

I CONFESS
REVELATIONS IN EXILE



Kooshyar Karimi was born in December 1968 in the slums of Tehran, Iran, to a family living in abject poverty. His mother Homa was an orphaned Jew who in order to escape an intolerable family situation, married Khalil, a bus driver and Muslim with two wives and six other children to feed. He was only eleven years old when the Iranian Islamic Revolution swept aside Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime. Amidst this post-revolutionary chaos, and the bloodshed of the Iran-Iraq war, Kooshyar pursued his education through to medical school with a determination to avoid war, stay alive, and support his mother. It is from here that he went on to become a published author, award-winning translator, doctor, husband and father by the age of twenty-six.

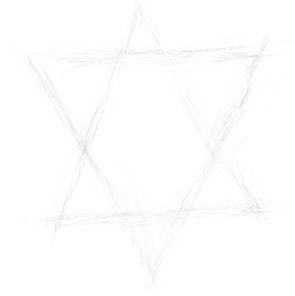
Kooshyar was kidnapped from the street near his home one evening in the winter of 1998 by the Iranian Intelligence Service. Tortured, burnt, and whipped over sixty-five days, Kooshyar found himself faced with an unimaginable decision...to spy for MOIS (the Iranian Internal Intelligence Service) against his own people or to be tortured slowly to death. His forced co-operation was a significant factor in the arrest of thirteen Iranian Jews in March 1999, a case that caused an international outcry.

Living this intolerable lie and knowing his own execution was imminent, Kooshyar drew on a fateful connection from the past to make his escape from Iran to Turkey. In 2000, he and his family were granted political refugee status by the UNHCR, and a visa to settle permanently in Australia.

He is now an Australian citizen working full-time in General Practice in New South Wales, and writing in his spare time.

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Only wood grown from sustainable regrowth forests is used in the manufacture of paper used in this book.

*To the memory of Habib Elghanian
The first Jew executed by the Islamic regime of Iran, 1979.*

And so my atonement begins...

DISCLAIMER

The story told here is factual. Every care has been taken to verify names, dates and details throughout this book, but as much is reliant on memory, some unintentional errors may have occurred. On occasions, real names have been replaced with substitute names to protect people who remain in danger of recrimination. The behaviour and speech of each person in the book is accurate, regardless of any prudent disguise.

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C oming to Australia, I lost my language skills. I felt like a painter without hands. I had the heart of the stories, but not the heart of the language. It took eleven years and ten drafts for me to create a perfect body for my manuscript. It was my daughter, Newsha, who brought it to life.

She has been the voice, the language, and the words of my story. I could never thank her enough for being the soul behind the words.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Robert Hillman who dedicated such hard work, research and commitment to the original manuscript in our work together.



STAR

It is snowing in Tehran on the night of my birth, a blanketing fall that starts in the morning and persists all day. On a bed in the basement that serves as her home, in a narrow, moulded street of Gomrok, my mother has been battling all day to master the contractions that shouldn't have come for another three weeks. Close to midnight, she has to concede that the child in her womb is about to be born, whether she is ready or not. As young as she is, she has given birth before and knows that no power on earth and no prayer will bring about the respite she craves. No arrangements have been made for the birth. No hospital has been booked, no doctor or midwife is on hand. She struggles, clenching her muscles in an effort to hold me inside for a few minutes longer as she staggers up the steps from the basement to the street. The stale streets of Gomrok hold some of the most notorious, despondent slums of Tehran. In this part of Iran, it would surprise no one if my mother and her child were found dead on the street in the light of morning. Women die in the streets here all the time.

She is barely seventeen years old, my mother. Her first child, a boy, Koorosh, was born when she was fifteen. Koorosh is asleep in the basement room, oblivious to my mother's striving

and shrieking. Better that he should remain asleep, since he is now alone in the basement and will remain alone for some time. The pain my mother is suffering is overwhelming, but her distress at leaving Koorosh unattended is just as strong. There will be no sympathy for her at all if Koorosh comes to grief in some way. In Iran at this time, the time of the Shah, the burden carried by a woman is unyielding.

My mother stumbles into the street with no plan other than to hail a passing stranger and plead for assistance. But this close to midnight the streets are empty. She falls to her knees in the snow, stricken by a particularly intense contraction. She is unable to regain her feet and can only remain where she is, stuttering out a brief, repeated cry for help.

As the narrator of this story I can, if I wish, provide the help and support my mother craves, and that I crave for her, in this hour of desperation. I could cause a sympathetic neighbour to come down from one of the above-ground apartments and cry out, ‘Ya Allah! Homa, let me get you to hospital!’ Or I could give her a hidden reserve of strength that would allow her to find a taxi. But if I were free to distort the truth in that way I would go further, and place her in a warm apartment with a comforting husband and a midwife in attendance. I would fashion my own birth in a way that gives my mother the easiest possible time of it. But my priority in telling this tale is to be truthful and I have to forego the solaces of fiction. My mother is on her knees in agony, my father is occupied elsewhere, perhaps with his other wives, and I am being forced from the paradise of the womb into the grief of the birth canal as the clock is about to strike midnight.

