

CHAPTER ONE

IRAN

THE LAND OF POEMS, ROSES, NIGHTINGALES, AND MULLAHS

Ahvaz, then a town made of mud brick with only two paved streets, is my birthplace. In the summer, the thermometer would soar above 130 degrees. Winds blew dust from the Arabian Peninsula and brought intolerable humidity. The summer inferno lasted six to seven months. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I used to take my tee shirt off, wring it out, and put it back on again. Many nights I still dream of my school days and the beautiful Armenian girl next door who always smiled, shyly turned her eyes to the ground, and quickly went inside. In the first few days of spring, vacationers came from all over the country to enjoy the warm weather and celebrate the Persian New Year. I always dreaded the goodbyes at the railroad station when my friends left for cooler places and the town got almost empty.

When WWII came to Ahvaz, I was only seven years old. I heard the thunder, and I saw black, donut-shaped puffs smoke in the sky. Later, I learned that it was antiaircraft fire. Despite my mother's plea, I went up on the rooftop and watched the dogfight between Iranian and British planes. The fighter planes were flying much too low. Some flew over our house, missing it by just a few feet; some loose bricks fell and almost hit my aunt. The petrified women all gathered in one corner and clung

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to each other. One young newlywed bride screamed uncontrollably and wet herself. I heard an Iranian plane go down into the Karun River just a block from my house. By the time I got there it was all over, and I did not see anything. In fact, the war was over. The whole war lasted less than an hour. Next day I saw some Indian, British, and American soldiers march by our houses. Even though the troops showed no sign of hostility, most grownups stayed inside. Only the kids lined up on the streets. Some American soldiers threw chewing gum into the crowd, and the kids jumped up and down for joy.

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Some of my best childhood memories are of visiting my grandfather, who lived in a farming town called Ramhormoz, which represented centuries-old, genuine Persian life. In the summer, when school was out, my father would put me on a bus and send me to Ramhormoz.

The little town, approximately sixty miles from Ahvaz, was a whole day's drive back in the mid-1940s and early '50s. Besides negotiating the unpaved roads, the driver stopped at individual houses along the way to pick up travelers. Once, we had to wait three hours for a mullah to get back from the mosque and pack. Later on, I learned that mullahs traveled free.

My grandfather was a likable, henna-bearded old man with a great sense of humor. He stuttered a little, but that never stopped him from telling a good joke. In his humorous stories, he always showed his dislike and suspicion of religious leaders, the Arab Iranians. I was too young to understand his stories and pointed jokes.

One day my grandfather sat me on a mule behind him, and we went more than an hour's ride to a small mud and bamboo hut where some family lived. The long trip tired me. A woman dressed in Lurestani costume put a large straw mat down and some pillows to lean on. A young woman, around eighteen years of age, brought a tray of tea and dates. She had a pretty

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face, and a head covering with silver coins dangled around her forehead. After salaam greetings, she nervously set the tray in front of us, and my grandfather gave her a good buyer's look, the same look he had when he bought a mule, two cows, and a goat once. But before he had a chance to say anything, she left, partly, I think, because she was shy and tense. My grandfather had waited too long to speak, and an attack of stutters did not help much.

After some talk and drinking tea with the family, we left, but not before Grandfather managed to slip a twenty-toman note under the pillow. I did not understand why. On the way back, I kept thinking maybe the place was a teahouse and he was paying for the tea and the sweets. Next summer, when I visited my grandfather, I saw the same young woman there. She had become Grandfather's youngest wife. I guess slipping some money under the pillow indicated a nuptial arrangement. They had a daughter and two good-looking boys. My grandfather was in his sixties when they got married. I think his intention was to marry a helping hand for the farm, rather than hire one.

RELIGIOUS MEMORIES

I was eight years old when I had my first contact with my religion of Islam. My father was a devout Muslim. In addition to his normal daily prayers and duties, once a month, he hosted a religious ceremony called *Rozekhaani* (a recitative and narrative of the tragedy that befell Shi'ite imam Hussein at Karbala, Iraq, in 680 CE) on summer evenings outdoors in our courtyard. My job that day was to water down our small, dusty courtyard so it would be cool and clean that evening. Then I had to cover the ground with worn-out carpets, kilims, and straw mats called *hasir*. I also helped my mother with the partition she had to make for the women, by running a rope from one point in the yard to another and draping a couple of sheets over it.

My chief duty that night was to serve tea and sweets when the guests arrived. The traditional sweets on these occasions were dates and halvah, a Middle Eastern confection made from crushed sesame seeds and honey. Halvah is very popular with mullahs, whom people jokingly referred to as halvah-eaters. They were also called less-complimentary names.

Speaking of halvah, as a preadolescent I used to sell cookies and halvah after school and in the summer. Halvah was a best-seller. However, it came in a tray open and unwrapped, which, in the summer, presented a challenge to keep flies away from the uncovered tray. One hot afternoon I went to my usual supplier for more halvah. He was taking his customary afternoon siesta. On the counter right in front of the store, I saw a large tray of black halvah. Since it did not look like the usual golden brown color, I was curious as to how a black halvah tastes. As I reached out to take a small piece, suddenly, a cloud of thick black flies rose from the tray and made an awful sound only to settle a foot away. The sudden noise that sounded more like a squadron of helicopters flying overhead waked the owner. He opened his eyes and shouted, "Why did you do that?" He was very upset, and I did not know why, "Go away," he said angrily, "don't you see these flies already eat and were taking their afternoon nap? You waked them up and scared them away. Thanks to you, now a set of new hungry flies would take their places and eat more of my halvahs."

Because we had no electricity, lanterns were used to light the house. On Rozekhaani nights, we would light a lantern called a Primus. I had to light and pump the Primus until my little thumb grew numb.

Our neighbor's ten-year-old son, Jamshid, would also come a little early to help us with the chores. Jamshid was old enough so that he could no longer sit on the women's side, while I could still visit both sides. Jamshid did not care for the ceremony and was not very much help. Sometimes he would grab a handful of sweets and dash out of the door before the guests

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would arrive, beginning at sundown. Some would only stay for the good things to eat and leave before the sermon. Some professional mourners would show up regularly but display little interest in the object of the gathering.

The mullah, akhond, or Arab Iranian, as I call Shiite clerics interchangeably throughout this book, would sometimes arrive more than two hours late. Our akhond was rotund, with a bright hennaed face. He wore a cloak and a large turban, and for a belt around his large belly, he had a rolled-up white bedsheet. In the Persia of my days, being fat was a sign of prosperity, health, wealth, and position. My young uncle made up a poem about our fat mullah. It went like this;

“A tummy appeared
from around the corner;
a day later,
our mullah arrived.”

