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It Was Just an Accident (12a)

Dir: Jafar Panahi

with: Vahid Mobasseri, Mariam Afshari, Ebrahim Azizi

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Synopsis: Iran, the present. Eghbal, his pregnant wife and young daughter are driving at night when they break down. A passing motorcyclist helps them get to a garage. There, mechanic Vahid thinks he recognises Eghbal as a former prison officer who tortured him while he was in prison (for an unspecified offence.) He kidnaps Eghbal, intending to kill him in revenge. However, he isn't completely sure he has the right man. He seeks the help of friends, all of whom were tortured as he was. They drive into the desert. None of them can positively identify Eghbal who denies any involvement in torture. All of them want some kind of justice. They argue among themselves as to the best course of action but decide to spare him. They try to resume their lives.

With Palme d'Or winner *It Was Just an Accident*, Iranian master Jafar Panahi delivers a cogent, morally ambiguous revenge tale whose targets are unremittingly sadistic but whose vengeance-seekers are rather more elastic in their reasoning than most.

It's rare and fascinating to see so clearly inside the psyche of a filmmaker shaped by the harshest of authoritarian regimes and in the eye of the storm of its cultural repression. Director Jafar Panahi's films are wise, principled, passionate, and most pressingly, reveal him as a filmmaker of moral clarity and furious, often blackly comic political statement.

In his latest, a beatific long shot opens on a man who will come to be nicknamed 'Peg Leg' for his squeaking prosthetic limb (Ebrahim Azizi). The man, preoccupied by his pregnant wife and child in the car, has accidentally run over a stray dog before his car stalls out altogether, leaving him stranded in a small town. This happenstance sees him recognised by a mechanic's assistant called Vahid (Vahid Mobasseri, giving a nuanced, interior performance of unspoken steeliness). With dawning horror, Vahid twigs that this motorist is the same man who, as a state prison official, cruelly tortured him and many others under lock and key by the extremist government. Motivated at first by sheer hatred, Vahid barely hesitates before fetching a shovel and nearly brutally murdering the man; he thinks better of it, but the queasy encounter leaves him in search of whatever form of rough justice he can find. He soon finds himself driving around in a van with an abducted man, and is slowly joined by a small clutch of former prisoners from different walks of life – all of whom are equally set on vengeance.



Within this framework, Panahi explores the moral justification and satisfaction of potential violent retribution against one's oppressive captors. It's an understandable philosophical question to set out for a man who has, himself, been arrested and imprisoned multiple times, subjected to physical and psychological torture, and banned from making films altogether in his home nation. He has spoken before about *It Was Just an Accident* being based in the variety of horror stories told to him by the prisoners and victims of the regime that he met while incarcerated. With a desire to amalgamate and bring some of those experiences to life, Panahi creates vivid Iranian characters whose actions express the reverberations of trauma and repression.

Vahid interacts and argues with each of the former prisoners on his van journey, and each presents a different, complex story wherein they fell afoul of the authorities. One, a woman soon to be married (Hadis Pakbaten) is cautious; another, a recklessly angry man (Mohamad Ali Elyasmehr), doesn't even mind that they can't totally positively ID Peg-Leg, and is happy to treat their quarry as collateral damage nonetheless. This is a revenge thriller that stays true to its genre while also maintaining its one-of-a-kind political statement; you always feel in safe hands with Panahi's sturdy, layered storytelling.

"What's most important now is our country and the freedom of our country," Panahi said after accepting the Palme d'Or. "Let us join forces. No-one should dare tell us what kind of clothes we should wear, what we should do, or what we should not do." It was a remarkable moment for a filmmaker who few expected would even manage to travel internationally to attend Cannes – he hadn't been since 2003, even while his films have been screened there – nevermind be present to accept perhaps the most coveted honour in cinema.

