

Iraj Bashiri



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بسته تفاسی
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میون

فرزند میرزا صفور علی

راغب

کارمند کشتی

The Black Tulip

Revised Edition

Kamal Khan

The Black Tulip

Revised Edition

Iraj Bashiri

 *Seragya
Publishers, Inc.*

1984, 1985, 2022

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The Black Tulip

For
Lalerokh

The earthquake that shook the house,
altered everything overnight.
It burned the sleeping world,
as would a fire,
And bloodied the ashes of the morning.
It threw the colorful panes
of the apertures of the heart
onto dust
And hid the faces of women,
and the color of flowers
behind a nebula of grudge.

...

I did not turn my house over to strangers,
Destiny drove me out of my home.

Nader Naderpour



In Place of an Introduction

After the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran hanged 16 Baha'is, including 7 women and 3 teen-age girls, in the city of Shiraz (June 16 and 18, 1983), specialists in Iranian and Islamic studies sent an open letter to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini protesting the executions. The letter, published in *Iran Times*, documented some of the impediments that the Islamic republic placed on the path of the progress of its Baha'i communities. The names of the scholars who signed the letter appear further below. The following is a list of the impediments cited in the letter:

- Home raids, unlawful arrests, arbitrary detentions, and violations of due process
- Economic persecution and confiscation of property
- Denial of the right to education
- Denial of cultural rights, including desecration and destruction of Baha'i cemeteries and violations of burial rights
- Incitement to hatred

Once the government of the Islamic Republic did not react and the atrocities continued, the present author decided to create a fictional account of the fear and frustration, more so the degradation of human dignity that the revolutionary committees of the Republic in the early stages, and the oppressive leaders of the regime thereafter, unleashed on the poor, vulnerable Baha'i communities. The intention was not to provide information on the belief system, or the culture of the adherents of the Baha'i faith; but rather, to create a continuous reminder of the regime's inhumane activities outlined by colleagues in their epistle to Ayatollah Khomeini. By providing an outsider's perspective, it was also to contextualize the treatment the Baha'is received, and to sympathize with a segment of humanity that even today is being unduly victimized. Similarly, the fictional portrayal was intended to provide awareness of the merciless victimization process itself and, indeed, to remind us of the phrase "Compassionate and Merciful," a phrase that is used ritually at the beginning of every undertaking. It is to

remind us that there is no merit in a ritual iteration of the phrase. The phrase must be fully comprehended and, more importantly, it ought to be implemented. Iran's iconic poet Sheykh Muslih al-Din Sa'di Shirazi, echoes that sentiment when he says:

Of One Essence is the Human Race,
Thusly has Creation put the Base.
One Limb impacted is sufficient,
For all Others to feel the Mace.
The Unconcern'd with Others' Plight,
Are but Brutes with Human Face.

The story in the book is about a relatively well-off Baha'i family experiencing a normal life at the outset of the revolution. The story follows the members of this family as they helplessly witness their assets confiscated, their sources of income cut, their social status diminished, and their security drastically undermined. As a story, it shows that death can be decreed in many ways. It can be decreed by hanging, by execution, or by stoning. All of them gruesome and painful deaths no doubt. If there is any mercy in them, it is in that they happen swiftly. The other type of death, similarly gruesome and painful, does not happen swiftly. Rather, it kills its victim gradually, as would a boa constrictor its victim.

The members of the Baha'i family in the book experience the initial stages of this latter type of slow extermination. Their ultimate fate is written clearly on the wall before them. They are exposed to a death that takes its toll gradually through uncertainty, fear, loss, and disgrace. The sad thing about the life of this innocent family is that it represents a community, indeed a host of Baha'i communities, whose members are mercilessly tortured. The sadder reality is that the Baha'i community itself is one among a bevy of similar minority communities sharing similar predicaments.

That kind of perennial death, in the course of which leaders bring misfortune upon themselves and their society, reminds us of John Milton's "On His Blindness," especially where he says: "They also serve who only stand and wait." In the context of the present-day Iranian society, Milton's "they" would include Iranian Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews, Sunnis, Sufis and, in general, all those who do not belong to a particular line. They wait for a charitable force akin to Milton's Lord. A force that would recognize their contributions as service, a force that would lift them high in recognition of their service, rather than put them down.

The story was written in Persian and English languages simultaneously. They share the same storyline, but they should not be considered translations of each other. The Persian version called *Lale-ye Siyah* was published in 1364/1986. It was not widely distributed. Only family members and close friends have had access to it. The English version (*The Black Tulip*) was published in 1984 and revised in 1985. In 2022, it was revised and expanded. The expanded version is presented on Academia.edu; irajbashiri.com; and Facebook.

An Open Letter to the Government of Iran:

We, as specialists in Iranian and Islamic studies, protest the hanging of 16 Bahá'is, including seven women and three teen-age girls, by the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the city of Shiraz on June 16 and 18, 1983. The Iranian Bahá'is have repeatedly expressed and demonstrated their loyalty to Iran. Nevertheless, they have been systematically persecuted for the mere fact that they adhere to a religion other than Islam. Such persecution and these cruel and unjust executions seem to us a contradiction of all that is best in the traditions of Islam and the Iranian people.

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The Specter

It was early in the evening. My wife Golnar and I were at home watching television. The telephone rang and I answered it. It was my brother Mokhtar's son, Bahman. I think he was calling from Shiraz. He asked, "Uncle, what are you doing?"

I said, "nothing in particular. We are watching television."

"My dad told me to call you and tell you to go on your roof..."

"On the roof!" I said. "What for?"

"All the people are on their roofs... Go and see for yourself," he said, and hung up.

"Something is going on," I said to Golnar. Let's go on the roof and find out."

"Who was on the phone?" She asked.

"Bahman," I said.

"One of his pranks, I bet," she said.

"No," I said. "He was serious. He said his father told him to call."

"In that case," she said, "let's go." Then, turning to the children said, "You can change the channel if you want, or go to your rooms. We will be back soon."

Bahman was right. Something was going on. All the neighbors, all around, were on their roofs. They were standing in clusters showing each other something on the face of the full moon. Some were using binoculars and a couple had telescopes. "What are they showing each other?" I asked our next door neighbor.

"The specter," he said. "Some see it clearly and some have difficulty.

"How can that be?" I asked.

"I don't know," he chuckled. "They intimate that bastards can't see it. On account of that almost everyone pretends..."

I looked closely at the moon and tried to see the specter, but all I could see were some grey spots. I walked to Golnar and asked, "I can't make out the specter, can you?"

"You are not testing me, are you?" She said jokingly, and added, "Just the usual. Another rumor..."

"But, do all those people believe it?"

"A large number do," she said. "Others consider it irrational..."

"Not superstitious?"

"Some consider it not so much superstitious but supernatural..."

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I think of it as a hoax."

"So, in your opinion, who is deceiving whom?" I asked.

"That remains to be seen," she said with a wink.

Before walking down the stairs, I turned and looked back at the moon one last time. I could not make out any outline. In fact, since I had never seen a specter, I didn't know quite what to expect or what to look for.

In the living room, the children had gone to their rooms. I went to turn the television on and Golnar said, "Wait. Let's talk about this. Do you think Mokhtar is telling us something? I mean, tongue in cheek?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean in response to you," she said. "In response to your statements that, as a nation, we can manage our own affairs, exploit our resources ourselves, create a progressive local, national, and global economy... that kind of thing..."

"That is not my opinion in particular," I interrupted. "Many think the revolution will enable us to do all that and more..."

"What do you mean by more? Do you mean implementation of sweeping political, social, cultural, and ideological reforms?"

"Yes," I said. "The revolution seems to be forward looking. In that case, we should be able to discard traditional ideologies and propel the country up to the level of the progressive nations of the world..."

"That last bit, I think," she said, "That bit is why Mokhtar sent you to the roof. Discarding traditional ideologies. Do you really and truly think this revolution is going to make free housing for all a priority and make water, electricity, and medical care free? Have you given the notion of water, electricity, and medical care free for all any thought? I mean in solid economic terms? And I am not mentioning the promise of bundles of cash money being thrown over the walls as compensation for the sale of shares of oil and natural gas!"

“I think,” I said, “You and Mokhtar are looking at a particular segment of society—the believers in the supernatural and the followers of superstition. I am looking at the progressive rationalists at the helm...”

So, all those on the roofs looking for the specter... which faction did they belong to? Those following superstition, or the rationalists, unless you mean nationalists?” She asked.

Before I could answer, the telephone rang again. This time, it was Mokhtar himself. He seemed to be in a panic. He said, “I don’t have much time. They are after me. I am calling from a hiding place. That’s why I had Bahman call to make sure you are home. I wanted to make sure that you see the crowd. To see how bedazzled they have become by the glitter of the fake beads of Aqa Shams al-Din’s rosary! To see how this cleric’s charisma, harsh rhetoric, pious demeanor, and *taqiyyeh* have bamboozled them! That’s what I was talking about. That’s what galvanizes them to action in spite of themselves! Didn’t he announce that he was not interested in the worldly? But it turned out that he was. Didn’t he say he would end all inequalities? What did he do? He institutionalized them. He is creating a bevy of elites and a hierarchy of underlings, all belonging to the same family, to rule over us...”

“Before you carry on any further,” I interrupted, “I have a couple of questions for you. First, are you calling from Shiraz? Is the specter Aqa Shams al-Din? And most important, do you give any thought to your wife and children when you go around giving these incendiary lectures?”

“Yes and yes,” he said. “Of course, I worry about my family and about you all. But more than that I worry about the larger community, and our community to which I have pledged my life...”

Then interrupting himself said, “at this point in my life all I can do is to carry out dad’s wishes. As your older brother, I advise you to think about your situation very hard and very deep. I am in the situation I am because of two things. One is because of who I am, a Baha’i. The other is because I cannot shut up. That is who I am. You are stuck with the first of my two identifiers. Unfortunately, under the prevailing circumstances, it doesn’t make any difference. Being a Baha’i by itself is tantamount to being condemned to death. So, think hard, set your options, and act. Keeping yourself and your family cooped up in your house is not a solution... I am running out of time... Say hello to all. I will call, when I can...”

Mokhtar’s words shook me to the core, as did the perilous state in which he had placed himself. The conversation, short as it was, made me reevaluate my views. I was looking at the glass half full while circumstances were testifying to the contrary. At the height of our victory, when I thought we had it made, wasn’t it Aqa Shams al-Din who swiftly turned our sweet success into bitter bane!? Then, didn’t he, through repeated pronouncements, direct us down the path that he had charted? “Dictates are what they are, dictates,” he said. “They must be obeyed by all.” Besides, didn’t he order that assignments should be made to those who belong to the line and none other? And that undesirables should be identified and either disabled or, on a case by case basis, eliminated. Am I not an undesirable? Isn’t that what Mokhtar just said? Didn’t the Aqa repeatedly bombard us with injunctions such as “the intensity of

the light of your revolution is maintained by the hard work of the custodians of the light! You must assist the custodians as they go about establishing your guaranteed just society.”

After all, it was in the process of the creation of the “just society” that, in the twentieth century, I was rudely hounded out of my office, an office that I had studied hard to achieve and which I had held with dignity for a decade. Yet, a bunch of riff-raff forced me out of the education building at gun point. More than at my own naiveté, Mokhtar’s words made me discern the naiveté of thousands of my fellow citizens who failed to protect themselves and, in the process, failed to protect me. That also includes the so-called rationalists.

I was the education director of the Isfahan province. But, in spite of all my credentials, expertise, experience, and service, I was discarded like a pair of old shoes. Rumor has it that difficult times await me, and innuendoes confirm my worst fears. Mokhtar’s words also opened my eyes to the reality that what had started as a promise of opening new horizons and new avenues for growth and progress, has already turned into a saw cutting at my roots. A saw that is stemming my growth, nullifying my identity, and stifling my being. Affairs are reduced to the point that my life’s achievements are summarized in one sentence: I was the education director of the Isfahan province. I don’t think anyone would contest that. Although, I am sure, some might. The confounding thing is that those who affirm my position are also those who, most likely, would hold it against me. In fact, they affirm it in order to hold it against me. Their duplicity turns my dreams into dreadful nightmares.

In short, I began to realize that hard work and ingenuity, the traditional standards for meritorious employment and promotion, have given way to raw power rooted in discrimination and, among other factors, to nepotism. Thousands and thousands of capable artists, scholars, engineers, doctors, and teachers have lost their positions and jobs. Thousands more feel insecure, while countless others have lost all hope for employment. In sum, Mokhtar’s last words made me feel the general malaise that reigns over our revolution-struck society. The only satisfaction that I could deduce from all that is that we all are in this together. A satisfaction that in itself is tantamount to torture.

Mokhtar, of course, was oblivious to the impact of the events that I had gone through since the onset of the revolution, starting with the armed attack on the education building, which almost put an end to my life. Our families did not get a chance to sit at our usual monthly gatherings and talk about affairs. That unexpected attack demoralized me. It made me mentally and physically paralyzed. In a way, it made me a prisoner of my thoughts rooted in my fears. The mere fact that my office boy became bold enough to order me around and the school children began to assign revolutionary tasks to their teachers pushed me deeper and deeper into myself. Somehow, except for me, everyone had become an authority of sorts and almost everyone wielded a gun. Nevertheless, deep down in my heart, I had a feeling that all that will pass and a new day will dawn. I had worked too hard for my plan for improving the educational system to abandon it.

At the same time, a thought runs through my mind. It says: You are being singled out. Maybe, but I am sure there are many others like me. It is strange that, as much as I would like to know how others are faring, I am just as anxious to be kept in the dark about their status. I have a vague feeling that what they would tell me might not be quite what I would expect to hear, especially if it pertains to the activities in the *mahfel* (Baha'i social gathering), an institution that began its ordeal on the day of its inception. There I could find out if others had seen the specter. Everyone else did.

The Meydan

In this self-created world that, after Mokhtar's call, I have created around myself, I feel much closer to my late father now than I felt when he was alive. On Fridays, I visit his grave. The visits keep his memory fresh in my mind. As I go about my daily life, he speaks to me. He reminds me of the father-son conversations we had. These days, I am analyzing those conversations and using them as a kind of coping mechanism to prevent myself from digressing into insanity.

Except with regard to some issues, my father was very generous about sharing his thoughts and experiences with me. In the case of the issues that he demurred, he basically left me on my own to figure them out. For instance, whenever I tried to find out why, as a family, we were different from some of the other families in the neighborhood, he would evade the question. When I pushed him for an answer, he would say, "There is no particular reason." Or, "If there is a difference, when you grow up, you will figure it out for yourself..."

That usually was the end of that conversation. Talking to Mokhtar, however, made me wonder if he was privy to dad's secret thoughts. He and dad did not go on walks together, like we did, but Mokhtar always helped father when the old man worked around the house, mending the pool, or fixing a wall or a door. They talked as they worked.

In any event, it is just before sunrise and I have made it to the *Naqsh-e Jahan meydan* (square). I am standing in front of the entrance to the bazaar and looking ahead at the beautiful blue dome and the four lofty minarets of the Shah Mosque on the opposite end of the *meydan* from me. What a magnificent sight! You have to be here on a sunny day at this particular time of the morning, as the sun rises, to enjoy the rays of the sun dancing against the intricate designs on the dome and the minarets. The reflection of the sunlight on the golden tiles of the dome of the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque is even more exhilarating.

Passing by the flowerbeds and looking at the flowers, I am reminded of my father's words of long ago, when we were walking together right here, around the *meydan*. "None of this was here." He said. His arms held wide open as if to embrace the whole *meydan*. "This landscaping and those flowerbeds were not here. The ice-cream stand and the shallow pond are absolutely new. In fact," he continued, "they say, in the old days, this square was used as a field for playing the game of polo." He even showed me the

stone markers in front of the Shah Mosque that had served as goal posts. “On occasions,” he concluded, “the square had also been used as a *caravanserai*. Caravans carrying Silk-Road goods from China to Rome spent a few nights in Isfahan.”

My father was not a traveling man, but he knew a lot about shot silks, spices, and lapis-lazuli. The stories he told us as kids were mostly about adventures in the Turkmen desert, the outskirts of Samarqand, and the slave markets of Bukhara; exotic places that, at the time, I could visualize with my mind’s eye and which I hoped to someday visit.

I realize now that, with regard to my upbringing, my father took a particular approach. He let my imagination loose on the world at large so that I could become familiar with the dynamics of change and with impetus for progress while, at the same time, he sheltered me from the divisive issues that were brewing locally all around me. He, apparently, did not want me to get involved in things like nationalism and ideology, the actual burning issues of the time. I wonder whether he was aware of the future consequences of that strategy, not only for me, but also for his grandchildren.

In any event, as I stand here, and look at the *meydan*, it no longer looks like a polo field, or a *caravanserai*. Streets, trucks, buses, lampposts, trees, and flowerbeds mask its identity. They mask it so thoroughly that even the shah himself, viewing it from his high Porte of Ali Qapu, would not be able to recognize it. This is a thorough makeover resulting from a collective will, effort, and mind set instilled in a dedicated people determined to change the identity of a sleepy medieval town.

“Change the identity,” of course, is a loaded phrase! It masks reality in the same way that the changes in the present-day *meydan* mask reality from the very shah who created it. Is there something behind the façade of the *Naqsh-e Jahan meydan*, I asked myself, about which father did not want me to know? His profound silence when I asked questions about the earlier history of the area gave me pause then, and it continues to give me pause today.

I am not sure to what extent my father was aware of the intensity of the force that was behind the renovation of Isfahan and, in particular, behind the creation of the *Naqsh-e Jahan meydan*. In other words, I am not sure whether he was aware of the fact that this vast area of old Isfahan on which the pond, the mosques and the Ali Qapu stand today, was originally covered by low-level mud brick houses. Was he aware that the original inhabitants that were rendered homeless were devoted to their faith as much as those who were uprooting them were devoted to their faith? I wonder whether he knew that, at the inception of the creation of these monumental structures, there were two existing communities that were increasingly drifting apart. Did he know that a chasm was being created between a powerful society intent on undertaking reconstruction, and a powerless society that was being destined to steady decline, leading to eventual elimination?

Maybe father did not want to, or did not have the heart to, expose his younger son to the lack of compassion prevalent at that time. I am sure I would have asked why didn’t they spend a portion of the money and the talent of the builders to build new dwellings and relocate those people? Now, looking at

the situation, I see that father did not want to get into politics. Then, as now, there was no willingness to relocate. Gradual elimination was the order of the day and, unfortunately, it remains that way.

My father was smart. I am sure that that fatherly protective shield must have been the reason. Mokhtar's words testify to that. The problem is that father did not pass that information on to me, his own son. He did not tell me in so many words that our family belonged to the latter group, the group destined for eventual extermination. In reality, he kept from me the fact that the majority of the Isfahanis of that era belonged to the latter group and were flagged for eventual annihilation. On that issue, he left me in the dark, and today, his grandchildren and I suffer the consequences of that decision. As a loving father, he tried to instill a middle of the way, progressive existence in me at a time when many other fathers were preparing their children for martyrdom and for admittance to paradise.

As if in a daze, I stood there, in front of the bazaar, looking at the deep blue color of the cloudless sky. Suddenly, a frightening thing happened. From the depth of the blue, a specter appeared and grew gradually larger and, as it moved in my direction, became more defined. Mokhtar was right. The specter that I could not see on the face of the moon, very closely resembled Aqa Shams al-Din. He was hovering over the *meydan*. Moments later, he was directly in front of me and, looking me squarely in the eyes, said, "In my previous attempt at reshaping the city of Isfahan I spared the population. I allowed them to live their lives as they had lived before. I only reshaped structures. This time, I intend to remedy that situation. I intend to, once and for all, reshape the people of Isfahan in my own image. I will reshape them so thoroughly that the result would put all previous attempts at reshaping the Isfahanis to shame..."

Having said that, the specter disappeared, leaving me looking at the empty space above the structures around the pond. Like Mokhtar's last words, the specter had a lasting effect on me. The encounter taught me a great deal about the nature of the revolution underway. I realized that there was nothing forward looking about it as I had originally thought. I had projected my own forward-looking ideas into a set of backward-looking slogans and, due to the intense conviction of Aqa Shams al-Din, mistook one for the other. In fact, I realized that what was happening around me was not a revolution at all. Not by any definition of "forward looking." Revolutions change the old and introduce new realities. The type of realities that were contained in my forward-looking outlook. What was happening around me was a mere continuation of the reshaping that had transformed the mud-brick houses of the original residents of that part of old Isfahan into a modern *meydan*.

If so, it made me think, to what degree would the Aqa's impending population manipulation affect me and my family? Would the reshaping be compassionate or would it be merciless as it must have been in those days when they forced the old Isfahanis to move to the desert! Could the impact of the Aqa's changes be so drastic that people and things around us would become alien to us? Can that alienation be so thorough that I would no longer be able to relate, in my usual way, to my city, my neighbors, my colleagues, and my family? The mere visualization of the outcome impacted me. Tears welled up in my eyes and blurred my vision. The entire scene disappeared in my tears. I felt lonely and harried.

In spite of the cool morning breeze and the calm and quiet of the outdoors that I cherish, I decided to leave the *meydan* and return home. I entered the lane beside Ali Qapu and walked briskly past the old royal palaces. But even though I was leaving the *meydan* physically, my thoughts were still engaged in it. I continued to think about the changes that were inevitably coming and that, in turn, morphed into the changes that had already taken place. I worried that even though the reforms implemented thus far appeared innocent, even innocuous, in reality they were creating a tribal community populated by submissive people obedient to the dictates of gods, prophets, and ideologues.

I came to this rather harsh conclusion as a result of a quick mental review of the reforms already in place. The university is closed, I thought. Administrative offices are closed. Schools are closed. Movie theaters and the city's only live theater are closed. The rule of law is abandoned, music is forbidden, sexes are segregated, and drug addiction is on the rise. What does the sudden closing of those institutions indicate? I asked myself. It indicates that the talents and the ingenuity that over the decades had been channeled into the promotion of those vital facets of social life would now have to find alternate functions through which to manifest themselves. The alternate use of those talents and ingenuity, according to precedence, would be construction of larger and more imposing *Naqsh-e Jahan meydans*, building new, magnificent shrines, and embellishment of the old grand monuments to the dead.

As I move on, I do not hear the sound of music that normally filled the air. That is because the ban on music has penetrated so deeply into the fabric of our society that even my children, at home, no longer listen to music. I admit I am not as patient as they are. Once or twice, I went to the basement and listened to a couple of favorite records. But each time I felt I was doing something terribly wrong and irrevocably sinful. I even felt the presence of the bearded minister of "Voice and Vision," an old college friend, appearing on the threshold reprimanding me. For a while I took refuge in the radio, but the topics were depressing. I recall vividly, one day, a *mullah* discussing the required footage for shrouds in mortuaries. He was detailing how every inch must be measured, shaped, cut, and used. I felt sick to my stomach. I turned off the radio and took refuge in the television. I couldn't believe it, but that same clergyman was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the studio! In his hand he held a measuring stick and in front of him were piled bolts of white calico...

At home, I tried as hard as I could to put the specter of Aqa Shams al-Din, which was still fresh in my memory, out of my mind. But to no avail. No matter how hard I tried, I kept seeing him sweep away small mud-brick houses with one hand and, with his other hand, placing mosques, palaces, and tombs in their stead. I felt he was showing me what my father should have shown me. He was showing me the roadmap to perdition. A destiny for traveling to which I did not have any preparation.

The River

The constant flow of the Zayanderud river has always intrigued me. The river comes from somewhere unknown to me, passes me by without revealing much about itself, and disappears to yet another place unknown to me. These days, strange as it might sound, I can easily identify with the river. My life, like the river, is flowing away from me, heading for a destination about which I dread to think. Thanks to the specter, at least I am aware of the circumstance in which I am placed, an awareness that I wish had remained obscure. Hence the insightful approach that my father had taken.

It is early in the morning, a week after my visit to the *Naqsh-e Jahan meydan* and my encounter with the specter of Aqa Shams al-Din. Earlier, the visit to my father's grave did not go well. I was enraged by what I saw there to the degree that I am at a loss for words to describe. At the present, I am standing on the ancient mud-brick bridge across the Zayanderud river. The three newer bridges, the metal bridge, the Siyosepol and the Khaju bridge are in front of me. While watching the sun rise and enjoying the sunlight on those bridges, I try to sort out my disparate thoughts. I find my predilections placed at a crossroads. I admire the artistic achievement of the medieval creators of the Khaju and Siyosepol bridges, but I take the existence of the recently-built metal bridge for granted. I try to understand the meaning, and the nature of the contradictory interactions that are shaping my view of things, interactions that define my life, that stimulate me in creating my thoughts, words, and actions.

As I gaze at the water, the bridges, and the sunlight, I realize that, unlike my eyes, my heart, and my mind that automatically discriminate, the sunlight does not discriminate. It allows its golden beams to wash over the metal bridge with the same care and measured pace as over the other bridges. Involuntarily, I am reminded of Aqa Shams al-Din. He is an avid promoter of this particular aspect of the sunlight. You can detect that from his remarks: We are all human beings. We are all Muslims. One day the whole population of the world will be Muslim. No one should have any doubt about that!

But, as I said, the concrete view that I see within myself, is contrary to the behavior of the sunlight and the pronouncements of the specter. I cannot be better than them! Yet, I can sense the very mechanism with which, often involuntarily, I separate, grade, and categorize bits of information. In other words, I observe discrimination at work within me: Isfahani, Shirazi, Tabrizi; Buddhist, Christian, Jewish;

Kurd, Turk, Arab, Ajam. Each item is clearly marked, even color-coded, as acceptable or unacceptable. And that isn't all. The intensity of the acceptability of some aspects outweighs and outshines the acceptability of the others. Tragically, I should admit, this is an outcome that is fixed within me, and more tragically, it is triggered in me in spite of myself! I believe some god, or prophet, or ideologue has lodged, nay ingrained, it in me.

Upon further reflection, I realize that the issue is beyond the sunrise, the bridges, and me. It is a force larger, more profound, and more egotistical than I can fathom. In addition, that multifarious force is lodged deep not only within my make up, but also, in various forms, within the makeup of my fellow citizens. As a result of this realization, for the first time in my life, I observed how the intellect, or lack thereof, of my fellow citizens, at the apex of them Aqa Shams al-Din, is vitally instrumental in setting the parameters for my future life. The question was turned around. It became, whether, as a human being, I would be able to overrule that force. More importantly, whether my fellow citizens would be able to overrule that imposition. No doubt, that was an alarming discovery, especially when I placed in the balance the fundamental differences of opinion that separated me from them.

Digging a bit deeper, I realized that both the apparent nature of the sunlight and the superficial aphorisms of Aqa Shams al-Din, nourished on simplicity. The simplicity of the sunlight and the sophistication of its beauty, masked the sunlight's most vital feature. The sunlight is the carrier of properties that provide nourishment for *all* plants, animals, and human beings irrespective of their differences. In other words, the sunlight can warm the bridges and nourish the water and the trees. It provides each with what is needed for it to sustain itself. It does the same for my fellow citizens no matter what their sex, color, or creed, or their attitude towards the affairs of the world at large might be.

The aphorisms of Aqa Shams al-Din, however, are only skin deep. They are not coupled with the compassion of the sunlight. He picks and chooses. As he said: One day the whole population of the world will be Muslim.

That realization not only took me by surprise, but also threw a gut-wrenching fear into my heart. What if, I wondered, Aqa Shams al-Din, the Supreme Custodian of Light, was to ignore the compassionate, all embracing, vital aspect of light altogether and concentrate his reshaping of the people of Isfahan only on the basis of the visual reality that entices him? What if he were to formulate a string of simple rules on the basis of his aphorisms—the equality principle in particular—and direct his minions to enforce them? More poignantly, what if he was to make that aspect of light the fulcrum of his teachings? How would the custodians of light working under him interpret that dispensation for the lay people? What type of society would emerge?

I did not have to go far for an answer. I posed the same question to the sunlight with regard to its life-imparting capability. I mean, what if the sunlight were to deny nourishment to the diverse life forces that it supports? For instance, suppose the sunlight were to decide to nourish only wheat, and possibly barley? What would happen to the garbanzo bean, the lentil, and the rice? What would be the end result

of the full implementation of that policy by the sunlight? Would it not be a globe covered with wheat fields accentuated by patches of barley? Is that the extent of Aqa Shams al-Din's reshaping of the people of Isfahan? A population all looking like him?

Occupied by those thoughts, I was transported to the *Naqsh-e Jahan meydan*, and to the time when the *meydan* was a *caravanserai*. In place of the mosques and the Ali Qapu, along the sides of the *meydan*, tall cranes and mighty oil derricks were installed. As if it were Resurrection Day, the specter of Aqa Shams al-Din stood in front of the bazaar, towering over the crowd. Using his inherent powers as the Supreme Custodian of Light, he looked into every individual's soul and determined the amount of light within him. He then handed the individual to a particular custodian of light to be incorporated in the just social order being established. Many more, however, who were deemed of low light, or of no redeeming light, were summarily hurled into the Zayanderud river that happened to be flowing harmoniously through the *meydan*.

The naked discriminatory process, the lack of compassion, the outright rejection of the multifarious needs of the crowd, especially the exercise of unbound authority lodged in a specter, shocked me and brought me back to reality. Involuntarily, I was reminded of my father whom I had left in a rage just minutes earlier. He was laying in his desecrated grave. Seeing the specter in this mode, I realized why my old man spared me the agony. The specter, on the other hand, was frank. He showed me reality in its ruthless, naked mien. He made me understand that, as an individual with zest for life, I had come up short on two counts and that I should pay for both those transgressions. One was my ancient roots in the creation of which I had no involvement, the other was my contemporary belief to which I had acceded willingly and wholeheartedly. I was transfixed. Like the countless crowd waiting to be scanned to be placed. Although deep in my heart, I knew the decree already. What I did not know was when that verdict would reach me.

Even though I stood firmly on the old mud-brick bridge, I had the sensation that I was floating down the turbulent river without even a straw to hold on to. I looked at the beautiful city of Isfahan as it went by. It looked frighteningly grim, as if it awaited the arrival of the destructive army of Tamerlane. Every time I tried to climb to the shore, a fellow citizen pushed me back into the current. Overwhelmed by this disturbing realization, I asked myself, what if, God forbid, the rumors and the innuendoes floating in various circles about my fate come true? What if the ingrained prejudice of my fellow citizens were to get the better of them? What would happen to me? In fact, what would happen to others who, in so many ways, are like me?

Time flew by and, like the previous days, people began to crowd the streets. Once again, I felt I should slip back into my house, close the door behind me, and hope for a miracle. But this time I was on the other side of the city and to reach the safety of my house, I had to cross several streets and alleyways. Taking long strides, I passed by many of my fellow citizens. Just a mere look at them made me

feel more apprehensive than I had felt the previous Friday. The main difference was that thinking about the future, rather than the past, had heightened my anxiety.

Not long ago, I took delight when I saw women on their way to work. They brightened the day just by walking by. The same women today are magically transformed into crow-like beings, wrapped up in thick, black *chadors*. Gone are the make-up, colorful blouses, skirts, and high-heeled shoes. Gone are the merry, satisfied faces of the young girls accompanying their mothers. How quickly all that has been effaced! Like taking the eraser to the blackboard! Incredible indeed. Looking at those drab scenes, it would not be an exaggeration if I were to say an angry demon had squeezed all the brilliant and delightful colors out of the spectrum and thrown them to the winds. The colorless future ahead made me anxious.



Karl Brunn

Neither is it any different for the men. They, too, have changed. Whether young, middle-aged, or old, they all wear beards. Where once I saw nicely groomed men smiling at me as they crossed my path on their way to work, now I see shabby beings with stern faces wearing dirty, wrinkled suits. They stare me in the face as if mystified by my very existence. What happened to the neck ties, bow ties, and the squeak of new shoes? I wonder. I realize now how much I enjoyed hearing the squeak of new shoes against the pavement, as opposed to the annoying scuffing of *malakis*. More than that, how much I miss greeting people who felt they had a purpose ahead of them as opposed to the ones who cross my path now, walking the streets without a purpose.

There are other passersby, mostly in groups. Of every group of five people I pass by, three are revolutionary guards who are taking some unfortunate victim to a committee to be interrogated. The fifth is an overseeing *mullah* whose job it is to see that all arrests are made properly and legally. He is also the one who makes sure that the committee proceedings are carried out according to the *Shari'a* law before he hands the victim the committee's verdict. Other groups of guards and *mullahs* escort victims to the gallows to be hanged, or to special execution squads to be shot. In these latter groups, the verdict is pinned to the victim's lapel and, in all cases, the victim is handcuffed.

Seeing these scenes not only makes me self-conscious, but also adds to my distress. It makes me visualize a day in the near future when I would be the victim. I don't know. Maybe within a few weeks, I might be the one who is escorted by three guards and a *mullah* to a committee and, who knows, God forbid, maybe even to some gallows, or to an execution squad. The fear of execution sends shivers down my spine. I think of the day when they will appear at my gate and ask for me. I dread the moment when our servant, Ali Asghar, runs to the door and says, "Aqa, there are three guards at the door. They want to talk to you." How am I to explain that situation to my wife and kids?

The Servant

As I get closer to my house, the disturbing thoughts about my imaginary struggles with the powers that be give way to thoughts about the trials and tribulations of my family. Only Ali Asghar and I venture out of the house. My adventures, as I explained, are brief. They take place on Fridays that the weather is good. They begin and end early in the morning. I feel like the whales that surface for fresh air and dive back to the depths. I leave the house, breathe the fresh air, make sure the world around us is still there, and slip back into the house waiting for things to sort themselves out. Ali Asghar, on the other hand, goes out quite frequently. He mingles with people, gets coupons, stands in never-ending lines, buys groceries, and watches revolutionary spectacles. This sixteen-year-old is the only link between us and the city in which I have been education director for a decade, and in which my wife has been a university professor for just as long.

Every time Ali Asghar comes back from the bazaar, he brings us a fresh account of events. Through him, we know who has been whipped, who has been arrested, who has been hanged, and who has been executed by firing squad. Following my prompting, he also tries to find out who has gained prominence in the community and who is demoted. In a nutshell, Ali Asghar is our radio, television, and newspaper reporter all rolled into one. By necessity, we trust him. In fact, under the prevailing circumstances, that is our only option. We depend on Ali Asghar.

Most of the stories that Ali Asghar tells are unsettling. They bring to mind the dirty alleys of Paris and the crude carts that carried the victims of the French Revolution to the guillotine. These images, mingled with the booms from the roofs of the nearby revolutionary committee, as it goes about its sacred duty, unnerve me, especially when I think ahead to my wife and children's reaction to the *mullah* and the guards who, one day, will come to our gate to arrest me!

Some of Ali Asghar's stories are incredible. I am not saying that he lies, far from that. But neither can I say with certainty that what he says is either accurate or credible. Maybe I have difficulty believing him because what he says belongs to a much different time, or even age. He compares Isfahan to a large prison camp in which every inmate, even children, are instructed to spy for the warden. That, to me, comes right out of concentration camps, gulags, and medieval dungeons, rather than out of the streets and back alleyways of old Isfahan.

Just the other day Ali Asghar said, "Today an old mother squealed on her son and paved her own way to paradise!" Does that mean that they hanged her son, or put him in front of the firing squad? I don't know. Still another time he said, "Reza, the ice-cream vendor's twelve-year-old son, ratted on his father. The revolutionary guards hanged the father and turned the business over to the son." Seeing how difficult it is for me to deal with the outside world, he becomes sarcastic, often even down right rude. "If I were to squeal on you," he once taunted, "I bet they would make me education director!"

The more things that go on like that, the more I feel diminished. That in itself makes Ali Asghar's remarks more poignant and worrisome. Often his remarks, like this last one, make me question his motive. Then I try to look at what he says logically. What he says might not be funny to us, I rationalize, but they seem to be funny to him. Why not allow the child to enjoy himself, even if it is at our expense? That, nevertheless, does not mean that his remarks do not terrify me. They do. Particularly, when I think about the fate of Reza's father. Ironically, after all is said and done, Ali Asghar laughs and says, "But don't be alarmed, director, sir. I am only joking. I would never do anything that would harm you."

Now, about halfway to my house, I was walking down Abbas Abad avenue. For some reason, I remembered something that my wife had recently said about Ali Asghar's possible dubious activities outside the house. She said that Behjat Khanom, her sister, had called and said that several times her son Vahhab has seen a boy looking like Ali Asghar mingling with a dubious *mullah* in the *Kohne Meydan*. Behjat Khanom calls only when she senses real danger threatening the family.

The information shocked me but, unfortunately, I could not verify the veracity of Vahhab's statement, and because of the possibility that Ali Asghar might leave us, I could not confront the boy directly. To tell the truth, I could not afford to lose him. So, in a bind, in spite of my wife's anxiety and my own frustration and helplessness, I kept ignoring the issue. In fact, I tried to convince myself that Ali Asghar is young—only sixteen. The *mullah*, if there is a *mullah*, could be a relative of his. More importantly, all my life I have worked with children like Ali Asghar. I am familiar with their psyche. All that finally led me to the conclusion that Vahhab must be fabricating a story!

I was close to home. As I continued walking along the beautiful Abbas Abad Avenue and marveling at its gorgeous tall plane trees, for some unknown reason, I had a feeling that I was about to lose them altogether. Strangely enough, never before have I experienced such a premonition. I was asking myself, “Why shouldn’t I be able to go to the *Naqsh-e Jahan* square any time I want and watch the sun rise without being lectured to by the specter of Aqa Shams al-Din? Why should I be deprived of standing before the tortuous bazaar and marvel at the beautiful blue dome and the lofty minarets of the Shah Mosque without fear of execution squads? These disparate thoughts then morphed into questions of their own: Why does the specter of Aqa Shams al-Din linger in my mind? Why doesn’t he issue his decree?”

