



IN THE
ROSE
GARDEN
OF THE
MARTYRS

A MEMOIR OF IRAN

Christopher
de Bellaigue

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CHRISTOPHER DE BELLAIGUE



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1

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Each day more than yesterday,
and less than tomorrow

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have used the Persian transliteration for Arab names when they are found in an Iranian context, such as the mourning ceremonies in Tehran for the Imam Hussein.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xi
MAP OF IRAN	xiii
1 Karbala	1
2 Isfahan	10
3 A Sacred Calling	42
4 Qom	87
5 Lovers	118
6 Reza Ingilisi	157
7 Gas	181
8 Parastu	206
9 Friends	257
10 Ashura	277
BIBLIOGRAPHY	281

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Karbala

Why, I wondered long ago, don't the Iranians smile? Even before I first thought of visiting Iran, I remember seeing photographs of thousands of crying Iranians, men and women wearing black. In Iran, I read, laughing in a public place is considered coarse and improper. Later, when I took an oriental studies course at university, I learned that the Islamic Republic of Iran built much of its ideology on the public's longing for a man who died more than thirteen hundred years ago. This is the Imam Hussein, the supreme martyr of Shi'a Islam and a man whose virtue and bravery provide a moral shelter for all. Now that I'm living in Tehran, witness to the interminable sorrow of Iranians for their Imam, I sense that I'm among a people that enjoys grief, relishes it. Iran mourns on a fragrant spring day, while watching a ladybird scale a blade of grass, while making love. This was the case fifty years ago, long before the setting up of the Islamic Republic, and will be the case fifty years hence, after it has gone.

The first time I observed the mourning ceremonies for the Imam Hussein, I was reminded of the Christian penitents of the Middle Ages, dragging crosses through the dust and bringing down whips across their backs. In modern Iran, too, there is self-flagellation and the lifting of heavy things – sometimes a massive timber tabernacle to represent Hussein's bier – as an expression of religious fervour. The Christian penitents were self-serving; calamities such as the Black Death provoked a desire to atone, to save oneself and one's loved ones from divine retribution. Iran's grieving does

not have this logic. This is no act of *arouement*, but a sententious memorial. Iranians weep for Hossein with gratuitous intimacy. They luxuriate in regret – as if, by living a few extra years, the Imam might have enabled them to negotiate the morass of their own lives. They lick their lips, savour their misfortune.

I see Hossein alongside Tehran's freeways, his name picked out in flowers that have been planted on sheer green verges. I see his picture on the walls of shops and petrol stations, printed on the black cloths that are pinned to the walls of streets. The conventional renderings show a superman with a broad, honest forehead and eyes that are springs of fortitude and compassion. A luxuriant beard attests to Hossein's virility, but his skin is radiant like that of a Hindu goddess. He wears a fine helmet, with a green plume for Islam, and holds a lance. I once asked an elderly Iranian woman to describe Hossein's calamitous death. She spoke as if she had been an eyewitness to it, effortlessly recalling every expression, every word, every doom laden action. She listed the women and children in Hossein's entourage as if they were members of her own family. She wept her way through half a dozen Kleenexes.

Every Iranian dreams of going to the town of Karbala, the arid shrine in central Iraq that was built at the place where Hossein was martyred. I went there myself, the camp follower of American invaders, and visited the Imam's tomb. Inside a gold plated dome, Iraqis calmly circumambulated a sarcophagus whose silver panels had been worn down from the caress of lips and fingers. They muttered prayers, supplications, remonstrations. Suddenly, the peace was shattered by moans and the pounding of chests, splintered sounds of distress and emotion. Five or six distraught men had approached the sarcophagus. One of them was half collapsed, his hand stretched towards the Imam; the others shoved and slipped like landlubbers on a pitching deck. My Iraqi companion curled his lip in distaste at the melodrama. 'Iranian pilgrims,' he said.

