

Farzad, Son of Glory

I MET FARZAD in Hamburg in a *Studentenwohnheim*, a kind of student dorm, where I lived for a month shortly after I first arrived. I came to Hamburg in the first place because, to my shock, I had received a scholarship to study at the university there the year after I finished my undergraduate degree in philosophy. I landed at the end of August in the mid-1990s with four overstuffed suitcases. After an orientation in Bremen, I lugged my four suitcases onto a train bound for Hamburg, where I stayed the first night in a miniscule hotel room in the seedy area of St. Pauli around the train station. It was so seedy I half wondered if my hotel wasn't actually a brothel.

The next day, I looked up the local Mormon church and went to Sunday services. I'm an atheist now, but I was raised a Mormon and was still a practicing one back then. The convenient thing about being a Mormon was you could count on having an instant support network no matter where you went in the world. The Hamburg ward was no exception, and a young married couple with a baby immediately took me under their wing. When I told them where I was staying, they exchanged raised eyebrows and proposed I stay with them for a couple of days until I could find more permanent housing. After a few nights on their living room couch and many phone calls, I found a month-long sublet for a *Studentenwohnheim* room in the neighborhood of Winterhude. The Mormon couple gave me a lift in their car and dropped me off at the front door, and my four suitcases and I settled into a Spartan little room in one of the upper stories.

At first, large portions of my days were taken up with shopping and cooking, as I didn't have much else to do and there were plenty of things I needed to buy. I spent enough time making elaborate meals in the shared kitchen that I quickly met other people who lived on the floor as they passed by or joined me to do their cooking. One day I was standing in front of the big battered stove, wondering how to prepare the food I had in a pan that was too small, when a slightly plump olive-skinned woman with beautiful long, dark, curly hair offered to let me use one of her pans. Her name was Farangis. I asked where she was from, which was a common question in the dorm since the international students seemed to outnumber the local Germans. She smiled as if at a private joke and said, "*Ich bin persisch.*" I racked my brain to come up with a country to associate with *persisch*, but couldn't, so I repeated the word with the inflection of a question mark: "*Persisch?*"

"*Aus Iran,*" she clarified. Ah, Iran. Persian, she had meant. Persia was Iran. I nodded and smiled back. She introduced me to her boyfriend, Farzad, a dark-

haired man not much taller than I who looked to be about 30, and we shook hands across the table.

Later, I thought about how the name Persia had different associations for me from Iran. Persia sounded beautiful and exotic, like a place of richly woven rugs and colorful silk fabrics, people in fezzes and curly-toed slippers sewn with golden threads and dusty old magic oil lamps. Iran sounded like a place with squat concrete office buildings and no air-conditioning, where people drove old beat-up cars that broke down a lot from the dust. It was a name from high school geography quizzes and newscasts that I tuned out, although I vaguely remembered something about a hostage crisis when I was in grade school. Beyond these scattered associations, my ignorance was near total. As a philosophy student, I cultivated a firm political apathy (a source of shame in subsequent years), on the rationale that current affairs had nothing to do with my idealistic pursuits of things like Truth with a capital T and inner spiritual beauty.

Farzad had wise-looking, deep-set brown eyes, with wrinkles just beginning around the corners, long eyelashes, and thick, expressive eyebrows that could wiggle suggestively. A gold tooth in the back of his mouth gave him the air of a pirate when he grinned wickedly, which he tended to do, but his habitually sad expression remained even when he smiled. He was an engineering student but looked like he should have been a poet or a philosopher instead. Everyone on the floor knew him, as he stayed with Farangis often, sleeping in her room and living in the dorm even when she wasn't there.

I saw him later sitting on the floor in the hallway in a small circle of other dorm residents, playing cards, talking, laughing, and smoking his pipe. Farzad was the only person I ever knew who smoked a pipe. He said he did it out of consideration for others, particularly for the ladies, as he liked to smoke and felt the pipe was less offensive. Since Mormonism forbids smoking, I had never smoked or been much around people who did, and had always viewed cigarettes as vulgar. I found their smell horrible—acrid and assaultive, with garbage-like overtones of vegetal decay and bile. It was one thing I hated about Europe, how everyone smoked and cigarette fumes choked me in every café or restaurant I went into. But Farzad's pipe smelled wonderful, rich and warm and enfolding, like vanilla and spices and chocolate. Farangis wasn't in the circle, but I recognized Sabine, a perky girl from southern Germany I'd met earlier, so I sat down to join them and hear the conversation. I stayed in the card circle for hours until it broke up, and, in the haze of generous feelings inspired by the aroma of pipe tobacco, was infatuated with everyone.

