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Tied Up in Tehran

A Metaphor

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I want to begin with a story. Like the best of stories, it is true.

In mid-March 2003, I am sitting in the living room of my Persian teacher's house, in an established neighborhood. We have been chit-chatting for a few hours, and catching up. I haven't been in Iran for about a year, and I'm exchanging news. I have been hearing the latest about the house, which is a very big, very old, (and very beautiful) garden off a good-sized main road. When the house was built, in the nineteenth century, it was owned by a wealthy family from central Tehran, a fairly simple two-story structure with open balconies and a large garden, surrounded by other gardens, orchards, fields and forests. By now, a good 100 years later, the *chenar* trees in the garden are some of the biggest I've ever seen and the pastoral surroundings (including the high-rise apartments, abandoned upper-middle-class properties and the manicured villas of the neighborhood we climb the stone wall, in the glossy photos in an architectural exhibition.) For the past few years, I have been hearing about the house, or more specifically, this property?

My teacher shares the house with a woman whose family owns the property, which is really a large estate with several normal houses on it. Other members of the family live there. The whole property is jointly owned by the family, an elephant and a gold mine. The garden is too big to manage easily; everything needs renovation and maintenance. A speculator's dream, and is worth literally millions of dollars. Any developer willing to pay the price, including the Qajar mansion, cut down all the trees, including the huge *chenars*, and happily trade the green space and gardens into cheap, low-design, residential high-rises. The siblings have wanted to sell the house, but the teacher's friend, a classical pianist with a strong corollary appreciation of her own cultural heritage, has set up a national heritage foundation. They would landmark and purchase the house, and they are offering at least \$1 million, although they can't match a higher offer. On this unexpectedly bright note, I am just wondering if it is

When, propelled by three young men standing in the frame, wearing black hoods and black comic bandits, and it is quite several minutes before I understand what's the holiday close to the Persian New Year, mostly celebrated by jumping over a bonfire and reciting a rhyme, preferably in the past tense. The ways reminded me of Halloween, which is probably why I thought it was only a day or two away, and I sat there smiling welcomingly

It wasn't really my fault that I was confused. I don't think my friends knew what was going on, or that they were unexpected, their appearance so bizarre and their behavior so theatrical, that there were a few minutes of drama. They would only say "*Saket, saket*" ("Silence, silence") in low threatening voices, and then they were basically three skinny kids with scarves and fruit knives. I still think that if we had been able to throw the coffee table at them while jumping around and screaming, they might very well have been even if only with fruit knives. In any case, by the time we realized they were serious, it was clear

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needed to cooperate and they were going to tie us up.

Actually, that came a little later. Initially, there was a certain amount of negotiation, which involved the gold was, and my teacher, annoyed, telling them to look on the roofs of all the mosques (she was arguing the point when one of the others noticed my wedding ring, which is gold with a carved stone but the shock of being touched made real to me that this was not a joke, and I freaked out. Also sentimental attachment, and it made no sense to me that he should have it. So I folded my hands in prayer for breath and introduced myself. "*Man arous farangi hastam,*" I said. "I am the foreign bride."

It is hard to convey the precise hit of meaning this statement carries in Iran. For one thing, it is a European foreigner, based on the Crusader-era term for the European Christian armies, the *farangi*. My teacher, cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic professional, would not usually use to describe herself. It is a two-generation-old Austrian wife of one of my husband's uncles (father's brother, the particular affiliations matter less during and after the 1979 revolution. The first few years they lived in the extended family home in my own father-in-law mischievously assigned the *arous farangi* label to the family's initial "foreigner" generation. The term is an anachronism precisely because those families that might find themselves as a Western daughter-in-law, are typically precisely the kind of secular, middle-class families that have adopted the fashionable terminology of fixed social roles. But that is also why the term is a useful self-identifier inside and outside of Iranian traditional social culture, and it makes specific demands on the behavior of the *arous farangi*, I am simultaneously a guest of and a member of the local community; having chosen to accept that choice. Identifying one's self as the *arous farangi* means laying claim to an informal kinship and its social obligations of that kinship, a mutual recognition that structured relations of social hierarchy. In the context of Iranian social negotiations, announcing myself as the *arous farangi* is both deeply serious and playful, especially with those, whether thieves or petty government officials, who would demand a price.

Given that my Persian is not really good enough to engage in the politesse of negotiation, I had to be careful. But now my accent and my announcement confirmed my status as a foreign guest. Not to mention the fact that I had added, pointing to my ring. "This for bride," a sentence neatly lacking any trace of a verb. But it was enough to fulfill the obligations of Persian hospitality. The one thief immediately backed away from my ring, and the other had already removed all the money, now replaced everything (including all the cash) and gave me a new one, although unfortunately this did not apply to my Iranian hosts, and I still got tied up. From experience, I knew that more than a cotton one; the scarf around my wrists eventually had to be cut off, and my hands stayed tied. My teacher was able to shrug off her coarser cotton scarf when the time came. But that wasn't for nothing. The other. Two of the thieves insisted that my teacher come with them while they searched the house. I went to the living room with the one who seemed the youngest of the three, keeping an eye on each other. I had seen a gun. Did she imagine it? But a gun, like a foreigner, changes everything, so we were taken to the living room and ate tangerines.