It all goes back to an 632, when the Prophet Muhammad died and Ali, his cousin and son in law, was beaten to the caliphate, first by Abu Bakr, the Prophet's father in law, and then by Abu Bakr's successors, Omar and Osman. Ali gave up political and military office, and waited his turn, and the modesty and piety of the Prophet's time was supplanted, according to

some historians, by venality and hedonism. After twenty-five years, following Osman's brutal murder, Ali was finally elected to the caliphate. But his rule, although virtuous, lasted only until his murder five years later and gave rise to a rift between his followers and Osman's clan, the Omayyids. The origin of the rift was a dynastic dispute, between supporters of the Prophet's family, represented by Ali, and the Prophet's companions, represented by the first three caliphs. It prefigured a rift that continues, between the Shi'as – literally, the 'partisans of Ali' – and the Sunnis, the followers of the *Sunnah*, the tradition of Muhammad.

After Ali's murder, Hassan, his indolent elder son, struck a deal with the Omayyids. In AD 680 Hassan died and Ali's younger son, Hussein, took over as head of the Prophet's descendants. Hussein was pious and brave and he revived his family's hereditary claim to leadership over Muslims. This brought him into conflict with Yazid, the Omayyid caliph in Damascus. When the residents of Kufa, near Karbala, asked Hussein to liberate them from Yazid, the Imam went out to claim his birthright, setting in train events that led to his martyrdom.

One night, on the eve of the anniversary of Hussein's death, I put on a borrowed black shirt and took a taxi to a working class area of south Tehran. The main road where the taxi dropped me was already filling with families and men leading sheep by their forelegs. Cauldrons lay by the side of the road. Everyone wore black; even the little girls wore chadors, an unbuttoned length of black cloth that unflatteringly shrouds the female body. I entered a lane with two-storey brick houses along both sides. There was a crowd at the far end of the street, their backs to us, and their silhouettes were flung across the asphalt. Black bunting had been strung between lampposts. Walking towards the crowd, I fell in step with a middle-aged man who was being followed by his family. I heard him utter, 'Hussein . . .' He looked shocked and puzzled, as if he'd just received news of the Imam's martyrdom.

At the far end of the street there was a stage marked out by pot plants. In the middle of the stage was a bowl of water, resting on a green cloth. The middle aged man's wife and daughters went to the opposite side of the stage, where the other women and children were gathered under an awning. His teenage son joined a group of young men with gelled hair on

the right. To the left was backstage, and an orchestra that consisted of two *tabak* drums and a trumpet. I stayed on the near side. Suddenly, the men in front of us parted to allow a stream of piss, from a camel trembling how-legged in the arc lights, to run down the street.

A young trumpeter played a riff and the obscene Damascene appeared stage left. (Everyone recognized Yazid: he wore a cape of red and yellow to accentuate his licentiousness, and he wasn't wearing so much as a scrap of green, the colour of Islam.) His helmet was surmounted by yellow plumes. His fat face was expressionless. After prowling around, he started to shout evil words into the microphone he was holding, which was connected to a loudspeaker that in turn felt as though it was connected directly to my ear.

Although he ruled the lands of Islam in the name of Islam, Yazid was notorious for his depravity. Today, Iranians treat him as if he were still malignantly alive. They recall the menagerie of unclean animals such as dogs and monkeys that he is believed to have kept at court. They talk disapprovingly of the 'coming and going' – a common euphemism for frenetic sexual activity – for which Damascus was known. It is said that he was as devious as he was deviant.

Perhaps Hossein had reckoned without the deviousness. By the time he and his companions bivouacked at Karbala, near the banks of the Euphrates, the caliph had bribed the inhabitants of Kufa to revoke their support for him. His small force was greatly outnumbered by the army that Shahr, Yazid's commander, had raised. Shahr had cut off Hossein's access to the Euphrates, and Mesopotamia in summer is as hot as hell.

Onstage, the players were relating the entreaties, negotiations and moral dilemmas that preceded Hossein's martyrdom. The women and children in Hossein's entourage were suffering from the heat. Since there were no women onstage, we learned this from a narrator, a slim, alert version of the man playing Yazid – his brother, perhaps. Suddenly, there was activity stage left and Yazid returned. The actor's movements and expression were the same, but now he wore green from head to toe. He had changed character and had become Hossein.

As far as I could make out through the echo and distortion, Hossein was relating the anguish that he felt at his decision to fight to the death.

