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For the Love of Iran

People say that it must have been tricky being a girl in repressive Iran. That was mostly not true for us in my childhood. What I remember when we lived there after the birth of my brother in 1938, right up until 1941, is that we were foreigners. We lived on the periphery of the real Iran, and usually on the fringes of the desert.

Those were still feudal times, with little in common with the ruling theocracy of today. Foreigners like my father had come to modernise the country. There was no organised opposition to the changes which Reza Shah himself was sponsoring. The ruler of Iran was sympathetic to German-speaking professionals. My father worked for Danish companies staffed by foreigners who supervised Iranian labourers. What I know about Iran is coloured by the sense I have of my father's itinerant work and the homes we lived in along the expanding railways.

I have many generalised memories and can recall a few anecdotes. Few of them are focused on people. Instead, they reflect how isolated we often were. They are obviously tinted with my mother's romantic love of the place, 'her spiritual home', as she was to remind us over and over again long after we had left the country.

'Nowhere are the cherries so plump and the apricots so delicious,' she would opine later, in middle age. She once put her hand through a flimsy wooden door in frustration when we as teenagers teased her over what we saw as her rose-coloured view of a place we had taken for granted.

In Iran father relished the various engineering challenges that confronted him. There was too much salt in the soil; there were obstacles in tunnels; there were bridges washed away by floods. Under his command worked large teams of locals whose varied dialects he could hardly hope to learn. It was work on a grand scale.

My mother was a true believer in the spiritual beauty of ordinary Iranians in their rural environment. That love she held to her heart. It had been born in the years spanning 1936–41, and was confirmed when she went back for a year in the late 1950s and again during the 1960s. Since then Iran, with much else in the rest of the world, has undergone irreversible change. It is easy to romanticise the past, or to understand it in the light of present-day conditions. But what my brother and I lovingly stored as happy memories must have been influenced by the way both our parents spoke about their time there. What follows is the vintage that I have laid down from a blending of observations gathered in the years between 1938 and 1941.

Except for a number of enduring images, oases of the mind, my recollections of Iran have become generalised impressions, like the shifting skies and the scenes of mountains and desert which, my mother remembered, were like a stage set. You drove towards the mountains and they fanned out as another range appeared. The vast stretches of desert, which we crossed so often by car on poor roads, were dotted with oases. These were stable and coherent places of habitation: perhaps a mud-baked wall, surrounding date palms, flat-roofed houses, a spring. Perhaps there was simply a set of terraced gardens with elaborate irrigation, supporting crops of watermelons and cucumbers.

One place was simply a small field. We came across it by chance, but the feeling of excitement associated with it has remained. We walked through a waterless riverbed, stepping on smooth stones and boulders, and climbed up a steep embankment. It was so steep that I had to be lifted up. But once at the top I stepped into a forest of sunflowers in bloom. At their feet sprawled cucumbers, with their clumps of leaves and tendrils. I cannot explain why suddenly my life seemed full and satisfying. I wanted to stay there forever.

Listening to me talk once again of that special place, my parents asked: 'Don't you remember that we could not get home? That a flash flood suddenly rushed down the riverbed and carried away the car and our

driver?’ I was astonished that I remembered none of this. But I do recall another late afternoon when we came to a flooded river and we could not cross. We were rescued in the twilight by a bus full of people.

My mother confirmed that this was on the very same day, and that the people on the bus were all pilgrims travelling to Mecca. They stank horribly of stale garlic, enough to make us want to faint, she remembered. ‘But they were so happy to help us.’ My parents had obviously concealed from me the tragic death of the driver who had parked father’s car in the dry riverbed.

Some oases were large cities. Beyond, across the stark land the engineers laid roads on difficult layers of salt-impregnated soil. Their workers burrowed tunnels through mountain ranges, and laid railway tracks to open the country to modern ideas. Meanwhile, nomads moved about with their tents, carpets and flocks. Occasionally they set up barriers to progress, creating problems which Rudolf had to solve.

Father adored his work. Mother fell in love with Iran. Nowhere else did the poor accept their fate with such dignity, she thought. ‘Nowhere else could peasants recite the words of their great poets by heart,’ she used to say. Nowhere was silence so large a frame for the sounds of people at work, for hyenas crying like babies, for the bells on the necks of camels that moved in procession from one depot to another.

