EDUARDO CARRILLO

The Artist Dreaming of Immortality in the House of His Grandmother, 1990
oil on canvas, 42 x 48 in.

COURTESY COLLECTION OF THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA,
GIFT OF ROBERT KEELER AND THE JOSEPH CHOWNING GALLERY

PAUL SKENAZY

Distant Relations

An American travels to Iran

You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

—Exodus 22:20

This is a love story. It is the story of a month I spent in Iran thirteen years ago—a chapter in my life when doors to another world opened to me and I managed to walk through some of them. It is not enough to call Iran a foreign world; it is distinct from any other country I had visited before. It's not true to call it an exotic world; the cities especially are industrialized, the population well educated. And it is unfair to call it a dangerous world, as I might have myself before I went. What to call it: that is more difficult to say. For now, let's start with the word *family.*

May–June 2003

Before Farnaz and I began living together in 1999, Iran was a news blip: the hostage crisis, Iran-Contra. By 2003, after four years of my getting to know Farnaz and her family, Iran had a more substantial, more confusing, role in my life. It was the country where her grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles were born. It was *Noh Ruz*—Persian New Year—each March equinox; Persian food and massive family get-togethers at Christmas; conversations in Farsi I couldn't understand. In the Bay Area where we lived, it was part of our home life. It was her Persian traditions awkwardly blended with my Jewish celebrations, a sometimes exciting, sometimes dissonant combination of half-practiced beliefs and cultural inheritances.

In 2001 Farnaz went to Iran with her grandmother, mother, and twin sister and brought back stories, kilim, and the desire to return: alone, to live with relatives, study Farsi, and attach herself to the country; and together, to introduce me to this part of her world.

So in April 2003, Farnaz traveled to Iran to stay for five months. She had planned to start her visit in late March but delayed the trip because of the Iraq invasion. I met her in mid-May for a month.

My father's family came from Turkey to the U.S. in 1912, a century ago. Turkish baklava was not the same as Persian baklava. But a trip with my sister to Turkey in 2001 was about all I had to go on to imagine what Iran would be like.

* * *

San Francisco International Airport. I sit toward the back

Liberal politics and love do not exempt me from the fears and formulas news reports construct.

of the gate area. A woman comes in, her head covered in a black shawl that swallows her hair. A hip-length jacket covers her upper body, two children walk beside her. I will learn to call the scarf a *rusari*, the coat a *manteau* to distinguish it from the one-piece cover-all, always-black *chadors* that many, particularly older, women wear in Iran. I see this woman and her children again in the Iran Air departure lounge in Amsterdam. While I sit and wait for that plane to leave, I watch a series of dramatic transformations as one after another fashionable woman in jeans, gold bracelets, necklaces, and earrings, with bright red lipstick, rouged cheeks, and abundant black hair, briefly disappears and returns, the makeup and jewelry gone, hair hidden. Eventually the Iran Air departure lounge is filled with women whose very nondescriptness stands out within the bustling European airport.

* * *

In his State of the Union address in 2002, George W. Bush described Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the "axis of evil." From the U.S. invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003, to the so-called "fall of Baghdad" (April 10) and declaration on May 1 that major combat operations in Iraq were over, there were frequent calls for similar regime change in Iran and for a U.S. military invasion to make that happen.

* * *

There are so many planes of torture where we don't need terrorists to sustain the attack. The unknown takes on valence, fear wears familiar faces.

Much of my life seems to be a process of arming myself against what is OUT THERE, firming up the buttresses, then paying the therapist one to two hundred dollars an hour to let me cry them into rubble every week or two.

* * *

I land at Mehrabad International Airport in Tehran at one in the morning. The steward stands at the door saying goodbye to passengers. Mostly in Farsi, *Khodha hafez*. As I leave he looks at me, "Thank you for flying with us. Have a . . . well, I don't know if you *will* have a good time in Iran."

I wait for my bags amid a hundred strangers in a cramped room with three or four circular luggage drops. Soldiers carrying rifles are stationed at the doors. A huge banner across two-thirds of the hall says in Farsi and English: "If you have fever accompanied by cough, we are waiting you at the airport." The word *waiting* is in bright red. It is the time of the Asian flu scare. ("That whole thing, it was just a plot your American economists designed to destroy trade with Japan and China," Farnaz's Uncle Hossein will rail a few days later.)

The women wear *chadors* or *rusari* and *manteaus*.The men are dressed in white shirts, open at the collar. There are no ties, though I don't notice this absence until days later when on TV a camera pans across the Iranian parliament: all men, all in suits, all in white shirts. With the revolution, ties became associated with the shah and the West. The only men I see in ties during my month of travel are three heavy Russian diplomats touring a minaret in Esfahan, sweating as they try to maneuver themselves down a narrow stairway.

* * *

Liberal politics and love do not exempt me from the fears and formulas news reports construct. I'm Jewish, alarmed by both the rhetoric from Israel about Iran and Iranian calls for the extermination of Israel. Even with the massive migration of Jews after the 1979 revolution, I know Iran still has the largest Jewish population in the Middle East outside Israel itself. One seat in its parliament is reserved for a Jewish representative. Farnaz's mother lives with an Iranian Jew, for whoever's God's sake! Still, I have no idea whether my Jewishnesss will matter in Iran.