When I turned into the alley that led to the stream near our house, I realized that while Ali Asghar and I have been able to leave the house and enjoy the fresh air, my wife and children have been cooped up in the house for weeks on end without a break. Isn’t it time, I asked myself, to put them in the car and take them out of the city, to the ancient Gabrabad district, for instance? Even if they don’t get to talk to people, they can, at the least, wade in the Zayanderud river, enjoy the breeze on their faces, and feel the warmth of the sun. Thus, having made my mind up, when I entered the house, I said to my wife, “I will get the car ready. You get the children. We are going for a ride.”

“Are you crazy?” She said in an incredulous voice. “You haven’t had your breakfast yet. The children haven’t either...”

“That’s all right,” I replied calmly. “We can have something in the car...”

“But why suddenly this up and go?” She asked. “Why not wait until things sort themselves out?”

“Things will never sort themselves out—not today, not tomorrow—we will have to live with them as they are. I have had it up to here...”

“You’ve had it up to here!” She raised her voice.

“Yes,” I said. “Because you and the children have had it even worse. Now, let’s get going!”

“OK,” she said. “But before leaving, I need to put some things together. Also, what is Ali Asghar going to do?... And “Gorgi”?”

“Ali Asghar is visiting his relatives until the afternoon. Gorgi sleeps in his spot, or moves around in the yard and guards his territory. We will not be gone for long.”

I arranged things so that we could spend the morning around the Zayanderud river and its tributaries. Later we could visit the ancient Gabrabad district, eat lunch under the shade of the willow trees there, and leave when it started to become hot and muggy.

After we left the house, I turned onto Sheykh Baha’i Avenue and did not stop. I was afraid that we might be stopped by the revolutionary guards or, worse yet, by the unruly

youths who carried lethal weapons. Past the Khaju Bridge, I headed for the tomb of the poet Valeh. I had heard that the love-stricken poet had built his tomb with his own hands and had sculpted his own tombstone leaving the place for the date of his death blank. Paying a visit to the gardens surrounding the tomb of the jolly poet, I thought, would be interesting.

But, unfortunately, at the gate, a badly scribbled note announced that, for the foreseeable future, the tomb and the garden area were out of bounds. Dismayed, I headed for Gabrabad. On the way there, my wife remarked, "You know, Gabrabad is an interesting place, a true reminder of the passage of time. It makes one aware of how people displace each other."

I could not see her face under the *chador*, but her voice carried a mixture of desperation and nostalgia. What changes was she contemplating? Nodding in affirmation, I said, "There is change, of course. The important thing is how we respond to it..."

Fortunately, we were at a place that I could park the car. As soon as the car door opened, even at their age, like uncaged birds that fly to tree tops, the children took off for the water. My wife and I strolled in the vicinity. There were many unanswered questions about our formidable future, but somehow we had mutually agreed to suppress them by taking refuge in small talk. I even had not heard from her, in her own words, how an illiterate *mullah*, in a small room by the entrance to the college, had dismissed her from her position as a professor, saying, there is no place here for the likes of you anymore. I heard the account second hand from one of my wife's colleagues.

After we walked a few steps, like a thief looking for the police, my wife looked all around, and when she became sure that no one was around, dropped the *chador* to her shoulders. In the sunlight, I could see the toll that the days of confinement and worry had taken on her. "Where did you go?" She asked casually.

"I took a taxi and went down the Najafabad road," I said.

"I am afraid these adventures of yours will get you killed. Don't you think what would happen if you fall into the hands of a bunch of zealots? Don't you think of us?"

"It's my father and others," I said. "I feel obliged to visit them. It's Friday."

"I realize that. I have family there, too. But those over there," pointing to the citizens of Isfahan, "they don't... that early in the morning, alone, by the river..." Then, as if she remembered something, she interrupted herself, "By the way, when you returned from your walk, you looked agitated. Was everything in order?"

"No," I said curtly. "Two of the graves were vandalized."

"Which two?" She asked anxiously. "The two that..."

"Yes, unfortunately," I interrupted her.

"Please Khamush, don't go there. I can't bear hearing any more about these atrocities."

She said that and, wiping off her tears, added, “not this early in the morning. And please, don’t mention any of that to the children.”

“Why not?” I asked. “Shouldn’t they have a sense of who their grandfather...”

“Khamush,” she pleaded. “You are rooted in Isfahan. Don’t tie the children up to this place as well.”

“In any event,” I continued. “From there I walked by the river to the old bridge, halted there a few minutes to gather my thoughts, and walked home. What did you do?”

“I have been thinking,” she said. “Days, and weeks, and months are going by and we are not taking any steps. Others like us have either sold their properties and left, or are selling...”

“How do you know that’s what they are doing?”

“I talk to colleagues, at least the ones who still talk to us...”

“So, what are you saying?”

“I am saying,” she said, “maybe while we still can, we should sell the house and the car and, if necessary some jewels, and use the cash. We can move to some safe place. I don’t feel secure in Isfahan any more. The treatment the children are receiving at school, the increasing bitter hate thrown at us, at them in particular, is unhealthy. It is likely to create problems for them later in life. Just the other day I caught Zhaleh playing with a razor blade. I don’t know if that is indicative of anything. She asked if it was true that Baha’i families exchange their wives? What am I to say to her? Children in school are spreading these lies. Kayvan is more and more going around with drug addicts much older than himself. He is trying to make himself fit into their gangs. There are traces of drugs in his pockets...I don’t know where he gets the money. You need to talk to him.”

“Why are you telling me all these things now?” I snapped.

“I have been telling you these things and much more... You are not hearing me... For nearly two years I have been harping on this vital issue. I have been saying we must leave this place. Leaving Isfahan for somewhere else is not a luxury any more. It is an urgent endeavor that we must undertake. I am afraid, it might be late already...”

“I just told you where I went, didn’t I,” I said. “This is our nest. It is undergoing change. We have to be flexible. I am sure they will find a middle ground.”

“Flexibility is a two-way street,” she said firmly. “Maybe a middle ground will eventually be reached. But that would be after us. If not after our children, if they survive this.”

Knowing where the conversation was heading, I said, “Give me some time, I will find a way. Meanwhile, why don’t you go and join the children? I am sure they will be more entertaining.”

“I don’t mind if I do,” she said, and added, “I left this bit of bad news for the end. They have arrested both Mokhtar and Sho’leh in Shiraz. They may have been taken to the Adelabad prison. I am not sure. I am worried and I am sorry.”

“I was afraid of that,” I said. But why both of them?”

“You know why.”

“How about the children?”

“They have taken them, too. No one knows their whereabouts... When you came back, I was about to call around for more information...”

Then, interrupting herself, in a matter-of-fact tone, she said, “Lunch is in the basket in the trunk. There is a blanket on the back seat to use as a tablecloth.”

I took the blanket and spread it on the uneven ground. Then, I gathered some dry branches and made a fire for cooking kabobs later. Although it was the middle of summer, it felt as if we were on a *Sizdabedar* outing. I took the basket out of the trunk and set the *sofreh* up. The children, engrossed in their freedom and play, did not seem to care about either breakfast or lunch.



In the afternoon, returning home, I noted that in the area where Reza Shah’s statue used to welcome travelers from Shiraz to Isfahan, a crowd was forming. Men, women, and children seemed to be settling in for a long wait. Fearing an untoward confrontation, I didn’t stop to find out the reason for the gathering and drove straight to Sheykh Baha’i Avenue and home.

Our house is close to the center of the city. As a result, unlike in Lonban, Nazhnan, Toqchi, and Sar-e Qabr-e Aqa, we have not seen masked bandits climb our walls, or thugs disrespect our neighbors. Nor have our family members been caught in crossfire. In other words, thus far, we have been relatively safe. That, however, does not allay my latent fears. I always beware of the calm before the proverbial storm.

The Trial

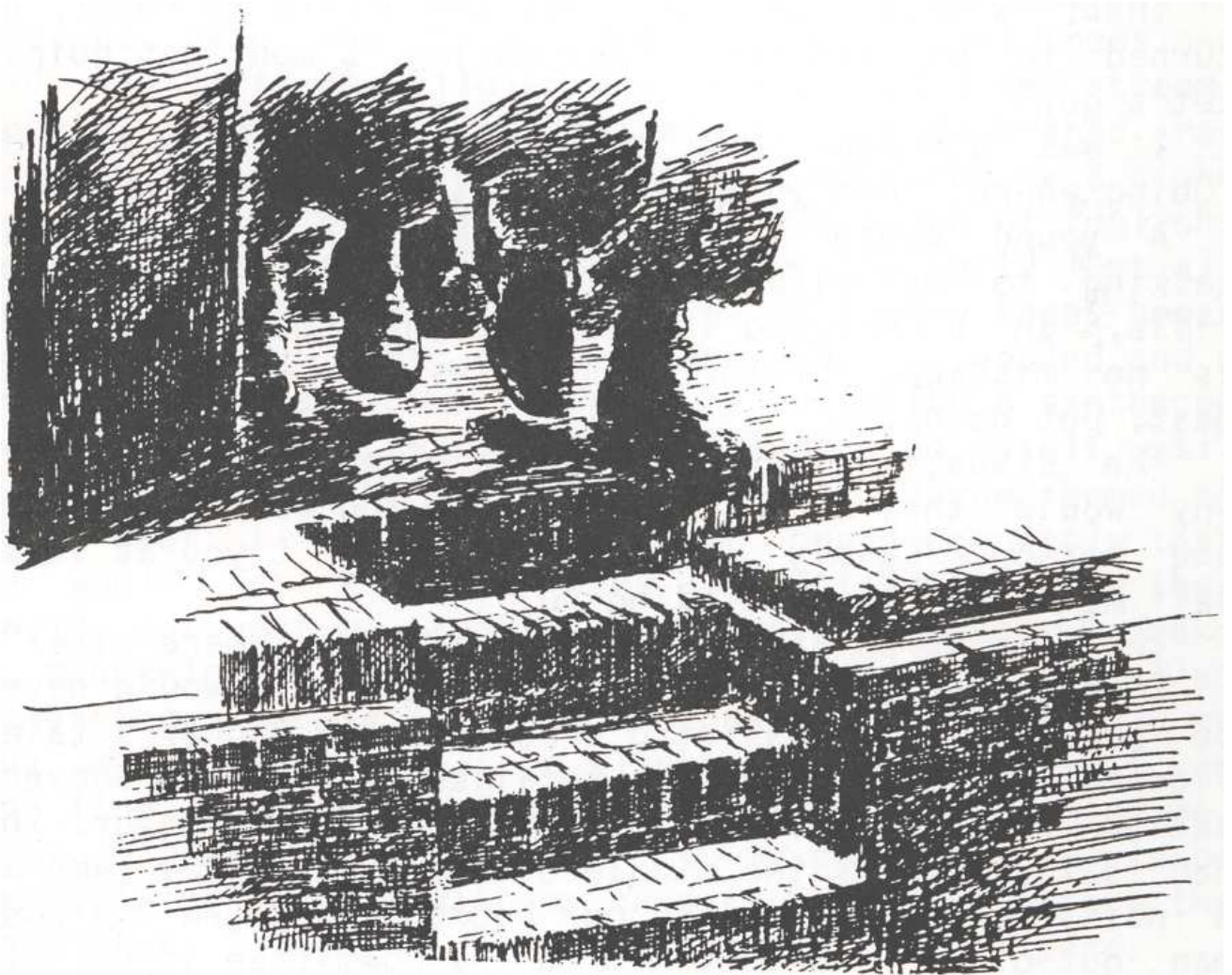
At about 2:30 that afternoon, I went down into the basement that is cool and has the luxury of running water. As on every other muggy afternoon, I began my study of our educational problems, especially those facing secondary school teachers. I have been doing this while asking myself whether I should bother at all. I am not or, at least, do not seem to be, involved in any future plans for education. Then again, what else am I to do? Habits are not easy to break. I probably will continue doing this type of study irrespective of whether I continue as director.

At about 3:00 p.m., I heard a crack that sounded like a distant gunshot. Momentarily, the memory of the ricochet of the gunshot at my office was revived in my mind, but it did not last long. Usually, when I work, I am not easily distracted. Following that, however, I heard a commotion at the top of the stairs. It sounded like the cocking of rifles followed by the distinct sound of army boots on hot, dry bricks. I hurried to the door where, to my surprise, I was confronted with two uninvited, huge, bearded revolutionary guards with rifles. They were about to enter the basement. Several other people from the neighborhood were standing behind them as well. Ali Asghar, who apparently had been unable to hold them back, was standing in the background. With guilt written all over his face, he stood there speechless. I looked for the third guard and the *mullah*. There was no sign of either.

By now, the unannounced entrance of revolutionary guards into private residences was commonplace. Nevertheless, I could not help being agitated. Visibly shaken, and without directing my question to either of the guards, I asked, "Are you gentlemen here to see me?"

The one, who was aiming his rifle at my midsection, addressing his colleague brusquely said, "Does he think he is still some goddamn son-of-a-bitch or what? Get him going!"

Then, without waiting for the other one to react, he moved towards me, pushed me with the barrel of the gun, and said, "Get moving. C'mon, get going. Move it! Let's go."



Karunas.

I was stunned. Not knowing what to do, I said, “Going where? Are you sure you are at the right place?”

A young woman, who must have been talking to my wife in the yard, joined the guards. Hearing me ask the question, she smiled, straightened the rifle on her shoulder and, in a charming Isfahani accent, said, “Brother. There is no mistake. Mistakes belong to the past. You’d better get going.”

The situation must be grave, I thought to myself. Then, addressing the guard who seemed to know something about me, I calmly asked, “Well, won’t you at least tell me where you are taking me?”

The same young woman said, “To the committee, of course. Where else?”

I realized that, contrary to my estimation that it would take some time before it would be my turn, I was being arrested. Ali Asghar’s tales, and a telephone conversation with Nahid Khanom, the wife of the ex-mayor, flashed in my mind. She had said, “It was in the middle of the night. The guards came as a noisy bunch, broke into our bedroom, dragged the poor old man out of bed and took him to the committee in his pajamas.” As I got myself together to leave with them, I blamed myself for leaving things to sort themselves out. I should have foreseen this...

As we left the basement, the clock in the living room struck 3:30. The guards had placed me in front. Fortunately, my wife and children were out of sight. A hand holding the half-closed door of the foyer is all I saw of them.

We left the house and walked in the direction of the Lonban Mosque. I did not know the exact destination, but Ali Asghar had said that a new committee had recently begun operation either in, or in the vicinity of that mosque. We were heading there.

There are two ways from our house to the Lonban Mosque. One is via the Sheykh Baha’i and Shahpour Streets; this is the longer way. The other is via a shady alley that stretches along a well-fed stream. Considering the afternoon heat, the guards chose the latter route.

Once we turned into the alley and I saw the water and the trees, my imagination got the better of me. Sweet memories of my early youth whelmed up. I recalled the days when, as a 9th or 10th grader, I used to memorize my lessons by walking back and forth at the side of this stream. My friends and I swam, climbed trees, and did all sorts of childish pranks all along this very stream and nobody bothered us. But now, as a middle-aged, respectable member of society, I was being escorted by a bunch of foolish, good-for-nothing kids to some God-forsaken committee, as if I were a highway robber, or a murderer. Momentarily, the whole world lost its coherence and within it, I felt like a sentenced criminal walking to the gallows. The thought of what might be ahead made me dizzy. My body became warm. My knees began

to shake, and I felt it difficult to walk. But, fortunately, the dizziness did not last long and passed. Following that, a cold sweat ran down my spine and made me feel better.

None of those escorting me seemed to be aware of what I was going through. They were young people carrying out an order. I hoped earnestly that we would not encounter any acquaintance. I knew the guards would not allow me to explain and sadly people draw conclusions of their own. Then, suddenly, I thought of my ring. It would be impossible, I thought, to sit in front of the members of a committee without both my hands visibly on my knees. Somehow to keep the Baha'i sign on my ring hidden, I had to take the ring off. To do that, I gradually slackened my pace until I was aligned with the guard, who was bringing up the rear. Then, I put my hands behind me, took the ring off, and pocketed it.

Except for the proceedings of early trials that I had been on television, I did not know anything about the revolutionary committees. The trials that were televised were invariably gloomy and depressing. In my mind, I identified them with courts-martial, a comparison that now filled me with horror. To ward off thoughts that might undermine my confidence, I convinced myself that an error must have happened. Someone must have brought up my name by accident. Surely, I thought, this was a mistake. Once the authorities at the committee see me in person and recognize me—the education director of their province—they would reprimand these fools, apologize to me, and this nightmare will come to an end.

But if there were any mistakes, they were on my part. The committee to which I was taken looked like anything but a court of law. In fact, it shared many features with the side shows that are presented in the corners of the bazaars. Those who have visited the *Chaharsu-ye Shiraziha* market in Isfahan, for instance, have no doubt noticed the antics of an old man who amuses audiences by describing some imaginary events depicted on a miserable little screen. Peasants from the surrounding communities gather around him, listen to his narration, and laugh and cry per his prompting. This committee featured many of the antics of that show. In fact, many of the same villagers, too, were present in the audience. The only difference, perhaps, was that this committee had four managers while the miserable side-show had only one.

At the time of our arrival, the committee members were concluding their interrogation of a man of forty or so. The man, from one of the villages around Isfahan, had a thick accent. Allegedly, he had seduced the wife of his friend, and now both he and the woman were being interrogated. To speed up the process, the woman had been sent to a different committee for interrogation.

Before long, the interrogation of the defendant and the testimony of the witnesses came to an end, and the committee members began their deliberation. Meanwhile, no one listened to the beseeching of the accused. The committee members were entirely absorbed in

the process, and made every effort for a timely completion of the defendant's dossier. What was disturbing in this trial was the prosecution's witnesses. One was the woman's husband and the other was an invalid who, judging from his behavior, hardly distinguished day from night. Regarding the committee members, I knew one very well—or, at least, I thought I did. I was somewhat familiar with another and I had heard the name of the third. I did not know the fourth. The sight of the judge that I thought I knew filled me with a combination of hope and anxiety.

After a few minutes, the chief judge studied the audience carefully, and then began his summation. Speaking with a mild Azerbaijani accent, he said, "The combatant people of Isfahan and environs have given of their lives, prayers, and property to the revolution more freely than the people of any other city, except maybe Tabriz. No one, but no one, should give himself the right to stain the honor of you God-fearing people."

"No one," the audience echoed in unison.

"If this clear-cut case of infringement on the honor of a close friend were being tried in the United States," continued the chief judge, "this trial would take months, perhaps even years, to reach a verdict. Then, the accused would be jailed for a few days or months, of course, but soon after, he would be let loose on society. Here, however, we have Islamic justice. We do not allow the guilty individual a chance to engage lawyers, develop files, and sponge off the community. Soon, God willing, there will be a review of our justice system, and my earnest hope is that *qesas* (retaliation) will become the cornerstone of our *Shari'a* law—do unto him what he has done unto you!"

"Amen," confirmed the audience in unison.

Having said these few words, he motioned to the clerk to read the verdict. The clerk read:

"In the Name of Allah,

... It is reported that Rajab, son of Mirza Ja'far, resident of the township of Kelishad, in the province of Isfahan, has committed an act of adultery. It is the sentence of this committee that he should be hanged by the neck until dead. The sentence will be carried out this very day of ... at the square previously known as the Statue..."

Gradually, it dawned on me why a crowd was gathering in the area where Reza Shah's statue used to stand. In relation to that, I also surmised that the committee interrogating the unfortunate woman must be the one in our neighborhood. When both verdicts are issued, I thought, the unfortunate couple will be dragged to the square. The man will be hanged and, in all probability, the woman will be buried waist-deep in the ground and stoned to death. I knew

that would be the case because, unfortunately, those modes of punishment had become routine.

At about a quarter past four, several revolutionary guards and plain-clothes officers dragged Rajab, son of Mirza Ja'far, resident of Kelishad, to the ground to take him out of the committee precinct. A *mullah* joined the group at the door as they left. Rajab's gradually diminishing cries and beseeching were accompanied by the sound of successive shots coming from the area of the roof of the committee.

The distant crack of the weapons sounded very similar to what I had heard just before the revolutionary guards had appeared in the threshold of our basement. Involuntarily I thought of our dog, Gorgi. He would not allow strangers in. So, where was Gorgi all that time? I wondered. Why wasn't he there? Even when they took me out of the basement, he was not in the yard. How did the guards reach the basement without having to confront Gorgi? Was Gorgi...? Did Ali Asghar...?

Having completed Rajab's dossier, the judges left the hall to take a break. Meanwhile, I tried to recall what I knew about each one of them so that I could form a strategy for my defense. The name of the judge whom I knew was Aqa Pisuziyani. We were old classmates but, quite recently he had rummaged for the turban and the robe of a *mullah*. In any event, I knew that he was a novice. There was no doubt, of course, that at the present he was one of the pillars of the house of justice of Isfahan and environs; if there were any doubts about the Aqa, they concerned his credentials and the process that had catapulted him so rapidly to this prominent position of responsibility.

In the past, my family and the Pisuziyani family had been close. I recalled, for instance, that on special *Ramadhan* nights, after eating *sahari*, a group of us young ones, including Hushang Pisuziyani, used to ride our bicycles to a holy place called *Zeynabiyyeh*, a distance of several miles from the city proper. Those were, and still are, among the most joyful and unforgettable nights of my life! I wondered whether Hushang, too, remembers those times, or whether he denies himself the luxury!

Pisuziyani is from Homayun Shahr, the old Sedeh. We studied together up to the tenth grade at the Sa'eb High School near Pol Shiri. After graduation from some other high school, he returned to Homayun Shahr to manage his family's estate. At Homayun Shahr, we were told, he did not get along with his father and, with the assistance of his mother's family in India, he made a trip to the subcontinent. This was one of the reasons for our not seeing much of each other for quite some time. Upon his return from India, he must have joined the theological school.

The last time I saw Aqa Pisuziyani was about a year and a half ago. I recall meeting him near our house, where Sheykh Baha'i meets Chaharbagh-e Pa'in. At the time, the only visible

change in his appearance was that he wore a small beard. He said he was coming from the Iran movie theater where he had seen a remarkable drama centered on sociological problems of India. He considered the movie a must see for adults as well as children.

Now, viewing his massive white turban, brown cloak, and walking stick, it became apparent that his earnest desire to visit the United States has finally given way to the call of the cloth. For some unknown reason, I felt betrayed by the very system for which I worked so hard and which I intended to improve. How could, within such a short time, Hushang Khan be allowed to masquerade as a *mullah*? Not to mention, as a full-fledged judge!

The name of the other judge was Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali. I had met him briefly once, or maybe even twice. Looking at him as he talked to his followers among the audience, I recalled a conversation that I had in my office with the governor who, incidentally, was executed just a few days ago, following the execution of the mayor. Our conversation turned to the vicissitudes of time. We wondered, were time and tide to surrender the reins of government to the *mullahs*, what would the fate of people like ourselves be? The late governor's words are indelibly etched in my memory. He said, "No one knew the *mullahs* better than the late Seyyed Ahmad Kasravi." Needless to say, the *seyyed's* view of the clergy was harsh. And that is putting it mildly.

The governor then used the family of this very Sham' al-Ma'ali as an example. From his explanation I gathered that he knew the Sham' al-Ma'ali family as well as I knew the Pisuziyanis. According to him, the Sham' al-Ma'alīs were among the well-established mule drivers of Fereydan and Kuhrang, and that they were related to the *Chahar-Lang* and the *Haft-Lang* clans of the *Bakhtiyari* tribe. The Aqa himself grew up in Daran, a small town with a high school. When his father was appointed the principal of one of Isfahan's high schools, he accompanied his father to the city. What intrigued the governor was that the son of a school principal, with a diploma in mathematics from the Sa'di High School, should choose to join the men of the cloth.

While the late governor was spewing out these details to prove that the *mullahs'* main objective was to gather wealth for themselves, their relatives, and their mosques, and that they would not strive for a better standard of living for the masses, especially for their ardent clients, the poor, I asked, "Is there a reason why the son of Hojat al-Islam Sham' al-Ma'ali chose to become a *mullah* rather than, say, an engineer?" The governor chuckled and said, "His late father was of the opinion that money gained through banking, or by holding governmental positions, was like money received by begging in public." I was amazed. I asked, "Is the money gained by the *mullahs* any different?" The governor, may God rest his soul, smiled and said, "Why are you asking me? Why don't you ask a *mullah* that question?" in recent weeks, with utmost clarity, I have come to the conclusion that every word that the late governor had

spoken was true. The *mullahs* are beggars at the threshold of the Commander of the Faithful and his descendants. Other people are simply beggars!

I knew the third Judge, an Aqa Mash'al al-Din, by name only. He was from Tabriz. Quite a while back, news came to the *mahfel* that he and a few others, in Tehran, had formed a powerful central committee to oversee important judicial cases nationwide. When a situation so warranted, one of these experts visited the designated province. The bold and decisive measures taken by these so-called "trouble-shooter" judges kept the ship of state in good condition. Aqa Mash'al al-Din was a *mullah* of some forty-odd years. He wore a black turban and had a graying beard. His hairline showed from beneath his turban. At first glance, he appeared pleasant and amiable.

The fourth, the committee clerk, was a youth of about twenty-five. He wore old army fatigues. A stubby beard covered most of his face. They called him Mr. Ali Zadeh. When the court was in recess, he occasionally rose and called for order so that the judges could enjoy their break. Although he spoke with an Isfahani accent, it was apparent that he was not from Isfahan.



In reality, what I refer to as the hall was, a very large room with only one door and a hundred to a hundred and twenty people in it. Farthest from the door, at the place of honor, there was a platform, raised about half a meter or so from the ground. The platform, actually the place of the judges, was covered with beautiful Persian carpets. The intriguing patterns of the carpets, enhanced by the extraordinary floodlights shining from above, imparted a special awesomeness to the scene. The floor of the room was covered with hand-loomed cloth mats. The audience sat on the mat and, as is the custom, carried their shoes with them and placed them next to themselves.

When in audience, Aqa Mash'al al-Din sat cross-legged at the head of the entire hall and, occasionally, drank tea served with lump sugar. Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali, an elderly man, sat to his right and, as if plagued with nervousness, continuously worked his rosary beads. As for Aqa Pisuziyani, he sat between Aqa Mash'al al-Din and Ali Zadeh, the committee clerk. A thick ledger was spread in front of the latter. From the way Aqa Pisuziyani struggled to read as much of the content as he could, I surmised that the page contained information pertinent to my case.

As for me, I was led to an Arj folding chair placed at the foot of the platform directly across from Aqa Mash'al al-Din. Compared to Rajab, son of Mirza Ja'far, who sat on the mat, in the first row, this seemed like special treatment. As I sat on the chair, thinking about my situation, a silk curtain, hanging high on the wall behind the judges, caught my attention. In

the center of the curtain, on the white background, there was the depiction of a tulip, a black tulip with blood-stained leaves that like red, hot blades taken out of a forge glowed. I had seen similar curtains with depictions on them before. One was in Aqa Pisuziyani's house in Sedeh. On that curtain, there was the depiction of a haloed man whose nose and mouth were covered. He sat on his bent knees. A pot of fire with glowing coals in it was placed in front of him. Another curtain was in my classroom, in elementary school. The depiction on that curtain was simple. It was a sleeping lion in the wilderness enjoying the rays of the sun. I recall every detail of that painting because, in later years, whenever the teacher bored me, and that happened quite often, I imagined being in that wilderness playing hide and seek with the lion.

With the judges' break over, Aqa Mash'al al-Din and Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali returned to their places. Only Aqa Pisuziyani was still talking to one of the revolutionary guards who had brought me to the committee. Then, speaking, they passed by me. Aqa, without looking at me, stepped up onto the platform. The guard plowed his way through the audience and went out of the door.

When the commotion in the hall subsided, the clerk stood up, pointed his index finger at me, and without uttering a word, looked at me. I thought he was motioning me to stand up, maybe in honor of the judges. But before I could react, his voice thundered in the hall, saying, "People! Do you know this man?"

The audience replied in unison, "Yes, we do."

I was flabbergasted. Never before, in my entire career, nay in my entire life, had I encountered a scene like this. I could not have even imagined the possibility of a day when I would be placed on an uncomfortable chair, pointed at and, like a lifeless object, be inquired about. Have you seen this before? I thought there would be some measure of order, a semblance of decorum at the committee. I hoped those in charge were aware that I was an educated individual and would treat me accordingly—just as I would have treated them in a similar circumstance. But, apparently, the revolutionary changes that I dreaded were more drastic than I had thought. The clerk continued, "Do you know who he is?"

Someone in the audience, a man of about sixty, stood up, pointed at me, and said, "He is the son of Mirza Mohammad who lives on Sheykh Baha'i Avenue."

The fact that at some point in his life my father had used the title of Mirza was news to me. But otherwise the old man was right. My father's name was Mohammad and we still live on Sheykh Baha'i Avenue. My father, of course, was no longer with us. At that moment, he was lying in his desecrated tomb along the Najafabad Road. The clerk addressed the audience again, asking, "Do you know his occupation?"

This time, one of my former employees stood up, pointed at me and said, "He used to be the education director."

After this introduction, in the course of which I was quite unofficially stripped of my position and title, the clerk invited the audience to silence. Then crossing his legs, he sat down.

Aqa Mash'al al-Din, slowly, and in a dignified manner, straightened his cloak on his shoulders, looked high up at the ceiling at the end of the hall, cleared his throat, and recited the following from the scripture:

“In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;

Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment.

Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek. Show us the straightway...”

He then stroked his bushy beard and said, “Dear fellow countrymen. The individual who is being interrogated here today has not committed a crime such as we could say, for instance, of Rajab, who just left us. We cannot say that he has seduced someone’s wife, or that he has paid his rent late or that he has refused to pay. He has not robbed anyone, neither has he murdered anyone so that we feel obliged to interrogate him for the sake of the victims, or simply for the sake of upholding the law. No, he has not done any of those things...”

Then he waited to allow the import of his words to sink in. Then, nodding his head meaningfully added, “Of course, he is not innocent either. Otherwise, why should he be appearing here before you, the combatant people of this land, to be interrogated? We can say, he summarized, this individual is innocent in some ways, and guilty, maybe even very guilty, depending on circumstances, in some other ways. It is because of those *‘other ways of being guilty’* that he is being interrogated here...”

It was obvious that Aqa Mash'al al-Din, with his pedantic tautology, intended to confuse the audience and, even before the trial begins, indirectly convince them of my guilt. He covered both sides of the issue so thoroughly that after his speech nobody would pay the slightest attention to my words or my laments. Rather, they would allow the guards to, like Rajab, drag me out and do away with me.

But, even though the end was clear, I did not have any option but to tolerate his unfair sermon. Aqa Mash'al al-Din continued, “In this world, there are two types of people. Those who, like you, are religious and God-fearing, and those who are devoid of faith. And by faith, instead of faith in its religious sense, I mean it in the sense that they lack conscience. That they harm God’s creation, including people, including your beloved children... and they do it without feeling remorse...”

This classification, no doubt, put me in the second category. And if he did mean me in particular, it was an assessment that was entirely devoid of justice and impartiality. I could not subscribe to that. To register my disapproval, I raised my hand to say sir, you are unkind. My ancestors have been well known in this city. They have attended sermons in the Lonban Mosque, they have prayed, and given alms like everyone else. I wanted this man, who was entirely unacquainted with the people of this city, and who was not a good judge of them, to be enlightened by the citizenry. I wanted to ask him to ask the man, who remembers the Mirza title of my father, which one of us two was religious, in his sense of the word, and which one was not. More importantly, which one of us is merciful towards God's creatures and which one drags the innocent out of their cool basement and keeps them in suspense for an eternity?

But Aqa Mash'al al-Din was a veteran. As soon as I raised my hand, without the slightest break in the smooth flow of his speech, he cast a reproachful glance at me and noted, "In due time, the accused and the audience will be given an opportunity to speak their minds. Let me add this much, however. The introductory remarks that are being made now are general in nature. They are delivered in the spirit of distinguishing between good and evil. They are not meant to pertain to any specific individual or to offend anyone in particular unless, God forbid, there is an individual here among us who does not belong to those whose praises are being sung in this noble session..."

The word "accused" descended on me like a ton of bricks. Of what was I accused? As he himself said, I had not killed anyone; I had not misappropriated anyone's property; and I had not neglected the duties of my office. Why, then, was he using such a harsh word against me? Aqa Mash'al al-Din did not dwell on my protest any longer and, as soon as he became sure that I would not interrupt, continued his sermon, "The Almighty, Noble and High, created man and showed him the right way. And, in general, people follow the right path. But in some cases, the infernal devil takes over some of these noble creations and leads them astray. It plants a dark spot in their souls that gradually grows. Of course, the devil cannot reach us all equally well, can he? Obviously, the greater number of us worship God. But, as I just said, there are always a few [after pronouncing "a few," he directed his large eyes at me], who accept the call of the accursed devil. Anyway, may the Almighty direct the sinful and the lost to the path of righteousness!... It is reported about the noblest of the prophets..."

After these words, as is customary, the audience chanted the praises of the Prophet Mohammad three times. Meanwhile, Aqa Mash'al al-Din, using the time, took out his handkerchief and dried the sweat on his brow, and continued, "... Mohammad, son of Abdullah..."

The audience chanted the praises of the Prophet one more time.

“... that God, the Most sublime,” he continued, “advisedly, places the cursed devil along the path of His creatures to test their resolve. That is the time when those who fail to recognize the antics of the cruel and deceitful devil become enmeshed in his snare, and, consequently, are afflicted with misfortune. In other words, there are those [here again, Aqa made a long pause and looked at me as I fidgeted restlessly on my chair], ... yes... those are the ones who are deceived by this bastard and slavishly carry out his behests... Well now, we may wish to say to hell with those infernal beings who follow the dictates of that wicked demon. So much the better. They open more space for us in the exalted heaven!... But are our affairs, the affairs of the offspring of Adam, this easy? This detestable being searches incessantly until he finds an individual whose fingers are all thumbs.”

Again, he looked at me. The audience, too, turned and looked at me, as if they were seeing me for the first time. “Yes,” he continued. “The devil finds a stupid and incompetent individual and, through that individual, finds innocent hearts, souls, and minds into which he can plant his seed of wickedness. Through him he undermines our resolve. More importantly, through him, he finds his way into the hearts, souls, and minds of our children and undermines their resolve. In the end, as you have observed, through such agents, he destroys the very foundation of our culture through implementation of misguided programs for the education of the young. Are not such crimes more destructive than what Rajab had done? Rajab ruined one family. People like this individual a ruin God knows how many families... countless... countless families...”

At this point, he stood up and walked a couple steps to the edge of the platform. “I want you as parents,” he said, “to take time, to go to the schools. To go and personally examine the textbooks that they use. To read them with an open mind... to examine the translations that they have made, and to find out about the perverted history that they promote. And that is not the half of it. Wake up and examine the media, the movies, and the souvenirs that they import day in and day out from abroad... I trust that you follow the import of all this... Ask yourselves,” he continued, “Why do our children have to learn such unfamiliar names as Cambyses and Xerxes? why do they need to memorize a string of dates from the dawn of creation until now? What is the significance of that knowledge? Over God knows how many centuries, show me something that a king built with his own hands, a road the building of which he administered personally. Being a just king to a donkey is not being just to a people! They had all the time in the world to educate the people about Islam. About their identity as Muslims. That was them yesterday, and look at their progeny today. The lives of their descendants are tied to ID Cards, sandwiches, and ballpoint pens...”

At this point, a middle-age man with a scraggly grey beard from the audience raised his voice saying, “Your Excellency, just to be fair. This man is not a teacher. He does not teach classes...”

Aqa Mash’al al-Din responded, “It is true indeed. He does not teach those things. He promotes those things. Is there a difference? How does he do that? I will show you in our next session. I will show you what he knows about things that he should not know, and what he does not know about things that he should know. Isn’t the term *taquti* enough to describe him?”

Whether the man became convinced or not, he sat down without uttering a word.

Aqa Mash’al al-Din’s poorly thought-out and undigested words, I thought, would sooner or later, elicit some reaction from Aqa Pisuziyani, who knew both my family and me. I thought he would interrupt Aqa Mash’al al-Din and bring him to his senses. But, alas! Aqa Pisuziyani sat there mutely and listened to his colleague’s eloquent discourse. And believe me, at times, when they were sure that I was not watching, both he and Aqa Sham’ al-Ma’ali supported their colleague’s superb job of convincing the audience of my sins.

Aqa Mash’al al-Din’s jaw was just warming up; he had forgotten that this committee was akin to a “court of justice” rather than to a community gathering for prayers and sermons. He bombarded me with every degradation he could think of—the type of attributes that he normally attached to Shemr the cuirassier, Mo’aviyyeh, the Christian, and all the others who had inflicted pain on the family of the Prophet at Karbala.

Meanwhile, I felt like a victim who was muzzled so that he could not react to the barrage of abuse thrown at him. I heard curses and innuendoes but all I could do was to feel furious within me. And, to my great surprise, my fellow citizens had nothing to say about all this. In fact, during those days, if you stopped them on the street and asked, “Is Mount Sofeh to the south, or to the north, of Isfahan?” they would *ta’arof* profusely and say, “Dear fellow. What kind of a question is this? Mt. Sofeh is to the north, or to the south, whichever Aqa Shams al-Din decrees!”



When I realized that Aqa Mash’al al-Din was just beginning his sermon and that he would not finish it before describing all the atrocities at Karbala, I stopped listening. Instead, I became engrossed in the curious silk curtain about which I spoke earlier. I was about to decipher the forms that made up the tulip when I heard the reproachful words of Aqa Mash’al al-Din. Addressing me, he was saying, “You, sir! You whose corrupt deeds are wasting the precious time of this committee and these noble people! Isn’t it time to stop daydreaming? Isn’t it time to pay attention? Are you not curious to find out when and where in your

miserable life you made your mistake? Isn't it time to find out when and where in the course of your life the infernal devil entered your world and turned it into this hellish night?"

Words like "accused," and phrases like "hellish night," made me tremble. Ali Asghar's dreadful reports, my own uncertain fate, and the fate of my family, especially my children assailed my mind. Instead of responding to Aqa Mash'al al-Din, I wondered if one of these *mullahs* could be the one whose activities had frightened Behjat Khanom? Worse yet, where was my wife when I left the house? Did they arrest her, too?

