

September, 2010

Benedictus

By Motti Lerner

©

An Iran-Israel-US collaboration

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World premiere at Golden Thread Productions, San Francisco, CA.
First performance on September 29, 2007.

Originally developed at Siena College, Loudonville, NY. First performed by the Department of
Creative Arts April 19, 2007

Additional development at The Tashmadada Theatre, Melbourne (2008), and The Lark Play
Development Center, NYC (2008)

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The setting

The action takes place in three different locations: Scenes One, Three and Five are set in a room at a small Benedictine monastery in Rome. On the walls of the room hang a picture of St. Benedict in his black monk's habit, and a crucifix. The room, which has two doors, is furnished simply: a table, a few chairs and armchairs, bookshelves containing holy works, and on the floor a carpet. In the past this room has witnessed a number of secret political negotiations between representatives of countries in conflict, far from the eyes of the media. Scene Two is set in the US Ambassador's office in Rome. The office is more chaotic than expected as the Ambassador has been working in it continuously for the last 48 hours. Scene Four is set in a cheap hotel room in Rome, which was chosen to host a secret meeting without arousing suspicion.

The characters:

Monk: 70 years old, secretary of the monastery's abbot.

Asher Motahedeh: A 56 year-old Israeli businessman with strong ties to the Israeli defense establishment and the Pentagon. Born in Tehran. Before the 1978-9 revolution he participated in the struggle against the Shah. Following the revolution he fled Iran with most of his family and emigrated to Israel. His older sister and her husband remained in Iran where they still live with their four children.

Ali Kermani: A 56 year-old Iranian clergyman-politician. Born in Tehran. Since the 1978-9 revolution he has served in key positions in the Iranian government, including that of Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and even Deputy Prime Minister. Since he opposed many decisions of the Supreme Leader in Iran, his political power has diminished and in recent years he has devoted most of his time to business activities in and outside Iran, but has always remained an important leader in the reformist movement.

Ben Martin: US Ambassador in Rome, 59 years-old. A Princeton graduate. He joined the State Department in 1977, during President Carter's administration. In 1978 he was posted to the American embassy in Tehran as a political advisor. In 1979, after the Islamic revolution, he was taken hostage by students who took over the embassy, and was released with the other hostages after 444 days. Afterwards he continued working in the State Department in various positions. He was involved in secret political activities in Central America and the Middle East. He was deeply affected by the 9/11 outrage and since then has supported President Bush's policies. In 2003 he was stationed in Washington as a senior State Department officer and was a partner to the rejection of the Iranian proposal for normalization of relations with the US.

The time

A hot summer day in the near future.

Political background

After several years of tough negotiations between Iran and the Western countries on limiting the development of Iran's nuclear technology, the West now realizes that in the course of the negotiations Iran has covertly accelerated its nuclear program and has reached the stage at which it can complete the manufacture of nuclear weapons within a few months. Through the UN Security Council the West has imposed sanctions on Iran, but the Iranian government is resolved to continue with its nuclear program. The United States threatens to attack the Iranian nuclear facilities, but its threats are dismissed. Negotiations have been suspended and the parties are firmly entrenched in their positions. The United States is preparing a military operation. Its aircraft carriers and submarines are already deployed in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. The play begins 48 hours before the attack is scheduled to begin.

Scene One

Light on Martin

Martin: I don't hate Iran. I never have. We're not fighting against the Iranian people but against the regime that's been oppressing it for more than thirty years. Those who accuse me of hatred forget that my wife was born in Tehran. That to this day we celebrate Nowruz at home. When I left Princeton to join the State Department I asked to be posted there. I worked for human rights from the moment I landed. It was Thursday, September 7th 1978. On the way from the airport I saw half a million people marching down Pahlavi Street chanting "Death to the Shah". "Long Live Khomeini". They were devout Shi'ites, middle-class people, students, and even intellectuals. The anger that had built up inside them over decades of oppression was stronger than the fear of the thousands of soldiers encircling them. I wasn't the only one in the administration who sympathized with them. Even President Carter, who backed the Shah, was critical of his tyranny. Those who accuse me of indifference toward human life have forgotten how many visas I issued to Iranians persecuted by the SAWAK, how many of them I hid in my apartment. The next morning – Friday, September 8th – The government declared martial law. But thousands who had not heard went out into the streets. The army opened fire. Hundreds were hit. We immediately called the foreign ministry. We protested. We pleaded. We threatened. We weren't much help. I could only hope that this Black Friday heralded the end of the Shah.

Light down on Martin. Lighting up on the empty room in the monastery. 10 a.m. A habit-clad monk escorts Asher Motahedeh into the room. The table is laid with a simple breakfast: a pitcher of water, coffee, biscuits, fruit, etc. Motahedeh is wearing an elegant suit and tie as befits a wealthy businessman.

Monk: His car is at the gate, sir. He'll be here in a moment. Should I switch on the air conditioner?

Motahedeh: Let's wait till he arrives.

Monk: I'm sorry the abbot couldn't welcome you in person. He's at an urgent meeting with his Holiness, who's very concerned about the war.

Motahedeh: Thank you.

- Monk: All the food is kosher. There are a few Jewish shops in Rome that...
- Motahedeh: Thank you. (**Seemingly absently Motahedeh inspects the bookcase**)
- Monk: You don't have to worry, sir. We have had discreet meetings like this here for hundreds of years. To this day not even a rumor has leaked.
- Motahedeh: I know.
- Monk: Some of the most important political moves of recent years were initiated here too. In total secrecy. (**Motahedeh is unimpressed**)
Would you like me to stay and introduce you?
- Motahedeh: No, thank you.
- Monk: We'll help you in any way we can, sir. His Holiness has always worked tirelessly to save human life. You have probably heard that the Iranian government has surrounded their nuclear facilities with hundreds of people as a human shield.
- Motahedeh: Yes. (**Checks the side of the bookcase**)
- Monk: His Holiness has already conveyed a stern protest.
- Motahedeh: So I heard.
- Monk: It would be a terrible war. Tens of thousands would be killed.
(**Motahedeh remains silent**) My office is down the corridor, sir. If you need anything.
- Motahedeh: Thank you.

The monk exits. Now Motahedeh discovers a microphone hidden in the bottom of a vase. He hisses a curse in Persian but leaves it in place. Ali Kermani enters, wearing a black robe and white turban. He sports a short beard. They look at one another.

- Kermani: You've put on some weight.
- Motahedeh: So have you.
- Kermani: I've also lost my hair. Fortunately, you can't see.
- Motahedeh: I read in the paper that you had an angioplasty last year.
- Kermani: If we'd carried on playing football we'd both be in better shape today.
- Motahedeh: I'm so slow that my grandchildren don't want to play with me. I've got two. Five and eight years-old. They sometimes humor me and let me be goalie.
- Kermani: I've got fourteen.

Motahedeh: By the time our children provide us with grandchildren, we're unable to enjoy them. **(Laughs)** I'm glad you agreed to meet me.

Kermani: If I had contacted you, wouldn't you have agreed?

Motahedeh laughs ironically.

Motahedeh: I hope getting here wasn't too difficult.

Kermani: I went to the mosque early this morning and snuck out the back door. **(Smiles)** I'm still there.

Motahedeh: Does your embassy know?

Kermani: Of course not. **(Looks at him)** Yours?

Motahedeh: I'd like to keep my head on my shoulders for a few more years.

Both laugh. A short silence. They are momentarily unsure of one another.

Kermani: How's the family? Your brothers?

Motahedeh: Fine, thanks. And yours?

Kermani: All well. Your mother?

Motahedeh: She's still making *Khoresht-e-Bademjan*¹ the way you loved it. **(Kermani smiles)** She's living with us now. We've got a big bomb shelter under the house. I imagine you've got one too.

Kermani: I hope we won't have to use it.

Motahedeh: Have you been in touch with my sister recently?

Kermani: All the women in my family are her patients. Four years ago she operated on my wife in the hospital in Tehran.

Motahedeh: Is your wife all right?

Kermani: Like a lioness! Last year she set up a biotechnology department at the university. She's taking a sabbatical in China next September. I can't imagine how I'll manage without her.

Motahedeh: My sister was never given a permit to leave Iran, even though she was invited to conferences all over the world.

Kermani: Some of the Revolutionary Guard generals are still angry with you.

