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## Letters to the Editor

Dear readers;

I am sure you often come across writings that have misstated facts regarding the culture and history of Persia, Iran. Do not ignore them. Kindly contact *Persian Heritage (Mirass-e-Iran)* to correct any discrepancies. Our editorial board will then research the item and advise the original writer. All nationalities have a duty to protect its culture and history. Furthermore we must all assure that the coming generations are being taught fact not fiction.

Dear editor,

I am a "second generation"  
Iranian American. My father is  
Iranian, my mother is American. I  
know a lot about my mother's  
background, but virtually nothing  
about my father's. I try to ask him,  
but the only thing he says is, "You  
are an Iranian." Because of this, I  
am blind to the Persian Culture.  
What does it mean to be an  
Iranian?

Parisa Zangeneh - Wallingford, PA  
13 years old

Dear editor,

I received the third issue of your  
magazine. I enjoyed reading it. It  
must be very difficult to publish a  
Persian publication in America. I  
am also enclosing Chapter One of my  
personal memoirs which I have  
written for my children. If you find  
Thanks, if interesting, publish it.

Sincerely  
Cyrus Farhmandi

Thank you for your Winter 96  
issue. As usual, the contents are  
thought provoking and well written.

My special thanks are directed to  
your cover and art. Each issue is  
different and special with the latest  
beautifully reflecting symbolically  
the end of the year when we reflect  
upon the passage of time and look  
forward to the birth of a new year  
while still daring to once more  
invest our hopes and dreams for  
the future in our children.

Mildred Firooznia, NJ

Dear editor;

Could you please inform your  
readers if Pardis Ansari a writer of  
an article in the winter issue is  
related to Mr. Ansari another  
writer in the magazine. If so,  
might I suggest to Ms. Ansari that  
she review her father's credentials.  
It seems he received quite an  
education from a country her  
parents felt necessary to flee in the  
name of offspring education.

Ali Adel, France

Are we that ungrateful? Have  
we who have immigrated to the  
United States lost all our values by  
being so shamefully rude to our  
host country? I am referring to

the article of Ms. Pardis Ansari. I was first taken back by her classification of the American media as being dishonest. Has she read the papers printed in Iran? The media may be politically slanted (and I add quickly that this is not a blanket statement and does not apply to all media) but it is not dishonest.

Secondly, I question her comparison of the American household to the Iranian household. I am much older than Ms. Ansari but clearly remember the homes of my American friends as I grew up. They would also do their homework when they came home from school. They would prepare the family evening meals because both parents needed to work to provide for the family, and they also watched the evening news for family discussion later that evening. I also remember clearly the households of my Iranian friends growing up in America at the same time. Some of them were wealthy enough not to understand the word "chore", since they had household help to do those tasks.

In my opinion the most disparaging statement she makes is that about her mother leaving everything in Iran in an effort to provide her children with a better education.

All of these statements are quite powerful and quite a perception for a thirteen years old. This suggests to me that Ms. Ansari's parents taught her to hate at a very early age.

I ask you Ms. Ansari if upon your completion of your college education you will return to Iran or will you continue to suck the richness of this country.

A. Mandarin, Texas

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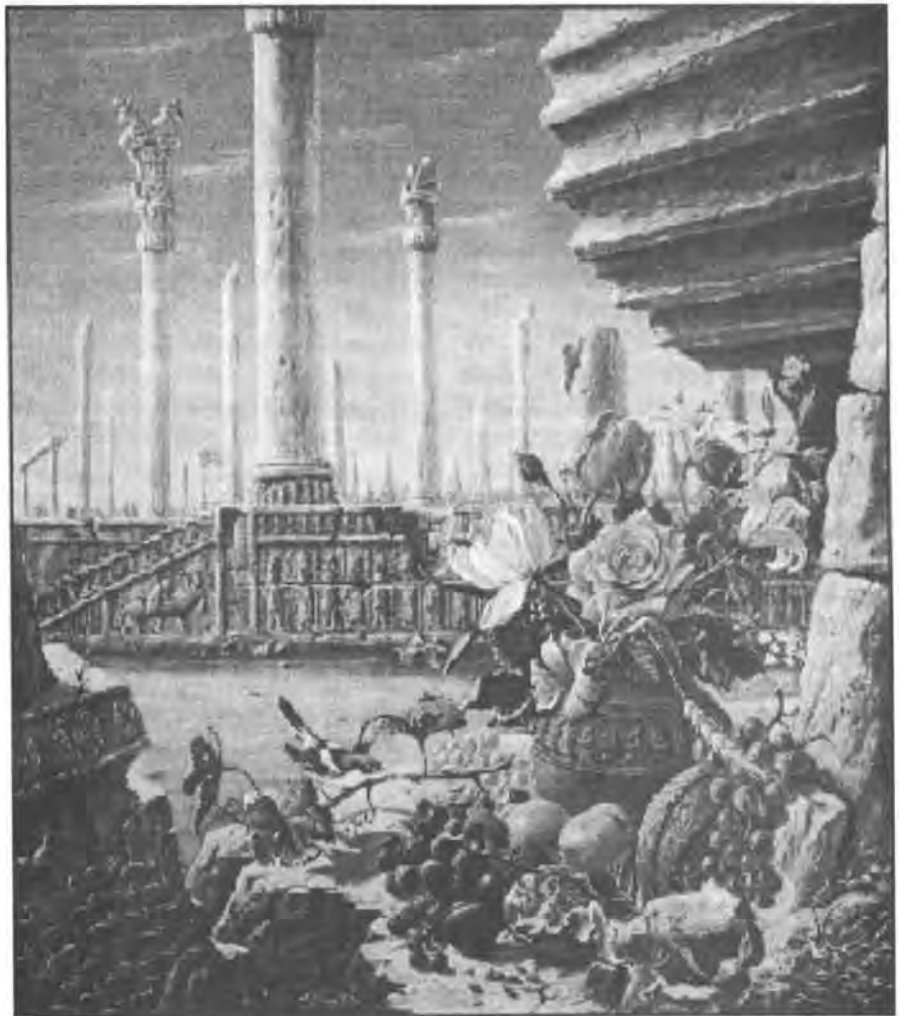
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# BABAK PEJMAN - ARTIST -

