

The World Shall Tell

Ancient Persia is a land of scent and interwoven sound that flows around and through you like a living river. As in most any land where bathing is a luxury, humanity is a base note of musk underlying the golden tang of almonds and the rolling curve of honey-scent. Voices rise in open harmony, the necessity of close-living turning every argument into a backdrop for the words of lovers nearby. There is no haven from stimulation; I'm not sure anyone would want one.

This overwhelming saturation of the senses is the reason most travel to the region. And if you can find a fellow traveler willing to share the site and timing of a good thing, you

might get the chance to visit an illusive beauty, valued for its intrigue and its air of magic: the night market.

Desert climes, for those of you who do not know, are different from what you may be used to in more than the obvious ways. Yes, they can be very hot. But drier air has little humidity to hold heat. When the sun goes down, the air begins to lose warmth quickly. The evenings are cool and dry and refreshing, a little relief as a reward for moving through the blaze of the day. By morning, the air can be almost crisp in comparison to midday, especially in autumn or late spring.

In the middle of the summer, when the ground itself gives off heat until deep in the evening and coolness is just a dream, the fresh, turning breeze of nighttime can feel good simply for lack of the sun. It's almost a necessity to wait until the darkness creeps in to move from the safety of the shade — more so if you are a woman or a child, not expected to labor in the hell of midday and with no reason to suffer it.

Women in ancient Iran were treated very well, with rights much like those of the men. They could own and inherit property, hold jobs, even rule. Trips to the time require a simple linen smock and, for me, a willingness to keep my mouth shut. This is not because it's expected of my gender. It's because I can't seem to master the subtleties of the language.

And there is the small matter of my blonde hair and blue eyes.

I am aware — have been told too many times to count — that I could easily change my hair and eye color when I visit sometime where it might be out of place. But I am, in my own way, vain. Oh, I'm not implying that I find myself beautiful. But I do like to find myself, not someone else, on my trips. If I don't feel I'm venturing into something dangerous — if there is no worry that my blue glance may cast a net of *matiasma*, or evil eye, over the unsuspecting marketgoers — then I don't bother to drastically change my look. I prefer to find my own way to work things out, if I can. When I visit Persia, I am a light-skinned Pathan, or a blue-eyed trader slipped in from Kashmir, here to barter a piece of King Solomon's lost treasure for a bauble or a handful of dates.

Markets of the people have their similarities through all times and locales. Places where humans and animals of every distinction can gather and mingle will almost always be loud, somewhat dirty and plagued by thievery both petty and great. The beggar's hand

brushes the rich man's robes. "Mothers" reach pitifully to make open-palmed pleas as an amazing, motley host of offspring gaze at the foreigner with big, sad eyes. They are not her children, my friend. See the quiet women with lined hands weaving, weaving, weaving while her baby sleeps at her feet? Offer your mercy to her. Poultry and fruit run and fall among sharp-faced flocks of hungry children. To steal or to starve? Or simply to play until you forget to be hungry? It is the way of the young the universe over to hover on the brink of exhaustion and malnutrition but somehow manage to make their feet fly.

A trip to a night market is usually made more for the chance to join the flow of humanity than to purchase something useful. The sky in the desert is at once clear and somehow soft, as if the sand and warmth have worn away all brittleness from the stars. Voices rise and fall in the ageless dance of commerce, but they, too, seem velvety and slightly muted. Sometimes I put bits of dried fruit and coins in the outer pocket spaces of my tunic just so little hands can slip in and away with something good for the night. Maybe I'm encouraging lawlessness; maybe I'm encouraging life. It pleases me; I do it, and it does no harm.

A note here on changing the ebb and flow of time: The continuum has a way of balancing itself. I don't claim to be a physicist, or a very good scientist of any sort, but I have been told, do believe and have actively confirmed that feeding a child millennia in the past will not noticeably alter what some might call my "present." I don't know why. But it is so. The world and its time flow on like water around a rock and continue where they were going all along. Or maybe I am simply an instrument that was always meant to be exactly where I am at any moment. Either way, I have seen the foolhardiness of rushing in like an angel of mercy to stop a destined war, only to find yourself an ineffective speck that time engulfs and flows over. It is the lives of the people who try and fail that change. I don't make grand gestures, and I can't stop the horrors that come with the vastness of eternity. But I can feed dates to a child and sleep peacefully.