A car crunches to a halt only metres from where my mother is huddled. In the midst of her pain, she realises that this will be the only chance for either of us to survive my birth, for the crown of my head has all but emerged. She attempts to shriek

but hasn't the power to shriek and breathe at the same time. The beam of a torch plays on her upturned face. She finds the strength to cry out, 'Please!' And the man with the torch hoists her up with his hands under her armpits and manages to get her onto the back seat of his vehicle.

He stammers in panic, 'The hospital! I will take you to the hospital! Be strong, madam!'

But the distraction of turning his head to address his passenger causes him to lose control of the car and it plunges violently into one of the deep gutters that line the streets in this part of Tehran. The driver shakes his hands at the heavens, cursing his ill-fortune.

'Madam, be strong!' he implores, and leaps from the car, attempting in vain to pull the vehicle back onto the road.

And as he strains with might and an inexplicable determination to move his car back onto the road, my mother grips the pendant on her necklace, gives a final wrenching scream, and I slide into the world covered in the blood and clotted debris of birth.

The driver, shaken by my mother's scream, hurries to the rear passenger door, swings it open and shines the beam of his torch over the gore, over me, over my gasping mother. In the illumination of the torchlight, my mother makes out something she had no time and no strength to notice before. The man, the driver, the Good Samaritan who had chanced by in such an unlikely way, is a policeman. Considering the life that is about to unfold for me and for my mother, this miracle is also a bitter coincidence. For the holy symbol on my mother's necklace—the one which now glimmers in the light of the policeman's torch, with Ruhollah Khomeini little more than a decade away from proclaiming the world's first Islamic Republic in Iran—is a Star of David.



ADONAI

At the time of my birth, according to the records of Persia's ethnic complexion which have been kept for perhaps four thousand years, the Jewish population of Iran is at its lowest. The noisy, sprawling city of Tehran is home to some twenty thousand Jews, including my mother, my brother and me. Another twenty thousand survive—even thrive—elsewhere in Iran, largely in the cities of Isfahan, Shiraz and Mashhad. In the distant past—two thousand years ago—Jews comprised as much as a quarter of the population of Persia. Over the centuries, our numbers have waxed and waned according to the generosity or venom of our rulers, none of whom were Jews. It is the same for the Jews of Persia as for the Jews of many other lands. We have made hay while the sun shone, and without any secure destination to flee to, have endured blizzards of persecution when we've had to. The persecution often enough took the form of mass murder, but enforced conversion was also popular: mass murder by a different means, bloodless but agonising. Shylock's shriek of anguish at the end of *The Merchant of Venice* is not the cry of a man separated from his shekels, but of a Jew wrenched from the solace of his faith.

In the earliest years of my life I am not to know that being a Jew in Iran means maintaining the sort of precarious existence

that a canary would experience in a house full of cats. I am five years old before it is revealed to me that the Muslim faith of almost everyone I know—a faith that seems to me as natural a part of people’s lives as wearing shoes or eating bread—is not ever to be considered a natural part of *my* life. My mother and my brother Koorosh and I are living in the same dank basement in Gomrok that my mother had emerged from to give birth to me on that night of snow and icy winds and amateur obstetrics. It is raining heavily, as it does in Tehran, and water is pouring into the basement through broken windows. It is late at night and we are in bed, Koorosh and I, holding tightly to our mother in the middle.

The fierce explosions of thunder and blinding flashes of lightning seem wicked in their intensity and the storm, in my mind, takes on the character of a great monster with its arms reaching out over Tehran. When the thunder grows louder still, I cry out in my dread that the storm is trying to kill us, and beg my mother to make it stop. She draws me closer to her and strokes my head.

‘I cannot make the storm stop,’ she whispers. ‘But listen to me. I will tell you something. Are you listening?’

‘Yes, I am listening.’

‘We will not die, my darling. Adonai will protect us, as he has always protected the Children of Israel.’

‘Adonai?’

‘Yes, darling, Adonai. Have no fear.’

‘Who is Adonai?’

‘Adonai is our God, my darling, the God of all Jews in the world.’

What my mother has told me leaves me feeling both comforted and baffled. I don’t know what Israel is, and I have not heard the word ‘Jew’ before in my life. But I have heard of God, or of *a* God, of Allah, the God of the Muslims. My mother seems

to be suggesting that our God Adonai is even more powerful than Allah and a more reliable protector, and I am glad of that. I picture the marvellous God Adonai confronting the storm monster and subduing him, breaking his arms, slapping his face. I think Adonai might look something like my absent father, but a thousand times taller and with a beard that reaches halfway down his chest. I fall asleep in my mother's arms, murmuring the name of Adonai.

The following morning, after our breakfast of grey bread, I pester my mother to tell me more about Adonai, for I intend to adopt this wonderful champion of the Jews as my lifelong protector. She seems reluctant to say anything more about Adonai at first, and in her bossy way urges me to eat up and sit with my back straight. Koorosh's enthusiasm for this new God of our household doesn't match mine. He was initially amazed to hear that we are Jews, but wakes in the morning with a big smile, relaxed and accepting. He is content to let me do all the questioning.