In return for fealty to Yazid, he and his companions would be spared, but that would mean living in dishonour, indifferent to God's will. Then Hussein's half brother, Abol Fazl, entered.

The portraits show Abol Fazl to be as god like as his brother, albeit more windswept. The Abol Fazl before us was shifty and greasy; he would have been convincingly cast as a sheep rustler. He was much shorter than Hussein, whom he clasped repeatedly to his breast as they both wept. Hussein was asking Abol Fazl to fetch water from the river. Both knew that the younger brother stood little chance of surviving his mission.

Abol Fazl leaped onto a mangy grey standing at the side of the street, where the camel had been. (The camel was peripatetic and for hire; it was now appearing on other stages in the neighbourhood.) He steered the horse dexterously around the stage, calming it when its hind legs buckled as it turned on the greasy asphalt. Whenever Abol Fazl approached the awning, the women shrank, while he (holding the microphone in one hand and the reins in the other) declared his love for Hussein and for God. The young men in the audience grinned when the horse broke wind during a break in the music. Their fathers frowned.

The next bit of the story happened offstage. Fighting savagely - I had read this in the books - Abol Fazl reached the riverside. He bent down, cupped his hand and brought some water to his mouth. Then he stopped himself and the water flowed back through his fingers. His sense of chivalry wouldn't allow him to slake his thirst before the women and children had slaked theirs. Having filled his leather water container, he remounted, but was cut down in the subsequent struggle, losing his hands and eyes. He cried out, 'Oh brother, hear my call and come to my aid!' Two arrows were dispatched. One pierced Abol Fazl's water container. The other entered his chest.

Abol Fazl staggered onstage. The pierced flagon was between his teeth. An arrow protruded from his chest. His arms were two very long stumps. The stumps supported two bloody objects, which he dropped for us to see: his hands, sliced off in the fray. The Imam cradled the dying Abol Fazl. The men near me in the audience were beating their chests in time with the *torbak*. The women under the awning rocked inconsolably.

And that was the end of the play. It wasn't time for Hussein to die; that

would come tomorrow, the day that is called Ashura. The actors picked themselves up and left the stage. Among the audience, there was a rustling, a rearranging of positions and a collective, audible exhalation. And then, to my surprise, the inconsolable found consolation, facial expressions brightened. The audience's agony changed to equanimity, even satisfaction. The man in front of me greeted the person standing next to him agreeably; a few seconds before, both had been blubbing like children. In the women's section, conversations began. Abol Fazl seemed to have been forgotten.

Had he been forgotten? Was this grief deceitful? Not deceitful, I think simply not exclusive. The emotions in Iran haven't been compartmentalised. They coexist; they thrive in public. The borders between grief, entertainment and companionship are porous. You can sweep buckets, natter with a neighbour and take away memories of a farling nag. Stilled sobs, trembling upper lips – they don't exist here. Emotion may be cheaply expressed, but that doesn't mean the emotions are cheap.

Some members of the audience were starting to leave their places. The narrator strode into the middle of the stage. He addressed us fluently, softly. He craved our indulgence – he wanted to tell a story that would live in our memories. The people moved back to their places and he began.

A few years back, he started, after the troupe had performed the play we'd just seen, he'd been delighted when a man dropped a large sum of money onto the green cloth in the middle of the stage. As he was counting it after the performance, another man had approached and said, 'Excuse me for interfering, but you can't accept that money.'

The narrator had replied: 'Why not? It's a lot of money, and I've got a wife and kids to feed. It pleases God when money is accepted for good work.' The man replied, 'Believe me, sir, you can't accept this money. Yours is Muslim work, and the man who gave you the money is a Christian. He's Armenian.'

The audience was gripped. What a dilemma! What would you do in such a situation? The narrator went on: 'The Armenian chap was driving off when I ran up to him and thrust the money through the open window of his car. I said, "I'm sorry; I can't accept this money. Forgive me, by the soul of the Imam Hussein, I can't accept!"'

When he learned why his money had been rejected, the Armenian

had switched off the car ignition and said, 'I have something to tell you.