¹ Aubergine (eggplant) and meat stew

Motahedeh: All these years I've been trying to get her out. Two years ago the Russian defense minister asked your chief of staff to let him take her. When my father died she begged to attend the funeral. (**Kermani remains silent**) She's got four children, seven grandchildren. With her husband and his family they're twenty-nine people.

Kermani: I'm not sure that they all want to leave Iran.

Motahedeh: Of course they do.

Kermani: Iran is their home. They want to rebuild it. Two of her sons took very big risks in the demonstrations for me.

Motahedeh: (**Ironically**) Iran is their home just as it was mine.

Kermani: It *was* home for you.

Motahedeh: Home is a place I can live in.

Kermani: Even if you don't agree with everything that's happening in it.

Motahedeh: Did anybody ask me what I agree with? Did anybody give me a chance to reply? The moment Khomeini came to power I suddenly became a Jew. If I hadn't fled I'd have been executed.

Kermani: If you hadn't fled you would have been released and gone back to university. Khomeini knew he needed engineers.

Motahedeh: If you'd offered me a pardon I would have come back to be a janitor.

Kermani: We didn't offer it because you fled to Israel. If you'd gone to France, Germany, or even...

Motahedeh: (**Interrupts**) So why did you agree to meet with me?

Kermani: Because you were the best midfielder I'd ever seen. I remember at least four, maybe even five, of your passes that led to unforgettable goals. (**Motahedeh laughs. Kermani turns serious**) Because thanks to you I didn't slash my wrists in the Shah's prison.

Silence. They embrace.

Motahedeh: You once visited Germany when you were Deputy Prime Minister. We stayed at the same hotel. I called you. The security people slammed down the phone.

Kermani: I didn't know.

Motahedeh: When you lost the presidential election I wrote to you. I proposed a business partnership in Canada. I own a construction company there.

Kermani: If you'd only known how that letter put me at risk.

Motahedeh: Are you serious?

Kermani: I, too, would like to keep my head on my shoulders for a few more years.

They embrace again. After a moment Motahedeh becomes businesslike.

Motahedeh: We can't permit ourselves to be sentimental, Ali. The Americans are going to attack you in 48 hours.

Kermani: I hope they won't.

Motahedeh: A few arms dealers who work for you have already approached me. I'll sell you whatever I can, and you'll get my sister and her family to Europe. **(He opens his briefcase, takes out a folder and hands some papers to Kermani)** I can load everything onto three jets and send it to you in 24 hours.

Kermani studies the documents.

Kermani: This is what you're offering?

Motahedeh: You'll get it through a Nicaraguan company. If they hear about this deal in Israel, I'll get life imprisonment. **(Kermani is silent)** Isn't it enough?

Kermani: No.

Motahedeh: What more do you want?

Kermani: We're not some African nation. We don't need French machine guns from the war in Algeria or Russian grenades from the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Motahedeh: I'm also offering you twenty M61 anti-aircraft guns.

Kermani: We need surface-to-air missiles. Anti-tank missiles. We need radar stations.

Motahedeh: You can't buy those from arms dealers.

Kermani: You'll get them.

Motahedeh: Where from? The Pentagon? The Israeli Ministry of Defense? They won't let me sell you a rusty needle to mend your uniforms.

Kermani: From here I'm going to meet a Russian arms dealer. **(He gets up)**

Motahedeh: I'm not sure that meeting him will be worth your while. **(Takes two additional papers from his briefcase and shows them to Kermani)**
This is what he offered you yesterday. This is what he'll offer you today. My offer is much better.

Kermani: I see you've done your homework.

Motahedeh: The Russian works for me. He can't offer you what I don't have.

Kermani sits down.

Kermani: I don't think we have a deal here.

Motahedeh pours a cup of coffee.

Motahedeh: Coffee? **(Kermani does not reply)** Don't tell me that because of the Revolution you've given up coffee as well. When we were at university you'd drink ten cups every morning. For a fresh coffee you'd run to the Turkish shop on the boulevard in your underwear. **(Kermani smiles)** Now I have just one a day. High blood pressure. Did you have any treatment after the angioplasty? How's the cholesterol?

Kermani: Don't ask.

Motahedeh: If you want to lower your cholesterol you've got to have a lot of sex. It's been clinically tested. The doctors deny it so that we go on buying medication. By the way, I've got connections in Rome. I can fix you up. Just don't go dressed like that.

Kermani: Enough, Asher.

Motahedeh: You're not a monk, Ali. Everybody knows about your other wives. You didn't marry them just to make people jealous.

Kermani: Don't talk rubbish.

Motahedeh: Incidentally, your daughters aren't exactly nuns either. Two years ago I saw the twins water-skiing in bikinis on Lake Geneva. (**Takes a photograph from his briefcase**) They're very beautiful.

Kermani pushes the photograph away. He sips his coffee.

Kermani: Maybe I shouldn't have regretted you leaving Iran so much. We should have hanged you, not because you're a Jew, but because you're such a womanizer. (**Laughs**)

Motahedeh: I suggest you reconsider my offer, Ali. You're running a multi-million dollar business. Your people know the markets. You won't get a better deal.

Silence. Kermani changes tack.

Kermani: I've got another proposal. I'm prepared to let your family go without getting any arms from you.

Motahedeh: What do you want in return?

Kermani: Contact with the Americans.

Motahedeh: You need me for contact with the Americans?

Kermani: I want to prevent this war, Asher. Negotiations between the governments have been suspended, and the Americans won't talk to me. I've approached Russian, German and Chinese diplomats and asked them to mediate. All the doors are locked .

Motahedeh: So how can I help?

Kermani: You have connections in the administration. Convey my proposal to them and they'll deliver it to the President.

Motahedeh: You'll get my sister out of Iran only if I convey a proposal to them?

Kermani: I'll get her out if you convince one of your connections in the State Department or the CIA or the Pentagon to talk to me.

Motahedeh: (**Laughs**) I can barely convince the Pentagon to sell me World War Two cargo ships that are falling to pieces.

Kermani: Listen to the proposal.

Motahedeh: I'm not a politician, Ali. I'm an arms dealer.

Kermani: No, you're not. You're a scrap metal dealer on the road to bankruptcy. **(Takes a document from his briefcase)** Your company looks like a dead dog whose flesh has been eaten by maggots.

Motahedeh: **(Laughs)** This profile saves me a great deal of income tax.

Kermani: If you mediate between me and the Americans they'll let you sell everything from their stores. Your profits will go through the roof.

Motahedeh: Look, Ali. I know that this war is unnecessary. Nobody will benefit from it. But it's unavoidable. They've already opened all the bomb shelters in Israel. The city centers have been evacuated. If you're willing to help me only if I persuade the Americans to back down, then perhaps you don't want to help me.

Kermani: You only have to persuade them to talk to me. If I get credit for getting the Americans to back down, I'll win the election in six months. As president I'll reach an agreement with them on Iraq, on fighting al-Qaeda, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and certainly on the nuclear issue.

Motahedeh: And my sister and her family?

Kermani: I'll smuggle them out to Pakistan on one of my planes. From there they'll get to France or Germany.

Motahedeh does not answer. He is still considering the offer.

Kermani: We must prevent this war, Asher. When the Americans attack, one-ton bombs will fall like rain. On military bases. Government offices. Bridges. Roads. Stadiums. Schools. Hospitals. Thousands will be torn to shreds. Burnt alive. Crippled. What they did in Baghdad was a fireworks display compared with what they'll do to us.

Motahedeh: If you'd wanted to prevent war you'd have negotiated sensibly before accelerating the manufacture of the bomb. If you were concerned about human life you wouldn't have sent thousands of your citizens to be a human shield at nuclear facilities.

Kermani: We haven't sent anyone.

Motahedeh: In the war with Iraq you sacrificed half a million people without batting an eye. You sent seven-year olds to clear minefields.

Kermani: Today I'm a part of a powerful reformist movement that's opposed to war. We want freedom and democracy. We want separation of religion and state. We want to rebuild our economy. We have influence in the business community, among intellectuals, students, even in the military. The majority in Iran doesn't want war. They want to prevent it. And so do the majority of Americans.

Motahedeh looks at him for a long moment.

Motahedeh: For thirty years I've read your interviews. I've listened to your speeches. Why have you never said all this before?