Aqa Mash'al al-Din continued, "Am I delivering a sermon, or what? Do you think I like the sound of my own voice! I am striving to return your lost soul to the straight path. My dear fellow, why are you daydreaming? If it is the accursed devil that tempts you, don't allow him... Break away!"

I could no longer tolerate this humiliation, especially when it was being dished out by a stranger to my city. Neither did I expect assistance from Aqa Pisuziyani. At the present, I felt, the Sphinx was more eloquent and helpful than him. In order to stop this show, and to put an end to the barrage of abuse that Aqa Mash'al al-Din was doling out, I stood up to address the audience. The two bearded revolutionary guards, who had escorted me to the committee, rushed toward me to force me back into my seat. But Aqa Mash'al al-Din motioned them to leave me alone.

Filled with apprehension and rage, I said, "Dear fellow citizens!" But I must have used the wrong words. My fellow citizens turned their faces away from me, as if saying, 'You are no longer a citizen of this city. Get the hell out of here and find yourself some other place.' I repeated my words and continued, "Fellow citizens! I know most of you by sight, and I know the names of many who, in the past ten years, have visited the education office. I don't intend to appeal to your sympathy. But I do want to appeal to your sense of justice and fair play. Didn't my father spend his entire life on elevating the prosperity of this city? Aren't the Najafabad highway, the old Isfahan-Aligudarz dirt road [here Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali gathered his robe and cleared his throat], the building and operation of the Pashmbaf factory, and the installation of the steel mill partially due to the efforts of him and his colleagues? Do you think the metal bridge, although utilitarian and not an object of beauty, appeared on the river by magic? I have seen my father's correspondences on these. He spent a good deal of his latter days changing the minds of those who feared the new bridge would flood the city with Armenians. This is not to mention that it was as a result of his efforts, and the efforts of individuals like him, that a sleepy town was transformed into a burgeoning metropolis..."

At this time, somebody from somewhere near the entrance, in a charming Isfahani accent, protested, "Isn't this nice that you yourself confess. Who allowed foreigners to enter this country? Was it not your father then, and isn't it you and your kind now that have brought

the French, the British and, recently, the Americans to this country? Isn't plundering the wealth of this country and bedeviling its people your ultimate goal? Why don't you address the schemes that you all had drawn for our oil and natural gas?"

I looked at Aqa Mash'al al-Din to see if I could respond. He did not seem to have any objection. I said calmly, "Your question has historical ramifications. I don't think there is any benefit in getting into ancient history here. But I can say this: foreigners did not come to this country during the lifetime of my father and I. They have been in this country long before your time and mine. This very city has been the seat of governments that dealt with the French, the Spanish, the British, the Dutch, even with Germans and Russians. Maybe someday, when you brush up on your foreign languages, you can read some of the accounts regarding foreign political and commercial activities here. It is true that wrong steps were taken, but a lot of good also..."

The same person, who I am sure had not understood a word of what I said, asked again, "When you were the education director, what was your opinion about land reform?"

This question stumped not only me but also Aqa Pisuziyani and Aqa Mash'al al-Din. They began to fidget nervously in their places. I was about to respond by saying that I approved of land reform, especially because it divested the filthy rich of their villas and villages and the *mullahs* of their private land holdings and public endowments. But Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali, as if reading my mind, joined the debate. Getting up slowly, without actually addressing Aqa Mash'al al-Din, he said, "With his Excellency Aqa Mash'al al-Din's permission, I would like to say a few words on this topic and clarify some of the misconceptions."

Aqa Mash'al al-Din, whose grip on the proceedings was becoming increasingly firm, looked at me and said, "The accused can take his seat." Then, to Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali, he said, "Please, Your Excellency." Then turning to the audience, he added, "I have traveled far and wide in this country, always on important missions such as this. Nowhere in this beautiful land have I seen an individual with the intelligence, religious conviction, and philanthropy of this Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali."

Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali thanked his colleague, and after reciting a verse from the scripture, summarized his thoughts on the subject of land reform:

"In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

Say: I seek refuge with the Lord and cherisher of Mankind..."



Paul Brown.

“My dear fellow citizens,” he said. “If you don’t mind, I would like to ask you a couple of simple questions: What does *arz* mean? It means land. What does *eslah* mean? It means to repair and to put straight; *eslahat* is the plural form of *eslah*, in the present state of affairs, it means to apportion the land, and whatever pertains to it, correctly. Of course, by land it is arable land that is being discussed, land fit for cultivation and farming. Not arid land. The next question is where should *eslahat* begin? I say that the most logical place for them to begin is at the farm level, not in some palace in Tehran. Or worse yet, in the White House in Washington, the capital of the United States. I further say that these reforms should be geared to the needs of people like you and me.

“Now, suppose as a farmer, you are working on your own land. And suppose you plant one grain of wheat. I say one grain and not a billion grains, so that we can save ourselves the headache of high-level calculations. Otherwise, I, too, could confuse you with numbers and graphs. Let’s say we let you plant this one grain of wheat. After a given number of weeks, or months, or whatever it takes, this grain will yield a head of wheat comprised of some ten, twelve or, maybe even twenty grains of wheat. Let me now ask you this question: Do all those twelve or twenty grains in this head of wheat belong to you? If we were to respond to this query without considering everything, of course, we would say yes. All the grains in that head of wheat belong to you. But, is that a fair assessment of the situation? You have been only one of the producers of this head of wheat. There are other cultivators: the rain, the wind, the moon, and the sun, just to name a few. They, too, have been active participants in this enterprise.”

Here, Aqa Sham’ al-Ma’ali stopped and cleared his throat. Then, lifting his hands to the heavens, he asked, “Could you have produced that many grains out of a single grain without rain, without nourishing sunlight, without wind? You are farmers. You enlighten me.”

The audience unanimously roared, “No!”

Aqa Sham’ al-Ma’ali continued by saying, “Of course not!”

Then after a pause, he asked, “At whose command are the sun, the rain, and the clouds that have given of their energy to your project?”

The audience roared, “at Allah’s command!”

“As you can plainly see,” the Aqa concluded, “Allah has a major share in your product. If you were to ignore Him this season, would you be able to till His land again the next year and produce another head of wheat like that?”

The audience shouted, “Of course not!”

“But,” he said in a soft voice, “Allah is generous. He gives of His invisible treasure to all equally. All we need to do is to follow the advice of our great poet of Shiraz, Sheykh Sa’di:

The clouds, the wind, the moon, and the sun,
For your comfort, and at your behest run.
They toil continuously for your satisfaction,
Should you not halt and monitor your action?

“The appropriate thing for us to do is to reciprocate,” he added. “But be not alarmed,” he concluded. “Allah does not force you to give up what you have earned. No, you contribute willingly. You give Allah’s share to the endowments so that through the Prophet, his daughter, the saints, and the religious order, your contributions and prayers reach the Almighty. Only in this way your debt is paid and the immense bounty of the Almighty is perpetuated. Therefore, every thinking individual, every righteous individual, everyone who is not given to misappropriation of public property, everyone who is not ready to hand over your land to foreigners, in short, every individual who is endowed with God’s love, will not forget Allah’s helpers. And he will not misappropriate the shares of others...”

He lingered there, with uplifted hands, for a few seconds longer, then turning to Aqa Mash’al al-Din, added, “Since the conversation turned to land reform, even though this is a judicial committee and not a place to sort out socio-political differences, I felt obliged to say a couple of words to clarify certain modern misconceptions. Your Excellency, I have no more to say.”

Aqa Mash’al al-Din cast an appreciative look at the speaker and, inspired by his speech, said, “I could not have put it more succinctly than that myself. Let us pray to keep drought, floods, and the locusts away from our land. More importantly, let us prevent evil from afflicting us with the type of plague that we suffered before our glorious revolution. Observe how the wrath of Allah has dealt with those who planned to misuse the rights of the people! Where are they now?”

I wanted to stand up and shout out loud, they are abroad, living as doctors, industrial engineers, university professors, agronomists, architects, and artists serving nations other than their homeland because you and your ilk forced them out. They were forced out in the same way that my colleagues are being forced out. Your creed prohibits cooperation, as if it were a sin. The whole world is turning on mutual understanding and cooperation. Your self-centered glory, an illusion indelibly etched in your mind will, in the long run, alienate the best and the brightest youth of this town and scatter them throughout the globe as orphans and refugees. Unfortunately for them, they do not have the luxury that their predecessors had—good education and a government that backed them up. I wanted to say all that and more, but I restrained myself.

Aqa Mash'al al-Din continued. "You may not know this, but they had set up enormous networks with the help of which they intended to confiscate your endowed lands and hand them over to foreigners. They intended to hand the Khuzestan plain over to the Americans to plant sugar cane. A similar deal was afoot for the resources of the Fars province. This is not to mention what they planned for your agriculture and industry, and for your oil and natural gas resources..."

As he spoke, he cast humiliating looks at me as if I had been the main wheeler-dealer in his trumped-up international plunder schemes. As for me, I had said what I thought was needed to say. For the rest of the time, I ignored the Aqa's nonsensical allegations, sat on my chair, and did not make a peep.

It was about 7:00 p.m. Many of the people in the audience had left. Aqa Mash'al al-Din looked tired. He intended to end the session and postpone the real interrogation until another time. Thus, in conclusion, he said, "My fellow countrymen. Today we have opened a file on the activities of the son of the late Mirza Mohammad, who lives on Sheykh Baha'i Avenue. God willing, in the near future, we shall meet again and will become better acquainted with the education director. You will see the inaccuracy of his understanding about Islamic education. You will notice how, over decades, the likes of him have deprived you and your children and grandchildren from receiving the type of education that your imams received. As far as you are concerned, he continued, "Whoever has any complaints whatsoever against this man; for instance, if, in the past years, he has fired you from your job without cause, if you have observed members of his family on the street without proper *hijab*, if you are aware of him having received bribes from members of your family or from friends of yours, if you know of any indulgence in alcoholic beverages—whatever complaint you might have against him, I want you to bring your complaints directly to me, so that, at our next meeting, we can question him about those as well and restore your rights..."

At this time, a youth of about twenty or so, came to the hall panting. He went directly to the judges' platform, handed a sealed envelope to the clerk, and whispered something in the clerk's ear. When the clerk indicated that he could leave, the young man left the hall. Then the clerk rose, went to Aqa Mash'al al-Din, bowed and handed him the envelope respectfully with both hands. Then he knelt at Aqa Mash'al al-Din's side and whispered the message he had received in the Aqa's ear. Upon hearing the clerk's words, Aqa Mash'al al-Din's face paled visibly and, while still listening, opened the envelope. The clerk left the Aqa and sat in his place. Aqa Mash'al al-Din scrutinized the note for a while. His composure gradually returned. He then sat on both knees, slipped the note into his pocket under his robe and, ignoring his colleagues' inquisitive looks, as if nothing extraordinary had happened, said, "What was I saying? Oh, yes. Of course, due to too many engagements, I shall not be attending the future

sessions of this inquiry, but my colleagues Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali and Aqa Pisuziyani, along with His Excellency Aqa Haji Chelcheraq, one of the savants of our time, will take charge of this case. I want to remind you, as I said earlier, to bring your complaints and hand them to Mr. Ali Zadeh. He will, at the appropriate time, convey those concerns to His Excellency Aqa Haji Chelcheraq. Let me assure you, however, that the rights of an industrious people like you shall never be ignored. I shall be in Tehran and I will personally follow the discussion of this case.”

It seemed as if, after reading that note, Aqa Mash'al al-Din got a second wind. He began to preach again, this time drawing on the ingrained prejudice that he knew existed in his audience. Prejudice that his audience harbored against things modern, especially the source of his own animus, modern education. This I could not allow.

Since this was not a court of justice, I decided, before the committee proceedings closed, to say something in my own defense. Come what may, I rose once more to pour out my anger. This action, I thought, would either bring my fellow citizens to their senses, or would add more fuel to the factionalism and the enmity that already permeated the whole society. In either case, a trace of my thoughts would enter this phony file they were putting together for me. I heard myself saying, “I wish to say a few words and I intend to say them no matter what the consequence.”

The same revolutionary guards approached me again. And again, Aqa Mash'al al-Din motioned them to stay clear. I said, “Much of what I am about to say may not be palatable to most of you. Under the prevailing circumstance, it is understandable. If I were in your shoes, I, too, would object. But I have always believed that vital questions must be raised, even if it means jeopardizing one's life. My first point is about identity and unity. Two major pillars of our society. Even though we may call ourselves Persians, Lurs, Kurds, or Baluchis, we all belong to the same nation and the same land. In other words, we form an Iranian nation. An ancient nation that, over centuries, has rejected slavery and has not associated itself with the lie, especially with undocumented accusations such as were attributed to me. This is my first point. My second point has to do with the standard of living. It is true that the poor and the rich live side by side in this land. Am I personally responsible for this? Does the poverty of the masses and the great wealth of a thousand families constitute a fitting accusation against me? This is my second point...”

At this juncture, someone from among the audience, undoubtedly the same individual who had asked the first couple of questions, in his own particular tough-guy tone, interrupted me by asking “Sir, all in all, how many points are you planning to make?”

I ignored him and, with a patience heretofore unbeknownst to myself, continued, “My third point is about ideology. Iran is a Shi'ite country, and Shi'ism is a separate branch of Islam. I am not responsible for the Sunni/Shi'i dichotomy. There are other faiths as well. We have

lived together relatively harmoniously throughout history. Why discriminate now? My fourth point is about civilization. In spite of all recent erroneous classifications, we are a civilized people. And even though in recent centuries we have been accepting a smattering of this or that lifestyle, the core of our civilization is Iranian and Islamic. You might wish to accuse me of modernism. I accept that. In fact, as a youth, I wore my hair long and now that I have lost most of my hair, I still wear a tie. Should this wearing of a tie affect my job security? Should I forfeit my rights as a human being because of that? Should I be called a disciple of the devil because of wearing a tie? What has happened to you people? You accuse me of having been mesmerized by foreigners. But is it not you who is mesmerized? How long are you going to allow yourselves to be treated like benumbed snakes in side shows?"

Having stated these points, I steadied my chair and sat down. My entire body trembled, and a second cold sweat covered my forehead. I dare say, I was nearly fainting when Aqa Pisuziyani's familiar voice helped me steel myself. Had I, finally, stirred my only savior and persuaded him to take my side? No. How low can this world get! The Aqa was merely regurgitating Mash'al al-Din's balderdash. "I used to know Mirza Mohammad's family," he said. "I even used to visit their house. Then I heard certain things about them. As a people, they were nice, but somewhat flawed. They did things that were against the Prophet's law and the laws of the saints. His wife and his daughter appeared in public without *hijab*; they mingled freely with infidel foreigners, and they housed a dog in their house as big as a calf. They did not treat their Muslim brethren with even a semblance of noble Islamic compassion. Let me give you an example. When their car ran over Kal Ali's son and that youth [may God bless his soul] died, they refused to pay blood money. Instead, they took their case to court, made a file, colluded with the jury and got out of the whole thing scot-free. Many examples like this can be cited. But just now the gentleman said a few things that, before the end of this session, if I may, I would like to respond to."

As usual, Aqa Mash'al al-Din consented, and Aqa Pisuziyani continued, "in his remarks, he said that we are Iranians. Well, there is a grain of truth in that. But would it not be more appropriate to say: we were Iranians? He used the word *bichareh*. That word, as everyone knows, has been thrown out of our lexicon. No one uses that word any more. *Bichareh* is a fabrication of the devil and it was hounded out of Iran with the devil. Then he spoke of religion. Everyone knows that the majority of the population of the world is Shi'ite; we, too, are Shi'ites and proud of it. Then what does he mean by this major dichotomy? Finally, he said that we are civilized. Pardon my French, but who would call that sh... civilization? Great Civilization, at that!"

Hushang Khan, my childhood friend, disappointed me on a grand scale. After his remarks, the more I looked at him, the less he resembled the young man that I used to know

and respect. Fortunately, soon after Pisuziyani's brief speech, the session came to an end and I was told that I was free to go home, provided that I do not leave Isfahan. I was also instructed to expect further instructions from the committee through Mr. Ali Zadeh.



On my way home, I walked by the stream of my youthful days, the very stream that early in the morning I had seen when I was returning from my walk and later, in the afternoon, when flanked by guards I had crossed it to go to the committee. Now, it was dark, which I did not mind. As I walked, I marveled at the various events that had transpired during the day. My short trip down the Najafabad Road was routine, but what I encountered at the secret graveyard was not. It was an inauspicious sight with the promise that the rest of my day would not be any better.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed watching the sun rise on the bridges across the Zayanderud river and admired the advantages of an egalitarian and sympathetic approach to life's inherent diversity. The immensity of the realization of the discriminatory processes that were taking place within me, in spite of myself, shocked me. It also indicated the extent of the damage that the discriminatory activities of my fellow citizens could visit on me and my family. The vandalism at the graveyard, appalling as it was, spoke volumes. It was the result of the actions instigated by the same custodians of light who, hours ago, were chastising me while patting each other on the back. Their supporters would blindly carry out almost anything they are asked to do.

The specter of Aqa Shams al-Din once again warned me about my future by showing me how exact he is in picking the miscreants and how submissive his minions are in placing or eliminating individuals. My fear mounted when I recalled how scanned documents through walls and files containing them. In the past only a few people knew the contents of each document. Aqa Shams al-Din was privy to all documents. There and then I realized that I will not be able to escape the piercing eyes of Aqa Shams al-Din and that, sooner or later, I will appear in his tribunal.

Following that, I saw happiness in the eyes of my children, especially upon their seeing the river. Their lit up, happy faces reminded me of the sunlight dancing on the beautiful tiles on the domes in the *Naqsh-e Jahan Meydan*. Then my wife's words about the grim future ahead and its impact on the children came up, a topic that I had been trying to avoid. Surprisingly, only hours later, Aqa Mash'al al-Din's remark were centered on that same topic. This time, however, my full attention was required. As if in itself all that was not sufficient to ruin an ordinary day, I was allowed to go home without being informed why I was brought to the committee in the first place.

Now, in the fresh evening air, I looked at the reflection of the crescent moon in the stream below. The moon's reflection was docile and profound. Mindful of the potholes on the uneven gravel road beneath my feet, I pondered about the sequence of baseless allegations against me, the possibility of my imprisonment, or even of my execution. The more I gave room to those thoughts, the more the future that my wife had been depicting became real and loomed large. I regretted that I had turned a deaf ear to her pleas to seek safety somewhere else in the world. She saw the futility of our studies, and the pointlessness of our success in getting good, viable jobs much earlier than I did. Early on, even before the revolution, she foresaw everything that Aqa Mash'al al-Din alleged in his prologue. At home, while I talked about the divine right of kings, the infallibility of the monarch, and the magic that the adoption of a good educational system would work, she, a true realist, spoke about the gravitation of the masses to values that were at odds with ours. More importantly, she foresaw that their values would destroy every plan that tries to confront them.

Now, in light of Aqa Mash'al al-Din's opening remarks, the immensity of my mistake impacted me. I could see the ruination of the plans that my wife and children had made for their future and, of course, a premature end to my own master plan for creating solidarity among the citizens of Isfahan through application of a viable, progressive educational system. A premonition similar to the one I had experienced earlier in the day on Abbas Abad street confirmed my fears. I felt that, there and then, the life that I had enjoyed up to that moment came to an end. The pitch dark vista in front of me and the blurred road to the crescent moon testified to that. I felt sorry for the children of the land, including my own. More than that, I felt sorry for myself for lacking the gumption to break away as I should.



The post-trial ruminations continued to plague me all that night. In the morning, as I opened my eyes and looked at the ceiling, the things I had said, the irrelevant and nonsensical comments of Aqa Pisuziyani, especially his ridiculous remark about "certain things," flooded my mind. These and the prospect of appearing before the committee again were driving me to insanity. Repeatedly, I asked myself, "What things could he have heard?" More than that, I was now apprehensive as to what kind of report could he have filed with the committee? Why were the guards sent to our house? Why did they destroy innocent Gorgi at the entrance? Why did they arrest me? Why did they keep me in suspense in the committee until evening, and then let me go? Why didn't they sentence me in the same quick way that they sentenced the man before me?"

The only issue that kept emerging in my mind, and which I could not suppress, was our affiliation with the Baha'i faith. Then again, this issue had been a family matter for as long as I

could remember. We had not advertised our affiliation. Only relatives and fellow Baha'is knew about it. Others, even Ali Asghar, considered us one of their own. The Pisuziyani, too, considered us the same way. I went on long trips to Zeynabiyyeh with Hushang. Nevertheless, this was one of the "things" that I wondered whether Aqa Pisuziyani could have heard? Or had Zhaleh, my daughter, been careless and said something in school, something that could have reached Aqa Pisuziyani's, or someone else's, sensitive ears?

At the same time, I thought, "Why would Aqa Pisuziyani, who is an educated man, a friend to whom I had been kind and nice, want to expose us?" Well, of course, there were great benefits, the least of which were visibility and notoriety. Otherwise, how could a novice like him rub shoulders with the likes of Mash'al al-Din and Sham' al-Ma'ali? Besides, could he, for instance, even in his wildest dream, interrogate the education director in public? Another perk would be that he would become recognized as one of those who rooted out corruption? And wouldn't that alone elevate his position or, possibly, even transfer him to Tehran? I would not be a bit surprised one day, when all of this hullabaloo subsides, to see him board the plane in the old Mehrabad Airport for London or New York.

What gnawed at me as I mulled these thoughts over and over in my mind was that Aqa Pisuziyani knew well that the Baha'is were being picked up from among the population and exterminated in groups, either on the roofs of the committee buildings or in slaughter houses near Gavkhuni. He knew that not only I, but my wife and children, too, would be executed without any questions asked. Could he, I wondered, forget our friendship and deliver us to the firing squads?

I recalled one of Ali Asghar's frightening remarks about the goings-on in the city. It was regarding two individuals who had been executed on the roof of the same committee building into which I was hurled. They had been sentenced as smugglers but, as Asghar Ali reported with glee, in reality, they had been Baha'is. And, ironically, this very Aqa Pisuziyani had happened to be the sole presiding judge! Would we, too, in a week or two, face the same predicament? The very thought of the possibility of seeing my thirteen-year-old son dragged away, stood up against some horrifying sooty-brick wall, and shot turned my blood cold.

For some reason, the past couple of days, I have been relating much of what was happening to me to Ali Asghar and his accomplice *mullah*. His guilty face, as they took me to the committee remained fresh in my mind. When I came back last night and asked to see him, I was told that he had already gone to his quarters. I went to his room near the entrance to ask him about the events in the afternoon, he was not there. On my way back to the main part of the building, he appeared from the dark. It seemed that he had climbed the wall or otherwise exerted himself. "I was sleeping," he said. "There was a noise, I went to check it out. I think someone was climbing the wall. I followed him, but could not reach him. Then I returned."

I did not pursue the matter further. The wall was too high for Ali Asghar to climb in pursuit of anyone. He could have jumped off it into the house, if someone, on the other side, had given him a boost. Now, in the morning, while still trying to sort out my thoughts on the Ali Asghar issue, the telephone rang. I called Zhaleh and she, with her special agility, answered it, and said, “Dad, ...its for you.”

The caller was a young man. “Sir,” he said. “I am Ali Zadeh, the clerk of the committee.”

I said, “Hello, Mr. Ali Zadeh, have you already...”

“No, sir,” he interrupted. “I am calling with the hope that you can help me...”

“I see,” I said. “How can I help you?”

“Didn’t anyone tell you, sir?” he asked.

There was not a trace of the fake Isfahani accent in his voice. “No,” I said, I haven’t seen anyone yet. What has happened?”

“Last night, sir, after the committee was closed, Aqa Mash’al al-Din was murdered.”

I didn’t know quite how to react. Was I to rejoice upon the death of an enemy, or was I to feel sad because of a man’s loss of life? I asked, “Murdered? Who martyred him?”

“No one knows yet, sir. It seems that a few men from outside the city had attacked and stabbed him.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” I said, “but how can I be of assistance to you?”

“Well, sir, since the very first day of our arrival, Aqa Pisuziyani has, for some unknown reason, considered Aqa Mash’al al-Din and myself to be stumbling blocks in his way. Now that Aqa Mash’al al-Din has left the scene, and I have lost my main support, Aqa Pisuziyani is coming at me very strongly. This morning, several revolutionary guards came to arrest me. I escaped through the back door of the hotel and, at the moment, I am still at large. I am a stranger in this city. Since it seems that you know Aqa Pisuziyani very well, I thought if I took my case to you, you would help...”

I interrupted him, saying, “Dear boy, you didn’t happen to have cotton in your ears yesterday, did you? Aqa Pisuziyani’s views about me and my family are crystal clear...”

“No, sir,” he said. “You are mistaken. Aqa Pisuziyani is a politician. In pre-committee hearing sessions, he defended you zealously; he distinguished you as one of the most competent directors in the whole city.”

Now I was really confused. Was Aqa Pisuziyani my friend or my enemy? If he were my friend, why was he confirming Aqa Mash’al al-Din’s assertions; and, if he were my enemy, why had he supported and defended me in pre-hearing sessions? I said, “In any event, what are they accusing you of? What do they want you for?”

“By God,” he said. “As far as I know, sir, I am innocent. Since my arrival here with Aqa Mash’al al-Din, it is being rumored that I am a Baha’i. I swear to the holiest of the holies that

this allegation is nothing but a fabrication. I am not a Baha'i and I do not know anyone who is a Baha'i. Between you and me, to hell with one and all Baha'is!"

I said, "Is it proper to curse people about whose faith you are not even informed?"

He said, "I know, sir. I should be ashamed of myself, but I hoped you would excuse my being impolite and rude. I merely intended to prove that all they say is fabrication. I would have directed all those swear words to myself, if I were a Baha'i. But since I am not, they won't be efficacious!"

From his explanations, I could gather that Aqa Pisuziyani was actively persecuting and executing the Baha'is of Isfahan. I also gathered that Aqa either did not know about, or had not discussed my religion in the pre-committee hearings. If it were not Aqa Pisuziyani who had sought my arrest, who had? To broach this problem, in a fraternal voice, I said, "God helps those who help themselves. If you expect me to help you, you must put some information at my disposal."

He said, "As you wish, sir. How can I be of service?"

"Just tell me, yesterday, under what charge was I brought to the committee?"

"Excuse me for evasion, sir," he said conclusively. "I am sorry. You are asking about secret committee communication. I have taken an oath not to divulge any such information. I can be executed without a trial. Please, ask any other questions, but..."

"Well, if you intend to insist and carry these precious secrets with you to the grave, who am I to say anything?"

As if shocked by the word "grave," without any hesitation, he said, "As I was saying—please keep this a most guarded secret—Aqa Mash'al al-Din believed that the education director in Tehran and the education directors of the provinces have undermined the whole education system of the country and thereby are detrimental to our Islamic culture. For this reason, whenever we arrived in a province, he would have the education director of the province brought before him. Then he would, as he did yesterday, lecture him using the same lecture; and then he would let him go. Here, however, initially he was confronted with Aqa Pisuziyani's vehement opposition. But since Aqa Mash'al al-Din had more clout, he succeeded in bringing you before the committee."

Ali Zadeh's explanation did not shine any light on my concern. I already knew about the plans at the Center for cleansing the pool. So, probing deeper, I asked, "What happens to these people's files?"

"They are filed under 'out of circulation.'"

In spite of its paucity, his brief explanation provided a fairly satisfactory response for many of my vexing questions of the previous night. I realized that I had misjudged Aqa Pisuziyani, accusing him of much for which I did not have any proof. He was not oblivious to

our past friendship. Without a doubt, he remembers our nocturnal trips to the *Zeynabiyyeh* tomb and that is why he has supported me. But would he continue to support me, if others found out that I was a Baha'i? I asked myself. Then to Ali Zadeh, "In your opinion, therefore, what will happen to my file?"

"Well, sir, for some reason, Aqa Haji Chelcheraq has refused the custody of your file and, as far as I can guess, Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali, too, does not dare..."

At this juncture, a voice different from Ali Zadeh's interrupted our conversation asking yet another individual, "Did you get it all on?"

"Yes," said the fourth voice with an air of finality.

Following this brief exchange, the line went dead. I turned around. My wife and Zhaleh were standing behind me waiting to hear about the call. My wife asked, "Who was it?"

"It was Ali Zadeh, the committee clerk. Apparently last night someone has killed Aqa Mash'al al-Din on the way to his hotel. And now the clerk is being sought."

"Where was he telephoning from?"

"He didn't say. Someone cut the line and, I think, our conversation was recorded."

"Good gracious!" she said.

Zhaleh, her face pallid, asked, "Dad, what is happening to us?"

"Nothing, dear," I said. "What can happen? God is merciful."



Several days after the mysterious murder of Aqa Mash'al al-Din and my strange telephone conversation with Ali Zadeh, about one o'clock in the afternoon, Ali Asghar arrived from his quarters, panting. He said, when returning from the noon prayers, he had talked to Aqa Pisuziyani. The Aqa had sent word that he would pay us a visit that night between the hours of nine and ten.

The news of this unexpected visit jolted us out of monotony and boredom; it gave us something to do. We had to receive Aqa Pisuziyani in as ceremonially correct a way as circumstances permitted. But first, I felt I should ask Ali Asghar about his talk with Aqa Pisuziyani and find out if the Aqa's visit was in any way related to Ali Asghar's activities. But all I found out was that Ali Asghar knew the Aqa as a friend of the family and that he had talked to him several times about the family. Once the Aqa had helped the kid get coupons from the mosque to buy food. In any event, my talk with him did not shed any light on the identity of the *mullah* in Vahhab's story.

When the house cleaning was done, we sent Ali Asghar to the market to buy what fruit and sweets he could find. We made sure that he would not leave the queue, as he sometimes did, before buying some grapes, apples, pears, or any other fruits available. We also cautioned

him to hold on tight to his coupons lest hoodlums try to wrest them out of his hand. Then, at about eight, in order to prevent Zhaleh and Kayvan from inadvertently saying something, we asked them to go to their rooms.

At about eight-thirty, after Ali Asghar retired to his quarters, and my wife and I were alone, my wife said, "I couldn't say anything while all these other things were going on. Why do you think he is coming here? I mean, at this hour of the night?"

"I don't know," I said. "Perhaps he has chosen this time so that no one sees him come here. Or, perhaps, he didn't want anyone else to accompany him. Something important must be afoot."

"Don't you think if it were an important matter he would call?" Then, quickly, interrupting herself, she added, "The telephone, too, is no longer the telephone it used to be—it has become yet another instrument for gathering information."

I have always been proud of my wife. She is intelligent, insightful, and endowed with a good memory. She does not forget significant events. She said, "When you were appointed education director, do you remember who was the first person who called and congratulated you?"

I had forgotten this event completely. But my wife's mention of it gave the Aqa's untimely visit a totally different meaning. Involuntarily I sprang to my feet and said, "Of course, it was Hushang. You have the memory of an elephant!"

She said, "I know this Pisuziyani very well—he is a cunning, opportunist spider. Before reaching this 'position,' he used to mimic villagers and bazaaris. He poked fun at the *mullahs*, in particular. His main refrain was, 'If ever I say good-bye to this land, it will be good-bye forever...'"

I was Pisuziyani's friend and yet, it seemed, I did not know him quite as well as she did. Thus, even though not the jealous type—I allowed my wife to run her life as she saw appropriate—I could not help asking, "May I ask how *Madame* has come by so much *information vitale* about the *Monsieur*?"

My wife now had me over a barrel, so to speak, and could, as usual, tease me for a while. But time was of the essence. Sweetly, she said, "After her children were in bed, Mozaffar's sister and I used to eavesdrop from behind the closet wall."

This reference was sufficient since Mozaffar, who is now a medical doctor in Germany, with private practice and all, used to be a very close friend of Hushang Khan. Indeed, one of the reasons for the fallout between Hushang and me, before his sojourn to India and joining the "men of the cloth," was his friendship with Mozaffar.

My wife's soothing words diminished my mental anguish. Then, before she said good night and retired to the bedroom, she said, "make sure to ask him to help us move to some other country. I am sure he can. He has connections... Do it Khamush. It is vital, please!"

"I will try, I said.

Then, making sure that everything is in order, she left me to meet Aqa Pisuziyani. Before long, Ali Asghar appeared at the threshold and announced that the Aqa had arrived. I hurried out of the room to meet and welcome him.

When in the room, the Aqa cast a long look around and, as he put his walking stick by the door, said, "Mr. Director, I trust that all is well with you."

"You are very kind," I said calmly. "Life has its ups and downs..."

Then, while ritually exchanging pleasantries, I invited him to sit on the sofa. With a special show of dignity, he took off his turban and placed it on the sofa. Under the turban, his hair was well-groomed and stylish. Then he took off his cloak, folded it a number of times and placed it under his turban. Then he sat down, saying, "I apologize for disturbing you at this hour of the evening."

"No apologies needed," I said. "It is your own house. Come and go as you please."

As is customary, a short while after Aqa's arrival, Ali Asghar brought a tray full of all kinds of fruit. He put the tray on the table in front of us, left the room and returned with yet another tray. On this tray there were cups in silver holders and a china teapot decorated with intriguing patterns and flowers. A pleasant, fragrant vapor, ascended from the spout of the pot. I poured a cup of tea and placed it in front of the Aqa, then poured another one for myself. He thanked me and, without any introduction, began to outline the reason for his visit. "Mr. Director," he said, looking me in the eyes. "I have come here to discuss two very important issues with you and, since it is late, I shall not beat around the bush. I hope that you will not consider my frankness an act of impunity or boldness. Time is short and we have to..."

"As you wish," I said. "Please go ahead."

"Well, one of the issues has to do with your file. After the untimely death of Aqa Mash'al al-Din, I have taken it out of circulation. I shall talk about that a little bit later. The other issue is about the selection of a mayor for the city. The acting mayor, as you know, is not made for the position. I know just the man for the job, but without the assistance of you and your colleagues, it would be difficult to install him in the position."

"I have always been ready to improve the city's image," I said.

"You indeed have," he said, and continued. "Well, this is how it will work. After you recover from your cold or flu or whatever it is that is holding you in, meet with your colleagues informally and praise the individual—I'll give you his name later—and convince them that he is the man for the job. I, too, will talk to the city fathers, the clergy, and the

bazaaris. Together, perhaps we can bring a semblance of decency to this beautiful city. What do you say?"

Then, without allowing me to answer, he returned to the first subject, my file. He said, "But regarding your file. Today, I received a tape recording containing, I believe, a conversation between you and the ex-committee clerk, Ali Zadeh."

This was the first time in the meeting that I felt uncomfortable. I scanned the various exchanges in the telephone conversation mentally as one would scan a film. He continued, "This Ali Zadeh is a Baha'i. He was sent here as part of Aqa Mash'al al-Din's entourage to create trouble. Fortunately, he was arrested somewhere in the Toqchi district and is now in prison. My advice to you is to stay away from him. I shall add the tape to your file and keep it there as well, out of circulation."

Without showing any sign of my latent concern for Ali Zadeh's safety, I asked, "Are you positive that he is a Baha'i? Has he confessed?"

"No, my dear fellow," he said. "Are you joking? They do not confess. Such information must be dragged out of them with a pair of pliers. In his case, however, we shall learn a lot tomorrow. Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali can find a needle in a haystack..." Then he sat back, folded his arms and, in a serious tone, said, "No one knows about the tape I spoke about. I wanted to let you know of its existence in case something comes up."

I said that I understood. Then, before the Aqa got ready to leave, again urged by my humanitarian instincts, I asked, "Then what do you think will happen to the poor fellow?"

"Which poor fellow? Ali Zadeh?" he asked. "He is done for. According to the tape, he has discussed secret committee matters in public. His punishment is death."

"But you said that the tape remains on my file and will not be circulating! How can it be used against Ali Zadeh at the same time?"

A mysterious smile appeared in the corner of his lips. Placing his palm on my shoulder for support, he stood up saying, "The law asks for two witnesses. The same two who made the recording will testify that Ali Zadeh has divulged the secrets of the committee. Then they will say that their tape recording did not come off as expected. Who can quarrel with electromagnetic tapes? May the Almighty Allah bless his soul!"



Karl Brown

He bent, drank the rest of the tea in his cup, picked out a nice, red apple and pocketed it. Then he picked up his turban with both hands and, looking at his reflection in the window pane, placed it on his head. I helped him put his cloak around him. When he was ready to leave, I accompanied him as far as the entrance to our garden. When I returned, my wife was sitting on the sofa waiting. As soon as she heard me enter, she said, "Didn't I say he is a cunning spider?"

Obviously, she had been listening to our conversation. Once again, I did not bring up the issue regarding help to emigrate. She graciously didn't mention it, perhaps seeing that the Aqa did not allow me to get a word in edgewise. In any event, we entered the bedroom together. That night I slept like a log.

The Decree

More than a year elapsed before Aqa Sham al-Din's decree that I had been waiting for arrived. It was exactly as I had envisioned it the night that I was walking from the committee to my house. He had looked into my soul and Golnar's, and the souls of my children, and my larger family, and issued an all embracing decree. It was now up to his minions to carry out his orders.

By the order of the Supreme Revolutionary Command in the capital, the revolutionary committees throughout the land were disbanded. Aqa Pisuziyani was appointed attorney general of Isfahan. At his behest, a review of the judgments in the now defunct committees got underway. The files of many of my acquaintances were reopened, but even though I had been told to expect to be summoned for interrogation in the near future, I did not receive any summons. My assumption was that Aqa Pisuziyani was keeping my file out of circulation.

Jobwise, through governmental and local decrees, our circumstance became precarious and, needless to say, we became increasingly vulnerable. Not long after the trial, both my wife and I were formally dismissed from our positions. I was dismissed as the education director of Isfahan and my wife as university professor. Oddly enough, I received a letter of dismissal on official stationery from the Department of Education and Culture, but my wife did not receive any indication that she had ever been a member of her institution. My dismissal note was simple and to the point. It read:

In the Name of God

Mr. Khalil Khamush,

According to credible information resulting from a thorough investigation undertaken by the group called "Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil," it has been established that you are intimately affiliated with the false Baha'i sect, a deviant sect that furthers the

objectives of international Zionism. Following circular No. ..., dated ..., the Department of Education and Culture of Isfahan hereby terminates your employment. Henceforth, you will no longer have either a position, or any rights, in this department.

