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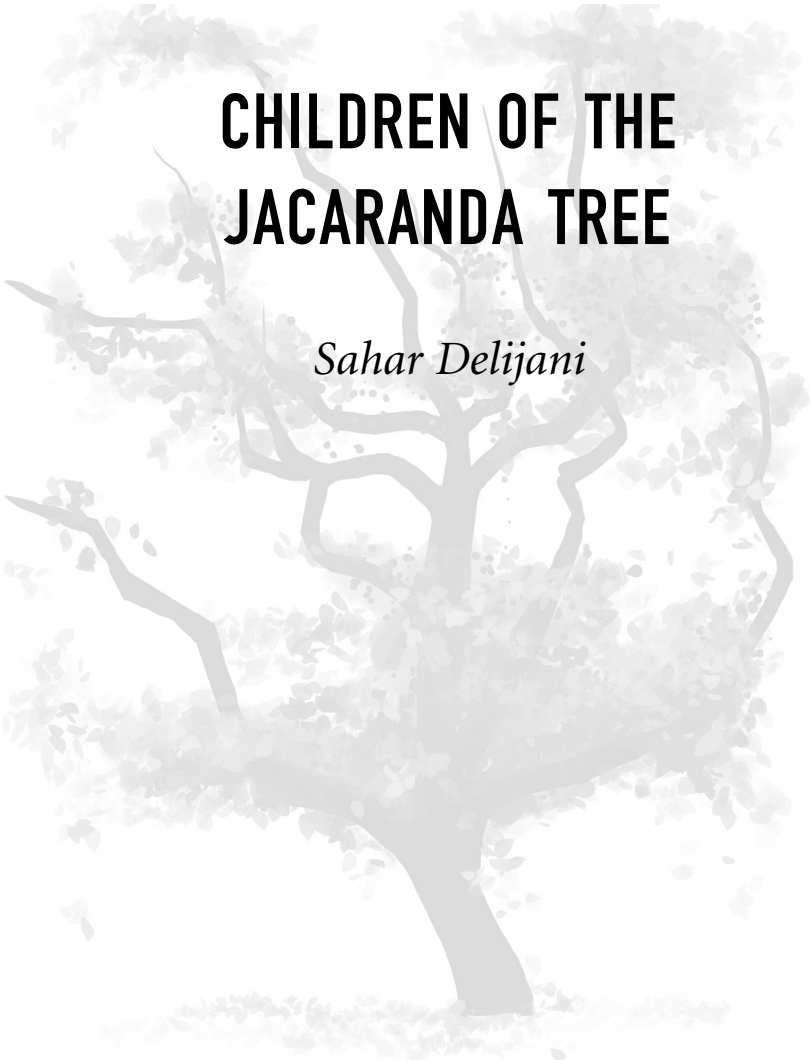
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CHILDREN OF THE JACARANDA TREE

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To my parents

Azar sat on the corrugated iron floor of a van, huddled against the wall. The undulating street made the car sway side to side, swinging her this way and that. With her free hand, she clasped on to something that felt like a railing. The other lay on her hard, bulging belly that contracted and strained, making her breathing choppy, irregular. A heatwave of pain spouted from somewhere in her backbone and burst through her body. Azar gasped, seizing the chador wrapped around her, gripping so hard her knuckles turned white. With every turn, she was thrashed against the walls. With every bump and pothole, her body was sent flying toward the ceiling, the child in her belly, rigid, cringing. The blindfold over her eyes was damp with sweat.

She lifted a hand and wiped the moisture from her eyes. She dared not remove the blindfold, even though there was no one else with her in the back of the van. But she knew there was a window behind her. She had felt the glass when she first climbed in. Sister might turn around and see her through this window, or they could stop so abruptly that Azar would not have time to put the blindfold back on.