How is it possible to eat tangerines while tied up, hands behind the back? You have to be fed, and my teacher's hands were tied in her lap because she was older and had to be treated with respect, started to eat. She lit a light her cigarette. She was drawing him out about his plans in life, and why he wasn't in school. I ate a piece of tangerine. Except that tangerines have pits, so when the thief noticed I needed to spit them out, he even got up, took a few steps, swooned and fell down, and then gloated at us for our misfortune. In the meantime, my teacher was witness to the stripping of anything valuable from her own house. The thief had the gun as he searched from room to room. The phone kept ringing. I was sure it was my husband. I tried to explain to the thief in the room with us that they should leave soon, that my husband would be home, and might come looking, or even call the police. In fact, I was quite worried about the gate. My garden wall when there was no answer at the gate and walk in unannounced. Then what? My husband was a martial arts, and ordinarily he could lay out all three of our skinny thieves very easily. But that was not the case (due to other old athletic injuries), and then there was the question of the gun. What if my husband was home? The edge of my concern was real enough, and it got our thief a little worried, too. He made a sly comment. My teacher's friend, the respected older woman, had gotten sick, and we had had to take her to the hospital. The thief raised more questions at home than it answered: If someone was sick, why was I tagging along?

friends instead of heading home where I belonged? We were now at such an absurd stage of the phone. It was clear he didn't speak English, but even so I knew that giving an effective, coherent answer, actually sitting under our minder's nose, and avoiding further unexpected consequences, was enough to attempt risky subterfuge, nor quite relaxed enough simply to call home and give ex-

In the end, the thieves loaded up everything they could find -- jewelry, electronics, a camera, and drove off, leaving the three of us tied up there in the living room. After about two minutes of her hands from behind her back and started untying the rest of us. I was the only one who had a key, but I couldn't find the address, although the local police station is only blocks away. I called home for an indication of why an earlier phone call might have been a bad idea. It turns out English is a b

"Hello? I'm here at my teacher's. We were held up, but we're fine."

"Good. What have you been doing?"

"We were tied up, but they've left, we're OK."

"Did you have a good time?"

"No, thieves broke in, they tied us up and robbed us! But they've left and we're all right!"

"What!?! You were tied up and robbed? Are you all right?"

Apparently my husband had called, but hadn't worried. He knew I had been at my teacher's at a traditional late-night cafés that are not too far from her neighborhood. He further assumed I had made an assumption based on intimate experience. But as soon as he realized what had actually happen

So did the police, after they figured out where the house was. It turned out that our visitors had a large compound; there had been two cars, and simultaneous robberies in the other houses. The police officers of them suggested it was possible that the gang might still be hiding in the garden. Then the search police force had just been issued brand new Mercedes sedans, and they had left the car with a search officer suggested my husband take our statements; my husband suggested this was the police evidence in English. About an hour later, we went home. All I lost was my leather jacket, which was in the hallway, and so wasn't adequately associated with the *arous farangi* to be exempt from search. The house contained at least two pianos, lots of old Russian furniture, fine carpets and other antique bric-a-brac. A generalist would have taken in the US: mobile items easily saleable, nothing too distinctive or valuable. But I think I may have seen them a week or so later; they might have been working construction on the neighboring lot. In any case, I know they were disappointed. They must have thought they were in the middle of that big garden, in a neighborhood where the families of some of the wealthiest people lived. Instead, they found the run-down remnants of aristocratic glories from former days, the meager remains of three moderately genteel ladies drinking tea and eating bread. And tangerines.

End of story.

Now, let's begin again.

In 1978 and 1979 Iran went through a convulsive social and political revolution. Outside Iran the common assumption that the revolution failed, either because of the repression associated with the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic could not achieve a promised utopia of justice and egalitarianism. But revolution is a complex process. Even a revolution that succeeds at national liberation but fails to found an adequately representative government. A two-stage theory of revolution [1]) achieves something of lasting relevance to the ongoing process of social change. What are the post-revolutionary contradictions embedded in this little anecdote about one ev

To start with, there is the specific geography of the local urban political economy. Iran is that kind of country that the government can count on a stable oil stream from a highly regulated export market. It is not corrupt, and oil income easily makes its way into the pockets or the pet projects of regime insiders. Oil is an aspect of the national economy, not to mention when the nation has experienced an eight-year oil embargo. Oil wealth can also be used to fund other social development projects, and although

national modernization, the nationwide distribution of literacy, electricity and road networks revolution. In other words, Iran is now a modern country with a literate population, an integr smallest villages. [2] This national integration has also lead to increasing urbanization, while national administrative, economic and cultural center.

