

Chapter 7

PERFECT JOY

Tehran in the summer of 1977 was a city of two halves—on the surface smooth like a millpond, but dark with unknown debris beneath. Already as far back as 1975 in Nottingham my suspicions that politically all was not well back home had been raised by a letter from Baba stating that the two-party political system which at least had paid lip-service to democracy had been abolished by the Shah. From now on there would only be a single political party called the *Rastakheez* ('resurrection', 'resurgence'). All loyal citizens were required to join it.

Students in foreign countries like me were expected to register their loyalty to the new system by signing the relevant form at the Embassy of Iran in those countries. Baba demanded that I do so in London without delay. He, along with many of his generation whose education had been heavily subsidised by royal grants, was afraid that non-action might be interpreted as being an 'opposer of the regime'. I don't think he realised what a logistical burden that demand placed on me. Nottingham was nowhere near the heart of London where the Iranian Embassy was situated. With the Consulate's mornings-only office hours it would mean my having to find accommodation to stay overnight somewhere in the city simply in order to put my scribble to a piece of paper which I was certain would be summarily dispatched to a drawer. So I ignored Baba's injunction which he followed up over the next few weeks by several more written reminders. The whole futile exercise served to raise concerns that the country was entering an era in which the Shah was no longer held in complete reverence by his subjects.

When I returned to Tehran in September 1977 it was obvious that there were tensions in the air. Criticism of the regime, however innocent, could be sufficient grounds for imprisonment. But

it was also no longer possible to stay out of trouble merely by refraining from open criticism. SAVAK began to round up writers, poets and intellectuals who failed to acclaim the current regime sufficiently, and it was rumoured that these people were punished for being 'Marxists'. Dozens of prominent clerics were also banished from the country. Many people now appeared to have an acquaintance who had mysteriously disappeared.

On the surface life appeared stable in the Tehran of my family circle. Baba was still employed as an honorary lecturer in Public Health at the National University of Iran in Evin. This was also where I held a lectureship in the same English department where I had once been an undergraduate. We didn't talk about politics at home, and *Amu-jan's* involvement with SAVAK activities was never mentioned.

During that first year after my return home inflation rose dramatically, and the government began to cut back on public expenditure which left many building projects unfinished. Hastily constructed dams failed to deliver water or electricity adequately in many areas, manufacturing profits fell, transportation facilities were inadequate to process the mounting deliveries of consumer goods waiting at the dockside in the Persian Gulf, and the price of basic goods rose even further. One of the most tragic failures of the Shah's innovative and laudable land reforms was that the plots distributed were often too small to yield a living, so peasants who had been dependent for centuries on feudal landlords were left with neither the means nor the expertise to succeed as modern farmers.

Migration to the cities to seek work soon became a flood, and those who found jobs in affluent north Tehran saw a very different kind of life—a city of Western decadence where supposedly observant Muslims frequented cafés and cinemas dressed in revealing clothing, and drank alcohol in *farangi*-style restaurants. Meanwhile, it was rumoured that the millions of dollars gleaned from the oil boom were being spent on military weapons. Further fuelling the disappointment felt by ordinary workers on low

wages was the preponderance of white-collar foreign workers, especially Americans, on prodigious untaxed salaries. Resentment grew, and with it corruption and injustice. Simple working class people didn't understand all the fancy talk by government ministers. They had always sought for answers to problems from their local mullah who had prayed that God's will be done. But now vocal mullahs were being sidelined by politicians, and many villages were turning into ghost towns. Like most ordinary citizens our family's sole source of information was what we read in the press or heard on the local radio, but even I was now aware that this was not the same country I had left five years earlier—a feeling that was not merely the result of having grown a little older and wiser; there was definitely a faint menace in the air.



Against this backdrop I was welcomed home as an intellectual heroine, with friends and relatives coming round to congratulate Baba and Mami on my return: 'Hasn't she done well? You must be so proud—she's definitely the brainy one!' Some more well-meaning folk added: 'Make sure she makes a good match; she mustn't be allowed to become a *torshideh* ('soured') old maid—she needs a husband!' Baba and Mami knew my hopes of a permanent relationship with the shadowy James had been dashed. While they were outwardly sympathetic, especially as James was a doctor and would therefore have been a suitable prospective son-in-law, they said they had known it would never work—we were poles apart in all the requisites of a lasting union—family background, nationality, culture, religion. 'Love' apparently was ephemeral and wasn't a requisite of the equation. Their advice was: 'Forget him—there are plenty more fish in the sea!'

I began teaching at the Faculty of Arts in October of that year. My departmental colleagues were mostly young Iranians who had been educated abroad, but there were also a few British and American lecturers who were mainly the foreign wives of Iranians. We were an eclectic group but we got along fine. My stu-

dents' English language skills were not really up to the mark; they struggled massively with the literary topics that were my particular remit. They were essentially students of English as a *second* language, not students of English literature. We had to go back to basics, and I ended up devising extra mini-courses in subjects such as Greek Mythology in order that they might try to understand Shakespeare and Milton.