She did not know what would happen to her if they caught her with open eyes, and she did not wish to. At times, she tried to convince herself that the fear that had crept inside her, cleaving to her, was not justifiable; no one had ever raised a hand to her, shoved her around, threatened her. She had no reason to be

terrified of them, of the Sisters and the Brothers, no tangible reason. But then there were the screams that shook the prison walls, tearing through the empty corridors, waking the prisoners at night, cutting across a conversation as the prisoners divided up their lunch, forcing them all to a tight-jawed, stiff-limbed silence that lasted through the evening. No one knew where the screams were coming from. No one dared ask. Shrieks of pain they were, this much they knew. For no one could confuse howls of pain with any other kind; they were cries of a body without a self, abandoned, crushed to a shapeless splotch, whose only sign of being was the force with which it could shatter the silence inside the prison walls. And no one knew when their turn would come up, when they would disappear down the corridor and nothing would remain of them but howls. And so they lived and waited and followed orders under the looming cloud of a menace that everyone knew could not be eluded forever.

From a tiny opening somewhere above Azar's head, the muffled din of the city waking up intruded into the car: shutters rolling open, cars honking, children laughing, street vendors haggling. Through the window, she could also hear the intermittent sounds of chatter and laughter coming from the front of the van, though the words were not clear. She could only hear the guffaws of Sister at something one of the Brothers had just finished recounting. Azar tried to keep out the voices inside the van by concentrating on the hum of the city outside – Tehran, her beloved city, which she had neither seen nor heard for months. She wondered how the city could have changed with the war with Iraq dragging on into its third year. Had the flames of war reached Tehran? Were people leaving the city? From the noises outside, it seemed as if everything continued as always, the same chaos, the same din of struggle and survival. She wondered what her parents were doing at this moment. Mother was

probably in line at the baker's, her father getting on his motorcycle and leaving for work. At the thought of them, Azar felt as if something was gripping her throat. She lifted her head, opened her mouth wide, and tried to gulp down the air seeping through a narrow opening into the van.

Her head thrown back, she breathed hard, so hard that her throat burnt and she started to cough. She undid the tight knot of the headscarf under her chin and let the chador slide down her head. She held tightly to the railing, sitting stiffly, trying to bear the swaying and lashing of the car as another burst of pain blazed through her like the fiery end of a bullet. Azar tried to sit up; she bristled at the thought of having to give birth there, on the metal floor of a van, on these bumpy streets, the shrill laughter of Sister in her ears. Tightening her grasp on the railing, she took a deep breath and tried to shut herself against the urge deep within her. She was determined to keep the child inside until they reached the hospital.

Just then, Azar felt a sudden gush between her legs, and held her breath as the uncontrollable trickle ran down her thigh. She pushed her chador aside. Panic swept through her as she touched the pants carefully with the tips of her fingers. She knew that a pregnant woman's waters would break at some point, but not what would happen after that. Did this mean the birth was imminent? Was it dangerous? Azar had just started reading books on pregnancy when they came to her door. She was about to reach the chapter on the waters breaking, contractions and what she should pack in her hospital bag, when they knocked so loudly, like they wanted to break down the front door of her house. When they dragged her out, her stomach was already beginning to show.

She clenched her jaw as her heart pounded violently. She wished her mother were there so that she could explain what

was happening. Mother with her deep voice and gentle face. Azar wished she had something of her mother she could hold on to, a piece of clothing, her headscarf. It would have helped.

She wished Ismael were there so that he could hold her hand and tell her that everything was going to be fine. He would have been frightened, she knew, if he had seen her in these conditions, sick with worry. He would have stared at her with his bright brown eyes as if he wanted to devour her pain, make it his own. There was nothing he hated more than seeing her in pain. The time she fell from the chair she had climbed in order to pick grapes from the vine tree, he was so shocked seeing her wriggling on the ground that he almost cried, gathering her in his arms. *I thought you had broken your back*, he told her later on. *I would die if something ever happened to you.* His love made her feel like a mountain, unshakable, immortal. She needed that all-encompassing love, those worried eyes, the way that by taking it upon herself to reassure him, to calm him down, she always succeeded in reassuring herself too.

