

Down the Carpeted Road

I stepped onto the narrow red carpet leading to the Shah of Iran. It was my friend Nosrad's idea, not mine. By chance I owned a magnificent golden costume which I wore. In the shimmering light of a pink sunset, I alighted from the dark limousine to the granite floor outside the Imperial Embassy of Iran on Massachusetts Avenue, Washington, D.C. on a Friday night in 1964.

"I'll meet you inside," Eli, my friend, said.

"Bring my parents with you," I countered. "I'll get the passes from Nosrad and our security papers." I felt nervous. The crowd hummed around me. Cars impatiently accelerated, abruptly braked, closing in awkwardly on the first glimpse of a red carpet. I delayed, breathing quietly.

"Okay," Eli told me. "Go ahead. Go inside."

My lips parted numbly. With down turned eyes I melted in with the group in front of me who chatted in Farsi and held their breath in, then released it evenly so their voices would be soft and the excited anticipation in their tone was veiled. "Nosrad," I sighed. She was an elder, a busy body, a Persian-Armenian woman of another age. She was always trying to match-make against all odds, and probably would continue to read palms about death, money and marriage on her death bed.

The doors of the Imperial Embassy stood before me. They measured twelve cubits tall. Ornate clusters of yellow dragon shapes swathed over the azure enamel panels. Behind the door I saw Mr. Farhad, a lecherous buzzard, with a limp, and a long nose.

"Sohaila," he said. His goggle eyes were luminous behind the thick glasses.

"Salom, agha, Hello, good sir," I replied. Only a hint of a weak smile crossed my lips.

"Kheli ghosgel e!" he said. "You are radiant tonight." His lean body arched and he adjusted his tie.

A slew of guests pushed me forward as I closed in on Mr. Farhad. I smelled his onion breathe and heavy tobacco odor. His hands felt for me hastily and pinched.

"Befarmayed...please..." I said, horrified. My dress was sleek and tight. I knew it was the pinch of his fingers I had felt.

I moved away propelling my legs swiftly and slipping into the crowd away from the repulsive Mr. Farhad.

He inched behind me and found my ear and whispered into my French perfume, "The Shah is looking for a wife," he said knowingly. He was unbearable, except he spoke the truth, the truth about the king. He was looking, and it was possible, barely, possible he could choose me.

"Why does he look here?" I asked. I felt foolish, dressing as though the Shah might find me, imagining a future of bejeweled promises of paradise. Oh, Sohaila, what musings!

"Soraya, his queen, can not bear children." He nodded sadly. "He must divorce her, by law, he has waited longer than the politicians wished." Mr. Farhad sensed he had my attention. His musk scent made me feel light-headed.

"It is sad," I answered. My brown eyes met his. Did he know that I knew this already from Nosrad? Her friend was a lady-in-waiting to the queen.

"It is confirmed by the doctors." Mr. Farhad heaved a prodigious croupy cough. A ghastly sound of sputum rose and descended.

Other guests raised their hands above my thick glossed hair and greeted Mr. Farhad. With relief I saw my friend Nosrad and raised my chest leading toward her direction in the noisy throng of bodies in the anteroom.

“Nosrad,” I said, happy to see her. “I almost left.”

Her eyes understood. She flickered her grayed eyelashes signaling she saw Mr. Farhad, who was pliable and filled with gossip in his veins.

“Come on,” Nosrad urged me in her thick Armenian accent. “There is nothing to worry about. Tori nist, don’t worry.” Her slanted eyes looked at me admiringly. “My goodness, you are beautiful tonight. Your hair is like midnight with dancing stars shining through it. Your dress, the golden threads, the red and green. Moshe Allah...with God’s blessing...” Her old voice wheezed through a narrow passage in her throat. Nosrad, an Armenian, was snubbed by some of the purist Persians. Her wealth, her girth and her tongue saved her by their largesse.

I was respected by Nosrad’s presence at my side since she was an elder, rich and cunning. Her experience had led to many matches. They were reimbursed by backsheesh, bribes, returned to her through any manner of payment, land, farms or gold would suffice.

“How do you know about the queen?” I whispered to her as we approached a massive staircase leading up to the ballroom where the Shah stood receiving guests in a formal processional line.

“Sh...” she uttered. Her wrinkles creased. Her masculine brows budged. She kissed my cheeks one at a time and I noticed her sturdy, brown shoes. Her weight was propped on them like a large crate of rocks. She swayed like a mountain. “The Shah will see a vision like you. It is good for his spirits. He is devastated that he must leave Soraya. But you never know if he may choose you. It is in the eyes, in the instant, be ready!”

