

In the Shadow of the Shahs

“An honest and vivid account of one woman’s faith journey through challenging times. At turns both funny and moving, the book includes some delightful vignettes of an unusual life in Iran. It contains some surprising twists and turns and provides insights which will appeal to anyone interested in exploring conversion and faith through the lenses of culture, identity and personal roots. I so appreciated reading this book.”

Rt Rev Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani, Bishop of Loughborough

“This account of conversion from a Muslim background to Christianity in the context of Iran is fascinating and the author has told her story in a clear and informative way. The whole story is beautifully told, and the book can therefore be thoroughly recommended as an example of a remarkable ‘Journey of Faith’ in the 20th and 21st centuries.”

Prof Hugh Goddard, Honorary Professorial Fellow, Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World, University of Edinburgh

“This is a beautifully written autobiography of a remarkable life. Farifteh Robb brilliantly tells her journey of faith and love across two cultures. I found it captivating and could not put it down.”

John Clark, Chairman of the Friends of the Diocese of Iran



In the Shadow of the Shahs

Finding Unexpected Grace

Farifteh V. Robb



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For my children and their children

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Author's Note

Insofar as this memoir touches on recent history and political developments in Iran, the author's sole intention has been to provide a personal perspective and reflection on these events as they were experienced by her at the time.



Map of Iran



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Preface

For a number of years my family have been asking me to recount the story of events that have shaped my life. It has taken me a quarter of a century to find the courage to do so. Until now my reluctance has been due to the fear of portraying events inaccurately, the fear of offending people, and the fear of censure. These fears still lurk somewhere within me, but I am now a different person and finally ready to acknowledge the reconciliation of my two worlds.

I was born *farangi*, in Geneva, Switzerland, in the winter of 1950. *Farangi* is a Persian word meaning “European”. My name “Farifteh” (“loved to distraction”) is pure Persian, but I was also given a *farangi* middle name, “Valentine”, from the saint on whose commemorative name-day I was due to be born. This name was recorded in my Iranian birth certificate even though middle names are not customary in Iran. When my sister arrived two years later she too was given a European middle name. There was no doubt in my parents’ minds that being born in *Farang* (“Europe”) was an advantage not to be ignored.

Growing up *farangi* in a Persian family in Switzerland and attending an international school meant that my sister and I became trilingual – able to converse effortlessly in Persian (*Farsi*), French and English. On visits to Iran this skill, along with our European manners, was always much admired, and my parents would bask in the knowledge that we were really blessed to have had a *farangi* start in life. However, despite this auspicious beginning, things didn’t turn out as they had envisaged, and we sisters have ended up with very different lives. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 in

PREFACE

Iran cut a great swathe through the social order, distanced many families, and changed ordinary lives for ever. Powerless to stem its tide the events that followed the Revolution separated us, and our paths circumstantially diverged. Sadly, now, a gulf exists between us – I have become quintessentially European, while she, perhaps somewhat reluctantly, is completely Iranian. We have each lost what might have been.

This memoir is the story of one such changed life – my own. I have written it for my children, and their children's children, that they might know something of their roots, and understand my life's journey. My own parents, like many of their generation, were economical in recounting their past lives, and much of their history is now regrettably lost. Until recently, I, too, have been similarly guarded in describing my experiences of conversion from Islam, and my life in Iran during the Revolution, in any detail. My hope is that this memoir will go some way in redressing that situation. It is not an exhaustive autobiography, but primarily a reflection on the more memorable events in my life.

I continue to inhabit two worlds – the Persian and the *farangi*. At times I have attempted to ditch one in favour of the other, but both remain resolutely integral to my psyche, and ultimately they have intertwined to make me the person I have become. It is this reconciliation that has bestowed upon me the unexpected gift of abundant grace.