Kermani: I have. Carefully, but clearly. (**Motahedeh remains silent**) I've had many opportunities to get to know you, Asher. When we blew up the Shah's armories. When we hid from the SAVAK. When I was wounded in Zhaleh Square on Black Friday. When you carried me away from there on your back. When we were captured. When we were interrogated. In the end we didn't manage to create the change we wanted. The Revolution took a different direction. Now we've got another chance. (**Motahedeh remains silent**) You always had such great hope in your heart. It's what kept me alive through the hardest days in prison. We need it now more than ever.

Motahedeh looks at him and a moment later is convinced of his sincerity.

Motahedeh: Have you got some kind of a document?

Kermani opens his briefcase, takes out a document but doesn't hand it to him.

Kermani: This must get to the President today. Their ambassador here has good access to the white house. He's probably our best bet.

Motahedeh: Martin? You know him better than me. Maybe you should contact him yourself.

Kermani: We haven't been in touch for a while.

Motahedeh: I can deliver it through the Director of the CIA. We're good friends.
Two weeks ago I had dinner at his home.

Kermani: Martin is their best expert on Iran.

Motahedeh: OK. Fine. I'll call him right away. Let's meet here at four. (**Kermani hands him the envelope. Motahedeh puts it into his briefcase**) You can't imagine how happy I am to be doing this.

Kermani: Thank you.

They embrace. Motahedeh picks up his briefcase and exits. The Monk enters.

Monk: I hope everything was to your satisfaction, sir.

Kermani: It certainly was. We'll need the room again at four.

Monk: Really? That's a very good omen, sir. It'll be ready. If you would like to rest, sir, we can arrange a room for you here with a comfortable bed, a bath, and lunch, of course.

Kermani: Thank you, but I'll return at four.

They turn to leave. Kermani stops and addresses the Monk.

Kermani: I might need a little help after all. (**Hesitantly**) We're trying to deliver an urgent proposal to the American president. Could you use your connections to request that the Holy Father pass it to him? I'm sure the President would consider seriously a proposal coming from the Vatican.

Monk: Of course, sir. I'm on my way to the abbot who's with His Holiness. He will convey your request right away.

Kermani: Do you think that the abbot could also convey a request to His Holiness for an urgent meeting with me? I am sure that his involvement in the negotiations would contribute greatly to world peace.

Monk: Well, surely, sir. The Holy Father will do everything in his power to prevent this war. He has always viewed human life as sacred. He has never hesitated to exert all his influence to save the lives of men, women and children. (**They exit**)

Scene Two

Light on Kermani.

Kermani: It was no longer possible to live under the Shah's rule. We needed the revolution like the air we breathed. The majority of Iran's citizens felt as I did. I could see it on the day of my release from prison. Even the jailers, who had never missed an opportunity of maltreating me, shook my hand. They, too, realized that the change was crucial. An officer drove me into Tehran. The traffic in the streets was sparse. Most of the shops were closed. As we drove into Pahlavi Street I suddenly heard a car horn blaring, and then another, still hesitantly, but they were immediately followed by an ear-splitting cacophony of horns. Cars began filling the streets, their headlights on. Masses of people came out of their houses, embracing, weeping, shouting with joy. "The Shah has gone", the officer said. He stopped, changed his clothes, and joined me in the celebrations. Freedom was intoxicating. But a great fear began penetrating the heart. I suddenly realized that after what I had done to get rid of the Shah I have a great responsibility for the lives of these people. For their future. I feared I would be unable to bear it.

Darkness. Light on the American ambassador's office in Rome. 1 p.m. Ambassador Martin is standing behind his desk, holding Kermani's proposal in his hand, and addresses Motahedeh who is sitting on the other side of it.

Martin: I'm very sorry, Motahedeh, I've already tried God knows how many times. Not one diplomat I asked even managed to meet her. We can't postpone the attack just because she's trapped there.

Motahedeh: I'm not just talking about my sister, Mr. Ambassador. I'm talking about hundreds of thousands of people.

Martin: We've done everything possible to prevent this war. If I was convinced that Kermani has a chance of winning the presidency I'd go to the ends of the earth to meet him.

Motahedeh: Meet with him and he'll convince you.

Martin: I've met him too many times already.

Motahedeh: I trust him, sir. If he says so, he'll be elected.

- Martin: I know exactly how much he can be trusted.
- Motahedeh: When you were held hostage in your Tehran embassy you trusted his every word. If he hadn't mediated with Khomeini and the students who overran you, you'd have been held there forever.
- Martin: That was thirty years ago. Today he's an ayatollah like all the rest.
(**Impatiently**) Anything else?
- Motahedeh: (**Takes some papers from his briefcase**) These are a few polls conducted by the Reformist movement. His popularity today is tremendous. With students. Workers. Farmers. Businessmen. Even with the army. The majority of the women support him because he's fighting for their rights. He'll implement all the reforms you want without you having to put a single plane into the air.
- Martin: I know of other polls.
- Motahedeh: The polls you've seen in the papers were conducted by the government. They don't want to show he has a chance.
- Martin: Our sources indicate the same.
- Motahedeh: Your sources, sir, are funded by the State Department. You know their interests.
- Martin: We'll meet again when you have more solid proof.
- Motahedeh: If he didn't have such wide support, he wouldn't dare talk in public about democratization and economic reform. He wouldn't demand that Iran accept international inspection of its nuclear facilities. He wouldn't have met you at the OPEC convention in Vienna in '94, at Kyoto in '97, at the International Atomic Energy Agency in '99. Any Iranian who held such dialogues with America was accused of treason.
- Martin: And that ensures that he'll win the election?
- Motahedeh: Yes.

Martin does not reply. He takes a bottle of scotch out of his drawer, pours two glasses, hands one to Motahedeh and drinks the other. Motahedeh sips his whiskey and looks at Martin expecting a positive move. Suddenly Martin stands up, and extends his hand towards Motahedeh.

- Martin: That's all. Thank you. Unfortunately, I don't think he stands a chance. I've got a lot on today, Motahedeh. It's been crazy here. I haven't slept in weeks. Once this war is over we'll keep talking.
- Motahedeh: **(Doesn't shake Martin's hand)** Is that your answer?
- Martin: I promised to see you for five minutes. I didn't promise you an answer. **(Impatiently)** Kermani is a man with too many faces. That's why he got only twenty percent in the last election.
- Motahedeh: He got much more. The Revolutionary Guards forged the results.
- Martin: If there were elections in six months, he wouldn't even be a candidate.
- Motahedeh: If he isn't a candidate, the students will flood the streets. So will the workers and the women. He is the only politician in Iran who dares to confront the Supreme Leader.
- Martin: Kermani is a dead horse. I haven't had a meeting with him since 9/11. Thank you.

He gestures towards the door. Motahedeh doesn't show any sign that he's about to leave. He takes a newspaper clipping from his briefcase and hands it to Martin.

- Motahedeh: This is an interview you gave to the New York Times in '81 after your release from Tehran. You said that he stopped the interrogators from torturing you.
- Martin: He could have done more. **(Shows him his hands)** Do you see this? Do you see how my hands tremble? It's not because I sometimes have a few glasses of scotch. It's because too many times during those 444 days they sat me blindfolded on a chair, stuck a gun next to my ear and fired it. I couldn't see him there. But I always heard his voice.
- Motahedeh: I know exactly what you're talking about, sir. I was in a Tehran jail under harsher conditions. Without a superpower trying to get me out. Without visits from the Red Cross. Try this. **(Takes a box of pills from his pocket)** They're made of passion flowers. Take three a day.
- Martin: Thank you.

Doesn't take the pills, but knocks back another drink.

- Motahedeh: But the best advice I can give you is to meet him. Today.
- Martin: Why? He doesn't believe in democracy. He doesn't support human rights. He doesn't accept international law. He doesn't commit himself to international agreements.
- Motahedeh: I can assure you that you won't regret it.
- Martin: What do you mean?
- Motahedeh: I mean what I say.
- Martin: Watch it, Motahedeh. I'm a United States Ambassador. I'm not a leader of some revolutionary gang in South America.
- Motahedeh: You've already declared your intention of running for the US Senate, sir.
- Martin: And one of your companies will make a contribution to my election campaign.
- Motahedeh: Of course.
- Martin: Thank you very much. (**Angrily**) If I touch your money, my hands will be dirty forever.

Motahedeh is deeply hurt, but he laughs.