She wished her father were there so that he could carry her to his car and drive like a madman to the hospital.

The van came to a stop and Azar, shaken from her thoughts, turned around sharply, as if she could see. Although the grumble of the engine had fallen silent, no door opened yet. Her hands crept up to her headscarf, tightening the knot, sweeping the chador over her head. Sister's gales of laughter once again burst forth. Soon it became apparent that they were waiting for the Brother to finish telling his story. Azar waited for them, her hands trembling on the slippery edge of her chador.

After a few moments, she heard doors open and swing shut. Someone fiddled with the lock on the back of the van. Her hand clinging on to the railing, Azar lugged her body forward.

She was at the edge of the car when the doors were drawn open.

'Get out,' Sister said as she fastened the handcuffs around Azar's wrists.

Azar could barely stand. She lumbered alongside Sister, engulfed in the darkness enveloping her eyes, her wet pants sticking to her thighs. Soon, she felt a pair of hands behind her head untying the blindfold and she found herself standing in a dimly lit corridor, flanked by long rows of closed doors. A few plastic chairs were set against the walls, which were covered with posters of children's happy faces and the framed photo of a nurse with a finger against her lips to indicate silence. Azar felt a great lifting in her heart as she realized they had at last reached the prison hospital.

A few young nurses hurried past them. Azar watched as they disappeared down the corridor. There was something beautiful in having her eyes out in the open, her gaze hopping hurriedly, freely, from the green walls to the doors to the flat neon lights embedded into the ceiling, to the nurses in white uniforms and white shoes, fluttering around, opening and shutting doors, their faces flushed with the excitement of work. Azar felt less exposed now that she could see and somehow on equal ground with everyone else. Behind the blindfold, she had felt incomplete, mutilated, bogged down into a fluid world of physical vulnerability, where anything could happen and she could not defend herself. Now it felt as if with one glance, she could shed the stunting fear that hacked away at her, that made her feel less than whole, less than a person. With open eyes, in the dim corridor surrounded with the bustle of life and birth, Azar felt she was beginning to reclaim her humanity.

From behind some of those doors came the muffled chorus of babies wailing. Azar listened carefully, as if in their endless,

hungry cries, there was a message for her, a message from the other side of time, from the other side of her body and flesh.

A nurse came to a halt in front of them. She was a portly woman with bright hazel eyes. She looked up and down at Azar, and then turned to Sister.

'It is a busy day. We are trying to cope with the Eid-Ghorban rush, and I do not know if there is any room available. But come on up. We will have the doctor at least have a look at her.'

The nurse led them to a flight of stairs, which Azar climbed with difficulty. Every few steps, she had to stop to catch her breath. The nurse walked ahead of them, as if she was avoiding them, this prisoner with her baby and her agony, the perspiration glistening on her scrawny face.

They went from floor to floor, Azar hauling her body from one corridor to the next, one closed door to another. Finally, the doctor in one of the rooms motioned them in. Azar quickly lay down and submitted herself to the doctor's efficient, impersonal hands.

The baby inside her felt as tense as a knot.

'As I said before, we cannot keep her here,' the nurse said once the doctor was gone, the door swinging silently behind her. 'She is not part of this prison. You have to take her somewhere else.'

Sister signalled to Azar to get up. Descending stairs, flight after flight, floor after floor, Azar clasped on to the banister, tight, stiff, panting. The pain was now changing gear. It gripped her back, then her stomach. She gasped, feeling as if the baby were being wrung out of her by giant hands. For a moment, her eyes welled up, to her biting shame. She gritted her teeth, swallowed hard. This was not a place for tears – not on these stairs, not in these long corridors.

Before leaving the hospital, Sister made sure the blindfold was tied hermetically over her prisoner's bloodshot eyes.