Head of Isfahan Department of Education and Culture,
Seyyed Hassanali Seraji

In order for my wife not to feel left out, I joked, “Let’s share this letter and consider it approval for the both of us.”

She looked at me with her special look and said, “I never looked to them for approval when I worked. Why should their antics faze me now?”

I admired her resilience, especially in light of the difficulties she has gone through, and hugged her. She reciprocated.

Following those decrees, all our privileges, including pension and insurance, were withdrawn. I lost the simplest rights that an individual has—permission to work. I was not permitted to work even as a menial laborer. Of course I was still expected to care for my family as fathers usually do. In addition, at about the same time, without prior notice, Ali Asghar left us and we did not hear from him again. His departure was not as traumatic as it would have been months earlier when we were virtually house-bound.

Then, we experienced two incomprehensible tragedies almost simultaneously. Within a fortnight, the heart ache resulting from those tragic experiences turned mine and Golnar’s hair white. First, our son Kayvan disappeared. The boy, according to Golnar, when I was taking a nap, answered a telephone call. Then he took a notebook and, when leaving told his mother, “I need to take this notebook to my classmate. I’ll be right back.” He had done that kind of thing before, so Golnar did not delay him. Unlike the other times, however, he did not come back.

When I woke up, he was still out. I asked for him. Golnar, somewhat worried, told me about the telephone call. We did not know which friend it could have been who had called. We asked the neighbors if they had seen Kayvan. Nobody had. Often, deep within me, I had worried that something like that might happen, because, like his peers, he was affected adversely by the revolution and was restive. And bad things had happened to some. But I always tried to put it out of my mind.

As a rule, Kayvan had never been late for dinner. So we waited. He did not come back. We called Behjat Khanom and other family, even his friends and classmates. But to no avail. No one had any idea where Kayvan could be. The next day, too, our search did not turn up any

results. The police refused to look for him. They required documentation that he had not fled because of maltreatment by the family. We did not have any such proof.

The only avenue that was left open to us was to seek assistance from the Chelcheraq Foundation. After all, Aqa Haji Chelcheraq had been a close friend of Khamush Senior. The Foundation obliged and assigned two of its members to look for him. They showed Kayvan's pictures throughout the city to see if anyone had any information about him. Several responses raised our hopes. Two said that they had seen him with a couple of young men on the way to the café on Mount Sofeh, but they could not identify the young men. Those working at the café did not recognize Kayvan's picture as a visitor either alone or with anyone else there. One witness said he had seen his name on a roster of drug addicts killed in a raid on a drug house. And another witness said he had seen him with a burly man on a bus going to Tehran. None of the leads produced any results. In the end, the Foundation called off the search and wished us good luck with our search.

We did not know then, and still do not know, whether to mourn for him or to keep a candle lit hoping that, one of these days or nights, he might come back. Without him, the house feels unusually large, cold, and empty. Golnar regrets her decision to stay in Isfahan. She continuously cries and says she should have taken her children and left me to develop my plans. Where she could have gone other than to her family I don't know. Zhaleh is totally distraught. She doesn't know what to do, where to go, and how to fill the emptiness that the sudden disappearance of her brother has created in her young life. All we can do is to try to give her, and ourselves, hope that Kayvan will show up and surprise us. But days and weeks have gone by and nothing of the sort has happened.

The other tragedy was that both Mokhtar and Sho'leh, who had been arrested and detained without any specific charges were executed, apparently in the dark of night in, I think, Adelabad prison in Shiraz. Our attempts at retrieving their bodies were met by officials who were instructed to be evasive in their answers. We were sent from one office to another and to another. At the end, we were told their bodies had been buried after execution in a particular place about which the family will get appropriate information in due time. We still have not received any credible information.

Mokhtar was a political scientist who, like us, had lost his position. For a while, he was hired as a truck driver and later opened a small shop near his house. Sho'leh was an ecologist in love with nature, especially with birds. She was accused of spying.

And, if that was not enough, while we were still getting used to our new normal, one morning, two men, a *mullah* and a plain-clothes official, came to the house. I met them at the gate and invited them to come in. They thanked me and said that they were on urgent business

to deliver notices to other places. Then, the plain-clothes official handed me a blank envelope that contained a piece of paper with the following message scribbled on it:

It is decreed that:

Due to continuous reports of anti-governmental, and anti-social activities taking place at the residential house on Sheykh Baha'i Avenue, occupied by Mirza Muhammad Khamush, the said property is hereby confiscated. The current occupants are given one week from the date of this notice to vacate the premises.

I looked at the note and then at the *mullah*, and said, "Haji Aqa, what anti-governmental and anti-social activities is this referring to? You can't throw me out of my ancestral home with this piece of paper. This is not a legal document. It is not on official stationery. There is no date, no signature..."

"It is what it is," said the official. "It's a verdict!"

The *mullah* then approached and, standing too close for comfort, and with a derogatory tone asked, "Were you not the education director a while back?"

"I was," I said. "What of it? Is that a crime?"

"No," he said. "That by itself is not a crime. If it is carried out properly, it is service. But the activities that you undertook when you were in that position were criminal. Now that you have lost that office, do you think you can continue those shenanigans shamelessly here in your private home while living next to decent residents! Well, you are mistaken. Even not taking your anti-social allegation, as a servant of the government, you colluded with the shah, brought foreigners into this country, and God knows what other unorthodox actions... You are lucky that all those charges, and more shameful ones that I would rather not enumerate, are not included in this notice. In fact, you are lucky that the notice is not signed and sealed. In that case, right this minute, I personally would put your belongings out on the sidewalk. Count your blessings and vacate the premises on time! People like you should be..."

He did not complete his sentence. The official approached us, held the *mullah* by the arm and took him away. I was left holding the piece of paper. The words of the *mullah* made it clear that, in our vulnerable state, I did not have recourse to any authority. I simply had to comply. And comply I did. Within a week, from Sheykh Baha'i Avenue, the three of us moved to a tenement in the *Chaharsu-ye Shiraziha* district, where we live now. We share the yard and the kitchen with four other families.

The move, on top of Kayvan's disappearance and the situation that I had created for my wife and daughter, had a devastating effect on me. The house that we left had originally been built by my grandfather. My father had expanded it by building a bath, a modern kitchen, a

guestroom, and rooms for entertainment and games. It had a sizable yard, flowerbeds, and a large pool. We had furnished it with the best Italian furniture available in Isfahan. Kayvan and Zhaleh had their own rooms to which they could invite their friends. Ali Asghar had his quarters by the gate and the car had adequate parking space at the entrance.

To the contrary, the house that we moved into was located in a back alley. To enter it, you had to navigate a long, vestibule from which a dark, tunnel-like egress separated and ended in what had been a stable. The sun-lit vestibule itself led to a rickety door. The house had a large yard with a poorly kept pool. Each tenant occupied a large room with a large closet. Neighbors took weekly turns to clean the yard. My main concern was the barely lit vestibule and the dark tunnel egress, but given our monitory situation I had to accept renting the room.

As a result of our house being confiscated, and the limited time that we were allowed before we had to leave, we lost our expensive furniture. Most of the items were bulky and could not be moved to our new dwelling. Besides, they were incongruous with our new circumstance. In order to provide money for daily expenses and for rent, we had to sell our car and, for a while, my wife taught music lessons, clandestinely, to a group of music enthusiasts. She earned some money to supplement our meager savings. But, unfortunately, that job, too, was short lived, adding to my sense of desperation.

The families in the tenement were mostly from the Fars province. They had lived in the same house, or the same neighborhood, for generations. They knew each other very well. We, on the other hand, were new not only to the neighborhood, but also to the unwritten rules governing the community.

One of the families was from Abadeh, where my ancestors came from. Knowing something about us, the members of that family, unlike the others, were somewhat sympathetic towards our predicament. But, because the other families had lost one or more of their members to committee executions and were bitter, they felt absolutely sure that we had visited the revolution on them and, consequently, had deprived them of their normal life at the side of their loved ones. Some of them openly accused us of spying for Israel, while others thought we spied for the United States. Our only option was to ignore them as poor people who did not know what they were talking about. Regretfully, however, ignoring such allegations rather than making them go away entrenches them in the mind of the accusers where they fester. At the end, we create maladjusted maniacs with lethal weapons at their disposal...



The shock of Kayvan's disappearance and the need for an intense search for him, as well as trying to get information on Mokhtar and Sho'leh and the whereabouts of their

children overshadowed the intense phobia that had paralyzed me. I managed to control it and, as a result, for the first time in a long time, I could mingle with neighbors and share my story with them. The hardest thing, of course, was to talk about Kayvan. Sometimes I talked about him in the past tense and, when I realized what I had done I had to explain my state of mind. Nevertheless, I admit that compared to what some of them had gone through, we were not badly off. In my mind, Kayvan was still with us. He had stayed in the Sheykh Baha'i house and refused to vacate the premises and move to the tenement with us. In my state of mind, the neighbors, outraged as they were, shunned us as beings protected by the devil!

One of the neighbors had a relative called Aminzade. A retired actor, Aminzade, lived in Baharistan. Originally we, too, had intended to move to that area, but because the rent was too high, we decided against the move. The neighbor said that to enter Aminzade's house, the security guards had climbed over his wall. Then, because the old man had been protective of his property, they had beaten him up and broken his jaw. At the end, they had confiscated his tapes, books, pamphlets, and collection of rare musical instruments. Now the poor old man lives alone with a broken jaw and a broken heart. Since the onset of the revolution, he had lost his daughter and his wife to two separate automobile accidents. Although both accidents had happened in the market place in the middle of the day, no one seems to have any recollection about them.

Our next-door neighbor in Sheykh Baha'i, whom I met in the teahouse, said that he was arrested on trumped up smuggling charges and held in confinement for three weeks. Recently, after paying a hefty amount of money, he had been temporarily released to attend the funeral of his son. The young man had been poisoned by the home-made drinks that are sold in legitimate stores under well-know brands. Another neighbor talked about the shame that the neighborhood has brought down on him. His daughter had been assaulted in the alley near their house. She had been beaten, raped, and left moaning in the dark alley. My Zhaleh is nearly the same age. For me, it is unthinkable what what I would do if, God forbid, something like that were to happen to her...

Those were isolated stories describing what individuals abandoned by law and order had to cope with. The larger story emerged when I met colleagues who, like myself, were living on borrowed time. In the vernacular of the time, they were *taghutis*, or supporters of the previous regime. The allegation of being *Taghuti* automatically placed them in an untenable situation, underneath the proverbial sword of Damocles, as it were. The irony is that my peers and I had shared a culture that was suffused with love for the shah and for Iran. The monarchy and the patriotic zeal that it promoted constituted the essence of the culture of our time. Now we were being chastised for having promoted that culture.

From their stories, I learned that at every moment, thousands of lives like ours were in jeopardy. These were upright people accused of having either pro-Israeli or pro-American sentiments. Similarly, countless others were accused of being associated with the Sunni, Sufi, and similar circles. I already knew the extent of the cleansing that had taken place in administrative offices, universities, and the entertainment profession. But I was not aware of the extent of the atrocities elsewhere. My colleagues opened my eyes.

Stories like that made me wonder whether someone, or something, was protecting us? In other words, I wondered if there was any truth to what the neighbors were talking about. If there was such a person, or such a thing, or such a force, I did not have any clue about its existence. Every now and then I came across Aqa Pisuziyani in the market, or on the street. We never said much beyond exchanging greetings. He still called me Mr. Director. Most other people had forgotten about my directorship. I was not sure whether he was poking fun at me, or whether he actually felt bad that my family and I should have been treated so shabbily. Several times I wanted to confront him and tell him that I no longer directed anything, but each time I thought discretion was the better part of valor. Why create hostility in a situation that is already suffused with bigotry and prejudice! Besides, I thought he may still have my file and, who knows, one of these days, circumstances might force me to seek his assistance.

In general, being more experienced, my wife and I coped with the transition the best way we could. Zhaleh, on the other hand, had a difficult time. On the one hand, she had to deal with hatred doled out by her peers in the neighborhood. On the other hand, she had to deal with overt curricular restrictions, as well as with outright prejudice, especially on the part of her teachers some of whom carried grudges against me but were most likely taking them out on her. This is to ignore the hole in her heart that was created by the sudden disappearance of her beloved brother. What if, God forbid, one of the older students, or one of the teachers, just to hurt me, were to take advantage of her. At such times, I talked to my father for assistance. Only he could help me sort things out. More than all that, Zhaleh was afraid of walking down the dark vestibule alone. We had a small window that opened into the alley. Usually she hollered at the window that she was home so Golnar would go and open the door for her.

My major regret has been, and remains, that when Golnar saw the abyss in front of us and warned me, I stubbornly ignored her advice. I guess I was too dedicated to my plans as a director and too devoted to my city. More than that, unlike Golnar, I could not imagine that the society that I thought I knew so well would turn its laws against its own citizens and knowingly destroy them. I am profoundly remorseful that my failure is hurting my wife and kid. I could have sought help from Hushang or, when he was still living, from Aqa Haji Chelcheraq. But I did not. I simply did not. Now, every time I see Aqa Pisuziyani, I am filled

with guilt and regret. I know for a fact that my “correct” actions then have resulted in the bitter outcomes we are experiencing today. I could have saved my son and I failed.

Even living in the same house with Golnar has become a task. We both know what lies at the root of our utter hopelessness leading to a predictable doom. Yet we continue to evade the enormous elephant in the room. Rather than a healthy discussion of the issue, as usual, we take refuge in small talk. How much longer can that charade continue?

The Invitation

Life passed at its own slow pace until one day, when I came home, my wife said, “Taqi, the son of one of the neighbors, was here looking for you.”

“What Taqi?” I asked. “Whose son is Taqi?”

“I don’t know. He said they live at the end of the alley—the house with the big door and the sign that reads ‘Aid is from Allah and Victory is at hand.’”

“But that is the late Haji’s house. Didn’t Taqi say what business?”

“Said his dad wants to chat with you.”

“His dad? You mean the *seyyed* who appears around here about the middle of each week? What business could he have with me? I have nothing to chat with him about.”

“Well, I don’t know. He seems to have something to chat with you about. Maybe he wants you to marry his daughter!”

“Look,” I said with frustration. “Let’s be serious. What do you think? Do you think he, too, is a cunning spider?”

“How do I know? I haven’t eavesdropped from behind his closet door, have I? As far as I know, the locals call him Ashekzadeh, or something like that. He preaches around the *Kohne Meydan*. And, according to the women in the bathhouse, he had been offered a position in high places here in Isfahan, but he had rejected the offer.”

“I wish I knew what he wants,” I muttered.

“What makes it so difficult?” She said. “Just go to his house and he’ll tell you!”

“That’s easy for you to say. Do you know his wife?”

“Which one? He probably has three or four.”

“Didn’t the boy say what time? I can’t just walk into someone’s house!”

“He said whenever you are free. It is not important what time during the day. But it must be either on a Tuesday or a Wednesday.”

“Just like airline pilots—a couple of days in Milan, a couple of days in Paris. Let’s see, today is Tuesday and in all likelihood, at this time, he is taking a nap. What if I go and pay him a visit in a couple of hours, say around four?”

“Fine. Go and see what the good *seyyed* has to say. He may have a job for you, or, who knows, he has lots of connections. Maybe something about Kayvan...”

“That I doubt for sure,” I said. “What exasperates me is that I have not had much to do with his type. You know them better than me. What should I expect?”

“Expect the opposite of what you normally...?”

“And what does that mean?” I interrupted.

“It means that he is a product of the theological school, a preacher. He probably preaches the same things that his teachers had learned from their teachers. In other words, you most likely are not meeting a high-level dignitary...”

Then, interrupting herself, she added, “Although he could have accepted the offer from Tehran and that would have made him a high-level dignitary...”

“That is intriguing, isn’t it?” I said, “Should I deal with him as a preacher or as a dignitary?”

“Neither. And don’t expect him to tell you what is on his mind directly,” she explained. “Rather, try to understand the point of his story through the hints that he provides.”

“I see,” I said. “But seriously, do you think he might have a job for me?”

“Khamush, dear. How often should I repeat this? There is nothing here in Isfahan, or in Iran, that anyone can offer either you or me. You were spared a harsh dismissal simply because you are a man. I carried the brunt of it all. I was the one who was told directly to my face...”

She stopped, took her handkerchief, dried her eyes, and sobbing added, “An illiterate *mullah*, one like the one you are about to meet, said to me, “Woman, you and your likes are not welcome here. You have no business at this sacred sanctuary any more...”

I wished I had not entered this conversation. She had held back this agonizing experience from me since the onset of the revolution. She didn’t bring it up even after Kayvan disappeared.

“I am sorry, dear,” I said. “I will go and talk to him.”



At about four in the afternoon, I wore a semi-official suit, without a tie, and a pair of old, home-made *malakis* and shuffling, headed for the late Haji’s house. I knocked. From behind the door, a sweet female voice, with a delightful Isfahani accent, said, “Who is it?”

“Son of Mirza Mohammad. I have business with the Haji.”

“Please, wait a minute!”

A good deal of time passed and nothing happened. Then, suddenly, a small door opened within the big door, and the rather large body of the late Haji’s son appeared in the entrance. The first thing that caught my sight was his over-sized black, baggy pants and the white cord that was tied over his fat belly. He was wearing a relatively short, white calico shirt with a V-neck. The bushy hair of his wide chest protruded through the opening. His head, without his turban, resembled a soccer ball with an artificial beard attached to it. In short, the Haji’s son was unlike anything that I had imagined him to look like. After a relatively long pause, I offered my greetings to which he said, “Hello, hello. Son of Mirza Mohammad. Welcome. Come in... come in... Mind the step!”

Intrigued by the jovial reception—I did not know the Haji’s son from Adam—I entered the house. It had a good size yard with a rather large pool with greenish water and dirty footbaths. A brick floor with many bricks broken or missing. A number of tall plane trees with exposed roots delimited the garden. At the far corner, there was a well with an old water wheel.

The Haji’s son led me to the short, closed door of a small room resembling an independent kitchen. In fact, the soot that had accumulated on the door frame, the wall, and the square opening that served as a window confirmed that we were standing in front of the closed door of a kitchen. He halted at the door and, before entering, as if obliged to give me an explanation, said, “I hope you will excuse me for not taking you to the parlor. I have a small room at the back of the kitchen here. We are going there.”

Having said this, he pushed the door open and we entered a dark kitchen. He led the way in the dark and I followed his shadow, “This way...this way...watch out for the water reservoir.”

The warning came too late. My hand was already in the cool water of the reservoir. Without saying anything, I followed his shadow until I could not see him. He kept walking ahead and talking, “...When you reach where I am now, turn right...”

He was still talking when, at the end of the dark tunnel, he pushed on a door and opened it. The whole space in front was flooded with the light of the lantern in that room. He left the door open, took off his slippers at the door and entered. I, too, took off my *malakis*, placed them next to his slippers, entered, and closed the door behind me.

“Come in... welcome... welcome...”

“Thank you.”

This was a small, but neatly arranged square room. Its walls were white and its floor was covered with elegant carpets. A lantern hung from its light blue ceiling was the only source of light in it. Near the far corner, there was a pot of fire, placed on a shiny brass tray. I

was secretly enjoying the artistry and the elegance of this hidden retreat when my eyes, having become used to the light, caught sight of something that struck fear in my heart. I saw a rather large opium device placed next to the pot of fire. My fears mounted as I got a whiff of the fragrance of the drug that permeated the room.

My initial reaction was that something underhanded was afoot. I thought this room could be a trap to catch me red-handed. If they arrested me in this room, I thought, they could convict me on charges of use, trafficking, or possession and, like many other Baha'is, sentence me and legally execute me. I went pale and a shiver, similar to the one I felt when I was being taken to the committee, ran throughout my spine. In a state of panic, I looked around. The Haji's son, realizing the cause for my panic, came to my rescue, "Excuse me," he said casually. "I was puffing away when you knocked."

I shall never forget his fat face, large red eyes, thick beard, bald head, and the cord that held his baggy pants up. While pondering the idea of "puffing away," used by a *seyyed*, I sat cross-legged across from him. He sat in the corner by the pot of fire and we were ready to chat.

"To begin with, son of Mirza Mohammad," he said, "this room has a history of its own. If gracious Allah wills, I will tell you some of it in the course of our chat. As far as the opium is concerned, don't worry... no one, but no one, knows about the existence of this room."

Even though I do not smoke, I still felt the pleasant giddiness that accompanies the use of the drug. My main objective was to stay sober and discover the motive behind this unlikely hospitality. He continued, "...Also rest assured that not a word of what transpires here will be heard outside of this room."

During the last couple of years, I have had great difficulty sorting out the import of the various titles that had become vogue. I did not know how to react to them. Administrators and military personnel were addressed with the term "Haji." Aqa Pisuziyani, even though I was not directing anything anymore, insisted on addressing me as Mr. Director. After some thought about his use of the old title, I came to the conclusion that he was aware of my level of education and my sensibilities. He also understood and respected collegiality. On the other hand, the *Seyyed* constantly addressed me as Son of Mirza Mohammad, as if I did not have any social standing of my own. In his case, I concluded that he was downgrading me to a lower status, denying my past achievements. In fact, he was putting me at a level lower than himself. After all, he was the son of a *haji* as opposed to the son of a *mirza*. Once humiliated to that level, I gathered, he could push me around unceremoniously. They also referred to doctors and engineers not with their professional titles but with the simple, all inclusive term "aqa."

As I pondered, I watched the Son of Haji poke the fire. He chose a nicely burning coal and picked it up with the tongs. Then, as he gently hit the tongs against the side of the pot to

shed the covering ash, he talked, “Of course, if a word of what transpires here is heard outside, the both of us would be in great trouble. Isn’t that right?” He chuckled.

“Yes, sir. I realize that,” I said, smiling.

After this brief introduction, he said, “Not long ago, quite by chance, I came across your dossier and, although from a distance, I became acquainted with you...”

The reference to my file both confused and shocked me. I was confused because I was under the impression that my file was out of circulation. I was shocked because, from its inception, this file has cost me my job and my ancestral home. More than that, it had made me a tenant in one of the lowest districts of the city. Now, I was sure, I was about to lose the only thing that was left for me—my dignity. The Haji’s son continued, “All of this was in relation to my community involvement trying to extend assistance to people facing difficulty. People like yourself.”

No matter how I looked at his words, they smacked of extortion. Having dealt with various varieties of blackmail, I could detect its foul odor from miles away. Exhaling an extra generous amount of smoke through his wide nostrils, he said bluntly, “Your dossier classified you as a group ‘B’ Baha’i.”

“Group ‘B’ Baha’i?” I said. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, I don’t understand either. All I know is what I am telling you. In the revolutionary committees, the Baha’is were divided into two groups. Those grouped under ‘A’ are all dead and their dossiers are marked ‘completed.’ Those in group ‘B’, as far as I know, lose their jobs, property, and the like. But they are allowed to live. For some reason, however, the true identity of the members of this latter group has not been disclosed to all committee members. You are a Baha’i from group ‘B’.”

“As you say, then,” I said. “I am a Baha’i from group ‘B’.”

“Don’t misunderstand,” he corrected me. “I don’t say that. Your dossier says that...”

“I understand, Haji...” I said.

“That’s how things are. Nothing to be ashamed of. It’s just a grouping,” he continued. “When reading your dossier, I came across several things that you had said in the committee that I liked. Even more than that, I liked your courage. The day when you said ‘from the Lur to the Kurd and from the Pars to the Baluch we all are Iranians,’ was a day when no one dared call himself Iranian.”

In a sad tone, I said, “Well, it was like the Arab invasion of the country and the question of *jeziyeh* and *mavali* and so forth all over again. Wasn’t it?”

He fell silent for a few moments then said, “In any event, I know that you are from the Fars province; we, too, are from Fars. Wouldn’t it be awful if we were to allow simple, religious

disagreements to mar our ageless affinity and prevent us from creating meaningful cooperation?”

His sagacious speech, entirely incongruous with his outward appearance, just like a Sheikh's smoking opium, baffled me. The word “cooperation” struck me as a key word. He continued, “For a long time, now, I have had the desire to tell the story of my life to someone with educational and literary background, someone like yourself, who could take notes and turn them into a book. Who knows, my experience could prove useful, produce a light, as the saying goes, to guide our children. Of course, I don't intend to mount the pulpit and say that my life reflects all that is good and proper. No, God forbid. That is not for me to say. My life, I believe, would indicate that we all should form philosophies of our own and stick to them. The very recognition of this fact, and other similar issues, would make a fitting textbook for our children who, at the present, are following cunning promoters of one foreign trend or another. It would teach them to think before they leap so that, in the process, they do not destroy themselves and, in the long run, the unborn generations.”

I had heard about upright individuals, who use authors to write their life's story. I did not have any objection to that kind of a book. I also had heard about shysters, who used this ploy to point out the vulnerabilities of their victims. In their case, the content of the book would consist of an extortionist's tale outlining his ability to rescue the victim from the miserable situation in which he finds himself. Which way would his story turn? I wondered.

While involuntarily agreeing with him, saying, “yes, yes. As you say.” I was pondering his promise that not a word of what goes on in this room would be heard outside this room. Then who would be the audience for his book?

Meanwhile, he paused, looked at me sitting attentively, and said, “Mirza Mohammad's son. Please feel at home here. Just as you do in your own house... Pour the tea and drink.”

I felt quite uncomfortable knowing that Muslims, especially the fanatics, would rather their utensils not be touched by others. But, once again, the Haji's son came through, “I am not an advocate of the strict rules of cleanliness, you know,” he said. “Please, pour the tea and drink! ...Now, what was I saying? Yes, Son of Mirza, let me make this as clear as possible. I do not intend to impose on you and, simply because you are a Baha'i, make you sit cross-legged across from me and listen to me pour out my heart.”

“No, sir,” I said. “Not at all. I am sure whatever you say will be a lesson not only for our children but for us all. Only if I could impose on you to send Taqi Khan to our house and let my family know that I will be here for a while. They worry, you know.”

“Certainly, no problem,” he said.

Then, without moving from his place, he reached for a funnel-like device, apparently part of a home-made communication system, and shouted into it, “Taqi... Taqi... Go to the son

of Mirza Mohammad's house! Giv'em our greetings and say that Amirza will sup here with us... Run along, that's a good boy!"

Then, he turned to me and said, "As you know, life has its ups and downs. Consider that dossier, there, on the niche. See it?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

"That's not your dossier—your dossier is thicker than that. This one belongs to someone else. Either tonight or tomorrow night, after I tell you how that dossier has come to my possession, I would like to review it with you. I have read it, of course, and I have made certain decisions on it, too. But there are several things in it that go way over my head."

Unable to control my curiosity, I asked, "Can I ask whose dossier it is?"

"As I said, it is not your dossier. Now, if I tell you whose dossier it is, what would remain to do for the rest of the evening, huh?"

I felt remorseful for having asked. I apologized, "You are so very right, of course," I said.

"Do you smoke opium?" he changed the subject.

"No," I said.

"Drink *araq*?" He asked with a wink.

"No," I said again.

"Well, there's a good Muslim! Shall I have a *hookah* (*qalyun*) prepared and brought in?"

"As you wish," I said.

He smiled. Then, once again, he reached for the funnel-like device and shouted, "Ma'sumeh!... Ma'sumeh!... Would you please prepare a *qalyun* and bring it here right away!"

He then drank the rest of his tea, poured a cup of tea for himself and another for me. Meanwhile, the *qalyun* was prepared and brought to the door. He got up, took the device from Ma'sumeh, who remained hidden behind the door, brought the *qalyun* in, and placed it in front of me. Then he walked to the niche, took a folded piece of paper from on top of the file, and returned to his place.

If you have listened to opium smokers, you would know about their fondness for getting into the details of things. In fact, for some the details outshine the very substance of the conversation. The Haji's son, I soon found out, was no exception. He discussed the events of his choice in full, gauged the impact of his words on my face, then continued. As for me, I was captivated by the mysterious file and the folded piece of paper. Similarly, mystifying was the real motive that had prompted the Haji's son to invite me to his den.

Once he resumed his place at the pot of fire, the Haji's son opened a pouch, which he brought out from underneath the small silk carpet on which he sat, produced a fresh piece of

opium from it and handed it to me, saying, "You are not a connoisseur, I would assume. But you can smell. It has come all the way from Fereydan."

I took the chunk, looked it over and smelled it. It had a pleasant fragrance. Then I poked my nail into it to see how hard it was. It was quite hard. I handed it back to the Haji's son. He took it, broke off a small piece and placed it on his heated opium pipe. At first touch, the opium froze to the porcelain with a special hissing sound. The Haji's son watched the sizzling for some time, then picked up the tongs. Poking through the coals, found the right piece, picked it up with a proprietary touch, shook off the excess ash, tightened the hold of the tongs, and placed the tongs at the side of the pot of fire. I continued to watch him as I pulled on the *qalyun*.

Before resuming his story, he squinted, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, "Son of Mirza Mohammad, what I am about to say may come as a shock to you; but there is a lesson in it for you and for your children. I have learned this lesson the hard way. Here I am offering it to you almost for free."

Having said this, he pursed his lips, placed them at the top end of the pipe and began to blow air into the pipe. His breath, accumulating in the pipe, escaped in spurts from a small hole just below the piece of opium. It made the piece of coal glow bright red. After blowing a few times, he began to suck the air in through the same hole. Often the hole would plug up and he would clear it with the sharp end of a safety pin. The fresh air carried the drug-laden smoke into his lungs. He did this several times in a row until his eyes began to water. This was the sign that his lungs were full and that he was ready to exhale the smoke and talk. Although feeling somewhat lightheaded, I kept pulling on the *qalyun* and thinking how could he not know about my son's disappearance...

The Chat

“About noon, over a year ago,” said my host, “I was here in this house. There was a knock on the door. Ma’sumeh answered the door and shouted. ‘It’s Ased Kazem’s son. He has a registered letter. He says it needs your signature.’”

“Having just woke up, I fastened my pantaloons’ cord, threw my cloak over my shoulders, and went to the door. Ased Kazem’s son, who had not seen me without my turban before, cast a long look at my half-sleepy eyes, and said, ‘Good day, sir.’”

“Good day to you, too,” I said. “Where is the registered letter from?”

“From Tehran, sir.”

“Then, hastily, he added, ‘Sir, my mistake. It’s not a letter. It’s a telegram.’”

“While he jotted down something in his log, I wondered who in Tehran could have sent me a telegram. I didn’t know anyone in Tehran. Then, when he finished entering the information in his ledger, respectfully handed the telegram to me with both hands. I thanked him and signed his ledger. Then, looking the envelope over, just for the sake of conversation, I asked, how’s it going with the mail service these days?”

“Not bad,’ he said. ‘Lots of complaints though. People complain about receiving their mail late, or about not receiving it at all. It is how it is with the mail service, you know.’”

“I know Ased Kazem, the young man’s father, quite well. So, when he was ready to mount his bike, even though several years separated the two of us, I *ta’arofed*, saying, what’s the rush? Come on in and have a cup of...”

“No, Haji,’ he said. ‘Thanks just the same. There is a lot of mail and I want to deliver it before lunch. Some other time, God willing.’”

“Then pointing to the telegram,” he said, ‘I hope I brought you good news.’”

“Having said this, he mounted his bike and rode away. I opened the telegram.”

The Haji’s son, then carefully unfolded the paper that he had taken from on top of the file in the niche and placed it in front of me. It read:

In the Name of Allah

Dear Haji Fanusiyani,

With this telegram you are appointed the Attorney General of the province of Isfahan so that you may attend to the judicial affairs of that province. It is incumbent upon you to review the activities of the now defunct revolutionary committees and to transfer all relevant cases to the office of the Attorney General in Tehran. According to the circular number A122 and the order of the "Aqa," the military as well as other relevant law-enforcement units will be at your service.

In addition, even though a long time has elapsed, our office has not received adequate information concerning the martyrdom of Aqa Mash'al al-Din in Isfahan. It is expected that your office will expedite matters and bring the instigators of that calamity to justice.

Sincerely,

Ayatollah Naftchi Qomi

Taking my eyes off the telegram, I recalled my wife's words about the gossip in the bathhouse. There was, after all, a grain of truth in what the women had said. What intrigued me was the reason for his declining such a lucrative position? He continued, "Only six months prior to receiving that telegram, before the revolutionary committees were closed, if someone had proposed that I take charge of half of what is in this telegram, I would have pronounced him insane and would have him confined to an asylum. But, in the wake of all the bombings, the slaughters that ensued, and a dearth of capable leaders, the order no longer appeared extraordinary. Of course, I am not saying that I was the right person for the job. Only Allah knows that. Not only I lacked experience in unraveling the intricacies of various, often difficult, cases, but also that I did not have any expertise in interpreting the complexities of the judicial system itself. Yet, there I was. What could I do? I have lived in this city for most of my life and I have not harmed a soul. Often, as an impartial judge of sorts, I have mediated small quarrels and I have consistently and quite judiciously tried to distinguish between what belongs to me and what belongs to others. I feel proud of myself to have been able to make this distinction. But could I continue this impartiality as the attorney general? Isn't it the job of the attorney general to interfere in people's affairs? Doesn't he often have to deny people handsome profits that they feel they have earned? Would I be able to deal with such disgruntled individuals? I mulled these thoughts over in my mind," he continued, "as I walked

to the pool and splashed a couple of handfuls of water on my face to wake me up. The children's mother, already cooking lunch, shouted from the kitchen, 'Who was it?'

"No one," I said. "Ased Kazem's son. He has brought a telegram."

"A telegram? Where from?"

"From the capital," I replied.

"What has happened? More riots and arrests?"

"No, no. None of that. They are offering me a job. They are asking me to become the attorney general of Isfahan."

"And what does that mean? What are you supposed to be doing?"

"Well," I said. "I don't know yet. He may have delivered this to the wrong house, although it has my name on it—it says Haji Fanusiyani."

"You are not a Haji!" she said conclusively, "Give it to Malihe to read it."

"I read it," I said. "The writing is legible. It's even printed. They want me to investigate and judge the affairs related to the committees..."

"What?... What did you say about the committees? Are you crazy? Why should you put your life on the line? You are neither the Haji they are looking for, nor the judge!"

"I don't have to be a judge," I said. "There are books. There are other judges. All I need to do is just to look at what the other judges do and follow suit. Besides, it is most probably an order from the Aqa. What do you want me to do?"

"Throughout this conversation she was in the kitchen and I could not see her. Upon hearing the word Aqa, she stormed out into the yard. Her *chador* was tied around her waist, and her curly gray hair covered most of her face. Going directly to the pool, she ritually rinsed her hands, then, squatting by the side of the pool, said, 'My dear man. Are you aware of how many *mullahs*, *mojtaheds* and *ayatollahs* have lost their lives so far? Tell me, how many of those have been close relatives of the Aqa?'"

"Her remark about the family of the Aqa infuriated me. I wanted to go to the other side of the pool and strangle her. "Woman!" I shouted. "Shame on you! Don't even hint at such things in public, or..."

"Or what?" She shouted back. "Beat me up again? Go ahead. If you think that will solve the problem, beat me up!"

"That is not what I meant," I said in a conciliatory tone. "Those words calmed her down. Then calmly, but firmly said, 'write back and say that Haji Fanusiyani has passed away, or say that you are sick. That's how Ashekh, meaning her father, would have handled it. You cannot go to battle against a bunch of Muslims, and *gabrs*, and Jews, and Baha'is and come out on top. And that is a fact. Throughout your fifty-odd-years, have you ever been enough in politics to want to begin now? As things stand, thanks to the late Asheykhi Hadi, you are

receiving a living for a few words that he strung together as sermons. Don't let your easy life misguide you. Otherwise, we, too, will have to leave this house tomorrow, this city the day after, and this country the day after that. Didn't that cursed shah try to overreach his limits? See what happened to him!"

"I resented the way she dragged her late father into every family conversation. Restraining myself from hurting her, I shouted firmly, "All right. I heard you. Stop it now!"

"Walking towards the kitchen, she added, 'Isn't what I am saying the truth? If it is not, forget the whole thing; but if it is the truth, then find a solution for it.'"

"All right! All right!" I said conclusively, "I will think about a way." Then, to change the subject, I asked if lunch was ready.

"What lunch!' she said. 'I am just starting it.'"

The Haji's son stood up, stretched himself and, without uttering a word left the room. I was tempted to get up, thumb through the file in the niche, and at least see whose file it was that he wanted to "review" with me. Perhaps, I thought, I could, at the least, prepare myself. But, as usual, I could not. I was afraid he might walk into the room and embarrass me. Besides, I thought, he could be standing behind the door, or he could be watching me through some peephole or crevice in the wall of his mysterious hiding place.

A few minutes passed. Then the door opened and the Haji's son returned. I rose as a sign of deference. He motioned me to sit down. Then he walked to the niche, picked up the file and carried it to the place where he sat. The words "strictly personal and confidential," were written in blue ink on the folder. There was no name on the file. The Haji's son poured me a cup of tea and said, "There is still a while before dinner. I had to say my prayers."

I remained silent for a while then, as is the custom, I said, "May it be accepted. Bless you!"

"Thank you," he said.

I felt somewhat uneasy about his remark regarding prayer, but did not dwell on it. Instead, I conveyed to him that I was interested in the book project and that I was ready to listen to his story and write about it. He picked up his story.



"Usually, during the low season for preaching," the Haji's son said, "I take an afternoon nap. Then, at about five or six, I go to the nearest mosque to say my evening prayers and talk to my colleagues. After prayers, I return home directly for dinner. This is my daily routine during this season and it is unchangeable unless someone dies in one of the districts, or there are wedding ceremonies, or other such things. That day, too, I was stretching my legs and was

about to go to sleep, when there was a knock at the door. Soon after, Ma'sumeh came to the door and said, "Two gentlemen in suits are in the alley. They say they want to talk with you."