A Romantic View of the Past... through the Eyes of the Present

Foreword by Debbie Hagan  
Interview by Negar Anna Ahkami

*Blending realism, impressionism and fantasy, Babak Pejman's paintings offer a modern look at the ancient ruins of the Mediterranean and Middle East. Fragments of stone temples, majestic villas and overgrown gardens, some of which no longer exist, are painted in direct, clear-cut detail. Pejman relies upon his vivid imagination to rebuild these relics showing the impact centuries of wind, nature and man's own destruction have had upon them. Using bright, contemporary, luminescent colors, viewers are welcomed into such lush yet forgotten places as Persepolis, Babylon and Pompeii.*



Born in 1962, Pejman spent his early childhood in Vienna. He then moved to Iran before settling in the United States in 1976. Pejman received a bachelors of arts degree from Rutgers College and later attended the New York Art students League. He also studied art and painting with renowned Russian artist Anatoly Ivanov.

*Persepolis in Spring*

Looking at the past, in Pejman's work, is always through the eyes of the present. As in "Spring Time in Persepolis", a gray-stone ruined palace with worn, yet richly detailed carvings is contrasted with a vivid still life in the foreground. Dew specked flowers, ripe fruit and a colorful bird perched on grape vine coax viewers in to relax and savor the architectural detailing

*By: Babak Pejman*

and rich craftsmanship that has been neglected, just like the great structures themselves.

Since his first gallery show in 1994, Pejman has received national and international attention. "Spring Time in Persepolis" was chosen to be made into a jacquard loom tapestry in France and is available by catalog through

*Design Toscano, Chicago. Wall-size murals are being published by ScanDecor, in Sweden, and Modern Art Editions, Nyack, N.Y. is publishing a series of graphics. Pejman's originals and limited editions are available through Pejman Gallery, Short Hills, N.J. and Richard Danskin Galleries, Palm Beach, Fla.*

*In the following interview, Pejman offers readers of Persian Heritage insights into his distinctive style and inspiration.*

**How do you describe your style? What artists have influenced you?**

I would describe my style as "Romantic Realism". I try to create a romantic mood in my paintings by showing beauty and solitude. The essence of my style is to portray an imaginary setting that a viewer would love to visit, with every spec of its detail. I purposely refrain from putting people in my paintings. If no one is there, you are free to imagine yourself within the painting. I also deliberately heighten the colors and details of the scenes to make the experience more intense.

I am influenced by European artists of the 16th to 19th centuries. My art is based on a return to the standards set by these artists which demand the knowledge of composition, perspective, color, three dimensional form, and anatomy. But more specifically, artists such as Alma Tadema, Maxfield Parrish, and Van Huysum have had strong influences on my style. Also, even though I paint in a realistic style, when it comes to the choice of colors to paint the effects and light, shade, and

atmosphere, I am deeply influenced by impressionistic artists in general.

**Have you actually been to many of the places that you paint or do you prefer just keeping the subjects you paint a distant fantasy?**

Most of my paintings to this point have been based on imaginary scenes and settings. A few exceptions are when I use an existing place such as Persepolis as a backdrop for a painting. A place such as Babylon, for instance, does not even exist any more. Therefore, to paint the type of subject matter as I do, being on location is not always an option. Also, part of my aim in painting is to design or create scenery - not merely copy it.

I think that a lot of artists can go to historic places, set up their easel and paint. With that kind of approach, all that can be achieved is a rendering of scenery which to me is empty and unimaginative. I am trying to go a step beyond that.

**Are your paintings of Persepolis partly based on your own nostalgia of Persepolis or based on your interest in the history?**

My paintings of Persepolis are based on my nostalgic view of Persepolis. Mainly, because the ruins remind us of one of the world's greatest ancient civilizations, before that of the Roman empire, which now happens to be neglected in terms



*Babak Pejman*

of its significance in history. I have talked to many cultured world-travelers recently who all know of such architectural sites as Acropolis, but think that Persepolis is in Greece also. They are surprised to hear that it is situated in Iran. So part of my nostalgia for Persepolis has to do with how neglected and forgotten this monumental site is today. In my painting "Spring Time in Persepolis" I try to portray this feeling.

**Your scenes and stylistic influences are very European. What, if any, influence does Persian art have on your paintings?**

I paint in a classical European style because I feel that this style enables me best in expressing myself by manipulating a two dimensional surface to create the illusion of three dimensions. But I think that my exposure to

Persian art through out my life has influenced my designs and choice of colors. I use a great deal of jewel tones in my paintings, especially in my still life paintings. So, while my style may be 17th to 19th century European, the colors I use are more representative of the ones you find in a Persian carpet.

**What are the artistic roots in your family? Did you grow up around art, and what inspired you as a kid?**

Both of my parents are musicians. When I was growing up as a kid, my father was composing ballets, operas, and motion picture soundtracks and my mother played the Harp in the Vienna Philharmonic and Tehran Symphony orchestras. So, I was surrounded by classical music while growing up. That exposure inspired me to be creative both in art and music. When I was in High School, I composed a few orchestral pieces that were performed by the School Orchestra and Marching Band. And following that, in College I formed a Band and produced a record. But eventually I came to the realization that my painting skills and talents far outweighed by musical abilities. So I decided to stick with playing the piano just for relaxation while concentrating my remaining efforts on the art business and painting.

**When did you start painting, and when did you discover your talent?**

I started to paint when I was seven years old. Even then I used a great deal of detail in my paintings. In High School I produced a number of significant paintings on canvas and won a

few awards. But despite my art instructor's advice, I decided not to enter the art field. Instead, I pursued an education and a career in business and computer software. So, for a period of nine years after graduating from High School I did not touch a paint brush. But some how faith led me to open up an art gallery as a family business which in turn sparked my interest in painting again. Since then, I have attended the New York Art Students League on a part time basis and studied with two world renowned Russian artists: Anatoly Ivanov and Ovanes Berberian.

