

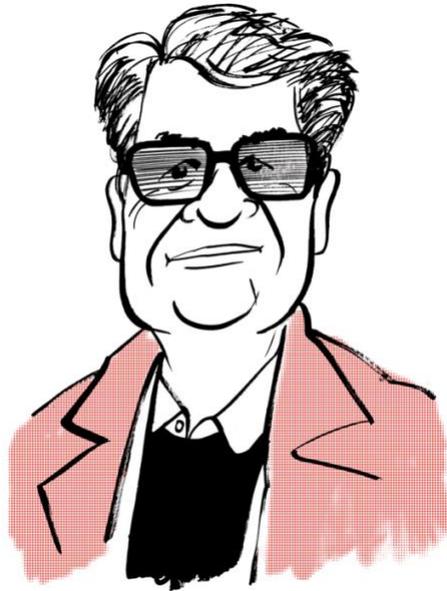
Dept. of Stealth

Jafar Panahi Steps Out of the Shadows

The director of “It Was Just an Accident” will face arrest upon his return to Iran after the Oscars. But for now he’s looking for a new pair of shades.

By **H. C. Wilentz**

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Exactly a month before the Academy Awards, the Iranian director Jafar Panahi, whose latest film, “It Was Just an Accident,” is up for Best International Feature, headed north on Chrystie Street looking to replace a pair of sunglasses. In an emerald overcoat, a flecked wool blazer, and jeans, he chain-smoked with a brooding sprezzatura; a wing of white hair fanned out at each ear. The sidewalk was narrow, but strangers instinctively gave him a regal berth.

It had been more than two hundred days since Panahi had left Tehran. In that period, after the U.S. air strike last June, thousands of protesters had been massacred by state forces, and, because of the subversive themes of “It Was Just an Accident”—which, in a stunning logistical feat, was filmed almost entirely in secret—the state had sentenced Panahi to a year in prison. “Iranians are rejecting all the moral and ethical indoctrinations of the regime,” he said. “This includes subverting rules

around the hijab, profanities, even mourning traditions. They are saying, We don't want this government.”

Panahi's time in the notoriously brutal Evin prison, where dissidents and political captives are held, inspired him to make “It Was Just an Accident.” In the story, a character named Vahid, damaged by vicious beatings in prison, kidnaps a man he believes to have been his torturer. Driving around Tehran with the captive drugged in the back of a van, Vahid seeks out other former prisoners to confirm the man's identity and to help decide whether to kill him. (Suspicious bystanders, sensing that something is up, are constantly demanding bribes; at one point, Vahid tells a pair of guards that he has no cash, and they hand him a credit-card reader.)

Panahi paused to look at a corner store selling decorations for the Lunar New Year. A toddler with an iridescent stuffed pony trotted past. He recalled dealing with his own daughter when she was young. “She had this idea of us building a mini pool in the middle of our apartment and putting in a baby crocodile,” he said. “I told her, ‘You're too young for that.’ ” She asked for an iguana instead. The parents capitulated. Panahi mimed cradling a reptile the size of a kitten. “She would take it anywhere she went. The iguana once got loose at a café, and it was total mayhem,” he said. “Women were screaming.”

In 2010, Panahi was arrested while shooting a film without a permit from state censors. “Back then, the underground cinema scene hadn't come about yet, and we really didn't know what security measures we needed to take,” he said. Officers apprehended everyone, including his wife and daughter. His family was released, but Panahi remained in prison for months. Eventually, he was issued a sentence that prohibited him from making films and from leaving the country for twenty years. “One day at court, the judge asked me, ‘How is your daughter?’ And he said it with a really bad tone of voice. And when I returned to Tehran I decided that moment to send her out of the country,” he said. “I didn't

see her again for ten years.” Her iguana, which by then was more than five feet long, stayed put.

Panahi ended up at East Ninth Street and shuffled into Fabulous Fanny’s, a vintage-eyewear store full of carrousel of dead-stock frames. Panahi pulled out his phone and showed an employee a photo of himself in a pair of glasses with thick black hexagonal frames. “I’m looking for something like this,” he said. The woman poked around, to no avail. “I’ll just go shopping in Europe with my daughter,” he said.

» Many filmmakers have left Iran—Asghar Farhadi, Mohammad Rasoulof. But Panahi has vowed to return as soon as the Academy Awards are over. “My family is there—my mother, brothers, sisters, son, friends—half of my being is there,” he said. “Some of my colleagues are in prison. Part of me keeps saying that I’m not allowed not to return. If I don’t return, it’s as if I have left them alone and turned my back to them.”

As he prepared to go, a manager showed him one more pair. “Y2K, early-two-thousands Giorgio Armani,” the man said, handing them over. Panahi shrugged, then headed for the cash register with the glasses.

Last spring, when “It Was Just an Accident” won the Palme d’Or at Cannes, Panahi delivered his acceptance speech in his sunglasses. It was easy to see them as a symbol of making art in the shadows. But he is suspicious of being saddled with a heroic mythos. “When they tell me I’m courageous, I always ask, Compared to who? Compared to the one who sits home and does nothing? Or compared to the one who has been in prison for years?” He said. “And, as for the sunglasses—I just like the way they look with my eyebrows.” ♦

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