Then there's the fact that I am American. I have fantasies of my imperialistic importance, can imagine everything from remarks to body searches, arrest, a sniper attack, a bombing. Spring 2003 is filled with violence. In the weeks before I leave there are two separate synchronized suicide bomb attacks in Riyadh and Casablanca (where the attack includes the bombing of a Jewish community center).

* * *

I stand a head taller than anyone else in the luggage area. I am light skinned, with red hair, wearing a T-shirt. Hossein saw a photo of me and said I should remove my earrings before getting on the plane so I did.

A man approaches, asks me where I am from. America, I tell him. He starts to yell at me: "It is wrong what you are doing in Iraq. Wrong to be there."

I agree with him.

He pulls a rolled-up *Time* magazine from his satchel and waves it in front of me, points to an article about Iran and its history, then hands me the magazine.

I have already read it, I tell him politely, handing it back.

He pushes it into my hands.

"Read again."

He is from Canada, returning to visit relatives.

Farnaz tells me later that she is watching this scene in the waiting room, standing with three or four hundred others staring at TV screens that capture everything in the luggage area. She wonders what I've said that makes the man so angry.

* * *

As we wait for our luggage, the passengers divide into two lines by gender. I wait nervously, as if a character in a Kafka novel about to be arrested for a crime he doesn't know he has committed. When I get to the front, a soldier takes my duffels, opens each of them, rifles his hands through, indicates that I can zip them up. We haven't said a word. He points me toward a slightly raised, curtained area about the size of a telephone booth with drapes serving as doors at both ends. I try to pick up the luggage, but the soldier waves NO with his hands and again points to the booth. I go in. A different soldier enters from the opposite side, leans his rifle against a post, and closes both sets of drapes. He frisks me, working from my ears down to my ankles. He stops at my belt, puts his hands in his pockets and indicates taking everything out of mine. I hold what I have in my hands. He runs his hands along my hips, indicates that I can put the stuff back. He bends down, runs his hands around my ankles and up my legs to just above the knees. Then he stands up.

"American?" he asks.

I nod.

"Wel-come," he says in broken English, opens the drapes on the other side, grabs his rifle, and steps out.

Mersi, I say.

"*Khoda hafez*," he answers, turning back for a moment, with a nod.

My two duffels are waiting for me on a different metal table identical to the one where I left them.

* * *

Because Farnaz and I are not married we cannot kiss in public. It is illegal to touch her. But we do both, the minute I leave customs, protected by the anonymity of the airport. She wears a plain beige hair covering, a beige hip-length jacket that I remember from her brief fashion show for me before she left. We fuss through our reunion, excited and tense in these first moments of rediscovery, as we push through the throngs that crowd the airport to welcome relatives and friends at two in the morning.

In e-mails, Farnaz's mother worried that Farnaz would have trouble registering in a hotel as a woman traveling alone. She didn't. She worried, and Farnaz worried, and passed her worries on to me, about holding hands in a taxi, or walking along a street, or in the park. There were no consequences when we did, but we did not more often than we did.

* * *

The taxi driver is someone Farnaz found the night before when she arrived in Tehran to meet me. He was a journalist before the revolution. His newspaper was banned; there were threats to his life. He no longer writes. He asks if we are thirsty, pulls over and takes a plastic bottle of water from under the hood where it rests out of the way, helps us with our bags, picks us up the next morning when we leave for Esfahan. He is my introduction to *tarof*. How much is

the fare, Farnaz asks. "You cannot repay the pleasure of serving you," the driver murmurs back. "Let me pay you, please." "The honor is mine." On the third round, Farnaz adds a "No *tarof*." He names an impossibly small figure for our long drive across Tehran. (Gas is incredibly cheap; cars insanely expensive.) We replay this ritual regularly everywhere we go.

* * *

In an e-mail, Farnaz told me that I would be arriving on a holiday, the prophet Muhammad's birthday: "Lots of weddings are happening Sunday and Monday because of the good omens it brings." As we drive through the streets, we see cars with cans strung below them, banners hanging out the side windows. We halt at an expressway exit because a party of five or six vehicles is angled across the road, while people shift from one to another. At the center of the circle is a groom in tuxedo (open-necked shirt) and a bride, her skirts covered with a cloak, her head veiled.

We sit next to each other in the cab and secretly slide our fingers together as we drive through the tangle of dark Tehran streets to arrive at Farnaz's Aunt Elham's mother's apartment. Mehri is her name. I have never met this woman before and I will not see her again until I leave Iran four weeks from now. But we are to spend the night here, leave unnecessary luggage. She is excited to see me. She is your plump dream of a grandmother: heavy soft face, warm smile, wide lips, wide nose, hair pulled back. I feel she will forgive everything. Her father was a military officer in the shah's guard, displaced after his downfall. She owns a small two-bedroom apartment somewhere far enough from the main zones of Tehran that the cabdriver had to stop for directions several times on his way just to discover the area of the city where she lived.