My own recollections merge with my mother’s deep attachment. Hers was a poetic response, springing from the sense of liberation she felt as a foreigner in this wonderful land. She was not bound by other people’s strictures or any need to conform. Unable to do anything about the terrible feudal situation in which rich landlords ground down the poor, she focused her mind instead on noble peasants whose religion enabled them to live with dignity and hope.

She often repeated these lines from the Iranian poet Hafiz:

If of your worldly goods you are bereft,
And in your store two loaves are left,
Sell one and, for the dole
Buy hyacinths to feed your soul.

This is, of course, a defence of the stoic resignation of the Iranian poor. My mother also sometimes grew melancholy as the wife of a busy engineer, making do on her own during workdays with only young children for company. Poetic romanticism compensated for that loneliness. It was her way of coping.

My brother's and my boredom at being confined in cars for hours on poor roads was made easier by the security we always felt, knowing that we were safe with our confident and loving parents.

One day I was alone with my beloved father. He often took me to work with him in his car because I so much enjoyed climbing and balancing on low scaffolding and riding in the Dressine, the little wagon that ran along railway lines under construction, to check on completed work. Once as we drove down a mountain range, we saw from a distance what we thought was a lake. Then, as we approached and passed it, the mirage turned into an abandoned garden where grape hyacinths competed with grass between crumbling clay walls.

My early childhood was like that surprise: simple and refreshing.

My brother Peter, often with domestic staff, grew up Iranian. I am ashamed now to remember that, on one occasion, I was uppity about them. 'They are only servants, after all!' was my self-defence for some naughtiness. Mother reminded me of my comment years later. Who had given me that patronising impression? Surely not my parents, who allowed Peter to mingle freely. He sat in the kitchen with the cook tasting *sabse polo* (vegetables with rice)—especially if they were shelled broad beans—*baddenyan* (aubergine) or yoghurt. He babbled away in Farsi, as much as German, his first language.

The earth and plants of Iran provide some of my most vivid memories. No nursery-bred beauty has ever surpassed for me the little bright red tulips with black hearts that flowered so briefly in the stony mountains. As an adult I can interpret my fascination. They flowered so well in so many places where no one could see them, buffeted by the wind, in soil too poor for most plants. There was independence and strength in their brief display. This has its corollary in the noble side of the human condition, when people do the right thing without expecting to be noticed.

After rain in Iran, patches of green and tiny scented blooms covered the harsh desert in which nothing soft survived, spread out like a vast carpet. You might suddenly come across desert dwellers, hard as scorpions or, as you rounded the bend of a hill on the back of a donkey, catch the sweet-bitter scent of stands of wild thyme and rosemary growing along the track. Those few shrubs thriving on stony ground still survive in a corner of my mind, beyond a village where the track would spring into life as a creek during the wet season.

In my memories, old Tehran lives, with its cobbled streets and the smell of urine in the gutters, a mixture of poverty and neglect and classy hotels. We sat in these on warm nights in rose gardens beside fountains, and ate delicious pink and white ice-creams from glass goblets on long stems. After one such outing, I became feverish and mother rubbed down my body with pure alcohol.

The Bazaar in Tehran was huge. Its arcades supported moulded ceilings that swept up to an opening through which light entered in shafts. Galleries ran in different directions. The place was always crowded, loud with people's talk and the noises of animals, smelly and very mushy underfoot. Mother bought vegetables and brass, bronze or silver utensils, as well as fabrics. But she also bought her produce from travelling vendors who announced themselves at the house door. Their donkeys were laden with *polo* (rice), *bamia* (okra) or *baddenyan*. I also saw fleet-footed carriers moving down the lane where we lived, delivering whole meals in stacks of white interlocking enamel pots. We ate sheep's milk yoghurt which had been set and was sold in little baked day ramekins. No milkman came and no milk was for sale.

There was one shop with special appeal to me, near our house. It stood on the corner of a wide dusty street and in its window were huge closed glass bowls with sweet cordials that tempted children with their colours: green, yellow, orange, red and even blue. This shopkeeper also sold delicious little bars of nougat with pistachios and the pollen of a lily. And oh, the smell of nan, the flat bread cooked on top of hot stones above glowing charcoal! We caught a whiff of that here and there wherever we travelled, but years later, after we had left, that fragrance drifted unexpectedly, seemingly from nowhere to my nostrils, long before flat bread was sold in our next homeland. Along with the smell of freshly cooked bread I immediately see clay ovens.