I inhaled the cold air coming through the open doors. Childless, I thought. How awful. Soraya was in the grace of the Shah, and he must abandon her. As I ascended the stairs I saw waiters carrying trays of steaming saffron rice by me and merging up the left side of the stairwell from the foyer where we stood to the top of the ballroom doors. They slipped into the ballroom. Nosrad was one step below me. Her auburn hair barely stretched over her balding scalp. She smiled to one and all as though she was the ambassador to someone’s future. Her narrow eyes surveyed the hundred guests now gathering in ascending rows to the waiting Shah’s handshake. She grasped my hand and squeezed hard. Opportunity!

“What are you planning?” I asked.

“Be calm, child, you are eighteen. Enjoy yourself,” she said it suspiciously. Plots bloomed like poppies in her mind. “Eli, your fiancé, will be fine. If he loses you to a greater cause, then it will be painful, but understandable. We need heirs from a woman, a beautiful young woman, a cultivated young woman. Who can replace Soraya? No one. Their story will be a love legend frozen in the pages of miniature paintings, recited by poets, lamented by lovers.”

Soon I would proceed alone and meet the Shah in the line. Suddenly the sturdy Nosrad was a welcome force.

“I haven’t eaten for days,” I said.

“That’s how you keep such a figure. But you better learn to eat if you want to last. I see your swimming has kept your shape limber and your body toned like a gazelle.” Nosrad tilted her head to the left, studying my arched neck, while her fingertips touched her lips, and she used her saliva to mat fly-away hairs on my neck.

I felt a thrill run through me. I was afraid and shaking with anticipation. I suddenly wanted to run. I fought against it. “Nosrad,” I said. I took the final step to the processional line off the stairs. The gap was closing. I could rush down the left side of the stairwell to the cool air, leave to the out of doors, like a nomad toward the hills.

Nosrad saw my serious fear. She took off her massive turquoise and diamond earrings that spoke of the depth of her wealth. The six layers of tear-drops were like chandeliers from a Fabrege studio in Kiev. Nosrad attached them to my ear lobes while removing my simple gold Persian coins and put my earrings on her own earlobes.

“Wear these,” Nosrad said. “They are magnificent against your chiseled face. He will see your smile, your teeth like an Arabian thoroughbred.”

I listened to her voice, the tiny slips of hissing, and the tingling of her bell-like finishes. I felt the earrings lay against my ears and touch my neckline as I tilted my profile. I raised my foot and my slender ankle showed under the golden pants I wore with the golden tunic. The border of the trousers was knitted with olive silk thread, pomegranate and gold thread. Paisley olive shapes covered my costume mimicking the cypress trees in ancient Persia. The trees of life, the colors of Mohammed’s robes, the green undergirding of the fine cloth were reminiscent of cloaks of royalty.

The line was now single file. The Shah was inside the ballroom on the right. Two guards flanked the heavy doors. They wore full military dress and carried submachine guns. With their right hands they held a thick iron chain. At the end of the chain, a Doberman Pinscher bared his teeth to all. I saw the black-haired guards not only at the doors, but others at the top of the stairs, below the stairs, at exits and a few had their right hand in their short jackets, probably holding handguns.

“What do I say?” I asked her.

“Don’t be afraid, have courage, be bold,” she said.

I felt her hand in the small of my back and before I knew it, I saw my pointed satin shoes move toward him. I counted the remaining forty steps. With each step reluctantly I turned back and saw the swollen crowd. I was on a course I could not change. I disappeared from view to those below me. My fingertips rechecked my lines, the sides of my dress, the back of my hips, up to my neck to my snaps and then to my earrings, finally to distract I touched my long aquiline nose. My bony cheekbones felt leaner than normal. I brushed my fingertips again over each ear, touching the magical earrings, putting my tongue quickly to my right tips and matting my hair even further. I touched the pearl studded netting that gathered my thick black hair in a bun at the nape of my neck. I was ready. I walked the final step and faced the double doors of the ballroom.