Edinburgh, 2017



CHAPTER 1

Baba and Mami



Baba and Mami, Birmingham 1948

People often ask me, “Whatever happened to the name ‘Persia?’” a name evocative of roses, nightingales, carpets, and cats, whereas “Iran” conjures up uneasy images of stern-faced mullahs and gun-wielding extremists. But Iran has always called itself by this name which means “Land of the Aryans”. In the early

twentieth century Reza Shah, father of the last shah of Iran, led his country into a modernisation programme which involved sweeping changes to the social order, industrial reforms, and the casting aside of an agrarian way of life which had dominated the kingdom for generations. The old order was based on a hierarchy that had bequeathed stability to Persian social mores for centuries. Now, overnight it seemed, gone was the society where there was a universally accepted code of dress, behaviour, and etiquette. For now the *farangi* way of life was “in”, and West, it seemed, had become the new “best”.

My parents, Baba and Mami, were unusual for middle class Iranians of their generation in that they had met in Tehran but had married in England in the late 1940s. There was a difference of seventeen years between their ages which meant that Baba was getting old when Mami was only entering middle age. Baba was born in 1905 and remembered the advent of World War I. He was raised in Semnan, a provincial town on the plains of north-eastern Iran at a time when Iran was still an agrarian country governed by feudal laws. Mami was born in Tehran in 1922. She was a city girl and a child of World War II.

My respective grandfathers were both physicians of the Persian old school. Baba’s father was an eighth-generation doctor prominent in local affairs. His extensive knowledge of illnesses and traditional remedies meant that he was a well-respected member of Semnani society, and he was accorded the honorary accolade of *Hâfez-e-Seheh* which means “Protector of Health” in Arabic, then the *lingua franca* of learned Persians. His own father had been known by the honorary title of *Montakhab-al-Attebâ* (“Chosen among Physicians”). Decades later when the Iranian government decreed that all citizens should adopt a Western-style surname excluding soubriquets such as *Haji* (“pilgrim of Mecca”), *Seyyed* (“descendant of the prophet Mohammad”), or

IN THE SHADOW OF THE SHAHS

Mirza (“nobleman”), he chose *Hâfezi* as his family’s surname, the suffix “*i*” being a descriptive patronymic indicating descent from the *Hâfez* line. [NB the surname “Hafezi” has always been written without a circumflex accent].



My paternal grandfather



My maternal grandfather

Mami's father was a doctor in downtown Tehran. Always respectfully known as *Aghâyé Doktor* ("Mister Doctor"), he practised a combination of homeopathy and public health, laced with a liberal dose of common sense. A small photograph of each grandfather exists, probably taken in the 1930s – both men were obviously important enough to warrant posing for this new portrait technology. My Semnani grandfather, elderly and benign, wears a crumpled Western-style linen jacket, shirt and tie; my Tehrani grandfather, balding with a natty moustache, is also dressed in a European suit and sports a handkerchief in his left breast pocket.

Baba grew up in a traditional household in Semnan, a dusty provincial town on the caravan route to the holy city of Mashhad. His home was built around a courtyard with its small central pool. In the outer courtyard were the men's quarters known as *biruni* ("outside"). Here men sat, drank tea, chatted, ate, smoked their water-pipes, recited verse, and received visitors. Within the courtyard were the inner rooms, the women's quarters known as *andarun* ("inside"), the domestic heart of the home, a set of interconnecting rooms protected on all sides by the patriarchal quarter. It included the kitchen, the chicken run, and an outhouse with its hole-in-the-ground toilet. The central room housed the all-important *korsi*, a traditional Persian indoor source of heat which is a low table under which a brazier is filled with hot coals and over which a thick blanket is draped. A tray containing the *samovar* (a tall metal urn to boil water) and teapot was placed on top. Around this family and visitors alike could sit and socialise.

Baba's mother had died when he was very young. He had an older sister and several step-siblings from his father's remarriage. Because of his mother's illness he had been wet-nursed by a local woman. In later years I met an elderly gentleman who

was respectfully introduced to us as Baba's *hamshireh* or "milk brother". He was not a relation, but as the wet-nurse's own son he was considered to be honourably related, since suckling from the same breast was deemed to create a bond as strong as a blood tie. Provincial Iran in the first part of the twentieth century was still in the grip of nomadic tribes, and marauding horsemen sometimes rode into town to engage in skirmishes with one another. When this occurred womenfolk would rush out to gather their children to safety. Baba remembered several occasions when he was scooped up and bundled along with a number of other small children and hidden in the cavernous depths of the communal *tanoor* (oven) which had cooled down after the day's bread had been baked.

