

Extract from *My Life As a Traitor* by Zarah Ghahramani with Robert Hillman, published by Scribe.

The blindfold is firmly tied. My consciousness is divided between the darkness that my eyes strive to penetrate and my stark terror. When the blindfold is removed, the first thing I register is the face of the man who is to be my interrogator. He is standing, and I am sitting, but my gaze instinctively seeks out this man's face. It's not an attractive face. I can see immediately that he knows the impact his appearance will have on a young woman – a child, really – snatched from the streets without warning. He knows everything about my terror.

He is tall, fat, and bald, and he stinks. I don't know whether the stink comes from his breath or from his body, but it is foul, like the reek of rotting meat. He is perhaps fifty years old, with an untidy beard streaked with grey. He wears a long shirt hanging out over his trousers.

He draws himself up even more fully erect and stares down at me, as if to reinforce the dominance not only of his stature, but of the power he has over my life. Some part of my mind, even in the midst of my fear, recognises that this man is enjoying himself, and that this is only the beginning of his enjoyment. He has already summed me up: a pampered middle-class princess from the university, playing at politics in street protests against the regime. I'm a toy to him. Maybe he hates me, too, but more important than his hatred is the enjoyment I will provide him with. I am guessing at his opinion of me, of course; the only things I can really be sure of are my fear and my aching desire to be safe, to be in the care of someone – my father, my mother – who wishes me exactly the opposite of what this man has in store for me.

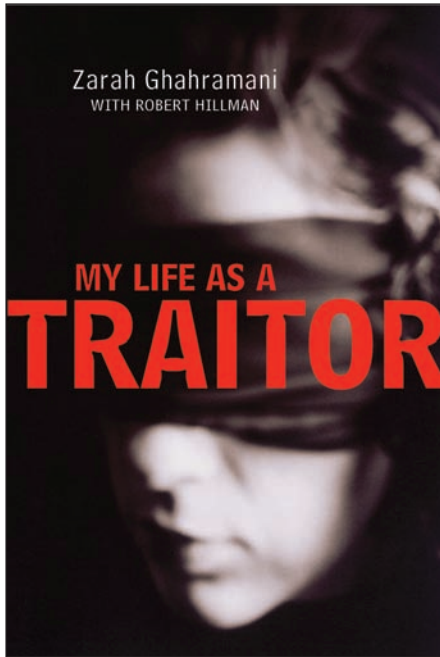
I know where I am, or at least I can guess: this is Evin Prison, in northern Tehran, some kilometres from my home in the inner suburbs. I have heard of this place; everyone I know has heard of it – all of my friends from university. We all know it is a place to be avoided, but only in the way that the good people in children's stories know that they must avoid the ogre's castle. It truly did not occur to me that a good person – me! – could be dragged into this bad place.

What had I done to deserve this? Voiced a few opinions, handed around petitions, gathered in street protests with my friends. I had never hurt anyone, never fired a gun, never thrown a stone. This was the horrifying contradiction of my situation: I wanted it to be known that I was a good person, someone who loved peace and books and conversations with my friends, but this man who stood before me did not care. If he'd been instructed to kill me, he would have killed me. The world he inhabits is brutal, primitive. There is nothing in him to which I can appeal. Nothing whatsoever.

The interrogator lets the reality of my situation sink in. He sits at a desk facing me, and says nothing for some time. Finally, he looks down at some papers spread on his desk. 'Zarah Ghahramani, born in 1981, with birth certificate number 992 issued in Tehran, a student doing a translation course. Is that right?'

'Yes,' I reply softly.

He strikes the table hard with the flat of his hand and I almost leap from my chair, such is my shock. My eyes had been slightly averted, half-closed, but now they are open wide – as wide as they can possibly be.



‘When you wanted to change the future of the country at the university, were you speaking so softly?’ he shouts. I don’t respond. Just for a split second, I shut my eyes and rapidly pray for God to intervene and make me safe.

The interrogator hits the table once more, as loudly as the first time. I don’t move.

‘When I ask you something, answer me, do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ I reply, my voice seeming to come from somewhere far away from where I sit.

The interrogator leans back in his chair and tugs at the strands of his beard.

‘What is your name?’ he asks, when he is good and ready.

‘Zarah Ghahramani,’ I reply.

‘Full details!’ he shouts.

I swallow to free my throat of the constriction of fear.

‘Zarah Ghahramani,’ I answer, in a voice neither too soft to antagonise this man, nor too loud, for that might make me seem belligerent. I am rapidly trying to educate myself in this man’s preferences, trying to learn what expression, what tone of voice, what demeanour will placate him just enough to save me from his temper.

‘Born in Tehran, birth certificate number 843, student of translation, entrant of year 1377.’

He makes no response at first. His plump hands are toying with a pen on the table before him. My gaze becomes transfixed by the toying motion of his hands, as if the power he has over me is concentrated in them. I think of what his hands might do to me, not knowing at this moment that those plump hands will become an enduring image in the nightmares that await me, not knowing that what I fear from those hands will come to pass.

I place my own hands on the table. I am making a deliberate attempt to regain some control of myself. I am trying to look like someone who is ready to begin a sensible, logical conversation.

Against my better judgement, I am going to treat this dreadful man as if he has some compassion. I am going to speak to him as if he cares about my situation, even though he doesn’t. This is whistling in the dark, yes, but I must do something; I must at least try to relieve my humiliation, if only for a few minutes.

He is observing me thoroughly while hiding his stare. When he sees that I have placed my hands on the table, he says, ‘Are you ready, then?’

Instantly my courage falters.

‘Ready for what?’

He gives me a menacing look.

‘Only I ask questions,’ he says. ‘Do you understand?’