One major problem was the lack of suitably simple reference material in the departmental library, and my students were not, on the whole, readers—they liked to be spoon-fed the basics and then to regurgitate the memorised information in their essays and examination papers. They demanded that lecture notes be typed up and distributed to individual students in the form of stapled 'polycopies'. By the time some of my colleagues retired they had actually written the equivalent of three or four textbooks-worth of 'polycopied' course notes! All this was a far cry from my own experience in England. Interestingly, most of the students actually believed they were really very good—after all they had excelled over hundreds of other hopefuls in the annual university *konkur* (from the French *concours* i.e. competition) in order to have gained an undergraduate place—and as far as they were concerned they were the elite. I sometimes wondered wryly what they would have made of the comment the Nottingham Professor of English had made to me: 'Go away, read for a few months, then come back and see me!'

Apart from the pedestrian grind of having to prepare and photocopy diluted teaching material, my university days weren't too full and I was able to also take on an extra job teaching English literature a few hours per week to secondary school students at an international school, the Parthian School, in nearby Evin. My pupils there were teenagers mostly of mixed parentage with an Iranian father and an English mother. My job was to prepare them for 'O Level' English (the British Ordinary Level of the General Certificate of Education). They were a great bunch of kids and it was nice to teach a small class of just five pupils as opposed to

lecturing in a large amphitheatre full of undergraduates. At the end of the school year the English GCE 'O Level' examination papers were delivered to the school by diplomatic pouch via the British Embassy and the completed scripts returned in the same manner.



I still lived at home with Baba and Mami, but I was getting itchy feet. My sister Lilli was now married with a baby daughter, Maryam. She and her husband Hossein, a fellow social worker, had departed for the USA where they were both enrolled in post-graduate study programmes at the University of West Virginia. I didn't know it then, but from that point on Lilli and I would not see each other again for over thirty years, and we would become virtual strangers.

My parents had their own circle of friends with whom they socialised, often meeting for afternoon tea and playing endless rubbers of Bridge—a new craze among the older generation of middle-class Persians. At home they entertained with a regular *dowreh* ('circle' i.e. meeting of friends) on most afternoons, at which I was expected to be present as the polite and helpful daughter of the house proffering trays of tea and fruit. The regularity of this duty was starting to grate on me, and after five years of living independently I was ready to have my own space.

In the late 'seventies it was not unheard of for young professional women in Tehran to be sharing an apartment together. One of my Parthian School English colleagues, Sue, was looking for two flatmates to share a three-bedroom furnished apartment not far from us in the Yusefabad area. Another English girl, Ann, a marine biologist working for the Iranian fisheries industry, would be the third person to join us. Baba and Mami were not entirely happy with the idea of their unmarried daughter no longer living with them at home but in another house a few streets away.

'Whatever will people say?' Mami kept repeating. 'They'll think we must have had a bad argument...' However, because I

was beginning to get on their nerves at home Baba eventually inspected the premises and agreed that the landlord and his wife who lived in the apartment below were respectable people and that the rent was not exorbitant. In any case I was now earning a decent salary. In the end it was agreed that I could go and live in the flat with the two English girls with the stipulation that under no circumstances were any lone men to be anywhere in the vicinity of our flat after 10pm. I finally got some measure of independence at the age of twenty-eight when I moved away from my parents and into the new apartment with Ann and Sue. We all got along fine. Each of us went out to work every day, returning home to cook and eat in the evenings. Ann and I became particularly good friends, and crucially it was Ann, a committed Christian, who first introduced me to the Persian Church which I hadn't known even existed. Curious to know where she worshipped, I asked her which church she frequented. 'St Paul's—the Persian Church, of course! There's a service every Friday in the English School.'



The English school of Tehran, officially named the Henry Martyn School after the eighteenth-century missionary and translator of the Psalms and New Testament into Persian, served as the premises of the Persian Anglican Church. It had a small indigenous congregation of Persian-speaking Iranians, mainly converts from Islam, but also from Judaism and Zoroastrianism, and in addition, a much larger congregation of English-speaking expatriates. The Episcopal Church In Jerusalem and the Middle East, to which it properly belongs, is a branch of the Anglican Communion which had been established following Church Missionary Society endeavours in the previous century. The Diocese of Iran is one of its four large dioceses, the other three being the Diocese of Egypt and North Africa, the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, and the Diocese of Jerusalem (together with Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestinian territories and Israel). At St Paul's Church in Tehran religious