One wall of the apartment is filled with portraits of family, parents, her husband now dead a dozen years. It is after two in the morning but Mehri is constantly offering food, and as constantly talking—to Farnaz in Farsi, to me in a hesitant English. There is breaded chicken, dolmas, a salad, greens, *kukuye* (a frittata-like dish made with various greens), cookies, fruit. And of course the ubiquitous yogurt, the more ubiquitous tea, with the tiny lumps of sugar Iranians take between their teeth so the hot tea can melt the granules in their mouths. The apartment creates a warmth that is hard to breathe in, Mehri so intent on helping, so sweet, so talkative, so lonely. Our plates are refilled before we can protest. I cannot eat enough to satisfy her.

* * *

Hossein is the Esfahan uncle, Farnaz's father's burly youngest brother, twenty years my junior. He owns a chain of takeout pizza parlors called Pizza Pizza. He establishes each franchise, then hires and trains family members to manage them. We eat at many across Iran, are entertained by cousin after cousin, at times stay in apartments above or nearby the restaurant that are kept for relatives to use as they travel. He is constantly busy, his cell phone clutched to his ear even as he watches soccer games or pirated U.S. movies on TV or cooks me a welcoming dinner. He and his wife, Elham, vacate their bedroom for our first nights in Esfahan, find us the vacant apartment of a friend on vacation for the rest of our stay in the city.

Hossein and Elham have two daughters: Bahareh, then in middle school, and Sahar, nine. Sahar is studying Iranian crafts and traditions, like the *daf* and *santour*. She is so shy that she won't speak to me, though she loves to provide Farnaz lessons in Farsi. The girls go everywhere in cabs because Hossein fears they might be kidnapped and held for ransom.

* * *

In the years following my visit, Hossein and Elham's daughters leave Iran and are educated in England. Bahareh studies International Health Care Management, Sahar computer programming. Hossein and his wife Elham now live in England, where they own an upscale restaurant. Hossein returns to Iran regularly to maintain his pizza franchises and other investments. In 2014, Bahareh went back to live in Iran and work for a nonprofit, but gave up in frustration, worn down by the conditions. Now she is looking for employment in the U.S.

* * *

My first day in Esfahan, Hossein's wife Elham insists that I sit in the front seat next to her as she drives. Lanes are a farce. Cars line up six and seven abreast at a stoplight, ready to leap forward. Drivers cut in and out, never use turn signals, squeeze through invisible spaces, constantly swerve in front of other cars, back up unexpectedly into the ongoing traffic, or simply drive in reverse for long stretches of highway. I spend the journey with my foot pressed down on a nonexistent brake pedal on the passenger side. When we get out, Elham smiles, tells me I passed the test: did not scream, cry out, beg her to slow down, put my hand over my eyes. It is her way to welcome me into the family.

* * *

Esfahan is known as the city of three *d*'s: *derakht* for trees; *docharkheh*, bicycles; *derayat*, cunning. They say you can't get the better of an Esfahani merchant. A story goes that a merchant welcomes his son into his business. The son tricks his father, steals the business from him, and leaves him bankrupt. When the father discovers the truth, he brags with pride about his son's skills.

* * *

A man stands behind a small cart in the Esfahan bazaar selling clusters of *sabzi khordan*: onion, parsley, basil, tarragon, dill. When we stop to buy some, he offers us several sprigs, refuses our money. We try again, and then again. He turns his face down, gesturing that it is his pleasure.

* * *

Farnaz wants to buy a purse made from old kilim material. She tells me to walk on five or six booths ahead in the bazaar. She buys the purse for four thousand *toman*, or about five dollars. It is exactly like a purse we saw in another shop earlier, which we were told was twenty thousand *toman*, or twenty-five dollars. The Iranian price versus the price for a foreigner. This happens all the time. Usually we just pay more; it seems the right thing to do. When Farnaz and I travel together, we have separate hotel rooms. I pay three to five times more than she does. Museums and mosques that require an entrance fee charge me up to ten times more than Farnaz or any Iranian pays. There is a local logic to this that I admire. I also admire the diasporic interpretation of local that can include people like Farnaz who live thousands of miles away in another country.

* * *

One night Farnaz and I are standing, lost, in an alley just outside the main square and bazaar in Esfahan. An older couple in their sixties walks by, holding hands. The man speaks a little English. He and his wife walk more than a mile out of their way to help us get where we are headed. He has a brother in Tennessee; a nephew is about to be married. He asks us what he might send them. A copper plate or bowl? A kilim or rug? Farnaz suggests. They thank us as if it is we who have done them a favor.

* * *

Hossein's apartment is across the road from the Zayandeh River, a wide body of water that is famous for its ancient pedestrian bridges. Farnaz tells me that *zayandeh* means "something that breathes," and the riverbanks seem to offer Esfahanis a different air than the rest of the densely populated city. The riverbanks are an endless park filled with walkers, picnickers, teenagers. Families descend with a blanket or rug, large bags of food, a brazier or propane stove. Children rush around in groups throwing balls, chasing each other. People sit at the edge of the river after work,

On holidays, the riverbanks overflow with people who occupy each inch of grass, construct tents alongside their cars on the sidewalks. They seem to possess this public space in ways Americans do not.

walk arm in arm across the bridges, fill open-air teahouses. On holidays, the riverbanks overflow with people who occupy each inch of grass, construct tents alongside their cars on the sidewalks. They seem to possess this public space in ways Americans do not.

