

*Kismet*

*“I see the Western world going through a difficult time. Cultures meld and lose their original cultural identity. Patrimony is lost. We forget our roots and deny our pasts. This isn't good. Public commitments should line up with private principles, rather than vacillate. Cultural integrity should be preserved. Principles should remain constant.”*

Shapour Bakhtiar, former Prime Minister of Iran

On the night of Thursday, June 28, 1990 I was en route to a restaurant in the Bois de Boulogne in the summer green suburbs of Paris to meet Shapour Bakhtiar, who had been the Prime Minister of Iran following the revolution in Iran, after the demise of the Shah in 1979. Shapour's days as Prime Minister were numbered to only a tiny handful, maybe eighteen, but his life's journey had been a calling toward democracy.

He was in exile in Paris, having narrowly escaped with his life after hiding in Iran in the moments after Khomeini had landed. Ironically, Shapour escaped across the border to safety in France as his nemesis entered from the same country. Shapour was loyal to his dream, the revelation of democracy in the Middle East and he had a government in exile in the hope of returning to Iran. Was it a futile aspiration, or a realistic conjecture, since politics and change are often partners? As a purist he praised the vision of democracy.

I rode in my cousin's gray Citroen. Aunt Yasmine's son, Josef, drove the car through the streets of Paris. His sister, Natalie, was visiting from Mexico and she joined us for the evening. Josef was working in Paris on a business project. His responsibilities kept him in Paris for over two years. Natalie wanted the chance to meet Shapour since she was part of the new generation that sought change in Iran, while living in another country. I wanted to look into Shapour's eyes and see what liberty looked like in that depth of suffering, commitment and action which was imbued in his heart, mind and soul.

The pivotal time when Shapour was the Prime Minister of Iran after the Shah left, had elevated him to a class of politicians to watch on the world stage, perhaps as a positive mentor for change. But the revolution came swiftly and completely obliterated any room for the delicate surgery of democracy. A divisive country saw anarchy. Yet the possibility of Shapour's leadership succeeding was tangible enough to keep a death threat out on him by the Revolutionary Guard, the loyal Jihadists for Khomeini, and to parties in the Mujahadin who had elements desiring the death of Shapour. Shapour lived in a kind of purgatory. Once, an innocent bystander was killed as a result of his presence near them. He was horrified that the insurgency was crueler than the secret police, Savak.

The dinner meeting of the cousins and our uncle, at least for me, was important because I was born into the same clan, shared family values, bloodlines as the Bakhtiar, and was tied too clan-ship that delves deep into the human story. I wanted to hear the Farsi of his childhood, though he trained in France as a lawyer and was equally comfortable in both languages. Shapour was a voice from the grave of the il-Khans in the Bakhtiar tribe. The tribe was still the oldest migrating tribe on the planet. The voices of the shepherd and the call to lead a flock were deeply ingrained processes within the leading families of Shapour's grandfather.

Since early in the twentieth century, Shapour knew of the first meetings between the British Petroleum Company and his grandfather. Shapour's generation began the early exodus away

from Persia. The grandfathers realized they needed to speak Western languages in order to deal wisely with the British and other foreign nations in business. Some Bakhtiar sons went to Germany, some to France, some England and America. They studied law, medicine and other disciplines and their goal was essentially to return to Persia /Iran and help improve the country. It was never to leave permanently, and not return with resources to those left behind.

The burnt offerings of Shapour's life would become a reflection on the indelible effect of the Bakhtiar tribe on politics in the Persian Gulf in the 20th century, predominantly in the Zagros Mountains, in Abadan and in Chahar Mahal. The region satisfied the global cup of thirst for oil. The navies of England and America transferred their powerful ships to oil burning fuels and for the remainder of the twentieth century the demand for oil from the Persian Gulf would become tantamount to national security for many nations.

The tribes of nomadic shepherders were known for their own standing cavalry at the turn of the century, and for their independent negotiations with the British. It was no surprise Bakhtiar cavalry stormed the capital, Teheran, twice in defense of a democratic parliament and a constitution. The land in the region of the Gulf had been Bakhtiar tribal domain for thousands of years until the division, extinction and round-ups of the Shah's father Reza Shah, who wanted to polarize the control of oil toward the central government in Teheran.

I revisited the streets of Paris, as we were in typical rush hour traffic and were in the district near Roland Garros, where I had been many summers for the Grand Prix tennis tournament. My brother, Freddy McNair IV had won the French Open doubles title in Paris in 1976 with his partner Sherwood Stewart, and my former husband, Erik van Dillen, had a hopeful strategy to take Bjorn Borg to four sets on center court, then lost in the fifth set. The quaint cafes surrounding Roland Garros were familiar to me. I had played in the qualifying tournament for the French Open at Jean Becker stadium near Roland Garros. The traffic gridlock eased and I remembered how the day had begun, as my heart quickened. The morning Paris skies were gray and the balcony we overlooked had an equally charming balcony above the streets that held restaurants, markets and boutiques.