"She said that and waited behind the door for an answer. I knew that the gentlemen were from the office of the attorney general. I said tell them to wait a minute. I shall be with them momentarily."

"I, then, threw the cloak that I had bought in Karbala on my shoulders, found my most expensive turban, shook it and placed it on my head, and reciting prayers, passed the pool, and went to the door. Of the two men, one was at the end of the alley. With his arms akimbo, he was whistling a merry tune. The other was sitting on the platform by the door waiting for me. Upon seeing me, he jumped off the platform, dusted off his suit and, in a grandiose way, said, 'Hello.'"

"I answered his greetings and said, did you wish to see me?"

"Yes, sir,' he said. 'The car is ready. Are you going to the office or...?'"

"I realized that copies of this telegram must have been sent to others as well and that I was in business for real. The problem was, however, that by even the greatest stretch of imagination I was not ready for actual business. Pointing with a nod to the other man I said who is that fellow?"

"His name is Hassan Khan, sir. He is your driver."

"And I am sure you yourself do not belong to these parts."

"No, sir, you are right. I don't. My name is Mansouri. I have been sent from Tehran to assist with the changes."

"Very good... very good," I said.

"Since I did not have the foggiest notion about how the office of the attorney general operates, or who else is at that office, or what my first act as attorney general should be, I decided, while learning the ins and outs of the job, to bring the office of the attorney general within my orbit, i.e., to bring my work to the mosque. The advantage of this move was that I could continue my chats with my colleagues and receive vital information from them about the committees and how they operate. Therefore, I said to Mr. Mansouri, "Take me to the Lonban mosque. Then go to the office of each of the committees and collect their files. Take all the files to the office (I didn't even know where the office of the attorney general was). At the office, sort out the files and bring the relevant cases (I borrowed "relevant cases" from the telegram) to me, in the Lonban mosque."

"Mr. Mansouri was at a loss. I must have said something outlandish for him to gasp the way he did, as he asked, 'Relevant cases?'"

"I did not let that affect me in any way and firmly said, "Yes, the cases relevant to the committees."

“Yes, sir. As you wish. Shall we walk to the car? The alley is too narrow for the car to negotiate... What time should I call at the mosque?”

“Don’t bother,” I said. “When my work is finished, I will get home on my own. Make sure to bring the relevant cases to the mosque in the morning. The mosque is, of course, the very one we are going to now.”

“Yes, sir, as you wish.”

“The large, shiny black car, with a flag on its side, took me to the mosque. At the mosque, the chauffeur opened the door for me and Mr. Mansouri hurried to my side to guide me into the mosque. I took my time getting out. The shopkeepers who, over the years, had seen me shuffle in and out of the mosque were flabbergasted. They stopped their work to watch me, Mr. Mansouri, and his car. As soon as I left the car, Hassan Khan sped off in the direction of the roundabout.

“Inside the mosque, it was quiet and serene. A couple of faithful who had missed the communal prayer were praying. I passed them to reach a relatively quiet corner where the murmur of the running stream lulls me to sleep. This is a secluded, cozy place where, on days when there is too much noise at home, or when I decide not to return after the communal prayer, I go and take a nap...”

“Since it was still too early, I decided to rest for a few minutes. I placed my shoes on the mat and was about to lie down when I heard someone calling me. I looked around. A woman in a black *chador* caught my attention. By the way, I forgot to mention that this is also the place where people come to have prayer wheels written, evil eyes taken off themselves and their family, and where the *Qur’an* is consulted for undertaking marriage proposals, and the like. The writing of wills, too, are taken care of a few steps from where I was. ‘Seyyed,’ she said, ‘for God’s sake, can you help me?’”

“Yes, sister. What is the matter?” I asked.

“My child is sick. I have taken him everywhere. No one seems to be of any help. Can you administer a prayer?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, as I thrust my hand into my pocket to retrieve my prayer wheel. “One moment,” I said. “What is wrong with him?” I asked.

“Well,’ she said. ‘He has stomach cramps, intense pain on his side, is feverish and feels generally weak.’”

“I carefully reviewed my supply of prayers, picked one and handed it to her. She took it and kissed my hand. Her touch made me feel somewhat uneasy. She said, ‘Seyyed, I don’t have any money to pay for this. But, if you wish, you can perform a *sighe* (temporary marriage) and make me your maid.’”

“She then opened her *chador* to show me what she looked like. She was beautiful. I said, that’s all right, sister. Look me up next time you come to the mosque. Right now, I am busy. Put this prayer and two Aspirin pills in a bowl of water and, after a while, have your child drink the water. Let’s pray that he will get over whatever it is. She thanked me again and left. I never saw her again.”

“Hajj Aqa,” I said. “I understand giving her the prayer. But why the Aspirin?”

“Everything in this world has two aspects. Ibn Sina’s approach to things, the way I understand it, has been like that. He would have given her a prayer and a home-made packet of herbs to put in water. That packet of herbs is what foreign technology has turned into Aspirin. I don’t know what the herbs that Ibn Sina used would have been. Those who manufacture Aspirin know...”

“That is a good way of looking at things.”

“That is the way I look at most things. Two aspects. I am happy that you asked that question. As we proceed, please don’t be shy. Ask your questions.”

“I shall, Hajj Aqa, I shall.”



“The next day, before sunrise, I woke Taqi up to take him to the nearby bathhouse. On the way, I explained to him that I might get a new job in which case we would have to make certain changes in our lifestyle. It was hard for a ten... uh, twelve-year-old—I have a terrible time remembering ages—to understand what changing lifestyle means. To explain, I said, “Do you remember the steam bath reservoir?”

“Yes,” he said, “But the baths don’t have hot reservoirs anymore!”

“You are right,” I said. “That’s what changing lifestyle means. Modern baths have showers instead of hot pools. This is what is called a minor change in lifestyle. Do you remember, after we left the steam room how, wearing wooden clogs, we walked down dark corridors to the cloakroom? There we rinsed our feet in a pool of cool, fresh water and went to the platform, sat there, drank tea, and talked?”

“I didn’t drink tea!” Taqi protested.

“Well, I mean, we the grown-ups. Children had enough time to put their clothes on and get ready. You know,” he continued, “This conversation with Taqi played heavily on my feeling of nostalgia. In the old days, whether in the bazaar, or in the bathhouse, or in the fields, people mingled with each other. There were no inhibitions like there are these days. For instance, when you passed the boiler room of the bathhouse, you knew that Kal Najaf worked

in that hellish underground pit to produce hot water so that you could cleanse yourself. You recognized Kal Najaf's contribution and respected him for it. The bath attendants and the owner would join you in the cloak room for a cup of tea and talk. But now, we no longer know who runs the bathhouse; we don't even know who the hell runs the whole world! They send a Mr. Mansouri from Tehran to help me. What does Mr. Mansouri know about Isfahan and the Isfahanis? Or take myself as the attorney general. Other than the driver and Mr. Mansouri, who else knew about my becoming the attorney general? Did the bath owner know? Did the bath attendant know? Did the man in the boiler room know? These were the inhabitants of Isfahan and none of them knew anything about what was going on. Isn't this frightening? How is one to learn about the joys and sorrows of other people?

"As we approached the baths, Taqi, having been thinking about his friend Reza, who lives on the street previously known as Shah Avenue, said, 'Dad, when we come out of the baths, can I go to Reza's?'"

"Let's see how things go, and what time we get out," I answered.

"In the bathhouse, an attendant whom I did not know, came, rubbed us down and left. I washed Taqi's hair with soap, rinsed it and handed him the pumice stone to scrub his heels. When we left the baths, Taqi had forgotten about Reza altogether. In order to keep him from remembering Reza, I said, Taqi, son, if you hurry up, I'll buy you some *bamiye* and *zulbiya* from the confectioner's. This remark speeded Taqi up. He also began to talk, asking, 'Why didn't Mr. Mansouri drive his car to the door?'"

"Because the alley is too narrow," I explained.

"Are you going to have it expanded?" He asked.

"No," I said. "We might move to Sheykh Baha'i, to a house where cars can come to the door."

"Or, perhaps, near Reza's?" He asked.

"Perhaps," I said. "As for Taqi, he continued his questions until we reached the confectioner's. Taqi's questions fascinated me. How observant children are! For example, he was asking: Why is it that after the revolution, people are more afraid of each other? Why does Ostad Ali have to smoke his opium pipe in the closet of his room? Why have they given Mohammad Khan the butcher's second floor to Sekineh Khanom and her daughter? Why did they change the picture on our flag? Why are there so many men with only one arm or one leg? Why?... Why? ... Why?... "

"All these were profound questions," continued the Haji's son. "But, as the attorney general of Isfahan, I did not have any answers for him. At least, no answers that would convince a little boy. Fortunately, the confectioner's shop was at the end of the block. It attracted Taqi as would a piece of sugar attract a fly. After we bought the *zulbiya*, on the way, every

now and then, Taqi held out the bag for me to help myself. I was glad that the confectioner had opened his shop this early in the morning. He is a pleasant fellow. What intrigued me after talking to him was that he already knew that I had been asked to serve as the attorney general...”

“At home,” he continued, “as usual, the children’s mother asked, ‘So what did you all talk about?’”

“A long time ago I gave up on explaining to her that one does not get to talk to anyone in the modern bathhouses. So, I said nothing in particular, and added, I must eat breakfast before the twosome appears at the door again. And, speaking of the devil, I was just about half done with breakfast when Ma’sumeh came to the door and said, ‘It’s the same man in the suit. He says its 8:00 o’clock.’”

“For the first time in my life I felt the pressure of working in an office. The job of attorney general, I thought, must be the most difficult job in the whole wide world...”

Why is he telling me all this about his life, his son, and his wife, I wondered? Who could write a book about such ordinary events? Then I remembered my wife telling me that the cunning *mullah* communicates his wishes through stories. I wished she were behind the wall of this den listening! What intrigued me the most in his story was the impending move to Sheykh Baha’i Avenue. Could this be the *Mullah* who had been talking to Ali Asghar? I wondered. But, knowing Ali Asghar, the idea seemed too preposterous to even consider...”

When the Haji’s son began to put away his opium device and cover the coals with cold ashes, I knew that we were nearing the time for dinner, perhaps another thirty minutes or so. But, after he put everything away, he returned to his place, and resumed his story.



“I am not a heedless fellow who, God forbid, disregards rules concerning what is allowed (*halal*) and what is not (*haram*),” he said. “Throughout my life, I have not cheated people or, as the saying goes, robbed Peter to pay Paul. Neither am I a stupid fool, who could be duped by every Tom, Dick, and Harry. As I mentioned, I am partial to certain personal philosophies, which I want to be included in the book. I don’t know the origin of these philosophies. Maybe they can be traced to my early youth or even my childhood. Or maybe I have inherited them, or they are products of centuries of change in society. It is for you to find out. As far as I am concerned, they constitute the foundation of my being. In fact, I can say that during the past twenty or so years, I have benefited a great deal from using those philosophies and, like a golden goose, they continue to pay.”

Then in a more formal voice he said, “I am sure you have heard the expression economics is for donkeys. Along that line, my philosophy, if you pardon the expression, says, work is for donkeys. I think originally, human beings are not made to work. Isn’t there a grain of truth in that? Actual human beings are intelligent. They are capable of reasoning and they distinguish good from evil. Physically, however, they are weak. By necessity, therefore, it is advisable for them to find a restive donkey, put a bridle in its mouth, place a saddle on its back, and exploit its God-given energy and strength. In fact, that’s how normally donkeys are treated, are they not? Of course, I am aware that you know that I am using the word ‘donkey’ advisedly. In addition to the quadrupeds that we all recognize, some bipeds, too, easily fit that same pattern. In reality, *they* are the point of my remarks. Who are they? They are the ones who, from dawn to dusk, fight nature by moving piles of dirt, or bunches of rocks or timber from one spot to another. Or those who, day in and day out, haggle in stuffy offices, read books in libraries, juggle numbers in offices, count money in banks, and the like...”

Here the Haji’s son stopped for my reaction. Seeing none, he drank some water, and continued, “In contradistinction to this group, there is what I distinguish as an enlightened group. Their activities approximate those of the pious cat. They study the various ways in which they can freely draw on the wages and property of the previous groups and lead a comfortable life. In a way, they are like tribespeople to our south. When they spot a village, or a town, that has become well off, they descend on it and plunder its wealth. Within a short time, the wealth for which village dwellers have spent decades, sometimes even lifetimes, becomes theirs...”

I could not believe my ears. I kept hearing resonances of the sermon of Aqa Sham’ al-Ma’ali in which the connection between Allah and the farmers resulted in windfall for certain groups. More than that, it reminded me of Aqa Shams al-Din himself who was tearing down all the structures that upheld a relatively progressive society in order to establish his will over the city. This *seyyed*, using a totally different set of tactics, was insulting me and all that I held dear. He was calling me and my kind stupid, and himself, a leech on the body of society, and his ilk, members of an enlightened group. He was insinuating that he intended to use me, as I am sure he was using other “stupid administrators,” as a cog in his exploitative schemes. The only thing was to find out how.

Rather than protest which, in the past, was my natural reaction to such assertions, I chose silence. He continued, “Now you may ask why am I being so frank about my views about people and about myself; why don’t I follow custom and keep everything to myself? The reason is simple. Unfortunately, people cannot distinguish the donkey from the man. And those who make a distinction do not do so with conviction. Yet this distinction plays a pivotal role in society and affects almost every member. Those who do not take it seriously, sooner or later,

fall victim to the web of cunning spiders of the type I mentioned. There they struggle for dear life. I believe the future generation must be warned about the actions of such wolf-in-sheepskin individuals. Putting all that in a book would solve that problem.”

I felt that his “wolf-in-sheepskin individual” and my wolf-in-sheepskin individual became mixed up. He was the fraudster in a philanthropist garb, projecting the image of a frank and no-nonsense man to persuade me to reciprocate and pour my heart out. He wanted me to describe the harm that his ingrained prejudice has inflicted on my family and possibly many others. But rather than doing that, I stayed calm and considered his speech as one that had more to do with the the good, Fereydan opium than himself! Once again, he squinted his eyes as if to see my face more clearly and waited for a reaction. I refused to budge.

Dissatisfied with my reaction, he continued, “You know what? Rather than singling out individual philosophies, like I just did, maybe I should tell you an account of my life. My philosophies would necessarily be included in the narrative and you can sort them out later. The more I think about it, a frank assertion of my thoughts, would provide several useful themes for the book. It would describe characters. For example, what kind of an individual could have become the attorney general of Isfahan. We can discuss, what kind of people were accused of crimes and what kind of judges presided over the courts that ruled on their cases. In other words, we can weigh the different approaches to administration of justice. In the process, you would become acquainted with my personal view of the matter. But most important, it would show how an individual, who does his homework and who can gather a few like-minded individuals around him, can live a prosperous life in one of the Muslim districts of Isfahan instead of a miserable life in the Jewish quarters of Shiraz. But before I begin,” he said parenthetically, “Do you want me to get a pen and some paper for you?”

“No, Haji,” I said. “There is no need for that. I make mental notes of what you say. Later, at home, I will put them down on paper...”

“You can do that?” He marveled.

“Yes,” I said. “When I was education director, I did that regularly. That is how I could concentrate on the substance of meetings while keeping track of the activities of various individuals.”

“That is something that I cannot do,” he said. “Probably the attorney general, too, has to do that. I have difficulty remembering how old Taqi is. In any event, do as you please. Now, back to the story of my life...”

The more I listened to him, the more I became interested in the reason for his disdain for modern things. He did not like the use of technology in medicine and did not approve of open discussion of issues in educational settings. He especially was opposed to any kind of meddling, as he put it, with the sanctity of the heavens. What was, therefore, I kept asking

myself, his reason for asking me to write a book about his views. All I could gather was what he was opposed to. He needed someone intimately familiar with his approach to knowledge to carry out that task. In any event, I was glad that the invitation was providing me with an opportunity to learn about his upbringing and schooling in his own words, and I seized the opportunity.

“As I said earlier,” the Haji’s son said, “my father was from the Fars province. We lived in the city of Shiraz until I was ten or twelve. The locality we lived in was called *Sar-e Kal-e Moshir* or, as the *Shirazis* bluntly put it, the Jewish quarter (*mahalle-ye juda*). My grandfather had a small jewelry shop behind the *Now* (new) Mosque. His customers were mostly Jewish. Of course, there were others who came from *Darvazeh Kazerun*, *Gowd-e Arabun* and *Darvazeh Qur’an*, but the majority of his customers and associates lived in the alleys and back alleys around the mosque. I know this because the dialect of Persian they spoke was distinct. In my family only my grandfather, perhaps due to many years of association with Jews, spoke with a Jewish accent. The rest of the family mimicked the Shirazi dialect...

“You may ask why, instead of living around the *Jom’eh* mosque, *Shah-e Cheraq* or the shrine of *Seyyed Mir Mohammad*, my family lived in *Sar-e Kal-e Moshir*? I don’t I have an answer for that. I broached the question several times when talking about Shiraz to my father, but he never gave me a straight answer. Often, he snapped at me saying, ‘What a nosy kid! It’s none of your business. Your job is to pay attention to your work and to customers!’”

Listening to the Haji’s son, I involuntarily recalled my own father’s words about the *Naqsh-e Jahan* square. How forthcoming he was in going over the details of the history of the *meydan*. Without the background that he provided, I had nothing to compare what I saw around me that fateful morning with what I could have seen if I had lived in that area centuries before. His explanations led me to explore the nature of the force that was about to change the very fabric of Isfahan and, in reality, the fabric of my life. When I learned how they forced my wife to leave the university and subjected the education of my children to their own narrow views of science and philosophy, I cried inwardly, not only for my family, that was carrying the brunt of this injustice, but also for so many other families that shared my background. It was obvious that decades later the consequence of these decisions will come to roost at the threshold of our children and grandchildren. The Haji’s son continued, “After the death of my grandfather, my father sold the jewelry shop to a man called *Sham’un* the Jew. He then made a big decision. He decided to leave Shiraz forever and move to Isfahan.”

Here the Haji’s son interrupted himself and looked around as if looking for something. When his mind was at ease, he resumed his normal story-teller mien, and continued, “Those were the days that people no longer traveled in caravans. Therefore, we took our luggage, tossed it into the back of a truck, on top of an already high load. As for ourselves, we, too,

climbed up there. Once in the box, my father pulled a bundle towards himself, opened it and pulled an old, clergyman's cloak and a matching black turban out of it. Once he placed the turban on his head, I noticed his stubby beard and realized why he had not been shaving the last few days. He threw the cloak over his shoulders and answered our inquisitive looks with, 'There is a lot of dust on the way to Isfahan.' As my father talked, he opened another bundle and from it he took out two sets of similar clothing. He handed one to my brother and threw the other one to me, saying, 'Our eyes and skin may become damaged'."

"We wore the clothes. My mother, who was annoyed for such a thing to be sprung on us, was told to wear a *chador*. Thus, in a few minutes our family lost its usual look and assumed an aura of spirituality. My brother, although somewhat dissatisfied with this fatherly imposition, took the situation in stride; but my mother, who had been freed from the *chador* during Reza Shah's time, was bitter. She wore the *chador* nonetheless. It was her husband's wish; she had no choice. At the end, my father took out a rosary from his pocket and began to work the beads.

"Later, the truck driver, a man of about thirty, came by to see us. He wanted to make sure that my brother and I would stay in the box and, when the truck was moving, would not climb up the sides. This, he said, would make trouble for him. When leaving, as a second thought, he turned and looked at my father. Considering the old man's spiritual presence, he thought it would be improper for the 'Aqa' to sit uncomfortably on top of the load all the way to Isfahan. He said, 'Asheykh, this is not proper that you, a descendent of the Prophet, sit on top of the load in the back. Please, come down and join me in the cab. It's a long way to Isfahan. It may take two or three days...'"

"My father winked at us and, with a special, dignified air, began to climb down the metal ladder at the side of the truck box. After that, we did not see him until we reached Abadeh. Then, in the roadside teahouse, while we were resting and drinking tea, father said, 'This driver is a noble soul. He had two passengers in the cab. They were traveling to Abadeh. They are gone now. He said the three of you can join me in the cab. But I want to put a condition of my own on your joining us. You should continue to wear the outfits you are wearing, behave, and speak as little as possible.'"

"But there is no dust in the cab!" my mother protested.

"I know that,' father snapped. 'I have introduced us as descendants of the Prophet. Now we cannot suddenly become ordinary people, can we?!"

"In short, the driver and my father, who now spoke of nothing but purity and piety, became fast friends and, when we arrived in Isfahan, the driver found this house behind the *Chaharsu-ye Shiraziha* market for us. The following week, he took my father around and introduced him to the grocer, the dealer, the confectioner, and the fruit and vegetable seller as

Asheykh. From then on, my father became known as Asheykh. My name, too, gradually changed to Asheykh's son. I lived with that name for a number of years. My real name, Hormoz, was all but forgotten."

The more the Haji's son spoke, the more I was confused. I knew that he preached. Thus far in the conversation, however, there has been no indication of his having received any formal, or even informal, education. "Now about work situation," the Haji's son continued. "Father did his best to keep the cloak and turban on my elder brother Habib, but he did not succeed. Habib would not listen to him and, whenever father remarked that Habib was destroying his future, Habib's answer was father should worry about his own future and allow me to manage mine on my own terms.

Eventually, when father became certain that Habib would not comply with his wishes, he opened a jewelry shop in *Darvazeh Dowlat* for him. As for himself, he started to make jewelry on the sly, here, in this house. And in order not to be discovered, or disturbed, he remodeled the unused space at the back of this independent kitchen into a work place. He built the fireplace such that it could be used as a forge from the other side. That niche with the file in it is where the old furnace used to be. The kitchen stove is no longer behind it of course. It was moved to the front where there is more light. Then father asked us to respond to those who might come to see him, especially when he was working in the 'kitchen,' with either 'He is sleeping,' or 'He is not home,' or 'He is at the mosque.' In this way, he could kill two birds with one stone. He could be Asheykh when he was out of the house, and continue the family tradition and sell his handiwork in Habib's jewelry shop in *Darvazeh Dowlat*.

"In other words," I interjected, "your father used your two prong approach to things..."

"Excellent analogy. You impress me. Very good indeed... The jewelry shop," he resumed his story, "did well. Habib Khan got married and left the house. And as years went by and my father became old and lonely, especially after my mother's death, he quit his jewelry enterprise, took some money and headed for the holy city of Mecca. These rapid changes prompted me to find a vocation and acquire a name for myself, on my own. Of course I had the option of waiting for my father's return and the inevitable promotion to the position of Haji's son. But I preferred the first option.

One day, I mustered my courage and entered the *Chaharbagh* Theological School. There I walked a couple of times by the side of the stream that runs through the yard. After a while, I sat at the foot of a tree, watched the water flow, and greeted the students and teachers as they passed by. Within a few days of doing this, I began to mingle with the students as if I was one of them. Eventually, after speaking to one of the students about school curricula, graduation, and the requirements for becoming a preacher, I realized that two avenues were open to me. One was to follow the example of the regular students at the school and aim for a diploma. The

other was to select a well-known *mullah* and, by using his status, gain myself some notoriety. After giving the matter due thought, I made my decision. Do you know what my decision was?"

"Two-prong?" I hazarded s guess.

"Excellent. You remembered. Lest one fails, I decided to follow both routes simultaneously. The first route led to classrooms, exams, required capital, and a long period of studentship. I do not need to tell you that the biggest stumbling block on this path was my lack of required background. So the first option failed. The second alternative involved humility and servility. I began to master those traits by frequenting mosques and *rowzehs*. Meanwhile, I also looked intensely for a preacher, whom I could persuade to have pity on me and help me get off the ground. Finally, I found a preacher by the name of Asheykh Hadi. He lectured at the school and preached in the *Kohne Meydan* district.

"In the course of a friendly chat in the school, I told Asheykh Hadi about my earnest wish to help men of God. But at my age and financial circumstance, I told him, all avenues were closed to me. Asheykh Hadi comforted me and said, if I was willing, he would allow me to attend to his donkey. He also promised that, when he rode from one sermon (*rowzeh*) to another, he would allow me to guide his donkey in the alleyways. Thereafter, I did not have any use for the school.

"As you see, my career as a preacher began with holding the reins of the donkey of Asheykh Hadi, who preached in and around the *Kohne Meydan*. The good thing about this arrangement was that the meeting places of the *Sheykh* were far from my home base. Those days, people around the *Chaharsu-ye Shiraziha* rarely visited the *Kohne Meydan*. For this reason, no one in the *Kohne Meydan* knew much about me. Gradually, people in *Kohne Meydan* came to know me as the son of Asheykh. By Asheykh, however, they did not mean my father, but rather Asheykh Hadi. I knew what was going on, of course, but I pretended ignorance. As for Asheykh Hadi, I told him that my father also is referred to as Asheykh. He acknowledged that it was a predicament but did not protest. We hoped that, as time went by, the situation would sort itself out. In this way, for a long time, my sole job was to guide Asheykh Hadi's donkey to various places and to listen to sermons, especially Asheykh's sermons. During my free time, I changed clothes, met with my friends near the *Khaju* bridge in *Gabrabad*, drank Persian vodka (*'araq*), and chased prostitutes till late into the night.

"Then, one day, Asheykh fell ill and, gradually, became bedridden. His wife combed the neighborhood to find someone among the *Sheykh's* acquaintances to substitute for him, but she could not find anyone. At the end, she approached me. I was sitting expectantly by the pool, under the pomegranate tree. Unwilling as she was, she said, 'Asheykh asked for you. He wants to talk to you.'"

“Without uttering a word, I got up and went directly to the Asheykh’s bedside. He looked weak. When he saw me, he smiled meaningfully and said, ‘Son of Asheykh, for many years now you have been accompanying me, and you have been listening to my sermons. Today, I need someone to substitute for me. Someone to tell the host, and the audience that, God willing, I will be there the next day and, to keep the routine, give a brief sermon from the first step of the pulpit? Do you think you can manage to do that for me?’”

“Yes, of course, I can,” I said with confidence. “In fact, I have been practicing your sermon on the ‘Drawbacks of Ambition’ over and over in my head.”

“Asheykh was extremely pleased to hear that. Like a gardener who one day notices the fruit of his labor in a budding flower, he took me by the hand and said, ‘I knew from the day we first met in the school that you were an intelligent fellow. Go to the door, convey my greetings to the host, and tell him about my being ill. But don’t talk to any of the preachers. They may create a problem. Then, when my turn comes, go to the pulpit, sit on the first step and deliver the sermon on the ‘Drawbacks of Ambition!’ Don’t forget to begin with ‘In the Name...’ Then, for the climax, rather than to the events at Karbala, which are complicated, go to Mo’aviyyeh’s palace...speak about the destructive nature of his ambition.’”

“To cut a long story short, that day I delivered Asheykh’s sermon on the ‘Drawbacks of Ambition’ not from the first, but from the third step of the pulpit and, for climax, I detailed the atrocities that befell the Prophet’s family at Karbala. And, I should add, I drew tears the likes of which I had never seen anyone of the other preachers draw before!

“Asheykh Hadi did not survive his illness and, predictably, his passing away left my position up in the air. Since everyone in the community knew me as Asheykh’s son, with the assistance of Asheykh’s wife, I persuaded the late Sheykh’s clients to invite me to preach for them at a considerably reduced fee. Most of them accepted. Then, gradually, I took over Asheykh’s rounds. After I had full control of Asheykh’s sessions and donkey, I began to bring the rest of his household under my control.

“A couple of years passed before I became acquainted with one of Asheykh’s daughters from his second marriage. Here I had an opportunity to test one of my philosophies, the one that says: don’t allow the garden to overwhelm you; pick your desired rose and move on. But, after flirting with Asheykh’s daughter for a while, our relationship became more serious. Eventually, it went totally against my original intention and ended up in my promising the girl to marry her—my first marriage. But since everyone was of the understanding that I was Asheykh’s son, it was not possible to marry the girl without a hitch. With the help of the girl’s mother and Asheykh’s first, helpful wife, I married the girl on my family’s side of town, in the present house, which after my father’s death belonged to Habib and me. No one from the *Kohne Meydan* community was told about my marriage.

“Bringing Asheikh’s daughter to this house made matters difficult. I still had to go to the *Kohne Meydan* early in the morning and return in the evening and, of course, this constituted work, which, of course, was against my philosophy...!

“It took a couple of years of hardship, but, at the end, I solved the problem with a second marriage. I thought a second marriage would not only cut my trips to at least half, it also would satisfy those in the *Kohne Meydan* who complained that their wives and daughters were being preached to by a bachelor. Thus, with the assistance of Asheikh’s helpful wife, who did this as a revenge against her rival, I married a fourteen-year-old and settled her next to Asheikh’s house. No one on my side of town knew about this recent marriage.”

At the time, there were two things in Iran that almost all boys were expected to experience. A rudimentary schooling and, at a later age, the draft. By now, it was obvious that the *seyyed* had flaunted the first and conscription, it seemed, was against his philosophy. My host continued his story, “As time passed, I began to tire of preaching daily in the *Kohne Meydan*. Instead, I began to visit old acquaintances in the *Charsu-ye Shiraziha* market, and in the mosques on this side of town. I was looking for a way to rid myself of traveling to the *Kohne Meydan* to preach altogether. After much thought and visiting many people, I came to the conclusion that I should seek the assistance of my father’s old friends. They might, I thought, be able to find me a niche in the Lonban district. With this idea in mind, I went to the same driver who had unknowingly started my father on the job and, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, asked for his assistance. The old fellow came through. Before long I was preaching around Lonban and, soon thereafter, in the Lonban community itself.”

“I should add that, like everything else, getting involved in the affairs of this district was not without a hitch either. I had to work hard for it, as had my father’s old associate. As a token of my gratitude to this old friend, I married his grand-daughter and settled her on the other side of the river, near *Jolfa*. This marriage happened on the eve of the revolution and, as far as scheduling events is concerned, it has tripled the difficulty. On Saturdays and Sundays, I go to the *Kohne Meydan* and spend the nights with my second wife. Mondays I rest somewhere in some mosque and on Tuesday, I come back here and spend a couple of days with the children’s mother here, where the mailman correctly found me. I take off on Thursday and spend the rest of Thursday and most of Friday in the company of my new bride near *Jolfa*.”

The Haji’s son looked worn out. A white substance had formed on his blackened lips and in the corners of his mouth. With an air of finality, he leaned against the wall and said, “I can do all this because I do not have a conventional vocation—none of my wives, even if they know, can complain. They understand that I cannot preach on all three sides of the town at the same time! With a regular job as attorney general, I had to make a major concession. After all, I could not divide the office three ways, could I?”

By now I had become better acquainted with this frank and rather amiable Sheykh. In fact, much of the boredom I felt while listening to the first part of his story dissipated. He knew where he belonged, how he had attained his position, who he was dealing with, and what his future activities should consist of. As for me, I still was trying to resolve whether it was actually him talking or the opium. In any event, I am sure that he was conveying his plan to me through the story, but I could not detect the salient points of it. One thing was clear. He was not one of the *amr-e bema'ruf* zealots. He did not seem to be trying to guide me to the right path.





Lawrence

Finally, dinner was ready. I could visualize it as it was being dished up in the kitchen, a few steps away from us. Ma'sumeh knocked on the door and said, "Haji. I have the *sofreh* and the water jug..."

The Haji's son walked to the door and took the table cloth and the other things through the-half-opened door. I felt that I should offer to help but, since Ma'sumeh was on the other side, I decided that I should let him carry everything by himself. Then, spreading the tablecloth, he said, "I hope you like fried chicken and rice."

"Oh yes, I do," I said.

"... and lamb kabob?"

Viewing the *sofreh* from a distance, I smiled and said, "definitely," and *ta'arofed*, "You really shouldn't have inconvenienced yourselves."

He did not say anything. Then, as I was on the way to the *sofreh*, he brought the water jug and helped me rinse my hand. As we sat cross-legged at the *sofreh*, he recited a verse from the scripture and invited me to serve myself, saying "Son of Mirza Mohammad. Please do not *ta'arof*. Eat whatever you like in whatever manner you feel comfortable. There are spoons, forks, and knives, too, but personally, I prefer fingers. So, please help yourself!"

I was not sure whether to follow his example and use my fingers or, awkward as it would seem, use the utensils. At the end, I decided to eat as I usually do. I filled my plate with rice, chicken, kabob, and yogurt and began eating.

Once I had served myself, the Haji's son took the rest of the chicken in his hands and tore it into two pieces. He laid the half from which I had taken a portion back on the side of the rice and put the other portion on his own plate. He then put some soup in a bowl, added pieces of bread to it and stirred the combination until the bread became soggy. He then dipped his fingers into the bowl, took some and slurped it up until he had eaten every morsel of the greasy bread. This done, he served himself some rice and began what amounted to his second course.

I was fascinated by the way he ate. There was no rhyme or reason to it; yet I am sure he did not consider himself unorderedly. He took a piece of flat bread and stuff it with rice and a piece of chicken or kabob. Then he dipped the morsel into the yogurt and put it into his mouth. The funny thing was that, even with a full mouth, he continued to talk, "Like the opium," he managed to say, "everything on this *sofreh* comes from my own barns and fields."

Hearing about his fields and their produce assured me that we were getting closer to his reason for our chat. He continued, "Recently I bought what amounts to a major portion of a village located between here and Arak. The village is called Ashgerd. It is surrounded by wheat fields as far as the eye can see. In addition, it has good running water, and, most importantly, good, honest, and God-fearing people. The lamb we are eating comes from that property.

There is also a property near another larger village called Damaneh. That, too, is a beautiful place with fields and streams. But the price of the property I am interested in is high. I may be able to swing that deal, too, if I sell my new property in Sheykh Baha'i, some older property in the *Kohne Meydan*, and add some cash."

I was not familiar with the places he was talking about; but buying portions of villages I thought was a thing of the past. I asked, "Who sells these properties?"

"Oh, the people," he said. "They still live in them, of course. But, by selling their communal rights, they get rid of their cash flow problems."

The subject was not of great interest to me. Nevertheless, I said casually, "Suppose you bought the property in Damaneh. What would you do with it?"

The Haji's son fell silent. His face turned red, considered his answer for a while, swallowed the big morsel he was chewing, and said, "Well, the question is not what I would do with it. The question is what would a capable person like yourself do with properties in Ashgerd and Damaneh?"

His answer was unexpected. I felt overwhelmed to the point that I lost my appetite and began to play with my knife and fork. Suddenly, it became clear that the Haji's son had more than a friendly chat up his greasy sleeve. He continued, "About a week ago, I made a trip to Ashgerd and Damaneh. So beautiful, I didn't want to return. I just wanted to marry an Ashgerdi lass and stay there forever. But here I am. It was not my *kismet*. Damaneh has great potential for development. It is on the Isfahan-Aligudarz, as well as on the Isfahan-Khomein-Arak, highways. The highway from Isfahan splits there, you see. Think of the potential for development. A hotel, a regular bus line, even a dam. There is also an *emamzadeh* there that can be repaired and highlighted. Besides, Damaneh is the gateway to the Kuhrang area and trade with the Bakhtiyari *lurs*."

I already could smell great trouble afoot. Just think of what happened to Aqa Mash'al al-Din who tried to outsmart his colleagues! Who wants to get on the wrong side of Aqa Sham'al-Ma'ali?

"Of course you can add tourism to the mix, too."

"That's more your department than mine."

His answer added to my concern. I sat silently and considered what had been transpired. Meanwhile, the Haji's son ate. He ate the rest of the chicken, most of the rice and all but one skewer of the lamb kabob. When he saw me sitting idly, he literally forced me to take the last skewer of Kabob. I resumed eating.

I loved the food his wife had cooked. It was traditional cuisine and it was delicious. All I wanted to do now was to leave. That, of course, I knew, was wishful thinking.



After dinner, I left my host for a few minutes. When I returned, the *sofreh* was gone and the low table in the middle of the room was refurbished with trays of sweets and fruits. I thought he would continue his discussion of developing properties and turning Damaneh into a metropolis, but he did not. Instead, he poured us each a cup of tea and said, "Now, I want to tell you about what happened after I received the telegram I showed you. Then, if there is time, we can go over this file. In fact, a list of names and this file are the only things that I gained from receiving that telegram."

As he spoke, he got up and went to the door. Apparently, although I hadn't heard her knock, Ma'sumeh had brought something. He returned with a pot full of burning coals, indicating that he was going to smoke opium again. He put the pot of fire down on the tray, fetched his opium device and returned to his original place for smoking. My legs were hurting from having sat on them for such a long time. I hoped that he would not impose the *qalyun* on me again. He pushed the file towards me but motioned that I should not open it yet. He said, "I bet I have given you a headache."

"No, not at all," I *ta'arofed*. "The account of your life is incredible indeed."

Assuming a pensive posture, he said, "Well, as I was saying, judging other human beings is the most difficult task that one can be asked to undertake. And now, those at the helm, knowingly or otherwise, had placed this burden on my shoulder. What could I do? I tried to do the best I could do under the circumstances for them and, of course, for myself."

Having said this, he fell silent, chose his favorite piece of coal, picked it up, shook it, and placed it at the side of the pot of fire on the ashes. Then he put a nugget of opium on the device as he had done before, picked up the tongs, blew on the piece of coal through the device and sucked the smoke.

Exhaling never-ending tubes of blue smoke through his nostrils and mouth, he said, "My first day as attorney general was a Saturday. First day of the week and a day on which I had preaching appointments at the *Kohne Meydan*. In order not to create any undue difficulty, I sent Taqi there to keep the audience busy by giving a sermon from the first step of the pulpit. I also told Taqi to tell my followers that I had been detained at home. Then I waited for Mr. Mansouri and the driver. They came on time and took me to the Lonban Mosque. An army truck was parked in front of the mosque and workers were unloading the files and furniture that they had brought from the attorney general's office. I asked Mr. Mansouri, "To which part of the mosque are they taking these things?"