IN GERMANY I ENJOYED the luxury of being interesting. People wanted to know what I as an American thought of their country. They wanted to hear about what cultural differences I noticed and what I thought of this and that in comparison to how things were in the U.S. (I never had the heart to tell them one of the main cultural differences was the relative lack of interest in cultural

differences.) Back then, being American was still cool—in fact, one of the first Germans I spoke to in Hamburg, on learning where I'd come from, responded with a low whistle and said in reverential tones, "*Amerika—das muß ein geiles Land sein,*" which could be loosely translated as "America—that must be a fucking awesome country." Back home and at school in Utah among the Mormons, I often felt dismissed as an odd duck: bookish, waifish, gamine, flat-chested, pimply, and shy—not the type whose opinion you wanted on cultural differences. In Germany, however, I was not only interesting, I wasn't even all that weird compared with the other students, to whom it was admirable to have read a lot, to obsess over using proper prepositions and case endings, and to think about whether God existed.

All this by way of explaining that it didn't strike me as odd, as under other circumstances it might have, that Farzad would issue a friendly invitation to stop by for some tea and another game of cards some afternoon, or that I would take him up on it a few days later and knock diffidently on Farangis's door. Farzad opened the door and looked delighted to see me. He waved me in and gestured for me to sit down amid some pillows scattered over an elegant-looking Persian rug that covered most of the floor. I was charmed to find that a Persian couple would have an actual Persian carpet in their room to sit and socialize on. You didn't often come across such things as Persian rugs in US dorm rooms. I seated myself, and Farzad busied himself making herbal tea for me with an electric hot pot (as a Mormon, I couldn't drink regular black tea). He brought out and set down on the rug a tin of buttery store-bought cookies, which I nibbled delicately on, not being particularly hungry but liking the concept of cookies with tea. As he brought out the deck of cards and started shuffling and dealing, I told him I wasn't used to sitting on the floor, but that it was nice somehow, cozy and *gemütlich*, and Farzad said, "That's what we do back home." I pictured Persians of both genders and diverse ages and occupations lounging on their richly worked rugs and cushy pillows sipping tea and smoking hookahs.

We played a game of cards, but I was more interested in talking. Farzad asked some of the usual questions about what I as an American thought of Hamburg and the Germans. He didn't like the Germans much himself, or living in Hamburg—he found both the climate and the people too cold. He paused a moment and then asked if he could ask me something. I said sure.

"The first time you met me, what did you think of me? Did you see me and think, 'He must be a terrorist'?"

"No," I said, blinking a little in surprise. "I just thought to myself, 'There's a person.'" ("*Da ist ein Mensch,*" is how I put it in my clunky German.)

He mulled over the phrase, repeating it to himself softly: *Da ist ein Mensch*. It pleased him. You could also have translated it as, "There's a human being" or "There's someone who is humane." To call someone a human being can be quite a compliment in German, as it is to call someone a *mensch* in Yiddish.

I explained to Farzad that I knew next to nothing about Iran and that he and Farangis were the first Iranians—Persians—I had ever met.

“You know, our history and culture go back thousands of years,” he told me. It was a culture rich in poetry and literature, art and thought. In the West, people tended to confuse Persian culture with Arab culture. But Arabic was not their language; it was the language of the Muslim conquerors. Persia had its own language and traditions and its own religion, too, even though the Arabs had tried to suppress them. The religion and culture of Islam were imposed on the country by the conquerors, but there was always resistance, and even to that day there were people who practiced the old Zoroastrian religion, which Farzad admired.

“They wear white to funerals,” he told me. “It’s a symbol of purity.” He thought it a beautiful custom.

After the whirlwind tour of Persian history, he tried to bring me up to speed on more recent political developments. I don’t remember much of what he said (fifteen years have passed since then) except that he ended by saying, haltingly, as though it were still difficult for him to comprehend, “And now the country is being run by a ... a bunch of stupid ... *mullahs*.” And he spat the last word out as though it were something that tasted disgusting.