Filmed with his usual understated but accomplished handheld – wonderfully compact and self-assured in spite of the film being made in secret – Panahi melds the personal and political in the most subtle and searing of ways. An enquiry into whether political violence on this scale should ever justify extralegal killing, or indeed

whether an eye for an eye is precisely the approach that's needed, *It Was Just an Accident* is a dark film indeed. It does, however, find levity in Vahid's ad-hoc, deeply amateur crew, who at one point run out of petrol and are forced to push their kidnapping van to its destination. It also sees the sparkles of humanity and warmth in people who are otherwise capable of towering monstrosity. Without tipping its hand at key moments, Panahi asks us what we are willing to tolerate in the name of maintaining a civilised world – particularly when the powers-that-be are anything but civilised.

Credits

Vahid	Vahid Mobasseri
Shiva	Mariam Afshari
Eghbal	Ebrahim Azizi
Goli	Hadis Pakbaten
Ali	Majid Panahi
Hamid	Mohamad Ali Elyasmehr
Eghbal's wife	Afssaneh Najmabadi
Eghbal's daughter	Delnaz Najafi
Salar	Georges Hashemzadeh
Director	Jafar Panahi
Screenplay	Jafar Panahi
Cinematography	Amin Jafari
Editor	Amir Etmiran

Iran 2025. 104 mins

Take 2

You'd be right to want to exact cold, hard revenge on a person who tortured you and planted nightmare imagery of death and suffering in your mind for life. Yet would you go so far as to murder them for the greater good, as penance not only for your trauma, but for the many others who suffered as a result of this person's horrendous, state-approved questioning methods?

This is the pertinent hypothetical at the forefront of the Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi's mind, as he was one of those people who was arrested, placed in custody under spurious charges and made to suffer the gross indignities of physical and psychological torture because he dared to resist the régime. His brilliant new film, *It Was Just an Accident*, extrapolates and dramatises his wavering, post-incarnation thought patterns as he ponders the true value of mortal revenge against his "patriotic" oppressors.

It starts, as so many Panahi films do, in a car, with a man driving his heavily pregnant wife and pre-teen daughter through the night. They hit a stray dog and the car stalls in the middle of nowhere, yet they find a kind man working at a small roadside factory who offers them help.

The car's driver has a prosthetic leg and walks with a distinct squeak, a sound that is heard by and triggers another man loitering on the upstairs floor of the factory named Vahid (Vahid Mobasseri). He enters into a state of frenzied shock and, when the family eventually drives off, he decides to follow them discreetly in his minivan. With the help of some shackles and a shovel, he waits for his moment and then attacks the father on the street for reasons that aren't initially clear. He bundles him into the van and then, with mad-eyed desperation, comes within a hair's breadth of burying his prisoner alive.

He firmly believes that the man with the squeaky limp is the feared jailer known as Peg-Leg, whose actions caused lasting damage to Vahid's body and mind, as well as countless negative knock-on

effects in his tattered family life. But at the very last second, he questions whether this is in fact the right man, and his doubt fuels a road trip around a bustling Tehran in search of corroborators who can positively identify this potential monster.

It's a beautifully written and executed work, one of Panahi's most formally straightforward yet powerful, gripping and generous. As the clock ticks on and the van fills up with folks from all walks of life who also want their pound of flesh, the messiness of life makes itself felt and the simple task at hand becomes more complex as a broader picture of their captor emerges.

Panahi has always been a philosophical and magnanimous filmmaker when it comes to questions of censorship and "what's good for the goose..." violence, often proposing creative, peaceable and poetic solutions. In the case of this new film, it's bracing and a little bit scary to see him shift towards an ambiguous middle ground, suggesting that whimsical diplomacy may no longer be an option in these dark, dark days.

David Jenkins: Little White Lies

Our next screening: February 20 2026

The Venue. 7.30pm

Late Shift (Switzerland/Germany 2024). 12a

Floria, a devoted nurse in a understaffed ER somewhere in Switzerland, works through the demanding late shift and her numerous patients. Despite the pressure, she meticulously tends to a critically ill mother, an elderly patient awaiting a diagnosis, and a high-maintenance private patient. However, a grave error brings her to the brink of collapse, threatening to derail everything. Petra Volpe's compelling hospital drama is anchored by the truly excellent Leonie Benesch as Floria, handling everything that is thrown at her and illustrating why she is one of the rising female stars of modern cinema.