Then there were the *Droschken* (horse-drawn carriages), with their animals tapping along the road. We would stop to go inside a shop, where a man on the ground would unwrap the purple paper from a pyramid of compressed sugar and tap it with a little hammer to free the granules. The loose sugar would be carefully weighed on a set of balanced copper scales.

From Tehran we spent an occasional summer holiday at Schimaran in the foothills of the local mountains visible beyond the town. The tallest was Mount Demavend with its pointed, snowy cone.

My father rented a house in a large garden behind a high wall. There were rows of zinnias and a pond from which spotted frogs suddenly appeared. 'You were so worried their colour would wash off,' mother laughed later. Our parents had problems with plagues of cats. These feral animals used to take possession of vacant holiday houses, leaping through air vents into cool rooms when no one was there.

Out in the sun my mother prepared bottles full to the brim with cherries and sugar. These fermented into cherry liqueur. Most wonderful, however, was the very old and gnarled sacred tree at the end of the lane. Every Thursday people came to light candles at the base of its trunk.

My brother was by now taking his first steps in grey home-made felt shoes. 'Soldier boots' my mother called them. She had sewn them with leather soles. She was justly proud of her improvisation, since she had no patterns. She must have made them in the summer of 1939–40.

About that time I saw an airman fall out of the sky.

It was afternoon in Schimaran. Alone in the garden, I looked up to see a bi-plane doing acrobatics high up above our vacation house. The engine was purring as the plane looped. Now he was flying upside down, lying on his back. I watched with fascination, anxious for his safety way up there, but slightly cross at his stupidity. I felt how hard it would be to turn that metal bird back to its normal position.

Then I saw that he could not do it. Silence. A rattle. Deathly silence. The engine had cut out. Then smoke began to pour from the tail as the plane dived rapidly, making an eerie, whining sound. Would it fall into our garden and smash everything to pieces? I ran into the house, calling out. My parents were puzzled. They had heard the sound but had not associated it with an accident.

I pestered them to take me to the wreckage. But no one was permitted to go to the site of the crash for three days. Father said that the man had been in the Iranian Air Force. Practising. When we were allowed to visit the site, we saw only bits of silver metal, too bright in the sun to look at. They were strewn far beyond our house, across a patch of scorched earth. The rest had been carefully cleared away.

I had waited with uneasy curiosity, thinking perhaps I might see the charred corpse. I had never seen anyone dead. I hoped *madly* I would see him. People were forever dying in children's stories, and I wanted to know what it was like.

Some memories lie inside glass cases like objects from past times. Others are like plasticine, to be kneaded into different shapes. Years later I became acquainted with the legend of Icarus, who fell from the sky when his waxen wings melted after he flew too close to the sun. The poet Auden wrote on the theme, describing the oil painting by Pieter Breughel the Elder. The various strands of these interlinked stories and memories are hard to separate. But my father brought my imagination bumping down to earth. The dead man was an Iranian military pilot who had failed to complete a training exercise, he repeated.

During this period in Iran we lived in a number of houses on the fringes of towns or settlements, at Khaladabad, Sharifabad and Karind. Our houses were usually made of mud bricks or adobe given a wash of mud or lime. They were flat-roofed, with large air vents down which the wind whistled. Sometimes these block-like houses had stairs to the roof, for sleeping under nets on a stinking hot night. There was usually a courtyard behind the front wall or behind the house, with plants and some kind of pool.

We were living in Khaladabad when my father celebrated his thirtieth birthday on 3 March 1940. His professional colleagues were invited for the day. Previously they had successfully hunted game, and we ate the delectable meat of gazelle and wild donkey. Our L-shaped house was cooled by a gallery of openings along the patio, serving as both windows and doors.

The sweet whitish meat of wild donkey was served with deliciously roasted potatoes. It was a festive banquet, but I found the adults boring. They drank so much alcohol that my father's Bulgarian colleague slumped across the table and remained immobile. I feared my father would do the same. This spectacle gave me an unpleasant sensation. My father's

spirits always picked up with a few drinks. Of stocky build, he held his alcohol well. But on that occasion I remember he was taken off to bed before me.

Some days Peter and I shared a tin tub masquerading as a boat, and were pushed around in the fetid water of the courtyard pool (*basign*) by grown-ups using long thin poles. I could not swim and feared the boat would overturn.

