

THE PEACOCK THRONE

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A DF Books NERD's Release

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First published in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, February 1996

Peter Cook died a few weeks ago. I never met him, and I didn't catch the announcement, but when a friend mentioned it to me the next day, casually over dinner at *The Pines of Rome*, I felt an odd visceral shock. Cook was just about my own age. He was one of the people who defined my sense of what is funny, starting way back with the "Beyond The Fringe" review and continuing right through his disastrous (and un-funny) appearance as a TV butler. The last time I actually saw him in a movie was his cameo role as an ancient clergyman in "The Princess Bride."

The dinner conversation that night swirled on at once to other things, but Cook's death lingered at the back of my mind. I can see no reason for that. Everyone must die, sooner or later. But I suspect that if Peter Cook had not died, and if I had not for that reason been for the next few days somewhat preoccupied with intimations of mortality, the rest of this might not have happened.

But I was, and although I was busy when the phone rang and I would normally have allowed my answering machine to take over, my residual sense of unease took over instead and I picked up the receiver.

"Christopher Dutton?" said a quiet male voice.

"Yes."

"A mutual friend suggested that I give you a call. If you have some free time in the next couple of days, I would like to take you to lunch or to dinner."

There is no such thing as free time. It is our most precious and irreplaceable commodity. Supposedly there is also no such thing as a free lunch. It did not seem a good idea to offer these trite thoughts to a stranger. Instead, I said, "Who's the mutual friend?" And, when he told me the name, "OK. What else did he say?"

"That you tend to have your own agenda."

"Don't we all?"

"I think so." He laughed. "I can live with that."

"I'll have to look at my calendar. Can I call you back?"

"Sure." He gave me a number and added, "My name is Roland Pierce."

"I'll call you in a few minutes."

I would, but only after I had made another call or two. The 351 prefix on his number already told me a lot, but I wanted to cross-check. "Convergence of evidence," it's called. You view something from several different directions, sniff its perfume, prick your finger on a thorn, and decide as a working hypothesis that it is probably a rose.

Roland Pierce was a more difficult case. Was he a rose, or not? Our mutual friend was away in St. Petersburg (Russia, not Florida) and could not be reached. Two agency friends that I called had not heard of Pierce, but they promised to make internal phone calls and network the name.

I waited, not patiently, for a reply. You can theoretically reach anyone in the world by three person-to-person-to-person calls, but that fact is misleading. Make the wrong calls, and you will bounce

around forever.

After fifteen minutes the word came back: Roland Pierce was a definite rose, though one who worked for a division far removed from any with which I had been involved.

So why might he want to buy me lunch?

My friends did not know. I did not know. What I did know was that given his background and affiliation he would explain only in person, and only in an environment of his choosing.

Why would *I* let him buy me lunch? That's a really good question. I was busy, I had refused three lucrative consulting jobs in four weeks, and I have more money than available time.

It hurts to admit that I may also have more curiosity than sense.

Roland Pierce was dressed in a grey suit that looked a little too cool for January, a white button-down shirt, and a blue Jerry Garcia tie that probably cost him forty-five dollars. He was sitting down when I arrived, so I had no chance to verify that his shoes were polished to a regimental shine, that his socks matched his shoes and suit, and that his fly was zipped. I'm sure it was. Add in abundant curly grey hair, a trim mustache, and an Islands tan, and you had an undeniable charter member of the League of Gentlemen.

I don't know what he thought of me and my attire, and I was not about to ask. We shook hands. I sat down and waited.

He poured white wine, already ordered and chilled. "How is your Farsi, Mr. Dutton?" he said.

It was a fine and unexpected opening gambit.

"Pathetic," I said. "It's fifteen years since I was in Iran."

"I know. But you have a habit of scribbling notes in Farsi during technical meetings."

If I had checked up a little on him, he had checked far more on me. Well, that was fair. He was the one with the resources.

"It allows me to express my ruder and more critical thoughts," I said. "Other people use shorthand. Fluency in spoken language is totally different."