The Iran of Baba's youth was nevertheless culturally secure and steeped in traditions which had remained unchanged for generations. People knew where they stood in the social hierarchy and everyone followed the strict codes of Persian etiquette without question. Persian etiquette is based on lofty ideals of politeness and hospitality, and infringement is often taken as a discourtesy. There is, for instance, the superiority of age. The greater your age, the higher your status and the more deferential your treatment. Elders are at the top of this social pyramid, while children are at its opposite end. Children are taught from an early age not to sit at the top end of a room in a social gathering. This area is considered to be *bâlâ* (high); it's usually furthest from the door, with the nicest end of carpet and the most comfortable chairs. The doorway area or *pâ'een* (below) is likely to be draughty and usually reserved for children and younger family members. Two separate incidents from Baba's childhood illustrate how an ingrained observance of Persian etiquette could at times be taken to extremes, and how it could also hide an undercurrent of intolerance, sometimes unfairly so.

The first incident is about Baba's elder sister who had been recently married and was the new mother of an infant boy. Her in-laws lived several *farsangs* (a Persian measure of distance equivalent to about four miles) distant from Semnan. They had not yet met their first grandchild and had proposed a visit. For days my aunt had busied herself cleaning the house and cooking meals, but her baby fell ill with a high fever. Before the advent of antibiotics there was a local saying: "*bacheyé avval mâlé kalâghé*" (the firstborn belongs to the crows) – crows being portents of doom. A poultice was applied, prayers were said, and the baby appeared to rally. As Baba's sister anxiously rocked the cradle on the appointed day, a cloud of dust was spied in the distance from the horses' hooves and the *droshkeh* (an open carriage) on the desert road. Suddenly the baby stopped whimpering, turned ashen grey and lay completely still. In that instant my aunt knew that her infant son had died. But so deeply instilled was her sense of propriety and hospitality that, instead of running wailing from the door to break the terrible news, she swallowed her grief and pretended that her child was merely sleeping. A dutiful daughter-in-law, she stepped out to welcome her husband's parents in the manner befitting their status. Pleasantries were exchanged and tea dispensed. Her in-laws admired their sleeping grandchild from a distance dictated by the fever, and after a brief and formal visit said their farewells, satisfied that their son had made a good match – his bride knew how to run a well-appointed and hospitable home, and as a bonus had also quickly produced a son. My aunt watched until their *droshkeh* was again a speck of dust on the horizon. Only then did she fall on the ground giving vent to grief, beating her breast and wailing inconsolably. The remarkable fact is that such behaviour was almost expected and not considered to be out of the ordinary. Many of Baba's relatives, on being informed of what had happened, merely commented: "Well, of course, that is exactly how a true *khânûm* (lady) would behave."

The second incident relates to the castigation of a neighbouring family who through no real fault of their own had fallen upon hard times. One of their sons had unfortunately become a *tariâki* (drug addict). To fund his habit he had sold everything his family possessed, piece by piece, leaving them destitute in a house devoid of all furniture. At last, desperate for more cash, he even dismantled the large ornate gate from his family's *biruni* and sold that too, thus shamefully exposing their new poverty-stricken existence to all passers-by in the street. The Semnani elders muttered and shook their heads over tea and backgammon, while reproaching the innocent neighbours behind their backs for having somehow fostered disrespect and poor manners within the family which had brought about this dishonour and fall from grace.

On the other hand, it is inherent consideration for the well-being of strangers that redeems true Persian hospitality from any perceived superficiality. Iran has an age-old Zoroastrian tradition relating to the thirteenth day of *Now-ruz* (Persian New Year, celebrated on the first day of spring) when it's unlucky to stay indoors. Known as *Sizdah bé-dar* ("Thirteen Out-of-doors") it is a day when whole families universally decamp to the countryside to enjoy a picnic. Baba remembered one particular *Sizdah bé-dar* when Semnan's local *kalântari* (police station) had a single prisoner, a thief, in its cells. Rather than leave him indoors and prey to the "Evil Eye" (which is traditionally believed to lurk indoors on the unlucky thirteenth day seeking to cause misfortune or injury), they walked their prisoner to the picnic site. While children played among the rocks and grown-ups spread rugs under the trees and brought out the food, the *kalântars* (police officers) tied him loosely to a cypress tree. There he rested in the shade, being fed delicacies from everyone's dishes – a bonus day out. Consideration for the feelings of others is Persian etiquette at its very best.

