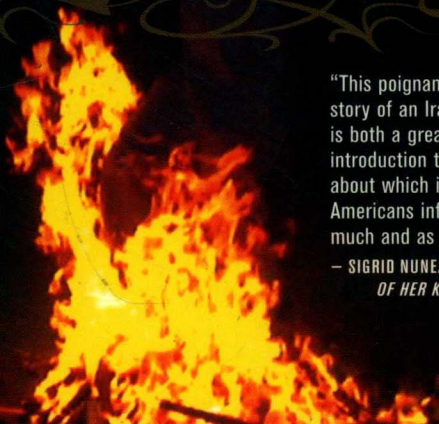
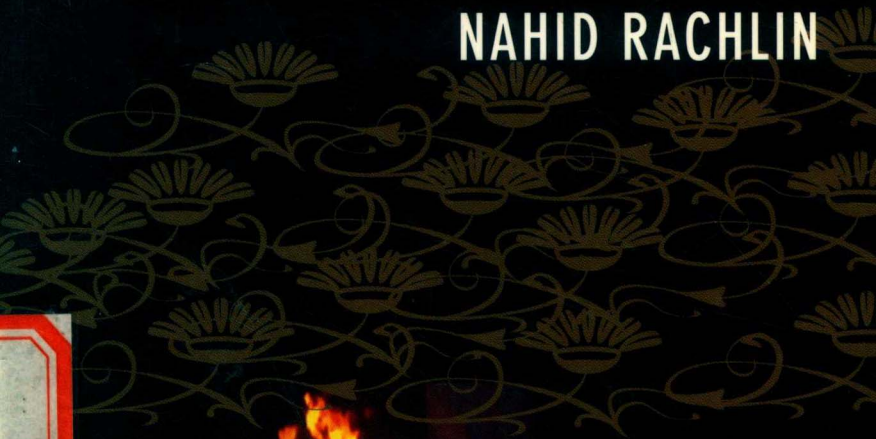




jumping over fire

NAHID RACHLIN



"This poignant, beautifully told story of an Iranian-American family is both a great read and a fine introduction to a land and a culture about which it is imperative we Americans inform ourselves as much and as quickly as possible."

— SIGRID NUNEZ, AUTHOR OF *THE LAST OF HER KIND* AND *FOR ROUENNA*

JUMPING OVER FIRE

Nahid Rachlin

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

San Francisco

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For Howard, Leila, Greg, Ethan, with love

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1

Soon after Maman and Baba took Jahan from the orphanage in Shiraz and brought him to our home in Masjid-e-Suleiman, she got pregnant with me. Jahan was only a year older than me, and as we were growing up he was always at my side. He was ahead of me in his development and always took the lead. He taught me new words, held my hand, and helped me walk. We spent hours playing together in our spacious house in the Iranian American Oil Company compound. We had a courtyard, a swimming pool and a finished basement. Our parents' bedroom was on the first floor. Jahan's and mine was on the second floor and we were able to break rules, indulge in mischief without always being noticed. We stayed up late and made a tent of sheets and blankets spread over chairs and played house inside it. We lay on one of our beds and, through the window, watched fireflies shining on tree branches, the moon sailing across the sky, numerous stars winking. We made up stories about what could be going on inside the moon and the stars, those distant lights. We wondered if the moon was really looking at us. Was there a magical ladder on which we could climb to the stars? We fell asleep on each other's beds with our clothes still on. When I woke at dawn I went to the window and looked at the courtyard, damp with dew. There was something nebulous and soft about those early mornings, full of the scent of honeysuckle that grew in abundance there. I woke up Jahan and asked him to look out with me. In the early hours of the morning a sweet, languorous feeling came over me, being with him, breathing the same scents, looking at the same sights. He called me Noor, meaning light, a word closest to Nora, the name chosen for me by our American mother with our Iranian father's consent.

In our childhood photographs we are almost always together, standing or sitting with our arms around each other. In one we are in a carriage, a blanket covering us up to our necks, giving the appearance of two heads: one light, one dark, springing out of one body. I took my coloring from Maman, Jahan from Baba. In another photograph he is wearing pants and a shirt and I a full-skirted dress, but we are embracing so tightly that again we look like two parts of the same person.

A girl had little freedom in Masjid-e-Suleiman (in spite of the Shah's attempts at Westernization) and as we grew older Jahan became my source of freedom as well as my protector. With him I could explore different neighborhoods, go to caf  s and restaurants, come home late. Our interdependency was all-innocent at first.