**You say your paintings are often based on history. What do you like about the past?**

Every thing that we see today is based on the past. The Greek, Persian, and Roman civilizations created architectural designs that we use today for virtually every site that we build. Also, in terms of fine arts, the Europeans developed the art of painting, sculpture, and music to perfection in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. I believe that the combination of technical ability and aesthetic awareness enjoyed by the artists of that era has not and will never be equaled. So, every thing that is to come from now on is a derivative of the past, thus making it very difficult to create a truly unique style today. That is why so many twentieth century artists are celebrated, not on the basis of the quality of their work, but for their uniqueness.

**Do you also find beauty in the present and what is modern?**

Of course. I very much enjoy living in the modern world. I actually think that man-kind has

never had it this good. Most people take for granted how technology and modern medicine have made our lives more enjoyable than ever before. I also admire certain modern architecture and furniture.

However, when it comes to the fine arts, with certain exceptions, I think that there is a great deal of junk that is referred to as art today. I believe that even if you want to be an abstract painter today, you still have to study the basics and be able to paint a classical composition before you start splashing paint on the canvas. When you study the careers of artists like Picasso or DeKooning, you will find that their early works were very classical. Later, they decided to break away from the technical boundaries, and that is what gives merit to their modern works. But a lot of art students today want to take the ultimate shortcut by starting to paint abstract. To me there is no merit in that kind of work. Technical knowledge and skill are still important elements in art.

**Your paintings allow us to travel in time and space. Are they also a way for you to escape to those places? Do you personally dream of living in another place and era?**

In some ways, my paintings do allow me to escape to these places. Another way of putting it is that my paintings reflect my dreams of the ideal places for me to visit. But the key words here are "escape" and "visit". I prefer living in the present.

**Your art work shows that you have a very romantic nature, sensitivity to detail and nature, and a poetic imagination that borders as mystical. And yet you also have a very pragmatic**

**business side that enables you to sell your work. Have both of these very different sides always been a part of your personality?**

I think that I have always possessed these two different sides. In my paintings I try to focus on the positive and show my appreciation for the beauty in the world by being poetic and sensitive. But, I still have to be able to sell my work. I don't think of these two different sides as opposing, but rather complementary. Today, in the midst of fierce competition in the art market, it is very difficult to stand out and be successful. As an artist you have to know exactly what the market wants, and be able to produce works that fall in the mainstream while maintaining uniqueness and originality. My aim in painting is to produce works that are unique, artistic, sophisticated, and in the mean time appealing to the public.

**But wouldn't that make your work commercial?**

"Commercial" is a tricky word! Would you think of Monet's work as commercial? Probably not. After all, they are in major museums and sell in auctions for millions of dollars. However, today, in the commercial poster market, Monet's posters outsell any other artist's. Does that make his work commercial?

There is a misconception out there today that if you are a commercial artist, meaning that if you paint for the market, then you are not a true artist. That is partially because there is so much junk commercial art in the market today. But if you go back in history, some of the greatest art works were commissioned. Michelangelo,

for instance, was commissioned by the Medici Family, while Boucher was commissioned by the French aristocracy. As a matter of fact, most of the world's greatest masterpieces in the history of art were created by artists who were supported by and painted for the wealthy. So, I think it is very hard to separate art and the art market. But, you don't have to sacrifice the quality and artistic nature of your work when you paint commercially. It is very difficult... but possible.

Now lets look at the flip side of this: An artist paints what his heart desires without giving any thought to its demand. If no one likes his art enough to buy it... then, what value do you put on the art besides self-appreciation for the artist. I think that a true artist creates works for other people to enjoy. If he is not able to move the viewer or stir some emotion, then he hasn't done his job.

**You mentioned uniqueness. What do you think makes your art unique?**

When you look at the individual elements in my works, you find nothing unique. But, yet the overall works are very recognizable and are not mistaken for any other artist. I believe that I achieve uniqueness by the way I combine these different elements in conjunction with my use of color. For example, I use floral and fruit still lives in my paintings which have a great deal of 17th century Dutch Flemish influence. But if you look at the Dutch Flemish works, you find that a floral still life composition is only about the still life and is usually in a very dark and morbid setting. In my paintings I make use of these highly developed Dutch still lives, but put them in a sunny

and architectural setting. Also, in terms of the use of light and shadow, I employ colors of a completely different style and era: Impressionism. So even though the elements are very classical, the paintings look somewhat contemporary.

**As we approach the third millennium, do you see any trends developing that may effect the acceptability of your work?**

Looking at the last two decades of the twentieth century, it is very interesting to see how the popularity and rise of abstract art came to a screeching halt by the end of the 80s. The 90s marked a return to classical, traditional, and representational art. I am not saying that abstract art is out. But, I do believe that it has and will continue to loose ground to classical art for some time to come. Take the prominent Victorian artist Alma-Tadema, whose works were selling for up to 30,000 Pounds in the late nineteenth century. In the 1960s, when abstract art was thought to have replaced classical art permanently, galleries were dumping his masterpieces in the \$200 price range. However, recently, two of his pieces fetched \$2.7 million and \$2.5 million at Sotheby's and Christie's art auctions.

There is a revival or renaissance of classical art and architecture which is well underway. And I find it very interesting that as we are approaching the year 2000, in the information age, we have made a full circle back to the classics. And as for my paintings, I feel that the timing couldn't be any better. •

# Shiraz

of

my youth,

1937-1956

*"What makes our heart to beat, is the love of our homeland!"*  
A German Writer.