* * *

Before she left for Iran, Farnaz and I started imagining a commitment ceremony. The talk continued in phone calls and e-mails until I arrived. I recall our phone calls and look back at e-mails from that first month she was away and am startled by how tentative many are, appealing for clarification of one phrase or another, reassurance. I look back now and wonder whether that impulse to have a formal ceremony for family and friends was because of that insecurity or despite it. In Esfahan, Farnaz and I go to a jeweler near the river with Elham, who serves as interpreter and bargainer.

* * *

Divisions of public and private: Once inside, the women in Hossein and Elham's world remove their *rusaris* and *manteaus*. They offer us liquor they've brought back from Dubai. Elham keeps a head scarf and wrap by the door to cover herself before she opens it to a stranger.

* * *

We enter what we think is a gift shop at Aramgah-e Shah Ne'matollah Vali, the tomb of a Sufi dervish in Mahan. It is mostly a bookstore: some pens on display, a wider range of books than I've seen through most of the country (translations of Pasternak, Hemingway, Fitzgerald into Farsi). Farnaz buys some postcards and the man behind the counter, who looks to be a college-age student, with a book open on his lap, asks her the usual questions: where she is from, does she have family in Iran, where did she learn to speak Farsi. As he hands her change, he gives her two key rings wrapped in cellophane. They have a plastic square at the end of the chain with a photograph of the flower-strewn courtyard of the tomb on one side and the gardens and pools of the Bagh-e Shahzadeh, the other sight people come to see in Mahan, on the other. "To remember us," he says to Farnaz.

* * *

We are in a cab in Yazd heading to our hotel. After a brief conversation in Farsi with Farnaz about the dismal state of Iranian life, the driver insists that we must come home with him. He ushers us into a small square room with no furniture, pillows lining the walls, where he sits us down while he and his wife prepare tea and sweets. We rise to greet his wife and daughter. His wife retired as a nurse but has resumed her nursing to help pay the bills. One son is an electrical engineer who can't find a job. Another son is a microbiologist who can't find a job. The oldest daughter is away at college studying museum restoration. We meet their fourth child, a girl in high school who speaks English. I offer my hand to say hello. She moves both of hers behind her back because she and I cannot touch. She explains that her parents are into politics because they knew the world before the revolution; she and her peers are not. She tells us she wants a life that would allow her to combine her Muslim faith with a career. She tells us she wants to travel the world.

* * *

An e-mail to a friend early in the trip:

Farnaz is wonderfully, amazingly (can I say sometimes to me a bit alarmingly) settled into this world though she says she feels her own separateness from it as well. It is moving to see her again. It's a struggle to answer the welcomes of this place; I often find myself pulling back in fear and defensiveness. Farnaz is surprised and disappointed in my hesitations, I'm annoyed that she seems to assume I should be able to enter her life here more immediately and enthusiastically.

* * *

Farnaz and I stand in a large square in Yazd. A group of six men in army uniforms rush up and know barely enough English to find out we are American. They insist on taking their picture with me. As Farnaz photographs us, they switch positions, so each can stand next to me, his arm around my shoulder. Then they shake my hand and move on.

* * *

We settle into a small pension in Bam, a dusty town in southeastern Iran famous for its mud brick citadel, some of which dates back two thousand years. Farnaz is tired, and I want a Coke, so she sends me off to search for a vendor with brief instructions on how to ask and pay in Farsi. As I walk along, alone for the first time in two weeks, a little boy giggles a yelled "'ello" from a metal doorway across a wide, unpaved street. He rushes into the shadows of a hallway when I turn to him and yell hello back. An instant later, he emerges again, this time surrounded by three playmates who have been lurking in the shadows. All of them, in a syncopated chorus, call out their "'ello" to me where I've stopped across the dusty thoroughfare to look at them, huddled below the metal grates on the windows of an apartment building. I answer back again, the street and passing cars intruding between us. Is it friendship or estrangement that I feel when I hear these greetings, the hollered "'ello," "'ey English," "'ey you," "'ey mister," "Where you from?" They are constant, oddly inviting and distancing.

* * *

Saeid is the Mashhad uncle, Farnaz's mother's brother. Mashhad is Iran's holiest city, visited by millions of pilgrims annually because its shrine houses the tomb of Imam Reza, the eighth imam of the Shiite tradition. Because it is the city most distant from the Iraq border, and so was the safest urban area during the Iraq-Iran war, the population increased fourfold in the 1980s to over two million people. The Holy Shrine is at the center of the city, much of it inaccessible to non-Muslims like me, encircled by city thoroughfares, with an eight-lane highway running directly below the shrine, so there is traffic noise in the area day and night. I write a friend: "Masshad is a world of *chadors* and faith, pilgrims and holiness; of too many people, too much poverty, too many unmet desires. The Mullahs have the same problems crossing the street as everyone else."