"I agree. But you never really lose it, do you?" He spoke as though from personal experience. "It just hides away somewhere in your brain. Give yourself a couple of intensive weeks of speaking and listening, and it wanders back."

I have a theory of the brain that addresses that odd phenomenon, but it didn't seem like the time and place. I said nothing, and after a few seconds he went on, "And your knowledge of nuclear reactors, how's that?"

"Worse than the Farsi. It's twenty years out of date, rather than just fifteen."

"You still keep Weinberg and Wigner's *Physical Theory of Neutron Chain Reactors* in your library."

It was a statement, not a question.

"I also have *Winnie The Pooh* and *Doctor Dolittle* , but I don't consult them."

"Ah, but they are undoubtedly on bookshelves in your family room." Pierce was holding his wine to the light and admiring its pure gold, and he chose not to look at me. "But Weinberg and Wigner, and Haim's big Persian-English dictionary, they are in your study. That's where you keep reference books that you use all the time."

Not just more checking, but *far* more checking. I had never seen the slightest sign that my house had been entered without my knowledge, but that was merely the sign of professionals. It meant that an observer from Pierce's organization would also be here in the restaurant.

"Don't you think we ought to get to the point?" I said.

"Certainly. I did not want you to think that we had been lacking in due diligence." Roland Pierce smiled at me as though to say that such a notion was quite unthinkable. I smiled at him, to show that I knew there had been a dozen major screw-ups in his organization within the past five years, beyond those that had made it to the media. After a moment his smile faded and he went on, "Computer-based information systems have come along enormously in the past decade. It is now possible to feed in a diverse set of requirements: personal mobility, experience in Iran, a working knowledge of Farsi, a background in physics, suitable clearances, a clean passport, and a second profession unrelated to my group's interests and activities. The system will seek out the individual who best fits the requirements, in a well-defined mathematical sense."

"You ought to have fed in a few more constraints. The individual should enjoy international travel rather than disliking it, need money, and have no other commitments on his time."

"You go to England an average of twice a year. You once made eight trips to Iran in a single ten-month period."

"I go to England to see family. I also once rode a twenty-five mile bicycle time trial in one hour flat. That would kill me if I tried it today."

"You do not need money," he went on, as though I had just agreed with him on the first point. "But in our experience the promise of financial gain is the least successful of all inducements." He managed to force a smile and beat me to the punch: "Although as you know we recently uncovered a disastrous and highly publicized counter-example to that principle within our own organization."

"As for your commitments, you just last week completed and mailed a book. In such a case you normally indulge in unrelated other activities for a month or two before undertaking another major project."

"Are you telling me that what you have in mind is a minor project?"

"My apologies. Before undertaking another major *writing* project. You would do little writing in this case, although it in fact provides the logic for your presence. However, I am getting ahead of myself. Are you aware that Russia has offered to sell light-water nuclear reactor technology to Iran, and that the United States is much troubled by that idea?"

"I heard Warren Christopher say as much, in a television interview."

“Then you might think that the news that Iran has changed its mind, and now professes no interest whatsoever in such purchases, would please us. In fact, quite the opposite is true. We believe that Iran has lost interest only because it has the key to something more disturbing. Are you familiar with the idea of cold fusion?”

“Enough to know it's total nonsense. Sheldon Glashow said it best.”

I saw a slight uncertainty on his face, like the first smudge on polished furniture. Could his briefing have been less than perfect? “Glashow? Ah, of our organization?”

“Sheldon Glashow is a Nobel Prize-winning physicist. When Pons and Fleischmann first announced the discovery of cold fusion at a press conference in Utah, Glashow realized at once that it was bogus. I heard him give a talk very soon afterwards which ended with, ‘Never trust a four-letter state.’”

“I see.” Pierce had regrouped even before I finished the first sentence. “Let me drop the term ‘cold fusion,’ in favor of simple fusion. Something is going on in Iran. All we have at the moment are bits and pieces, but we believe that they have discovered the secret to commercial fusion power. In fact, they have a working fusion reactor.”

“Why bits and pieces? You must have dozens of contacts inside the country.”