We had no idea he was adopted until he was fifteen and I fourteen. I clearly remember the afternoon when we were led to that amazing discovery. It started out in an ordinary way, with me waiting by the door of my high school for him to pick me up. His boys' school was close to my girls' school and it was easy for him to accompany me home and back. He had started doing that when we were still in elementary school to make sure that the tough boys from other neighborhoods who came to our area wouldn't harm me. His instinct to protect me was reinforced by a general attitude that a girl needed protection.

Other students, all in the required uniforms, gray with white collars, were also waiting to be picked up or were getting into cars to be driven home. The relentless heat that had seized the town for the last six months hadn't quite subsided. The air smelled of gas discharged from the refinery and the underground petroleum deposits. Flames coming out of the refinery towers, visible from almost every area of the town, glowed like an advertisement for the inferno. Trees were withered and dusty.

Jahan was late and I looked up and down the street anxiously. Then I saw him coming, wearing what his school required: gray pants, a white shirt, a navy blue jacket, well-shined shoes.

"Jahan, I was worried."

"I'm sorry Noor, I was held up talking to Bijan."

Even though it was hot we decided to walk around for a while before going home. We passed through the square that divided the old town from the new town, where the Americans and Iranians working in the oil business lived. Around the square were teahouses, restaurants, and shops. Some vendors were selling their merchandise from carts—leather handbags, belts, watches. One vendor had piled chunks of gum that looked like white soap on a cloth spread in front of him on the ground.

We came out of the square onto a narrow, winding street, lined with jewelry shops. Customers, mainly women, were looking in the shop windows at displays of gold rings, earrings, bracelets, and necklaces, studded with sapphires, rubies, and other precious stones. Some were inside haggling with the shopkeepers.

Then we came into the old town's residential section. The streets in this quarter were winding and narrow, flanked by baked mud-brick houses so close together that they formed high walls along the street. They had flat roofs, small doors, and there were no windows overlooking the streets. Instead, they faced inward, into courtyards and gardens. This was to protect women from the eyes of passersby. Jahan thought the houses were beautiful and liked this part of town more than I did. He was a boy and could play freely in these streets with his friends, some of whom lived here, while people always stared at me because I looked like an American girl. The majority of women in this neighborhood wore headscarves or *chadors*, even though covering up was optional at that time, during the Shah's regime. The ultra-conservative Muslims who lived here resented the presence of Americans and the English, because they were a constant reminder of the Shah's embrace of what they considered to be materialistic and immoral. They thought that these foreigners, *farangis*, were spreading vice and that the Shah collaborated with them. Soon I became aware of critical glances for not covering my

hair. A bearded man wearing a turban approached us. He stared at me and then said to Jahan, "Who is she to you?"

Jahan ignored him but when the man repeated his question, he took my hand. "Let's get out of here," he said.

We took the quickest way home. When we reached Elm Avenue, an employee of the Christopher Cinema was putting up a poster for the movie *A Place in the Sun*. I was excited that another American movie was coming there. The films they showed were usually decades old but still they transported me away from Masjid-e-Suleiman, which I found more and more stifling as I grew older. I saw some movies more than once, usually with Jahan. He was willing to go if the movie had Farsi subtitles. His English wasn't as good as mine because he didn't try to speak in English with Maman as I did. He stayed with Farsi.

Then we entered the wide, palm-lined Washington Avenue, where our two-story house stood among other grand Tudor style houses, all set back in courtyards—their only Muslim feature. The compound was a classic colonial enclave. Our house was provided by the oil refinery's hospital, where our mother had once worked as a nurse and our father was still employed as a radiologist.

Once home, we immediately put on our bathing suits and dove into the large swimming pool to cool off. When we got out, drops of water like pearls covered our skin. Then we lay in the hammock, which was suspended between two trees behind some dense bushes. It was shaded and secluded there. Lizards scuttled beneath the bushes. Hawks flew above us, their wings spread. We could hear the loud shriek of the parrot, Sabz (Farsi for green), on the porch. "Salaam, halet chetoreh," he squawked the greeting Jahan had taught him. Crows that had built a nest on the top of a tall palm tree, excited by Sabz's voice, flew out, cawed, and wheeled around frantically. Petals from flowering bushes drifted over our faces and into the water, their perfume enveloping us. White-yellow butterflies danced around honeysuckle flowers.