- Motahedeh: I'm not worried. You'll manage to clean the dirtiest hands in the world. Your office was always America's best Laundromat.
- Martin: That's enough, Motahedeh.
- Motahedeh: The New York Times would be more than happy to hear about Kermani's proposal and your response to it.
- Martin: What did you say?
- Motahedeh: You heard me, Martin. They'd also be very happy to hear about the arms I sold to the Contras in '85. Shall I tell them who asked me to do it? Who paid me? Shall I tell them about the arms I sold to the Shiites in Yemen in '94? Shall I tell them who signed over the payment to my construction company account in Canada? Shall I tell them about Afghanistan? About Iraq?
- Martin: (**Forcefully**) We're doing our best to run this insane world, Motahedeh. Those weapons were to protect helpless citizens from the tyranny of ruthless dictators.

- Motahedeh: Good intentions count only in heaven, Martin.
- Martin: If you think the Russians or the Chinese can run the world better, then go talk to them. They'll get your poor sister out before you even ask.
- Motahedeh: **(Stubbornly)** Meet him for ten minutes. Perhaps there's still some chance of preventing this war.
- Martin: Since when have you wanted to prevent a war? You make your living from wars.
- Motahedeh: Not this one.
- Martin: This one is vital. If we don't win it, they'll have a bomb in three months.
- Motahedeh: If you don't go and see him now, Martin, I'll hold a press conference in an hour.
- Martin: Get out of here! Now! And don't ever knock on my door again with your filthy hands. Did you think we didn't know that Kermani's in Rome? We've been tailing him since he landed at Leonardo da Vinci. We're at war with those goddam Iranians, and you're selling them arms? **(Takes a document from his desk drawer)** M61 anti-aircraft guns. APC's. Ammunition. The Mossad won't buy your Nicaraguan company story. The day this document falls into their hands, you'll fall from the window of your hotel suite. Even your good friends in the CIA won't be able to save you. Get out before I call security.
- Motahedeh: Thank you. **(He picks up his briefcase)** The American Empire has just taken another step towards the abyss. **(Exits)**

Scene Three

Light on Kermani.

Kermani: I was a young man, So were all my friends. Our underground operations hadn't prepared us for rule. We were helpless in the face of the chaos that reigned after the Shah. Ministers disappeared. Members of parliament went into hiding. There were no organized political parties. We prayed for a miracle. On February 1st a rumor spread through the streets of Tehran, and crowds began flocking towards the airport. I was squashed into a bus that could barely make its way through them. When we reached the airport tens of thousands were already there. The soldiers were forced to fire into the air to keep them off the runways. Suddenly, a distant speck was seen in the air. It gradually became bigger. When we saw the Air France 747 approaching, chanting burst from the crowd: "Khomeini-ye-ma, Imam-e-ma". Our Khomeini, Our imam. Ayatollah Khomeini came down the steps. Scores stood in line to kiss his hand. He gave a short, resolute speech. He promised to banish colonialism and turn Iran into an independent state. I knew who he was. The combination of his power and fanaticism frightened me as well. But we didn't have another leader. That night I presented myself at his office.

Light down on Kermani. Light on Motahedeh

Motahedeh: I was born in Iran. I grew up there. I fought for it. I was imprisoned and tortured for it. I thought that my life would be dedicated to it forever. On the day I was released I joined the celebrations for Khomeini's return. I had no doubts about his leadership. I hoped to become part of the new regime and continue the struggle for workers' and farmers' rights. Even before seeing my parents I went to the offices of the Iranian Freedom Movement. My friends were all drunk with joy. Khomeini announced that he would retire to his religious duties and appointed the movement's leader, Mehdi Bazargan, prime

minister. Bazargan had been my teacher at university. I was ready to go through fire and water for him. I hurried to his office. A group of Khomeini's people was waiting in the corridor. They ordered me to follow them for interrogation. I wasn't afraid. I didn't try to escape. I thought they knew what I had done for the revolution.

Light down on Motahedeh. Lighting up on the room in the monastery. 4 p.m. The drinks and food that were on the table have gone. Enter Kermani perspiring profusely, escorted by the Monk.

Monk: I spoke to him a few minutes ago, sir.
 Kermani: He's on his way?
 Monk: He called from his cell phone. Should I call him back?
 Kermani: He'll be here.
 Monk: Should I switch on the air conditioner?
 Kermani: Thank you.

The Monk switches on the air conditioner. Kermani removes his turban and wipes his face with a handkerchief.

Kermani: Has the abbot returned from his meeting at the Vatican?
 Monk: No sir, but he called and apologized.
 Kermani: Did he say anything about the audience with His Holiness?
 Monk: We will have the decision within a few hours.
 Kermani: **(Visibly disappointed)** A few hours?
 Monk: Discussions on such matters can sometimes be prolonged. The cardinals are still discussing the fate of the Christians sent to defend your nuclear facilities. Do you think they can still be saved?
 Kermani: Yes, certainly. I've got a few ideas.
 Monk: Are you willing to help us, sir?
 Kermani: We're all in the same boat. I'll help you and you'll help me.
 Monk: **(Taking the hint)** I will inform the abbot immediately, sir. Your position will certainly influence the council's discussions. **(Hurries out)**
 Kermani: **(After him)** By the way, is there somewhere I could take a shower?
 Monk: Of course, sir.

The Monk indicates the second door. Motahedeh enters. He looks at Kermani who replaces his turban.

Motahedeh: Sorry. The Americans held me up.

He shakes Kermani's hand. The Monk bows and exits.

Motahedeh: You're not really that bald, Ali.

Kermani: Thank you.

Motahedeh: I can help you get a hair implant. I know someone in Paris who does excellent work. **(He tugs at his own hair to demonstrate)**

Kermani: What did they say?

Motahedeh: I must have a beer. My mouth is dry from so much talking. I don't understand. Is this their famous hospitality?

Kermani: What did they tell you?

Motahedeh: Who?

Kermani: The Americans.

Motahedeh: They were very positive. **(Angrily)** I asked them to put out some food. I haven't eaten since this morning.

Kermani: I've got some mints if you want.

Motahedeh: If I don't eat every two hours my ulcer starts acting up.

Kermani: Here. **(Offers him the mints)**

Motahedeh: I donated a hundred thousand dollars to the monastery for them to host us today. I deserve a little more than mints. There's a good Iranian restaurant in the square. **(Takes out his cellphone and dials)** Their *Khoresht-e-Bademjan* is almost as good as my mother's. Will you have some?

Kermani shakes his head. Motahedeh sees the Monk entering carrying a tray of drinks and sandwiches. He puts his phone back into his pocket.

Monk: **(To Motahedeh)** Everything is kosher, sir.

Motahedeh: Who asked for kosher food?

Monk: We respect the religious beliefs of all our guests, sir. **(To Kermani)**
Do you still want to take a shower, sir?

Kermani: **(Shakes his head)** No, thank you.

The Monk bows and exits. Motahedeh tastes a sandwich but doesn't like it. Despite his hunger he puts it back onto the tray.

Motahedeh: Aren't you eating? It's kosher.

Kermani: I've eaten.

Motahedeh: Why did you want a shower?

Kermani: It was hot outside.

Motahedeh: **(Laughs)** Bravo! You've been out on the town! I should have known you wouldn't survive a day without a woman from your harem. I could have fixed you up with one of my gypsies. They're something special. They never let you feel like you've bought them.

Kermani: **(Firmly)** What did the Americans say?

Motahedeh: I told you. They were very positive.

Kermani: They agreed?

Motahedeh: More or less.

Kermani: What exactly did they agree to?

Motahedeh: They'll meet you; reach an agreement, postpone the attack, and let you take all the credit.

Kermani: Are you sure?

Motahedeh: That's why I was so late. Ambassador Martin can't talk to the white House. He has to go through the Secretary of State. We can't wait for him. I called the director of the CIA. Twenty minutes ago he got back to me and said he's prepared to fly out here.

Kermani: When?

Motahedeh: Tomorrow.

Kermani: He's willing to talk?

Motahedeh: Unofficially, to prepare for official negotiations as soon as you win the election.

Kermani: Can't he leave today?

Motahedeh: Well, that's the problem. The CIA doesn't know who you're representing. You're not a member of the government and this reformist movement of yours failed in all its struggles over the last few years.