One night, I embarked on such a trip to pander to my fascination with Middle Eastern markets and their almost constant tinkle of bells — something that is satisfyingly sweet in the clear of night without the modern under-hum of traffic and electricity. Anything I could fashion into an anklet that would shimmy and sing the belle bell music as I walked would do as a souvenir. I had my usual hidden cache of goodies on my person: dried

dates and figs with a small smattering of princely walnuts and three plump, golden raisins for that hint of the exotic.

I could feel the hits and snags as racing children casually bumped me and came away with a treat or a coin, bringing to mind the out-of-place feeling that I was fishing on a riverbank and waiting for a strike. Nothing but little fish, please, I thought, and smiled in a way that, looking back, must have made me seem suddenly foreign to my surroundings, at least to one who would know.

I was looking at a bronze arm cuff laden with carnelian and lapis lazuli — possibly very old, even then — when I felt a tug at my sleeve. I politely ignored the pick-pocket's lack of skill and did not turn in that direction.

The tug came again, sharper, and a voice: “You come mit me; ve drink tea.”

I have no way to describe my moment of out-of-body near-hysteria upon hearing that lovely, rough, German-accented voice on a tender night in Persia, circa 600 B.C. I did not outwardly react; inside I wondered for a moment if I were dreaming or perhaps had made some kind of traveling miscalculation.

Travelers do occasionally stumble upon each other in the wild, so to speak. We are known to one another, learn from one another, follow set rules and gather as any such group must. Night markets, fairs and bazaars are popular attractions to my ilk; they are the theme park of the time tourist. But there is such a vast and dizzying array of moments from which to choose that overlapping, while not incredibly rare, is at least uncommon. And the general greeting is more a meeting of the eyes and a sort of wry lip-purse, not a demand to talk couched in an invitation to take tea.

Besides, why would anyone of us need to make such a connection in such a place? It's a pleasure trip of an almost narcissistic sort — it's like seeing another tourist in 20th century Paris and asking them to lunch with you because you both have cameras.

I was bewildered but intrigued, and doubly so when I saw the speaker. She could have been no more than four and a half feet tall. She was swaddled in linen like a veiled harem girl but must have been at least 70, judging by the age showing in the hand on my arm.

Rheumy blue eyes, alert behind cirrus clouds of cataracts, squinted at me for a moment, and then she chuckled.

“You like tea.” It was not a question.

I closed one eye and looked at her much the same way she had inspected me.

“Yes.”

I left the vendor with a shrug of apology and followed my little guide into the heart of the market, past scented oils and amulets, through crowds of children that seemed not to notice her at all, much less offer her a second glance. Me they sometimes smiled at and then whispered to each other, like adults discussing a fool or an infant, and I smiled back as if I had no idea what they were thinking and dropped the three raisins behind me for them to fight over.

We eventually made our way between the market stalls and groupings and onto a side street, little more than a path, until we came to a small door in a long, continuous wall. There she paused, and I could smell the oddness of a sweet anachronism, lavender soap on clean skin, as I was forced to crowd in behind her in the narrow space. She opened the door and moved aside to allow me in first, and then she looked left and right and struck a match, lighting a torch in a small clay pot outside her door and then one just inside. The match she carefully broke in half and fed to one of the little fires.

“Not good to leave things strange, yes? Is better to consume and leave no traces, when you can.”

I nodded, thinking it sad life advice but a wise course of travel and wondering which it was for her.

The door opened onto a vaulted room with plastered walls covered in yellow, blue and dusty red patterns. High windows that in daylight would let out hot air and receive glancing sunlight opened onto the stars.

She lit more little pots of fire and pulled two chairs up to a small table. Out of a reedy basket she drew two bone china cups and a little pot, all covered in creamy yellow roses and sprigs of painted ivy. She handled them like baby ducklings, cradling each in her hands with a fond smile before setting it down, and she saw me frown, I guess, in question.