Saeid is an engineer, in charge of factory efficiency for a fruit juice company that sells juice combinations—banana, mango, and orange; apple, strawberry, and pear––in foil squeeze containers. One daughter lives in Lausanne where she teaches computer technology after completing her degree in France; his other daughter is a dentist in New Jersey. Saeid also designs and makes his own furniture in a tiny shop below his house. The house has little of the heavy and ornate dark wood furnishings so constant in the upper-middle-class homes in this country; instead, he and his wife, Monir, occupy an open living room, barely demarcated between a TV and sitting nook, a dining area, and a circle of chairs around a tiny fireplace. His lean face has the same kind of openness. It is startlingly asymmetrical, the mouth leaning down to the right, the nose making a turn to the left, the eyes not quite aligned in height. It is a warm face, but certainly not beautiful. Attentive; rugged if you are searching for a compliment, amiable if that word means anything. On Fridays in the late spring and summer he and Monir rise at five in the morning to beat the heat, pack food and camp stove and water, and drive out of town to hike for three or four hours. At home Saeid whistles, one song or another, all day ("Strangers in the Night" most often during my stay). When he hikes, he switches to bird calls. And he loves to tell jokes, which he struggles to say properly for me in English. There is seldom a pretext, but after a few days I start to recognize the preambles, like bars of music establishing a key: There was this man . . . , I once heard of a boy . . . , Here's something I wondered about . . . , There's a story I heard about an Iranian man who goes to America . . .

> . . . and rents an apartment. The apartment is filled with cockroaches. But because he can't speak English very well, he doesn't know how to explain this to his landlord. So he knocks on the landlord's door and tries to explain by pointing here and there and

Mashhad is a world of chadors and faith, pilgrims and holiness, of too many people, too much poverty, too many unmet desires.

When we lose something, Persians say we lost it instead of our head.

making crawling motions with his hands and curling his back up.

The landlord is sympathetic but doesn't understand. Finally he takes the Iranian man by the elbow and points him upstairs. They go to the apartment so he can see what is wrong. When they go in, the Iranian immediately rushes to his dresser, opens a drawer, and points.

The landlord looks in and sees six huge cockroaches crawling all over the poor man's clothes.

"Jesus!" the landlord exclaims.

"Yes," the Iranian says, thumping the top of the dresser, "Everywhere Jesus!"

* * *

June 4, 2003, is a national holiday in Iran commemorating Khomeini's death fourteen years before. "They are still crying," Monir says, irritated, about some women we pass sitting on a stone wall along the road as we return home from an early morning hike.

* * *

Farnaz discovers that her Olympus camera is missing. She retraces her days; it must have been stolen in the airport in Mashhad. She had the camera when she left the plane from Kerman, the camera case at the top of a plastic bag of carry-on items. It sat on the baggage cart while we waited for the luggage to come off the plane. We turned around, both of us at once, to greet Saeid and Monir as they rushed toward us. We turned back. This story fits the evidence; we develop it into our theft narrative. As the search becomes more and more frantic, Saeid and Monir tell Farnaz, "When we lose something, Persians say we lost it instead of our head."

* * *

Farnaz, Saeid, Monir, and I drive to Kalat, a mountainous area in the countryside about 150 kilometers outside Mashhad, in eastern Iran near the Pakistan and Afghanistan borders. The idea is a peaceful day in a valley fronted by the Hezar Masjed ("thousand mosques") Mountains—a series of peaks that all resemble the domes of mosques. On the way we picnic alongside the road in a field of red poppies. After lunch we are flagged down as we pass an army outpost. We wait as soldiers consult in a small brick building behind metal fencing; eventually we are told to drive on. Monir assumes we are stopped because someone reported that she had her hair blowing back in the breeze while we were driving, or that we were watched when we picnicked earlier on the hillside at the top of the pass and she and Farnaz removed their *rusaris*.

The road dips through water as we enter a long valley where we park, then walk the edge of the river to a massive series of waterfalls. Hundreds of people—parents, children, old men and women—crowd into the falls. Slippery rusted metal stairways have been cut into the rocks to help people climb up from the river to the higher falls, where they perch while others clamber around them, yelling at friends below, letting the cold streams push across their laps.

We climb up with the rest, between older women in their seventies and eighties in full black *chadors* and children who deliberately slip on the ladders so they can fall into the water. The elders have someone from their families holding their hands. The skirts of their *chadors* are soaked up to their thighs, higher. Other, younger women clamber up wearing jeans, their hands in thin white gloves, in case they need to reach out for support to a male hand not from their own family.

Wet and cool, we move to the shore, near a domed clay bread oven angled into the ground like a huge gourd. A woman makes flat rounds of bread dough that she hands to a man tending the fire. He takes the round loaves and slaps them against the insides of the oven. The heat glues the dough to the clay sides, where they brown from the fire in two or three minutes. The man scoops one out, replaces it with a fresh piece of dough, and offers the flatbread to the next customer. They make two kinds: a pizza-like crisp bread and a sweet bread, with milk, sugar, honey, and turmeric, which gives it a pale yellow color. It costs next to nothing: fifty *toman* for the regular rounds, two hundred for the sweet ones; two hundred *toman* is twenty-five cents.

