

# It Was Just An Accident movie review: Jafar Pahani's Cannes drama lays bare humans' taste for violence, how it hurts themselves

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It's late in the night, and a family of three, a husband, wife, and their young daughter, is heading back home.

Suddenly, there's a sickening thump, and the car comes to a halt. The man gets out, looks at something on the ground, his face lit by the headlights. We do not see the exact shape or size of the roadkill, but the little girl mentions the death of a dog, the woman justifies it as an act of god, and this little interlude sets the tone for the rest of the film.

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The man behind the wheel stops off at a garage after the accident. We see a mechanic suddenly start to behave strangely, preventing the wife and daughter, who have stopped to use the restroom, from switching on the main light; he is hiding from something or someone connected to the damaged car.

The sense of foreboding that Panahi effortlessly manages to infuse his films with starts building up when the mechanic follows the car, and lies in wait for day to break.

At an opportune moment, he grabs the man, bundles him into his van, and takes off into a deserted spot, where he begins digging a grave.

And just like that, *It Was Just An Accident*, becomes something more. The past comes crowding in. The man who's been trussed up and blindfolded under suspicion of having done tremendous damage to a group of people who have been living under a shadow all these years. As it keeps unfolding, the man's sins keep growing,

The most hurt of them all is the mechanic, and as he goes about gathering the other victims, all of whom have suffered a great deal at the hands of the man now under their control, buried memories come up. One is a wedding photographer, another is the would-be bride, and a third is a man who doesn't seem to have a profession, but is to be found on the streets, exuding aggression.

Pahani's previous film which he filmed in secrecy, *No Bears*, was a masterpiece, which lays out the depth of his own isolation, portraying two villages, a border, and people living under fear. This one isn't as delicately poised, and in places, the film slackens its grip on us.

One of the most moving parts involves the man's pregnant wife and distraught daughter, who are driven to the hospital by this group: they may want revenge, and are enraged enough to want to kill, but when it comes to family, they keep aside their feelings.

The difficulty of women being able to speak about male-generated cruelty, even to their closest ones, is striking. The bride-to-be has been brutalised by their is-he-isn't-he captive, but it takes her

almost an hour into the film to share the details with the groom.

The captive himself, instead of being grateful to his captor for taking his wife to the hospital so that she can be safe while giving birth, yells at him for 'daring to touch his wife', rather than seeing it as a humanist impulse.

There's mention of Syria and the on-going war and limbs having been lost during the conflict.

There's also Panahi's incarceration as one of the most vocal critics of the Iranian regime. Currently, the on-and-off ban on him has been lifted, but as he says, it is still as difficult for him to make his film, and travel with them.

All these threads are woven into the narrative of *It Was Just An Accident*, and the film lays bare the extent to which ordinary people become slaves to the seductive idea of violence, so much so that they don't see how much it can not only hurt other people, but themselves.

There are fewer surprises here, as compared to Panahi's earlier work; some of the humour turns a trifle heavy-handed, but the director does what he does best— capturing the rhythms of life of the ordinary citizens in Iran, as well as those who have been living with trauma.