Behind the orderly house with its pomegranate trees sprawled a neglected orchard, gone completely wild. In this safe domestic jungle I could become an explorer on my own: the call of the wild.

At Sharifabad, in our house on the desolate outskirts of town, we had an orchard of fruit trees and a small vineyard. The best eating fruit was on hand if you climbed an apple tree and bit into green apples that were just beginning to ripen. That walled garden was our shelter. The greenery was so lush I could keep a tortoise as a pet, until one day, after I left it on a table with a bunch of clover before going for my own lunch, it ran away.

In creeks all over Iran we came across huge wrinkled tortoises of great age. Perhaps it was forbidden to slaughter them. If a Muslim man intended to cut down a tree, our mother said, the Koran obliged him first to ask its forgiveness.

We travelled so much. My parents were always exploring, driven by their endless curiosity. Sometimes by the roadside on an open plain, Peter and I would press our ears against telegraph poles, to hear the wires hum. The vegetation on the ranges near the Caspian Sea was so thick it was said tigers could be found there.

We stopped at night wherever we had arrived, never seeking the luxury of a proper destination. Perhaps it was a caravanserai, a hotel or a *chai hane* (a men's tea-house) where special arrangements had to be made for 'mixed' company.

During one long journey we stopped at cotton fields. We had seen the white woolly tufts from afar as we descended towards the mud houses of the town of Natanz. On that same journey we stopped to watch carpet-weaving families in Esphahan and saw the lines on which bundles of burgundy and dark blue wool were hung out to dry, above vats of dye. Pottery was also drying in the sun, and ornate carpets were draped unguarded over rocks. They had been cleaned with black tea.

We also had holidays when we were transported by donkeys and lived in tents, up high in the mountains at Thame, a place not found on foreign maps. I saw butter wrapped in paper lowered by string into a *kanat* (underground irrigation channel) for cooling, deep down where sunlight barely touched the watercress. I heard that a daring thief once stole some by crawling along the subterranean canal.

In northern Iran it was not unusual, after crossing a mountain on a perilous road, to follow a stream down into one of the valleys. I can still see through the windows of my mind a pristine stream, lined with poplars, gurgling over smooth pebbles.

I acquired a special fondness for camels. They bore my adoration generously even when I would leap noisily around them at watering stations. It worried my parents when they saw these bubble-blowing mad things, in sexual heat, but no camel ever harmed me. I was more at risk from humans.

I did not tell my mother for many years how one of her domestic servants, Ibrahim, an Iranian father of twelve children, had one day in the garden tried to get me to massage his erect and naked penis. I was five. I did not even know what that very long sausage sticking out of his trousers was, but I knew instinctively not to do as he asked. I pulled my hand away from it with assertive words: 'No. I don't want to do that!'

He panicked, threatening me with *shaitan* (the Devil) if I told *Hannum* (the woman). Perhaps that is why, among a handful of remembered Farsi words, there lingers the word for Devil. Did this episode cause me to dream of black snakes, over and over again? For a while, later in life, they turned green, before disappearing completely.

Had my parents made me a prude? I recall feeling shame when my father wanted to photograph Peter sitting naked on a chair. I stood between the chair and the camera. I am the only one who remembers why I stood just there. It was not because I wanted to be the star of the picture.

Peter followed Ibrahim, the occasional cook who understood the local dialect, everywhere. I meanwhile listened to endless repetitions of the music records my parents had acquired from a departing Scandinavian engineer. I was enchanted by the picture of the dog on the label listening through a trumpet-shaped ear-piece, labelled His Master's Voice.

A grown-up would wind the gramophone by turning a handle, while a needle on the record magically made music pour forth. Mother was surprised when one night I asked her to send me to sleep by playing again 'that piece of music in which God walks through the room in silver slippers'. At first she did not know what I meant but, by process of elimination, found that I had paid J.S. Bach this supreme compliment.

Classical music was to remain my faithful companion. Since those early days it has re-energised me whenever I am tired, filling me in turn with admiration and joy. I can also argue that my mistake in music in early childhood cut across the anti-Jewish propaganda that was to mark the coming years.