'Maman, can I ask you something?'

'Ask me nothing!' she says. She is mopping up the storm water that has gathered in pools on the floor, squeezing out the rag into the sink.

'Maman, is Adonai the God of the Jews?'

'Yes! Did I not say so? Why ask me what you know?'

'Maman, please can I ask you something?'

'No!'

'Are we Jews?' I persist.

It is very important to me to get the facts straight, for this new and fascinating information about Jews and Adonai and the Children of Israel has come to me at a moment of a quickening in my curiosity. I feel at that time the urgent, instinctive need to extend my understanding of the world and I want facts, history, stories. Most children of this age experience this hunger, I think.

Or perhaps that quickening is not simply curiosity, but the development of a need to enhance my security, for in addition to truth, I hunger for heroes. In the earliest years of life, one's parents are the heroes, usually adequate enough even with their limitations and flaws. But a little later, fresh gods and heroes with mystical powers exercise a deep allure. My mother could comfort me in her arms, yes, and she could mop up the water after a storm, certainly. But by her own admission, she could not wrestle and subdue a storm monster. I need Adonai for that. My mother pauses in her mopping. She looks at me as if she were weighing up alternatives.

'Alright,' she says.

She wrings out the sodden rag, dries her hands and sits cross-legged with Koorosh and me on our bed. The hesitancy of a few minutes earlier has vanished from her face. She now looks fiercely animated. It only ever requires a sudden gust to make the coals in my mother's eyes glow with an almost maniacal intensity, and the gust of wind this day is my nagging demand for more news about the great Adonai.

'I will tell you of the Children of Israel.'

She interrupts herself time and again to remind us that we are to keep what she is telling us secret. I am delighted to hear that our God Adonai is a secret God, that his powers are only ever employed to benefit Jews. The covert nature of his interventions adds an element of intrigue to his adventures.

The Children of Israel, so my mother's story reveals, were not children at all. The Jews she identifies—Noah, who so pleased God, Abraham the Patriarch, Moses who carried a long stick known as a 'rod', David the King—were grown men. And Israel, so my mother says, is in fact a place, a country, a long way from Iran but not so far as America or China. The most thrilling part of her story concerns the mission of Moses, who led a great many Jews out of slavery in Egypt (I had heard of

Egypt!—I had heard of the pyramids!) and overcame the armies of the Pharaoh by wielding his rod and dividing the waters of the Red Sea and drowning the Pharaoh's soldiers and horses.

Listening to my mother, I begin to feel that Moses might be a more solid sort of hero than Adonai Himself, since Adonai, as she now claims, has another name that cannot be spoken, a name she would write on a piece of paper for me and Koorosh at another time, but that we must never utter. This is awkward. Moses, on the other hand, has a fine, utterable name. My mother says that Moses was 'full of courage' and that his rod 'saved the Children of Israel too many times to count' on the strange and beautiful and arduous and also slightly boring journey (forty years!) from Egypt to Israel. I am enthralled by the ingenuity of Moses, and by his determination, but the sparse diet of the wandering Jews saddens me. Unleavened bread and bitter herbs don't seem much of an improvement on the fare of our famished household. I would have been happier to hear of Moses employing his rod to conjure mountains of watermelon and fish and cheese. She also speaks of Joseph, who became prince of Egypt (the same Egypt of the Moses story—puzzling!) after a great many ups-and-downs, and of Ruth who wept in an open field a long way from Israel, yearning for her native land.

A few questions remain unanswered once my mother has concluded her story. Since we are living in Iran, rather than Israel, does that mean that we are slaves, like the Jews of Egypt? Would Moses or someone very like him, lead us out of Tehran to Israel?

'We are not slaves,' she says. 'Israel is our home, but Iran is also our land. Jews have lived here for thousands of years. Before Allah, came Adonai. Before Muhammad, came Abraham and Moses. Remember that.'

As new as the idea of being a Jew is to me, I still have a pretty good sense of what would happen to me if I ran into

the street and shouted out, 'Before Allah came Adonai!' I have no such term in my vocabulary as 'minority', and certainly no phrase as sophisticated as 'victimised, marginalised and despised minority', but my mother's story of the Jews and of their ordeal over the centuries suggests that I should definitely heed her exhortations to keep the whole business secret.

I will wear my Jewishness under my shirt, like a singlet, the closest garment to my flesh. And this is attractive to me, keeping it all secret. The Muslims sing the praise of their God in public day and night. The Muslims have no secrets. To be a secret Jew, praising Moses and Adonai with his unutterable name in private, away from the eyes of the world—yes, this is deeply satisfying. I will walk down the street with the singlet of my faith hugging my flesh and not a soul will know. And then one fine day, my mother and Koorosh and I will follow Moses, or New Moses, or whatever name Moses wishes to give himself in the twentieth century, to Israel where we will be fed watermelon and fish and cheese ten times a day to reward us for keeping our secret so faithfully in Iran.