My cousins and I discussed who spoke which language most fluently. Natalie was fluent in Farsi and English, Josef spoke English and a little French, and I was fluent in French and spoke conversational Farsi. We decided who would translate, since Shapour spoke fluent Farsi and French and conversational English. We had been in the car for about an hour when it was time to look for the restaurant. Shapour's assistant gave me the name earlier that day, after asking if I preferred French, Persian or any other cuisine. I choose French for Paris. "Mr. Bakhtiar looks forward to meeting all of you," she had said graciously. I felt a pang of fear, but remembered that in the words of poet Firdausi, "A man will not die before his time, so take the brave road!"

I rolled down the window and smelled the fragrant flowers of summer in Paris. The forest dew floated through the breeze. We were close. I saw a row of police cars in front of the restaurant parked at odd angles. The restaurant was part of an older rain-stained edifice with wrought iron balconies. Below the awning was porch filled with a few diners. My cousin turned into a parking spot and switched off the engine. We stepped out and onto the dark sidewalk at dusk. We entered through a narrow door. Although we had seen diners on the porch from the road, I was startled to see the man restaurant was empty. The dining room was decorated in a buttery yellow and contained exquisite French furnishings. It was lit softly and I had to adjust my eyes.

I noticed Shapour ahead, his back was to us. He was sitting waiting in front of the white table cloth and salmon tinted napkins. There was no one in the entire restaurant. He was alone, in a

dark jacket, a slender person who was alert and turned quickly to greet us. His almond shaped eyes, moustache and receding hairline were just as in his photographs. He was happy and so were we as though meeting ancestors, exchanging their ancient greetings of Persian taroff, protocol of the ages, and expressing the celebration of a moment of peace.

“Salom,” Shapour said.

He was gracious and showed few signs of age, except for faint strands of white hair by his temple. He spoke directly to me.

“I want to thank you for your letters and notes over the years. They meant a lot to me.” He described to us his years in prison under the Shah, even while his cousin, Soraya, was Queen, and the new face of Iran. From a century earlier when the Qajar Kings ruled the country during the final moments of a mystic country emerging into the twentieth century. The Bakhtiar tribes had been leaders in the two battles for democracy early in the 1900’s. They fought for Constitutional rights and the right to a parliament. Shapour had aligned himself after World War I with Mossadeq, a staunch nationalist. The American CIA basically intercepted the rise of power of Mossadeq, concerned he had Communist attachments, but the Bakhtiar had no such fears. The American push was for the new Shah, like his father, Reza Shah. The Bakhtiar were disenfranchised, sent to Afghanistan, assassinated, displaced, dispelled and threatened as primary opposition to the centrist powers of the Shah in Teheran. With the chance again for democracy so close, and the Shah’s regime in exile, why did the Iranians choose the volatility of revolutionary jihadists? This plagued Shapour. He was in disbelief.

At a table near us were a group of armed guards. But one man was not a guard, and we were introduced. It was Shapour’s son. The evening went on with delicious food and celebratory conversation, both serious and filled with gratitude for life. We spoke of relatives scattered around the globe. Shapour was modest, humble and bold in his ideas. He seemed a man enmeshed with destiny, who has seen terrible things, murders of friends and family, imprisonment and agonizing realities of modern Iran. He described what upset him most, being a liability to other people. A man died, killed by a bomb meant for me,” he said. “An innocent person didn’t go home to his family that night. That pains me deeply.”

“I answered a call to help in a crisis,” he said about the revolution in Iran. “The Shah didn’t particularly like me, nor me him. But the nation was in trouble and I was there. I agreed to be Prime Minister.” After the short transition and his emergency exit to France, he said he did not consider living in America. He didn’t speak English well enough. Security was better for him in America, but his life was in Europe was closer to Iran.”

He wrote a memoir, *Yek Rang, One Color*, on the premise that principles and actions should conform in public life. His final words have stayed in my mind for years. We both knew time was short, life was brief and if there was a message to share this was the opportunity. He looked at the three of us, part of his wide ranging family legacy as the son of an il-Khan.

“I have a mission,” he said, “to meet democracy. The human mind and human beings are like trees with roots and flowers which live in a healthy forest. The human mind grows naturally towards democracy, not tyranny. The duty of the revolution was to give birth to democracy. I devote my life to it.”

Shapour removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes in the fading light of the evening. “I hate fascism, communism and dictatorships. I can only love democracy.”

We sipped savory French café as Shapour drank Evian water. He shared final words. With downcast eyes, Shapour embraced us, then his guards moved quickly, escorting him to his car,

their racing lights indicating urgency and vulnerability. The guards surrounded him like a human shield, rapidly moving through the narrow passageway without a second glance. The sirens blared and engines revved, then they were gone.

As I opened the car door I remembered his last words to me, "If you look into the eyes of democracy, you will see suffering. It's a great price one must pay for freedom."

On August 9, 1991, a year later, I answered my telephone at home in California. It was my aunt. "Shapour's been assassinated," she said. "He's gone. They've killed Shapour!"

They found his chief aide too. His wife and son were away. He had called her and said he expected visitors to the house. He wasn't supposed to let people in without his son, who had been with the guards in Paris. That son was from his first wife, was older, and mature, and helped his father. The killers used kitchen knives and tortured him.

I stared at the phone. In the years that followed I thought what mattered most about his life was how he loved freedom. I heard his calm voice, and saw the tribal man, the scholarly man and man of peace in the eyes of the son of an il-Khan from the Z