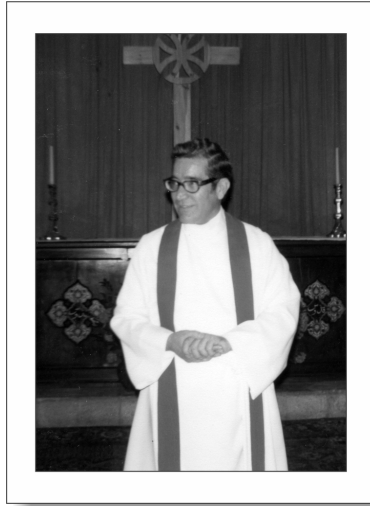
services were conducted in both Persian and English. Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, himself a convert from Islam, strongly upheld the view that the church's inherent Persian roots and culture were always its strength and he was keen that the church should maintain its Iranian essence. The accent was firmly on 'Christianisation' and not on 'westernisation'.

Because the early missionaries were keen to show the love of Jesus in action in Persia, they had established a large network of charitable organisations in the form of Christian hospitals and schools for the blind in cities like Isfahan, Shiraz, Yazd and Kerman. These institutions employed a large number of foreign Anglican and Presbyterian missionaries to keep them running. The danger of this hive of activity, especially for Muslim converts in the post-Revolution era, was that in becoming Christians and frequenting the company of such people, hard-line extremists might assume that they were aligning themselves to Western interests. This scenario, however, was yet to occur.

Friday is the Sabbath day in Islam and the one day in the week when people don't need to work. Innovatively, this church had switched its Sunday services to Fridays to make attendance possible for the majority. One Friday morning I accompanied Ann to the Henry Martyn School. St Paul's Church in Tehran seemed to offer everything I had hoped for in all my years of sitting on the religious fence, and I may never have come across it had it not been for branching out to live on my own away from my parents.

The priest in charge of the larger English-speaking congregation of mainly foreign expatriate workers and diplomatic staff was a young American pastor, the Reverend Stephen Arpee. His Iranian counterpart, the Reverend Khalil Razmara, who like Bishop Hassan was also a convert from Islam, was in charge of the much smaller Persian-speaking congregation consisting of first- and second-generation converts. Every Friday there were two church services at St Paul's, both of which included Holy Communion—one in English in the morning and another in Persian in the afternoon. In theory one could attend Divine Service in both lan-

guages on the same day. The Persian congregation also met for Evensong on Friday evenings. I began to attend both services fairly regularly and felt instantly at home. At last I had found my church, a place of worship where I felt comfortable among folk from the same background as myself.



Rev. Khalil Razmara, St Paul's Church, Tehran

My eventual 'Road to Damascus Moment' was not preceded by a trumpet flourish or a flash of lightning, but it happened in a quiet moment one evening while I was at my desk writing. Suddenly I *knew*. I can't remember why I thought I *knew*—I just did. It was really that simple. After all those years of questioning, searching, deliberating, all the agonising over the pros and cons of conversion, none of it seemed to matter any more. I knew I had been a Christian at heart for a long time, but now I felt it was time to stop hiding and to declare it. I wanted to be purged of my past life, and to receive the sacrament of baptism. At the time I said nothing to Baba and Mami, but only confided to the two priests, Reverend

Stephen Arpee and Reverend Khalil Razmara. Both were quietly pleased, and Stephen said that he would prepare me for baptism for which I would require a course of instruction. Khalil was more cautious, and said it was really important that I should first meet our Bishop, Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, who lived in Isfahan, several hundred miles south of Tehran. It so happened that Bishop Hassan was due to visit Tehran soon, and a meeting was duly arranged.

I have never forgotten that meeting. It was to change my life. Bishop Hassan was a truly loveable man, and a real shepherd to his scattered flock. In time he became a surrogate father to me, as he also was to many others from all walks of life. We talked privately for a long time, and he impressed upon me that the road to baptism in Iran was fraught with practical problems. 'I would rather baptize a whole village than a single person,' he said, 'not because the numbers are greater, but because people who are in the same boat support one another when times are hard. A single person converting from Islam will be very alone in their faith.' His warning to me was that baptism could isolate me from my family and other Muslim Iranians. A convert would be in it for the long haul and would need the metaphorical stamina of a marathon runner in order to survive.

Then Bishop Hassan asked me a surprising question: 'Do you want to get married?' When I said yes, provided that the right man came along, he continued, 'Then I presume that in adopting Christianity you would want a Christian marriage?' 'Of course,' I replied. 'It goes without saying.' 'Well,' he said, 'I have to tell you that I have travelled all over this country as Bishop, and I have met all our congregations up and down Iran, and I can tell you now categorically that there isn't a pool of single Iranian Christian men your age or older! There is a blind Christian gentleman in Isfahan, and a divorced Christian fellow in Kerman, neither of whom presently has any desire to get married. If you are serious about becoming a Christian and having a Christian home in Iran, then by becoming a Christian in this country you may be closing