He would hold a set of tasbih, rosary beads, in his right hand, hurry to his usual corner spot, and devour his dinner. He was the only one to eat. Early in the day, my mother would cook his usual meal, a whole chicken with rice and trimmings. He had strange table manners. He would eat fast, with an unusual noise, like that of hyenas fighting over a kill. As he walked toward the *mambar* (pulpit) with his mouth half open, he would make a cowlike chewing motion.

Because I was too small to understand the sermon in Arabic, I lost interest, got restless, and could not sit still. I would get up, walk around, and pay no attention. Invariably, the akhond would get distracted and give my dad a warning glance. In return, my dad would give me a menacing look. Sometimes, if I were standing up, he would pull at my sleeve and force me to sit next to him and keep quiet. This could happen several times during the sermon. I learned to keep a safe distance from my father and occasionally walked behind him so he could not grab at my sleeve.

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One evening when I was wandering about, which annoyed the mullah, I ran behind my father, thinking I was safe from his stares and burning pinches on my arm and legs, but he managed to grab my shorts, which also served as my underwear. I fell down hard on my face, naked, my shorts at my feet. It was an embarrassing moment for me and for my father, who frantically tried to pull up my pants. The sermon was interrupted at the high point of an emotional delivery about the moment when Imam Hussein's opponent, Yazid, chopped off his head on a very hot day at Karbala. The loud crying and the beating of the chest in the audience gave way to stares followed by laughter. On other side of the partition, the women heard the commotion, looked over, and also started laughing. My mother came to my rescue, picked me up, and exchanged angry words with my father: "*Chera tonboone bache-rah mikashi?*" [Why are you pulling off the kid's pants?]

Visibly angry, the mullah got up and left, but not before telling my father to watch out for me. He warned that I would most likely turn into an infidel as a grownup. He said this while fingering his prayer beads nervously and clearing his throat menacingly. At this moment, I first began to question my faith. He smelled bad, ate our food, spoke in a language I did not understand, and caused me to be punished for not standing still. I thought Islam was a sure loser.

HARD TIMES

We were very poor. My father, who worked at the government-owned railroad, supported a household of ten on a measly income. Promises of a pair of new shoes or a shirt were made near the end of each month but were forgotten on payday because he was always short of money. At the age of ten, I started selling cookies, brownies, and halvahs on Fridays and during the summer vacation when I stayed in Ahvaz.

Fridays were holidays and holy days. The weekend holidays ran from mid-Thursday to midnight of Friday. Saturday was the first day of the week. On Fridays, we went outside in the street to watch the parade of people walking to the nearby shrine to pay homage to the local *imamzadeh* saint. No one knew where he had come from or what kind of miracle he had performed. He was called Ali-ibn-Mahziyar. There is a Persian saying that the holiness of a saint depends on the guardian of his tomb. Among the many pilgrims, there were always a few hookers from nearby brothels, who were easy to recognize by the way they dressed and their generous donations to the shrine. They would buy cookies from me, tease me a bit, and offer them to the poor who lined the path with their hands stretched out. The whores would go back to their usual work until the following Friday.

A railroad bridge divided Ahvaz into two separate parts. The ethnic Arabs lived on the other side of the bridge, where my elementary school happened to be. In the winter, the muddy road was a challenge. There were no sidewalks. I had to roll up my pants and sometimes take my shoes off until I reached the schoolyard. The street pavement stopped under the railroad bridge. At the end of the Ahvaz-e Bala (Upper Ahvaz) was the British Petroleum administration with its housing, clubs, offices, and a packet of well-kept homes for British and some high-ranking Iranian executives, but people in the nearby Arab community lived like Bedouins, keeping goats, water buffalo, and cows inside their living quarters. The Arabs worked for British Petroleum. The oil company had also built some modest tract homes for them with a little landscaping. We used to admire the newly built houses from a distance; they were modern in shape compared to our sunbaked mud-brick homes. These homes had pretty glass windows, a rarity in those days. Less than a year after the workers moved in, most of the doors and windows were broken and cardboard and newspapers covered places where there was no glass. Goats and sheep ate up the lawns.

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YOUNG ADVENTURES

On my way to the school one early cold morning, I saw a man's body lying in the gutter with a bullet hole in his forehead. It appeared that among other strange customs of old Arabia, a groom must show his manhood by daring to steal something from the bride's or her family's home on his wedding night. Both families knew that, but that night the police did not, which was why he was lying dead. His hands were painted with fresh henna. I was only eleven, and all day long in the class, I thought about this man. On the way home, I avoided the spot where his body lay.

On the way to school, there was a large pipeline, about a foot in diameter, which carried water to the community. Part of this waterline was underground, and part of it above ground with a pool of mud and sludge under it.

One cold early-winter morning, a classmate dared me to walk over the pipe, a distance of about a hundred feet. I walked and balanced myself well almost to the end of it before I fell into the pool of sludge up to my neck. My books sank, and I could not find them. My whole body was covered with the gooey slush. My mother met me at the door. She grabbed my ear (the only clean part of me she could find) and, while keeping proper a distance, walked me to the public bath or hammam next door. It must have been a few minutes after nine, and the hammam then was open for women only. Mother paid no attention to the objections of the supervisor. She undressed me. I was already twelve years old. Over my objections and the horrified looks of employees, she dragged me into the main part of the hammam. That was the first time I saw the opposite sex naked. Some of the young women darted into the private stalls or took refuge in a corner, covering whatever they managed to cover. The women who remained were mostly older with sagging breasts. One woman, not directly looking at my mother, lamented the situation and hoped that my mother was not going

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to bring her husband next. That was a very uncomfortable day for me.

Our next-door hammam was open from four until eight in the morning for men only, and from nine on for women. Lacking a modern shower, it had a large roman tub with no water circulation. It was cleaned once or twice a year. Sometimes not only would there be an inch of oil on top, it would have a foot of sludge at the bottom. You knew you were nearing a hammam by the malodorous smell. A man with strong arms would travel from one bathhouse to another, removing the sludge. He would carry a bronze container with a small hole in the bottom and a string tied to the top. He would drop it in the bottom of the tub, which was called *khazineh*, and drag it from one corner to the other. The water would sift through the little hole, and the dirt, grime, and mud would stay in. He would repeat the motion until the tub looked clean. In addition to the hot tub, there were one or two other tubs with cold water.