Inside the ballroom a banquet table as long as the arm of a giant was set. Staff poured from flagging doors with festoons of food arranged on silver trays. Fresh iced caviar in red and black dollops perched over ice gardens. Dolmeh, kebabs, platters of rice decorated with orange rind, yellow saffron, red berries, slivered green pistachios layered across the white table. Tureens of koreesh stews including eggplant and lamb gave way to overflowing ornamental fruit platters with Persian melon, kiwi, clusters of red and green grapes, tiny peaches, soft apricots, bright pomegranates and blood red cherries stood like gemstones on either end. Sonorous Persian music whined through an amplified system. Artistic dancers veiled in satin costumes stood on modest platforms and danced gracefully. I was filled with a vision of a desert oasis, a fantasy of colored carpets strewn awry over the floor at various angles, creating the impression of a kaleidoscope on an immense desert floor. Under the desert tent was a mirage of candle lights that shone through the room.

“Cast your eyes downward,” Nosrad whispered. My reverie ended. “The candlelight hides your amazement,” she said.

“The embassy is dazzling tonight,” I said.

“The sparkle is in your eyes,” her voice said. “She prepared me to meet the Shah, a profile that was now visible as I raised my gaze.

“He’s handsome,” I said, barely breathing.

“He can be the other too.” Nosrad sniffed the air like a coarse mule.

The times were fragile. The Shah’s rule caused unbelievable progress, and yet villagers suffered from erratic transformation toward modernity. Villagers abandoned their tribal customs and watched western movies in the cities. The illiterate moved too quickly. The military spied on councils of upstarts, arrested those who threatened the regime, and some disappeared in accidents. From military jets to sophisticated protocols, the country reached for western goods at the same time they grasped earthly rituals. Consciousness twisted in a winding chaos ready to spring to rebellion.

“I wish I was the chosen one,” I said to Nosrad, confessing my wish to her. My adrenalin rose. My charms exuded their finest poisons. I became a flirt and my mind reeled with deceit.

Nosrad’s eyelids narrowed to nearly shut. “You are free. Life can be kind or cruel. Willingly give yourself to the universe.”

“I raised my right hand in deference to the Shah of Iran and bowed gracefully with my shoulders. “Salom,” I said.

“Salom khanom,” the Shah responded.

“She is the daughter of the great doctor, Dr. Boround,” Nosrad said from behind me. “He was your father’s own physician.”

The Shah’s face lighted.

“My father was happy to have your father serve him,” he said.

“Merci,” I said.

The Shah gazed at me. “And your sisters and brothers are well, I hope,” he said in a calm voice.

“Very well. My brothers are also doctors. Two of my sisters are studying medicine as well,”

I saw his thick nose, his short stature and his straight wide shoulders moving out from the epaulets. He seemed a charismatic man.”

“And you. What do you do?” He asked.

Me, I thought. He saw me then. A fire might have crossed his face. His silver gray hair was combed straight back. His uniform glistened here and there with gaily colored medals and a belt with a shiny buckle. He was Alexander, Cyrus, Darius. He was many leaders standing in front of me.

“I lead a simple life,” I said.

“You are a student?”

“Yes, in the arts.”

He smiled.

“And for pleasure?”

“I ride horses.” I smiled subtly and held his hand one last time. The fire died then.

“Walk on,” Nosrad said. “Let him see your backside.”

“Nosrad,” I protested.

“It is good to see a strong horse from behind as well as the front.”

“I’m horse meat to you, Nosrad.”

“It is your time, Sohaila.”

“My time for what?”

“To inspire those around you with what you have seen and felt.”

“I felt his warm hand.”

“Did you see those eyes?” Nosrad’s feet clipped a quick pace to the buffet table. Mirrors reflected around the room and the table seemed to duplicate itself, as well as the guests and the exotic red flowers. Water fountains sprinkled in the corners of the room.

I saw my reflection and laughed. “Nosrad,” I said. “Let’s have tea and talk.”

Nosrad lifted her plate, now full. “We better eat first. These Persians are wolves. There won’t be any fessenjoon if I don’t swallow the first batch.”

Eli, my fiancé, entered the room smiling and stood by me.

“I met the Shah,” he said.

The three of us sat and ate at marble tables. When the sumptuous meal was finished the dancers began more fervently. The live musicians played the sonorous music as small conversations paused and watched the next moment which was becoming. Eli held my hand and looked into my eyes. I was free again from the spell of money, power, and pleasure. I saw my fiancé, my faithful companion, my future. I had been willing for a moment to succumb to all temptation, and throw myself to the lions. I was saved in that pivotal moment, by a spiritual grace. I wanted nothing more than to enjoy the evening, observe the people and go home. My wedding would come soon, in the spring. I would wear the earrings Nosrad had bestowed on me, as a sign of beauty and a reminder of temptation.