

*On 'Remembering' in the Midst of War:
the Story of Khadijeh*

I suppose I knew her face, once. I must have known her voice, because according to my mother, she prayed over my cradle.

My mother, a superb linguist, had been discouraged by the other expats in Tehran from learning Farsi and, uncharacteristically, in this instance she followed the crowd—regretting it for all her days thereafter. Her capitulation to conventional wisdom was not so surprising, though, given she was then living thousands of miles from home for the first time and knew no one who spoke any of the languages she spoke most readily, apart from the snatches of French that served as the glib lingua franca of embassy parties.

She had enough on her plate speaking English all day long. I don't know how my mother learnt English. I knew her only as dazzlingly fluent, dismayingly incisive in argument, even in a non-native medium, with more correct grammar than the vast majority of native speakers and a dauntingly broad vocabulary— as well as a few oddities she stubbornly refused to correct, such as pronouncing 'unique' as 'eunuch'. She did not learn English in school or university, I'm almost sure, and in any case, in the Tehran of those days, English was not yet the world's stock in trade. How she managed, culturally and linguistically isolated, newly married and soon pregnant, can be counted only a mystery or a testament to an unusually strong character.

Later, when the baby had grown old enough to sit up after dinner, listening to the grownup conversation as the candles dribbled their last onto the table, my mother and father reminisced nostalgically about my birthplace: evoked Isfahan and Shiraz, where they honeymooned; Persepolis, the forest of columns whispering of Persia's former grandeur; and Tehran, where they had lived. They—but mostly my mother, a Nordic Scheherazade—told stories, often prompted by my taking a second helping of rice at dinner, rice that my mother sometimes made the way she had learnt from Khadijeh, with layers of damp dishcloths over the pot and a crust of rice on the bottom that was supposedly the most delicious part. 'It's because she's Persian', Mama would say, nostalgically, as I spooned more rice onto my plate. Fine by me: I never acquired a taste for the crust and knew little of Persia, other than the fairy-tale stories of our resident Scheherazade, but Persianness at least sounded more palatable than greed.

In the stories of my birthplace, the place of which I have no first-hand memory, Khadijeh figured prominently. I don't remember how I first heard her described. I suppose she must have been hired as a housekeeper, but judging from the stories, she must have also been a kind of nanny to me. Only in late adulthood did it dawn on me that she must even more have been a friend to my mother, the young woman far from home and family, linguistically marooned, facing a first pregnancy and then, a first child. Khadijeh no more spoke Swedish than my mother spoke Farsi, so they communicated in English, a foreign language to both of them.

The linguistic barrier did not deter Khadijeh from raising the vexatious issue of my family's ungodliness with my mother. 'Madame', she would say, 'there is only one God!' 'Yes, Khadijeh', my mother would reply, 'this is what Christians also believe'. Khadijeh would shake her head in sorrow, sorrow that my mother was so benighted she did not even realise she was a tritheist.

The conviction that her employers were the worst kind of infidels did not stop Khadijeh from teaching my mother enough about bargaining for Mama to have procured in the Tehran bazaar some of the objects I grew up with, the relics of Persia, the vestigia of my birthplace. Some do not remain—the carpets eventually ravaged by the damp of later tropical homes and the haplessness of puppies. Some, however—ink drawings, an antique map of Persia, inlaid boxes, engraved silver trays and bronze platters—testify to their origin to this day, in my home far away from my birthplace, hardy survivors of travel over five continents.

Nor, oddly, did Khadijeh's dismay at our godlessness deter her from lending her chador so Mama could visit a mosque incognito—or at least as incognito as it is possible to be with milk-white skin and startlingly blue eyes that no chador could cover.

One of the remnants of those days in Teheran was a fragment of blue tile from that mosque visit. It occupied a predictable place on the African mahogany bookcase that stood in living room after living room in our various houses. It was so much a part of our lives that it must not have been until I was in my mid-teens that I thought to ask Mama about it. That was when I heard the story of her visiting the mosque swathed in Khadijeh's chador.

'This came from a mosque?' I asked, holding up the jagged quadrangle of glazed turquoise. 'Yes, it was on the floor'. 'You pried it up off the floor?' 'No, it had come loose. It was lying there, so I picked it up'. 'And took it home?' 'Yes, it was just lying on the floor'. 'So you *stole* it?' I don't remember how Mama responded to this reproach. Evidently her normally strict conscience was clear on this point, though I had the adolescent's satisfaction at moral triumph over the benighted elderly. Years later, what stood out in my memory about the story of that day was not Mama's violation of the eighth commandment, but Khadijeh's chador.

