The Calligrapher of Isfahan

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At the end of the ceremony marking the fortieth day after my father's death to which all our relatives and close family friends were invited to our home, as is the custom among Shiis, and when they all had gone, my mother entrusted me with a task that seemed unimportant at first. But later on, as you will soon see, it changed forever how I felt about myself, my ancestry, and even my country.

My father was not young when he died—eighty-seven; but, because a sound constitution hid his old age from us, his death, appeared more or less sudden. That morning I got to work an hour late, and, the moment I sat down at my desk, the receptionist informed me I had to get in touch with my mother immediately. My telephone with my father's home that was limited to a short conversation with my nephew, made nothing clear to me but the need for my immediate presence at home. It didn't look good; clearly at such times one can't help imagining all sorts of things—even the worst.

I hurried home and the minute I arrived, the situation became clear. My younger sister greeted me and, unable to control herself, burst into tears as I held her in my arms. As soon as my mother who was sitting on the couch in the large drawing room facing the entrance saw me, started sobbing in a loud

voice, saying things I couldn't make out. I went over and, when I tried to comfort her, her crying became more frantic. Then my cousins came, and with each new arrival my mother would begin to wail again and remember something related to father and the newly arrived relative. Of course, she couldn't reach the end of any of these recollections because she'd burst into tears, which muddled what she was saying. She hadn't quite gained control of herself when another relative would appear, providing her with a new excuse for a crying jag. Finally, my brother came, and again the prelude to my sister's crying and mother's wailing followed.

I loved my father and admired him for various reasons. He taught me to be patient and not give up in trying to reach my goals, and likewise to rely on my own creativity to overcome the struggles in life. He possessed an extraordinary strength of spirit and made me feel safe so long as he was around. In contrast to the prevailing view of how boys come of age, I think that it goes well only when they feel secure about such matters. All in all, I managed to get through the pain caused by his death. My thinking on life and death differs completely from what I had believed as a boy; I've reached the conclusion that people come into this world one day and will naturally leave it on another. This is an unimportant event and doesn't make the slightest dent in the almighty wheel of existence. This is a fact every thinking person must accept without question. It is also possible to regard death as a long journey—longer than that which our life span would permit us to see the passenger

return. Be that as it may, father's death was immeasurably painful to me. Recalling him today is often paired with the pleasant thought that I could always take pride in him.

In the eyes of society, he was valued partly because of football. During the years before the Second World War, he directed two of the capital's soccer clubs, so diligent as a manager that he was even able to sew the leather cover of the balls. But apart from soccer and related things, he was also a skilled craftsman which had nothing to do with the family's traditional profession of calligraphy. In his small workshop despite its limited facilities, he had managed to make a carburetor based on a German model, and for this he received a medal of industry from the then Prime Minister. The medal is now in my possession.

Nothing worth mentioning happened in the time just after his death, except for the perfunctory Third and Seventh Days observances, the successive condolence calls—by telephone or in person—of friends and acquaintances from far and near, proclaiming their sorrow at losing him. The familiar, repetitive and, naturally, meaningless courtesies like: “I hope this is the last of your grief,” “He's in the ground, but long may you live,” never resonated in my mind as one of those to whom they were addressed. Then came the rites of the Fortieth Day.

There was someone else besides father missing at these perfunctory and lifeless gatherings hosted by every member of the family—my wife. Our

first child was born that morning, and both the child and his mother were kept in the hospital. My wife naturally insisted on paying a condolence call personally—even if only for a few minutes, but mother and I stopped her from doing this, thinking it would be bad for her health. Her doctor had the same opinion.

That night, after all the guests had bade their farewells and gone one-by-one, mother asked me—not my brother—to accompany her to father's study. I suspected that nothing of importance was in the offing. Petty details like this were beneath my brother's notice.

Still palpable in that grim room, which betrayed all the signs that its owner was gone, was the scent and warmth of my father's presence—or, perhaps, that was what I imagined.

This was where we met many times when my visits were too brief for him to come down to the drawing room where mother (who had informed him of my presence in the house in advance) ordinarily spent her time. Hard-won experience has taught me how to keep my emotions in check; but were it not for that, I would have burst into tears with mother around—something I had to avoid. The day after his burial I had a good cry lasting several minutes in the privacy of my own room. That sufficed—although now, as I write these words, I can't rein in my tears.

There, on my father's desk was a wooden chest covered in a brownish cloth, which was very familiar to me. It was perhaps from India or Ceylon,

parts of the world father had visited often when he was young, bringing back cute little wooden figures for me and my big sister… My reminiscences were interrupted by mother who, pointing to the chest, said, “This is where your father kept his private papers. A few days ago I looked through them to see whether or not he might have left a will or some kind of last wish among them. But the truth of it is I found nothing.”

Several years before, father had told my brother and sisters and me the house and the furniture would ultimately belong to us. But, while mother was alive we had no right to them; only upon her death would we divide them among ourselves.

I assured mother that father had left no such will. Nevertheless, she asked me to go through the chest with a fine tooth comb so that if there were something needing immediate action, no time would be lost. Then she added, “The chest also contains a few old manuscripts, which, I know, you find interesting.”

That was right. Some wedding contracts dating back 150 years that were found in a chest belonging to my maternal grandmother, written in a beautiful *nasta'liq* and decorated with bird and flower patterns; these manuscripts—now framed in gold—grace the walls of my study. Honoring mother‘s wishes, I brought the chest home with me, but it seemed rather pointless at the time. Little did I know how the contents of the chest would affect the course of my life for at least the next seven years.