This is how the argument goes. One of the children's songs which I used to like singing when young was Mozart's *Frühlingslied*:

*Komm lieber Mai und mache
Die Bäume wieder grün ...*

And so on. It is a simple song in honour of Spring. I was already an adult when I discovered that one of the lines which I sang, *ein schönes Judenlied* (a beautiful Jewish song), is really *ein schönes Jubellied* (a song of jubilation). Anti-Jewish propaganda never took proper root in my head later on. My parents did not encourage it and besides, I knew that Jewish Germans sang lovely songs, because Mozart had told me so.

My mother carried some of the stock prejudices of her upbringing but my father always corrected her if she ever uttered the misguided statement that Jewish financiers had contributed to Germany's woes and therefore helped the ascent of Nazism. I remember my parents as being cosmopolitan: civil towards and tolerant of strangers.

The Iranian climate and physical environment could present problems for those not used to them. I nearly lost my sight from sandy blight after my father was forced to drive us through a sandstorm. A Russian specialist visiting Tehran saved my sight after I had lived for a terrifying period in total darkness and was put for safety back into a baby's cot.

Peter was intermittently sickly. At one period, all his teeth turned black and began to crumble; he had rickets. Occasionally both of us were infested with parasitic worms. They lay in wait in the dust and on the food we ate in public places. I had yellow jaundice for which my mother's prescribed cure was vitamins from grapes and the exposure of the naked body to

sunlight, accompanied by buckets of cold water poured over you in the open air, if in the privacy of the garden. Mother told me that the cure for tapeworm was to lure it out by pouring warm milk into a chamber pot. When this did not work, she was told to swallow a couple of tablespoons of petrol. Fortunately, our children's worms were less threatening.

One doctor commented that we were particularly susceptible to infections because mother kept us too clean.

Some of the best times at Sharifabad were our visits to the dunes where our mother took us to play, while father worked his long hours. Dunes were everywhere in Iran. They moved imperceptively, leaving wave-like patterns behind them. Sometimes a set of dunes completely covered an *imamsadeh* (holy man's grave), until the wind carried them away. We played at making little houses: the holy man's mausoleum, a mosque, village houses, a tea-house, a caravanserai. They were usually just mounds of sand decorated with bits of wood and stones, but mother's imagination transformed them.

One day a caravan suddenly appeared over the dunes. Mother heard the bells approaching, graduated in tone according to the camels' rank. As the long line of beasts and their keepers passed, laden with goods, she heard in the ringing of these foreign bells something more. She realised that it was Pentecost Sunday at home in Germany, and she began to cry. Pentecost fell in the middle of Spring.

She remembered that the laziest donkey in her homeland would kick his heels in the air when violets appeared in clumps and when fruit trees bloomed all over the land. She had by this time been an expatriate for several years, and had only been back to Germany once since her marriage. The sadness at the core of her happiness as the expatriate wife of a busy engineer may be summed up in an image that has stayed with me. We are walking along a track, probably at Sharifabad, beyond the settlement. It is a mild but grey day, hinting at rain. We children notice pairs of dung beetles with their shimmering green and brown backs pushing huge lumps of sheep dung to their shelter. We follow the track to a weathered wall, stepping through a broken slab and finding ourselves inside a walled orchard, full of high grass. Several trees are covered in white blossoms. They are almonds.

'A group of brides in white,' says my mother.

I approach what I think are blossoms scattered on the grass. As I draw near I see that they are feathers stained with fresh blood. It was probably a fox, the adults explain, that ate a duck.

Later in life that scene in Iran was to find resonance in other metaphors. There was John Shaw Neilson's celebration of the light in the orange tree. And in one of William Blake's *Songs of Experience*, the worm that flies in the night devours with its fierce possessive love the crimson heart of joy of a rose.

Years later, when I was lonely in a foreign boarding school where there was no one with whom I could communicate in my language, I used to bring out these recollections of Iran as one would shuffle a pack of cards. My memories became my friendly ghosts, the companions of my heart. There was little to disturb their pleasurable innocence. Like the faces of people whom I have truly loved in my life, the memory of them is deep and comforting.

These memories of childhood are of a simple, happy day-to-day life. At that early time, life was not about serious human striving, about mental development, the growth of awareness, identity, sexuality, ideals, politics—all those preoccupations of the lives of adults. I had no knowledge of government or of war, no awareness of nationality or politics, nor even a sense of organised religion. My parents had not entered a church with me since my baptism.

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