“Perhaps.” He weakened. “Of course we do. They are hearing a great deal. But I doubt that any one of them understands it. In fact, reading their reports I am sure that they do not. We need someone who knows the country well, someone who also knows enough science to discard what is patently false. Someone like you, Mr. Dutton.”

“Iran isn't Washington,” I said, “where if you probe in the wrong place or say the wrong thing you can duck behind the First Amendment. Salman Rushdie is still in hiding. Do you know about SAVAK?”

“The ‘Organization for the Information and Security of the Country.’ A splendidly innocent name for a secret police.”

“Iran still has SAVAK—not officially, I know, but it's there. Something like SAVAK is too valuable to throw away just because a new government takes over.”

“Of course. If my own organization did not exist, it would be necessary to invent us. However, in your case I see neither danger or difficulty. It is not that you would have a cover of being a writer. You *are* a writer. If they question that, and ask you to generate a story or an article while you are there, do you doubt that you would be able to do so?”

“Not at all.” But *writewhere*? I thought. Rotting in some Iranian jail? I recalled Van Meegeren, locked up after the Second World War, forced to paint a Vermeer because the fake Vermeers he had sold to the Nazis during the war were so good that he had been charged as a collaborator. “I could write if I had to,” I said. “But what on God's green earth makes you think that I would leave this”—I gestured to the Puligny Montrachet, the breadsticks, and the creamy asparagus soup that had just been served—“to go off and risk my head, hat, and ass on a wild goose chase to nowhere?”

Roland Pierce swallowed a first spoonful of soup and dabbed fastidiously at his mustache with the cloth napkin.

“Our mutual friend,” he said, “gave it as his opinion that you would be temperamentally unable to resist.”

* * * *

The trip across the Atlantic was entirely normal, with an on-time Heathrow arrival in the bleak grey of a February dawn. After a three-hour nap at my preferred anonymous hotel in Bloomsbury, the day in London was too busy with trivia to leave time for thought. It was only on the second leg, the slow night flight to Teheran via Rome, that the divergence began.

The days of crowded PanAm and IranAir flights, packed to the last passenger seat and beyond, were gone. I occupied a half row on a quarter-filled darkened plane, drowsing and dreaming. I had given Roland Pierce a long list of names, and he had come back with a trace on only three of them. It didn't matter much, because I believed that I knew the whereabouts of all three. I was testing Pierce rather than expecting useful new information. But it left a question. Where were all the rest?

Wanted, living or dead: Reza Marzban, Reza Majd, Reza Tavvakkoli, Khosro Behrooz, Abdol Hekmat, Reza Ferdowsi, and a couple of dozen others. Half the country had been Reza's, named after the Shah's father. What names did they use, now that the *Shahanshah*, the King of Kings, and his whole *Pahlavi* succession were officially a blot on history, a dark stain across the Persian landscape?

Reza Marzban was a Navy captain whose final swimming test for his officers had been to take them half a mile off-shore and make them jump overboard. When he left the Navy his commanding officer had given him a simple choice: resign under the Navy's terms, or be shot. He made at least one sound military decision, and became a civilian. But I could still remember those mad, dark eyes as he drove us all over Teheran, from the great cemetery in the south to the slopes of the Elburz Mountains in the north, boasting of Iran's future, pointing out the grand new buildings that were springing up everywhere, mocking the decadence and weakness of Europe and America—and at the same time criticizing the Shah in a way that made every other Iranian we met cringe away from us, in mortal fear of SAVAK.

Logically, the revolution would have welcomed him as one of their own. In practice, after a revolution the first act of a new government is to eliminate the insurgents who destroyed the old. Reza Marzban was either out of the country, or he was dead; dead as the exiled Shah, dead as the grandiose visions of Iran as a twenty-first century superpower.