“Why did you leave?” I asked.

“*Ich war Kommunist.*” I felt a small thrill of shock on hearing this, as I mainly associated Communists with James Bond movie villains and McCarthyism and minor cadres of bearded literature professors in the US. I didn’t know anyone who had ever actually been a Communist. Things had gotten dangerous for the Communists in Iran; if Farzad had stayed there he might have been killed. The German government had given him political asylum.

“And your family?” I asked.

They were still in Iran. I wondered what it had been like for him, having to go live in a foreign country all alone. I had done it without any death threats at my back, and it had been hard. I thought of the four heavy suitcases I had dragged and heaved onto the train from Bremen to Hamburg with a great deal of huffing and grunting, and how I had only managed to get them onboard before the train closed its doors with the help of a stranger who lent me a hand. I pictured Farzad standing alone on a train station platform under a gray drizzling sky with one large black suitcase that had all his belongings in it, looking out of place as people in raincoats hurried past without a glance. Had anyone lent him a hand? Had anyone offered him a couch to sleep on? I was afraid to ask about his family in any greater detail, for fear of hearing that some of them weren’t safe or had been killed. Farzad didn’t volunteer further information on the subject.

Incidentally, where was Farangis? I asked. I hadn’t seen her in nearly a week, since before the card game in the hallway.

She had gone back to Tehran to visit her family.

When would she be back?

Farzad didn't know, he told me, looking serious. It depended on how soon she could get a return visa.

Would she be safe there?

He hoped so.

And Farzad, would he be able to go back to visit?

No, he couldn't go back, he said, shaking his head. That would be too dangerous.

It was beginning to dawn on me with new force that there were people in this world, such as these people, whose problems were serious to an extent that dwarfed my own, which tended to revolve around things like being painfully shy and not having a boyfriend and vaguely wondering if I was cut out for grad school.

I didn't want to wear out my welcome, although I could happily have stayed for hours, so I excused myself and thanked Farzad for his hospitality and the conversation. Farzad said he had enjoyed himself, too, and to stop by again any time. I took him up on the offer several more times in the remaining weeks before I moved out of the *Wohnheim*, and our afternoons together became a pleasant ritual: my timid taps on the door, his wide welcoming smile, hot tea, the cookies leaving buttery crumbs on my hands and lap, cards, and conversation.

DESPITE THE DECADE and a half that have passed since we spoke, fragments of things he told me stand out in my memory.

I asked him what his name meant in Persian, and he said it meant "son of glory." I thought it was a good name for him and told him so; it seemed fitting he would be called something poetic. (Recently I looked it up on the Internet and got the translation "glorious birth," which seems close but not quite the same thing. I prefer Farzad's version as the more lyrical one.)

He would often say, "*Ich bin ein temperamentvoller Mensch*," a little self-mockingly, with a charming twinkle in his eye. That is, he had a tempestuous nature. I think what he really meant by that was he was everything the Germans, in his view, weren't—he wasn't detached, coldly reserved, sober, logical. He saw himself as passionate and emotional, hot-tempered, even, and was proud of it.

Another joke was that he was always sweating because he was "hot" (wicked piratical grin), ha ha. If you say in German that you are hot rather than that it's hot to you (*mir ist heiß*), you invite teasing and innuendo rather than air conditioning.

Once I spied an old ID of his on his desk, and in the picture Farzad had the most absurd bushy mustache, like something straight out of a seventies sitcom. I laughed and teased him about the mustache, but he told me that back home everybody (the men at least) wore mustaches. It was just what you did.

Bayou

According to Christopher de Bellaigue in his memoir *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs*, around the time of the Revolution and afterwards it was particularly among the left-leaning families in Iran that men wore big mustaches; if Farzad had been pious, he would have had a trimmed beard instead.