## Introduction

In 1956, I left Shiraz and went to Tehran to prepare to come to America. In 1957, when I was twenty years old, I came to America to continue my education. I completed my BSCE in 1963, and while working as structural engineer, I completed my MSCE, and later my post graduate studies in the same field. In 1994 I retired with thirty years of services as a registered Structural Engineer. For the past forty years, I have often reviewed the memories of my life. This phenomenon sometimes happens to immigrants who have settled in the U.S.A., with a different cultural backgrounds. On these mental excursions, I see the sights and sense the feelings of the places that I have been, and the experiences I have had. When in September of 1974, my late wife Helga and I, visited Shiraz for four weeks, I did not see and feel the same things as I remembered. Shiraz had grown and changed, it was not in any way the same. Recently my children asked me to write my memories for them. I began by writing about my childhood hometown Shiraz in Iran.

Cyrus Farahmandi

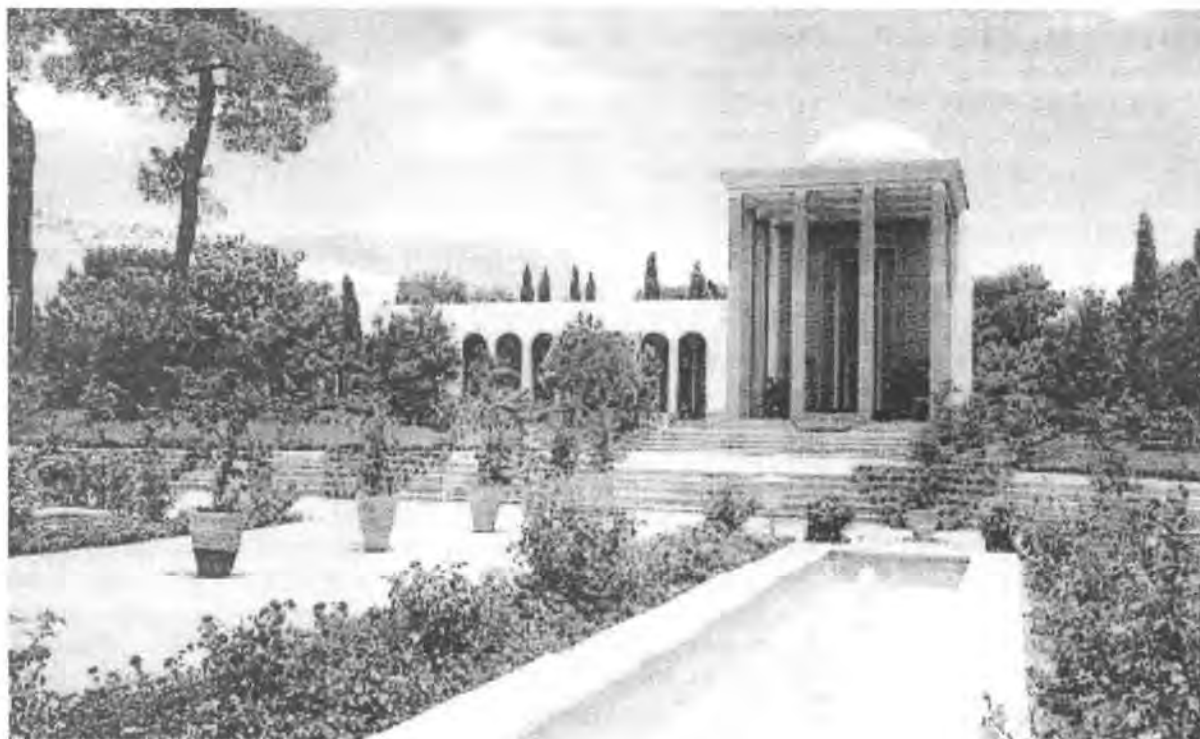
**T**he Shiraz of my youth is very charming. Its charm was in its simplicity, its fresh air, its relaxed and laid back way of life, and its simple and down to earth people. In the folklore of Iran, Shirazis were famous for their simplicity, compassion, big hearts, and their love of poetry.

One of our family's pastimes was to play a game we called "Poetry Game" from memory. In this game one member of the family, usually our Dad, would recite a line of a poetry. Others would take turns and were supposed to recite another line of poetry which began with the letter of the alphabet that the first line ended. Everyone would get in the game. All the poetry we used was from

spiritual and love songs. They reminded us, repeatedly, to be kind, compassionate, and godly. It was like Family Evening Meeting several times a week and several hours long! Usually we played against Dad, who loved poetry, and knew many lines by heart. The game was supposed to end when one side couldn't remember a line that started with the right letter. Our father would even lend us a line to get the game going! We had played this game so often that many of us were a walking quotation book! We always tried to memorize a few more lines for the next game.

We were firmly rooted in our traditional ways. We felt very comfortable with our surroundings. The presence of great-grand parents and their

children and other relatives, warmed our heart, and gave us awareness of our past and hope for future. We believed in God first, and in our parents next. No one could come between us and our parents. We never even dreamed to say intentionally anything that would hurt them. Their wishes were our command! A day did not start right if we didn't say Good Morning to our parents. I still can recall many instances that my older siblings would remind me that I forgot to say Good morning to our parents, and I would turn around and apologetically would say Good Morning!". On New Year's Day, the first thing that we did was to kiss their hand, while they tried to hide it and gave us a hug, and a kiss on our cheeks.



Sa'di's Tomb

Modern technology had not torn the family apart, and robbed us from our traditional ways. Inside the walls of our homes and next to our immediate family, we knew we had privacy. Our home was our haven. We didn't have problems of bugging and eavesdropping. The family members were part-time psychologists and therapists. We often unloaded our minds and hearts to them. They listened carefully and at the end if they could not come up with any solution they tried to ease our pain by saying "don't worry, Insha-Allah (God willing), things will be better soon!" Clearly Shiraz was not a place to have a lucrative counseling business!