- Kermani: Does Martin know about this?
- Motahedeh: Of course he does.
- Kermani: What does he think? Didn't he ask to see me?
- Motahedeh: He needs permission to meet with you. The director of the CIA doesn't. He'll come here the moment they get proof that they can trust you.
- Kermani: Proof?
- Motahedeh: Look, the CIA and the State Department are not always on the same page. I stressed your status. Your influence. Your popularity. But the CIA demanded something more concrete.
- Kermani: What?
- Motahedeh: My sister and her family.
- Kermani: You're joking.
- Motahedeh: A man who can't release them can't win an election.

Silence. Kermani thinks for a moment. A moment later he looks at Motahedeh.

- Kermani: All right. They'll be released.
- Motahedeh: We are forty hours away from the Americans' attack.
- Kermani: I know.
- Motahedeh: My sister was interrogated after I fled. She has never recovered. She can't cross the border on a donkey.
- Kermani: I'll tell my people at the ministry of the interior to prepare travel documents for them. They'll be on their way in a few hours.
- Motahedeh: Where to?
- Kermani: By plane to Pakistan.
- Motahedeh: The moment the American ambassador in Islamabad informs the CIA that they're in his office, we can move forward.
- Kermani: I want to hear it from the Americans.
- Motahedeh: That's what they told me to tell you.
- Kermani: I'd rather hear it from Ambassador Martin.
- Motahedeh: They want proof before they start talking to you, and you want to provide them with proof afterwards?
- Kermani: He can tell me over the phone.
- Motahedeh: We're schoolchildren?

- Kermani: They won't impose conditions to speak to me. The man in the White House is a decent man. He doesn't want another world war. My plan could calm his hysterical advisors.
- Motahedeh: You're prepared to sabotage negotiations to prevent a world war for one damn phone call?
- Kermani: If I open negotiations on my knees, I stand no chance of getting up.
- Motahedeh: I should have known.
- Kermani: You should have known what?
- Motahedeh: They told me you're obstinate. Petty. Fanatical. That the moment they start negotiating with you, you do everything to impede progress. You're the world champion in stalling.
- Kermani: I know who I'm facing. They want to set the rules of the game and decide its result. And if you try to argue, they put a gun to your head. And sometimes that gun goes off.
- Motahedeh: They want to know that they can trust you.
- Kermani: Martin knows that.
- Motahedeh: He knows nothing. How could you go on meeting this son of a bitch all these years? I'm not surprised he hasn't talked to you since 9/11.
- Kermani: We haven't talked, but we have exchanged policy documents. In 2003, when I was Deputy Prime Minister, I sent him a comprehensive plan for normalization. I agreed to stop supporting Hezbollah and support a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.
- Motahedeh: And on the same day your president vowed to bring an end to the empire of the great Satan and his little Jewish servant.
- Kermani: If the Americans had accepted our proposal, this conflict would have ended a long time ago.
- Motahedeh: **(Cynically)** Yes. Sure.

Silence.

- Kermani: OK. I understand that Ambassador Martin doesn't want to talk to me. I'm prepared to talk to the CIA representative in the Embassy.
- Motahedeh: After my sister reaches Islamabad.
- Kermani: How do I know they'll agree then?

Motahedeh: That's what they said.

Kermani goes to the table, pours himself a glass of water and drinks it down. He takes a paper napkin and wipes the perspiration from his face.

Kermani: I'll tell you why I wanted to take a shower. Not because I was "out on the town", but because I've been on the phone with Tehran. For two hours, discussing how to arrange the release of your sister. Checking every detail to make sure that the Revolutionary Guards won't get their hands on her. They're watching her all the time. I left exhausted, drenched in sweat, and now I hear that the Americans won't talk to me.

Motahedeh: They'll talk to you tomorrow.

Kermani: Why can't we start talking right now?

Motahedeh: Because I demanded to have my sister out first.

Kermani: Demanded? You can make demands?

Motahedeh: The Americans need me. We've worked together for the last twenty years. The Director of the CIA consults with me quite often.

Kermani: I suspect you're not telling me the truth, Asher.

Motahedeh: Of course I'm telling you the truth.

Kermani: During the hardest days in jail, when I was broken, when I was ready to give up, when you fed me and washed me. I always told myself that you were the only man in the world I could trust completely, unconditionally, without any doubt.

Motahedeh: You can trust me, Ali. Even if you don't understand everything I do. I trusted you even when I had many reasons to doubt.

Silence.

Kermani: What happened at the embassy?

Motahedeh: I told you. Martin needs the Secretary of State's approval. There's no point in waiting for him.

Kermani: He threw you out and said he wasn't prepared to talk to me, didn't he?

Motahedeh: Forget about him. We've got to work directly with the CIA. They don't believe you'll get elected. That's all.

Silence.

Motahedeh: Over the last few years they've lost faith in all your delegates. I demanded that you free my sister so I can prove you're different. That you can be trusted.

Kermani: So all anybody has to do to get the CIA to trust him is free a few Jews?

Motahedeh: I know how their mind works. I've sold arms for them in places no one knows about. That's how you oil their wheels. (**Kermani remains silent**) There are things you don't know about, Ali. I owe my sister her life. We won't get anywhere until she's released.

Kermani: There are things you don't know about either. If I release her without anything in return, I'll be hanged. I've been on their hit list for a long time now.

Motahedeh: I know. I'm trying to save you too.

Kermani: Me?

Motahedeh: From yourself. From your face-saving games. Yes, the Americans didn't want to talk to you. They think you're full of hot air. At every meeting you had with them you'd get insulted and leave. Now they're afraid that the day you're elected president, you'll forget your promises. I'm trying to make you more credible. Give me my sister and tomorrow you'll meet with the Director of the CIA . (**Kermani is silent**) I want to prevent this war too, Ali. People are fleeing Israel in droves. All the departing flights are full. In Iran people are hiding in caves in the mountains. (**Silence**) True, I'm very concerned about you having nuclear capability, but I'm even more worried about the Americans attacking you tomorrow. Before their first missile hits Tehran, you'll be launching missiles at us. Tel Aviv will be hit. People will be killed. We will respond with nuclear missiles. In less than an hour Tehran will be a heap of rubble. The city where I was born, where I grew up. The city to which I hope to return every morning when I wake up...

He falls silent. Kermani thinks for a moment and finally decides to yield.

Kermani: Fine. Inform the Director of the CIA that he can start out.

Motahedeh: Good. He'll start out the moment the American ambassador in Islamabad confirms that my sister is in his office.

Kermani: She'll be there tonight. Let's meet here at eight tomorrow morning.

Motahedeh: I'll be here.

Motahedeh extends his hand. Kermani ignores it. He picks up his briefcase and leaves. Motahedeh remains alone. Enter the Monk.

Motahedeh: We'll be here tomorrow morning at eight. I'll give you another fifty thousand dollars.

Monk: We shall be happy to host you, sir.

Motahedeh: I hope you can improve the menu. There's an Iranian restaurant called 'Isfahan' in the piazza. We'd like to have their breakfast .

Monk: Anything else?

Motahedeh: Yes, a bottle of champagne.

Monk: Mr. Kermani drinks champagne?

Motahedeh: He will.

Monk: Of course.

Motahedeh: About my sister.

Monk: Your sister?

Motahedeh: I know you listen to our talks. **(Exposes the hidden microphone)**

Monk: **(Embarrassed)** We do it to preserve the good name of the Church, sir, and only when we have no choice.

Motahedeh: Tomorrow you'll give me copies of all the recordings. Otherwise you'll find it very hard to preserve the good name of the Church.

Monk: Of course.

Motahedeh: And regarding the matter of my sister. **(Silence)** Is there any way you can help her?

Monk: What do you mean, sir?

Motahedeh: If these talks fail, they'll harm her.

Monk: Our influence in Iran is negligible, sir. We can't even save our own people.

Motahedeh: A week ago you informed the Americans of the precise location of all your churches there.

Monk: We have received no assurances.

Motahedeh: All I'm asking is that you hide my sister and her family in one of these churches. I shall, of course, make a generous donation to that church.

Monk: We shall happily accept your request, sir. I'll call Tehran immediately. I know our nuncio there personally. I was once his secretary. He constantly assists persecuted people of all religions. He will not hesitate to help her too.

Motahedeh: Thank you.

He shakes the monk's hand, picks up his briefcase and leaves. The Monk turns off the air conditioner and exits after him.

Scene Four

Light on Martin.