I lay back in my airplane seat and dreamed those dreams again. I saw the cloud-capped palaces, thousand-foot skyscrapers in downtown Teheran (genuine earthquake country, but technology would solve that). I watched in my mind's eye as the desert around the city turned to roses, by the miracle of nuclear-powered desalinization plants and irrigation. I saw the fleets of Concordes and 747's flying in daily or hourly from Europe, Japan and America, disgorging the beautiful people into the glittering new airport. They stayed in Teheran's world-class hotels, and in the five-star restaurants of the city they dined on caviar from the Caspian, Persian Gulf shrimp, and iced *Piruzi* vodka. I saw—not my dream, but the dream of every red-blooded Iranian male—a dozen blondes in every modern Teheran office, mini-skirted and glamorous in the style made respectable by the *enghelab-e-safid*, the Shah's “White Revolution.”

Morning and Mehrabad Airport shattered the vision. On my old visits the place had been insanely busy, with every family member of every passenger at the airport screaming a greeting or wailing goodbye. Now Customs was as inefficient as ever, but Arrivals was almost deserted. The old pulse of excitement and energy had vanished completely. In its place was an air of neglect, of drabness and decay and disillusion.

As a relatively obscure writer I did not merit government greeting or official notice. A conversation with

Immigration offered a chance to loosen my rusty tongue, and confirmed that my papers made me good for a two-week stay. Official purpose: travel guides. Then I rode into town in an ancient cab that might well have been the one that took me there the last time. The center of the city was as I remembered it, but no street names today reflected any element of the short-lived Pahlavi “dynasty” (the Shah claimed a 2500-year heritage, but his father was illegitimate and he never knew the identity of his grandfather). I paid the driver in the new currency. It seemed to be the only thing in the city that was new. It made up for that by its cheap appearance.

I had not attempted to make a hotel reservation in advance. It would have anyway been impossible, because the place that I preferred lacked Fax machines and English-speaking staff. In the old days, guests at the Teheran Intercontinental, Hilton, and Sheraton were monitored closely. I could not see that changing merely with a change of regime. The Ayatollahs had a degree of suspicion of foreigners that made the Shah look like Mister Rogers.

The Khedmat Hotel, like its up-scale cousins to the north and west, had seen better days. The room I was offered was “the best one in the whole hotel,” according to the manager, and I am inclined to believe him. It was clean but shabby. On the floor was a genuine but well-worn Kerman rug. There was of course no telephone.

I unpacked my single bag, lay down on the bed, and slept until two in the afternoon. Then it was time for work. I took a cab and headed north, for Fereshte Avenue. *Fereshte* means angel, but the man I was hoping to see was anything but.

I told the cab to wait and walked up to the heavy wooden door. This was the same house, but how about the occupant?

The door was answered by a young man, maybe twenty-five years old. He was by definition one of the lucky ones. The decade-long war between Iran and Iraq had slaughtered half the youth of the country. Like the girls of Europe after the First World War, the maidens of Iran in this generation would look long and hard for a mate. Many would remain spinsters.

“Yes?” he said, without expression.

“I am seeking Mr. Radegan.”

“I am Mr. Radegan.”

“Mr. *Abdi* Radegan.” And then, on an impulse, “Perhaps your grandfather?”

“What is your name?” he asked. And after I told him, “Aha! He has spoken of you often. One moment.” He disappeared, and I went back and paid off the taxi driver.

The man who came to the door wore blue loose pantaloons and house slippers, and he shuffled rather than walked.

“Can it be?” he said. He gazed at me and beyond me. “Is it really?”

“It is.” I realized that he was blind. “Father, it has been a long time.”

“Too long.” He came forward and embraced me, and stared unseeing at my face. “Too long, indeed. Christopher. My testament.”

It was what he had called me when we met people, as much as he used my name. He had taught me Farsi, and in his view my speech provided the testament to his skill.

“No worthy testament, Father. It has been so long. My memory went.”

He laughed, because to that point we had been speaking English and I had suddenly switched languages. My last phrase, *Yodam raft —my memory went*, was a true Farsi idiom.

“It returns,” he said. “And quickly. Come in, come in.” And he led his way confidently through the dim-lit interior of the house.

“I am sorry that the treatment did not work,” I said, wanting to let him know at once that I was aware of his blindness.