When Baba was ten years old, a *rammâl* or “fortune teller” prophesied that he would one day become a doctor. On a hot summer day he and two lads who were brothers were playing near the dry riverbed in Semnan when they encountered a youth who practised geomancy. For a few coins he tossed his dice, and from the lie of stones and lines in the dirt he foretold that each of them would achieve great things: my father would cure the sick, the elder of the boys would become close to the sultan, and his brother would be a warrior. This prophecy did indeed come to pass: Baba went to medical school, the older boy became a senator in the Shah’s new parliament, and his brother joined the army where he rose to the rank of general. The *rammâl* collected his coins and went on his way. What neither he nor any of the lads could have foreseen was that one day their worlds would come crashing down around them, and that there would be neither sultan nor shah to lead the country, and not even a kingdom remaining.



Baba

There was only one educational establishment in Semnan, and it was for boys only. Baba attended the primary department known as the *maktab* where basic literacy and numeracy were drummed into pupils by an inordinate volume of copying and rote learning. Subjects taught depended on the skills and interests of their teacher. One of Baba's schoolmasters decided to teach the boys the basics of engineering. This subject was eagerly anticipated by the boys but lessons ended abruptly when it became clear that they were unable to attain the first requisite which involved the ability to draw a long and perfectly straight line in Indian ink without the help of a ruler. This skill had to be mastered first as the bridges and dams that they might be called upon to design in the brave new Iran could end up uneven or lopsided. Why were rulers not allowed? The reason given, Baba said, was that they might not always have all the necessary tools and instruments at their disposal in the desert, and they must be able to "make do" without them! The boys therefore spent an entire term attempting to draw straight lines freehand. Baba was finally able to do this with his eyes closed and looked forward to the next lesson. But after the holidays that particular schoolmaster left town and the boys never progressed beyond this point in engineering studies.

From the *maktab* Baba graduated to the *dâr-al-f'noon*, which served as a secondary school, and after that he travelled to Tehran to study medicine. Upon qualifying as a doctor he first became an adviser at the new Ministry of Health, and subsequently accepted a scholarship from Reza Shah's government to go abroad to study Public Health, choosing England as his destination. Most of his contemporaries who gained one of these prestigious grants chose to go to France, since the old Persian legal and fiscal systems were based on French models and at that time French was the second language in Iran. But Baba had read and admired the popular book *Self Help* (1859) by the Scottish philanthropist and philosopher

Samuel Smiles, and had been inspired by its portrayal of sterling British character-building values such as perseverance, civility, independence, and individuality. It was for him a turning point.

Baba first went to London in the summer of 1936, arriving at the height of the abdication crisis of Edward VIII. It was a world away from the sun-baked fig orchard of his father's house and the shady walnut and pistachio trees that dotted the dusty streets of his native Semnan. His journey to England from Iran was by rail across Turkey and Russia – a journey that seemed to take for ever. It was, in effect, a voyage that crossed not only the East–West cultural divide, but which also bridged an agrarian way of life and the new industrial age. From Tehran Baba made his way north to Russia where he boarded a Trans-Siberian train that rattled across the northern steppes of Russia and the arid valleys of Ottoman Turkey before stopping for a few hours in Constantinople.

Baba was not unused to the sight of poverty, but even he was shocked at the ragged state of Russian peasantry where, in the railway stations, barefoot women were employed to shovel snow and dirt from the tracks. Baba thought a country must really be desperate if it sent its womenfolk out barefoot in all weathers to sweep snow. In his dominantly patriarchal world women were considered to be weak and subservient, but if weak they were also to be cherished and protected.