Our hammam consisted of three areas. The first was the reception area, usually a table where the owner sat. The second was the changing area, a locker room. In this spot, there was a small, very shallow wading pool for washing your feet before entering the main area. The third and main section was like a huge sauna with a large roman hot tub and two small cold tubs. The heat for warming the water would come from chopped wood and dried dung.

I was about thirteen years old before I was allowed to visit our next-door hammam by myself. Inside, masseurs for a nominal fee and a tip would wash your body and give you a good rubdown at the same time. They used a rough mitten like glove with which they rubbed your body up and down to remove the dirt. The more experienced masseur used a trick to bring to your attention the amount of dirt by rolling up dirt like rolling up a cigarette and depositing it on your arm or upper body, where you could see how dirty you were and how good a job he was doing for you, thus obligating you to give a good tip.

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Occasionally, the dirt that was rolled up and brought to my attention often looked like a cigar and was as big.

One day I had no money for a tip. On my next visit, I forgot to ask for another masseur. It was revenge time for him. He must have thought I was a thirteen-year old contortionist. He twisted, tucked, and pulled on my arm so that my hand reached and touched places I never thought I had. Like an ex-wrestler, which I could tell he was by his cauliflower ears, he picked me up and threw me on my stomach and, while pushing down on my back with his foot, pulled my legs and brought both my feet all the way from back of my head and placed them in front of my face and angrily said, "Look at your dirty toes." Then he jumped up and down on my back, taking the wind out of me. And for the final rinse, he poured boiling water on me. I thought my skin would peel off. I told my mother that I was not going to the hammam anymore unless she gave me enough money to tip this guy.

EDUCATION TIME

My first lesson in Persian history came when I was about fourteen years old. One beautiful spring day, my father, with a free railroad pass that he got once a year, loaded up the entire family, aunts, uncles, cousins, and even some neighboring kids and took us from Ahvaz to "Shush Daniels" some seventy miles away. The Bible calls Susa simply "Sushan the Palace." It was where the biblical heroine Esther lived in luxury.

There, my father showed me the ancient city of Susa, as it is called by the Europeans. He told me that people come here to pay homage to Daniel, the Hebrew king and prophet, who they believed could prevent drought.

The shrine building has a white conical shape and is located on the bank of the Shure River. We had to walk up a few steps to the rooftop and through a door to enter the shrine. The actual crypt is buried under a few feet of flowing water. My

father took my hand and walked me to the edge of the roof, pointing toward some open fields and mounds. He said, "Son . . . during the reign of Darius the Great (522-486 BC), the entire province of Khuzestan enjoyed a network of well-paved roads all the way to Persepolis," the famous Achaemenid ceremonial capital near Shiraz. Then he looked at my astonished face that was asking, "What roads?" He quickly added that of course none of them was in existence now. He then walked me to the other end of the rooftop, straightened his shoulders, and with a voice that I had not heard until then, proudly pointed at some highlands in the distance. "Son," he told me, "those ruins were once the winter capital city of our ancient emperor King Darius the Great." While looking at the ruins, I was wondering why his voice had changed to a graver tone and why, for the first time, he kept calling me son. As I grew older, I realized that my father was very proud of Persian history, and when he said these things in his own way, he tried to teach me the importance of those ancient ruins.

On the way back from Susa, my father found another subject to talk about with pride. The topic was the railroad where he proudly worked as an engineer. He said that when he was young, he took the same trip on muleback, and it took him two days. It had taken us only about two hours.

During WWII, Ahvaz became the point of embarkation from which the British, Americans, Russians, and Poles shipped supplies, tanks, guns, airplanes, grains, and canned food to Russia. My father worked overtime. He said he had read somewhere that the World War II allies called Ahvaz "the strategic crossroad of the Middle East."

For my father, working at the railroad was everything. He had a high regard for German engineering and great admiration for Reza Shah Pahlavi (ruled 1925-1941) who, according to my father, took tremendous risks and pains in building the Trans Iranian Railway. My dad once took a trip from Ahvaz all the

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way to the Caspian Sea where the line ended. He talked about the enormous challenge Reza Shah the Great faced, including the usual opposition by the clergy, who were dead set against any modernization.

My father always used the train as an illustration. “Take the train for example . . .,” he used to say. And we would tease him about the train lessons. “OK, kids, it is train time again.” Even though his description of Persian history was often blurred, as it was with some Persian historians as I later learned, the events and names were correct.

In teaching us Persian history, my father would say, “Imagine the Persian history as a train, and the locomotive as the head of each dynasty and each compartment as containing a king. Now, some kings never ventured outside of their compartment. Some slept throughout the whole journey. And some were kicked out of their compartments. And some didn’t get to ride even in the caboose. But the train keeps moving along.”

My father had a Persian history book that he cherished. One day he gave it to me to read. It was too archaic in language, and I had problems understanding it. He wanted me to keep reading it and pass it on to my son someday.

Later on, when I was able to understand it, I found the book to be quite interesting. I read that Darius the Great, for example, kept a daily journal, recording the construction of his magnificent palaces at Susa on clay tablets: “The ground that was excavated, the bricks that were molded, and the cedar wood brought from the mountain area called Lebanon. The people of Assyria carried materials to Babylon. And the people of Karkha in Anatolia [Turkey] and Ionia [Greece] carried everything from Babylon to this Empire. The Babylonian people did the work. From every corner of the Persian Empire and beyond came men and material. Caravans arrived bearing gold, with Medes and Egyptians to work it, ivory, silver, ebony, lapis lazuli, and turquoise.” I also read that Greek travelers and historians have described the area of Susa and Ahvaz as one of

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the first cities of the old world to have agriculture, livestock, and industry. For instance, Rabbi Benjamin of Spain, who visited Susa around 1162-1173, reported in his book of travels that in addition to a Zoroastrian temple and a Jewish synagogue, ancient Ahvaz was home to a large congregation of Christians obliterated by the Arab horsemen who attacked Persia in the middle of the seventh century, bringing Islam with them.

ANCIENT PERSIA

According to Persian historians, the Iranian plateau became the cradle of the Persian civilization around 6,000 BC, when farming made possible permanent settlements and the foundation of a broad culture. Archaeological findings of 5,000 BC are on display at the University of Pennsylvania. Around 1,500 BC, the Aryan nomads, consisting of two groups, Persians and Medes, migrated to the Iranian plateau from central Asia. Persian prophet Zoroaster founded the religion Zoroastrianism around 1,100 BC. Monotheism, the concept of good and evil, and man's salvation in life through *good thoughts, good words, and good deeds* were born.