We talked now and then about religion. He was understandably curious about Mormonism, never having met a Mormon before me. I told him it wasn't so different from what little I knew of Islam, figuring the analogy would help with cultural translation. Mormons honored the Jewish and Christian scriptures in the Bible, I told him, but had their own prophets and revealed scriptures. Mormons didn't drink alcohol and believed in modesty and chastity before marriage and fidelity within marriage. (Although most Christians believe in the latter, it's probably fair to say Mormons are particularly strict about the whole premarital chastity thing. In four years at a Mormon Church-run university with 30,000 students, I knew of only one unmarried student who'd had sex, and she'd gotten kicked out.) I didn't mention it to Farzad, but I was a rather special case of chastity myself at the time, having made it to the age of 22, when I left for Germany, not only a virgin but never even having French-kissed anyone.

Farzad believed in God but didn't like religion. There were too many rules, he said. One was *beschränkt* by it, constrained and narrowed in one's life and outlook.

In response, I argued that my religion was freeing, not constraining, because rather than—as might seem to be the case—a long checklist of rules to follow, there was really only one rule for me, which was hardly even a rule because it was what I wanted to do anyway. The one rule was, more or less, to love God, to be true to Him and in that way to be true to other people. This concept, as you might imagine, required some unpacking to satisfy Farzad. What did it mean to me to be true to someone (*treu zu sein*)? I said it meant loving people, “furthering people” (*Menschen zu fördern*), nurturing them, looking out for them, caring for them.

Farzad nodded respectfully, even admiringly. But the disingenuous part of my version of Augustine's *Dilige et quod vis fac* (“Love and do what thou wilt”) was that, in point of fact, following my one rule did entail a long laundry list of other rules. Be Mormon, not Episcopal or Catholic or Baptist or Jewish or Muslim. Don't smoke. Don't drink. Don't swear. No drugs or coffee or tea. No sex before marriage. Don't wear skirts that are too short, sleeveless tops, or tee shirts that show off your midriff. Spend three hours in church every Sunday. Pray every morning when you get up, every night before bed, and before each meal. Don't watch R-rated movies. Give a tenth of your income to the Church. Farzad had been dead-on with his critique of religion, at least when it came to my version of my religion.

Apart from these weightier subjects, he would tell me stories about his life back in Iran, and I would tell him about my life in the U.S. and the solitary, aimless days I spent in Hamburg wandering the city. I prattled away to him

about my small discoveries, discomforts, and surprises and listened raptly to his stories as though I were sitting at the knee of a favorite uncle, which was more or less what I saw him as.

ONE MORNING I WOKE UP EARLY, around dawn, and was lying in bed when I heard the sound of singing coming through my window. I got up, threw on a robe, went to the window, and poked my head outside to see what it was. Our side of the building faced a little park with a small woodsy area so that when you looked out you saw trees with broad, spreading leafy branches and could hear birds singing from their perches on the twigs. I could just make out Farzad's profile as he leaned out his window and sang. It was a strange, haunting melody that would rise and then swoop suddenly and linger on long tones, with words I didn't understand but that seemed to be about something sorrowful and aching. He looked out at the trees into the cool morning mist and didn't see me watching.

AS MY SUBLET IN WINTERHUDE drew to an end, Sabine, the perky girl from the South, had in the meantime been keeping her eye out for a place for me and triumphantly announced one day that a girlfriend of hers was looking for a new flatmate. On Sabine's recommendation I got the room, so I packed up my four suitcases and moved out of the *Wohnheim* into a comfortable apartment in the tidy neighborhood of Eppendorf, near the university. I promised to come back and visit my acquaintances in Winterhude. One of the many things I loved about Germany was that such promises were taken seriously. So about a week after moving into the new place, I dropped by for a visit.

Sabine and a few of the others were there, and we decided to head out to a café. I said first I would knock on Farzad's door to say hi to Farzad and invite him to join us.

Farzad opened the door, and although I said I couldn't stay long, before I knew it I was comfortably ensconced on the floor pillows and absorbed in conversation, just like old times. He told me more anecdotes about growing up in Iran and said that when he was younger there, he would sometimes have two or even three girlfriends at a time. Everyone generally knew about it, including the girls involved. He simply was the sort of person, he said, who was able to fall in love with more than one woman at a time. He had always gotten along well with women, better than with men—not just his girlfriends, but women generally.

I nodded, recognizing the truth of this from my own experiences with him. He was charming and affectionate with the girls in the dorm and always seemed at ease with them. He would casually put a hand on your shoulder or the small of your back, and you would feel as though he were just being friendly and not like you were being hit on. The other girls in the dorm all liked him, too; I wasn't the only one.