The seemingly interminable journey across Europe passed in a blur, but Baba retained a vivid recollection of finally arriving in Paris at the Gare Saint-Lazare at night. It was raining, and the street lights of Paris twinkled in the dark. Electricity was as yet to arrive in Semnan, and Baba was completely entranced by what seemed to be “fairy lights” all around him. He could not stop looking down at these shiny dancing stars reflected in the wet pavements. From Paris Baba made his way to Dieppe and then across the English Channel to Newhaven.

Lodging with a landlady not far from the Mall, everything appeared strange to him – the small dark houses, the soot-laden chimneys, the cold and damp weather, and the thick swirling London fog. Memories of sunny poetry recitals among the cypress trees of Semnan now were a world away, but Baba was keen to better himself and he threw himself enthusiastically into the business of getting to know this new *farangi* world. Among his early recollections were watching the changing of the guard at the gates of Buckingham Palace and seeing a kilted regiment marching past. “Who are they?” he mused out loud, not having seen men in skirts before.

“That’s the Middlesex, mate!” a bystander incorrectly informed him.

“Ah,” he thought to himself wryly, “in England, there are men, there are women, and there is also ‘middle sex!’”

Meanwhile he first had to become fluent in English, matriculate, and sit the entrance examinations for Medicine. Baba’s entry into the training scheme was not as straightforward as it had seemed when his acceptance papers had come through in Iran. Already a qualified doctor, his traditional Persian medical qualification from Tehran University wasn’t considered adequate in the English system, and he was obliged to complete the final three years of undergraduate Medicine and Surgery at University College Hospital in London prior to studying at “The Tropical”, as the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine was locally known. The first hurdle was matriculation. For this he was required to pass the final school board examinations in literacy and numeracy. Baba duly applied. The problem was his mastery of English, which was as yet fairly rudimentary. He managed to pass the literacy paper where he had to write an essay titled “What I would do if I had five guineas”. He did rather well at this, considering that his reflections were based on the experiences of

a thirty-year-old graduate, and not merely the saving of pennies for sweets or a bicycle. The maths paper was a different challenge. It contained a problem involving the speed of falling hailstones. Baba raised his hand to ask the meaning of the word “hailstone”.

“No questions,” intoned the invigilator with a masklike expression on his face.

Never one to accept defeat, Baba did his calculations but wrote in the margin of his paper: “I don’t know what a hailstone is, but I have done the sum by assuming that each hailstone weighs 15 lb.” He passed.



Baba as a young doctor in London

A few years later, having finally requalified as a doctor in the British system, he returned to Iran to work at the Ministry of Health in Tehran. There he became acquainted with one of the

young secretaries – Mami. But their friendship then was solely on a formal footing.



Mami

Unlike Baba who was born almost a generation earlier, Mami's youth was spent in the eye of Reza Shah's cultural reforms. *Aghâyé Doktor*, my Tehrani grandfather, was a strict disciplinarian who ruled his household with a rod of iron. His three sons (one died in infancy) and three daughters knew him as a kindly but remote autocrat whose word was law. They lived in a three-storeyed brick house at the end of an alley in downtown Tehran, and in keeping with his status as a physician, *Aghâyé Doktor* ran his household along fairly progressive lines. Meals were taken at a dining table with knives and forks – then relatively unusual in Persian households where a family traditionally sat on the floor round a cloth spread on the carpet and ate using their fingers and spoons. A dining table was considered

to be very *farangi*. Mealtimes often ended in tears, however, as even a minor misdemeanour signalled immediate expulsion to the kitchen to sit among the servants. Mami remembers numerous occasions when one after another she and her brothers and sisters were relegated outside until only her father and mother remained seated at either end of their grand table.