Martin: I don't delude myself. I'm aware of the dangers of this war. I wish we could avoid it. We've been trying to talk to them for thirty years, and for thirty years they've rejected every one of our proposals. The writing was already on the wall in early 1979, but only on the morning of the 4th of November, after President Carter had allowed the dying Shah to have medical treatment in Minnesota, our eyes opened and we saw it. Thousands of students marched in the streets. Cars with loudspeakers drove around and incited the mob. Towards noon they surrounded the embassy, demanding that the Shah be sent back to Teheran and handed over to them. We knew that our security people would be unable to keep them at bay. The Iranian army did not intervene. Khomeini had forgotten that we'd persuaded the French to allow him to return to Iran. In the evening they charged the embassy. Fortunately, the security people held their fire. The blood on the sidewalk was that of a deaf-mute beggar who sat by the gate. One of the students said he was a CIA undercover agent. His friends tore the poor man to pieces. Even before they began interrogating us we discovered the true face of the new rulers, for whom we so naively paved the road to power.

A room in a cheap hotel in Rome. 7 p.m. Ambassador Martin enters. He puts his briefcase on the table. He takes a look through the window. He ponders. A moment later Kermani enters, wearing an elegant business suit. They look at each other. Kermani extends his hand to Martin. Martin shakes it warmly.

Kermani: Good to see you.

Martin: Sorry about the room. Too many people know me at the Intercontinental.

Kermani: I don't think we'll be sleeping here.

Martin: **(Laughs)** We don't have much time, Ali.

Kermani: I left my office the moment I got your message.

- Martin: I hope you haven't taken what I said to Motahedeh at face value. I wanted to call you as soon as I realized you'd sent him. But I had to get rid of him. We don't need middlemen.
- Kermani: He said your response was positive.
- Martin: Did he?
- Kermani: Yes.
- Martin: Positive? **(Laughs)** I've never been able to understand your friendship. That man gives the Jews a bad name. **(Clears his throat)** You should have contacted me directly.
- Kermani: I wasn't sure you'd want to meet with me.
- Martin: On 9/11 a sea change took place in the world, Ali. I'm not blaming you for what happened, but there was no point in meeting afterwards.
- Kermani: That's why I was surprised to hear that you're prepared to discuss my proposal. It's quite similar to the one you rejected in 2003.
- Martin: Meanwhile the circumstances have changed.
- Kermani: What do you mean?
- Martin: I think that right now we might have a lot more in common.
- Kermani: **(Inquiringly)** Yes?
- Martin: Sit down. **(Kermani sits down)** I hope we won't be seeing Motahedeh around anymore. He's got a big mouth. His phone calls to the CIA in Washington might sabotage our efforts. I'm sure they haven't promised him anything, but he's a dangerous man. He knows too much about them. Give him his sister before he does something stupid.
- Kermani: Don't worry. I'll take care of it.
- Martin: How's your family? I imagine they're in a safe place.
- Kermani: If you give me your list of targets, they'll be in a far safer place.
- Martin: **(Laughs)** I almost didn't recognize you in the suit.
- Kermani: I hardly recognize myself in it.

They laugh. Martin goes to the minibar and takes out a bottle of whiskey.

- Martin: A drink? **(Kermani shakes his head)** My wife sends her regards.
- Kermani: Thanks. Is she here?

Martin: You know her. She's afraid that if she leaves me alone for one day I'll get kidnapped.

Kermani: I arranged to see Motahedeh in Rome, hoping to meet her.

Martin: She's been waiting for your phone call for years. She doesn't understand why the differences between us should spoil your relationship. I think that she secretly regrets turning down your marriage proposal. **(They both laugh)** Coffee? Tea? I hope they have room service in this brothel. Maybe something to eat?

Kermani: I've got some mints.

Martin laughs, pours himself a whiskey and sips it.

Martin: Look, Ali. Your proposal is very good. It lays the foundations for major changes in the Middle East. The only doubt we have is that postponing our attack might not ensure your victory in the election .

Kermani: I'm convinced I'll be elected.

Martin: The last election showed clearly that as long as those ayatollahs are in power, they'll decide who the president is.

Kermani: If you postpone the attack the reformist movement will become more powerful and ensure that elections are free. If there are free elections I'm sure that.

Martin: There's no way the elections will be free when the Revolutionary Guards are the monitors.

Kermani: I don't think you know too much about the election system in Iran.

Martin: I know enough. While I was imprisoned in our Embassy you were too busy to notice that I was learning Persian.

Kermani: I did notice.

Martin: For thirty years I've been tracking every change that's taken place there. **(Frustrated)** How could you allow those crazy students to become such prominent figures? Two weeks ago I bumped into one of them in the lounge at Heathrow and he laughed at me. He's your Minister of Health, for Christ's sake.

Kermani: We've already discussed this many times, Martin. I hope you didn't invite me here to continue that discussion.

- Martin: You'll never be president as long as the ayatollahs are in power.
- Kermani: So what do you suggest?
- Martin: We want to ensure the future of Iran, don't we?
- Kermani: Yes.
- Martin: The future of Iran will be ensured in a new world order.
- Kermani: You want to discuss a new world order now? Your planes will be taking off in thirty-six hours.
- Martin: Now we need to discuss the essentials. We'll work out the details later. **(He opens his briefcase and takes out a document)** After the attack we'll remove the Islamic regime and announce elections. You'll run for the presidency and we'll support you. After you're elected we'll normalize US-Iran relations according to your proposal.
- Kermani: **(Reads the document)** Is your president aware of this plan?
- Martin: Yes.
- Kermani: And he approves it?
- Martin: Absolutely.
- Kermani: Motahedeh was talking about a totally different plan.
- Martin: Motahedeh doesn't know anything. I threw him out the moment he got into my office.
- Kermani: You threw him out?
- Martin: What do we need him for?
- Kermani: It's a pity you didn't consult him. Do you think that anybody in Iran will vote for me if they know I agreed to your attack?
- Martin: Nobody's going to know about it.
- Kermani: The Iranians know how to put two and two together.
- Martin: Read it. **(Sips another drink)** As soon as the Islamic regime has been removed, you'll establish a temporary government and offer us negotiations. We'll give the impression that you persuaded us to stop the bombing. We'll create the impression that you persuaded us to remove all the international sanctions. We'll make it look like you convinced us to invest in rebuilding your economy. We'll create the impression that.
- Kermani: **(Interrupts him)** Who'll remove the Islamic regime? The Revolutionary Guard? The army?

- Martin: Would you prefer that we offer this plan to the speaker of your parliament? Your deputy chief of staff? The commander of the air force?
- Kermani: Have you discussed it with them?
- Martin: This plan creates a better world order for you too, Ali. Iran won't be isolated any longer. It'll become part of the global economy. It'll develop. It will finally become a democracy.

Kermani looks at the document again. After a moment he turns to Martin.

- Kermani: Do you really think you can still attack a foreign country and impose a government on it at will?
- Martin: It will be a government elected by the Iranian people .
- Kermani: They won't elect it if you kill thousands of people in order to establish it.
- Martin: In countries where there's opposition to democracy, it's got to be imposed by force. We'll do everything in our power so that 70 million Iranians will live in a free country and enjoy the human rights that were taken away from them for a hundred years.
- Kermani: Let's try and make it happen without so much bloodshed.
- Martin: It's a pity you didn't think about that when you seized power. So far you've executed one hundred thousand of your citizens, perhaps more. The real figures will never be known. This week alone you sent four thousand people to act as a human shield at your nuclear facilities.
- Kermani: We didn't *send* anyone. We selected them from the tens of thousands who volunteered to be *shaheeds*. If you don't attack us they'll stay alive.
- Martin: Millions will die if we don't help you get rid of the Islamic government.
- Kermani: Your own losses will be very heavy too, Martin. We're capable of launching 11,000 missiles in the first minute. And their range covers your forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. I know how you feel when you see lists of dead soldiers in your newspapers.