We knew our friends, and our enemies. The friends we trusted, the enemies we shunned. Sometimes we had to confront the enemies. After some sparring and shouting each

went their own way and soon things were forgotten. We could even count on the compassion of our enemies. They were not there to destroy us at all costs. There was a limit to what they did. It seemed that the golden rule was seeped into our culture. We never wished evil on others if we didn't want it on ourselves. We never tried to chart the course of other people's lives. We never tried to change anyone's beliefs. We never spied on other people. I never remember my parents ever telling us to say or to act a certain way to irritate certain individuals.

The look of the city itself was simple. I still remember the time that there were only few cars in Shiraz. If we happened to see an automobile, we looked at it with interest. If there was a parked car, a few young men were studying it. If some family acquired an automobile,

everyone knew it. I still remember, as a boy of four or five, standing on the balcony of our home, next to my parents, looking and pointing to a biplane flying over Shiraz for the first time. I still remember the time that if, my mother needed to ask her parents a question, she would fetch a messenger, because our grandparents didn't have a telephone. All the buildings, except a handful, there were one or two-story buildings, others weren't taller than four stories. We did not have smog or traffic jams. The common mode of transportation was with horse drawn carriage. I never heard of drive by shooting and senseless murders. I didn't feel there were any racial tension in our neighborhood. People were not hung up on the color of one's skin. People knew each other. We even knew who the neighborhood beggar was. I remember hearing about a man



who mailed a letter to an individual in a certain street, and wrote on the envelope: "ask the beggar at the corner where the addressee lives!"

We didn't have TV at the time. Our main entertainment was to go out and see a movie during the weekends. Iranian Broadcasting Agency had few hours of programing in the mornings, which usually started at the daylight, a couple of hours during the noon time, and again few hours in the evening. The rest of the time we looked and listened to our surroundings and people near us. We talked and played games, we read books or magazines, and visited friends and relatives. We looked around. We did a lot of walking.

Things are not this way anymore. Today's travelers will find the city filled with mud-roof houses, cars, traffic jams, smog, and narrow streets. This is not the way I remember Shiraz. In my heart, I still feel the simplicity of my hometown.

Shiraz was, and is the capital of the province of Fars, or Pars. The name "Persia" in the ancient time, referred to the empire which had its capital in Pars Province. In 1935 the government of Iran officially changed the country's name to Iran. "Persian," or "Farsi" is still used to signify the language and artworks of Iranians. The Capital Building, in ancient Iran, was known as Takhte-Jamsheed," which means "Throne of Jamsheed." Jamsheed was one of the ancient Iranian Emperors. The ruins of Takhteh-Jamsheed, Jamsheed is one of the ancient and is some forty miles north east of Shiraz. Western writers and historians

call Takhte-Jamsheed, "Persepolis." If you happen to go to Iran and are planning to visit these ruins, please do not tell your guide that you want to see "Persepolis," chances are he wouldn't have the faintest idea what you are talking about. Ask him to take you to Takhte-Jamsheed and he will gladly drive you there without a question.

The ruins of Takhte-Jamsheed are the remnants of a glorious history that influenced the old world for centuries. Cyrus the Great, 559 BC, the emperor of Iran, received the rulers of other countries in this palace. The large audience hall can be visualized by the outline of a series of stone columns. There are massive animal stone carvings guarding the entrances. The sides of stairways are covered with stone carvings. These carvings show the emperor of Iran receiving gifts from the far corner of the old world. Cyrus ruled over a vast area, but he respected the religions, and customs of other people. In a cuneiform carving, found near his tomb in Takhte-Jamsheed, he states that: "I Cyrus... when I conquered Babylonia... ordered that all should be free to worship their god without harm....." This is considered the first declaration of human rights. The Jewish people, who were the direct beneficiaries of Cyrus' decree, were very grateful. In the Old Testament books, Cyrus is called the Anointed One, and God's Friend. Takhte-Jamsheed was eventually burnt down when Alexander the Great defeated the Iranians in 333 BC. In 1971 AD, on the celebration of the 2500-year monarchy in Iran, a series of large and expensive tents were set up near

the ruins. Many heads of State who were invited for the celebration stayed in these tents.

Shiraz is the hometown of two famous poets, Sa'di and Hafiz, who have immortalized Shiraz in their poetry books. Sa'di; born in 1184 AD, and Hafiz; born in 1325 AD, have both praised Shiraz. In their verses, they describe Shiraz as city of flowers and nightingales. Their poetry is very popular in Iran. Most people in Iran, memorize their poems. It seems that their thoughts, right or wrong, have seeped into the psyche of Iranian culture throughout the last seven centuries. Like countless other Iranian school children, I had to be able to read, with correct inflections, Sa'di's famous Golestan Book. It was a required subject in the ninth grade. I was so impressed with the religious meaning of the opening chart that I memorized it. Today, after more than forty years, I can still recite several pages of Golestan from memory. I have recited these verses, and many more with spiritual meanings, hundreds of times as a way to stay in touch with God. I would like to translate the first paragraph of the opening chapter of Sa'di's Golestan Book. My only regret is that in translating a poem, some of its beauty and effectiveness are lost. Translating a verse is like giving your sweetheart a collection of petals, instead of a rose!

"In the name of God, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful. We are obligated to Almighty God. Obedience to Him, increases our blessings. Thanking Him, increases our wealth.



Eram Garden

Every breath we inhale,  
 continues our life,  
 When we exhale, causes the  
 comfort of our being.  
 Therefore there are two  
 blessings in every breath,  
 And for every blessing, one  
 thanksgiving is required.

His unlimited rain of mercy has  
 reached everyone,  
 And his unconditional bounty  
 has spread everywhere.  
 He will not mar the dignity of  
 his servants with a shameful sin;  
 And he will not stop the allotted  
 daily sustenance to an erring  
 infidel

When a grieving sinner extends  
 the hand of repentance,  
 In the hope of forgiveness to the  
 Almighty,  
 If, He does not look at him, and  
 the sinner calls on Him again,  
 If, Almighty looks away, and  
 sinner cries and pleads again

The Almighty tells his angels: I  
 accept his plea, I forgive his sin.  
 He doesn't have anyone but Me.  
 I am ashamed of his crying  
 Oh! How great are His mercy  
 and His love;  
 The sin is committed by man,  
 and He is ashamed!..."