The Achaemenian dynasty was the original locomotive of the Persian history train. Cyrus the Great established the Persian Empire in 550 BC. His compassionate policies throughout his reign made his empire known as the Benevolent Empire. From the founding of the earliest declaration of human rights (the decree is displayed at the United Nations) to the peaceful conquering of Babylonia in 539 BC where he freed the Jews from captivity, facilitated their return to their homeland, and reconstructed their temple in Jerusalem, Cyrus is hailed as the "Shepherd of the Lord" in the Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament, which says, "I am Cyrus, King of the World. When I entered Babylon, I did not allow anyone to terrorize the land. I kept in view the needs of its people and all its sanctuaries to promote their well being . . . I put an end to their misfortune.

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The great God has delivered all lands into my hand; the lands that I have made to dwell in peaceful habitation.”

Darius the Great was in the second compartment. He reigned from 522 to 486 BC. He carried on the tradition of Cyrus the Great and created a banking system, built roads, and established a pony-express mail delivery system as well as introducing the earliest minting of coins and standardizing of weights and measures. Among other well-noted projects, Darius constructed the famous Persian Royal Road, extending over 1,500 miles from Sardis near the Mediterranean Sea to Susa, the winter capital. He also is credited with building of Persepolis Palace, constructing the underground irrigation system, and cutting a canal to link the Nile to the Red Sea. In the nineteenth century, archeologists in Egypt discovered the following inscription by Darius commemorating the completion of the canal. “I am a Persian. I ordered the digging of this canal from a river by name of Nile, which flows in Egypt After this canal was dug, ships went from Egypt through this canal to Persia, thus as was my desire.”

WARS AND EMPIRES

Persian history describes Persia during the reign of Darius the Great (522-486 BC) as very similar to today’s America. It had a multitude of diverse religions, races, languages, and traditions that flourished culturally and prospered economically under one central government. Stories of religious tolerance, democracy, open society, and sharing of prosperity are attributed to that era. Darius the Great said, “I believe in justice and abhor inequity. By the favor of the great God it is not my desire that the weak man should have wrong done to him by the mighty”

Persians were also very much into the sport of polo, which not only served as a team game, but also made people fit for any war and incursions.

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I learned that Iranians have always called Persia “Iran.” It is not clear when the country was first called Persia. However, it is said that early Greek traders and merchants, trading around the region of Fars or Pars in Iran, erroneously called Iranians “Persi” or “Persians,” and Iranian traders called Greeks “U-nani,” for the Ionian merchant traders.

Greeks knew glorious Susa. So did the Hebrews, according to the history books. Nearly two centuries after Darius the Great made Susa his winter capital, his descendant and namesake King Darius III suffered defeat in 331 BCE at the hands of Alexander the Great. The Achaemenid train was derailed, and the empire ended. When Alexander marched on Susa, he discovered riches beyond belief. And at Susa, he announced plans for uniting Greece and Persia into one great empire. He married Darius’s daughter Stateris and, at the same time, held a mass wedding of 10,000 Greek Macedonians to Persian wives.

Alexander’s death in 323 BC was followed by a long struggle among his generals for the Persian throne. The winner in this contest was Seleucus I, who, after conquering the rich kingdom of Babylon in 312 BC, annexed thereto all the former Persian Empire and founded the Seleucid dynasty. For more than five centuries thereafter, Persia remained a subordinate unit. After the overthrow of the Seleucid in the second century BC, it became the Parthian Empire.

Ardeshir I, a Persian vassal-king, rebelled against the Parthians. He defeated them in the battle of Hormuz in AD 224 and started the second train, a new Persian dynasty called Sassanid. His son Shapur I, who waged two successive wars against the Roman Empire, conquering territories in Mesopotamia and Syria and a large area in Asia Minor, succeeded Ardeshir in 241. Shapur I fought the Romans and destroyed the Roman army in the battle at Edessa (now Sanliurfa, Turkey) in 260 and captured Emperor Valerian (AD 253-260). Valerian died in captivity in Persia. Shapur I built the first famous Jondi-Shahpur, a learning center, which included a major

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medical center complete with staff and classrooms. Today, in Ahvaz, a hospital operates under the same name.

The last of the Sassanid kings was Yazdegerd III, during whose reign (632-651) the Arabs invaded Persia, destroyed all resistance, demolished the train of Iranian historical destiny, and incorporated Persia into the Islamic Empire.

My father's Persian history train stopped here. It was the end of the line for anything Persian. From here on Persian history was written by the Arab conquerors. The history of Persia from mid-seventh-century up to present was never discussed in any of my classrooms. The glorious Persia's past was wiped out, and a new Islamic calendar begun.

In their writing of Persian history, most Persian historians unanimously agree that the destruction at the hands of the Greeks and Romans was nothing compared to what was in store for the Persian Empire when Arab horsemen invaded Persian soil and brought their Islam with them. Persian historians, writers, and poets could not find sufficient nouns or verbs to explain this dark epoch for future generations. They believed what was lost was larger and deeper than words. According to their writings, a deadening of the heart and a dulling of conscience replaced the age of optimism. *Via negativa* became the path. And from this date on, a great nation that healed wounds and put the pieces together after each war and resumes a normal life was never able to rise from under the oppressive weight of Arab Islam.

Later in life, I started asking myself what happened to the civilization that produced such tolerance, knowledge, and beauty throughout its history. I could not find an answer until I came outside of the country and read Persian history. The more I read, the more contempt in my heart I had for the Arab Persian clergy. I learned that the barbaric Arab attack at the introduction of Islam that wiped out that civilization brought a new phenomenon, a philistine culture, and a backdrop that was not only hostile to intellectual achievements, but which also set the terms for all subsequent progress. The appalling ignorance of

the Islamic caliphate outlawed freethinking, tolerant, Persian culture. It not only had nothing to replace it with but also allowed no new culture to develop, let alone flourish. The decadent and corrupt governments, hereditary privilege, repressive religion, poverty, and ignorance gave no time during the next 1,400 years for nationalism to take hold.

During this dark period, while religious teaching in the hands of generally illiterate mullahs flourished, the country became isolated from the rest of the world. Most leaders were handpicked by the clergy. Some leaders, such as Safavid Shah Abbas I (1579-1629), had vision and hopes of greatness for their country. But for any modern plan that did not have the blessing of the ayatollahs, they had to build a magnificent mosque or a religious school to pacify the ulema. The religious institutions always hampered Shah Abbas's accomplishments. Such was the case with opening the country to foreigners and encouraging trade with Europe, or relocating Christian Armenians away from Ottoman oppression in Jolfa to an area in his capital city of Esfahan.