"Looking inside the mosque, he said apologetically, 'Sir, they are running a bit late. For the time being, they are stacking everything in your chambers.' Then hurriedly added, 'I mean we have cordoned off a section under the dome as your headquarters until you decide to move into the office.'"

“Fine, fine,” I said, and slowly retired to the sunny side of the mosque to join an old acquaintance, Ased Ahmad, who was sitting under the morning sun. Ased Ahmad looked quite pensive for this early on a Saturday morning. I asked, “Ased, I hope everything is in good order. Where are the faithful?”

“Raising his head from his folded knees, he responded, ‘They are at the hospital.’”

“At the hospital?” I echoed his hollow words. “What’s at the hospital?”

“Stroking his short beard, he said, ‘Apparently Aqa Haji Chelcheraq has suffered a heart attack.’”

“I was shocked. I said, Aqa Haji Chelcheraq! What has caused it?”

“Ased Ahmad pointed to the truck and said, ‘Too much of that. He literally lived in those committees trying to make sure that people were judged correctly. He did not judge by imitation, like some novices are doing nowadays.’”

“What a loss!” I said indicating my astonishment. “What are his chances? What do the doctors say?”

“Viewing the heavens, he said, ‘Not good.’ Then looking serious and skeptical, he added, ‘What have the doctors to do with it? What do they have to say? God giveth and God taketh away!’”

“So it is,” I consoled the old *Seyyed*, who was deeply affected by the impending loss of a close associate.



“When the job of moving the dossiers was finished,” the Haji’s son continued, “I joined Mr. Mansouri in my “chamber” where piles and piles of dossiers were literally stored. Mr. Mansouri explained, ‘Sir, these are not all the files. We could access the files of only two of the committees. Others were called, but we could not reach anyone.’”

“What committees do these dossiers belong to?” I asked.

“The one near here, and another one on *Chaharbagh* Avenue!”

“Well, while you work on getting the rest, I shall work with these dossiers. Eventually, all these dossiers, as well as those to be collected, will have to be taken back to the office.”

“Yes sir, I realize that.”

“Now regarding arrangement. How have you arranged these dossiers?”

“Sir,’ he said. ‘We have organized the substantive parts of the files very carefully into four categories. These files here, because there were no serious allegations against them, are marked ‘dismissed.’ We thought you might want to review them to see if they are in order. This pile here consists of three categories of files. Each category contains a number of small files of about a few pages. These we have marked ‘completed.’”

Here the Haji's son took a long breath, stared at the ceiling for a few seconds and then added, "I estimate the number of dossiers in each category to be somewhere between 300 and 350. I asked Mr. Mansouri, what does 'completed' mean?"

"Sir, it means executed."

"So why are we working with them?" I asked.

"I don't know sir,' he said. 'Perhaps to see if justice had been...'"

"How about these?" I interrupted, pointing at a third pile.

"Sir,' he said. 'These we have marked as 'out of circulation.'"

"And what does that mean?"

"Sir, it means that, for some reason or other, the committee members have felt that these individuals should be dismissed from duty and be kept under surveillance."

He then looked up at me and said, "Your dossier was in this group."

I was under the impression that once a judge puts a file out of circulation, no one would have access to it. Apparently, I was wrong.

I wanted very much to ask the Haji's son about the "A" and "B" grouping that he had mentioned with regards to the Baha'is, but I felt he might think I was too pushy. To tell the truth, I did not want to be embarrassed again. So, I continued to listen as he talked. I was sure that at some point, either he would mention it, or I would ask. He continued, "Then, I asked Mansouri about the smallest pile. He said, 'Sir, these are marked "strictly personal and confidential.'"

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means that these files have been put together in consultation with experts in various fields, experts who have investigated the judges who have passed judgment on those cases!

"Is there any indication regarding who appointed the experts? Did you find out?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Apparently, a Haji Chelcheraq."

"I weighed his answer for a moment, then asked, other than this Haji Chelcheraq, who else knows about the contents of these files? He thought for a short while and said, 'To the best of my knowledge, no one else here, sir.'"

"To make absolutely sure that that was the case I said, 'Are you positive?'"

"Without the slightest hesitation he said, 'Absolutely, sir.'"

I said, "Fine..., fine..."

"Then he asked, 'Is there anything else, sir?'"

"No," I said. "Just the routine."

“Yes, sir,’ he said, and added, ‘I have placed two guards inside and one at the entrance. And I also have brought old Rahman from the office to bring you tea.’”

“Fine..., fine...”

“As soon as Mr. Mansouri left, I began my examination of the dossiers. As a rule, I disregarded the dossiers marked ‘dismissed.’ The pile marked ‘completed’ also did not attract my attention. I figured rightly or wrongly those lives were lost. Besides, inasmuch as they were identified as *taghuti* (associate of the devil), they did not deserve sympathy. The next pile was of great interest. It contained dossiers that belonged to people like yourself. People who, due to their race, sex, or creed had been valued highly by the previous regime. And rightly so. They were the major contributors to its progress. But the present regime considers them unsuitable...”

“Unsuitable?” I asked parenthetically, “or undesirable?”

“At this juncture,” he said, “I think, to the authorities, undesirables and unsuitable were the two sides of the same coin. Speaking frankly, I would call them unwanted. In other words, they are free agents with a difference. The difference, a major one at that, is that nobody has permission to employ them, or even hire them...”

“So, how are they supposed to make a living?”

“It is up to them to be resourceful and find a way,” he said. Then, with a wink, added, “They cannot work legally doesn’t mean that they are incapable of working, if you get my drift.”

“I do,” I said. “But who would offer such work?”

“Let me put it this way,” he said. “Suppose the so-called undesirable individual and his family are given a number of sheep, say fifty, to take care of for a so-called owner. According to arrangement, the family is allowed to use the milk and wool of all the animals. They can use some of the milk themselves and sell the rest to generate cash for buying the things they need. The ownership of the animals and their offspring remains with the owner...”

“But isn’t that employing an undesirable, which is prohibited?” I asked.

“What happens if officials question the undesirable about ownership?”

“That’s where things become dicey. But there is the solution. As long as the matter stays between the two of them, there is no problem, it works fine. There is no written contract. He simply would say they belong to him. It is not illegal for the undesirable to own property. All they can do is to confiscate his property.”

“That I am familiar with. What if they confiscate the flock?”

“Then both parties suffer. The owner loses the chance to increase his flock and the undesirable loses his source of income... Your question, however, is neither here nor there. Perspectives vary. The stuffy office mentality that you follow is different from the neighbor-

helps-neighbor mentality that is usually applied in such cases. In addition, the owner has people in the system who see to it that things move smoothly..."

"I am so glad that your type exists," I said. "Because the other type is merciless and brutal."

"We do our best, Son of Mirza Mohammad. That's what a neighbor is for..."

At this point, the Haji's son, bemused by some thought that crossed his mind, smiled and asked, "We digressed quite a lot. Didn't we? What do you think I did after looking through those dossiers?"

I considered the question to be rhetorical in nature and did not respond. In fact, I was so overwhelmed by his explanation that I could not say anything. He went on, "I took several pieces of paper and, on each piece, I put down a summary of the life and activities of those individuals who struck me as extraordinary. Some notes for future reference, you know."

Clouds were gradually being lifted and I could discern a dim outline of Mr. Fanusiyani's scheme. He continued, "You are here, of course, because you were one of those individuals."

He paused to hear me say of course, which I did."

He then continued, "Having exhausted those dossiers, I moved to the smallest pile—that of the committee judges. There were six files, each marked 'strictly personal and confidential.' The thickest was the one that is right there in front of you. It belongs to no one but to our very own great attorney general, His Excellency Aqa Pisuziyani."

I had a vague feeling all along that the file could belong to one of the judges, but I did not suspect it to belong to Aqa Pisuziyani. Pretending to be startled, I said, "Really, our attorney general's?"

"The same," he said, smiling.

For a while, he seemed to be amused. Then assuming a serious tone, he said, "Now, if you join me here on this side, we can look at some of the documents in his dossier together."

Looking at the file assured me that Aqa Pisuziyani did not have my file any longer. This man, I thought, has had access to all files, including the Aqa's own file. As he made room for me next to him, I moved over and placed the file, still unopened, in front of him. He wetted his thumb and, in a clumsy way, opened the file. A copy of Hushang Pisuziyani's birth certificate was on top of the documents. The Haji's son asked me, "How well do you know Aqa Pisuziyani?"

I looked at my schoolmates high-school picture, shook my head and said, "I don't know him well at all. We were acquaintances."

"How is it then that I have a feeling that he knows you quite well!"

"Possibly because we attended the same school."

“That could be,” he said with an air of incredulity, and added, “in any event, he is an enemy of yours. I am sure of that and I thought I should warn you about him. But, as long as I am alive, and as long as his dossier is in my possession, I will keep your dossier out of circulation. You have my word on that.”

“According to your own account,” I said, “you don’t have my file...”

“I have your dossier, just as I have Pisuziyani’s, and a number of others. Like your so-called colleagues, you are jumping into conclusions. For your information, I worked at the office for a few more days.”

“I see,” I said, “I would like to thank you for your concern. You are a true neighbor.”

“Mirza Mohammad’s son,” he said quite matter-of-factly, “don’t thank me; thank yourself for cultivating your potential. Otherwise, you, too, like so many others, would now have a completed file.”

“Well,” I said, “I thank God for that.”

“Indeed,” he said, and invited me again to look at the file. “Look at the Aqa’s birth certificate, especially at his grandfather’s surname, Behdin. Doesn’t *behdin* mean a *gabr* (Zoroastrian)?”

“Yes, the word does,” I said with skepticism. “But here it is only a surname!”

“Correct,” he said. “But look at the documentation on the faith of the whole family.”

I looked. It said, “Unknown.”

I was still unsure regarding what the Haji’s son was driving at. “Pisuziyani’s own religion was clearly marked as “Shi’ite.”

“He is Shi’ite,” I said. “His birth certificate shows that.”

“It does,” he said. “But I have my doubts. You probably don’t know the Pisuziyanis well. They are filthy rich. Before the revolution, they owned quite-a-good deal of the lands around Hodayun Shahr. But they did not own any property in Isfahan proper. Since the revolution, however, the following are reported just for the Aqa: three houses (one of them a house of ill repute), one school, two transportation services, three trucks (used frequently in drug trafficking and smuggling goods from Bandar Abbas and Lar). Where do you think this wealth came from?”

I could not help but think about the “dismissed” and “out of circulation” files. But in order not to make any kind of judgment, I said, “After the revolution, preaching picked up...”

“Perhaps,” he said, clearly disappointed at my poor grasp of the subtle point of his statement. Then he thumbed through some of the documents and stopped at one marked “AZ Confidential Report No. 2.” Looking at that document, he said, “Haji Chelcheraq, may God bless his soul, was a thorough investigator. And he was blessed with having very competent

assistants. They tell me, since medieval times, when they persecuted the *Zendiqs*, there have not been many judges like him...”

Continuing to pretend ignorance, I asked, “Who are the *Zendiqs*?”

“Those fools who preferred infidel cultures over the Islamic culture. In different ages *Zendiqs* assume different guises and appear under different names. The *Zendiqs* of our time are those who visit *farang* for a stint and come back with slogans about equality and human rights. They are an ignorant lot. Islam is based on equality and human rights!”

I continued to review the file quietly until he stopped and said, “Here is something that baffles me. This AZ fellow, whoever he is, reports to have watched Aqa Pisuziyani in the bathhouse. He reports that under his usual clothes, the Aqa wears a long, white shirt and he ritually ties an unusually long cord around his waist and, all along he recites something. Do you know anything about those items or the incantation?”

“Well,” I stuttered. “I don’t know... But all I can say is that such a report about the attorney general is absolutely preposterous.”

“Why? Do you know something about him that I don’t know?”

“Yes, I do. But...”

“But what?”

Suddenly I felt pressed for time. I needed time to sort out my thoughts before responding. But like the priests of the Spanish Inquisition, he repeatedly bombarded me with the same question.

“Nothing, really.” I stalled, then added, “I think I am letting my imagination run away with me. It might be something that has to do with his family. The Christian clergy, as you know, wear something similar; although instead of a string it is a belt.”

He did not pursue the matter further. Instead, he said, “You could be right, you know. It’s just like my old man. He used to wear a skull cap in the house.”

There was silence for a while; then he added, “Anyway, this Pisuziyani must know much more than the high school education his file reveals. He speaks of things that I know virtually nothing about. Look at this report, again prepared by the same AZ.”

It suddenly dawned on me that the letters A. and Z. must stand for Ali Zadeh, the committee clerk whom, after the death of Aqa Mash’al al-Din, Pisuziyani persecuted. I asked, “What does it say?”

“Well, it says a lot. It is a transcript of one of Pisuziyani’s sermons. Read it for yourself.”

He pushed the file away from himself, put his finger, with a discolored nail, on a line and said, “Read from here and tell me what you think.”

I took off my glasses, cleaned the lenses and put them back on. Following his directions, I read, “...we are told that, after the Islamic invasion, the Persian language survived but the

Persian culture died. This is erroneous. The Iranian culture not only survived, but it was refurbished with new and more vibrant social and spiritual dimensions. The ancient Iranian concepts persisted and today they constitute the major pillars of our religion. For example, can you imagine your faith divested of the coming of the Mahdi? Can you live a day without the assistance of the Fourteen Immaculate Ones? Can you feel secure after death, if you were not sure of the intercession of the Commander of the Faithful...?"

I didn't read any more. Tongue-in-cheek as the sermon was, it bespoke a Pisuziyani that was decidedly different from the one who denounced me in the committee. At the same time, he sounded very much like the friend that I hoped would come to my rescue in the committee, but never emerged. In order not to get into a discussion with the Haji's son, I said, "I don't see a date on this document."

"I understand it to be one of the earlier reports by this AZ fellow, himself a colorful person. Although no name is given for him, his accomplishments at an early age included a degree from abroad and experience in compilation of special intelligence and counter-intelligence. He must have been on Pisuziyani's case for a long time before the revolution; the sermon strikes me as one delivered by a novice trying to impress naive audiences."

"So it seems," I said, and inwardly thought the sermon could belong to the year after when the Aqa returned from India. The year that he must have been overly enthusiastic about his roots. How skillfully then, I thought, he had handled his response to my statements at the committee. He seemed to have developed a special ability to compartmentalize issues in a way that one issue would not interfere with another. In that case, I felt, Ali Zadeh had been right and that the Aqa has been extremely protective of me. What he accused me of at the committee was worlds apart from what he could have accused me of.

All this raised my interest in Pisuziyani's file. But the Haji's son was not about to allow me to read any of the documents in it. He closed the file gently and kept his hand on it. Then he bent towards me and said, "You see, every item in this file is worth its weight in gold. Sitting there, in the Lonban mosque, I realized that finally, I mean finally, I had found the exact fellow that I had been desperately looking for."

I was amazed at this *seyyed's* ability to juggle things. I said, "What did you do then?"

"What did I do?" He echoed my words. "Well, there I was, supposedly working as attorney general. The children's mother was absolutely against my accepting the position and my life situation was totally incompatible with the demands of the office. Most importantly, I was not sure that the telegram was intended for me and not for my late father!"

Then, as if testing my level of curiosity again, looking me in the eyes, he asked, "What do you think I did?"

Again, I did not have a brilliant answer. He continued, "I put the pieces of paper with the names and the notes on them into this dossier, shoved the dossier inside my pantaloons, and tied the cord as tightly as I could. Then, I went around and scrambled all the other files until it looked as if a tornado had hit the chamber. When all was in utter disarray, I called Rahman. Moments later he entered and said, 'Yes, sir. Can I help with something?'"

"Yes, Rahman," I said. "Get Mr. Mansouri."

"Several minutes passed before Mr. Mansouri entered. The expression on his face upon seeing the chaotic state of the room was unforgettable. A Tehrani, born into office discipline and order, was facing disorder and chaos. He said, 'Sir, yesterday I meant to say that the files should not be moved before being properly secured...'"

"That's all right, Mr. Mansouri." I assured him calmly. "No harm is done! Rahman will take care of them. I was looking for the dossier of Aqa Pisuziyani. Are you sure that you brought all the dossiers for the two committees?"

"Yes, sir. I am positive. I can go and look for it in the office..."

"No, that's all right now," I said reassuringly. "Find it later. Right now, it is getting past time for me to rest."

"We can drive you home, sir," he said enthusiastically, and added, 'I mean as far as the car can negotiate.'"

"No, no. That's all right, too. I can manage. However, it seems that, as you said, the mosque is not an appropriate place for working on such involved cases. Have the dossiers moved back to the office with the rest. And tomorrow, don't come for me that early! Then, as I walked away from the "office," I made sure that Mr. Mansouri sees that I left empty-handed."

As he spoke, the Haji's son unfolded and handed me another piece of paper. That piece, too, did not belong to the file proper. It read:

In the Name of Allah.
To the threshold of His Excellency
Ayatollah Naftchi Qomi

This humble slave is honored to have been delegated the awesome task of being the Attorney General of Isfahan and of reviewing the actions of the revolutionary committees. Following your directions, I have reviewed the files, which are in order, and have moved most of them from the committees to the central office. This I did with the help of Mr. Turaj Mansouri, my assistant. As to the lesser question, i.e., the assumption of the office of Attorney General, I would have to respectfully decline on account of my age which now approaches

seventy, but more so on account of a herniated disc which plagues my life every waking hour. The office, as you know better than anyone else, needs an able-bodied, knowledgeable man of the caliber of Aqa Haji Chelcheraq, but of about forty or fifty years of age. If recommendations are not interpreted as impertinence, I know a younger man by the name of Aqa Seyyed Pisuziyani, who has spent much time in similar, albeit lesser, capacities and who, I am positive, can return Isfahan to normalcy. I recommend him without any reservations for the position of Attorney General.

Respectfully,
Yours very truly
Haji Fanusiyani

When I finished reading, the Haji's son took the letter, refolded it and placed it under his mat next to the other letter and the opium pouch. He then smiled meaningfully and said, "remember my first philosophy? Here is an example. Of course, I need not tell you that although Aqa Pisuziyani knows that his job was offered to me first, he does not know about this letter. Neither does he know that I have his file. It is between you, me, and Ased Kazem. Ased helped me compose that response. I am sure you will keep all this to yourself."

"Oh, definitely," I said respectfully. "You can be sure of that."

I looked at my watch. It was past midnight. I said, "Haji, at some point, I must come and listen to your sermons. You are an extremely enlightening person."

"Please, son of Mirza Mohammad. You are very kind. I tried to make time pass. In these days of adversity, that's all we can do. All I am trying to do is to be neighborly and, if all goes well, to assist. I think everything that I intended to say was said. A word to the wise, you know. Think about it. Talk it over with family. Some late afternoon, let us smoke a *qalyun* at the side of the pool over there and discuss your decision. What do you think?"

"That suits me fine," I said. "Thank you for your hospitality. Please thank Taqi Khan's mother for the delicious *Qormeh Sabzi*. Tonight, probably, I will dream of Ashgerd and Damaneh even though I haven't been to any of those places..."

"You may get there yet," he said. "Who knows? You may live there and help those people. I'd love to live there myself."

"Thanks again."

"I will walk you to the door," he said.

"No, please. I don't want to inconvenience you!"

“No inconvenience at all, son of Mirza Mohammad,” he said, smiling.

Moments later, I was in the alley and in fresh air. The plaque “Aid is from Allah and Victory is at Hand,” gracing the entrance of the Haji’s house, meant an absolutely different thing to me than it had when I entered the house some eight or so hours earlier. The visit, as bizarre as it was, made me feel humiliated and mortified. My main problem now was how to convey the essence of my chat with the *seyyed* to my wife without making her upset.



When I entered our one-room apartment and saw my wife drinking coffee, I knew that it would be a long night. Seeing me, she came to the door and rather angrily whispered, “Zhaleh couldn’t make it beyond eleven. She was worried. So was I.”

“But I sent Taqi to let you know that I was going to be late!” I whispered back.

“Yes. I know you did,” she said. “But he said you were having supper there. It is past one o’clock in the morning!”

Trying to pacify her, I said, “The *Seyyed* had a lot on his mind and I felt obliged to hear him out.”

“To hear him out!” She repeated my words. “You sound like you owe him something.”

“No. I don’t owe him anything.” I raised my voice a little. “In fact, he owes me my dignity and self worth that he did his best to ruin. Until now I thought it was Pisuziyani who forced us out of our house. But I was wrong. It could have been this *mullah*. He holds all the right cards. In fact, he is the one who is running everyone, including Pisuziyani.”

Without uttering a word, she raised her index finger to her lips and nose to prevent me from proceeding. Then, in a barely audible voice whispered, “‘Seddiqeh’ washes their clothes. She eavesdrops. I saw her do it.”

Her words of caution dismayed me. I had so much on my mind that I intended to tell her. I was even ready to give up my sleep to go over what went on in my meeting with the Haji’s son in detail. But, apparently, I couldn’t say much. Isn’t this a travesty that a *mullah* like him should be able to reduce my options from what it was in Sheykh Baha’i to this miserable existence? A situation in which I cannot tell my wife what is on mind at one o’clock in the morning in the privacy of my home? Mutely she pointed to a stack of paper and a pencil on the floor. Disgusted and unwillingly, I picked up the pencil and wrote, “We didn’t have this problem before!”

She wrote back, “We apparently had, but didn’t know about it. I saw her do it early this morning. When I told you about the *Seyyed*’s message, I intended to tell you about that, too. But it slipped my mind.”

"I see," I wrote back. Then, when she resumed writing, I moved to her side to read her message as she wrote. The perfume she was wearing and the general secrecy of the situation took me to the days before we got married, when she used to write love notes to me. She still had her college-girl behavior, especially when it came to writing notes.

"What did he say?" she wrote.

"You were right," I wrote back. "He did not say anything directly. He talked about his family background in Shiraz and a few projects. One is to write a book about his philosophies. Another is a managerial kind of thing, supervising his future plans in two villages called Ashgerd and Damaneh."

"Those sound quite straightforward," she wrote.

"But he didn't offer anything substantial out front."

"Is there a third?" She asked.

"There is," I said. "He outlined a kind of guest-host shepherding based on trust."

"You lost me there," she wrote.

"Suppose there is a family in need," I explained. "He would give the family a number of sheep to take care of. They agree that the family would be able to use the milk and wool of the animals in any way they choose. The ownership of the animals and their offspring would remain with him. If a circumstance arises that the authorities become involved, the family would assume the ownership. Then, as was the case with our house, the authorities would confiscate the flock. He would be ready to take the loss and stay clear of any investigation. The family, of course, would lose its source of income..."

"I think the book thing is a red herring," she wrote. "The shepherding is what he wants us to do. The other option involves administrative work. I don't think he would want to risk that...in any event, there is a lot that we need to talk about. Rather than writing these clumsy notes, why don't we talk in the back room?"

"Excellent idea," I said.

The back room, about half the size of our living room, accommodates almost everything that is not immediately in use, including the children's bicycles, my wife's old shoes, and my increasingly useless suits and ties. As I watched her, she smiled, folded the sheet of paper and took it with her into the back room. I followed. As she sat down in the poorly lit closet, she said, "The *seyyed* seems to be the type who makes others do his dirty work. And when something goes wrong, he would make them take the fall. There were professors like that in the department. They, too, got their dirty work done by a particular the secretary or the registrar."

"What dirty work were professors involved in?" I asked

"Peddling grades..."

“I see,” I said. “How does that work?”

“The student gets a low grade of say eight out of twenty. The student’s father approaches the teacher and persuades him to change the grade, say to fifteen or sixteen. The professor phones the new grade to the registrar. The registrar, in spite of the eight submitted by the professor, enters sixteen in the leger. Then the old grade, alongside other grades, is destroyed. Since there are no checks and balances, at the end, nobody is any the wiser...”

“That is atrocious,” I said. “Why didn’t you say anything about this before?”

“The reason for telling you, or not telling you, is neither here nor there. I am telling you why I think the shepherding is what the good *seyyed* wants you to do. He would rather you deal with animals, dogs, wolves, and bears than with administrators of one type or other in public...”

“Why not the book project?”

“You said the more you listened to him the more you became convinced that he disdained modern things, including modern medicine, education, and industry, especially man’s interference with the heavens. He is against those things because they are products of schools that are not affiliated with his known and revered type of knowledge propagated by appropriate points of light. In his understanding there are two distinct types of knowledge. One takes source in the mind of Lucifer, and the other takes source in the supreme point of light. Each knowledge type has its own supporters hierarchically placed below the source...”

“That’s exactly what Aqa Mash’al al-Din’s rebuke could be...”

... We are shunned by the custodians of the just society because of this dichotomy. His book proposal at the beginning of your chat was simply to whet your appetite, as it were.”

“I see,” I said. “In any event, those are the suggestions. We need to make a choice and, in my opinion, the sooner the better.”



The next morning was quite pleasant. The breakfast *sofreh* was spread in front of the room. My wife asked, “Did you have a nice sleep?”

“Yes,” I said. “But I need a few days to recover from last night.”

“Was it that hard?”

“It was. But it was also eye opening,” I said smiling. “Makes one wonder about people and their philosophies.”

“I told Zhaleh some of the things we talked about. She is excited.”

“Excited about what?” I asked curiously.

“About going to Ashgerd, of course.” She retorted.

“Wait a minute,” I said impatiently. “Nobody talked about going to Ashgerd...”

Then, remembering Seddiqeh, I lowered my voice and added, “Can we talk freely?”

“Yes,” she said. “Seddiqeh went to work.”

I said, “Well. Now, let me make this clear. The man made some tongue-in-cheek suggestions and I agreed to give them some thought. That is the long and short...”

“So, what prevents us from going?” She interrupted rudely. “Wouldn’t that be the best opportunity to leave this dump and live in an environment that is not as suffused with...?”

“Darling,” I interrupted her in a calm voice. “I know these have been, and continue to be, trying times. Don’t let your emotions get the better of you. Look at what I said logically.”

“Logically...logically,” she echoed my words. “Logically you should be picking up your briefcase to go to work. Logically, I should be teaching my students. But, instead, you haven’t had your breakfast yet, and I am sitting here daydreaming. Tell me, what in our entire miserable life is logical?”

Having said this, she stormed out of the room and did not return until I was about done with breakfast. Then, she entered the room silently, sat by the samovar, poured a cup of tea and handed it to me, saying, “We didn’t talk about everything that you and the Sheykh talked about, did we? So, what else did he say?”

I said, “He showed me a document in a file that he has on Pisuziyani. It was a report that I believe had been filed by the committee clerk Ali Zadeh. I guess that is him even though it carried only the initials A. Z. The report stated that, underneath his clothes, Pisuziyani wears a *sudrah* and ties a *kushti*. The Sheykh is trying to find out if those items have any significance...”

“You didn’t...”

“No,” I said. “Of course, I didn’t. I said that might be something Christian. He pretended that he accepted my answer and changed the subject. I think, in the long run, Pisuziyani might be in as much trouble as we are, if not more. I wonder if I should warn him.”

“I don’t know,” she said. This Sheykh is dangerous. I don’t like his attitude, especially his treatment of the minorities.”

“But it is not just him or just the minorities. People like the Sheykh are caught in the claws of some type of tribal prejudice against those who do not share their opinion... their prejudice cuts through all levels, the meritorious and the enterprising in particular. They are affected the most. In fact, they are the ones who are continuously harassed, forced out of the country, or eliminated. Whether we like it or not, we, too, are walking alongside them down a one-way road. Nobody knows what lies ahead. I regret it profusely that we did not leave the country when we still could.”

“Leaving the country?” she asked. “What suddenly brought that up?”

“Circumstances,” I said, “Leaving the country seems to be the only way to assure security for Zhaleh...”

“What do you mean?” She squinted her eyes. “What security are you talking about? She is already beyond help. My son, within a short span of time, got lost to the world... how often did I tell you to find out where he gets money to buy drugs? You didn’t talk to him...”

“I tried to talk to him. I tried several times. He was restive. He was learning things that I never dreamed of knowing when I was his age. At the same time, I was afraid I might push him too far. I did not want to make him run away from home, or, God for bid, do something foolish?!...”

“Well,” she said. “See where we were just a few years ago and where we are now. I had high hopes for Kayvan. All turned into ashes... As for Zhaleh, I don’t want to even talk about my poor girl... If we had...”

Having said that she began to cry. Within a few seconds, she was sobbing so hard that the whole neighborhood could hear.

“What has happened?” I asked affectionately. “Are you hiding something from me? Where is Zhaleh right now?”

“She is at Behjat’s. Yes, unfortunately there is something that I have been hiding,” she said, looking away from me. “I have been trying to find an opportune time to tell you. But it seems there is never an opportune time for bad news. Maybe, now that she is not here...”

“What are you trying to tell me? Say it instead of sobbing...”

“I will,” she said, drying her eyes with the corner of the scarf on her shoulders. “The day before yesterday, she came home from visiting one of her friends. She was a bit late. As she walked by me sitting in the sun, I saw a streak of blood on the back of her *chador*. I didn’t say anything and let her go in and do whatever she wanted to do. After a while, she came to the yard in changed clothes. Then unlike other times that she came to me and cheerfully talked about her friend and her visit with her, she went to the pool, sat there and began playing with the gold fish. I sneaked in the room and found her clothes. She had tucked them behind your suits. There I found blood on her under garment as well. I took the under garment, came to the door, and called her to come in. When she was in, I closed the door, showed her the under garment and asked, “What is this?” She went pale. Then, without saying a word, went to the corner, by the closet door, stood there with her forehead against the wall. “It wasn’t my fault,” she said. “Ja’far Aqa did it...”

“What do you mean Ja’far Aqa did it. Ja’far Aqa did what?”

“Ja’far Aqa was hiding in the dark in the vestibule. He jumped in front of me. With one hand, he grabbed my waist and with the other hand he covered my mouth. I couldn’t breathe... He is extremely strong... He dragged me behind the closed door at the end of the tunnel and

said, 'If you shout, I will kill all of you!' I didn't know what to do. Then he let go of me... That brute," Golnar concluded, "a big young man, twice the size of Zhaleh, raped the innocent girl in the dark. And now goes about in the yard as if nothing has happened..."

Golnar's words, as she explained what had happened, made me increasingly angry. "Stop it!" I said. "Why didn't you tell me this the day before yesterday? Is Zhaleh sure it was Ja'far?"

"She said she could not see his face. But she is sure it was him. I didn't tell you right away because I don't like the sight of blood. As hard as it was, I tried to give us some time before discussing it to put things in perspective. Ja'far Aqa is a villager. City boys were let loose on villages as teachers and medics. Only God, they, and the villagers know what atrocities they visited on innocent girls and young women there. Not all of them of course. But some of them. A good number of them. Now the shoe is on the other foot. Those innocent villagers are visiting havoc on the urban population. Some of them, like Ja'far Aqa, are illiterate brutes, drug addict thugs egged by zealot preachers to pray on emasculated people like us..."

"So," I interrupted. "Ja'far is vindicated?"

"No, I am not saying anything of the sort. I am putting two and two together... I am telling you this is not an accident. They are forcing us to shout out in the *Charsu* that this brute has raped Zhaleh! Remember what they did to poor Tala? Think! That is why I think it is important that we leave Isfahan. Leave, I mean, before the situation gets worse. Before, God forbid, Zhaleh begins to show..."

Having said that, she walked to the corner of the room, sat there, and holding her face in her hands, began to rock herself to and fro. I was lost and didn't know what to do. So I sat next to her and said, "All right, I give up!"

Seeing me unusually depressed, she held my hand and said, "Why don't you go to Aqa Pisuziyani and discuss our situation with him? Don't say anything about Zhaleh. But see if he knows anything about Kayvan. He has helped you before. He may know something about this *seyyed* and his plans."

"I would," I said in desperation, "if it could be of any help. But the battle that I talked about is not between Fanusiyan and Pisuziyani."

"So, that is the *Seyyed's* name," she mused. "How interesting. I imagined there would be a spark of sorts somewhere around him. Fanusiyan the lighthouse..."

"It is a battle between Fanusiyan and Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali," I interrupted.

"And how did Aqa Sham' al-Ma'ali get involved in this? You didn't mention him before."

"I didn't mention him before because I didn't know, but..."

"So, what is Ashgerd to him?" She interrupted.

“Ashgerd is nothing to him,” I said. “But if Fanusiyan buys into Damaneh, as he plans to, then he would be infringing upon Sham’ al-Ma’ali’s interests in the Kuhrang area.”

“But you choose the shepherding option, you would not be involved in trade,” she snapped at me again. “The way you described it, you most likely would be some kind of outsider.”

“The issue is not that,” I said. “The problem is that Fanusiyan is not the only person who knows I am a Baha’i. I am sure Sham’ al-Ma’ali knows that, too. He would not remain impartial. How long do you think it would take before the Ashgerdi’s identify me as the village Vahabi and hound us out of their village?”

“Khamush, she pleaded. “Please don’t talk like that, especially in front of Zhaleh. You are frightening me.”

“I don’t mean to,” I said. “I am sorry. They have made it our *kismet* to die a slow death. All of us. And it will happen whether we live in this dump or in that one. I am running out of options. I have lost control. I have lost Kayvan. I am losing Zhaleh. And I am not sure at all where I stand vis-à-vis you.”

“Maybe,” she said calmly, looking at the carpet, “you don’t know where you stand by me. But I know quite well where I stand by you. There was a time that you soared like an eagle and I admired you for your candor and drive. These days I see you as a man who is drowning. I see you as you struggle to pull yourself out of the water, and I see those who hurl you back into the tumultuous waves. I love you as the waves claim you as much as I loved you when you soared like an eagle. That is where I stand by you.

“That’s all great between us,” I said with a bitter smile. “But, realistically, it would be naive to think that one day I might retrieve my position at the education department, or that you would get your position back at the university. It would be just as naive to think that we could return to our home in Sheykh Baha’i or to any degree of normalcy. That was a dream. It died the night I was walking back from the trial. This is reality. Kayvan is gradually becoming a name. Zhaleh has lost her innocence before her time. You are day dreaming, and I continue sinking, taking everything with me...”

She placed her hands on my shoulders. Then, keeping me at arm’s length, looked into my eyes, and said, “Now, there is my long-lost husband, Khamush the realist,” and hugged me affectionately.

I pulled back and protested, “I have always looked at things realistically.”

“No,” she said, with a stern look on her face. “Not since the onset of the revolution. Tell me, what part of your resistance when I was pleading to leave this country realistic? All you did was mope around and try to create equity and balance out of chaos. Who would call such a person, under those circumstances, a realist?”

“So, what do you think we should do?” I said in a resigned but defensive tone, and added, “particularly since you seem to have all the answers!”

“I don’t have all the answers. Nobody does. But,” she said firmly, “I think we would have a better chance of survival at the hand of the villagers.”

“Damn this world,” I said. “Damn it all! See to what degree of mendacity...”

Breaking into tears, which made me feel totally pathetic, she said sobbing, “First, they took our jobs. You said the same thing, ‘Damn... Damn,’ and then, ‘That’s all right. Let them do it.’ When we lost our house, again you said, ‘Damn... Damn,’ and then, ‘That’s all right. They can have that, too. During the last few years, we have lost our servant, our jobs, our pride, and, I hate to say it, our son. What they have done to Kayvan and Zhaleh is beyond the pale. Khamush, I don’t know about Kayvan, but we are on the verge of losing Zhaleh. An opportunity has come our way. Let’s grab it and go. Why worry about the rivalry between two *akhunds*?!”

With tears choking me I said, “Believe me I didn’t mean to be callous. I am as distressed as you are. What do you suggest we do?”

“I suggest,” she said emphatically, “that you get out of those miserable clothes, shave that scraggly beard, throw away those revolting *malakis* and become yourself. Go to the *Seyyed*, accept his darn offer, whatever it is, and let us get out of here. We have to dislodge Zhaleh from Isfahan before it is too late. By the time we are settled in Ashgerd, and the battle begins, if there is a battle, we will cross that bridge...”

“What happened to your suggestion to go to Pisuziyani then?” I asked.

“That still stands. Do it, if it seems to you a valuable option. But just do something!”

Having said this, she left the room again. This time, she closed the door behind her.



Karl Marx.

Left alone, I analyzed the situation and realized that, as usual, she was right. For years, as education director, I had seen two systems of education at work. The traditional *maktab* vis-à-vis the modern system. But because the *maktabs* had been in operation in the country over the centuries, I did not consider them a threat. But they proved to be. What I failed to see was the connection between the *maktab* and the mosque. Neither did I see, in my wildest dream that, one day, the *maktab* system would rise and challenge the authority of the formal system. My wife often talked about the unhappiness of some parents whose children gravitated to music and dance. I considered those complaints exceptional and rare. As a result, I missed some vital clues that could have prompted me to sell the car and the house while we still owned them and to bail out. But now all that is water under the bridge.

Returning to the problem at hand, I admitted to myself that, on more than one occasion, I had misjudged Aqa Pisuziyani, a man to whom I probably owed our precious lives. Driven by the poisonous atmosphere permeating Isfahan, I had allowed ideology to cloud my judgment and, in the process, make me irritable, abrasive, and overly suspicious. In other words, fear, mistrust, and a general feeling of hopelessness had taken their toll on me. As hard as I tried, I could not find even one instance, during the past two years or so, that I had made an important decision. I had simply allowed things to take their course, hoping that they would resolve themselves. The grating sound of the whistle of the bullet as it passed over my shoulder, and the indignity that I suffered at that kangaroo court had transformed me into the very individual that I had always detested.

At the end, I decided, before giving an answer to Fanusiyani, to go to Aqa Pisuziyani and share what Fanusiyani had proposed with him. If Pisuziyani decided not to talk to me, then I would accede to Fanusiyani's proposal. Thus, without a word to my wife, I left the house and spent the better part of the morning walking to Pisuziyani's office. All along the way, I held a mental conversation with him. Then, when I was halfway to the main building where his office was, the Aqa's driver greeted me. "Mr. Director," he said. "His Excellency saw you enter the gate. He prefers to meet with you at his house. If you come to the Saqafi bookstore at the juncture of Saremiyyeh and Shapour, say about 5:00 this afternoon, I will pick you up there and take you to the house..."