"Jahan, do you know how butterflies are born?"

“From caterpillars. They have a thin, yellow string wrapped around them and the string forms the cocoons. Butterflies grow inside them. Then they tear the cocoons open and fly away.”

After a while we dressed and went into the basement to do our homework. It was cool there, well insulated by stone walls. There was a comfortable sofa to sit on. A large filing cabinet and many boxes stood against one of the walls. One box was filled with items left from our early childhood—rattles, toy cars, dolls. A closet contained splendid, formal clothes that Maman and Baba had worn on special occasions—parties given for the refinery employees, an elaborate wedding or Norooz party. After we were finished with homework I took out a shimmering satin dress and put it on. Jahan put on a velvet vest. We took those clothes off and put on others, making up stories, playing different parts. Jahan loved adventure tales, identifying with princes and heroes of the times of Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes. He’d choose a story from *Shahnameh*, the epic poem by the tenth-century poet, Ferdowsi, and we’d act it out. This afternoon I was Princess Noor, disowned by my family, and Jahan was the prince who comes to my rescue.

Then my eyes went to a locked filing cabinet. “Why is that always locked?” I asked.

“Let me see if I can open it,” Jahan said.

I hesitated. “Maybe there’s a reason they keep it locked. They wouldn’t like it if they found out we opened it.”

“We won’t tell them,” he said.

He began to pull the drawer in different ways but it didn’t open. He took a wire hanger from the closet, straightened it, and then hesitated before he pushed the wire into the space between the lock and the upper part of the drawer. He pulled on the drawer and this time it opened. There were several files in it with labels on them: HOUSE, INVESTMENTS, TRAVEL.

“Look at this one,” he exclaimed, pointing to a file all the way in the back. It was labeled JAHAN.

We looked at each other, puzzled. He pulled out the folder and we sat with it on the sofa. We found several sheets of paper with signatures and stamps on them. We read every passage slowly, some several times. The technical language was hard to understand. We were utterly silent as we read.

In the name of Allah. At the Surrogate court, held in Shiraz, the province of Fars. April 18 1960.

On the petition of Dr. Cyrus Ellahi and Moira Ellahi, his wife, adults, said parties having been examined by me, as required by the law, and the said parties having presented to me an agreement to adopt and treat the minor, Jahan, two months old, presently residing at Bacheh Khaneh Orphanage, as their own lawful child. A statement of the date and place of birth of the person to be adopted, as nearly the same can be ascertained to the change of name proposed and that there has been compliance with all applicable laws. On motion of J. Ali Molavi, attorney for the petitioners, herein, it is ordered that the petition of Dr. Cyrus Ellahi and Moira Ellahi for the pre-adoption of Jahan (the last name is kept confidential), a minor, be permitted. The Child, Jahan, had been found on the steps of Jamei Mosque by a man who had been going there to pray. He brought the infant, who later was established to be fifteen days old, to the Bacheh Khaneh orphanage. Then, soon after the infant was brought to the said orphanage, the mother came in, revealed her identity (kept confidential) and put him up for adoption in accordance with the law.

Another sheet listed our parents' names, incomes, places of birth, occupations, religions (Maman a Christian, Baba a Muslim). And there was the actual adoption paper.

In the name of Allah. At the Surrogate Court held in Shiraz, Province of Fars, in the Civic Center in the said province, June 21, 1960.

On the petition of Dr. Cyrus Ellahi and Moira Ellahi, his wife, adults, duly verified before me the day of May 30, 1960, and the

affidavit of J. Ali Molavi, Esq. Duly sworn before me the day of May 30, 1960 and the above named parties having appeared before me together several times with Jahan (last name withheld), a minor under the age of fourteen, and said parties constituting all the parties required to appear before me, and said parties having presented to me an instrument containing substantially the consents required by said law, an agreement on the part of the adoptive parents to adopt and treat the minor as their own lawful child, and a settlement of the date and place of the person to be adopted, as nearly as the same can be ascertained, the religious faith of the parents and of the child, the manner in which the adoptive parents obtained the child, and the said instrument having been duly signed, verified and acknowledged as required by law by each person whose consent is necessary to the adoption. The adoption of the infant, Jahan, would be in the best interests of said infant; and it appearing to my satisfaction that the moral and temporal interests of the infant, Jahan, will be promoted by granting the petition of said Cyrus Ellahi and Moira Ellahi, his wife, and approving the adoption; and it appearing to my satisfaction that there is no reasonable objection. It is ordered that the petition be granted. It is further ordered that the minor Jahan born on February 12 of 1960 in Shiraz, Iran, shall be henceforth regarded and treated in all respects as the child of said Cyrus Ellahi and Moira Ellahi, his wife, and be known and called by the name of Jahan Ellahi.