If you were a thirsty traveler  
 traveling, by camel caravan,  
 through the desert of central Iran  
 for days, as Sa'di had done often  
 in his life, you might also like  
 him when reaching the outskirts  
 of the city, take refuge under the  
 shade of a lonely tree, by the  
 small stream of Rokni, and ask  
 God to "keep Shiraz safe  
 forever!" If you were a young  
 man with a tender heart and an  
 idealistic mind, one who  
 appreciates love and beauty  
 above worldly goods, as Hafiz  
 must have been, then you would  
 also say: "If that fair maiden of  
 Shiraz would accept my love, I  
 would give for the beauty mark

which adorns her cheek  
 Samarkand and Bukhara!"

When Taymmor Lang  
 (Tamerlane) conquered Shiraz,  
 after a bloody battle, he wanted  
 to see Hafiz shortly after. Hafiz  
 in Islamic countries is a title  
 given to a learned person, who  
 has memorized the entire Holy  
 Koran, and can recite it from  
 memory, and can explain its  
 meanings. Hafiz was such a  
 person. Taymmor was himself a  
 Hafiz. He was anxious to meet  
 th famous Hafiz to have a lively  
 discussion on religious topics.  
 Taymmor's seat of empire was  
 at Samarkand. When Hafiz was  
 brought to Taymmor, the  
 emperor told Hafiz "Samarkand  
 and Bukhara are my favorite  
 capital cities. I have waged  
 many battles to bring lands from  
 Europe to India under my realm  
 to increase the size and the  
 importance of these cities. How

### *Rachlin Bio*

*Nahid Rachlin has published three novels, FOREIGNER (W.W. Norton), MARRIED TO A STRANGER (E.P. DUTTON, reprinted in paperback by City Lights) THE HEART'S DESIRE (CITY LIGHT), AND COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES, VEILS (City Lights), as well as individual stories in many magazines.*

*Included in her resumé are, a Doubleday-Columbia fellowship (Columbia), a Wallace Stegner Fellowship (Stanford) and received many grants and awards, including the Bennet Cert Award, PEN Syndicated Fiction Project Award, and a National endowment for the Art grant. Ms. Rachlin currently holds a teaching position in creative writing at Barnard College, New York.*



*Nahid Rachlin*

# Azar

I was practicing a part in a play titled , DROWNING, in front of the large mirror in my bedroom. It was the biggest part I had played in the ten years of my trying to be an actress. I was supposed to be a lonely woman, a character with whom I easily identified. Wasn't I lonely with my marriage having broken up two years ago, no deep, steady relationships, with men or women, and my family far, far away? I had just spent my thirty second birthday alone. At times I even felt an unwarranted homesickness. The high rises, the blinking lights at night that I could see out of my windows of my apartment evoked nothing in me, had no relation with sights and sounds of my childhood in Tehran. It was as if I were in transit between two airplane rides.

I was almost at the end of my practice when the phone rang. I normally would let it go on my answering machine but the night something made

me reach for it. "Do you recognize my voice? I'm Azar."

Yes, it was the voice of my cousin. "This is amazing, where are you?"

"In the U.S., New York. I'll be coming to L.A. tomorrow to attend to some business. I've been so excited."

After we hung up I could not go on with my practice, I was so stirred up. I took a glass of wine and stared at the TV screen for a while, absorbing nothing. Of all the people I grew up with Azar had acquired a particular significance. This was partly because we were intense friends for a period of time and partly because she had become the marvel of our family, starting from where she did - living with an abusive stepmother, stepbrothers and stepsisters -- and arriving at where she was.

We had moved into the house next to theirs, in an old section of Teheran, when I was fourteen, the same age as Azar. Our houses were separated only by a fence. Standing in my room, a few steps above ground level, I would see her watering the flowers or running out to buy something for her

stepmother, tying the laces on her younger stepsister's shoes or ironing a shirt for one of her stepbrothers. She was tall, gaunt, and awkward, leaning a little to the side when she walked, as if under a burden. Her best feature was her eyes -- large and a light amber color. From the right profile there was a hint of prettiness, but her left cheek was marred by a scar from an injury when one of her stepbrothers had flung a plate at her. Repeatedly I would hear her crying and then once I actually saw her kneeling down by the pool and her stepbrother beating her with a large stick. For the next few days she limped when she walked.

Whereas she was tormented, I was simply lonely. My mother, ever since I remembered, had been suffering from an obscure illness that made her sleep most of the day, and my father was always travelling, his job as the president of a caviar cannery taking him everywhere. I had no brothers or sisters and my mother discouraged me from inviting friends over because she wanted the house to be quiet. And she did not like me to visit friends either so that I would be there when she needed someone. She did not trust any of the maids who had come and gone through our household. I loved movies because of the other forms of existence they revealed and sometimes I cut classes to go and see one. At home, in my lonely hours, I acted out the parts I had seen in a movie.

I was more privileged in material ways than Azar. I had a spacious, sunny room, furnished with a desk, comfortable chairs and bed, all painted turquoise, matching the predominant color of a Persian rug on the floor. I had a phonograph and many records, a short wave radio on which I could get foreign stations. And I bought my clothes from the nicer, more modern shops in Shemiran. Sometimes I gave Azar money which she had to spend hiddenly from her family.

At rare family get-togethers, mainly on Norooz Holidays, when all cousins, aunts, and uncles were present, Azar and I stood apart from the cousins close to our age in that we lacked their heedless, light-hearted ways. When Azar and her family were not present, everyone whispered about how cruelly she was treated, and we all wished she could be rescued somehow from the clutches of her tormentors.