HOLLYWOOD AND PERSIA

Hollywood movies depicting Greek soldiers racing into combat while Persian officers flogged slaves into battle troubled me even as a teenager. I saw more than one movie in the early 1950s calling Persians "barbarians." All the way home, I kept thinking where Hollywood got its information.

I learned that Greek historians have dominated ancient world history. Consequently, the West bases its knowledge of the East, particularly Persian history, on the account of Greek historians. I knew that those historians have ignored the facts that the Greeks kept slaves, and that Greek mercenaries and defectors fought on the Persian side. Perhaps without any Persian accounts, the West has assumed that this was the history of the Persians, an accurate and complete history. However, I

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place more blame on the Persian historians for not presenting any opposing viewpoint or argument on their history.

The Greek historian Herodotus (484?-425 BC), who was born in Halicarnassus (now Bodrum, Turkey), at that time a part of Persian Empire, was exiled from the city of his birth in about 457 BC, for conspiring against Persian rule. His account of the Greco-Persian War is the first great narrative history in Western civilization, which is presented as the entire history of the ancient Middle Eastern and Western culture. As a Persian, I believe that not only did Herodotus not have any love for the Persian rulers of the region where he was born; he also had bones to pick with them. And he conspired against them. The West has taken as true history some of Herodotus's reports of obscure events. Out of nine books on world civilization that Herodotus, the father of history, wrote, three of them are exclusively about armed conflicts between Greece and Persia in the early fifth century BC.

History has ignored the fact that Persians were farmers, tradesmen, and producers of handcrafts. They did not engage in slave taking or slave trading in the fifth century BC or any other time in history. On the other hand, ancient Greece around the fourth century BC had slaves not only in wars but also as agricultural workers. The ancient city of Sparta, the capital of Laconia, had several classes of people. The inhabitants of Laconia were divided into *helots* (slaves) who performed all agricultural work; *perioeci* or merchants without political rights; and the *spartiatai* or the governing class, soldiers, officers, and rulers.

In ancient Greece, the helots or serfs of the Spartans were enslaved. Helots were the lowest of the four classes of Spartans and had virtually no civil or political rights. They were entirely the property of the state, which assigned them to work on the land of individual Spartans. The helots could be freed or sold only by the state. In wartime, they were used as soldiers or as oarsmen in the galleys.

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It is true that the Persian Empire covered a vast area, including the birthplace of Herodotus. And in wars, the imperial government used people from their empire, particularly the Arab nomads who carried supplies, tended horses, pushed horse-driven water tanks, and set up tents. It is also true that in defeat, those people, who were not trained in combat, were killed, or taken as slaves by the victor.

FIRST LOVE

In the autumn of 1954, when I just turned 18, I got a job as a tallyman in the port of Khorramshahr some eighty miles from my hometown of Ahvaz. Aside from the simple work of tallying what cargo ships were unloading, it was also exciting in the sense that I got to meet people of other lands and it was an opportunity to work on my English. Although it was not a steady job, the pay was good. And it was as close as I could get to the outside world.

Khorramshahr was a town well known for its date palm farms and beautiful autumn nights where the famous Karun River, the only navigable river of Iran, ended its journey and joined the Shatt al Arab, a stone's throw from Iraq. The city of Khorramshahr is on one side of Karun River. On the other is the city of Abadan, famous for its oil refinery.

I rented a single room in a five-room house with two other families sharing a single bathroom in a row of homes that were called bank houses. Before I left Ahvaz, my mother wanted me to first check out the possibility of living with distant relatives of hers. I went there first, but they were already cramped for space and had no room for an additional person. So, I was fortunate to rent a room that was better than what I had in Ahvaz. One family had four children, among them a sixteen-year-old girl and the other one, two boys and a seventeen-year-old girl. I knew I had to be careful not to bump into any of

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those girls. And when I came home from work, I stayed in my room most of the time to avoid any contact with the girls and the vigilant eyes of their mothers.

One day, the mother of the sixteen-year-old brought me some sample cookies that her daughter had just baked and told me how well she was doing at school. That day I realized that she no longer feared me and was comfortable in the knowledge that I had shown no improper behavior and had no ill design toward her daughter.

At work, there were two other guys on the same shift. One was a twenty-eight-year-old, thin, well-mannered Armenian name Albert, and the other an Assyrian who was private and kept to himself.

Albert and I became friends rather quickly. I helped cover for him when he was late for work, which happened often, and when he showed up with the smell of alcohol on his breath. On those days, cargo ships did not carry containers, and the ships cranes unloaded loose payloads that had to be tallied. When Albert was absent, I was running back and forth half the length of the ship to tally his side and mine.

It took Albert a while to tell me that on the way to work, he stopped at a small bistro/bar for a sandwich and a few drinks. The small bistro place was conveniently located near the pier and was run by a Christian Armenian husband-and-wife team. The customers were mostly non-Muslims. Albert would sometimes bring me a tasty ham or mortadella sandwich that only Armenians know how to make.

A clubhouse catered to English-speaking people and showed movies in English halfway between work and my home. Other than Abadan, on the other side of the Karun River, which had a large number of foreigners working for its oil company and a theater inside of the club called Cinema Taj, no other place in the country had such movie houses. The club consisted of a large converted house with a glass showcase on each side of a double door. One side showed

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the current movie and the other side the upcoming events. The front yard was used for seating. The operator was an Indian who was also the caretaker.

One evening, I went to that theater to see a movie in English. Even if I did not understand half of the movie, I wanted to be among people who spoke English and had good positions. There was a soda fountain with a small glass showcase packed with a hot Indian pastry called samosa, filled with spiced vegetables and meat.

While I was standing near a group of people around the soda fountain, I noticed a couple who were inquisitively looking at me as if they were going to ask me something. I was also curious. I thought perhaps they were going to ask such questions as “What are you doing here?” or “Do you speak English?” Maybe they worried that I was wasting my money. And when they finally did come up to me, one of them, in polite slow deliberate English, asked if I had seen the movie. I told them I had not but that I was eager to see it. The few minutes that I stood among those people who represented other parts of the world and spoke English were a grand time for me. Just by being there among successful people mirrored my future prospects. I felt sure of my direction, my potential, and of my eventual place in society. I also felt ten feet tall. It didn’t matter that I was living in a sunbaked clay house in Ahvaz. Or that the shirt I was wearing was the only one I owned and that I washed it every other day. What did matter was that I felt like an emperor waiting for a chance to shine.

