
ROSES AND NIGHTINGALES

There are times when I dream of Shiraz. It happens whenever it rains in London, Paris, or any other city I may be in. How can I forget this city where cypresses stand tall, straight, and dense against a blue, cloudless sky; where the roses, splendid and fragrant, are serenaded by the nightingales? Then I remember him. As a child I was entirely under his spell. Every morning, after performing his ablutions, uttering his Muslim prayers, and shaving, my paternal grandfather would ask me to sit beside him on the Qashqai rug and choose a book from the pile on the floor. Excited, I would rummage through his collection, discarding each and every volume except for one superbly bound illustrated copy of the *Shahnameh*, the epic Book of Kings.

Containing sixty thousand verses and written a thousand years ago by the immortal Iranian poet Ferdowsi, this masterpiece had taken thirty years to compose. Every line was meant to evoke national pride in Iran's past glories before the Arab conquest of Persia. As I opened the book, my young eyes would devour the miniature pictures. Here and there I would spot a king or a prince seated on a magnificent horse. There were queens and princesses in silk robes and jewels. On another page a brave warrior battled with a horned monster. Elsewhere I marveled at doomed lovers drinking wine from

cups of gold, carousing in a rose-filled garden under the silver moon and a flowing stream.

Still in his white cotton pajamas, Mohammad Kadivar would put on his thick glasses and take me on a magical literary adventure. Mesmerized by my grandfather's voice, which was husky with the pathos and power of the verses he recited, I would listen intently as he recounted the mythical tales and rattled off the names of the proud and good King Jamshid and Zahak, the evil prince who banished him; the daring blacksmith Kaveh and his battle to save Persia from dark forces. I heard the names of the colossal warrior Rostam and his son Sohrab. There was also a phoenix-like bird called Simorgh who could carry a camel or an elephant on its giant wings. My grandfather always spoke in Farsi so that his grandson, a Persian–French boy from Minneapolis, would one day understand the meaning of being an Iranian. Barely four years old, I was instantly drawn to all those vivid images.

The Persian word for 'grandfather' is 'Baba Bozourgh,' but from the very beginning the middle-aged man reading to me was called Papi Kouchik. It would be years before I understood and absorbed the rich heritage of my country. There were other books too, with roses and nightingales painted on their covers honoring the eternal poets. Typical of his generation, my grandfather was a devotee of the Shirazi bards: Hafez and Saadi, treasured for their celebration of earthly pleasures. He could quote abundant verses by heart. To impress his wife he would scribble one of his latest poems on paper, folding it carefully before asking me to deliver it to my unsuspecting grandmother at breakfast time, when the family sat down at the table on the veranda.

An Iranian breakfast, or *sobhaneh*, as my grandmother called it, was a simple affair: warm flatbread, butter, quince jam, honey, walnuts, feta cheese, mint leaves, and tea. My grandfather always sipped his black tea in a tiny glass with a lump of sugar between his teeth, and I tried to imitate him. Then he would wink at me. That, I knew, was the signal to pass the note to my grandmother. Tugging gently at her dress, I would sheepishly hand her the secret message. Mamie Kouchik would blush. Shaking her head in mock exasperation she would roll her eyes

and declare: “God save us . . . when will this old man act his age?” Suppressing a giggle, she would put away the love poem in her purse.

Strange that I never saw my grandparents kiss. Instead Mamie Kouchik would hand me a pink rose she had cut from our small garden or write a few humorous lines for her husband and whisper: “Go give this to Agha joon.” Papi Kouchik would read the note and crack up laughing, and reward me with a sticky pistachio nougat he kept in his breast pocket. These loving exchanges often masked the sadness and regret my grandparents had for having left Shiraz so many years ago. As residents of modern Tehran, a rapidly growing metropolis laden with a vast population, heavy traffic, and smog, they appreciated Shiraz for her perfect climate—high elevation, invigorating air, dazzling sun, and cool night breezes from the purple-tinted Zagros Mountains rimming the city. Nobody really disagreed with them.

That summer of 1966, my Iranian grandparents had come to Shiraz to help my thirty-six-year-old father, a western-trained surgeon, and his French wife and two sons to settle down in their rented house. Mamie Kouchik, an olive-skinned woman with a penetrating stare and wrinkled face, had volunteered to initiate my mother into Persian life and was unable to separate herself from my baby brother. My grandfather often took me out on his daily morning walk. Holding his hand I would step out of the two-story house located on Behbahani Street and head down with my grandfather to Ferdowsi Street.