Recently, I was driving with one of my employees, a Muslim, and the brakes failed as we were coming down from the mountains. There were valleys on both sides, and we were going faster and faster. I called out, "Oh Jesus! Save us!" and tried the brakes again, but they didn't work. I called out a second time, louder, and rammed my foot down on the brakes. Nothing. A third time, I beseeched Jesus to save us. Again, no result.

Panic struck. I looked across at my employee. He said quietly, "Call for Abol Fazl." I was having trouble keeping the car on the road, I shouted, "Who's Abol Fazl?" He said, "Sir, time is running out. Call him!" I had nothing to lose, so I shouted, "Save us, Abol Fazl!" and the brakes suddenly worked. We came to a halt just short of a cliff.

When we got out of the car, I asked my employee if he'd seen a man on the road, as we were braking. He shook his head. I told him that there had been a man wearing green, and that he had no hands.

The narrator paused. He bowed his head and emitted three sobs. Then he wiped his eyes and his tone became diffident. 'Festiveable brothers and sisters, you may wish to express your appreciation, and it doesn't matter how much you put on the green cloth . . .' he went on to list sundry denominations, all of which were beyond the means of those present. 'No, the amount doesn't matter. But if, during the course of the coming year, you request Abol Fazl's intercession, and he doesn't answer, take the matter up with me . . .'

Nudged by their mothers, the little boys and girls came across to our side of the stage, to get money from their fathers. Then they went over to the cloth and knelt down to kiss and touch it – it had an association, however tenuous, with the Imam Hussein, and few in the audience had the means to go to Karbala. They dropped their money. Once the cloth was covered with notes, men appeared holding trays laden with refreshments. They'd been provided, we learned, by a local trader called Mr Naji. His philanthropy would earn him friends in this life and divine favour in the next.

There were cakes and cucumbers laden high on a copper plate, cinnamon-flavoured rice puddings and little stork's bundles containing deep-fried white candies seasoned with rose water. There was a ewer pouring water into

plastic cups, a loop of tea from the spout of a kettle. In her determination to get a rice pudding, a woman elbowed me in the face. I escaped from the crowd.

Rubbing my jaw, I walked away into a nearby side street. The piercing notes of the orchestra had been succeeded by a mellow, distant sound. Gradually, it grew closer and I was able to distinguish individual sounds within it: hands striking chests, a tremor of lamentation and the diesel motors or generators that were amplifying the lamentation. The processions had started.

Suddenly, I heard a scramble of words through a loudspeaker, and the boom of a bass drum. I looked back up the humdrum street, with its box-like parked cars and unsanitary smell coming from the drainage channels, and saw an army of mounted men on the brow of a hill. Their lances scintillated in the lamplight as they prepared to charge and meet their doom.

The army turned out to consist of a man carrying an iron standard, along whose considerable length oscillated swords and gargoyles and plumes of different colours. He was followed by two columns of men, marching in time with the base drum, flagellating their backs with chains on short handles — a strike for every ponderous beat. A man held up an unintended cross that was composed of two loudspeakers tied to a pole; they were wired to a microphone held by a wailing man a few paces behind.

I had to squeeze up against the wall to make room for the standard to pass. The bearer was thickset, bulging and tight-lipped in his task. He was bound to his panoply from a buckle on a thick belt around his waist. As he passed, he half-slipped, and the weight of the standard pulled him towards me. Thinking I might get hit, I ducked into a side alley.

Once the man had passed, I followed the procession to the main road, where it entered a string of processions, a dozen or more from different neighbourhoods. They were united, and also in competition with each other. The people along the pavements would decide which procession was biggest, and which had the most impressive standard. Had the flagellants been equipped with one chain or two? (From that, you could gauge the benefactor's generosity.)

There was a mood of sombre recreation. More young men with heavily

gelled hair held suggestive conversations with groups of unescorted girls – this being the only night of the year when young women, under the cover of piety, were allowed to roam without a chaperone. Families strolled. Young boys had been dressed in the white Arab robes of little Ali Akbar, Hussein's nephew; Ali Akbar had fought bravely against Shahr's men, before being cut down.

The more I walked, the better I understood the enormous size of this crowd; it extended as far as the eye could see. This main road was fuller, perhaps, than it would be at any other time in the year. The same was true of main roads across Iran; at that moment, tens of millions of people were in the streets. I reflected on the grief, and the entertainment that people made of that grief. Then I remembered another reason for the show: defiance.