Back on the corrugated iron floor, the doors slammed shut. The van smelled of heat, and violent suffering. As soon as the engine started, the chattering up-front picked up where it had left off. Sister sounded excited. There was a flirtatious edge to her voice and her high-pitched laughter.

Back in position, Azar slouched slightly, fatigued. As the van zigzagged its way through the jarring traffic, she remembered the first time she took Ismael to her house. It had been a hot day, much like today. He smelled sweet, of soap and happiness, as he walked beside her down the narrow street. She wanted to show him where she came from, she had said, the house she lived in with its low brick walls, blue fountain, and the jacaranda tree that dominated everything. He had been doubtful; what if her parents came back and caught him there? But he came anyway. *Nothing but a quick tour*, Azar promised, laughing, grabbing his hand. They ran from room to room, never letting go of that moment, of each other, of the perfume of the flowers that enfolded them.

She wondered where Ismael was now, and if he was all right. It had been months since she had any news of him, months when she did not even know if he was still alive. *No, no, no.* She shook her head repeatedly. She should not think about that. *Not now.* She had heard from some of the new prisoners that the men had also been transferred to the Evin prison. Most of the men. If they made it to Evin, it meant that they had made it through the interrogations and everything else she did not dare think about at the *Komiteh Moshtarak* detention centre. She was sure Ismael was one of those men. She was sure he was in Evin with her. He had to be.

Once again, the van came to a stop and the door swung open. This time, however, the blindfold did not come off. The sun

shone feebly through it and into Azar's eyes as she faltered out of the van, tottering alongside Sister and Brother into another building, and then down a corridor. They must have entered the labour ward of another hospital for soon the sounds of women moaning and screaming filled her ears. Azar felt a rush of hope. Maybe now they would leave her to the safe hands of the doctors. Maybe now the agony would be over. The blindfold slid down a bit from one side and from the opening she watched eagerly the grey tiled floor of the long corridor and the metal feet of chairs along the walls. She felt the brisk passing of people, perhaps nurses, their soft shoes thudding down the hallway. Their bodies running past raised a quick breeze to her face.

Yet, soon Azar was going up another flight of stairs. The sound of the women's moans drifted. She cocked her ears and knew they were taking her away from the labour ward. The corner of her eyes twitched. When they finally came to a stop and a door opened, she was led into a room and told to sit down. She lowered herself onto a hard wooden chair, exhausted. Sweat dripped from her forehead and into her eyes as a rush of pain came back to claim her. *Soon the doctor will be here,* Azar thought, trying to console herself.

Yet, she quickly realized, it was not a doctor she was waiting for, when from behind the closed door came the slip-slap of plastic slippers approaching; the noise grew louder and louder. She knew what that sound meant and that she had to prepare herself when she heard it. She gripped the warm, sweaty metal of the handcuff and squeezed her eyes, hoping the slip-slap would stride right past her door and leave her alone. When it fell silent behind the door, Azar's heart sank; they were here for her.

The door squeaked open. From underneath the blindfold she had a glimpse of black pants and a man's skinny toes with long pointy nails. She heard him dawdle across the room, pull a chair

raspingly over the floor, and sit down. Azar's body grew tense against the ominous being that she could not see but felt with every molecule of her body. The child inside her pushed and twisted. She winced, clasped into her chador.

'Your first and last name?'

In a quivering voice, Azar gave her name. She then said the name of the political party to which she belonged, the name of her husband. Another stab of pain and she crouched over, a whimper escaping through her mouth. But the man did not seem to hear or see. The questions continued to roll off his tongue mechanically, like he was reading from a list he had been given and knew nothing about. There was an aggressiveness in his voice that stemmed from the deep and dangerous boredom of an interrogator who had grown tired of his own questions.

