didn't believe it myself.

Reza wasn't that little kid anymore. He was a mullah now. When the smell of his Shah Abdolazim perfume poured into the mosque hallways, everyone stood up in his honor, even children and the elderly. They would bring him tea in Turkish teacups. People would go to him for *istikhara*, and everyone honored and respected him.

"Last night at dinner my mom said let's go and ask for Samaneh's hand in marriage for that ill-fated Mojtaba. His parents are deceased and those two really love each other. Nastaran was saying that the day that Reza went to propose, Samaneh was crying in the basement. But my dad said, what are we supposed to say to Uncle Mash Akbar? What should we say his job is? Reza is a mullah, he's highly respected in the community. The other day in Shah Mosque, he scolded the whole royal family. They say a letter came from the SAVAK, and they're trying to stop him from preaching."

"Long live His Highness," I said under my breath.

"It's not that simple. You think if Reza is out of the picture, they're going to let Samaneh marry you? They'll give her to somebody else. Maybe they'll give her to Ghasem, Behjat Khanom's son. He's not nobody. He was flogged in the SAVAK prison. You know how much Uncle Mash Akbar loves Ghasem. He says he's an honorable man."

"You're saying this to try to fool me, but I won't be fooled by you anymore."

"Fool you? As if I asked you to break a monster's horn. You should pray for the SAVAK to arrest you—that's when your fate brightens. You'll get the seal of revolutionary on your forehead. Just a few kicks and punches in there, and then Samaneh will be yours. Uncle Mash Akbar himself will come and propose."

"You say SAVAK so lightly, as if it's nothing. Haven't you heard they can stick you to a wall like a poster?"

"Don't you want Samaneh? Come to the mosque tonight. Uncle Mash Akbar will be there, so will Samaneh."

"I'm not coming."

#### IV.

**WE WERE LIKE** posters hung up on the wall. He could deal with all of us singlehandedly. He'd beaten us up pretty badly, without even asking anything or saying anything or wanting us to confess to anything. He put black blindfolds on our eyes. With every strike of the whip,

our heads would smash into the wall in front of us. Mohammad Taha shrieked before getting whipped. I had an urge to pee; I let go.

He laughed, he kept laughing and hitting us. My whole body was burning. I wanted to pass out so I wouldn't feel how painful this is, how painful love is. The cable kept swinging in the air and biting like a wounded snake. Out of every four strikes, one hit me, one hit Mohammad Taha, and one hit Uncle Mash Akbar. The fourth strike hit someone else who neither yelled nor screamed. He would just draw a sharp breath with every strike, and then even that went silent. The last strike came down on the back of my head. I blacked out until my head smashed onto the stairs and I regained consciousness. Someone was hauling me over the stairs, taking me up. I could hear Mohammad Taha's moaning from below; it seemed they were taking him someplace else, but I couldn't hear his footfalls.

The upstairs landing was full of dead bodies and smashed-up people. The man who was dragging me dropped me on one of the corpses. A little farther, I saw Uncle Mash Akbar among the bodies. His hands were tied behind him like mine were, but he was facing me. His salt-and-pepper beard was now red.

"Don't be scared, son," he said. "These are just a bunch of lustering bullies, they can't do anything . . ." Then he tilted his head a little and said in a lower voice, "Under torture, there's only one way to not feel the pain. All you have to do is hang on to someone in your heart. Keep picturing them in front of you. With every lash of the whip that lands on you, with every kick and punch that hits your face, just keep your heart warm with their presence, with their memories, their remembrance . . . this way you won't even notice the pain or the wound . . ."

The thick, dark blood that was oozing out of his mouth made his lips bluer. Uncle's face was just like that day when Samaneh stole Aunt's lipstick and painted her whole face with it. The same day I got to see her brown hair through the crack in the door and something trembled in my chest. I asked him, "Who do you imagine?"