Farnaz, her aunt, and her uncle wait in a long line. I stand to the side, taking a photo of the riverbank below. A young man dressed in jeans comes up to me, carrying a rifle in his left hand.

I nod to him; we saw him earlier when he helped us cross a stream.

He tears off a chunk of bread and offers it to me. *Mersi*, I say.

"Hello. How are you? Where you from?"

America.

"I speak a little."

Where did you learn?

"In school. University. Engineering. Electric."

You like school?

Shrug. "It is school."

You live in Mashhad?

"Yes. All life, Mashhad. You know?"

A little. My wife's uncle and aunt live there.

He looks at me, unsure.

Dayi, *khale*, I offer two words I learned last week. He smiles when I point them out.

"You like park?"

Yes, and the waterfalls. I point to my wet pants, my wet shirt, make signs of water flowing over me.

"Ah, *ab-shar*."

Ab-shar, "waterfall," yes.

"You see Iran? Where go?"

I list city names: Esfahan, Yazd, Kerman, Bam.

"I no."

Pause.

"You like Mashhad?" he asks me.

I didn't; it lacked the river, the bridges, the public parks of Esfahan. I like the countryside where we are now, I say. I like how everyone is out in parks on holidays. Picnics. Bread. Tea.

"Places like this America?"

Yes, lots of parks.

We'd come to the end of our mutual vocabulary.

He holds out his rifle.

"You want try?"

No, thank you. Is it yours?

He nods.

Where did you learn to shoot?

"Army. Required. I learn to shoot."

He picks up his rifle and aims it across the river.

"You want try?"

No. I don't like guns.

Shrug. "Just guns."

Farnaz comes by with bread, and a salaam. They talk in Farsi. I reach for the bread and offer him some. He takes it, still holding the rifle.

* * *

The Kerman Airport is new. Panes of glass across the front. Huge pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei drape one sidewall. Farnaz and I find seats in the waiting room near a thin man reading a newspaper with one hand while the other absentmindedly moves bead after bead along a full-length *tazbih* (a string of thirty-three or, in this case, ninety-nine, beads carried both casually as worry beads and also as prayer beads). He glances over as we talk, asks us in English where we are from, moves to the vacant seat next to me.

"I work Lahijan, irrigation. I live Mashhad. Monday to Rasht and Lahijan, sometimes Kerman, like now. Friday back Mashhad. Engineer, make canals."

He is helping create a network of concrete pipelines to facilitate water movement and enable wet areas of the country to contribute their overflow to the drier sectors.

"I live Rasht in government apartment. Nice, but miss family."

He is slim, polite, formal, in khaki slacks and a pale-green sports jacket, clean shaven. He sits upright, almost soldierly, with no movement at all save his left hand, extended at an angle from the elbow, where the beads jump swiftly through his fingers. He speaks English slowly but clearly.

"I live in U.S. 1970 to 1975, a little later. Civil engineering student, University of Texas, Dallas. I remember time well. Happy time for me. I was also Los Angeles three weeks. UCLA. In meetings and conferences about shah. I don't know how to say about this. I have not used my English for many year. We were trying to do what we thought was revolutionary work. It was our foolishness."

Why foolishness, we ask.

"Before the revolution, we were all better off, all of us. I feel guilty for everything that is now. This is fascism.

They killed thousands and thousands. Thousands of people. I don't know how to call them: people who were in groups in politics. They just killed them, all of them."

A moment of quiet, though the beads don't stop.

"We all hate regime. All the people. I think 95 percent of the people hate. We are hoping for the Americans. We don't want another country occupying but it would be better than now. We want something different. Me. Some of us. Everyone I talk to. We wish Bush would come Iran."

There are a lot of us in the U.S. who don't want Bush or our troops to go anywhere, we tell him. There are a lot of us who don't like Bush.

"No. Bush good, very good. He is for people, not government. I have even heard people say he is lost imam. You know about imam? Mahdi? I was in taxi a day ago and the driver was saying he and his friends think Bush is twelfth imam."

We have nothing to say to this. It is not a new message, this hope that America will deliver Iran from its religious rulers. We've heard it in taxis, in quick whispers in the bazaars while a vendor wraps up something we've bought. We've heard it in long tirades against the government in hotel restaurants, in litanies of personal woe. We've heard it thrown to us across streets as we walked. A few days later, as I wander through the small mountain village of Masuleh, two workmen look up from stuccoing the front wall of a house and ask me, "Where you from?" America. "America!" they exclaim. "Bush good, Bush good. Bush come!" We have nothing to say to all of this, after spending March and early April walking streets to protest the Iraq invasion.

There is a pause.

"Is there a way to find people in U.S.? If you don't know where they are?"

Sometimes, yes, we answer. We suggest a web search, Google. Does he have a computer?

He doesn't work much with computers but his grown son from a first marriage does.

Who is it that you want to find?

"I lived with a woman, also a student Texas. Bonita Smith. Lived together two years. I go back to Iran to help the revolution. We write and then stop. I try to write, to call. No answer on phone number. No letters back, not right address I think. I still remember phone."

He rattles off an American phone number complete with area code. I look up her name when I come home. I don't find much. Smith is not an easy last name to research.