The whole world was spinning around me. The words themselves were frightening, seemed to be hiding things in that convoluted, strange language.

Finally I said, "I can't believe it. You look just like Baba." Jahan—with an inception of beard on his face, and standing 5'9", five inches taller than I was—looked much like our father.

"Why did they hide it from us?"

"Yes, why?"

"They lied to us," Jahan said. It was hard for me to tell if he was more angry or hurt.

"Yes," I said. "They lied."

2

We waited in the living room, hoping our parents would return home early, something they rarely did. Baba usually left for work right after breakfast and returned at about nine in the evening. In the morning, Maman went shopping for things that she couldn't get at the American Club store. She took Golpar, our maid, along with her. Sometimes they walked to the market, at other times the chauffeur took them. Maman liked to go with Golpar because she felt more comfortable when being accompanied outside of the compound, if not by a man, then by someone like Golpar who wore a *chador*. Also Golpar managed to bring down the prices of everything by half with her haggling, and this was a ritual that Maman always enjoyed. Then Maman would leave for the club. Often our parents ate out, either at the club or at their favorite *chelo kebab* restaurant, sometimes with friends. After dinner they'd go to concerts of Iranian classical music, which Baba loved and Maman had cultivated a taste for. Golpar came early in the morning and left late in the evening six days a week and usually served meals to Jahan and me.

So much love flowed between Maman and Baba that little of it ever seemed to come in my or Jahan's direction. They wanted us to turn out well, according to their own visions, but most of the time they ignored us. After our discovery I wanted to say to Jahan that he and I weren't so different, even though he was adopted, because our parents were just as remote from me as they were from him. But we sat in silence, swept up in our separate thoughts. I stared at the blue Nain carpet on the floor, trying to escape into its colors, its intricate designs of birds, flowers, and rectangles surrounding the medallion in the center. Jahan kept pacing around the room. Then we heard the front door.

"Is anyone home?" It was Maman's voice from the hallway.

As soon as she came in, Jahan said in a shaky voice, "Look what we found."

"What?" Maman asked, coming to a stop. She took off the straw hat she wore when she went outside during the day. Her long blond hair flowed over her shoulders.

"What does this mean?" Jahan asked, his face reddening. He gave her the folder. "Why didn't you tell me?" His eyes were filled with tears, but I could tell he was trying not to cry.

Maman gave a start at the sight of the folder. As if to give herself time, she said, "The fan is so low." She went to the switch and turned the fan higher. "It smells of mosquito repellent in here. Ahmad shouldn't have sprayed so much of it inside." Then, in an admonishing tone, she asked, "Why were you messing around with that cabinet?" Her Farsi, the language she used most of the time with Baba and Jahan, was more accented because she was upset, the blue of her eyes denser. "Wasn't it locked?"

"We broke it," Jahan said, looking away.

Maman sighed. "Your father and I were waiting for the right time to tell you." She went over to him and put her arms around him. "We love you as our own son, you *are* our son." She put a quick kiss on his cheek.

"Why do I look so much like Baba then?" Jahan asked in an earnest tone.

"Just a lucky stroke," she said. "We loved you as soon as we laid eyes on you. Here you were, a miniature version of your father. You already had a pile of curly hair and your eyes were the same shade of brown as his." Her voice became wistful. "I still remember the blue outfit you wore that day we went to get you. The nurse put a blue woolen hat on your head and wrapped you up in a checkered white and blue blanket before putting you in my arms."

"Why did my . . . why was I put in an orphanage?"

"The woman who gave birth to you had no way of giving you

all she wished to," Maman said. "I'm sure she hoped someone else would provide better for you. That only shows how much she cared for you. But I'm your mother now. You love me like a mother, don't you, as I love you as my son?"

Jahan nodded but clearly he was still upset. "Does everyone know?"

"No one. Honey, we didn't see the point of telling anyone. We thought it was better that way. People could take things the wrong way."

"Even Uncle Jamshid and Uncle Kaveh?"