On the leafy Rudaki Street we would stroll beneath the trees, relishing the quiet neighborhood and the old, graceful buildings. There was a kiosk on a street corner where Papi Kouchik often stopped for a few minutes to glance at the newspaper headlines. Usually, if I behaved, Papi Kouchik would treat me to a *faloodeh* ice cream or buy me chewing gum from one of the street urchins. On the shaded sidewalk along the lengthy Zand Boulevard we admired the boutiques and arcades, modern hotels, bookshops, cafés, and movie theaters with names like Capri and Persepolis.

Once we took a taxi to the zoo and watched the caged peacocks, monkeys, and a sleepy lion. There was also a circus performer dressed as a Persian Hercules in a leopard-skin outfit who impressed children and their parents by bending iron bars. Further down on

a hill, commanding an entrancing view of the city, was a splendid garden housing the renovated tomb of the poet Hafez. My grandfather enjoyed bringing me here, where birdsong and the hum of insects filled my senses. The dust and scent of roses tickled my nose. More like a pleasure park than a burial ground, this well-kept garden attracted people of all ages. They came to recite sonnets, sing, and drink, dancing to the sound of music.

In the Hafezieh we would cool down in the shade of an open-air dome held up by eight columns. My grandfather would open a small book of Hafez's poems and murmur a few lines while one hand caressed the marble tombstone of that great wise man who lay below. I did not know at the time that the name Hafez means "He who has memorized the Quran by heart." Born in 1320, Hafez wrote five hundred verses in his lifetime. Twice he was chased out of Shiraz by the Muslim orthodoxy for being a corrupting influence on the youth. Long after his death in 1388 he remained a worldly and enduring symbol of love and free thinking.

Behind the poet's resting place was an orange grove and a well-kept cemetery. After offering prayers for the souls of the forty mystics, scholars, and other notables of Shiraz who lay buried in the sacred ground, Papi Kouchik would take me to another spectacular garden.

The locals and tourists who came to this place liked to pose for pictures in front of the Saadi Mausoleum, a white octagonal structure designed by the French architect André Godard. The tombstone of this humanist poet was of polished marble and embellished by Iranian artisans with famous verses. There was also a rectangular pool where on my first visit I threw a rial coin at the fish, wishing that my grandfather would live forever. On the way back we stopped at a bakery to buy our oven-baked bread with names like *barbari*, *sangak*, *taftoon*, and *lavash*, samples hanging from nails. From there we went to the popular Rudaki market where Papi Kouchik selected the best fruits and vegetables from the stalls before we hurried back home to avoid the invading heat.

At noon, the family gathered upstairs in the dining room and tucked into a Persian feast prepared in our dark kitchen by Roghayeh, a cheerful young woman my grandmother had brought with her from

Tehran. In a muted atmosphere we filled our bellies with saffron rice, kebabs, and delicious stews such as *fesenjan*, *bademjan*, and *kboresh* *ghormeh sabzi*. There were bowls of yogurt seasoned with garlic, raisins, and shredded cucumbers. I loved the crispy *tadiq* rice scraped from the bottom of the pot. In the heat of the summer we quenched our thirst and washed down our food with ice-cold water poured from glass pitchers. Later, while Roghayeh cleared the dishes, everyone disappeared into their rooms for their afternoon siestas.

Unable to do the same, my mother would find a corner in the house to peruse her magazines or write long letters to her parents in Paris describing her experiences. In the late afternoons, when the sun's rays gently faded away, the entire household would migrate to the courtyard next to a patch of lawn and a sad-looking rosebush. Roghayeh would serve us tea in tiny silver *estekans* while I leaned happily on a square cushion with my grandfather, who would hand me an apricot or peel me a large, juicy orange with his pocketknife. Other times we enjoyed slices of watermelon and sipped refreshing *sharbat*, drinks made of crushed ice and syrup. We usually sat on garden chairs and reclined on wooden benches covered with tribal kilims.

My grandfather loved telling stories. He constantly enthralled us by sharing memories of a way of life that no longer existed. Mamie Kouchik would dry her tears with the corner of her white chador. Other times she produced old photographs from her handbag. I would stare at them, fascinated and blissfully unaware of their significance, even if I realized that they evoked a different age. I thrived on such moments when everyone around me conversed in Persian, French, and English. Like all families we had our own folklore, repeated and embellished until it became part of the tapestry of our lives.