The people on the streets were united by their love for the Imam Hussein, his father the Imam Ali and (to a lesser degree) the other ten Imams that are regarded by most Shi'a Muslims as the rightful inheritors of the Prophet's mantle. Shi'as are an overwhelming majority in Iran, but only a small minority across most of the Muslim world. It was the forebears of today's Sunni majority, Yazid and his followers, who rejected the hereditary principle and murdered its exponent, the Imam Hussein. (They also, Shi'as believe, murdered every other Shi'a Imam, apart from the twelfth.) Even now, in the twenty-first century, the Sunnis of neighbouring Pakistan are capable of launching murderous attacks on the Shi'as of that country, shooting up mosques and assassinating prayer leaders. In Saudi Arabia, a Sunni monarchy controls the holy places. Many Sunnis regard the Shi'as as heretics.

And so here, and in other streets across Iran, the people were showing that they would neither be extinguished nor ignored. They were showing, too, that they would not forget that dreadful sin, the murder of the Imam Hussein.

Isfahan

One afternoon in the spring I set out from the Armenian quarter in the lovely city of Isfahan, towards the Seminary of the Four Gardens. The following day was the anniversary of the investiture of the Imam Ali as the Prophet's successor. The people were in a good mood. They revered Ali for being modest and just, and looked forward to celebrating these qualities by visiting family members, stuffing themselves with *berjaye* – a dish that features minced sheep's lungs – and passing judgement on their hosts' new daughter in law. They strolled in the mild afternoon sun, mothers and daughters arm in arm (and fathers in their wake), buying tulips to put in iced water to keep overnight, and sweetmeats to take as gifts.

I reached one of the main roads that head north towards the river, and hailed an old shared taxi. The back seat had its complement of three. The occupant of the front passenger seat stepped out so that I could sit between him and the driver; I was suspended over the gap between their seats. The driver sat hunched over the steering wheel, leaning slightly against the door. We moved off. The driver changed gears like a surgeon replacing dislocated bones.

We were soon stuck in traffic outside one of the big banks, in front of which was a shiny blue car mounted on a gantry. The car – new, French-made – was an incentive: every account holder stood a chance of winning it in a prize draw. It was caparisoned with bunting and flashing light bulbs.

It had metallic paint that had been devised by a computer. The bank had put it on the gantry to publicize it – and to make it hard to steal.

I looked in the rear-view mirror and my eye was taken by a fat woman sitting in the middle of the back seat. She was staring longingly out of the window at the zippy French car. She caught me looking at her and pretended to be scandalized, tucking her fringe under her headscarf. 'What's happening up there, Mr Driver?' she demanded. 'Why aren't we moving?'

A car, a Buick from the 1970s, was stuck at the intersection, having carried out half a U-turn. Another car, an Iranian-made Paykan, had grazed one of the Buick's tailfins. The drivers had got out of their cars. The wife of the Buick driver was leaning out of the window, yelling.

'Look at the wife, egging him on!' said our driver. 'What difference does it make? That poor Buick's been wounded more times than I have.' The side of the Buick was discoloured from dents that had been amateurishly smoothed out. The engine was still running. It emitted black smoke.

The taxi driver reached under his seat, pulled out a thermos and unscrewed the cap. He poured a little tea into a dirty glass that rested on the dashboard, swilled it around and poured it out of the window. He filled the glass with tea and, putting it back on the dashboard, closed the thermos and put it back under his seat. Then he held up the glass and said, 'Please go ahead . . .'

He was offering us tea. In such instances, you don't accept. It would be bad form. It's his tea, but he has to offer it. It would be bad form not to. But he'd be put out if someone said, 'Yes, I'd like some of your tea.' No one does. The driver gets to drink his tea and appear courteous at the same time. Both ways he wins.

There was polite murmuring around the taxi: 'Thanks, but no' . . . 'You go ahead and have some' . . . 'I don't feel like tea' . . . 'I've just had some tea.'

Ties. We'd all enjoy a glass of tea.