As the youngest in a large household Mami felt generally unnoticed. Particularly fond of her father she strove hard to become his favourite. One successful ploy was to lie in wait for the *yakhi* or “street ice seller” to arrive with his mule and cart shouting out loudly “*âyy yakh*” (“Ahoy, ice!”), announcing his wares. During the hot summer months, oblong blocks of ice were hewn from the *qanâts* (underground water stores) deep in the mountain foothills above Tehran where they had been left to freeze during the cold winter months. Frozen *qanât* water would be dug out and hawked around the city streets by *yakhis* who would stop at houses and help to carry the block into the kitchen area where it could be chipped with ice hammers and stored in earthenware pitchers. Prior to the advent of refrigeration, every house aspired to have a *yakhchâl* or “ice pit” to keep perishables fresh. As soon as Mami heard the *yakhi* calling she would run up the alley with sheets of newspaper to take delivery of their daily ice block. Once home she would wrap it carefully in layers of newspaper, further insulate it with a blanket, and then hide it in the coolest place she could think of – usually underneath their horsehair settee. All afternoon she would nurse her ice block, trying to keep it from melting by renewing the layers of newspaper and guarding it from anybody intent on chipping off bits of ice to suck. As soon as her father appeared she would knock off a large chunk with the ice hammer, deposit it in a tall glass with sherbet cordial and put a fresh mint leaf on top. This she would present to her father, who invariably patted her head and told her what a good child she was.

Although Mami lived in the city, she seems to have had more encounters with animals and wildlife than Baba who was raised in the country. Stray cats and dogs roamed in every city street. Dogs are considered as *najess* (“unclean”) in Islam and were universally shunned, but stray cats were sometimes adopted as pets. Mami loved cats. One particular feline was taught by her to feed itself politely by dipping a paw into food and licking it clean. Such was the dexterity of this adopted puss that it was even allowed its own place at the family dining table. One hot afternoon during the siesta Mami watched her cat come face-to-face with a snake that had slithered out of a hole in the dry stone garden wall. Puss bravely stood his ground facing the hissing reptile’s fangs, then took a swift swipe at the serpent’s head while holding a protective paw to its nose. Mami recognised the cat’s innate ability to know that the only vulnerable part of its body unprotected by fur was its nose. Another scary incident also involving a snake was the discovery of a large one hibernating in their prized horsehair settee. In the bazaar, a shocked upholsterer, to whom the settee had been sent for repair, was confronted by a large curled reptile sleeping among the springs and wadding of this settee that he had turned over to inspect its underside. On hindsight, it was recalled that uneven lumps had been felt every time someone had sat down on that piece of furniture. The fact that these lumps seemed to “disappear” if one thumped them hard enough had not been remarked upon at the time!

The sister nearest in age to Mami was Zari, a beautiful child with light hair and the much-prized slanting almond-shaped eyes. But Zari was a rebel, prone to disobedience, and she often got Mami into trouble along with herself. *Aghâyé Doktor* was extremely strict with his daughters, and especially vigilant since Reza Shah’s edict on modernisation meant that all girls should go to school. School uniform was the ubiquitous *sarafan*, a type of pinafore which could

be worn over clothing. Zari would secretly sew up the hem of her *sarafan* to make it shorter, and, loathing the regulation plaits with central parting, she often put her hair up in rag curlers at night. Mami never forgot the morning their father caught sight of them leaving for school with Zari's ringlets bobbing from beneath her headscarf. He strode out into the yard, pulled Zari up by her collar, turned her upside down in his strong arms and dunked her headfirst into the courtyard pool, then set her back on her feet with her hair hanging in wet strands from beneath her soaked headscarf. "Never let me see either of you marching off like that all dolled up – or I'll forbid you to attend school!" Mami always complied with the strict code of conduct expected of them, but Zari, ever the rebel, often balked at imposed restrictions. As matters transpired she would eventually escape as soon as possible into a loveless match that freed her from parental restraint, but not, unfortunately, from paternalistic restrictions that would follow her into married life.

Mami's youth was spent in the eye of Reza Shah's cultural reforms and the one which affected women most was the abolition of the veil. Unlike Arab women Persian women have never hidden their faces. They have traditionally worn a garment known as the *châdor*. The word literally means "tent". In the military *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire soldiers were organised into *urdus* ("camps") where they were protected from the elements by pitching a *châdor*. The term *châdor* also came to signify a protective tentlike covering for women. In essence the *châdor* is a large rectangle of thin cotton worn over the head and draped round the body. It cannot really be fixed onto the wearer other than by holding it together under the chin with one hand, thereby further restricting its wearer. Securing it with pins is considered to be both unsightly and defeatist. In negative terms the *châdor* relegates women to amorphous creatures. Young girls were taught to wear the *châdor*