"Fine," I said and, looking at the window where I thought the Aqa might be watching, nodded and headed for the gate.

When I returned home, I told my wife about my attempt to see Pisuziyani and that I was invited to his house that evening. She said, "That sounds good. Now I have to find a way to eavesdrop on your conversation!"

The Lie

As per our arrangement, Aqa Pisuziyani's driver came to the Saqafi bookstore on time and took me to the Aqa's house, which was a couple of kilometers past Darvazeh Dowlat, near Sar-e Qabr-e Aqa. He was a jovial fellow of about forty. All along the way, he talked about rising prices, especially the rapid rise in the price of gas. He wondered why a country like Iran with so much oil and natural gas reserves should charge such a high price for gas. All I could do was to agree with him and sympathize.

We arrived at the mansion at sunset. The main building was located in the middle of a vast stretch of land, unusual for residential structures in that part of town. The copper sunset, reflected in a pond in the distance, gave the scene an unforgettable attraction. Upon seeing the car enter the gate, the Aqa walked to the car and, as I was getting out of the car, said, "welcome, Mr. Director, welcome..."

I felt somewhat overwhelmed. But thanks to my wife who had insisted that I should wear at least a partially formal outfit, I did not feel totally out of place. Hushang Khan was wearing a long, tan cape and sandals. No turban and no cloak. He acted as if the years that had separated us did not exist, and that he had not criticized me profusely in that cursed committee. As I followed him to the building, I recalled my thoughts about him in Fanusiyan's house. The recollection comforted me and made me feel better. Since I was a year older, he held the door open and insisted that I should enter first.

In the parlor, he led me to the sofa and sat across from me in an armchair. Then, after exchanging pleasantries, said, "Mr. Director, this morning, when you came to my office, I saw you. I thought it would be more appropriate for us to meet here at the house. After all, we are old friends, are we not? And, if I am not mistaken," he continued, "you wanted to talk to me about your neighbor, Fanusiyan. I say that because a number of people like yourself have complained about him. I should tell you ahead of time not to worry about him. He is under intense surveillance. So, as you can see, there is a lot to talk about. But, if you allow me, he

concluded, “before you begin, I would like to convey to you some of the things that I already know about Fanusiyan. Just to make your job easier, mind you...”

“As you wish,” I said. “However, before that, there’s a favor that I would like to ask. It’s about a family issue...”

“I see,” he said. “I was coming to that. It’s about Kayvan. I heard about his disappearance from an acquaintance and have been looking for him.”

“yes, it is about Kayvan. He went out and did not come back. We have looked everywhere. Even the Chelcheraq Foundation has looked everywhere...”

“This morning when I saw you I checked our files to see if there was anything new. Unfortunately, there was none. I will tell you what we have found after you tell me what you already know.”

“The Foundation found three leads,” I said. “One person indicated that he had seen his name among the names of drug addicts killed in a raid. Another said he had seen him going to Tehran in the company of a burly fellow, and two had said that he had been seen going to the café on Mount Sofe. None of the leads were specific enough to pursue. At the end, the Foundation abandoned the search. That’s as much information as I have.”

“Well, according to my information,” the Aqa said, “except for what you said about the Mount Sofe sighting, about which I am not totally sure, the other two Kayvans were not your son. There was a singer, a relatively well-known singer, who came to Isfahan from Tehran on business. His name was Kayvan Khamush. He had a manager who was on the heavy side. That most like is the burly man you mentioned. They were members of a gang of four that worked with Afghan drug smugglers. They were busted here in Isfahan. Both the singer and his manager, and a number of others were killed...”

“How old was this singer?” I asked.

“He was about twenty. And just to put your mind at ease that he was not your son, his father’s name was Abbas and, originally, they came from Neyriz...”

“Well. That clarifies a lot of confusion.”

“Please rest assured that I will keep my eyes open and hope that one of these days your Kayvan will show up.”

“We hope so, too.”

Then, changing the subject to his original topic, he said “Mr. Director. The information that I am about to give you about Fanusiyan is totally reliable. It has come to my office from various official sources. In fact, I have been personally involved in gathering some of the data. Of course, as I just said, Fanusiyan’s dealings with his clients is an involved issue, only a fraction of which pertains to you. So I will try to keep the information as concise and as pertinent as possible. That would give us time to discuss whatever is on your mind as well.”

“Your suggestion sounds logical to me,” I said. “Please go ahead.”

“First of all,” he said, “it is not clear at all whether Fanusiyani’s father had ever become a Haji. For many years, in the area where his son lives now, he had been known as Ashekh Zargar. Towards the end of his life, the Ashekh went on a pilgrimage to Mecca but, apparently, he did not complete the journey. According to his fellow travelers who completed the pilgrimage and returned, he died somewhere near Karbala. The ones who report this are all trustworthy Hajis.

That’s one version. The other version is that Fanusiyani senior was born on a certain day of the year and, his family following tradition, had named the infant Haji. What I am trying to convey to you is that the Haji’s son is a fraudster, unworthy of being called either Haji, or Son of Haji. The same is true about the long story that he tells. There are various renditions of that story. All of them are made out of whole cloth. In other words, think of him as a story teller...”

“Are you talking about the story regarding his family’s Shirazi roots?” I asked in amazement.

“That,” he said, “and the rest...total fabrication.”

“But he has a lot of information on people, particularly an extensive file, and a lot of damaging information on you yourself,” I said.

“Yes, he does,” he said, and added, “or so it seems. The important thing is that he did not come by the information he peddles in the crass manner that he describes the events. It is true that due to a mistake made in the offices in Tehran, which, given the circumstances that obtained at the time, was totally understandable, this shyster became privy to certain valuable information in certain files. The charlatan that he is, he gives the impression that he has almost everyone’s file in some hidden place. Using this ploy, he has made a fortune by blackmailing a lot of people and, my guess is, that he is trying to blackmail you.”

“Did I hear you mention you are taking action against him?” I asked. “How long before...”

“We have to assess the extent of the damage before we move in. that usually takes time. The problem is that he gives the same story to different people, with different adjustments. It is hard to extract the needed information on the basis of which he can be convicted. For instance, I don’t know what version of the story he has used in your case. But whichever version it is, it is based on the same big lie. Lies, Mr. Director, have a tendency to become real to those who fall for them. In fact, most of the time, they become their promoters. If they realize that aggrandizing the lie might move their own fraudulent projects forward, they even support the liar and try to justify the lie. After a while, even those who started the lie convince themselves that the lie was not a lie in the first place! That “certainty” makes questioning both

the original liar and his supporters and followers a challenging task. After all, even though his victims are not aware of it, as law enforcement officers, it is our duty to safeguard the security and well being of all Isfahanis. My understanding is that,” the Aqa continued. “The Haji’s son very carefully studies the lives of his victims, with an eye to their vulnerability. In your case, for instance, with an eye to your Baha’i affiliation, which you, understandably have been trying to keep private. Isn’t it so?”

“It is,” I said, in a matter of fact manner. “But he was quite frank about it,” I complained.

“I can see that,” said the Aqa, and added, “I can go as far as to say that, like a detective, he plants people in the homes, or in the offices, of his victims. They, in turn, provide him with reliable information. In some cases, he has familiarized himself with the victims’ idiosyncrasies, including writing style, lecture modes, and so on. In some cases, he had held “innocent” conversations about his victim with the victim’s close friends and associates.

“Then,” the Aqa concluded, “once he has an overall picture of the victim’s vulnerability, he uses that vulnerability as a weapon of sorts and attacks the person. The attack covers both the victim, who is usually someone of high rank, and his underlings and associates. He carries on the intimidation and extortion until the victim becomes destitute or until the victim shows signs that he might contact the authorities. The down side of all this for the victim is that the Haji’s son chooses victims towards whom the authorities are unsympathetic. Hence the plight of the victim. In fact, it is the fear of the authorities that compels the victims to take refuge in the Haji’s son in the first place!

“Thus far, these tactics have worked for Fanusiyani and his ilk. The fact that he preaches in several places, that he has several wives, and that he is an opium addict and a womanizer are all fabrication. I can go on and on, but I think I have made my point. Let me also add that he is not the only one. There are other extortionists just like him. I hope you are not bothered by any others. Now,” he sat back and said, “I am ready to listen...”

“I am at a loss,” I said. “I really am. There is virtually nothing left to talk about...”

At this point, the door opened and a tray of *chai*, and one laden with fruit, were brought in. Within a short time, the unusual fragrance of the tea filled the room. Looking at me, the Aqa smiled meaningfully and said, “quite distinctive, isn’t it? The aroma I mean. The tea comes directly from India.”

“Indeed, it is,” I replied. “I am sure it reminds you of your productive sojourn there.”

“It does,” he said, as he poured a cup for me. “Please, help yourself,” he said, pointing to the fruit.

I put some grapes on my plate. Like the old days, he watched me, then said, “Let me jog your memory. You had a young servant. If I am not mistaken, his name was Ali Asghar.”

“Yes, we did,” I said.

“Did you know that Ali Asghar had an aged mother and a young sister?”

“No,” I said. “He never talked about his family. He often went to his village to visit...”

“Did you know that Ali Asghar was planted in your household by Fanusiyan? Our investigation shows that Fanusiyan had been gathering information on you since a long time before the revolution...”

“So that’s how that boy...” I gasped as he interrupted.

“You call him a boy?”

“Yes, a boy,” I said, “sixteen at the time...”

“That is not what his birth certificate indicated. He was twenty-one years old about a year go. He did look like a fifteen- or sixteen-year old though, I grant you that. After Ali Asghar left your employment,” the Aqa continued, “I had him arrested. He confessed that he had been working for Fanusiyan. The Haji’s son had promised Ali Asghar that he would take care of his aged mother and find a suitable husband for his sister provided that Ali Asghar brings him “usable” information about you and your family. Fanusiyan and the young man met occasionally in the *Kohne Meydan*. That must have been the times that he had told you he had been visiting his village.”

“I was warned that something was going on,” I said out loud, “but the onset of the riots and the chaos that ensued made me lose track of things.”

“In any event,” the Aqa continued, “you were not the only one affected by the information that your servant conveyed to Fanusiyan. In this very room, I had a confrontation with the son of Haji over you. He threatened me that unless I confiscate your house and register it to his brother’s name, he would report me to the committees as a cleric in cahoots with the Baha’i community.”

“Hushang khan’s explanation reminded of the Haji’s words: every item in this file (i.e., Fanusiyan’s file) is worth its weight in gold... and finally, I had found the exact fellow that I had been desperately looking for.”

Looking at me apologetically, the Aqa added, “Forgive me dear friend. I had to do it. Both our lives were in jeopardy. That is why my office confiscated your house on the basis of a trumped up charge. We registered it to Habibullah... My advice to you is that, in this dog eat dog world, be on guard for every eventuality conceivable. And I emphasize every!”

I was flabbergasted and totally speechless.

“Did Fanusiyan tell you that he has your file?” He broke the silence.

“Yes, he did,” I said.

“Did he show you your file?”

“Come to think of it,” I said. “No, he didn’t.”

“Did you ever wonder why not?”

“No, I didn’t,” I said curtly.

“Because he does not have your file. If you recall, the last time we met at your house on Sheykh Baha’i, I told you that your file was in my keeping. Well, it still is! Besides, your file has a special feature that, if he had known about it, he would have made it the main topic of his conversation with you. I am referring to the tape recording and its transcript. Did he mention them?”

“No, he didn’t,” I said, and in my defense, I added, “He talked about some very specific points in my file. He even talked about the “A” and “B” categories under which the Baha’is were classified. He pointed to subjects that could have come only from the minutes taken by the committee clerk...”

“First,” he interrupted. “There has never been an “A” and “B” distinction in any set of files. Granted, an “A” and “B” categorization sounds official. A good fabrication on his side. But he did not get the crucial bit of information—your affiliation with the Baha’i faith—from your file. He got it from your servant Ali Asghar. At that time there was no information regarding your faith available to the committee.”

“Furthermore,” he continued. “The statements that he has attributed to the committee come from his own notes. All through the time that you were being interrogated he, and a young man, who was sitting next to him, were in the second row behind you. Both were taking notes. Those things, including his file on me, as well as his Jewish background are all fabrication devised, on the one hand, to outrage his victims, and on the other hand, to fill them with apprehension. As I said, by intimidating those at the top, he gains an opportunity to extort enormous amounts, in cash and property, from the underlings. His victims are mostly landowners, and ex-office holders like yourself. That is where the bulk of his gains come from. In fact, that is how, quite effortlessly, he took over your house. He literally forced me to confiscate it for him.”

I chose not to react to all that. He respected my silence and did not probe the issue further. We both were tired and fell silent. After a short break, the Aqa said, “Now we come to the reason that has brought you here. My guess is that Fanusiyan has made further demands. This time directly. Isn’t that so?”

“Yes,” I said. “He has. It seems that he is planning to initiate a couple of projects in two villages in the Fereydan area. One village is called Ashgerd. The other is called Damaneh. He outlined some modification and modernization plans for improving the socio-cultural aspects of Damaneh and he wanted to see if I was interested to contribute...”

“To contribute. In what way? Write a book about the project?” He asked.

“No, not about the project.” I said. “He asked me to write a book about his own experiences and philosophies. Actually, he spent most of the time on taking about the project. Regarding details about the village project, it was late at night. He did not elaborate. I assume he was thinking about using me in some kind of managerial capacity. He gave me a few days to think about his suggestions...”

I did not mention anything about the shepherding project. As Golnar had predicted, it had the potential of becoming my future calling. I did not want the Aqa to send his minions to confiscate the flock in the same way that he just now explained he had confiscated my house. That would leave me without a job. Something that I could not afford. And, of course, I did not mention Ja’far...”

“Then, you thought of me,” he interrupted by train of thought.

“Actually, no,” I confessed. “My wife, Golnar, suggested that I should consult you before giving an answer.”

“You did the right thing,” he said. “Fanusiyan has used both the book ploy and the renovation of abandoned lands in far off places in his dealings with other victims as well. Although, normally, it seems that to each individual he has suggested one project. In that respect, your case is different. The book ploy fits as a suggestion to an education director. The village project does not. There must be a reason for the additional suggestion. Whatever that reason is, I can assure you, it is far from being benevolent. The Haji’s son is not worrying about providing you with a living, as he pretends...”

Having said that the Aqa fell quiet. Then he got up, walked to and fro in the middle of the room and, bending, with his face close to mine, he said, “I suspect that Ali Asghar might have reported about something that you might own, but which is out of his normal reach. For instance, things that, for safekeeping, you might have left with family or friends. Whatever it is, Fanusiyan wants you to retrieve that in order to take it with you. He intends to somehow wrest it from you. For instance, once you are out of the city, that is my guess... As I told you, he has done similar things to others, and most of the time, he has been successful. My advice is that both you and your wife be on guard...Now then,” he concluded, “what are your plans?”

“As you know, I have two children. Zhaleh is almost fifteen. Kayvan is...”

I could not continue. Tears gathered in my eyes and I could not bring out the words. “I am sorry... thirteen,” I blurted.

“That is quite understandable. Nothing to apologize about.”

“After the chat with Haji Fanusiyan, my wife and I had a long conversation about our options. My wife suggested that I should seek your advice regarding our second option, which is leaving the country. Our first option, of course, as difficult as the circumstances are, is to stay and deal with the Fanusiyan types. We have some savings to sustain us but, under the

prevailing circumstances—without jobs, monthly rent to pay, regular expenses—within a short time we will go broke and become destitute. Abroad, as an educated couple, we might have a better chance of survival. Our kids, too, we hope, will grow properly and help us.”

“That makes good sense,” he said. “So, have you come up with a country?”

“People are going to Canada...”

“Yes, but going to Canada entails securing a visa from Canadian authorities. For that you should have started a couple of years ago.”

“I am aware of that,” I said. “But that’s one country we thought of. We also thought about going to the Soviet Union. Some people we know have gone there.”

“You mean people affiliated with the Tudeh Party...”

“I know,” I said.

He sat back and fell silent. Then, with renewed vigor asked, “How about Afghanistan, Turkey, Europe, or South America?”

I did not react. Then point blank, he asked “This savings you mentioned. Roughly, how much is it?”

“It is not cash money,” I said. “It is in jewels. Over the past decade, my wife has bought some of it and some of it she has inherited from her grandmother through her late mother.”

“In short,” he said. “we are talking about family jewels...”

“That is exactly what I am trying to say, family jewels.”

“More than before,” he said, sitting back in his chair, “I am certain that Fanusiyan is after your jewels. He probably knows about them from Ali Asghar. The young man must have watched your wife wear different items on different occasions, or casually in the house.”

“I am sure he has,” I said and, inwardly, blamed myself for not paying special attention to the activities of the boy, especially after I was warned about possible future difficulties.

“As I said,” the Aqa said, “Fanusiyan intends to dislodge you and take the rest of your property. He believes, as the faithful in general do, that, as a Baha’i, your property is *halal!*” The Damaneh-Ashgerd renovation project, I think, is a front. Of course, there might be important individuals here in the city who have properties there and the Haji’s son is looking for someone credible to deal with them. But that is far-fetched.”

Following that statement, he assumed his serious stance. The stance that he usually assumed when he was dealing with a serious issue. “Mr. Director,” he asked. “How much do you trust me?”

I was taken by total surprise and didn’t know quite what to say. “I am here for your advice, am I not?” I said, trying to keep my emotions in check. “All avenues are closed. You know my family. You know the circumstance we are in...More than that, as you just mentioned, you know we are living among a people who believe hurting us in any form—economically,

emotionally, physically, even psychologically—opens the gates of paradise to them. In a manner of speaking, the incentive for killing us is in their blood. Some will undertake it in spite of themselves...”

“I know... I know, and sadly, it does not end with just the Baha’is.”

He then made a long pause. I thought that was an apt time to tell him about Fanusiyan’s interest in his own Zoroastrian background, but since he had already told me that everything was under control, especially that everything Fanusiyan had said is fabrication, I did not broach the subject.

“I have something in mind,” he finally said. “But, before I can talk to you about it, I need to make a few long-distance telephone calls. Rest assured, however, that I know that time is of the essence. I will have an answer for you soon. Meanwhile, ask your wife to take as much of the jewels that she and your daughter might need and, when you come back here next time, bring the rest of the jewels with you. Also, meanwhile, try to find out what documents—copies of birth certificates, photos, school transcripts, diplomas, etc.—I might need for visa purposes. Bring those, too, with you. As far as Fanusiyan is concerned, meet with him, accept his offer, and do exactly as he says. Who knows, if your first option works, so much the better. In any event, no one except your wife, should know about our conversation here.”

“Rest assured,” I said. “I will see to it.”

“I wish we had this conversation under much better circumstances. But things are what they are. The driver, who brought you here, will take you back to where he picked you up. Next time, he will come and bring you back here again. Meanwhile, your job is to get the jewels and the required documents I mentioned together and bring them to me.”

“I will get everything ready,” I said, “And thank you for your understanding and support...”

“You are welcome Mr. Director. Don’t forget. We are friends and friends help friends. I trust you would do the same for me. Regards to family...”

I got in the car and the driver took me to the Saqafi bookstore.



On the way home, I realized that I was leaving Aqa Pisuziyani’s house with more questions than answers. What bothered me the most was that now two individuals knew about our jewels. One knew vaguely that they might exist. The other knew precisely what they were. More poignantly, both were interested in them. One might be planning to wrest them from us. The other expects me to take them to him on a silver platter. I was baffled. Nevertheless, trying to look at the bright side, I convinced myself that Pisuziyani’s analysis, based on his interrogation of Ali Asghar, was spot on. I had wondered about Ali Asghar myself.

What intrigued me was that, all along, in spite of the danger involved, Pisuziyani had protected me against the likes of Fanusiyani. A new conundrum was gradually taking shape in my mind, replacing the Ali Asghar-*mullah* conundrum. Is Hushang Khan actually helping me, or is he helping himself at my expense?

Fanusiyani's offer, which Pisuziyani labeled fabrication, but which Golnar considered a good option, promised a new life in Ashgerd. Could it be that the Haji's son, remorseful about what he had already done to me, was trying to compensate for his cruelty? More importantly, could I afford to refuse a job with the potential of providing an income on which we could build a new life in our own homeland, without becoming a refugee family? More than that, our stay in Isfahan meant involvement in a despicable plan that already included my Zhaleh...

When I got home, I communicated Pisuziyani's revelations, as well as his willingness to help, to Golnar. She was devastated. Ali Asghar's criminal behavior impacted her the most.

"How could he?" She kept repeating. "I told you about him," she reminded me, "but you ignored not only my warning, but also Behjat's concern, and Vahhab's good will. Until this moment," she continued, "I had a vague feeling about the existence of goodness in the world. Now I can no longer distinguish who is a friend and who is a foe. I am at a loss."

"So am I," I said, "so am I..."

"How could Ali Asghar do that to us?" She asked in a daze. How could you allow a twenty-one-year old man live here? We have a fifteen-year old daughter... then she paused, and added, "Seddiqeh, too, is a lethal viper. Not knowing any better, for a long time, I did not pay attention to her."

While I was gone, Golnar had convinced herself that living in Ashgerd could be the beginning of a new phase in everyone's life, especially Zhaleh's. But now, Pisuziyani's assertions frightened her. With exasperation visible on her face, she asked, "What if the Aqa himself is after the jewels? What would happen to us then? There is no law and order here. You cannot sue the Attorney General... If this does not work, we will be left somewhere in the middle of wilderness empty-handed... I wish I had not..."

"Now... now..." I said. "Don't blame yourself for an outcome that is not yet certain. I assure you that Pisuziyani does not need our jewels. He is well off."

"His being well-off is exactly the reason for my concern. How did he come to all that wealth within a short time? Besides, if you look at his situation logically, he is not really well off at all. He lives in a mansion provided by the government, rides a car provided by the government, has a driver provided by the government. Once those things are taken away from him, won't he become as destitute as we are?!"

She then paused, considered our options, and out of desperation, quietly said, “In any event, before you take the jewels, I want to take a couple of pictures of them. We need to keep a record of what you give him...”

“What good will that do?” I asked casually.

“Theoretically, none. But practically, I still can look at my jewels...”

I did not dwell on her answer and casually advised, “Do it on a day when no one is home and keep an eye on Seddiqeh until I change the lock. “



Karl Linné.

Ancestral Home

With no other option left open to us, we decided to put the lifeline of our family—our family jewels—in Pisuziyani’s hands. This was a high-stake gamble. If a win, it would mean we could rescue what was left of our lives and begin a new life with dignity in some other country. If a loss, it would mean destitution, slavery, and consternation. Meanwhile, in the tenement, we announced that we were moving to Ashgerd to manage the affairs of the Haji’s son. As a result, a week or so before the move to Ashgerd, at about five o’clock in the afternoon, carrying the jewels in a sack, I went to the Saqafi bookstore, where the driver was scheduled to pick me up. I was extremely worried and on edge.

The driver picked me up and took me to the Aqa’s house. On the way, seeing how uneasy and glum I was, he did not engage in his usual small talk. In fact, he said nothing other than hello and how are things? At the house, too, I was unusually morose. In the yard, the Aqa acknowledged me with a nod and went on to the car and talked to the driver. After a short while, he joined me and, together, we walked to the house.

In the parlor, I handed him the sack. He looked at it and said, “I gather this is what I think it is.” Then, lifting the sack up to shoulder level, added, “Quite heavy, too.”

“It is,” I said, “on both counts,” and, as I sat down on the sofa, added, “Hushang Khan, this is all that is left for us. I hope you fathom the depth of my concern and desperation...”

Saying, “I do dear friend, ... I do,” he put the sack on the floor beside him and made himself comfortable on the armchair across from me. Then, casually, he asked. “By the way, did you bring the documents that I mentioned?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I did. They, too, are in the sack. Although,” I added, “I am not sure whether I have everything that is required.”

“Not to worry,” he said. “I don’t know what is exactly needed either. Those who work on the itinerary know. If there are things that need your attention, my driver will notify you to provide.”

Then, in quite an unceremonious tone, he said, “Mr. Director, during the last couple of days, I have explored the options that you mentioned, as well as a few others that were not covered in our conversation. Unfortunately, they all lead to cul-de-sacs of one type or other. I even talked to Mozaffar. You might remember him. He is in Germany now. He said countries like France and England do accept immigrants, but only those who come from North Africa and India, their former colonies. Iran is not a priority for them. Germany, where he lives, is the hardest to immigrate to, unless you are from Turkey. There are even many Turks,” he said, “who have been living there for years and still have not received their citizenship. This is not to take into account that Mozaffar was talking about the difficulties involved in moving a single individual over a certain period of time. We are talking about three or four individuals to be moved within a limited amount of time. His advice was that we should explore refugee status, which, I know from personal experience, has technical problems of its own. It requires concrete proof that the individual’s life is in imminent danger, and things like that...”

“But our lives are in imminent danger,” I protested.

“They are,” he confirmed, “but only in the eyes of those who are familiar with your predicament. Consider the situation at the embassies where they issue visas. The immigration officer looks for tangible evidence. What tangible evidence do we have to present?”

“In other words,” I interrupted with exasperation, “the situation is totally hopeless.”

“No. I wouldn’t say that.” He said calmly. “Not by any means. The situation is not altogether hopeless. There are other avenues that we have not explored yet. In fact, I have a particular country in mind that we have tangentially talked about but has not been the focus of our discussion.” Then assuming his usual stance, he asked, “Why not immigrate to our ancestral homeland?”

For a minute, I was confused. Then, misunderstanding him, asked, “Are you talking about Israel?”

“Of course not,” he said somewhat annoyed. “Since when Israel is the ancestral homeland of the Iranians?”

“What homeland then?” I asked.

“I am talking about our Aryan homeland. A homeland that we both can easily relate to,” he said, and continued, “You see, before your immediate ancestors chose to join the Baha’i faith, they most likely were *Ithna ‘Asharis*. Your forefathers before them could have been Sunni Muslims. Their forefathers were Zoroastrian. The homeland of the Zoroastrians is Balkh...”

“So,” I interrupted. “I understand now. We are back to Afghanistan.”

“No, we are not,” he said. “You see, every time that enemies, whether Arabs, Turks, or Mongols have made Iranians feel unwanted in their own homeland, their ancestral home has beckoned them. I am talking about that ancestral homeland.”

“So, you are talking about India,” I said unenthusiastically.

“Yes, I am,” he said, with his special smile. “Did you and your wife give India any thought?”

“No,” I said. “To tell you the truth, India did not even occur to us.”

“Well, I have given it due thought,” he said, and added. “I even made several calls to Gujarat. There is a remote possibility there, in Gujarat, for you and your family to settle down and begin a tranquil life. Gujarat beats Ashgerd by far. In fact, under the circumstances, if it works, I think, Gujarat would be an ideal place for you. For one thing, there are other Iranians there. So you would not have any major cultural or linguistic problems. My relatives on my late mother’s side live in Gujarat. They are engaged in education, trade, and tourism. They said they can help you find suitable jobs. Most importantly, you have your daughter to think about. She needs a proper education. In India, she can become educated in an environment that is relatively devoid of discrimination. She will have an opportunity to pursue her dreams.”

I was sad to see how he left Kayvan out. But he didn’t have an option. We were getting close to moving away from Isfahan. Kayvan would become relevant if, and when, he shows up. Until that time, as unwilling as I was, I had to agree with him. He had to be left out. There was no option.

“Suddenly India sounds so heavenly,” I said sarcastically. “But realistically,” I asked, “How do we get there?”

“You get there by boat. There is a boat that goes from Bandar Abbas to Bombay.”

“I know that,” I said. “I mean...”

“I know what you mean,” he smiled. “You mean visas, tickets, etc. My office will use the materials that you have provided to take care of those issues here in Iran. My family will take over from us when you arrive in Bombay. As for Kayvan, I will keep his materials at hand. If he shows up, which I hope he will, I will send him over as well.”

I had not thought about India and did not have the slightest notion about how to break the news to Golnar. I didn’t know how she would react, especially with leaving Kayvan behind. At the same time, I was reminded of the information that Fanusiyan was seeking regarding Pisuziyani. It all made good sense. Hushang Khan, too, like me, had been protecting his family. I looked at the sack, as if for the last time, and said, “I see.”

He, too, looked at the sack, and said, “Let’s hope there is sufficient value in here to cover tickets, bribes, and what not.”

Since I could not put a price on the contents of the sack, I did not say anything. He added, “Not to worry. If it is sufficient, so much the better. If not, I will make up the difference. Right now our concern should be focused on getting you and your family to safety.”

I was literally speechless. Mesmerized to be exact. The Aqa sat back, held his head in his hands and fell silent for a while. Then, looking serious, he said, “Khalil Khan, don’t think I am doing all this for you, which, of course, I am. I have a stake in this, too. Just as you worry about your wife and children, I worry about my wife and daughter.”

I did not expect him to make such an assertion so openly, especially using my first name. The same feeling that I had when I entered Fanusiyan’s den and saw the opium device was revived in my mind. Agitated and confused, I asked, “What do you mean?”

Seeing me restless, he said, “Don’t be alarmed. In addition to being friends, we are colleagues. Are we not? So, like the old days, we can talk about issues frankly. Can’t we? It is true that I have a high position and live in this beautiful mansion. But this, too, like so many enterprises here, is a sham. At some point, the person who, for whatever personal reason, has chosen me and given me this beautiful house, and more importantly, this elevated position, might favor someone else. I don’t need to lecture you about nepotism and job security in the city, do I?”

In a flash, Golnar’s assessment crossed my mind and the palpable irony in his explanation made me feel sorry for him. Unknowingly, he was talking about the very individual who had placed him in that position and who was trying to decipher the symbolism of his garment in order to utilize it to force him to perform even more effectively in furthering his nefarious plans. Or, conversely, if required, to eliminate him altogether. Once again I felt I should warn him about Fanusiyan, and once again, I convinced myself that he has provided enough information to show that he was aware of his own precarious situation as he was of mine. So I said, “If that were to be the case, you would find yourself in my shoes.”

“No friend,” he chided. “I would find myself in a situation much worse than that. You have me. I will not have anyone to support and assist me. Fortunately, while working on the logistics of your case I have gained a new perspective on my own situation. I am delving deeper and deeper in the real reason for your departure. I ask myself: Is it because of a difference of opinion that he has to leave everything behind? And I respond to myself, hardly. He is being forced to go on this trip simply because he does not belong. And, unfortunately, I come to the conclusion that your kind of forced emigration applies to the majority of the population of Isfahan...”

“Hushang Khan,” I interrupted. “You are speaking in riddles. Can you come down to my level?”

“Mr. Director, please,” he said, and added “What is forcing you out is an ingrained prejudice that, over the centuries, has been imposing similar sojourns on the best and brightest members of this society...”

I realized that Hushang Khan, too, has seen the specter that showed itself to me in the *Naqsh-e Jahan meydan*. I felt sorry for him as, at that fateful moment, I had felt sorry for myself. I also felt sorry for his wife and daughter. No matter how I looked at their situation, they, too, had a grim future ahead of them. However, in order to lighten the conversation, I said, "I am not sure if, like the old days, you are not pulling my leg!"

"I wish I was, Khamush," he said calmly. "But, unfortunately, I am not." Then, in a melancholy voice, he added, "You know that I don't like telling tales. I would rather leave that to the Fanusiyans of the world. But there is a special account that I would like you to hear. It put things in perspective for me when I learned it, and I am sure it will do the same for you. The gist of it is that cultures do not die, people do!"

"I am all ears," I said.

"In India, I have an uncle on my mother side. His name is Vasu. God willing, you will meet him when you get there. He is a jolly, old guy. Actually, a good anthropologist and painter. You will recognize him within the first few minutes of your conversation with him. When he explains something, he begins with a soft voice but, before long his voice is raised until he is literally shouting... In any event, I had a discussion with Vasu about the relationship between Zoroastrianism and the Islamic faith. You can imagine the volume of his voice as he reached the end of the story."

"I will make sure not to have a discussion like that with him," I said.

"In any event," he said. "Vasu compared the relationship between Islam and Zoroastrianism with a relationship that holds between a variety of vine that grows in rain forests in India and the other trees in the forest. Since I did not know much about the issue, I asked for an explanation. He said, "In the jungles, there is a variety of woody vine, a type of fig tree to be exact, that uses ordinary trees as its main source for sustenance and growth. It is usually referred to as the strangler vine..."

"A strangler vine?" I echoed his words. "Does that make sense?"

"In the context that Vasu explained it does," the Aqa said. "The process begins when a few seeds of the vine, carried by the wind, become attached to the moist bark of a tall tree with a thick trunk. He referred to this tree as the host tree. From where they are lodged high on top of the host tree, the seeds of the vine send aerial roots down, on the body of the host tree, towards the bottom. The roots stick to the trunk of the host tree and, as they move down, share the nutrition that the tree sustains itself on. At the same time, the seeds also send branches up towards the canopy..."

"To me," I interrupted, "this seems quite natural. A normal process that goes on in the jungle all the time."

“It does. Doesn’t it?” He agreed. “But only up to this point. Once the vine roots below reach the ground and are established, and once the branches above pierce the canopy and reach sunlight, the vine begins to deprive the host tree of both its sources of sustenance, that is its nutrition and sunlight. And that is not all. The vine also begins to strangle the host tree, as would a boa constrictor its victim. The more the host tree fights back by expanding its body to tear the vine apart, the tighter the constriction becomes. At the end, the host tree gives up and its branches begin to die. Following that, the tree itself begins to undergo a slow death. As time goes by, the trunk of the host tree breaks up into pieces and falls down to the bottom of a hollow cylinder, a vacuum that is created by what, not long ago, had been its own trunk surrounded by trunks that once had been aerial roots...”

I sat back in amazement and said, “That is a sad story, and so graphic. Frightening, if I may say so. But how did Vasu relate this process to the two faiths?”

“Actually, he had prepared a chart depicting the process,” said the Aqa. “A kind of graph that showed how Yamanite warriors, assisted by the Prophet and Imam Ali, assailed Zoroastrian strongholds in western Iran of the time and created bases for the expansion of Islam. Later, after Shi’ism was born, cities like Isfahan were affected...”

“I was just becoming interested in the story when he said, ‘of course it is not my place to tell you your history...’”

“So what did you do?” I asked.

“What could I do? I tried to find what he meant by using other means.”

“Do you think Fanusiyan is like that strangler vine tree?” I asked.

“It is a hard case to judge,” he said. “The vine tree is not doing what it does out of malice. As you said, what goes on between it and the host tree is a natural process. The vine tree grows by stealing nutrients, water, and sunlight from other trees.”

“But in the process it annihilates those trees...”

“I wouldn’t use annihilate,” he said. “Annihilate is too harsh a word. Too clean cut.”

“So what term would you use?” I asked.

“I would say it incorporates the host tree into its own makeup. In other words, unbeknownst to both the vine and the host tree, the essence of the host tree becomes incorporated into the fabric of the vine, resulting in a hybrid. Hybridization is an inevitable process when plants, animals, and human beings compete for nutrition and light...”

His explanation transported me mentally to Fanusiyan’s den, and to his own lecture that Fanusiyan labelled, “one of his early lectures when he was a novice.” The Aqa’s words echoed in my mind: Can you imagine your faith divested of the coming of the Mahdi? Can you live a day without the assistance of the Fourteen Immaculate Ones? Can you feel secure after death, if you were not sure of the intercession of the Commander of the Faithful...?”

“So what else did you gather from that?” I asked.

“I gathered,” he said, “that the tree in the rain forest, because it is stationary and has not developed any defensive mechanism against the invader, is powerless. It has to endure this slow hybridization process. As human beings, however, we have options. We can seek distance from the invader, not only physically, but also ideologically and spiritually.”

“You said you are not a story teller,” I said, “but you spun an alarming yarn, indeed a frightening one,”

“My tale is alarming because I have access to information. Limited as it is, one can see through it. The pressure that has been weighing heavily on you the last couple of years is like the crushing force of the boa constrictor. It is forcing its will on you to give up. It is the force of a storm that has been blowing in this direction for centuries. A storm that, since the beginning of this century, has become more intense and purposeful.”

“You lost me in the prior centuries,” I said. “What has happened since the beginning of the century that I don’t know about?”

“It is not something that you don’t know about.” Conversely, it is something that you know too much about. So much that it has become routine for you. You trained cadres who worked with students. Did you ever pay attention to what happened to the brightest of your students after graduation? Some were sent abroad because they deserved to receive further education. That is not deniable. But the majority of those who went abroad were the ones who were assisted to go. They were sent abroad to get rid of them. Do you know what happens to those youths after they leave the tarmac in Mehrabad? A few return. The majority stay not because they do not want to come back and help their homeland. But because, from afar they observe the treatment that the returnees receive. They see how regretful those who did return were as a result of their decision to return...”

“But those were different times,” I interrupted.

“That is what we all think,” he said knowingly. “And that is where we are wrong. God knows how many are kept abroad through intimidation. Now, it is the turn of the likes of you to be forced to join them. And, in time, it will be my turn. Since I started to work on your case, this question has been nagging at me. What if, under the circumstances, the authorities reverse policy and prevent people from traveling abroad? What would happen to me and my family? That’s the perspective I gained working on your case. It made me realize that, as rosy as things appear today, there is a high probability, even a high possibility, that they might turn nasty tomorrow. I owe it to my wife and daughter to worry about that eventuality today, not tomorrow. And I thank you for bringing me to that understanding.”

His confession was an eye opener. Increasingly, I felt that in addition to losing the opportunity to leave Isfahan when I should have, now, once again I might have placed my

lifeline in the wrong hands. This, in spite of the warning that he himself had provided that, when making decisions, I should consider *all* eventualities...

“Maybe you, too, should come with us,” I said amiably.

“Don’t be surprised,” he concluded, “if we take the next boat and, before you unpack, meet you there.”

At that moment, when he smiled, that distinctive beam that usually lit up his face did not come through. Rather, his smile sat flat on his face. It made me feel dubious about having asked for his assistance.



As the day of our departure for Ashgerd drew near, under the watchful eyes of the neighbors, especially Seddiqeh, we packed our suitcases and got them ready. This being a relatively long journey, and sure that we would not be returning to this house, we donated a good portion of our household items to the neighbors.