He looked me in the eye and said nothing. I knew he was a revolutionary. I knew he was Imam's fan but I was no one's fan. I was just a simple man in love. I'd had no idea there were guns and proclamations and the police in that place, and of course I had no idea Samaneh was not going to be there. I hadn't been looking for trouble. I just wanted to live my life. Marry Samaneh and become her refuge, have kids with her, raise them, give them a good education so they'd turn out to be doc-

tors and engineers, then marry and fill our house with loud and playful grandchildren. And then, in my final moments, I could rest my head on Samaneh's lap, stare into her eyes and that freckled face, and say, "Oh Samaneh . . . your love killed me."

These images made my heart melt and put a smile on my lips. Uncle Mash Akbar was right. Love is a cure. It kills the pain and decapitates the grief. A lover's tear is not salty, it's sweet. When it falls on a wound, it doesn't make it burn, it doesn't sting. Just knowing that someone is waiting for you turns the blood in your throat into a sweet syrup. You just need some lettuce to dip in it!

**V.**

**THEY TIED OUR WRISTS** with some thick rope and hung us from large steel hooks in the ceiling, just like slaughtered animals. Our toes couldn't reach the ground. I just hoped my weight would stretch the rope a little so I could put my feet down and rid myself of the horrible pain for just one second.

On my right, Mohammad Taha was hanging, and on my left was Uncle Mash Akbar. Ten steps farther, another person was hanging, completely naked. I think it was the fourth person. But unlike us, he was suspended upside down from one leg. The other leg was floating in the air, and he was slowly turning around like hands on a clock. He had his back to us. There was not a single white spot on his back. He'd been flogged so badly that his entire skin, from his neck all the way to the back of his thick and hairy thighs, was full of cracks, like the dried soil of the desert. He was turning slowly, and now, his long black beard, thin lips, and black-and-blue cheeks reminded me of only one name: Reza.

I didn't know whether I should be happy or sad. I wasn't in better shape myself. The pain in my arms got worse and worse every second. I tried to lay my thoughts in Samaneh's embrace so I could forget the pain, so I could forget my bones were snapping out of place and stop remembering that night and the guns and the proclamations. I wanted to think of Samaneh, but Reza's face, which was now looking at us with closed eyes, wouldn't let me. His face wouldn't let me see the white of Samaneh's teeth through her pink lips or kiss her red cheeks like always, in my mind.

Mohammad Taha regained consciousness and started wailing. Someone came into the room. He was wearing a white shirt, tucked inside his light blue pants. He twisted Reza so hard that he started to spin around

like a pinwheel, and the screech of the chains tied to his foot filled the room, but Reza said nothing.

He moved over to Mohammad Taha. With his right hand, he grabbed his mouth and started to squeeze hard, as if he wanted to break all his teeth. Mohammad Taha gagged; the man hit him in the face so hard it knocked him right out. Then he glanced at me. I pretended to be asleep so he would leave me alone and let me enjoy my swing, but the rope had loosened enough to put me on the ground. When my feet reached the floor, I was too weak to stand. But the man pulled the rope so hard that I jumped up and my body smashed into Uncle Mash Akbar. He opened his eyes and said, "Be a man, my son, don't forget."

## VI.

**THE BRIGHT LIGHT** of the interrogation room was hurting my eyes, and I couldn't see the face of the man who was sitting under the lamp. White smoke rose from a cigar in his right hand.

"Are you going to say, or should I?"

"Say what?"

He slapped me in the face; my vision went blurry.

"You're going to talk! Good job. And I'll help you. Now talk like a human being and tell me what the hell were you doing among all those saboteurs. What was going on in there? Who was doing what?"

"I just went there for Samaneh."

He slapped me again. I spat on the floor. All the blood that was left in my throat poured out with it. The man grabbed my hair and rubbed my face in it.

"Listen, kid, I'm called Manouchehri. I've made tougher men talk. It's best for you to start talking, or you're just going to get beaten up."