“Of my mother. She say to take them always and keep dem safe.”

She stroked a finger down the face of a downy painted rose on this antique family heirloom that would not be made for more than a thousand years.

“I grow tea myself. Is gut. Strong, not for children.” I remembered the German children of my youth being scandalized that I drank sweet iced tea at the age of nine and smiled a little bit for the memory. I could see large containers along the window edge of the room, their tops green with the waxy leaves of healthy tea plants.

“English woman bring me tea plants. You want milk? Is goat’s.” She had a little container of something buttery looking that she dribbled into her tea cup with small smacks of pleasure, but I declined. I do like milk or cream in my hot tea — cow’s milk.

The honey she offered next I accepted, startled by the perfection of its flavor. This was the elixir upon which the reputation of the substance was founded. When she brought a pot of steaming tea, made from a finger-clench of fermented black leaves and water heated over the fire, I could smell the liquid heating the honey and mixing with it in my cup.

She managed to do all this still wrapped in her little bundling of linen, but as I took my first sips, she drew off her outer layers, and I could see her smile at my expression of bliss. Her face was round and so was her hair, little spriggy clouds of white ringlets that looked like she kept them cut with a knife — which she probably did.

“From his tongue flowed speech sweeter than honey.”

I looked up, startled as much by her words as by the delicate, almost unaccented way she said them.

“Homer,” I said, still puzzled but very much impressed. “It is a little like a man, isn’t it? It might be good for you in small doses, but woe to her who lives on tea and honey alone — mere mortal food would be a travesty.”

She looked almost like a debutante as she peered up through her lashes and smiled at my youthful pretension.

“I confuse you. You wonder why I say this, yes? Why I’m here, why I grow tea and drink honey and goat’s milk and all — all this I have.”

At a loss, I nodded. She sighed, folded her hands, looked down and back up.

“I love my husband. We marry very young. We have one son, a good son, very handsome. Name him Faber — means artist.” She paused for a sip of tea and looked far into the future, into her past.

“Happy family, we three. Faber grow up some, get strong. He join Army. He and Erich — my husband — they die in War. I have nothing left. I see picture in book when I’m going through the things they leave, picture of building — Persepolis.” The last word was said with perfect inflection. No trouble with the nuances of language for her, at least the language of ancient Iran. “I close my eyes, open them here, stay here for 30 years. Make life. Find home. Drink tea mit honey. Scare little children. Is gut.”

My tea was still hot. She told it that fast. No explanation about whether she had traveled before. No indication of how she managed to make a life a millennium in the past, whether she’d had to go back to her time, what her family there knew. Just, “Is gut.” I had no idea where to start. Maybe she didn’t either.

“We were not Nazis.” She had my attention again, and at least now I knew what war, or set of wars, she meant. “They were part of the Wehrmacht, the resistance makers, the defenders of the nation. They were good people.”

She turned her head away and I looked down into my tea, little swirls of honey just darker swatches of gold in a sea of amber.

“But no one knows Wehrmacht, only they know Nazis. They tell me this, people I talk to from the times ahead, people who come here for playing. I leave to think my life is ruined, kaput, so broken. I stay because I find my life is like a nothing, and all my good boys lost to something evil.”

“Why I go back? Why be young again, in that place, to feed a world where all my mark is wiped away so soon, but the bad mark stays?”

I had no real answer. I felt my lips moving, but I cringed inside because I had no idea what might come out. “Sometimes the little marks stay. You remember them. And I will remember you.”

“Bah! I’m old.” She cackled then, sounding beyond old, sounding timeless. “I am really old to, you, yes? I am thousands — maybe millions? But no, you don’t look like spaceman. Look like little German girl, British girl maybe, on *feiertag* — holiday?”

American, I told her. Not so distant from her own time, mine, and I had been to Germany, as a child, and played in the green grass, and eaten fat orange carrots that were sweeter than the ones at home.

“Is gut,” she said again, and we nodded.

“You have question?”

I had no idea where to start. I wasn't even sure what was important for me to know anymore. I thought I might feel sad for her, lonely, but I would have felt that anyway, if she had been in a little flat somewhere in Wiesbaden with a daschund and a telephone. Who would she call? Maybe that should have been my question, but I was almost afraid to know.