Meanwhile, Aqa Pisuziyani sent word via his driver that, on his side, matters were making steady progress, that the required documents were in order, and that he and I did not need to meet any more. This being the first of the month, we were instructed to be in the house of a friend of the Aqa in Daran, a town a few miles from Ashgerd, on the fifteenth of the month. From there, we were informed, the Aqa had arranged for us to be taken to Bandar Abbas via Lar. We were to receive further instructions regarding the Daran leg of the trip, including the address of the house, the name of the owner, and the identity of the person taking us to Lar, during our short stay in Ashgerd.

The logistics for our settling in Ashgerd was arranged by the Haji’s son. We were to be picked up from Damaneh by an acquaintance of the Haji’s son who, we were told, had also arranged living quarters for us in Ashgerd. Thus far, we had not received any confirmation from the Haji’s acquaintance regarding those arrangements.

On our side, we secretly planned to, after receiving information from Aqa Pisuziyani, remain in Ashgerd until the fourteenth. Then we would go to Daran, ostensibly to stay the night, see the town, and do some shopping. In reality, however, to go to the house of the friend of the Aqa on the fifteenth, and from there to Bandar Abbas via Lar.

On the day of departure for Ashgerd, a man with two porters sent by the Haji’s son came to the house and took our suitcases to the bus depot. We had three leather suitcases, beige, with similar locks. At the bus depot, I handed them to the bus conductor personally. They stood out among the other items in the luggage compartment. Then, to make sure that all went well, I stayed around until the compartment was closed and the bus was ready to move.

The day before leaving, thinking that we might need some cash, I turned some of the jewelry that I had retained, into cash. Since each one of us was carrying a portion of the cash, I was constantly on guard for pickpockets. The bus had a stop in Tiran. Before the bus stopped, the driver said a stop was coming up but, because it was a short stop, all passengers should stay in the bus.

Damaneh was the next stop and, for us, it was the end of this part of the trip. The village of Damaneh is located at a fork in the road. One road goes to Khunsar, Khomein, and Arak. That was the route that the bus was taking. The other route goes to Ashgerd and Daran. When the bus stopped in Damaneh, we and a couple of other passengers, got off. I expected the conductor to open the luggage compartment and hand over our suitcases, but, instead, the bus started to move in the direction of Khunsar. I ran after the bus and banged on the side. The bus stopped. The conductor opened the door and shouted, "Yes, sir?"

"We have three suitcases in the luggage compartment," I shouted back.

"What suitcases?" he said, and then, as an afterthought added, "Oh yes. Now I remember. Didn't you already claim them in Tiran?"

"What do you mean?" I said in an agitated voice. "I didn't leave the bus in Tiran. The driver told us all to stay in the bus..."

"Well, then," he said, "Somebody like you did. I thought it was you. I took the suitcases, three of them, beige, from you in Isfahan, didn't I? And you saw me put them in the compartment... I am sure it was you that I handed..."

Then interrupting himself, said, "If it were not you, as you say, who was it then?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," I said. "I am telling you I didn't leave the bus. Nobody left the bus in Tiran..."

"I don't know what is going on there then, sir..."

As he talked, the bus started to move, and I began half-running after it.

"Right now," the conductor said. "I am confused, and the driver is telling me we are being late..."

The bus started to move faster in the direction of Khunsar. The conductor, before closing the door, shouted, "Come to the depot in Isfahan. They will sort it out!"

I slowed down but kept walking after the bus as it picked up speed. In utter despair, I was repeating to myself, "Father!... Where are you?" Then I turned around and looked behind me, my wife and daughter were walking towards me. "We are in nowhere land," said Zhaleh. "There is no one here to pick us up!"

The Tulip

The intensity of the fog that had covered the afterlife scene decreased and the mountains, trees and, eventually, the people that populated the eerie scene emerged. Neither the scene nor the people were real. Even though the scene looked normal, it lacked physical reality. People were in afterlife bodies. They appeared as if they were shadows of their earthly existence. Objects retained their former shapes and people retained their recollection of the past. They even could breath, taste, and converse.

Ali Zadeh, the ex-committee clerk, in fatigues and a Pahlavi cap, was sitting at the foot of a tree waiting. The majority of the people who went by him were walking along a one-way road. It was a dirt road, in a gorge, stretched at the side of a turbulent river going in the same direction as the crowd. No one from the other side of the road had ever come back to this side, where Ali Zadeh sat. Almost everyone walking on the road carried something that resembled a portfolio.

Ali Zadeh did not have a portfolio. His fate, alongside the fate of a small group of individuals like him, was still uncertain. As a result, like the other members of this group, he was not permitted to go beyond the spot where he was. Since his arrival, he had gradually discovered the reason for his being denied a portfolio. What he did not know was how to alter the circumstance in which he had placed himself. He was waiting for his mentor.

Since his arrival, Ali Zadeh had met many of the individuals who had received death sentences in the committees. He also had met some of those whose decrees had resulted in the execution of those poor souls. Most of those who recognized Ali Zadeh as the committee clerk stopped by and talked to him. But there was no sign of Aqa Shams al-Din, Aqa Mash'al al-Din, Rajab, the unfortunate woman who was stoned to death on allegation of adultery "Tala," and a host of others.

At this point, Ali Zadeh's thoughts were occupied by one individual and one individual only, Aqa Haji Chelcheraq. He was waiting for the master, who had originally made him aware of the existence of an afterlife, as well as warned him about the difficulties that his soul might

encounter in the next world to appear. The difficulties that he was experiencing now were exactly the difficulties that the Haji had warned him about. Knowing about the extent of the Haji's wisdom, devotion to truth, and faith Ali Zadeh was optimistic about his future.

One of the amazing features of afterlife was the individual's access to information. Once a need was expressed for a piece of information, the information was inspired to the individual. That is how Ali Zadeh knew that the Haji was scheduled to appear at the gate on this day to cross the bridge. He, therefore, chose this particular spot, near the gate, for his last meeting with his mentor.

As he sat there, Ali Zadeh could hear the names of those being summoned to appear at the gate. People, in spite of being from different races and faiths, spoke the same language and, in an orderly manner, responded to the calls. Everyone knew exactly what to do and, when summoned, where to go. Chelcheraq's name had not come up yet.

Finally, the old master appeared in the distance. He looked somewhat older than his usual self and more bent. He was carrying his portfolio under his arm. His anxious face bespoke his desire to go through the gate, enter the court, talk to the judge, and receive his eternal verdict. Never before, in recent years, had the old judge felt this particular type of stress, the stress that students experience immediately before taking a test. Throughout his life, he had prepared for every eventuality, yet he was worried about that one hidden flaw that might ruin his whole enterprise.

Upon seeing Ali Zadeh, the Haji approached the ex-committee clerk, greeted him, and sat next to him. Ali Zadeh hoped that, as was the case on the earth plane, the Haji might have some encouraging advice for him. He hoped that with the assistance of the Haji he might be able to set himself free from purgatory. The Haji, on the other hand, was surprised to see Ali Zadeh at a distance from the gate. Addressing Ali Zadeh rather inquisitively, he said, "Son, I expected to see you at the gate."

Ali Zadeh said, "Haji, for what you taught me, I owe you a great deal. Only I wish I had exerted more diligence. My case, albeit very slowly, is making progress. I am not allowed to go beyond this spot. That's why I am not at the gate. I don't know when..."

Haji Chelcheraq smiled meaningfully and said, "Behruz, I wish we had time on our side. I would gladly talk to you about your predicament, but as things stand, unfortunately..."

Ali Zadeh, as if not hearing the Haji, mournfully complained, "Haji, I don't know how to explain my situation other than to admit that, unknowingly, I made a monumental mistake. In that world, most of the time, I did not have the slightest notion about the actual value of life. In spite of my hard work, and I should say I worked day and night, I am being told that I have not accrued sufficient merit. I did not expect the situation I am in. I did not even imagine that my actions in that world would result in the calamity that I am going through. Were it not for

your contribution, I am sure, I would not have garnered even the opportunity to redeem myself.”

Then, after a long pause, he asked, “Sir, how do I go about this rehabilitation process?”

The Haji said, “All along I told both you, and the others, that that world was merely a field for cultivating the ability to present the right color of tulip in this world. None of you paid attention. Some thought I was joking. From all indications, I could guess that you were on the verge of understanding what I meant. Then the revolution happened and you abandoned the unique job that you had created and followed Aqa Mash’al al-Din. You did that in spite of the fact that you were familiar with the cases I was working on, especially the case of the Aqa. You were aware of the type of criminal activities he was undertaking against the best contributors to the prosperity of our towns...”

Ali Zadeh, almost on the verge of tears, lamented, “I don’t know how it happened, sir. It all went by very fast. I did not get a chance. My understanding of the world as a whole was foggy. With hindsight, I see now how I was pushed through life without a chance to live it. I facilitated what others wished to accomplish, or needed to accomplish. I did not initiate anything on my own...”

“And hence the tragedy, Behruz,” Chelcheraq interrupted firmly. “Rather than using your life for your own good, and for the good of your fellow man, you allowed it to be used for you and against your fellow man. You shirked your responsibility to yourself and to many more individuals like yourself.”

“I understand that now, sir,” said Ali Zadeh with regret. “But that is all water under the bridge. Could I have done otherwise...? But, more poignantly, what do you think I should do now?”

The Haji said calmly, but firmly, “It is not water under the bridge and you see that plainly. The problems that you are facing here are the direct result of the actions you undertook there. And those actions are of your making. You are the one who did not take life seriously. According to yourself, you did not use your God-given rationality to decide on a positive course of action for yourself and others. Instead, you allowed yourself to be tantalized. you enjoyed being tantalized. You followed your desire and your desire has brought you to this end...”

“It all would have been different,” Ali Zadeh interjected, “if the revolution had not taken place. I left your service because I was galvanized. I was a hundred per cent sure that Aqa Shams al-Din was the man of the hour and that Aqa Mash’al al-Din intended...”

“No one contests the ability of those you worked with,” the Haji said. “But on what basis, with what knowledge, with what experience, with what precedence did you make such a

fateful decision? It is one thing to evaluate your ability to see if you can do something. It is another thing to evaluate the outcome and see if it would be meritorious.”

Ali Zadeh, filled with remorse, said. “I cannot tell, sir. But I wish I had watched you more closely and followed your example...”

“Son,” Haji Chelcheraq interrupted him again. “During the time that you worked at my office, you worked as hard for me as any real son would have worked for a father. You did not live in Isfahan, but that did not deter you from doing the work required of you. I am proud of you. But, how many times did I say working hard is not the same as working purposefully and meaningfully. No matter who, or what, the source of emulation might be, mere imitation of an exalted source in this world would not translate into merit in the world to come! I am sure you received a great deal of accolades for what you did for Aqa Shams al-Din and Aqa Mash’al al-Din. Unfortunately, those accolades are inconsequential here.”

“Haji Aqa,” Ali Zadeh said. “I don’t mean to criticize or anything like that. But you talked in riddles. You talked about the next world, white tulips, rainbows, and becoming at one with nature. Your words did not make any sense to us, to any of us. We often discussed them among ourselves, but...”

“I know, son,” the Haji admitted. “It was partially, if not totally, my fault. I myself did not have a firm grip on what I was preaching. I had a gut feeling about actions and consequences and I had a particular liking for the color white...”

Ali Zadeh marveled at how, even here, the Haji continued to wear a white robe, cloak, and turban.

“Maybe,” the Haji continued. “I love the color white because it embodies all the marvelous colors of the rainbow. What I was trying to convey to you was that, at the end, by walking down the right path, you would provide yourself with an opportunity to present the right results. That’s all!”

“How did you come by this insight? Can I ask that?”

“I did not come by it. As a youth, I worked in small villages, seeing to the needs of the downtrodden. I built houses for them. I created schools for their children and provided provision for their elderly. In later years, as you were witness, I headed a foundation that did the same thing on a grand scale. Nobody handed me anything and I did not expect anyone...”

Ali Zadeh, trying to refocus the conversation on his own desired subject, asked, “Is that why you refused to judge the case of Khamush? Because you did not want to imitate?”

“Exactly so,” said Haji Chelcheraq. “As a judge, it was my duty to understand the situation of the accused as well as the motives of his accusers. If you or I were in trouble, and the ex-education director could help, he would do his best. He is an extremely kind person at heart. In addition, he is wise, logical, thoughtful, and constructive. If he has a shortcoming at

all, it is his love for his profession and for his city. I knew that much about him. Others, too, I am sure, might have known those very exact things but, unlike me, they chose to ignore reality. That, unfortunately, has created a predicament for not only the ex-education director, but also for many others like him.”

“I did not know that family at all,” Ali Zadeh admitted. “But I understand now how, generation after generation, they had worked hard for the prosperity of Isfahan and for the well being of its people. Now, it is clear to me that, throughout the time that he was interrogated, I was literally deaf to his cries for justice. Now I interpret the issues that he explained and defended very differently than I interpreted them at that time. In other words, during his trial, I was not myself. Everything that he said at the trial regarding his ancestors was true, but I did not see them that way. I feel sorry for his family as you do.”

Then, continuing his thoughts further, after a heavy sigh, he added, “Now, when late at night, I look at the stars and the moon and review my life on the earth plane, my life appears as a delicate, colorful bubble, a mirage that stretches from the moon to the milky way. It is absolutely disconnected from me. Now I see how I mistook that mirage for real life, and how involuntarily I pursued that mirage until it gradually melted into the darkness of the night. For some reason, I did not realize that the faster I pursued that image, the greater the distance between us grew. And, regretfully, I did not stop and question the reality of that life!”

Finally, returning to his original question, he asked, “Your Excellency, how is it that you know so much about the ex-education director and his family?”

“I knew Khamush senior, the father of the ex-education director, quite well,” said the Haji. “Towards the end of my life, he and I worked on a number of projects for the city, including establishment of education centers, newspapers, libraries, and the like. I couldn’t have judged his father’s case, had there been one against him, because we were friends. I didn’t accept to judge the son’s case, because he had done nothing wrong. Nothing that could be established without a doubt. The committee organizers wished to impose a verdict upon me, a verdict that was contrary to my best judgment. I did not consent and, in fact, I threatened those who intended to harm him. I made them have second thoughts. Look at it this way. If from the beginning of my career as a judge I had adopted their approach to justice, and many do, what would be the consequence of my actions today? Would I even reach this spot? Then, showing Ali Zadeh a white tulip that he took out from his portfolio, he added, “I did not want to besmirch a capability for achieving which I had spent a lifetime.”

Saying this, he raised the tulip to eye level and, in a paternal tone, said, “There is a capability by which one can transform the color of the tulip into white. I picked this one to show the judge. He is a tulip connoisseur.”

“Then, looking distant and sad, he sighed, “On my walks I often go by Aqa Mash’al al-Din’s house. Wild, black tulips...”

The information, in light of the Haji’s explanation, did not surprise Ali Zadeh. He knew Aqa Mash’al al-Din well. He knew in particular that Aqa Mash’al al-Din lacked the insight and the dexterity of Haji Chelcheraq, especially in the matter of handling tulips.

As time was short, in a last-ditch effort to pull himself out of purgatory, Ali Zadeh asked, “Your Excellency, can you teach me how to change the color of tulips? I don’t have the slightest notion how to do that.”

“Yes, of course, I can,” responded the Haji. “The problem is that it requires time which, unfortunately, at this moment we do not have. In a nutshell, however, I can say tulips that grow here, like everything else, have a particular heavenly characteristic. They become white when they are touched by charismatic, fair, and truthful individuals...”

Then looking Ali Zadeh in the eyes, said, “Fortunately, you are young and have a whole life ahead of you.

“What life?” Ali Zadeh asked in confusion.

“My fatherly advice to you,” Haji continued, “is this: Make sure to remember and implement the knowledge that you gain here...”

“What life though?” Ali Zadeh insisted to know.

“Your life, son,” the Haji replied. Then, responding to the deep voice that thundered, “Chelcheragh!” he got up and added, “Fortunately or unfortunately, I don’t know which, it is my turn. I have to move on.”

He then kissed Ali Zadeh on both sides of his clean-shaven face and hugged him. Tears gathered in their eyes. They shook hands and parted. Before Behruz sat down, the Haji, as he was walking away, said, “I forgot to mention. I saw Fanusiyan’s brother, Habib. He said the Pisuziyanis have left Iran for Canada...”



Responding to the call, the Haji joined the crowd of people who were walking to the gate at the side of the turbulent river. At the gate, ordinary officials looked over his portfolio and handed it back to him. The Haji rejoined the others. As they moved forward, he noticed that, at particular points, various individuals separated themselves from the group and went down different paths. Eventually, only a small group remained. The march continued until they reached a point at which this group, too, went in the direction of a deserted alley that ended at the foot of a high, black mountain. Only the Haji remained. He alone was inspired to continue the walk alongside the river.

For quite a while, the Haji walked by himself. Then he suddenly found himself on the northwestern corner of a vast space reminiscent of the *Naqsh-e Jahan meydan*. Here the river turned and ran straight down the expanse of the *meydan* between what looked like the remnants of the Sheykh Lotfollah mosque and the Ali Qapu palace. What caught him by surprise was that the river was unusually quiet, so that at the gate of the Shah mosque, it was virtually stagnant.

The Shah mosque, too, was devoid of its normal splendor. Only the façade and its four minarets were standing. Neither the portal nor the minarets had any tiles on them. Beyond the gate, clear to the black mountain, the ground was covered by vine trees of the type that grow in rain forests in India. At a short distance from the polo posts, the figure of a horse and a man attracted his attention. The man was holding the reigns of the horse. He reminded the Haji of someone, but the Haji could not remember exactly whom. It was Rajab, whose trial he had denounced openly. On the horse, he noticed the figure of a woman in full Arabian desert attire. He recognized her immediately. He had stared at her bloody face for a long time. It was Tala. The Haji remembered how he had made a point to be present at the square when she was stoned to death. After the deed, he had remained with her to make sure that when she breathed her last breath she was not alone. The recollection of the scene brought tears to his eyes.

Farther away, by the polo post, he saw the bent figure of Aqa Shams al-Din. He wore his usual, shabby black turban, black robe, and sandals. His portfolio and cane were placed on the ground, at the bottom of the polo post. The Aqa, from the corner of his tired eyes, he watched the Haji approaching Rajab to present his credentials.

Rajab took the Haji's portfolio and handed it to Tala. Tala examined the documents and nodded her approval. She retained the portfolio except for the tulip that she handed over to Rajab. Following that, she looked at the Haji and smiled. With a nod from Tala, Rajab gave the tulip to the Haji and accompanied him to the gate of the Shah mosque. "Enter the water gently," Rajab instructed, "and proceed down the steps."

With the water up to his waist, the Haji turned and asked Rajab, "Is the gentleman over there by the polo post Aqa Shams al-Din?"

"He is," Rajab replied curtly.

"What is he waiting for?"

"For another miracle," Rajab replied. Then, pointing to a spot on the horizon, added, "Keep your eyes on that spot and proceed! The river will take you to your destination."

As the Haji moved down the river, he sank deeper and deeper. The last thing he heard was, "Keep on walking! Go in peace!"

He walked gingerly, looking at the white wilted tulip petals floating on the surface of the water. Then, just at the moment when he was worried that he might drown, the bottom fell and he became submerged. To his surprise, however, he did not feel like a drowning person. To the contrary, he felt comfortable as if he was floating in the air. With his eyes closed and holding tightly to the tulip, he sank deeper and deeper towards the bottom of the abyss.

Upon touching the water, the tulip had become lucent and was lighting up the surrounding area as far as the eye could see. Looking up, as he drifted down, the Haji saw a marvelous rainbow of colors created by the rays emanating from the tulip and reaching the translucent surface. Looking down, he saw the outline of the snow-capped Mount Damavand emerging from the depth. His whole life, from the moment of his birth in the river valleys of the Zagros Mountains amid fields of up-side-down tulips, to his days in the theological school in Qom, to this incredible moment of drifting freely down towards the peak of Mount Alborz, flashed before his eyes. Surprisingly, unlike the apprehension that he felt at the moment when he was approaching the abyss, he felt serene. He was ready for his final judgment.

The End

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Glossary

Abadeh

a town halfway between Isfahan and Shiraz.

Abbas Abad

a district on the northern shore of the Zayanderud river in Isfahan.

Akhund

a preacher; once a term of respect, now slightly depreciatory.

Ali Qapu

a splendid administrative and residential palace; part of the Shah *Meydan* complex.

Amirza

Vulgar pronunciation for *aqā mirza*” (see “*aqā*” and “*mirza*”)

Amr-e be Ma'ruf

Promotion of virtue

Aqa

originally meaning elder brother in Turkish. In modern Persian, the term denotes a gentleman; mister, sir. After the 1979 Revolution the Ayatollah Khomeini is referred to as the “*Aqa*.”

Araq

a strong brand of home-made vodka much liked by Iranians.

Ased

vulgar pronunciation for *aqā seyyed* (see *aqā* and *seyyed*)

Asheykh also ***Ashekh***

vulgar pronunciation for *aqā sheykh* (see *aqā* and *sheykh*)

Atashgah

the site, near Isfahan, of the ruins of an ancient Zoroastrian fire temple built on a relatively high hill.

Baha'i

a member of the Baha'i faith; a follower of Baha'ullah, who advocated universal brotherhood of man and legal equality between men and women.

Bamiyeh

saffron-flavored fried pastry.

Behdin

a believer in the best religion, i.e., the religion of Zoroaster; Zoroastrian.

Bichareh

poor. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, this term was replaced with the Arabic term *mustaz'af*.

Caravanserai

stopping place, where merchants spent the night under the protection of the town's watchman.

Chador

a veil worn by Iranian women. It covers their entire body. The *chador* ceased to be fashionable during the Pahlavi era (1925-1979). After the Islamic revolution, it made a strong comeback. Today, black *chadors* constitute the dresscode of the pious and God-fearing women of the Islamic Republic.

Chahar-Lang

see the Lurs

Chaharbagh

a boulevard divided into upper (*bala*) and lower (*pa'in*) chaharbaghs by the Zayanderud river. The boulevard constituted the western boundary of the palace complex built by the Safavid monarchs (see Siyosepol).

Chaharsu-ye Shiraziha

an open market in Isfahan originally established and operated by the Shirazi emigrants to the city.

Chelcheraq

a chandelier; a proper name based on the terms *chehel* (forty) and *cheraq* (lamp).

Christian

a Nazarene. Here it refers to the Christian who decapitated the third Shi'ite imam, Imam al-Hussein, after his defeat in the Battle of Karbala.

Communal Prayer

the Friday prayer, offered in common in the mosque.

Fanusiyān

a name based on the term *fanus* or lighthouse.

Fars

Arabized version of Pars; a province in the south of Iran. In ancient times, this province included the seat of the Persian government; the entire realm was identified with this province which the ancient Greeks referred to as Parsa. The terms Persia and Persian in modern Western languages are derived from Parsa. The language of Iran, Farsi, is also related to the same semantic complex.

Fereydan

an administrative unit west of Isfahan; it includes the town of Daran and the villages of Ashgerd and Damaneh.

Friday

Sabbath; the day of communal worship and rest. Saturday is the first working day of the week.

Gabr

Zoroastrian; Iranians who refused to submit to the Islamic *Shari'a* law.

Gabrabad

a district in the suburbs of Isfahan, previously inhabited by Zoroastrians.

Gavkhuni

salt marshes about fifty miles southeast of Isfahan wherein the Zayanderud river ends.

Gorgi

a proper noun based on the term *gorg* or wolf. (It should be mentioned that dogs are shunned by the Muslims. Anyone who touches a dog is required to ritually wash his or her hands seven times.)

Haft-Lang

see the Lurs

Haji Aqa

vulgar pronunciation for *aqā haji* (see *aqā* and *Haji*)

Haji

a Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. The pilgrimage is made in the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar; it is performed on the seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth days of that month. Feast of the sacrifice is held on the tenth. A child born on the day of the feast of the sacrifice is automatically given the title *Haji*. The title, however, is nominal. It lacks the religious distinction of the title acquired through piety and performance and

completion of the pilgrimage. The actual *Haji* title cannot be inherited or transferred to another person.

Halal

That which is allowed by *Shari'a* law.

Haram

That which is not permitted by *Shari'a* law and the performance of which is punishable.

Imam

a religious leader; in Shi'ite Islam, one of the twelve saints descending from the line of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad.

Imamzadeh (lit., offspring of an *Imam*)

a minor shrine wherein a descendant of an *Imam* is buried.

Isfahan

popularized as *nesf-e jahan* or half the world, the city of Isfahan served as the capital of Iran during the Seljuq and Safavid dynasties. As a result, today, Isfahan offers the traveler, as well as the scholar, a most remarkable array of ancient and medieval fire temples, bridges, tombs, mosques, and residential palaces.

Ithna 'Ashari

Twelver Shi'ism, the largest branch of Shi'a Islam.

Jeziyeh

tribute; tax, especially such as was paid by Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians who refused to convert to Islam.

Jolfa (properly New Jolfa)

an Armenian town on the southern shore of the Zayanderud river—Isfahan is on the northern shore.

Kal

Vulgar, short form for *Karbala'i* (see *Karbala'i*)

Karbala'i

title of one who has made a pilgrimage to *Karbala* in present-day Iraq.

Khaju

a magnificent bridge on the eastern flank of the Safavid palace complex. This bridge connected the city proper with the Zoroastrian quarters (Gabrabad) on the southern shore of the river (cf., Jolfa and Siyosepol).

Khamush

a proper name based on the term *khamush* meaning extinguished.

Khan

a (Turkish) title affixed after a person's first name, e.g., Hushang Khan.

Khuzestan

a western province of Iran that includes the fertile plain of Khuzestan, as well as most of the Iranian oil fields.

Kohne

ancient; old; name of an ancient district in Isfahan (*kohne meydan*).

Kuhrang

site of the Kuhrang tunnel; this mountainous region of the Zagros range is inhabited by sedentary as well as nomadic Bakhtiyari tribes (see the Lurs).

Lurs

the education director uses the term "Lur" in a general sense. He lumps the sixty or so Lur tribes of southwestern Iran together with the somewhat more numerous Bakhtiyari tribes who live to the southeast of the Lurs. The Haft-Lang, and the smaller sedentary Chahar-Lang groups, to which he refers, belong to the Bakhtiyari confederation.

Madreseh

theological school in which the *Qur'an* and the *sunna* are taught and discussed. Outwardly the *madreseh* may resemble a mosque, but it lacks most of the distinctive features of a mosque. Instead it has small rooms in which students studying Islamic theology live and work.

Mahdi

the twelfth *Imam* of the Shi'ites expected to return in order to purify Islam.

Mahfel

a place of meeting. In Baha'i circles, this term refers to weekly gatherings in which the faithful pray and socialize.

Malaki

cotton shoes with either cloth or rubber soles.

Mash'al al-Din

a proper name based on the terms *mash'al* (torch, flame) and *din* (religion)

Mavali

non-Arab converts to Islam. In the early days of Islam, converts in Persia, Central Asia, etc. were treated as second-class citizens because they were not of Arab descent.

Meydan

a public square, an open field (see the Shah *Meydan*)

Mirza

Scribe

Mo'aviyyeh

the founder of the Ummayed line of Caliphs. Yazid's commanders defeated and killed Imam Hussein in Karbala. Then they took his family to Mo'aviyyeh's palace in Damascus, as captives (see Mo'aviyyeh's palace).

Mo'aviyyeh's Palace

refers to that portion of a *rowzeh* in which the atrocities that befell the beleaguered descendants of the Prophet are recounted.

Mojtahed

a doctor of Islamic law.

Mullah

A cleric; a learned teacher, or expounder, of the religious law and doctrines of Islam.

Naftchi

a proper name based on the term *naft* (oil), and the Turkish suffix *chi* denoting the performer of an action. Here it refers to one who sells or otherwise handles oil.

Naqsh-e Jahan (square)

same as Shah *Meydan* or Shah square.

Opium Pipe

the opium pipe consists of a ceramic top and a hollow wooden body. The opium is placed on the ceramic top near a small hole. The heat, brought to the opium with a pair of tongs, produces smoke. The smoke is drawn into the mouth through the hole, via the pipe, and is inhaled.

Pisuziyani

a proper name based on the term *pisuz* or tallow-burner.

Qalyun

water-pipe or hookah. It is an instrument for smoking tobacco. It consists of a base filled with water and a hollow, wooden body that sits on the base. Tobacco is placed in a ceramic container and fixed on the top of the body. Fire is placed on the tobacco in the ceramic container. The smoke, before it is inhaled, passes through the cool water.

Qesas

retaliation—the cornerstone of Islamic criminal law.

Qom

a religious center between Tehran and Isfahan.

Qormeh Sabzi

a stew containing green vegetables and meat.

Qur'an

the divinely inspired sacred book of the Muslims. It is written in the Arabic language.

Ramazan

same as Ramadhan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar during which the fast is observed. It is also the month during which the holy *Qur'an* was brought to the Prophet of Islam by the angel Gabriel.

Reza Shah

the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty; reigned from 1925 until 1941, when he was forced to abdicate.

Rowzeh

a garden; The description of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and the other martyrs of Karbala. These descriptions and eulogies are taken from a compendium entitled the *Rowzatosh-shohada* or the garden of the martyrs. The term *rowzeh* is an abbreviated form of that title.

Sa'adat Abad

the southern flank of the Safavid royal complex—now a relatively deserted district of Isfahan.

Safavid

a dynasty of Persian kings that reigned in Iran from about A.D. 1500 until the fall of the dynasty to the Afghans in 1722.

Sahari

food eaten before dawn during the fasting month of *Ramazan*.

Sassanian or Sassanid

a dynasty of ancient Iranian monarchs that ruled from AD 226 until the demise of the dynasty in 658.

Seljuq

a dynasty of Persian kings that reigned in Iran from AD 1037 to 1187.

Seraj

Lamp; light

Seyyed

a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad, recognized by the black color of his turban.

Seyyed Mir Mohammad

a religious shrine in Shiraz adjacent to the Shah-e Cheraq

Shah-e Cheraq

a religious shrine in Shiraz.

Shah Meydan (same as *Naqsh-e Jahan*)

A large rectangular plaza that includes the Shah mosque, the Sheykh Lotfollah mosque, the Ali Qapu, and the entrance to Isfahan's covered bazaar. The *Shah Meydan* constitutes the northern flank of the sixteenth-century Safavid palace complex straddling the Zayanderud river.

Shah Mosque

also referred to as the Royal mosque, the Shah mosque is one of the most impressive structures constructed by Safavid architects. It has four minarets, a lofty turquoise dome, and a most imposing facade.

Shahrestan Bridge (same as Marnun bridge)

an ancient bridge (some three kilometers west of the Siyosepol bridge) believed to have been built by the Sassanids and, later repaired by the Seljuqs. Similar bridges are built by Sassanid monarchs elsewhere in the country.

Sham' al-Ma'ali

a proper name based on the terms *sham'* (candle) and *'ali* (supreme).

Shams al-Din

a proper name based on the term *shams* or the sun and *din* (religion).

Shemr

the general who slew Imam Hussein in Karbala.

Sheykh

a title of respect used before the name of learned men.

Sheykh Lotfollah Mosque

a private chapel in which the Safavid royal house worshiped. It is located opposite the Ali Qapu palace in the Shah square.

Shi'ite

a member of one of the two sects of Islam. The Shi'ites consider *Ali*, the Prophet's son-in-law, as the first *Imam* and successor of the Prophet. The members of the other sect, the Sunnis, do not believe in *Imams* and do not build shrines. Iran became a Shi'ite nation after the Safavids came to power in the 16th century.

Sighe

a marriage of convenience; a temporary marriage usually blessed by a *mullah*.

Siyosepol Bridge

a magnificent bridge on the western flank of the Safavid royal complex. The Chaharbaq boulevard joins the Armenian town of New Jolfa to Isfahan proper.

Sizdahbedar

the thirteenth day of the Iranian New Year festival (the festival begins on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year (*Charshanbe Suri*) and continues until *sizdahbedar* on which day the Persians go out of doors, partly for pleasure, and partly to frustrate the inauspiciousness of the thirteenth day.

Sofreh

a tablecloth. The *sofreh* is usually spread on the floor at mealtime. People sit around the *sofreh* and eat (mostly with their hands).

Ta'arof

the word *ta'arof* is widely used. It consists of several forms of compliments,

practiced habitually by all Persians. The main forms are ceremonial greeting, feigned courtesy, asking guests to help themselves with food, etc. These gestures, however, are often half-hearted and are generally made to make the interlocutor fall at home and comfortable.

Tabriz

city in northwestern Iran. Capital of the primarily Turkish-speaking province of Azerbaijan.

Tala

a proper name based on the term *tala* (gold).

Tamerlane

(properly, Teymur the lame) is recalled by Isfahanis as the savage invader who built a 'tower of skulls' in the city square, using the heads of seventy thousand Isfahanis.

Taqiyyeh

dissimulation. A doctrine according to which a Shi'ite is allowed to smooth down, or deny, the peculiarities of his religious belief, in order to save himself or herself from religious persecution. For instance, some Shi'ites pass themselves off as Sunnis. Although it is absolutely against their creed, some Baha'is pass themselves off as Shi'ites.

Tuman

a monetary unit worth ten *rials*.

Vahabi

Not to be confused with Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia. *Vahabi* is a vulgar pronunciation for Baha'i.

Zargar
goldsmith

Zayanderud

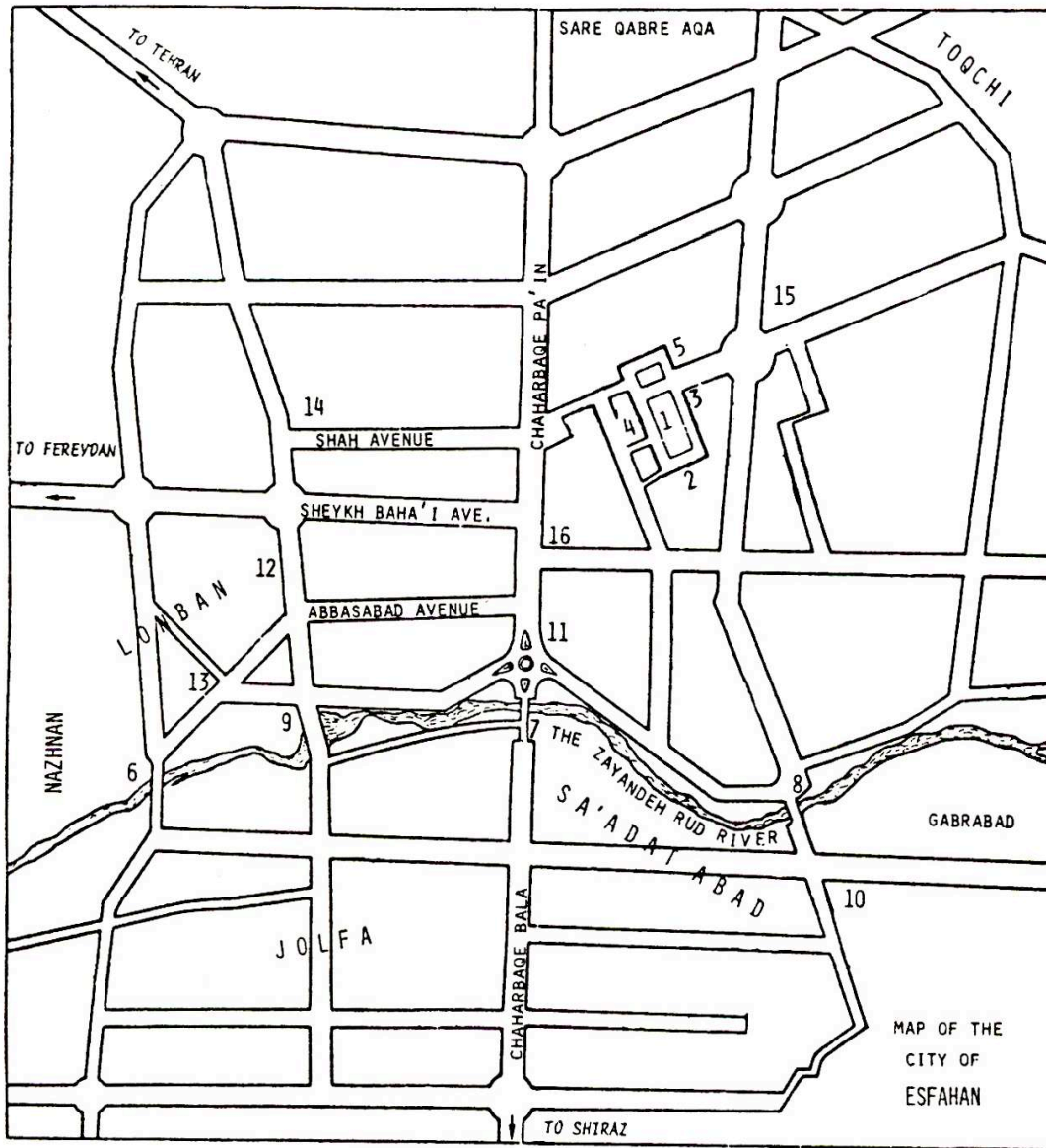
name of a river in Isfahan (see Gavkhuni).

Zendiq

an atheist; a fire worshiper; a member of the communities that refused to accept Islam.

Zulbiya

pretzel-shaped sweet fritters prepared with baking powder, rose water, flour, and vegetable oil.



- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. Naqshe Jahan square | 9. Metal bridge |
| 2. Shah mosque | 10. Tomb of the poet Vahh |
| 3. Sheykh Lotf Allah mosque | 11. the Statue |
| 4. Ali Qapu | 12. Lonban mosque |
| 5. entrance to Esfahan's covered bazaar | 13. Pol Shiri |
| 6. Shahrestan bridge | 14. Chaharsuye Shiraziha |
| 7. Siyosepol | 15. Kohne meydan |
| 8. Khaju bridge | 16. Chaharbaq Theological School |

Map of the city of Isfahan