He shrugged philosophically. “It was a long shot. The Americans are devils, but unfortunately they are inefficient devils and cannot grant wishes in exchange for your soul. Better *kur thankhar* .”

Better blind than a donkey. His eyes had troubled him for twenty years, since the time when he retired as superintendent of one of Teheran's most populous school districts. His last trip to Europe and the United States had been a move of desperation, but when we met in Washington at the time he was optimistic about the treatment. “Anything that hurts so much must do some good,” he had said. But apparently it had not.

We settled into the long living-room. Some things had not changed. A line of statuesque aunts, black-clad and veiled in the traditional *chador*, sat along one wall. For all I knew they had been sitting there since my first visit. They spoke softly not to me or Abdi but to each other, openly eavesdropping on our conversation and giggling for mysterious reasons.

An hour went by while Abdi and I played catch-up. Since our last meeting his life, in a country torn apart by turmoil, religious revolution, jihad, and war, had been far more peaceful than mine. The power centers might shift, but little from outside penetrated the walled villa, with its mulberry trees, stone-flagged courtyard and cool, calm interior.

He laughed when I reminded him of my first visit, to partake of an early afternoon tea. I was the complete novice to Iranian customs, and I did not realize that it was usual to nibble a little of each dish as it was served. I had eaten everything on my plate, and looked on in dismay as the courses came and came and came. I thought it impolite to refuse. At the end I tottered away unable and unwilling to eat again that day.

This time I knew better, sampled judiciously, and murmured compliments. After the last course had been served Abdi made a slight gesture and the matched set of aunts rose, bade me a polite “*Khoda hafez*,” and left the room. Abdi regarded me with those shrewd, sightless eyes.

“Now, my son. It is strange times to meet again, and here. You wish to talk to me?”

“I do. How are your ears, Father?”

“There are less than there used to be. But they function.” Abdi, high school principal and then school superintendent in Teheran, claimed to know the names and faces of ten thousand of his former students. If it was an exaggeration, it was not much of one. I had never been out with him in the old days without a

constant stream of respectful greetings from young men and young women. They formed the basis of an information network that put the Baker Street Irregulars to shame.

"I wonder if your ears might listen for me."

"If I ask them to do so. But listen for what?"

Roland Pierce had given me stern instructions to talk to no one about fusion. He had almost certainly known that I was going to ignore him—why otherwise had I given him a list of names? But what could he do? It was my head in the noose, not his.

He could worry, and he was probably doing it. Pierce did not know, as I knew, of Abdi's total honesty.

And how did I know? Simple. I had long ago tried to recruit him, and failed. Abdi's loyalty to Iran was rock-solid; but it was to Iran's history and people and sacred soil, not to the Shah or to the religious leaders who were now pushing the country back a thousand years.

I told Abdi all I knew, which was precious little. I told him of rumors abroad of a great new discovery; of a power source that would return oil to its rightful place in the world, as the source of petrochemicals instead of energy; of my desire to determine how much of the story was fact and how much was fiction.

He listened in silence, and at the end he shook his head. "Here is another Persian proverb for your collection: 'To protect a secret, place it among a million falsehoods.' No one will know which is real."

"But your ears can find out."

"Perhaps they can. They are intelligent young men. I will ask them."

"Young women, too. You would not neglect those."

That brought a big smile, and a rueful, "My son, it is not from choice. I celebrate my seventy-seventh birthday at New Year."

Abdi, during his tenure as teacher, had done what in America would have brought him disgrace and quick dismissal: he had enjoyed a sexual relationship with some of his former pupils. Not just a few of them. Several hundred, according to rumor. Here in Teheran he was a legend and a sought-after provider of certain advice. The restoration of hymens and the repair of slightly-used virgins forms a thriving medical specialty.

"But I take your meaning," he went on. "The ladies too will be my ears—and yours."

He asked at which hotel I was staying. He was astute enough to ask if I was likely to be there.

"I will check in," I said, "at least once every twenty-four hours."

"Give me a couple of days," he said. "Then you will come here again, and perhaps I will have news."