* * *

In my last week in Iran, Farnaz and I are sitting in BOOF, a fast food restaurant in the northern city of Rasht. Over our sandwiches, she says to me: "You know what I think is the most important lesson Iran has to teach you?" I have been thinking about lessons, in so many words, for a while, as if a story ever ends or fables need punch lines. "It's how to let others do things for you."

The simple, irreducible fact of generosity: nothing is expected in exchange. The world is not reciprocal. I can take the kindness personally (Her family likes me!) or impersonally (This is how you treat guests, strangers.). Both ways I count and don't count. Taking what someone offers assumes you feel comfortable not knowing what comes next, that you deserve their kindness. I come from a trade and barter family, where you repay kindnesses, where love comes with a price. Not knowing, deserving: I've been absorbing both inconceivable concepts each morning with my feta and *sabzi*.

Kindness seems as much a part of the blood of the Iranians I've met as tea and sugar. I know this isn't always true: Farnaz has relatives who are thoughtless, impatient, self-focused; who can't see beyond their own needs; who speak to me only as a convenient opportunity to chatter on about themselves.

Generosity as just generosity, a way of life, with no meaning beyond itself. Simple, foolhardy in some literal sense of that word. In Rasht, we are welcomed by Alireza, a distant cousin. "It is nothing," he says again and again when we try to thank him, turning the word *nothing* into a long and rolling song: "nuuuthinnng." "No problem," he says, taking us across town to meals in the middle of the day; taking off a day of work to drive us to a mountain village; providing us with an apartment to stay in, water and tea, drinks and dinners. "It is nothing, nothing at all."

Maybe it is nothing at all. People do and do for me in ways I don't expect, can't repay; in ways that are not always apparent, that don't always turn out well. And many times do.

* * *

Farnaz and I go with Elham to pick up our rings: mine a wide band of white gold, hers two thin bands, one of small inlaid diamonds, its mate a plain band of white gold. We love wearing them, though all three are too large and need resizing.

* * *

On our last night in Esfahan, Farnaz and I leave Hossein's apartment to walk through the park along the river to a tearoom, which is not a room but a flat slab of wood, a raft along the riverfront, attached by a plank walkway to land. I sip tea, Farnaz slurps on the *galyan*, or water pipe. I buy some elephant ears (large *palmiers*) as we leave from a little kiosk selling desserts: a last taste of the country. We've had them before, just once, in the bazaar here in Esfahan: honeyed, sugared, seared in fat. They remind me of a dish my Turkish grandmother would make on occasion that we called Cracker Jacks when I was a child growing up in Chicago.

We walk along the river back to the Si-o-Seh Pol, or "Bridge of Thirty-Three Arches," built around 1600. We cross it into the sunset, watching the light behind us change as the sun turns the bricks of the bridge a deep crimson before they move back into shadow and return to their pale brown. The sky darkens from a flat blue to purple, the flies swarm.

The bridge is crowded, the banks full of people. It is a Friday after all: holiday, holy day, family day, friend day. The end of the day: the hours of snacks and talk and parks. Men are walking arm in arm with other men; women with women—a sight I've become familiar with over the weeks. *Rusaris* are set at an angle and pulled back from the face and hair, bits of vanity amid the strict dress codes. We turn to walk back across the bridge in the other direction, watching the crowds of people, looking down on the two teahouses under the bridge.

This is what I now know, familiarly, as the usual crowds, the large crowds, the Friday crowds; what I now know, familiarly, as the usual men and boys sitting in the arches and on little folding benches selling shirts, selling fortunes, selling knives and combs. What I now know as the driving energy of the street, the elbowing and talk that eventually so overwhelms my defenses that I give up to it, come to relish it and desire it. All that proximity, dodging

Kindness seems as much a part of the blood of the Iranians I've met as tea and sugar.

along sidewalks carrying a bread under one arm or a package gripped by plastic handles hanging from the other, the watching eyes and the rub of shoulders as you pass, that lack of protective space we seem to crave in the U.S.

Farnaz notices what is always true of us as we walk:

"It's amazing how everyone stares."

Do they do that when you walk alone? I ask her.

"Yes, but not as much, not everyone. They sometimes stare and then do a double take and look at me and think I am a foreigner, and then decide maybe I am Iranian, like they're not sure.

"But when it's the two of us, it's all the time."

* * *

Back to Tehran and Mehri's the night I am to leave. Sahar is there visiting her grandmother. She still has never said a word to me. By the end of the night, however, she is helping me as I tie up the larger kilim for travel. I tell her in English to cut string of a certain length or show her the length with my finger. She cuts the string, walks to the middle of the room to hand the length to me, then returns to the couch where she sits next to Farnaz, who holds her hand.

* * *

When I'm moved, I tend to burst into tears. I cry often my last days in Iran. More often I start to well up and fend the tears off, as if resisting a virus before it takes hold. I pull my eyelids tight, squeeze my eyes behind them.

I try to say goodbye to Saeid at the table in his backyard and find that I can't. I know that if I try to speak I'll start

In January 2016, the U.S. lifts economic sanctions against Iran. U.S. tourism is expected to soar in the next years.

to cry. And somehow I'm not supposed to. I'm fifty-eight after all, Saeid is a formal sixty-two; we're the men of the family, as the saying goes.