It just sat there for several days, ignored. The tiny new addition to our family, a boy with such enormous pupils they nearly crowded out the whites of his eyes and with a piercing look so lively it took our breath away, pushed all other concerns to the side, and, I am ashamed to admit, even dulled the pain caused by father's death.

A week later, I decided to open the chest and was astonished to see the sort of papers in it: father's discharge card from military service, his motorcycle driver's license. Some of the documents were of no use at all: the deed to a house sold years before or the copy of a receipt for a debt that had been paid in full as attested to by the signatures of both parties on the margins. But I did find one document dated 1850, a family tree prepared by father's grandfather, who had a governmental job. And father often spoke to me of the esteem people had for him. What other interesting things were in the chest? A china plate bearing the portrait of some European woman in profile! There was nothing extraordinary about the plate; of course its age, which could be ascertained from the date on the back, was noticeable. But what was an antique plate doing among private papers in a small brown wooden chest? I placed it back in the chest and closed the lid. I kept the family tree out to examine it more, a task that occupied my leisure time over the next several days.

Father had never said a word to me about the family tree, probably because it didn't matter to him. It went back eight generations, beginning with

an ancestor of mine who had lived in the late 16th century during the time of Shah Abbas who appointed him scribe in the royal library. Three generations later, however, the tree became ambiguous, and clearing that up became an obsession with me, acting like some mysterious but long-lasting drug that affected every atom of my being.

Instead of the name of the mother of one of my forebears, which as was the rule in such documents must be recorded in a facing box, there was a question mark inked in blue and obviously added to the original later on.

This might well have been an unimportant matter, but ignorance or carelessness on the part of the man who finally drew up the tree; but there was a marginal note in green ink referring to it, which was the reason for my curiosity. Want to know why? It claimed I had French blood flowing through my veins.

The first person I told about this was my wife. She immediately burst into loud laughter and then, as she rubbed tears from her cheeks with both hands, started calling me “monsieur.” “I‘m sure the blood of the French is hardly as thick as the Arabs, Turks, and Mongols,” she said.

Then, to show her lack of interest to the matter, she gently slid the family tree back across the desk and got up.

Should I have modeled my reaction to something three hundred years in the past on my wife‘s—apt and coldly logical? She was right of course. Historians—even geneticists—know Iranians to be descendants of Aryan

bands who moved south, settling eventually on the broad plateaus of Iran. Over the centuries, however, this homeland of mine, has been a place where invaders from the Russian Steppes, the scorching Arabian Peninsula, the lands of Turkic nomads, and the frigid wastes of Mongolia ran roughshod. This is actually why I can't quite conceive of what it means to be Iranian in the Aryan sense. But at that moment this was not the issue for me. What I found fascinating was how this supposed French woman met up with one of my ancestors.

Later, going back through what I had seen and heard over the years, I looked for signs supporting such a connection. Here and there among my father's family were children born with blue eyes, and, at her wedding celebration, mother had seen an old aunt whose eyes were the color of limpid blue sky.

The note on the margin of the family tree was clear and concise; it didn't bear a signature nor was it dated, but it was clear it had been added later. Given that such documents never fell into the hands of outsiders, the writer of the note must have been one of the heirs, a knowledgeable individual. The note read: "At the beginning of the 18th century, Marie Petit accompanied a delegation sent by King Louis XIV of France to the court of Persia. Although without an official position in this delegation, she introduced herself everywhere as the representative of the French royal princesses. Elahyar is the issue of her brief and temporary union with Soleiman. As soon

as Elahyar was born, Marie Petit entrusted the infant to his father and left Iran. There is not much information about her life."

Who was Marie Petit? What is the name of a foreign woman doing on our family tree?

Major discoveries at times are the products of modest pretexts. My investigations led me to the library of a collector who kept Farsi manuscripts in Delhi. There I found a small volume titled: "An account of the personal life of the grandson of the great calligrapher during the siege of Isfahan."

I knew at the time Isfahan was so grand, so huge that travelers would say: a cat could travel from roof to roof for one hundred farsangs without touching the ground.

We are Iranians but we don't know what it means to be Iranian. It's a puzzle, as mysterious to us as why this land has continued to exist over the ages. Now I've come to the conclusion that the reason for this is precisely because we haven't a clue about our own history and the lives of our forefathers. The point is this: my research not only resulted in the discovery of the book, which offered a greater and deeper acquaintance with my ancestry, but also allowed me to get to know myself better. This self-knowledge changed my life and made a new man of me.

The text was written in a fine *nasta'liq*, which is justly renowned as the "bride of scripts," on Khanbaliq paper. To be honest I'm publishing it for my son's sake. Now more than ever, members of the younger generation need to

know about what life was like for their forebears. By doing this, of course, I am breaking with a long-standing tradition in my land, for in my country fathers always have secrets that become public after their death. Although there are the exceptions when fathers reveal their secrets as they are dying, I am doing so in middle age. Meanwhile, publishing this work will be instructive to kings and the powerful, as well as the rest of the people. The powerful will learn what actions must be avoided; while the people will learn what experiences mustn't be repeated.

In the meantime I must add the work you have before you has not remained immune from my revisions. First, to make the text flow I have taken it upon myself to replace archaic or difficult words with more modern equivalents. Sometimes, in making the historical period easier to understand and appreciate, I have inserted explanations into the text, which, naturally, manifest my own creativity in writing, something that first appeared early in high school and ended when I graduated. I admit this was the part of the task that gave me the most pleasure. More importantly, perhaps, is this point: I have toned down Elahyar's account to keep critics and censors from fault-finding. Nevertheless, I swear I have remained faithful to the core of the text. I don't have the original memoir, but a photocopy is in my possession.