Perhaps the chador was lent in the hope that if my mother entered a true house of prayer, she would be struck with an apprehension of the truly divine and turn from her polytheist ways. For while Khadijeh was clearly appalled at her employers' irreligion, she did not give up hope for us.

Mama told me she would sit beside my cradle, crooning in Farsi. 'What are you saying?', my mother asked. Khadijeh would shrug, leaving Mama no wiser. So Mama brought a spy, a friend who knew Farsi, to listen outside the door. 'No cause for worry. She is praying your daughter will grow up to believe in God.'

I suppose Khadijeh's prayers were answered, although, as is often the way of prayer, not quite as she had envisaged. Whether she prayed filled with hope or prayed at the cliff-edge of despair, I do not know. What I do know is that her love proved enduring and I grew up believing in God, although by Khadijeh's reckoning, a tritheist.

The final story of Khadijeh is my mother's last memory of her, as she walked beside my parents across the tarmac of the Tehran airport, cradling me in her arms and only relinquishing me to my mother, sobbing, at the steps leading up to the plane that would carry us from Iran forever.

The photograph above, ravaged by time and storage in a cardboard box, is the only material remnant I have of her, the woman who loved me so much and cared for my parents so well. It is all that I have of my birthplace, apart from the relics of the bazaar and the stories my parents told of 'Iram indeed . . . gone with all its Rose', the dreamtime 'Iram' of Fitzgerald's translation Khayyam's Rubayat, a silk-bound edition of which lodged on the same bookcase in our houses as the fragment of floor tile from the Tehran



mosque. Less misty than Khayyam's quatrains, but more real, were my mother's stories of her own escapades, in which Khadijeh figured as a kind of female Nasreddin, the Middle Eastern folk character who seems a simpleton but always turns out to be wiser—or at least shrewder—than his adversaries.

I look at that photograph and think 'If you did not know the story behind it, surely you would imagine the chubby baby with a mop of curly dark hair is the daughter of the woman on whose lap she is sitting, the plump young woman who also has a mop of curly dark hair'. But she is not. The baby is not the daughter, just the cherished.

The face of Khadijeh, unsmiling in this picture predating our era of self-sponsored grimacing glamour, is the face of one who loves, the face of one who cares for strangers, even infidels. Hers is the face of one who hopes and prays and gives her self with toil and tears. She must by now be either dead or very, very old but she lives on in the memory of the baby long grown up, who remembers the fretting and praying woman only filtered through the sagas spun out at the family dinner table, by the light of fading candles.

Love endures beyond all else in this decaying world and I think of Khadijeh when I now look at the pictures of the bombing of Tehran, so many years since the vanishing of the Tehran of my parents' memories. Their Tehran was the jewel in the crown of a Shah installed by the CIA in the name of democracy—and for the benefit of the American economy; the Tehran of cosmopolitan parties whose dance floors were scented with the wafting smoke of Sobranies and adorned with elegantly-coiffed women draped in Parisian couture; the Tehran of the take-no-prisoners bargaining of the bazaar and of the cries of muezzins floating from the heights of minarets, urging the still-dozing faithful to recall that 'prayer is better than sleep'; the Tehran of bellowing camels whose trains wound over the roads fringing the city, up in the mountains, where my parents lived: the Tehran that was a dizzying cocktail of corruption and the glamour of deceit; of the heedless luxury of the rich, the relentless striving of merchants and the back-breaking toil of the poor; of the living, though sometimes cruelly uncompromising, faith of its people; as well as of the remnants of a past 'Iram with all its rose', which somehow seemed, back then, not to be so long gone, at least judging by my parents' memories.

To me, however, the child who will never see a place that would seem no more than mythical, had I not been born there—I am real, so it must surely also have been—Iran is the country of Khadijeh, many Khadijehs, how many I will never know. All I know is that goodness begets goodness, and kindness, kindness, so Khadijeh can neither have been the first of her kind, nor the last, and the bombs of today therefore fall either on her or those like her.

As she prayed over my cradle, so I pray for her, her descendants and countryfolk: may she be sustained in hope, if she is still alive; may she rest in peace if she has died. In either case she is as surely beloved of God as she once loved the strangers sent to her by God. May her people, the people of Iran, survive this present terror and may they not take from it the corrosive lessons of war and hatred—rather the lessons of Khadijeh: the lessons of hope, of kindness to strangers, and of the love of God.