One afternoon when I returned from school and I was particularly restless and lonely, I decided to go and visit Azar. My mother was asleep so I knew I could get away for a short time. The outside door of their house was open and I walked in. All the doors to the rooms were shut but I could hear muffled sounds of footsteps, whispers, clanging of pots and pans. Then I heard a cry, which quickly changed into a prolonged moan. I listened carefully. It was from Azar's room on the second floor. I went up the steps and knocked on the door. The moaning stopped immediately. "It's me, Soheila," I said.

Azar opened the door. In the bright sunlight coming in through a window, I could see that her eyes were red and swollen her cheeks tear-stained. Then I noticed a bruise on her arm and a tear on the side of her dress. Her long, brown hair was dishevelled.

"What's the matter" "Who did that to you" I asked, my heart beating loudly. She was silent. Poor Azar. Even her room exuded abuse. The walls were yellowing and stained. An old cot with a dirty mattress on it stood in a corner and a tattered rug was spread before it.

We sat on the cot and talked until her stepmother interrupted, coming into the doorway. "What's this idle talk when you have so much work to do," she said to Azar.

Azar looked at me. "I guess I should get some work done."

I got up, said good-bye to Azar, and left.

When I reached home my mother called me to her room, her voice plaintive. "Soheila, I told you not to go anywhere after school."

"It's lonely here."

"After I die you can go and find someone."

When I was senior in high school my mother did die. My father, a firm believer in education for women, decided to send me to the United States to go to college. Gradually I lost contact with Azar -- we exchanged a letter or two and we stopped.

But another cousin occasionally filled me in with what was going on with Azar. She had gotten married to a man who worked in a construction company, building hospitals and schools. Within a year of their marriage, mysteriously, they seemed to have come into a fortune. They had bought an expensive house and lived lavishly. Then her husband had been arrested and thrown into jail

because he had been caught stealing from the company. The rumors were that he had also been dealing in drugs, smuggling heroin from Iraq. But they had sent much of their money to banks in Europe and Azar had been able to take her two small children, both girls, and flee the county. She had settled down in France and had multiplied her fortune by good investments in European stock markets and by buying and selling real estate. It sounded like a Cinderella story but with some twists. Though her husband had finally been released from jail the two of them could no longer live with each other -- the bitter experiences had divided them. They had spent terrible years fighting over the money the custody of the children. Finally she had gotten the custody of the children and half of the money. Then she had married a Frenchman.

As for me after graduating from college, where I had studied drama, I married a Greek man, who had tried his hand in writing screenplays and directing. He had some success in making documentaries. One of them, about a Greek island, was often shown in film festivals and cultural museums. Then my marriage broke up -- when I found him in our bedroom with a young woman, his assistant. Even from the beginning he had been a cold person. His love-making lacked tenderness. Amazing that a Greek man, with his kind of background, coming from a large family, would be so unattached, unaffectionate. Not only that, I stayed in the chilly relationship until the inevitable end.

After the divorce I threw myself even harder into work. I spent hours every day auditioning, taking dance lessons, voice lessons, and going to speech therapy to get rid of my accent. I rarely answered the phone -- calls got collected on my answering machine and then I returned them selectively. I lost most of my friends. I didn't want to be this way, but it was as if I was controlled by a powerful force.

The day Azar was to arrive I stayed home, cleaned up the apartment, rearranged the furniture and plants and bought some flowers to put around. She had said she would not be able to eat supper with me but I bought a couple of bottles of wine for us to drink. An hour before she was due I tried on a few outfits before I settled for blue jeans and a T shirt.

When she arrived, I dashed to open the door and we embraced excitedly. Then as she pulled away, I could see that her appearance had changed dramatically. The scar on the side of her face was no longer there, her eyes stood out even more because she had lightened her hair to their exact amber color. Her tall figure was now willowy and graceful in a stylish, lavender dress. I could not take my eyes off her.

"You're looking great," I said.  
"You too, you haven't changed much."

I offered her wine and we sat on the sofa. She took out a little box from her purse and handed it to me. "A present."

I opened it. It was a gold bracelet inlaid with rubies. "This is beautiful." I put it on.

"You used to be so generous to me," she said.

Enveloped in the past, we barely spoke about the present, though as she recounted some of her memories, her voice sounded wounded as if a knife was put through it.

As she was leaving, a few hours later, she gave me her address in Mougins and we promised not to let too much time go by before we would see each other again.

About a year later I visited her for a week in her house in Mougins, a town famous because Picasso had lived there. It was just outside of Cannes and the spring film festival was taking place, a part of the reason I had come at that particular time. She and her husband, Pierre, met me at the airport. She was wearing a white blouse on a white pleated skirt, striking against her skin which was tanned to a darker color. She looked even prettier than last time and there was conscious gracefulness to her gestures as she greeted and embraced me. Her husband was good looking with his dark hair and plea blue eyes. I knew he was a translator for an import-export company and apparently he knew several languages. He and I shook hands. "I've heard so much about you," he said in broken English.

We got into their car and he drove to their house. Their house was a mansion, set among other elegant houses on a tree-lined street. As we went inside she told me she had bought it at a reasonable price from a German couple who, fearing a change of regime in France, had quickly sold the house and gone to Switzerland. The large,

high ceilinged rooms were furnished with ornate Italian furniture. Blue silk Persian rugs were spread on the floors. Photographs of the two of them and of her daughters -- she said were now eight and ten years old -- stood on a table. The room I would be staying in had a canopied bed.

As we sat in the living room and talked, Pierre was pleasant to the point of diffidence, saying "excellent" to almost anything I said. Azar's two daughter, Simin and Samira, came in and greeted me politely, in broken English also. Samira, the older girl, was tall, slim, and reticent looking; Simin was short, overweight, and had a livelier manner. They sat next to each other and asked me questions about the United States, acting.

In a few moments they left, so did Pierre.

"I adore my daughters," Azar said to me. "Too bad you don't have any children."

"I've been so involved in my work..."

We talked for a long time, this time mainly comparing notes about our way of life.