"*Enshallah.*"

"God willing, as always. Good hunting, my son."

As I left I realized that it had been a mistake to dismiss the taxi. In the old days I would have had my driver wait for me, even if it was going to be three or four hours. But in the old days it would hardly have been necessary, since it was easy to find a taxi. Now the street was almost deserted of automobiles.

I could have gone back and asked Abdi to have one of his household drive me downtown. Instead I went to the end of Fereshte Avenue and began to walk south. I told myself that the exercise would do me good. After so many hours of sitting in airplanes I needed to stretch my legs. A quarter of an hour later I began to change my mind. A light snow was falling, and the cold wind at my back came all the way from the snows of the Elburz Mountains. I was only thirty-six degrees from the equator, but this was February and I was more than four thousand feet above sea level. When I was able to stop a taxi after twenty-five minutes, and climbed in with the other three Iranian passengers, I felt that my legs and lungs had been stretched quite enough.

“*Takht-e-Tavoos*,” I said. Peacock Avenue, or in literal translation Peacock Throne. Not a bad description for my destination.

I stared around me when I alighted. It was dusk, but I could see that this was a more opulent location than I had expected. She had certainly moved up in the world. The apartment building was tall, with massive double doors. The front desk when I entered contained a big internal switchboard for calling individual apartments. At that switchboard sat a uniformed clerk.

“I am here to visit Victoria Gasparian,” I said. “What is her apartment number?”

“Is she expecting you?”

“No. But we are old friends.”

“Excuse me, but I must call her before I can give you her apartment number.”

As an experiment, I placed a fair-sized note on the marble desk top. He shook his head, and repeated, “I must call *Khonum* Gasparian. What is your name?”

“Christopher Dutton.” Iran had truly changed from the old days. Or was I just out of touch, and my bribe too small?

He had picked up the telephone, and was waiting impassively. It took a long time, long enough for me to become convinced that she was out, but at last he said into the phone. “You have a visitor at the front desk. His name is Christopher Dutton.” There was a brief pause, then he continued with an unflattering but I suspect accurate description of my appearance. Finally he nodded, put down the telephone, and said, “Apartment 5-C.”

I nodded and left the banknote where it was sitting in front of him.

The single elevator was slow and creaking. As it began its stately ascent I wondered how many residents used it. Even in its heyday, Teheran had an electricity supply famous for brownouts and blackouts. The major centers all used their own back-up generators.

She had not waited for me to arrive at her apartment. When the elevator door opened she was there, standing in front of me. I stepped forward, and after a moment's hesitation we gave each other a curiously stiff and formal embrace.

"It is you," she said. "I thought it could not be, even when he described you."

As she led me to the open door of her apartment I glanced sideways and made a quick head-to-toe inventory. The last time I had seen Victoria was in Frankfurt, almost ten years before. She was now forty-one, and the added years had been more than kind. They—or exercise and diet—had slimmed and tightened her legs and body and refined the line of her jaw. The lustrous dark eyes, skillfully outlined with *kohl*, were more beautiful than ever in her thinner face. Her hair was still black as jet.

"Vodka?" she said, as I followed her into the apartment.

"I thought that alcohol was forbidden under the ayatollahs."

She gave me in turn a quizzical and evaluating sideways glance. "I am a Christian, not a Moslem. Drink is *notharom* for me. Anyway, everything is forbidden under the ayatollahs." She handed me an eight-ounce tumbler of vodka and ice-cubes, raised her own to her lips, and looked at me over the top of the glass. "Would you want me to give upeverything?"

"That would be a tragic loss." I raised my tumbler to her. "*Salomati*."

"To health, and to old friends. You are looking good."

Iranian vodka is the best in the world, even when it has to be bootlegged. While we toasted each other I examined the living-room of her apartment. The two twelve-by-nineteen Persian rugs on the walls would have suggested substantial wealth anywhere else, but here they were commonplace. More impressive were the lacquered cabinets filled with Limoges china, the hundred-gallon aquarium stocked with a rainbow of tropical fish, and the long coffee table with its mosaic inlay of fine Iranian turquoise.