- Martin: We have sufficient power in the region to ensure that our losses will be minimal.
- Kermani: That's what you said when you invaded Iraq.
- Martin: This time we won't repeat the same mistake.
- Kermani: What mistake? (**Martin doesn't answer**) What mistake?
- Martin: Today we have a few alternatives to a ground attack.
- Kermani: You'll rain missiles on every corner of the country? Destroy the infrastructure? Put us under siege? Drop fifteen-ton MOPs² on the Natanz enrichment facility? (**Martin doesn't answer**) I hope you are sensible enough not to use nuclear weapons. The entire region will be irradiated, Martin. Everyone will be affected.
- Martin: We have calculated all the risks.
- Kermani: So now you are holding a gun to *my* head.
- Martin: Yes.
- Kermani: But unlike our students, you're going to pull the trigger.
- Martin: You leave us no choice. (**Takes another sip of whiskey**)
- Kermani: I don't think you are aware of the consequences of this attack, Martin. The Iranian people will unite behind the religious leadership. The Muslim world will rise up against you. You'll ignite wars across the planet. It'll take generations to extinguish the flames.
- Martin: They'll be extinguished the moment you discover that we're prepared to use force. The Age of Innocence is over, Ali. If we allow this regime to acquire nuclear weapons, it will turn the world into a living hell.
- Kermani: How do you know that nuclear weapons in our hands will be more dangerous than in yours?
- Martin: After 9/11 we can't gamble anymore.

Pause.

- Kermani: I always thought that you were a rational man, Martin. Even back in '79, when the students threatened to execute you, you didn't panic. Why are you panicking now?
- Martin: I think it's you who's panicking.

² Massive Ordnance Penetrator.

- Kermani: I've got good reason to.
- Martin: So let's move ahead with this plan. We can work out all the details in an hour.
- Kermani: Somehow I have the feeling that your president doesn't know anything about this plan.
- Martin: Of course he knows.
- Kermani: How could he? You met with Motahedeh at 1 p.m. That was 7 a.m. Washington time. The President was meeting with the British Prime Minister. At 9 a.m. they both met with the Chinese Minister of Defense. The President didn't have a chance to even hear about my proposal. It's all yours, Martin. Isn't it? You are the only person who read my proposal and you are the only person who came up with this counter-proposal. **(Throws the proposal onto the table)**
- Martin: This is an official US offer, Ali. The Secretary of State sent it to me an hour ago.
- Kermani: It's yours. Why? Because you were a hostage in Teheran? Because some hotheaded students held a gun to your head? Is this your revenge?
- Martin: This is US policy. It's got nothing to do with revenge. **(Forcefully)** I know you. You're not blind to your terrible fanaticism. To its monstrosity. To its danger. We both saw this plague breaking out. If we don't disinfect this region, it'll spread throughout the world. 9/11 was just the beginning. **(Kermani does not reply)** You've served the Islamic revolution all your life, Ali, but you've never really been a part of it. I knew that when I was lying blindfolded in the embassy yard, in front of the firing squad. You pulled me out of there. Yes. It was you. I recognized your voice. At that moment I knew you were the person to lead Iran towards a better future.
- Pause.**
- Kermani: 'This world will not survive much longer if the people in power don't act responsibly'. You said it so many times.

- Martin: We are acting responsibly, Ali. This isn't about America's fate. It's about the fate of an entire civilization. I can't see any other government in the world acting as responsibly as us.
- Kermani: Don't you think we owe ourselves another chance before we destroy ourselves?
- Martin: I'm giving you another chance. Take it. **(Takes the document from the table and hands it to him)**
- Kermani: I'll look for it elsewhere. **(Picks up his briefcase)**
- Martin: Nobody in the administration will talk to you. Don't count on Motahedeh's talks with the CIA. I talk to them as well. **(Kermani turns to leave)** You're making a big mistake, Ali. Iran will pay for it in years of chaos... bloodshed... of misery...

Kermani leaves the room. Martin remains alone. Darkness.

Scene Five

Light on Motahedeh.

Motahedeh: Even after eighteen months in the Evin prison for political detainees I remained a loyal Iranian. Although I was interrogated and tortured every day. I saw thousands executed. I hoped that this tyranny proved the weakness of the new regime. When Evin became overcrowded I was sent to a jail in the south. On the journey I managed to break through the truck's metal bars and escape. When I got back to Tehran, wearing a beard and mullah's robe, murmuring verses from the Koran, I thought I would return to the underground. I was sure that hundreds of thousands would rise up against the ayatollahs. That day there was a mass rally on Pahlavi Street. On a big platform, Ayatollah Khomeini was delivering a speech. Two million people answered him with rhythmic chanting, "Death, death to America". "Death, death to Israel". I made my way to the platform. Sitting behind Khomeini was a young man wearing a robe and a turban. I had no difficulty recognizing him. He was my friend Ali Kermani. A great darkness fell over the earth.

Light down on Motahedeh. Lighting up on the room in the monastery. 9 a.m. Kermani and Motahedeh are alone. Their meeting is at its height. On the table is a sumptuous breakfast, but they don't touch it.

Motahedeh: I talked to the CIA three times last night. They won't fly out here as long as my sister is still in Tehran.

Kermani: Her plane will take off in a few hours. As soon as the Pakistanis give it permission to land.

Motahedeh: Why didn't you talk to their Prime Minister?

Kermani: He's touring the army units deployed along the borders. I've spoken with his deputy. We'll get the clearance this afternoon. We shouldn't waste any more time. The Director of the CIA can start out right away.

Motahedeh: She called me an hour ago. When she got back from the airport, her neighbors realized she was trying to flee. Somebody will surely set fire to her house and run her over when she escapes into the street.

Kermani: My people are guarding here all the time. She will not be harmed.

Motahedeh: Teheran will be bombed in twenty-four hours.

Kermani: We can still prevent it.

Pause.

Motahedeh: You can get your wife and children and grandchildren onto the same plane.

Kermani: They're staying in Tehran.

Motahedeh: Why? Because if they flee you'll lose the elections?

Kermani: Because Teheran will not be bombed. **(Silence)** I've got a simpler deal for her. Asylum in the German embassy. If you call the CIA in Rome and persuade them to meet with me, she'll be there in an hour.

Motahedeh: And in two hours the Revolutionary Guard will storm the embassy and take her.

Kermani: They won't even know she's there.

Motahedeh: Is there anything they don't know?

Kermani: Fine. I'll hide her in my home. They won't dare break in. I've got a nuclear bomb shelter. It's protected against radioactivity. She'll be completely safe.

Motahedeh: I'm not even going to consider such a proposal.

Kermani: Do you still want to save her?

Motahedeh: I'll give you a million dollars for her.

Kermani: Don't bother.

Motahedeh: Two million? Five? Ten?

Kermani: I can't be bought, Asher. You of all people should know that.

Motahedeh: If you hadn't been bought already, you wouldn't have your fleet of oil tankers. I can imagine how much this war will cut your profits. Maybe that's why you're trying so hard to prevent it.

Kermani: I'm trying to save thousands of lives.

Motahedeh: Why do I find it so hard to believe you? Could it be that I've been mistaken about you all these years? Could it be that after I escaped, you betrayed everything we struggled for? Haven't you declared time and again that nuclear capability is an existential Iranian right?

Kermani: I have always promised I would sign all the nuclear treaties.

Motahedeh: When we planned the revolution we weren't thinking about bombs.

- Kermani: Today we're exposed to a far greater threat. We're surrounded by nuclear states who want our oil.
- Motahedeh: Haven't you ever thought that you might be the threat? That you disseminate fanaticism throughout the world? That you support the worst terror organizations?
- Kermani: We're supporting organizations fighting for legitimate liberation.
- Motahedeh: Of course you are. **(Painfully)** I loved Tehran so much. The university. The party. The cinemas. The nightclubs. The women. The hopes we had. We wanted Iran to be a better place to live in. Haven't you ever noticed that you took it back to the Middle Ages? That you made it an ignorant society, where human life has no value? Where there is no aspiration to any progress?
- Kermani: We define our progress in accordance with our priorities: Education. Health. Science. Redistribution of land...
- Motahedeh: **(Interrupts)** It seems that you're not interested so much in progress. According to your priorities it seems that you're more interested in backwardness.
- Kermani: And you know full well that's demagoguery.
- Motahedeh: Or perhaps you're exploiting this backwardness to continue ruling? Perhaps you're using religion to turn the Iranian people into a flock of obedient sheep? We always said that 'religion is the opium of the masses'. What happened? You suddenly saw the light?
- Kermani: I was always a believer.
- Motahedeh: Or maybe you became a believer so you could find yourself a place on the Revolutionary Council?
- Kermani: **(Assertively)** I believe that religion can make people more decent..
- Motahedeh: Give me a break, Ali.