In the evening we all went out to a restaurant. The village of Mougins was full of winding cobblestones street, two white churches, stucco houses, some high up on hilly roads. Ancient trees shaded the sidewalks. A post office and a few shops were scattered here and there. The restaurant was on a narrow road and had large picture windows giving us a view of the outside as we sat at our table. One window separated us from a glass-in room with animals kept in it -- baby lambs, pigs, rabbits -- a little wilderness farm. Soon a waiter brought over a large variety of appetizers and then fish, roast duckling, lamb and wine, which Pierre ordered. Samira and Simin sat next to each other, whispering between themselves.

"This is a lovely restaurant," I said to Pierre.

"You like it, excellent."

"I wish you were staying longer," Azar said.

"Or come and visit us in England or Austria."

She proceeded to tell me about all the houses she owned in different cities around the world and Pierre joined in, describing each of them to me excitedly. Simin and Samira began to giggle at something.

"Stop talking so much and eat," Azar said to

them.

"And don't whisper," Pierre snapped, the first deviation from his polite manner.

The two girls looked at him with hurt eyes and did not say anything. "You're very badly behaved today," he added.

After we finished eating Pierre asked for the check. The waiter put it on the table. As soon as he left, Pierre began to add up the bill. "There's a mistake here," he said to Azar. "They're charging us extra for the lamb."

"Just ignore it, it isn't worth the bother."

"It's the principle of it. They never make a mistake the other way around." He signaled to the waiter to come over, and then he pointed out the mistake on the bill. The waiter apologized and changed the figure. He walked away, looking embarrassed.

Still Pierre was angry. He said, "I'm not going to give him a tip."

"You should, you know," Azar argued feebly.

"I don't want to encourage bad behavior." All the way back he was sullen.

When we got home he turned to Simin and Samira and said, "Go into your rooms now. Tomorrow is a school day." The moodiness lingered in his voice.

Simin and Samira gave in and went up the stairwell, looking dejected.

"I'm going to bed too, I have to get up early tomorrow," he said to Azar

He turned to me. "Good night."

"Good night."

He kissed Azar quickly on the lips and went up the stairs too. I was very tired from the trip and withdrew to bed, not having a chance to talk to Azar much.

In the morning Azar and I took a walk in their garden, several acres of it, with stone benches to sit on. The air was filled with a bittersweet aroma from the plants. There were many patches of vegetable and fruit trees everywhere (dark cherries that we picked and ate on the spot, artichokes we planned to have at lunch). "There's friction between Pierre and the girls all the time," she said. "He's too strict with them, and rough at times. He insists that we shouldn't give them too much pocket money. Their own father, who they see

once a year, is permissive by contrast."

Two peacocks appeared under the trees, strolling slowly with their colorful wings spread out. "This is like a fairyland," I said.

"A couple takes care of the animals -- we also have a cow, chickens. They also do the gardening. They are the last of the entourage of people who used to work for me before I married Pierre. Then he dismissed them all. That's how he is -- he has a hard time spending money even when it isn't his own!"

"Still you live in this style."

"We rent it out in the summer to a Saudi couple. We spend the summer in our house near Vienna. All our houses are rented at least a few months out of the year. Pierre is frugal about everything. But I need him in spite of his faults. You're lucky to be able to live independently."

"My kind of life isn't for everyone, there's so much space around me, a lot of solitude." Then we left, for me to go to the film festival and she to do some more errands.

I spent part of the next day at the festival also since everyone was busy with something or other. I returned at twilight. No one seemed to be home and I went to my room. As I sat there, looking through a magazine, I heard a moan. It started and stopped. It seemed to come from Samira's room. I jumped up and went over to see what was going on. The door to her room was a crack open and I looked in. I drew back with shock as I saw Pierre and Samira in the middle of the room with him whipping her on her buttocks with a stick. There was an ominous urgency to his flogging as it meant to slowly drain her of all will or strength. His voice shaking with rage, he kept repeating something in French. "My God, Pierre, what are you doing?" He stopped suddenly and his face, already flushed, became even more red. He flung the stick on the floor and began to leave the room. Passing me, he said, "I'm sorry to expose you to this." Not sorry that he had hit her!

I went in and embraced Samira and tried to comfort her but she pulled away and ran out of the room. I looked for Azar. She had just come in and was talking her jacket off in the hallway.

"Something horrible was going on. Pierre was beating up Samira," I said breathlessly.

"I can't stop him. I've tried and tried."

"Bust..."

She abruptly opened the bottom of her blouse

and revealed bruises on her chest.

"This is what he does to me when I try."

My voice was almost inaudible as I heard myself say, "Why do you stay with him?"

She just stood there with her shoulders hunched, her head tilted to the side, and the muscles of her face pinched in. I could visualize the bruises all over her body, not the ones just inflicted, but thicker ones left from the distant past. Even the space around her took on a different feeling. I could see that dirty, grimy mattress on the cot in her room of the past, the yellowish walls. Her fashionable black dress took on that ragged look of the clothes she used to wear.

"Do you know what you are doing" I realize it isn't easy to shake the past but still..." I had come to a sudden understanding, not just about her but myself too. In way I lived was repeating the past, its loneliness. The familiar was easier to fall back on.

She had started crying and I felt tears rolling down my eyes too. We hugged each other and continued crying for a moment. The I went to my room.

In the morning, as I sat with the whole family at the table, everything was back to normal, with the peacocks strolling in the garden under a gentle pale sunlight and the scents of coffee and sweet rolls in the air. Everything except for Azar -- she looked resolute as if she were waiting for the right moment to take the step she had needed to take for a long time now.

That was my last day there. One night, in my apartment, I took out several wigs and tried them on, a red one, a blond fluffy one, a black wavy one. In each I was transformed to a different person. I made me ecstatic to go from one person, one pose, to another. Then I put on different make-up, different clothes, some of which I had kept from different parts I had played. Who did I want to be, which one of these characters, in what pose? If I could act like any of those people, why couldn't I adopt one for my real life? This is all very new still. But I have hope for both myself and Azar. •