As for his revelations about having several girlfriends at a time, I took this in stride, commenting noncommittally only "Oh," and "Hmm," feeling it wasn't my place to judge given that it didn't and couldn't involve me in any way. I felt flattered, more than anything, that he would risk confiding in me about something personal, something others might well judge him for and disapprove of. It had to mean he thought of me as a friend, trusting me to take a neutral point of view. Still, it was dawning on me that Farzad was something of a Don Juan at heart and had probably been with a lot of women.

Farzad seemed to want to change the subject after that. He got up and put a cassette into a tape deck on the desk by the window and pressed the play button. The volume was low and the sound a little scratchy, but I determined from the lilting drumbeats and wailing vocals that it was Persian music.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked. I laughed and jumped up from the floor.

"Sure. Okay. But I don't really know how to dance to this kind of music."

"It's a Persian group. One of my favorites. Don't worry, it's easy, I'll show you." As a dance instructor might have done, he put one of my hands on his shoulder and one of his hands around my waist and took my other hand in his free one. I was wearing a cropped T-shirt that, contrary to my long laundry list of Mormon rules, bared some of my midriff, so his hand on my waist touched bare skin, causing a little shiver of excitement. He pulled me close, and we danced to a slow song, much the way I'd danced to Top 40 slow songs at dances back in high school.

It was all in good fun for a few minutes more until suddenly, with no warning, a hard, paralyzing arousal washed over me. I could feel Farzad trembling in my arms. All the blood seemed to drain out of my head, my lips felt cold, and the center of me from my belly button down to my knees felt flushed with heat. I was dizzy and felt like I might fall down. I froze in place and then stumbled backwards, tottering stiffly on my feet like a wooden toy soldier until I bumped into the bed and sat down on it. Farzad stood motionless on the carpet in the middle of the room, looking at me, his face expressionless.

"I'm not used to—dancing like that," I said, breaking off mid-sentence to gulp for breath. I hoped that saying something, however banal, would bring back a sense of sanity and normalcy to the room.

Farzad turned his back to me to face the window. He walked forward a few paces, opened the window, and put his head out towards the trees. Leaning over the windowsill, he drew in several deep breaths of the cool air coming in from outside. Then he turned back, reached over to the tape player on the desk, and pushed the stop button. The buzz of Persian music clicked off, and the room fell silent.

Farzad turned again to look out toward the trees. Putting his hands back on the windowsill, he leaned out slightly and started to sing. It sounded like the same haunting, aching melody of strange words I had heard him sing that one

morning at dawn before I moved out of the *Wohnheim*. I got up and crossed the room to stand over by the desk. Leaning back against it at an angle, I tried to see the expression on Farzad's face. His eyes were closed and he looked half pained and half pious, as though he were praying and grieving at the same time.

When he paused for a few moments, I ventured to ask, "What do the words mean?"

He looked darkly at me over his shoulder.

"Nothing. It doesn't mean anything."

Awkward moments of silence passed. At last I said it had been really nice to see him, but I had better go join the others—unless he wanted to come out to the café with us after all?

No, thank you for the invitation; he preferred to stay where he was.

We said our goodbyes. I opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, closing the door slowly, trying to catch a last glimpse of him through the narrowing gap before turning around. I felt dazed, stiff, and wooden. I headed back to the communal kitchen, where Sabine was sitting at the table.

"Where have you been? We were waiting for you." She shot me an inquisitive look, then added in an arch tone, "You were in there with Farzad for an awfully long time. We wondered what had happened to you."

I could feel myself blushing. "I'm sorry. We just got to talking and I totally lost track of the time." I apologized again for making everyone wait for me, and then we gathered the others and left for the café.

I SAW FARZAD one other time before I left Hamburg. I had come back to the Winterhude dorm to see Sabine again. I was afraid of running into him although I had missed him and thought about him often since moving to the new place. Neither of us had made any effort to stay in touch, which I took to mean nothing good on his part. All the same, I half wondered if I'd only imagined the sea-change that had come over our brief friendship when we'd danced in Farangis's room, since, after all, nothing had really happened and nothing had been said. It wasn't as though he'd even made a pass at me. Still, I had a sense of having been led into temptation, of having been led up to the brink of a precipice, and of having said no, and of having hurt and embittered him with my no. I also felt vaguely betrayed, not only by Farzad, who was supposed to be like a favorite uncle to me and wasn't supposed to be dangerous, since he was together with Farangis and it was her room we had danced in, and since she was beautiful and had smiled at me and lent me her frying pan—but also by my own cold terror at the precipice, the unreasoning terror that hadn't given me a choice about saying no, that had made me back so irrevocably out of and away from those trembling arms.