every time they left the house, even if they were only going out to play. They quickly became adept at holding on to it, though not much else could really be carried in the remaining free hand. Women are sometimes obliged to hold the ends of their *châdor* between their teeth when crossing a busy street simply in order to be able to carry a child in addition to a shopping bag. The *châdor* by virtue of its shapelessness and restriction has come to symbolise second-class citizen status for women, and “ditching one’s *châdor*” was taken as a sign of women’s liberation. Reza Shah’s reforms in the 1930s included a general ban of the *châdor*, and he paraded his own royal women in public without *châdors* wearing hats and *farangi* clothes. Religious people considered this to be scandalous and certain sectors of society refused to comply. In public places such as *bazaars* soldiers were posted to enforce the new rule and instructed to divest any woman of the offending garment and to cut it up with scissors, much like Russian soldiers in the time of Peter the Great who were equipped with shears to remove the long beards of the Boyars. Reza Shah’s attempts to drag his demurring country firmly into the modern world were only partly successful, though like Peter the Great he is credited with creating the dawn of a more enlightened nation.

Mami’s mother, always respectfully known as *Khânûm Bozorg* (“Great Lady”), once had a humiliating experience involving the new *châdor* policy. One sweltering hot midday she realised that she had forgotten to buy bread. As her servant was busy in the kitchen, she lifted her purse, donned her shoes, grabbed her *châdor* and ran up the alley across the road to the local corner shop. Unfortunately, positioned in the doorway was an anti-*châdor* soldier keen for action. *Khânûm Bozorg* was petrified as she had done what some women did in the midday heat – she had shed most of her clothes in the house and was clad only in a thin shift and her underwear. Thinking she would be up the street and back home in a jiffy she was

semi-naked under her *châdor*. The soldier approached demanding that she hand over the garment. “Rules are rules,” he said. “Now give it to me.”

Khânum Bozorg pleaded unavailingly. The soldier became impatient and yanked the outer edge of her *châdor* while she held on to its opposite edge in a grim tug of war. Before the soldier could win, *Khânum Bozorg* managed to break free and run back home clutching her modesty round her with both hands with her purse between her teeth, having left her new shoes behind in the scuffle. “It is much better to lose one’s shoes,” she said, “than to lose one’s *âberu* (dignity).” The irony of this incident is that half a century later, following the Islamic Revolution, Iranian women like *Khânum Bozorg* who had been in the vanguard of modernisation, and who had been persuaded to adopt Western style clothing, were forced back into the ungainly tentlike garment in the interests of the new Islamic modesty. Officials implementing this return to the dark ages were known as the *monkerât* or “purity police”. My grandmother, by then well into her nineties, was obliged to readapt and readopt the now loathsome garment. This was surely a sign that the world was coming to an end.

“No, it’s a revolution,” one of her sons informed her grimly, “Revolution actually means ‘everything must turn around!’”



Khânum Bozorg

When Mami was entering her teens, World War II began. Iran was a neutral country, though this fact was largely ignored by the Allies. Mami remembers bombers flying over Tehran. *Aghâyé Doktor* had instructed that all of his children were to shelter in the *zir-zameen* (underground room) if any planes were in the skies overhead. An illiterate woman servant called Naneh lived with them and helped to look after the children. On quite a few occasions Naneh coaxed her charges out of the safety of the *zir-zameen* and into the courtyard or the street to watch the circling aircraft. "Come out, children, come out and see the big silver birds!" she would cry, and Mami and her brothers and sisters would tumble outside and stare open-mouthed at the Russian and British aircraft flying overhead.

Mami's older brother Hushang was awarded a scholarship from the Shah's government to further his studies in Europe, in Birmingham, as an engineering student. When Mami finished school she became a secretary and shorthand typist in one of the offices of the new Ministry of Health. There she met the young personable Dr Hafezi (Baba) who had been educated in England at University College Hospital in London. Their acquaintance was formal and relatively brief. Dr Hafezi was about to return to London to study further at the prestigious London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Mami said that she, too, was going to England. As the baby of the family Mami had enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than her brothers and sisters and there were few objections when she wanted to travel abroad, the main proviso being that she must be chaperoned by her brother. So in the summer of 1947 Mami and Hushang left Iran and travelled to England together.