I selected a seat near the front rows since the screen was smaller than in regular movie houses. Finally, the lights went dim; the national anthem was played, and the picture of the shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi shaking hands with some dignitaries was shown on the screen. It was mandatory for all movie houses to play the national anthem, and the patrons had to stand up. After the national anthem, it was time for a cartoon and a short one-reel Laurel and Hardy comedy.

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I was sitting away from most people and there were a couple of empty chairs to my left and a few to my right. Suddenly, in the dim lights, I saw a young woman enter the row of seats where I was sitting. She walked past the couple and the few empty seats and sat right next to me. I have never been able to describe the sudden feeling, not then, not now, not ever. My heart stopped for a moment and then started to pound so loud that I was afraid she would hear it. While I tried not to directly look at her, I noticed that she was dressed in modern European wear. At first, I thought perhaps she was lost. Or, in the dark, she had mistaken me for her husband or a relative. Surely, I said to myself, no ordinary Persian woman would dare to come out alone, much less to go to a movie, and sit next to a stranger. I was so nervous that for a moment I thought of getting up and running outside and keep on running until I got home. My mouth was dry, and I am sure my face was pale. I was glad that it was dark and she could not see how pathetic I looked.

Since this kind of feeling is rare among the people of the West, especially Americans, I must explain a point here. In the Middle East, particularly in Iran where the Shiite religion oversees every aspect of the day-to-day life of its people, boys and girls are kept apart in segregated schools and cannot establish a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. There is no such thing as dating or locker-room talk. If a girl is seen with a boy, no matter how briefly, how innocent the relation, she is considered lewd and immoral (of course, not the boy, only the girl), and the consequences are severe. In many cases, girls are forced to run away from home in disgrace and are seduced, deceived, and abandoned. They may fall prey to pimps and are forced into prostitution, leading to a short and tragic life. And since boys and girls cannot date, they resort to feelings. Imagination takes the place of reality. And since they are only allowed to see in their mind's eye, young boys and girls find refuge in poetry and love letters that are often never delivered. That is one reason why every teenage Persian boy and girl is

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first a poet. Each boy is a hero, and each girl is queen of Sheba with a narcissus in her hair. Christian boys and girls in Iran have more fundamental freedom in that respect.

She leaned toward me and in a most delicious voice and in clear Farsi said, "I saw you outside talking in English with a couple, and I am trying to learn English." She waited for some kind of response. But I was unprepared for this . . . this emotional and psychological jolt that even turned my body temperature out of whack. On top of everything else, that delicious scent made my head go around. I said to myself, "Oh God . . . Please! Please! God . . . I will do anything you ask. I will crawl on my hands and knees to our neighborhood mosque and carry all its dirty rugs to the riverbank, wash, dry, and put them back, if only you make this movie last six hours long." There was a long silence, and finally I muttered something. I am sure it was nothing that made sense.

I knew that she was Christian Armenian, and she knew that I was not. As a rule, Christian girls stayed away from Muslim boys. A Christian boy and a Muslim boy or a Muslim girl and a Christian girl would sometimes make friends, but hardly a Christian girl and a Muslim boy. However, something in her voice and her demeanor instantly told me that she did not have to fight to overcome any aversion. To dampen my dry mouth and gain a better control of my inside, I asked if she would like to have a soft drink. I bought two sodas. Those days some thirst-quencher bottles had a round glass ball that floated inside the bottle as you drank and was used as a cap. To open the bottle, you had to push down with your thumb, and sometimes it made a loud noise. To show my civility, I opened the bottles at the stand so I would not disturb anyone and especially not reveal bad manners in front of her. In those days, you really had to take an umbrella or some other protective device whenever going into a regular movie, especially on matinees. You had to keep one eye on the screen and a wary eye on the people sitting behind you to keep from being showered with their shaking and opening soda bottles,

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bombarded by walnut shells, roasted watermelons, and pumpkin seeds, or pelted with anything else they happen to be consuming, not to mention ear-deafening shouts and belching.

The 1940 movie was Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, with Greer Garson and Sir Laurence Olivier. I had seen this movie more than thirty times mostly for sentimental reasons. I remember each scene, each line I translated for her, and the ecstasy, the closeness, the fresh and delightful scent from her hair, the same scent I had smelled once before as a little boy when a female member of my family had just come home from hammam, that inimitable fresh scent of women.

Outside of the theater, we excitedly walked and talked in the dim-lighted streets for several blocks before I asked her where she lived. We realized that we were walking the opposite way. Each time we reached a lamppost, she would stop and excitedly take out her worn, page-missing dictionary and ask me to repeat the line I had translated inside the theater for her. And she would utter the line repeatedly. She told me that her husband and her brother both know some English, but they had no patience to teach her. "They tease me and laugh at my accent," she said.

She lived in an upper-class area of Khorramshahr with other Armenian families. There were three houses on the same block occupied by the Christian Armenians. I walked her to her door and made sure she safely got in before I left. When she told me that her name is Anahid, I kept thinking no wonder she looks so noble, like Anahita, the ancient Persian goddess known for her beauty and flair.

Things looked so very different all the way home. The air that I walked on smelled so very good. I was ready to hug and kiss everybody in sight. The dirty stray dogs that I used to run after only to kick, I wanted to embrace and kiss. Even my humble single-lightbulb lonely room looked bright and cheerful. I could not stand still, lie down, or sleep. It was too incredible, too much, and too fast. However, amid such wonderful love-

intoxication, something kept popping into my mind and wanted to sober me up. At first I kept pushing it aside and continued the exhilaration, but it kept knocking and knocking until I sat down and started to think. The confusion started with asking myself why she allowed me to walk her all the way to her door if she was married. Shouldn't she be somehow concerned or even afraid that her husband might ask who this guy bringing her home is if he saw us together? My answer to myself was, of course, that maybe she was just as excited as I was and wanted to have my company as long as she could. After all, she was unpretentious and told the truth the minute she met me. She said she wanted to learn English, and all the way home she asked questions and probed her dictionary. Well, but . . . she can't be that emancipated? Not here, not in this country! Not even the Christians, I kept telling myself. Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, amid feelings of rapture, bewilderment, and restlessness, I slept.

More than a week passed, and I did not see or hear from her. We had no way of contacting each other. We had no telephone. In addition, that whole week I was working until late at night. Each night, I walked past her house on my way home and even walked by the closed theater.