He pulled my hair and raised my head, staring into my eyes.

"Okay, suit yourself. But don't you dare go around spreading rumors that we beat up children in the SAVAK!"

He hung his gray jacket from an old hanger in the corner of the room and rolled up his white sleeves to his elbows. He tied my hands and feet to the rusty iron chair I was sitting on. From inside a closet, he picked up a long, narrow whip. He landed the first strike on my leg. I screamed. Yesterday's wounds hadn't healed yet. He put a metal bucket over my head and landed the second strike even harder. I yelled. My voice echoed inside the bucket and multiplied. Now I had to endure the pain without crying out. The smallest whisper turned into a sledgeham-

mer, banging my head. The sound was even more painful than the whip hitting my thighs. He fastened an electric cable to my hand. Now it was impossible to hold the scream. My own voice was driving me crazy.

“What kind of creature are you? Everyone else who was arrested with you has snitched already. And your beloved Sheikh Reza kicked it after two slaps. Now a wimp like you is going to back the mullahs up? Are you even made for this kind of stuff?”

Up until yesterday, I was here just because of Samaneh, but now, out of spite for these bastards, I was going to back the mullahs and non-mullahs. I was a mistaken person. A mistaken person who was not in the right place. I’d realized this with the first sting of the whip. But it didn’t matter. All that mattered now was not to be that person anymore. He flipped the electricity switch, and my whole body was shaking and shooting with pain. An uncontrolled low and constant sound was coming out of my throat. Just like when I was a kid and said “AAAA” in front of the fan. Ah, Samaneh’s “AAAA” was so beautiful.

“What the fuck were you doing that night at the mosque?”

“I told you a thousand times. I was there because of my love for Samaneh.”

“So all those proclamations, they just came out of my dad’s grave, is that it?”

He flipped the switch again; my entire face, even my lips, were trembling. I saw my mother coming to visit. Just like in my childhood, she put her finger under my chin and said, “Smile, my beautiful boy, smile . . .”

On the interrogation form, they wrote, “He is insane, love has made him blind. Still, keep him in custody.” And there was a fingerprint under it.

## **VII.**

**THREE MONTHS AND** seventeen days have passed. Maybe less, maybe more, I don’t know. But even if I had spent just one day in there, it felt like three months and seventeen days, three months and seventeen days of pain. They put clothes on me and a blindfold. When we were in the car, my whole body trembled with the screech of the Anti-Subversion Building door opening. It looked like we were going out.

In the darkness of the night, we reached the Qasr prison. At the door, they gave us new prison uniforms: gray shirts and pants with a pair of closed-toe slippers. Each person received a blanket too. The clothes smelled like the military, the compulsive service. Then they pushed us

into a large hallway with cells on both sides, like graves waiting for us with open mouths. They wanted to devour every single one of us and slowly chew the cuds of our bodies and souls. Everyone else was shaking, but for me, this wasn't such a bad place, for me who had never had a place of his own.

After Dad died, I had no one else. A homeless vagabond. I spent one night at my uncle's, one night at my aunt's, and for the most part I was with Grandma. I didn't even have a mattress. Sometimes, half of my body was on Grandma's mattress and the other half on the rug. Now I had a cell that was mine. Cell number ten. The "10" had a small 1 and a big 0, as big as the round hole on the door.

You can see the outside from the hole. They're taking someone with a blindfold. The soldiers are wearing blue uniforms, turquoise. Samaneh also had a dress this color. Grandma brought it for her as a souvenir from Karbala. A guard looks inside through the hole. I divert my gaze and turn my head. There's a window on the other wall. Dad always used to say a house should have windows. Now my house has a door, walls, a window. The sky is still blue. Or maybe navy blue. There are no stars, but there is the moon.