Silence. Kermani suddenly suspects something.

- Kermani: I don't understand what we're arguing about. You're too smart to think that your moralizing will make me work harder for your sister's release.

Motahedeh: I'm not moralizing. I'm trying to figure out what happened to you in these thirty years. I'm trying to understand why you stayed there.

Kermani: I stayed to make a difference. The revolution made some very important achievements.

Motahedeh: Of course it did.

Kermani: Didn't I fight for free elections? For minority rights? For women's rights? I almost paid with my life for preventing the closure of the newspapers.

Motahedeh: Once you decided to stay there you became one of them. When I was arrested by the Revolutionary Guard you weren't prepared to risk a single hair of your beard for me.

Kermani: I have risked much more.

Motahedeh: Of course you have.

Kermani: Haven't you ever asked yourself how your parents, your two brothers and your younger sister were able to escape? Do you think they managed to cross the border into Turkey by chance? That they were lucky?

Motahedeh: They escaped in a truck that belonged to my father's partner. And he didn't save them out of the goodness of his heart. My father gave him the house and the bus company.

Kermani: He got them only because I ordered them not to be confiscated by the treasury.

Motahedeh: That partner was a relative of Khomeini's. He didn't have to worry about having even an old shoelace confiscated.

Kermani: I had to protect him from Khomeini too. His people wouldn't have missed an opportunity to line their pockets. And I'll tell you something else. I'm well aware of why you owe your sister her life. When you escaped from jail you hid at her house. I knew it the day you got there. But I still ordered the police to stop her interrogation.

Motahedeh: **(Stunned)** You knew?

Kermani: I also knew about the million dollars you sent her last year to bribe an airport passport control officer. I knew and forbade her arrest.

Silence. Motahedeh takes a sip of coffee and immediately spits it out.

Motahedeh: **(To himself)** Bastards. **(To the hidden microphone)** You there, can you hear me? Bring some fresh coffee.

Kermani quickly rips out the microphone.

Kermani: What is this? Did you plant it?

Motahedeh: Of course not.

Kermani: Why the hell didn't you tell me? Were you thinking of blackmailing me?

Motahedeh: I thought that maybe one day we'd need it to protect ourselves.

Kermani: You should have told me.

Motahedeh: And *you* should have told *me*. **(He opens Kermani's briefcase and takes out a tape-recorder)** Anyone who's ever negotiated with you knows that you record everything.

Silence. Kermani takes out a handkerchief and mops his forehead.

Kermani: You know what kind of a world I live in. You know the dangers I face. **(Motahedeh does not reply)** But still, let's try and make some progress. **(Motahedeh does not reply)** As soon as I'm elected, I'll show you the files of your arrest and release and you'll see what I did for you and for your family. **(Motahedeh does not reply)** We're probably not the right people in the right place. Braver people would have already stopped this madness. But there aren't other people here. Only us. How can we go on living knowing that hundreds of thousands died because we were cowards? Because we didn't trust each other when their lives were in our hands? **(Motahedeh does not reply)** If you don't want us to put a bullet in our heads one day, call the Director of the CIA right now.

Motahedeh: And what do I tell him if my sister is not released? That she'll be released tomorrow?

Kermani: **(Frustrated)** Why is it so hard for you to believe me?

Motahedeh: Because I can't understand how a powerful man like you is unable to release one woman and her family. I only have one explanation.

Pause.

Kermani: I'm not releasing her because I've got no proof for what was said in your talks with Washington. You didn't even give me a hint about who you talked to. I'm afraid that the director of the CIA doesn't even know he promised to come here.

Motahedeh: I spoke with Washington three times in the last few hours.

Kermani: I want to hear what they said from them.

Motahedeh: You'll hear from them as soon as you tell me the truth.

Kermani: I'm telling you the truth.

Motahedeh: Are you sure? Ambassador Martin called me last night. He proposed a plan to you. Why didn't you tell me about it? What did you want to hide?

Kermani: I didn't tell you about it because it's absurd. You know I would never trample hundreds of thousands of corpses to be elected president.

Motahedeh: Stop playing games, Ali. You refused to accept Martin's plan to remove the Islamic government because you're working for it.

Kermani: That's not true.

Motahedeh: If you really came here as the head of the reformist movement, you could have released my sister straight away. But you came here because your President sent you. That's why you had to get his permission to smuggle her out. That's why her plane couldn't take off to Pakistan. Because he refused to allow it. He hates Jews so much that he won't let even one Jewish woman out in exchange for a million Iranians.

Kermani: You know full well what I think about this president.

Motahedeh: And how did *your* plane manage to take off? Even Martin couldn't explain it. No aircraft can take off from Tehran today without the president's permission. Answer me. How did your plane get permission?

Kermani: Of course it was the president who gave me permission to leave Tehran. But that's irrelevant. From the moment I landed here I've been working towards different goals.

- Motahedeh: Stop lying to me, Ali.
- Kermani: He allowed me out to buy arms. He doesn't know about the proposal we delivered to the Americans.
- Motahedeh: You're acting on his behalf to gain time.
- Kermani: I'm doing everything possible to depose him.
- Motahedeh: That's a lie too.
- Kermani: It's you who's lying. Yes. You talked to Washington. But the director of the CIA didn't promise you a thing. If you really wanted to save your sister, she'd already be on her way to my home.
- Motahedeh: Of course I want to save her.
- Kermani: Then call and tell her that my wife will pick her up. (**Motahedeh hesitates**) Call the CIA and I'll call my wife.
- Motahedeh: I'm not calling anybody until my sister is out of Iran.
- Kermani: Do you want to save her or not?
- Motahedeh: I'll call the CIA the moment she's...
- Kermani: (**Interrupting**) You don't want to save her! You did. That's why you came to meet me. That's why you lied to me about your meeting with Martin, who threw you out of his office. But the moment you realized that I would actually release her only after I spoke with the White House, you changed your mind and decided to block me.
- Motahedeh: If you released her, you were already.
- Kermani: (**Interrupting him angrily**) You blocked me! When they saw my proposal they wanted to come here. That's why Martin asked me to get rid of you. You persuaded them to stay there. Why? Because Martin promised you arms deals in Africa? Because you want to settle accounts for what they did to you in Evin? Is that why hundreds of thousands must die? They can still be saved! (**His anger mounts**) You want to know what happened to me during those thirty years? First take a look at yourself. Once you were a man. Now you're a bloodthirsty beast of prey. You're even willing to sacrifice your sister! Is that your great progress? Don't you care if America attacks us? That it will annihilate us? Raze us to the ground?
- Motahedeh: (**Restrainedly**) Yes. I blocked you. Not because I became bloodthirsty. I was willing to help you get to the White House right up to the

moment you rejected Martin's proposal to remove the Islamic government. That's when I suspected you weren't fooling only me, but the Americans too. That's when I called them and told them to put everything on hold.

Kermani: For God's sake! I'm doing everything possible to reach an agreement with them!!

Motahedeh: You don't want to reach an agreement. You want them to postpone their attack for a few months so you'll manage to manufacture a few bombs. And the first will be dropped on us.

Kermani: That's not true! That's a fabrication! It's all in your sick mind!

Motahedeh: Millions will perish. Cities will be destroyed. The land will be contaminated with nuclear fallout. It will be impossible to live on it ever after. I'll do everything to prevent that, even if my sister has to save herself.

Motahedeh picks up his briefcase and turns to leave.

Motahedeh: Don't bother looking for another way to reach the White House. They know who you are. They've known for a long time. I was the only fool who didn't.

Motahedeh exits. Kermani remains alone. The Monk enters hurriedly.

Monk: Sir... (**Kermani remains silent**) I have a message for you from the abbot... Sir... (**Kermani remains silent**) Unfortunately, the cardinals have recommended to His Holiness that he should not convey a message from you to the White House. (**Kermani remains silent**) I did my best, sir, but they are concerned that should the President of Iran hear we have helped you, he will have hundreds of Christians executed. Possibly even thousands. I did not manage to allay their fears. (**Kermani remains silent**) And regarding the audience you requested, sir, His Holiness is extremely busy. He is devoting all his time to prayer. At this very moment he is celebrating a special Mass for world peace in Piazza San Pietro. (**Kermani remains silent**) With your permission, sir, I will join his prayers.

The Monk exits. Kermani remains alone. Darkness.

Curtain