One night when I got home, I saw a box of homemade cookies in my room. At first, I thought the family's sixteen-year-old daughter baked them. Her mother once gave me a taste of her baking and boasted about her other good qualities. But when I went to thank the mother in the morning for the delicious pastry, she sarcastically told me that some woman who did not even know my name had brought them. I knew right away that it must have been Anahid, because, simply, I did not know another woman. I was going to kiss my landlady's sour face, but I restrained myself. There was no note with those tasty pastries, but I remembered telling her that I lived in the bank houses, and there were only a handful of them. How she found the right one is something only a woman could do.

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One evening, Albert and I finished work early, and he invited me to have a sandwich with him at his usual bistro/bar. At first, I thought perhaps this was an opportunity to tell Albert the cares of my heart, to tell him of the inconceivable thing that was not supposed to happen to a Muslim boy, to tell him of my incredible meeting with Anahid and how I would like to see her again. However, I quickly realized that the Armenian community was very small and Albert probably knew everyone, and that might not be a good idea.

The few people inside the place knew Albert and each gave him a friendly hug. After a couple of drinks, they asked Albert to sing. That's when I found out that Albert could sing well, play an instrument, and outdrink everyone there. Somehow my being there perhaps assured Albert of getting home safely. Thus, each time to "your health" and "in your honor," he added a couple more drinks to his usual number, and my fear that I might have to carry him home was realized as soon as we walked outside.

Albert was leaning on me for support as we walked the dimly lighted streets. We came to the street on which Armenians lived. And when we stopped at the middle house my knees started to shake. Albert could not find his keys; with his toe he kept knocking on the door. My head was going around and I was ready to pass out. I tried to leave him at the door and run away, but the door opened, and there stood an astounded Anahid. She was as beautiful as ever. Other than, "Ah . . . ah . . ." she did not say anything, and neither could I. For an instant, her pretty face became a bit pale and looked as if she was going to pass out. I thought, "Oh God . . . now all three of us need to be carried." I wanted to get away fast, but she grabbed my hand and said, "Please, come in." I told her, "I can't, I really can't." Then she said, "OK . . . OK . . . Please don't go away. I will be right back." And she took Albert inside. When she came back to the door, she said, "Can we go to the movies tomorrow?" While shaking my head "No . . . no . . .," only "Yes . . . yes . . . let's do that" came out.

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“No, I am not going to the movies tomorrow night or any other night. I am not going to dishonor Albert and myself. I like and respect Albert.” All the way home, I kept saying the same thing over and over. It was past midnight that I finally convinced myself to go. Only to see what she has to say, and that will be the end of that.

It was after 8 p.m. The sun was still shining. And outdoor movies started when sun went down. Anahid and I got there at the same time. She said, “Thank you for bringing my brother home. Albert told me about his young friend and how nice he is, but I didn’t know it was you.” I was going to grab and kiss her. Instead, I showed her my joy by giving her a nice warm hug. However, while I was content, I felt that something was still missing. “Doesn’t your husband mind me walking you home?” I timidly asked. “No, my husband is not here. He is in Kuwait. He is working there. He comes home once a year.”

I remembered that in those days many Iranians took jobs in Kuwait. Work was scarce in Iran. The rich oil fields of Kuwait were the mecca for job seekers. A few able bodies of my own family went to work there and came home once a year. I asked if she missed him. She looked to the ground momentarily, and when she raised her head, she said, “Yes, very much.” I saw tears in her eyes. I felt bad asking her. She told me that when her husband came home, he could stay no more than two weeks. “The first few days are hard for both of us. We have little to talk about. He feels like a stranger for the first few days.” Looking at her, I thought how anyone could stay away from this . . . this so adorably, so inordinately beautiful woman a few hours, let alone a whole year.

For the next few months, we saw each other twice or three times a week, during which I taught her English. She with her fresh and progressive mind taught me a new life that I was so thirsty to acquire. Anahid was so unassuming and open about her feelings that if she had not seen me for a few days, she would give me a bone-crushing hug and the customary wet and loud kisses on my cheeks in public the minute she saw me.

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There was no encroaching upon each other's liberty and dignity in our relationship. Her self-assurance made me realize that, unlike Muslim women whose individuality was crushed by the cumulative weight of tradition and religious dogma, which delivers them to the society timorous and resourceless, Christian women are not impeded by such chains as much and can reach individual independence. Anahid's thirst for elevating herself brought her to the same cinema club and the movies as mine did.

Many nights we walked along the riverbank, where a romantic moon shone through palm trees. She would grab my arm or hold my hand and walk comfortably and courageously while my timid eyes watched for people staring. She was proud of our friendship that allowed us to keep our self-respect, even if it was only in our own eyes. She was only twenty-four, but she looked very mature and much emancipated through an eighteen-year-old's Muslim eyes.

There was an Indian or Pakistani restaurant that we patronized a couple of times a week and both enjoyed for its hot Indian dishes. She always brought me a little something, something she made, something she baked. Regrettably, other than a new dictionary, I gave her nothing.

A PAINFUL FAREWELL

When we walked hand in hand, we were sometimes shadowed by two or three older guys. She told me they were local Arabs who followed her every so often. She said they enjoyed shouting dirty words from a distance and on many occasions, she had taken verbal abuse from them, but she had paid no attention to them.

One late night on the way back, just a block from her house, the same three guys appeared from nowhere. One of them stopped me, pretending to ask something, while the other two

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hit me from behind repeatedly with heavy palm branches. I was caught by surprise and had no chance of fighting back. I took a savage beating. I ended up spending three days in the hospital. Anahid knew nothing about it. I did not want her to see me defeated that way. I still carry the scars on my back. As soon as I was able to walk, I boarded the daily train to Ahvaz to see my family and to recuperate.

While at home in Ahvaz one day, I saw an American military officer going to the next-door hammam, and I waited outside until he came out. I struck up a conversation with him, during which I asked if they had an opening for an interpreter. He said yes and gave me an address to apply the next day. My mother managed to bring out everyone in the household and the neighbors to see her son speak American as she put it. I got a good-paying job as interpreter/translator the next day.

A couple of weeks later, I went back to Khorramshahr to pick up my little belongings, pay final rent, and of course, to say goodbye to Anahid. I spent an hour going up and down her street with the hope that perhaps she might come out for a moment before I finally knocked on the door. An elderly woman opened the door and called Anahid. She looked very pleased to see me. She closed the door behind her while holding my hand. She told me that Albert was fine and was out at the moment.

“Can I see you at the movies tonight?” she asked.

“Do you know what is playing there?” I replied.

“No, any movie would do,” she said.