The driver took out a packet of cigarettes and we went through the same rignardole. We felt our breast pockets for imaginary packets of cigarettes. Eventually, the driver withdrew a cigarette from his packet, lit it and settled down to watch. A policeman had arrived at the intersection. He was trying to broker a reconciliation. The driver of the Paykan was a cocky brute.

well built, young enough to be the Buick driver's son. He darted from one foot to another. Soon, the policeman seemed to make a breakthrough. The youth hugged the Buick driver.

During the argument, the traffic lights at the intersection had turned green several times, at which cars had surged forward from all directions. Lots of them wanted to turn, this way or that, but the Buick and the Paykan were blocking their way. The cars were revving, edging forward, kissing bumpers. Someone would have to reverse. Iranian drivers don't like reversing. It's a form of defeat. I felt sorry for the policeman.

He did a good job. He positioned himself in the middle – whistling, gesturing, occasionally giving a winning smile. He was a professional. In a little while, at his prompting, a car edged forward from the middle, and away. Another followed. The knot was untied.

'Well done!' the taxi driver murmured, and we moved forward. The protagonists stayed where they had been. They would wait for more policemen, who would take statements and measure angles to determine who was at fault. As we went past, the Buick driver's wife, a woman in a red scarf, leaned out of the window and shouted at her husband, 'I should have known you wouldn't have the balls to stand up for yourself! You, who took the full brunt of the Iraqi attacks! Why don't you stand firm, instead of letting some headless chick trample your pride?'

The woman's husband turned around. His face was full of anguish. His wife wasn't much older than the Paykan driver.

The taxi driver sighed as we drove off. 'You've got to show them who's boss from day one. I mean, now it's too late. He's let her get out of control, challenge his authority. Nothing he can do now.'

A little further down the road, a man who was sitting next to the woman in the back seat got out. He was replaced by a thin woman who recognized the succulent woman: they were distant relatives. They didn't seem pleased to see one another. They passed on regards to each other's families, and extended invitations for tea and lunch.

The thin woman said, 'Did you get stuck in in Tehran?'

'More than dear Isfahan, I can tell you! You know, what with struggling to combat the illness of my late husband – may God show him mercy – and the demands it's made on my time and health, this is the first time

I've been to Isfahan for five years. Oh! My heart burned when I saw the river – dried up like a burned cigarette, with the wretched boatmen standing around in the mud, with nothing else to do but pray for rain. I mean, is it possible for a river to have no water? Our river? In this day and age?

'They sold our water to Yazd,' the driver said. 'They sent it off in a pipeline. Cost a fortune to build. The fathers of bitches.'

We were in a long queue of cars. The driver leaned out, far enough to see past the cars in front. He swung the wheel and pressed down hard on the accelerator. We emerged from the queue of cars, into the oncoming traffic. There weren't many cars coming; the lights ahead were red. By the time the oncoming traffic started to move, we were elbowing our way into a gap between two cars, now much nearer the traffic lights. One of the other drivers raised his hand, but was too lazy to clench it.

'I don't know why everyone drives so fast,' the fat woman said to her relative. 'All they do when they get to their destination is drink tea.'

The driver grinned. 'God forbid, madam, you were offended by my efforts to expedite you to your destination! Or perhaps it was what I said? Do you have Yazdi blood, by any chance?'

'Lord, no! My parents – may God show them mercy – were from Isfahan, and proud of it. But the president is from Yazd, isn't he?' she said slyly. 'That might explain why they're allowed to drink our water. The Yazdis have always had it in for Isfahan. I should know; my son married a Yazdi. She won't even iron his shirts. She says he gets through too many. He gives them to me, my poor darling. Too proud to iron an Isfahani's white shirt, the Yazdis are!'

'At least they opened the dam again, in time for the holidays,' said the third passenger in the back seat. 'There's water in the river now, thanks be to God.'

'Exactly!' said the fat woman. 'They were scared the Isfahanis would flay them if they didn't open the sluices. But they'll shut the dam again after the holiday, and say there's no more water. They'll send it to Yazd instead.'

'And our poor Isfahani kids will carry on topping themselves,' the man said. 'Everyone knows the suicide rate goes up when the river's dry. It's bad for the soul.'