My departure tears my heart out. Looking back, I understand that the moment has no real objective correlative. I've spent only a week with Saeid. I don't know him well enough to sit comfortably in a room to talk or not talk for an hour. However much we *might* say, we have so little we *can* say. Reaction exceeds situation. The event stands for something else: loss, departure, absence; a distance that no longer exists; an intimacy that can't be measured by the hours we've spent together.

2016

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.
—Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr

Show me a bad that leaves and
a good that comes in place of it.
—Iranian saying

Tehran has a new airport. Mehrabad, where I landed, was replaced in 2004 by Tehran Imam Khomeini International Airport (IKA), thirty kilometers southwest. The liberal Mohammad Khatami, a reformist president, was replaced in 2005 by the ultraconservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

In June 2003, shortly after I left, Iran erupted in the largest antigovernment demonstrations in four years. The unrest began with a rally by a few hundred students at Tehran University, but appeals by dissident Iranian satellite stations in Los Angeles led thousands of other Iranians to join the protests, which spread to other major Iranian cities. These and other, more recent demonstrations, have done little to change the political power structure inside Iran.

Less than six months after our visit to Bam, on December 26, 2003, a magnitude 6.6 earthquake centered near Kerman destroyed much of the citadel and most of the city, where many buildings were built of the same mud brick used in the citadel twenty centuries before. More than twenty-six thousand people were killed, another thirty thousand were left homeless. The town has slowly been rebuilt, but the citadel itself is no longer what it was.

* * *

In late 2007, Farnaz and I leave the U.S. to travel for eight months. We hope to include a month or more's stay in Iran as part of the journey. But diplomatic relations are far worse than in 2003. Economic sanctions are in place. Discussions about Iran's nuclear facilities are at a standstill. We try online sources, speak on the phone with travel agents and government officials, solicit the help of relatives. After months of unsuccessful attempts, we give up.

* * *

In December 2015, Congress approves a new Visa Waiver Program that requires anyone who is a national of Iran (or Syria, Iraq, Sudan), or who has traveled to any of these countries in the last five years, to apply for a visa to visit the U.S. This involves European citizens as well as those from Middle Eastern countries. The law essentially restricts the free passage to the U.S. for Hossein, Elham, their children, and many other Iranians.

In January 2016, the U.S. lifts economic sanctions against Iran. U.S. tourism is expected to soar in the next years.

* * *

Farnaz e-mails me shortly after I leave Iran:

> I love my ring. Funny, telling story: my mom asked what it looked like. And then she said, "Well, do you know how many carats it is, or did you get a receipt or anything for it?" And I said, Uh, no?
>
> She: You didn't want to know how many carats it was?
>
> Me: Uh, no?
>
> She: Well, if you go back to Esfahan, maybe you can just go in and ask him to give you something that says it on there. You might want to know.
>
> This all makes cultural sense to me: how much women need to know the value of gifts and property they receive from their own family/ husband/ husband's family so they know they have those things to count on if they need to sell them. It isn't JUST a material desire to know the value of their jewelry that my mother and grandmother perpetuate. I think my mother thinks, well, if you ever need or want to sell it, don't you want to know how much it's worth? It contributes to a sense of self-sustenance.
>
> I hope that story didn't depress you—it was more an informative anecdote than any reflection of my own buying into the counting/pricing stuff (as you probably already know about me).

* * *

I write Farnaz an e-mail on the plane home:

> Already the gestures of people in the streets disappear—that swagger of the young men as they walk together, stand along a roadside or on the sidewalk. I think of Yazd especially, where Imam Khomeini Street was lined with men, young and old, clustered in groups at corners and mid-street, sometimes around a brewing teapot or in front of a kebab stand and sometimes not, a cheap *tazbih* dangling from one hand, swinging round and round, or the beads sifting through their fingers in ones or twos, a day or two's growth of rough beard on their faces, sharp creases often along the cheekbones, the clothes soiled grays and browns and beiges, the black shoes or sandals dusted over with the omnipresent dirt and grime of the streets.
>
> And you, strange to me after a month away, familiar as rain. The red poppy fields on the way to Kalat that day with Monir and Saeid: late spring, the sun and heat, the pleasure of the feta and the bread and *sabzi*. Sitting there, the four of us, you rising occasionally to take a photo of the Thousand Mosque Mountains, backdrop to our roadside picnic. Is it our open hearts that rouse the poppies or do the poppies open the heart?

* * *

This is a love story, across cultures, about a month when I met a woman I loved and didn't know I didn't know. About fears that I would feel alien among her relatives, fears that I might disappear into this family, or land, or both. Farnaz and I married in 2010, gave each other our rings once again, sure this time that they fit.

Paul Skenazy grew up on the north side of Chicago on overcooked vegetables and the failures of the Chicago Cubs. After four years at the University of Chicago, Skenazy moved on to Stanford for graduate school, better weather, and the Sixties. He taught at UC Santa Cruz for three decades, wrote critical books, articles and book reviews, and raised three children. For the last decade he has been writing novels, stories, and essays while resigned to the failures of the Oakland Athletics.