"Your father's family didn't visit in those days. They were young and getting settled—your aunts giving birth to one child after another, your uncles traveling because of the jewelry business. My parents never visited either. They were both ill and stayed close to home. You don't have to tell anyone if it's easier for you. We'll keep it as our secret."

"Why is it written like that?" I finally managed to say something.

"Legal documents have their own language."

Jahan turned around and started to climb the stairs.

"We'll talk more about it later, darling," Maman said to him. "You can discuss it with your father too, any time."

Jahan didn't respond. I followed him up the stairs but he went into his room and shut the door. So I went to my room. I tried to do more homework but my mind was on what we had discovered. It was amazing that all our lives we had no hints about it, our parents had kept it hidden so well. It was incredible that Jahan had another mother who had abandoned him, that he had been put in an orphanage.

Baba and Maman must have eaten out, perhaps had an engagement they couldn't break, otherwise wouldn't they have wanted to be with us that evening, after what we had discovered? Golpar hadn't been there either, it being her day off. I slept through dinner and woke several times from dreams that left me uneasy, though I didn't

recall their content. Then it was dawn, and rays of morning light were shining into the room. It was odd that Jahan hadn't tried to wake me. He must be very upset. His room was quiet now, its door closed, so I went downstairs by myself. Golpar was back and had spread her prayer rug in her room, adjacent to the dining room, and had a *chador* on. She genuflected, touching her forehead to a *mohr*, a clay tablet from the holy city of Karbala. She rose and intoned, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is his prophet."

She was the only one in our household who prayed. Even though Baba and Maman were strict with me, neither of them practiced religion. Baba came from Muslim parents. My grandmother on Maman's side had been an observant Catholic. My grandfather on her side was a Protestant, who first converted to Catholicism and then finally abandoned religion altogether. Maman said she took after her father. Her mother used to force Maman to go to church with her, but Maman couldn't wait until she didn't have to. Both she and Baba said religion only created factions, that bloody wars were fought in its name. Occasionally she and some of her American friends went to the foothills surrounding our town and prayed together, but she explained, "It isn't religion, it's something more spiritual than church. The mountains have a calming effect." Our parents were certainly full of contradictions—Baba as well as Maman. Baba insisted on my following traditional rules of conduct, for instance, even though in many ways he had disappointed his family's expectations. I often resented Maman's going along with his rules for me. When I complained she said, "We live in this country, it's best to do things the Iranian way." And now I was mistrustful and angry with them, for hiding something so important from Jahan and me.

Golpar had finished praying and came in and served me breakfast—Nescafe, hard-boiled eggs, toast and marmalade. I had selected the instant coffee and marmalade from the American Club store myself. Her *chador* was off, displaying her long, henna-red braids. Her colorful peasant clothes and the braids made her look like a doll, an

aged doll, her face all wrinkled. "Did Jahan have his breakfast?" I asked.

"No, *azizam*. He hasn't come down yet." Exuding a warmth and concern that I never felt from our parents, she asked, "What's wrong?"

I shrugged. "Nothing."

"Don't worry, Allah will fix everything. He is compassionate, merciful."

As I ate, Golpar carried on a stream of one-sided talk. "My aunt took her child to Hajrat Fatemeh's shrine and, ever since then, the child can walk. . . In this modern kitchen the food doesn't come out as good as on the old stoves. . . Men have all the power." She chronicled all the suffering "inflicted by men" on her female relatives. Her voice became bitterer as she said, "My poor cousin, her husband doesn't do anything to help her, he goes out and pleases himself. What can we women do but obey? Allah gave them more than us. But Allah must have his reasons which are beyond our comprehension."

Jahan was coming down the stairs and Golpar got up and ran into her room, adjacent to the kitchen, to put her *chador* on. She had started covering up in front of Jahan since he turned fourteen and had become a man in her eyes. She came back and said to him in a deferential tone, "Sit down, let me make you your eggs the way you like them. Two or three? You're a big man, *mashala*."

"Two please, Golpar *joon*." His school clothes were meticulously ironed. Golpar was so painstaking with her tasks, particularly in what she did for Jahan and Baba. She both feared and resented men, which made her deferential toward them in a way she wasn't with Maman or me. But she was so kind and tender that I never felt resentment toward her.

She served Jahan and went back into the kitchen.

After we finished eating, Jahan and I left the house together so he could drop me off at my school as usual. But something was very different, in him, between us.