The room was very hot. Under the coarse layers of her manteau and chador, her body was soaked in sweat. The man asked her the date of her husband's arrest. She told him that, and whom she knew and whom she did not. Her voice throbbed with agony as waves of pain blazed through her. *I must keep calm,* she told herself, *I must not make the baby suffer.* She shook her head against the image that continued to crop up in her mind: that of a child, her child – deformed, broken, a sight of irreversible agony. *Like the children of Biafra.* Azar grunted. Sweat trickled down her back.

Where were the meetings? the man asked. How many of them attended each meeting? As she gripped the chair against the fresh, all-encompassing stabs of pain, Azar tried to remember the right answers. All the answers she had given from one interrogation to the next. Not a date, not a name, not a piece of information or lack of it should differ. She knew why she was here, why they had thought that this was the perfect time to interrogate her, to get at her. *Keep calm*, she repeated to herself while she answered. As she

omitted names, dates, places, meetings, she tried to remain calm by imagining her baby's feet, hands, knees, shape of the eyes, their colour. Another wave of pain soared and crashed inside her. She writhed, shocked at its ferocity. It was pain she had never thought possible. She was losing herself to it. *Fingers, knuckles, nostrils, earlobes, neck.*

Where did she print the leaflets? She heard the man repeat the question. She tried to answer but the contractions seemed to be swallowing her, not giving her a chance to speak. She lurched forward, grabbing the table in front of her. She heard herself moan. *Belly-button, black hair, curve of the chin.* She took a deep breath. She felt like she was going to faint. She bit her tongue. She bit her lips. She could taste the blood blending into her saliva. She bit into her whitened knuckles.

But the outside world was quickly fading away as Azar's pain grew worse. She could no longer hear anything, nor was she aware of what was around her. The waves of pain had hurled her into a space where nothing else existed, nothing but an agony so acute and unbelievable, that it felt no longer part of her, but a condition of life, a state of being. She was no longer a body; she was a space where everything writhed and wriggled, where pain, pure and infinite, held sway.

She did not know how long the man waited for her answer about the leaflets – it never came. She was only half conscious when she finally heard him close what sounded like a notebook. She knew the interrogation was over. The sense of relief was almost dizzying. She did not hear the man get up but she did recognize his slip-slapping away. Soon she heard Sister's voice telling her to get up. Azar stumbled out of the room, down the corridor, flanked by Sister and someone else who felt like a nurse. She could barely keep their pace. She lumbered along, almost bent double, breathing quickly. The handcuffs felt unbearably

heavy on her wrists. They went down the flight of stairs. The sound of women's wails once again filled Azar's ears.

'Here we are,' the nurse said as they came to a stop.

Sister unfastened the handcuffs and took off Azar's blindfold.

She climbed on a narrow bed in a room full of nurses and a doctor. The wall on her right side was dazzled by the afternoon sun. In a lull between contractions, Azar sunk heavily in her exhaustion, her arms lying slack next to her on the bed, watching the smooth skin of sunlight as she submitted herself to the hands of the doctor checking her.

Sister stood next to the doctor, looking on in silence. Azar refused to look at her. She refused to acknowledge Sister's presence there, wished to forget it completely. Not only Sister, but everything Sister's presence meant: Azar's captivity, her solitude, her fear, giving birth in a prison. She was now a foreigner, surrounded by people who saw her as an enemy to be tamed and defeated, and saw her very being as an obstacle to their power, to their own understanding of right and wrong, moral and immoral. People, who loathed her because she refused to take what they offered as what she had fought for; people who saw her as their foe because she refused to accept that their God had all the answers.

Azar wanted to close her eyes and pretend she was somewhere else, in another time, another place, another hospital room, where Ismael was standing next to her, caressing her face, looking at her with concern, holding her hand and not letting go, and her parents were outside, waiting, her father pacing up and down the corridor, her mother clasping her hospital bag between tense fingers, sitting on the edge of the chair, ready to careen into the room when needed.