My hands and feet are shooting with pain. Where my nails should be, there are black pieces of flesh. The floor is cold, very cold. I walk slowly on the carpet and count my steps. The distance between the wall and the door is four paces. Four paces for me. Maybe if Mohammad Taha were here, he could walk it in three paces with those long legs of his. It's good that he's not here. If he were, he would try to convince me again. Just like the night when he put me in that grave. Like now, that he has buried me in an even bigger grave. If he were here, inside these four walls of desolation, he would gather a heap of stupidity firewood to start a huge fire, the smoke of which would only get in my eyes, while he could cheat his way out of it, pass out without getting slapped and wail before even getting whipped. To hell with him and his evil existence; even his absence is painful, a pain twisting in my chest, making my poor heart long to see his stupid face.

The width of the cell is two paces. Two paces for me. Maybe for Reza, it would be three paces. But he's not here. It's even good that he died. If he'd been alive and was thinking of Samaneh, I would have personally set fire to his beard and killed him. Or maybe not. Now that I think about it, I realize I loved him. But I didn't want him to know Samaneh . . . Ah, to hell with these goddamn thoughts, to hell with this bloody

love. The sound of Reza's sharp breaths under the whip fills my ears. I don't know what he was thinking about then or whose face he was imagining, but I hope he wasn't kissing Samaneh's face in his mind. I hope he didn't say, "Oh Samaneh, your love killed me . . ."

I'm going crazy. Someone is walking out there. I hear Samaneh's footfalls.

### VIII.

**THE WALLS HAVE** voices, they speak loudly. They're constantly talking: about the past, of those who came and those who left, of those who were released and those who were set free, of those who arrived correctly and then got mistaken, of those who arrived by mistake but didn't stay that way.

The cell door opens but no one enters. Just an arm reaches in. Someone has brought me a bowl of food and a cup of water. I want to take his hands instead of the water and hear his voice instead of the food. Loneliness makes you hungry for humans. Solitary is even worse than torture. Under torture, you know there's at least one person who is trying to make you talk. It's important for him that you don't keep anything on your chest, nothing heavy; he'll be glad to hear your secrets.

But in solitary, it's just you. Alone. You know that no one will spoil you, no one will become your friend, they won't even visit you in your dreams. After a while you realize that sometimes someone comes and sneaks a peek through the hole in the door, as if he's looking out for you. But he says nothing. When you look at him, he leaves. Waiting, you stare at that hole to see him again. You get used to it, slowly. You are gripped by the possibility of someone coming and taking a look at you.

The cell is just like a grave. Cold floor, tall walls. When you look at the walls, it seems like they're closing in. And you don't know, you don't know what's going to happen. Now, tomorrow, a year from now . . . you don't know whether you're going to stand under the gallows or take a picture under Shahyad tower. You don't know if morning will come or night will stay forever. You don't know whether your love is waiting for you or she's licking honey off the groom's finger. You don't know why your mind is there and the rest of you here. Then you remember how much work you delayed, how much you should have been running, how much you should have been living. You keep talking to yourself, over and over. You dig up your whole life, remembering days you'd forgotten for years. People come to visit you in your imagination, people

who have rotted in their graves but whose words are still fresh.

A little later, you remember Amiz Hassan Naraghi's words, which you've heard a few times: "The world is a prison for the believers." And then you remember that once you read a book the name of which you've forgotten, but you remember a sentence that said, "Freedom is the only eternal merit of history." And then in that same moment, you wish you were free.

After a while, you think to yourself, what's the time? You calculate, based on the staleness of the rice in the bowl, the water getting warm in the cup, and even the guards coming and going. You think it might be three or four in the morning, five at the most. The guard opens the door.

"Prisoner, get out."

I put down the pen and paper. I don't know whether I'm going for execution or for morning prayer. I hear Mohammad Taha from the adjoining cell, "Just say some prayers, it'll be over and we'll leave."

I look inside his cell through the hole. The soles of his feet are all black and blue. I don't think I'll ever hear his footfalls again.