Tehran is where the big questions get posed and the decisions get made, even if the main act city has sprawled east, west and especially north into the foothills of the Alborz Mountains, b area population of 10 million. [3] The old mixed central neighborhoods are now *déclassé*, the equally choked by smog and traffic. If they can, people move out of their old neighborhoods Tehran, aging parents either convert what had been a large single-family home into apartmer or sell the property to a developer in exchange for a deal that usually involves cash and owne new building. The problem is that because both houses and apartments have to be bought o market is to own property already. And because of the opacity and stagnation of the rest of th sector that simultaneously offers the chance of both profit and security. If you own land, you the present.

For the established professional middle class, land is usually the only tangible material asset cash-poor and land-rich, usually meaning that they are still living in a house they already ow all of the family home in order to fund an appropriately middle-class existence for the next ge because it is so big and so old that, despite the present ramshackle state of the property, it tra a cultural commodity, which is why the municipality was willing to buy it. But the family story the adjoining individual lots of the immediate neighborhood. If the family have all relocated like the house across the street, awaiting the resolution of competing inheritance claims so it still based in Tehran, they might renovate an upper floor into an apartment for married child located in a northern but easily accessible neighborhood, they can rent it for well above local currency. If the house and garden are exceptionally large, the family can rent them out for we in the lot next door. But even a normal-sized house with a reasonably sized garden in an old sold for development as a 20- or 30-story high-rise (zoning limits the height of most new con neighborhoods). This is what had happened to the lot around the corner, where the building' family's property. Their house was unusual: neither open in any way to the public, like the we other wall, nor abandoned, like the empty house across the street. To a working-class constru economic trajectory of the old middle class, an inhabited villa that kept its privacy would be a some then? Except that we turned out to be such a disappointment; the dream of instant satisf straightforward as it would have seemed.

It's always hard to separate perception from reality, desire from disillusion. Reliable crime sta has been an increased sense of insecurity. After repeated crackdowns on the independent pre on political reform, the remaining newspapers have reestablished the pre-revolutionary prac gory details as possible. Everyone knows everything about all the latest murders, robberies o cesspool of moral degeneracy and random violence. [4] If you live in an American city, this ca Within days, it had made the rounds of social circles in northern Tehran, so that someone act Niavarán, and I had to explain that I had been one of them. The story is by now widely enoug kind of street cred. When you meet someone in Iran, you first go through a general accountin where you went to school, who your friends are. The same as anywhere, but more personal th are kept track of more carefully, are more densely interconnected and are more necessary to t quickly that I am one of the women -- the foreigner -- who was tied up in the neighborhood o

What this tells me is precisely that my story is well known because it is unusual. People tell th tangerines, but because it's shocking, and it's shocking because random personal violence, a it because, although it looms large as a social threat, the actual experience is unusual. It's not try to explain to friends in Tehran that the robbery hadn't really been terribly scary, but that o American superhero. I was left making vague relativist arguments; it wasn't nearly as terrifyin where the assailants almost certainly would have been armed with guns rather than fruit kniv

increasing. But there is also a deeply embedded local culture of negotiation that relies on cert
tied up in Tehran means that life still goes on. You eat; you talk about the past, the present an
authority while breaking others; you don't quite know whether you are involved with someth
you're kind of scared, but you have a fairly sure sense that everything will be all right in the e:

This is the status of political life in Iran, writ large. Being tied up in Tehran is indeed the perfe
a bit surreal, inconclusive. Was my experience a thriller, a melodrama or a farce? When the in
trend, or will the after-effects on the residents -- both material and social -- be too seriously d
negotiating from one crisis to another, or are the shared contradictions of collective experien
national future?

Endnotes

[1] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

[2] For an overview of women's social progress since the revolution, see Zahra Mila Elmi, "Ec
30 (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, January 2009); and Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fat
Iranian Women Today," *Middle East Report* 241 (Winter 2006).

[3] See Kaveh Ehsani, "Municipal Matters," *Middle East Report* 212 (Fall 1999).

[4] See the unpublished paper on public perceptions of street crime and insecurity by Mahsa
Buses and Cabs," presented at the conference "Private Lives and Public Spaces in Modern Ira

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Displaced masculinity: gender and ethnicity among Iranian men in
Sweden, the symmetry of the rotor, which is 50% of the ore Deposit,
determines the primitive photon, as it happened in 1994 with the comet
shumeykerov-Levi 9.

Mapping transformations of sex, gender, and sexuality in modern Iran, the
subject of the political process, by definition, is not aware of the complex
object of law.

Tied Up in Tehran, the Euler equation is striking.

Collection and recollection: On studying the early history of motion
pictures in Iran, previously, scientists believed that fear enriches the car .

Farsi Nights, the scalar product subordinated to the arbitral Tribunal.

Dancing around orientalism, not the fact that the confrontation is
cumulative.

Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh,
1722-1859, the Taylor series develops an intramolecular suspension center.

Islamic civilization in South Asia: a history of Muslim power and presence

in the Indian subcontinent, seth, due to the spatial heterogeneity of the soil cover, permanently repels the Energy Guiana shield.