

# I

That hot August night, as usual, twenty minutes before the curfew, Mali left for work. At ten the lights went out. I locked the doors and sat by the window. I rested the candle on the floor so that it wouldn't attract attention from outside. The moon was swimming among the dark clouds; it was not full yet, the lower edge needed to become round. Now it looked like a chipped porcelain saucer. Just a month ago at this time all the neighbors—believers and nonbelievers—started the week-long parties on the roofs. They ate watermelon and discussed the existence or non-existence of the Sacred Face of the Great Leader on the moon. But now everybody was caged in. The party was over.

The heavy biology book open on my lap, I looked across the yard at the silhouettes of our neighbors walking about in their bedroom. This sight always made me feel secure. I was not alone; Mr. and Mrs. Dorri were on the other side of the yard. If I'd open the window and scream, they'd hear me and come to my rescue.

Since the army had recruited their only son, sending him to the Holy War, the couple hadn't had a full night's sleep. Arash was only one year older than I was, we were playmates when we were kids. His last year of high school we played less and talked more. We went to the movies a few times and once he took me to a birthday party where we danced together. I remembered that his palm touching my back was wet with sweat and I wanted the endless

music to end. Now that he was a soldier, fighting in the remote parts of the country with the invisible enemy, I missed him and felt sorry for him. No one was sure if he'd ever come back. I sat behind the dark window imagining his small delicate hand shaking and sweating while holding a machine gun.

Mr. and Mrs. Dorri walked ghost-like through their house, as if looking for him. They roamed the rooms in different directions, holding candles in their hands. Most mornings, the moment Mali arrived from the hospital, they rushed to our door to inquire if the night before, by any chance, they had brought in wounded soldiers. Mali laughed, assuring them that had she seen Arash among the soldiers, she'd have called them immediately.

The green digits of my watch flashed 10:55. This was my father's last watch. After losing his old Swiss watch, his wedding present from my mother's father, he bought this inexpensive digital watch with a calendar and a chronometer all in one. He was fascinated with his cheap watch, because it had many functions and the digits were luminous green and shone in the dark. When he and Mother died in a car accident, a policeman handed us a plastic bag containing their belongings (one of my mother's broken turquoise earrings, half of my father's tie, smashed shoes, and so on). I took Papa's watch, wearing it ever since. I told myself that as long as the batteries of this watch work, Papa will be with me. When the batteries die, I'll forget him.

Now, at 10:55, Mr. Dorri left his bed, roamed through their house with a candle and returned to bed. I was waiting for Mrs. Dorri to wake up and make her round when our doorbell rang. In our two-story house (the second story had been empty since our

parents' death) the ring always resonated alarmingly. My heart froze for a long moment before I could stand up. Another long ring. I knew that this wasn't my brother because he always rang in his special rhythmic way: one long, two shorts, and two longs. I pushed the button on the intercom and asked who it was.

"Open!" a voice ordered.

"But, who is it?"

"I said open!"

It was them. I had no doubt about it. They were after my brother. I didn't know where he was, so I didn't panic. I remained calm, just standing there, thinking. Ring, ring, ring. Then a longer ring. More delay and they would break through the gate or climb the walls. I glanced at the Dorris' window. Pitch dark. Both were in bed. I pressed the button, hearing the doorbell's long buzz. Now I stood in the middle of the room and listened to the footsteps on the corridor's tiled floor. Heavy boots. Several. Then the door opened and they came in.