They went north to Birmingham where Hushang was to study civil engineering. After a few weeks Mami enrolled as a Pupil Nurse in Birmingham's Dudley Road Hospital where she

would live in the nurses' home and train for a diploma leading to qualification as a State Enrolled Nurse. While in training she would be provided with lodgings and a living wage. It seemed an opportunity too good to be true for a foreign girl – except that Mami grew homesick. She had never been away from home, had very little English and no friends. Her initial dreams of a wonderful life in *Farang* took a rapid nosedive in post-war Birmingham. She came to loathe the daily fare of boiled cabbage and lumpy semolina, the constantly grey skies, the gloomy industrial Midlands, and the loneliness of her dormitory where cheery nurses were continuously slamming their doors and shouting “*Ta-raa, luv!*” Mami endured a few weeks of this life before telling her brother that she wasn't staying. Meanwhile, Hushang was happy in his digs, doing well in his studies, and had already met Margaret, the local English girl whom he would eventually marry. He asked Mami to give it six months – if she didn't like it come next summer, he would take her home to Iran. Fate intervened. At some point during those six months, Baba, now a fully qualified doctor and a public health specialist, travelled to Birmingham to visit friends. He and Mami met once more, and this time a romance blossomed between them.

At the close of 1946, funded by the new Shah's government, Baba had sailed to the United States to learn about sanitation in the American prison service with a view to instituting similar measures in Iran. When he returned to London at the inception of Beveridge's new welfare state and Bevan's National Health Service it was to a city shrouded in a thick pea-soup fog where people queued on wet pavements clutching meagre ration coupons. Before leaving to go home he decided to go north to Birmingham to visit a number of his Iranian friends. There he and Mami met again. He was forty-two years old, and Mami

was only twenty-five. While he was there they heard that Baba had been successful in gaining an appointment as a delegate for the Eastern Mediterranean Region at the International Health Organisation. This important organisation had been formed from the League of Nations, and a year later it was renamed the World Health Organisation, and became a branch of the new United Nations. Its headquarters were in Geneva, Switzerland, and it was a prestigious appointment. Baba wasted no time in asking Mami to marry him and move with him to Geneva. Mami loved Baba and readily agreed – marriage would also conveniently provide her with a welcome escape from Birmingham.

Always one to do the right thing, Baba first returned to Iran to bid goodbye to his family in Semnan, and while there he went to ask *Khânûm Bozorg* in Tehran for her daughter's hand in marriage. By then *Aghâyé Doktor* was long dead, and Mami's mother was only too glad to see her youngest married off to this well-educated doctor – never mind that they would be living halfway around the world. All her other daughters already had several children, and Mami wasn't getting any younger – in fact, she was getting close to the age where she might already be thought of in traditional circles as *torshideh* (“soured”, in other words, “on the shelf”).

In 1948 Baba and Mami tied the knot in a Birmingham register office. Mami's brother, Hushang, and his new English wife, Margaret, were witnesses to the marriage. Baba and Mami never talked about this momentous occasion, and sadly no photographs were taken. Nevertheless it would have been a happy event. Mami cheerfully informed the formidable matron in charge of the nurses' home that she was leaving Dudley Road Hospital for ever. That interview somewhat mollified the stern matron when Mami also proceeded to deposit on her desk more than twenty butter ration coupons which she had been saving up in a drawer.

BABA AND MAMI

Baba and Mami travelled from Birmingham to Geneva at the close of 1949. They lived initially in a single room in the leafy suburb of Miremont, but soon moved to a modest flat with two bedrooms on the fifth floor of a residential apartment block in the Champel area. They would rent this flat for the next seventeen years, and it would become my childhood home.

“If only we had known we would live in *Farang* for so many years,” Mami would sigh, “we could have saved up to buy it, and we would now be rich.”

That flat definitely appreciated in value and would have been worth a small fortune by the time they eventually left Switzerland for Iran in 1965. But because they always knew they would one day return “home”, and not sure exactly when that would be, they continued to pay rent year after year.



Baba and Mami, Geneva 1950