The man next to me scinted in his seat. 'Pardon me, but you're wrong. The problem is not Yazd, but the farmers in Isfahan province. They've planting rice along the river banks, even though rice needs more water than almost any other crop. Only an idiot would plant rice when there's a drought.'

'And what would you have us eat if there's no rice?' the fat woman demanded. 'You want us to get thin and weak?'

'We should buy our rice from elsewhere.'

'Sir, you'd prefer that we eat Pakistani rice that has no perfume? Or that sticky revolting stuff the Turks call rice? You can't make a respectable *polov* with that.'

The man sitting next to her said, 'She's right; our rice is the best in the world. Everyone says so.'

'And there's another thing,' said the woman. 'our dear motherland has been dependent on foreigners for hundreds of years. Now you want to put our bellies at the mercy of Pakistan! Everyone knows who's behind Pakistan: the English! It wouldn't surprise me if the English had something to do with our water shortage. They always stir up trouble in countries they fear. That's why they're the best politicians, and we've never been any good.'

'The English are indeed very devout,' said the man next to me, 'but I haven't heard of them altering the climate.'

The woman snorted. 'I wouldn't put anything past them.' Then she said, 'With your permission, Mr Driver, I'll get out here.'

The thin woman said, 'I thought your brother lived further on.'

'He does,' the fat woman replied. 'But I like to exercise before a holiday. I'll walk the last half-kilometre.' The taxi stopped. The thin woman got out to allow the fat woman to do so. The fat woman put out both her arms to try and lever herself from the hollow she had created in the back seat. For a moment, one of her hot hands gripped my shoulder. She stood at the window, and looked in.'

* You should know about *talarruf*. In Arabic *talarruf* means behaviour that is appropriate and customary in Iran, it has been corrupted and denotes ceremonial insincerity. Not in a pejorative sense; Iran is the only country I know where hypocrisy is prized as a social and commercial skill.

Three examples:

When the taxi driver offered us tea and cigarettes, and we refused, this was *talarruf*. He

The fat woman said: 'How much, sir?'

'Be my guest,' said the driver.

The fat woman said: 'I beg of you.'

'Whatever you like,' he grinned. 'Really, it's not important.'

'How much? I beg of you.' The woman was getting out her purse.

'I'm serious; be my guest.'

'How much?'

The driver surrendered. 'Seventy-five *tomans*, if you'd be so kind.'

'Seventy five *tomans*? I only got in at Hakim Street. It's fifty *tomans* from there.'

The driver frowned. 'Seventy five. It's been seventy five *tomans* for three weeks now.'

'I gave fifty *tomans* two days ago. I'm not giving more than fifty!' She looked sharply at her relative who was examining her nails.

'It's seventy-five *tomans*,' said the driver. His smile had disappeared.

Suddenly, the woman was angry. 'Is this the correct treatment, the day before we celebrate the investiture of the Imam Ali, *safoor* to him and his family?' She looked accusingly at me. 'Is this the right impression to give foreigners, that Iran's a country of unprincipled hat lifters? I'm not giving a penny more than fifty?' She threw the note in the window.

The driver picked it off my knee. As he put the car into gear, he said, 'She eats my head with her worthless prattle. She's too stingy to stay in as far as her destination. Then, she rips me off.'

'We're only related by marriage,' said the thin woman.

I said: 'I may as well get out here, Mr Driver. I want to cross the bridge.'

had no intention of giving us tea and cigarettes, and we reacted accordingly. A man may propose that his son marry the daughter of his impoverished younger brother without having any intention of permitting the match: the son is already engaged to the daughter of an *ayatollah*, and the brother's daughter is a repulsive dwarf. But the quietness of *tohrat* can be found in the behaviour of a *mulak* I once observed entering a Tehran hospital in the company of several other *mulak*. As the *mulak* crossed the threshold, he said to the men waiting behind him, 'After you.'

If, through some mistake or misunderstanding, an offer extended through *wahat* is accepted, it will be retroactively countermanded. I remember reading somewhere of a *tesoqlar* who was arrested for theft after being denounced by a shopkeeper who had repeatedly refused to take his money.

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