It was a stupid movie starring Wallace Beery, called *Alias Is a Gentleman*. I call it stupid because as much as I loved our first movie, I hated the last one. I never had the desire to see it again.

I could not tell her that I had come to say goodbye because she was so happy to see me and was holding on to my arm and because I missed her so much. The feeling was so overwhelming that I actually had a knot in my stomach and had to excuse

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myself for a moment. I rushed outside of theater, holding on to my stomach, and tried not to vomit. I sat on the side of the movie house in the dark, facing the river, and cried. I have never been able to express either the joy of the first meeting or the pain of the last. When I came back to my seat, she sensed that something was not right. That's when she said, "I am afraid to ask why I haven't seen you for more than three weeks, and I am fearful of the answer." That's when I told her that I had a new job in Ahvaz and I would like to be near my family. She was quiet, and no longer looking at the screen. She held my hand with both hands, and I could tell she was crying. Throughout the movie, she was quietly sobbing, and so was I. I was no longer translating the movie; she was not paying attention to it. All of a sudden, she got up and said, "Do you mind if we go? I don't want to see this movie." We walked in silence. She didn't say anything, and I couldn't open my mouth. When we neared her street, she turned around, grabbed my arms, looked into my eyes, and said, "Why are you breaking this off . . . Why can't we be friends, be together forever . . . ? What is wrong with that?" She did not wait for an answer. And I had none to offer. At the door she whispered, "I wish you happiness, and may Ali's safe hands always guide you." And I said, "You too." I walked fast until I reached the corner, where I sat on the sidewalk to collect myself. I was so troubled, so lonely, and so lost.

The next morning I went back to Ahvaz. There, I tried to ease my pain by keeping busy at work. But whenever I heard our next-door Armenian women laugh or talk, I wanted to jump on the train and rush to see Anahid. Unfortunately, the inclination always gave way to sound judgment. I learned to nurse my wounds, my first depression, my first heartache, and at the age of nineteen, I was a wise old man.

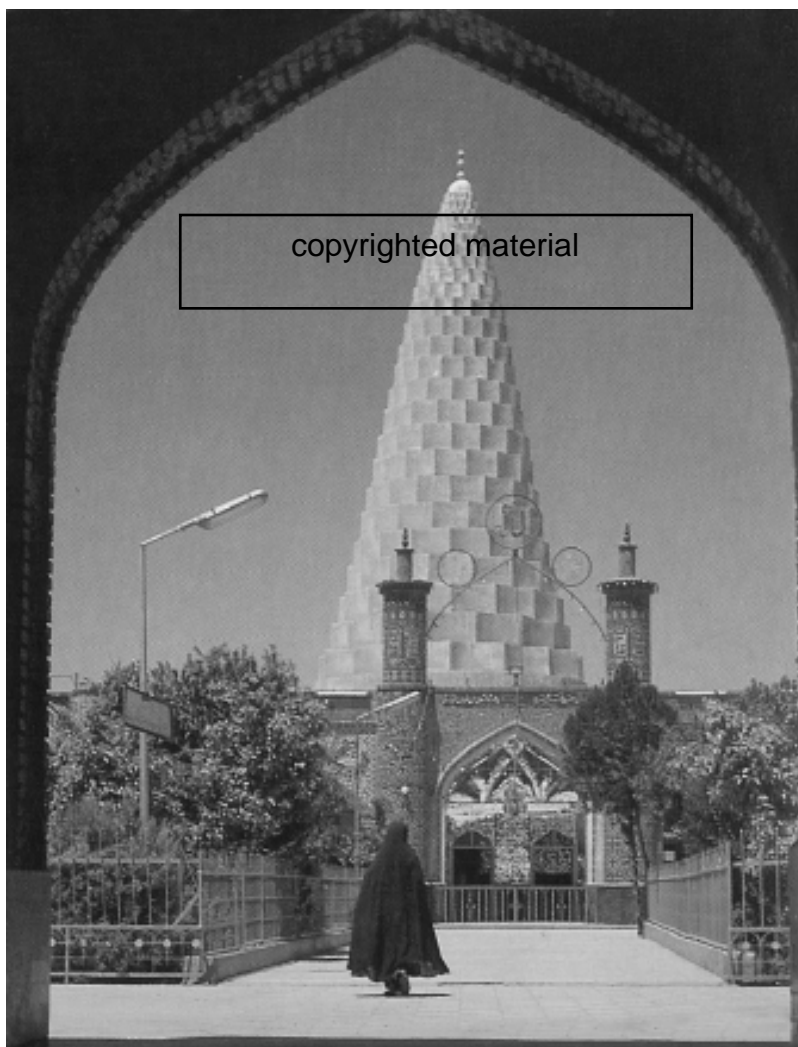
One miserable year passed before my inclination, better judgment, wisdom, and all other miserable things agreed that it was time for me to see Anahid. I had a one-week vacation. I

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thought I would spend it in Khorramshahr. As soon as I got there, I went to the bistro/bar to see if Albert was there. He was not. I asked the owner. He said, "Albert has not been here for months. We don't know where he is." I walked to Anahid's house. An elderly woman opened the door. She recognized me. I asked if Albert was home. She said, "No, they are no longer here, they are gone." "Gone where?" I asked. "To Tehran," she said, "Albert got sick and they had to take him to Tehran to a special clinic. I think he had some liver or kidney problem." "What about Anahid," I asked. "Anahid came back three weeks later and packed and moved to Tehran to be near her brother," she continued, "I think Albert and Anahid went to Ahvaz to see you. But they came back the next day."

I took the train back to Ahvaz the same day. Looking out the window of my lonely compartment, I kept thinking about our first night. About how she walked past the empty seats and sat right next to me. About my heartbeats when she put her beautiful face so close to mine when I was translating the movie. About how she brought out the best in me and how much she taught me in such short time. And how she handled a desiring eighteen-year-old boy who had presumed that God made women for his sexual adventures and had little respect for them. About how she influenced and guided me with her strong moral compass, even though our two hearts met so recklessly. About how noble, how uncomplicated, and how unpretentious she was. About how much I enjoyed our first movie. How I was comparing her beauty to Maureen O' Sullivan and Frieda Inescort who played in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Decades later in the United States, I anxiously stayed up at three o'clock in the morning to see that movie on television. No matter how many times I see that movie, I get misty-eyed. I finally got my very own copy, a gift from my children. After so many years, deep in my heart I miss her so much.



Shush Daniel (Susa), the winter capital of
king Darius the Great 522-486 BC
(The Atlas of Mysterious Places)