As it happened, I did run into Farzad, who wandered alone into the otherwise empty kitchen while I sat at the table waiting for Sabine. I felt a rush of delight on seeing him and told him with all the ingrained openness of my American

manners that I was happy to find him there. He smiled his same broad smile, but his eyes glittered differently, his expression harder and colder. He asked how I was getting on in the new place and if my semester had started off well. I answered his questions, and then, overwhelmed with relief that he wasn't ignoring me or hiding from me or visibly angry with me, I blurted out awkwardly, "You're so nice, Farzad!"

He surveyed me from his standing position and said in a low voice, "I'm not that nice."

There was no accompanying smile, and I knew then that in spite of the politeness he was angry, and I felt afraid of him, as though he had issued a warning. I fell silent, and he proceeded to make toast, and we didn't talk any more until Sabine came and I left with her.

IN THE STORY I TOLD MYSELF about Farzad afterwards, he was a seducer who had run a routine on me, from which I, doe-eyed virgin, had managed a thrillingly narrow escape with my virtue just barely intact. The routine went: (1) Wait till she moves out of the dorm; (2) tell the multiple-girlfriends-at-a-time story; (3) gauge her reaction; and (4) if positive, ask her to dance and make your move. The whole thing was especially reprehensible given that his aim was to use me to cheat on a girlfriend who was away and possibly in danger in Tehran. And in her own dorm room, no less. And after she had lent me her frying pan! And when he knew full well that I was Mormon and therefore had to stay chaste or risk eternal damnation.

Another version of the story was a comedy of clashing cultures in which the comic element was that we had both so obtusely managed to talk completely past each other—I utterly missing the point of the story of the simultaneous multiple girlfriends, he oblivious to the earnestness that underlay my talk about chastity and fidelity and love for God and my neighbor—he making his points with typically excessive Middle Eastern subtlety and I missing them with classic American inability to grasp nuance. There was also the hard-to-miss irony of a secular leftist having escaped the hands of murderous Koran-thumping mullahs only to end up some years later in the arms of a fanatically religious Book of Mormon-thumping ingénue from America.

Now, as I put the story on paper, I find myself coming up with more sympathetic interpretations. Maybe he genuinely thought he was the one being seduced. After all, it was always me who came to his room and spent hours alone with him. And who in his situation wouldn't have had his head turned at least a little by a shy, virginal 22-year-old American girl confiding in him and hanging on his every word? Maybe he had already encountered his share of people in Iran or elsewhere who went on about chastity but were happy enough to be relieved of it when the opportunity arose. Maybe he thought it would put my mind at ease to hear about his impressive ability to fall in love with more than one woman at a time. Maybe when I froze and backed out of his arms with

that look of wide-eyed incomprehension on my face, he felt he'd been led on and made a fool of.

Or maybe the fact that his intentions weren't purely avuncular didn't necessarily mean they had to have been lotharian. Maybe he had no intentions at all, just a gnawing loneliness, grieving as he was in a cold and (to him) unwelcoming country over an absent lover and a lost home that would never be the same even if he could go back. Maybe he acted impulsively, and those strange moments of dancing together had been as unexpected for him as for me, and he was angry with himself for how he'd behaved, as much as at me for backing away.

Whatever the story I tell myself, in retrospect it had a moral, which was that like Farzad I was a *temperamentvoller Mensch* and wasn't cut out to be a scholar or a saint. The flooding, destroying desire that dancing with Farzad in Farangis's room had called up was something I had felt before and would feel again. But in those days each occasion on which I felt it was momentous because it pushed me further in the direction of the truth—not Truth with a capital T, as I thought I wanted back then, but the truth of myself, which I was still far from, but needed in order to find any further truth that mattered. For that reason, whatever version of the story I tell myself about Farzad, it ends with a feeling of wonder and gratitude.

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