“Why here?” I asked, and I realized I had stopped caring about whether she was a seasoned traveler or had happened upon it in some incredibly rare, serendipitous conjunction of grief and whimsy.

“Faber was artist, like his name. But he was word artist, make sentences make you cry, make your heart sing. He loved poems, his, other people's. He had book with pictures about here, and a poem by man named Nezami — a man not lived yet here, I think, but he will. This is the part I read, make me come here, to be close to my boys.”

She stood up and folded her hands like a little child reciting for class, and I had to fight a smile, but the words came from her mouth soft and clear, again with little accent, and I found myself looking away.

“Love grants me powers that Nature might deny;
And, whatsoe'er my doom, the world shall tell,
Thy lover gave to immortality
Her name he loved — so fatally — so well!”

She cleared her throat and waited until I looked back up.

“And this: ‘These few moments which you can never find again ... If you have a heart, do not be without a beloved.’”

I wisely waited for explanation this time.

“I thought...” She cleared her throat. “I thought maybe I find a way to make them immortal, like the poem say. Oh, not really, not bring them back. Well, maybe at the first, but, bah,” here she waved her hand dismissively in the air, “I know rules. I know possibilities, impossibilities. I think, maybe I build them a shrine, a statue, a monument. I start here, like poet, where world is young, and make something to last.”

“But nothing is good enough, nothing is right. And then I hear about the Nazis, the forgetting, the changes. And after I lose a little grief, I realize how I am foolish to think this way, to make a monument to German boys here in this place. Who would believe it? Time would swallow it up. Is out of place. Better, I say, to leave no traces. Drink tea, taste the honey, scare the children, and remember. No one can change memory here, because no one knows but me. No one. But you. And you leaving.”

She smiled at me, and then looked a little expectant. She raised an eyebrow.

“Is gut?” I asked.

“Ja, sehr gut.” She smiled and picked up our cups and the teapot, rinsing them in a bucket and repacking them in their little reed basket.

Then she brought them to me.

“You take ’em. Can’t leave no traces, right? Cups is traces. You take.”

I could feel the ridges of the basket as she pressed it into my hands and the weight of the baby-duck dishes inside.

“Oh, but it was your mother’s... you have to drink your tea!” It was wholly unexpected. I could feel tears in my eyes but was afraid to wipe them because I didn’t want her to see.

“I’m old. Old Persia lady. I drink tea from clay cup. Is OK. You take ’em.”

I gripped the basket and made to pull it into my lap, but she held firm.

“You remember me, yes? And the Wehrmacht, the boys? When you see the teapot, you think, I remember her, I remember Marta, and Faber and Erich. They was good people.”

I was crying by then, big sniffling tears that I had nowhere to wipe. She kept one hand on a basket handle but wiped my cheeks with her lavender-scented sleeve.

“You promise? You make a mark. I lie — is not good to leave no traces. Leave traces! Be beloved.”

I nodded and somehow mumbled, “I promise,” and then I put the little teapot’s nest on my chair and hugged her hard — I think she was startled and maybe had not been hugged in a long, long time, but then she hugged me back and said, one more time, “Is gut, ja?”

“Ja,” I said, and then, fishing for something, anything else to say, I looked her in the eye and very seriously asserted, “YOU are the Wehrmacht, Marta.”

You are the defender, the guardian of the memories, the resistance-maker, fighting against the forgetfulness of time.

I not entirely sure I knew what I meant just then. But she seemed to understand. I cried all the way out the door, and she patted me on the back and sent me home with a little strip of sweet-smelling linen and a little bit of a broken heart. I thought then I would have liked to meet Faber and Erich, but the pain of it would have been too great, knowing how the story ends.

I never got my little jingle-bell anklet. But on a bookcase in my home is a china teapot painted with yellow roses, made sometime around the end of the 19th century, I think. Inside it is a small strip of finely woven cloth, and when I lift the lid I can smell spring flowers and a hint of honey the likes of which hasn't been tasted in more than a thousand years.

It is best, I think, to create and leave traces when you can.

Is gut.