We sat down side by side on a brocade couch, worked with traditional Persian motifs. "Too long," she said, echoing Abdi Radegan. "I have not seen you for too long. Tell me everything—where you are living, what you are doing, why you are here. And I will do the same."

I told her. But not everything. The years fell away easily, and we talked and talked in that curious mixture of English and Farsi that we had always found so pleasing. She had married, after waiting until she was almost thirty-four, a man many years older than she. That did not surprise me. When she was in her mid-twenties I had met her father, and he was then close to eighty.

Her husband had died one year ago, leaving her comfortable financially and in a position to pursue and enjoy her position within his family business. Career women are less rare in Iran than American hostile publicity would have you believe. She was proud of her success. She stated, perhaps a little too pointedly, that she had no desire to re-marry. It would interfere with her career.

"And you?" she asked.

I shook my head. I had no urge to marry again, either. My reasons also had to do with career, I explained, but I did not go into detail.

At eight o'clock I said, "You must be starving. Can I take you out to dinner?"

She gave me a big-eyed mocking glance. "Meaning, you have finished the bowl of pistachio nuts and you are still hungry. You have not changed. But I think we will do better to eat here. The restaurants of Teheran are not what they were."

“No Intercontinental?” I said. “No Maharajah? No Ivan?”

She laughed and shook her head. I was mixing together two of our long-ago shared experiences. Once when I was staying at the Intercontinental I took Victoria to lunch there. The best restaurant was on the top floor of the hotel. As we were about to enter the elevator a little man ran forward and said he was sorry, but we could not go upstairs.

“We can't go to lunch?” I said.

“Oh,” he said, “*to lunch* .” And he waved us on.

Victoria, a respectable secretary, should have been offended at being mistaken for a street hooker (the hotel had their own, and outsiders were not allowed on their turf). But she was well aware of her dazzling appearance. She just laughed and stepped onto the elevator, and the little man gave me a respectful “One lucky fellah” look.

As for Ivan, one of the more improbable features of pre-Ayatollah Teheran was the performer at the *Maharajah* restaurant. Ivan was a Pakistani with an excellent voice and an American country-and-western repertoire that he had learned by listening to records and tapes. Victoria and I had danced there together for the first time to a Charlie Rich song, “Behind Closed Doors,” performed by Ivan. She knew all the words, which was more than I did, and she had sung them in my ear.

Apparently she knew them still. She sang, “Then she turns the lights down low, and she lets her hair hang down;” and she went on, “You are fortunate. Today I bought fresh fish and shrimp. I will let my hair hang down, and I will cook for you *mahi-va-maigu* with rice. And you will be astonished at my new skills.”

Double meanings were sliding along under the mixture of two languages. I was sliding along with them, under the mixture of jet-lag, high altitude, and multiple vodkas.

Roland Pierce was not my kind of guy, but he was nobody's fool. The information that had come back to him about Victoria Gasparian was scanty, but he had been in the business a long time. I suspect that he had wondered about her name on my list even before he sent off his inquiry.

“What is her role in this?” he had asked me. “She has nothing to do with science, nothing to do with newspapers or writing. I don't see why she should be involved.”

“To give me a look at modern Iran from an inside point of view,” I said. “Look, before the Shah was kicked out, not one of your people—and there were loads of them in Iran, from Ambassador Helms on down—nobody had any idea that the whole country was ready to blow its lid. The revolution started in the mosques, the last place any of you thought of looking. I decided long ago that Iran is like an onion. You peel off one layer, and you think, now I really know how the place works. Then you find there's another layer beneath, and then another. Finally you realize you are dealing with an infinite number of layers. Whatever I am, I'm not Iranian. I need an Iranian eye.”

I thought that sounded pretty good.

“I see,” he said. His face remained neutral, but I don't think he swallowed my argument. Which was as it should be, since it was eighty percent bogus. *He* may be dedicated to liberty, justice, and the American way, but my life includes other things.

“Ah, why should life all labor be?” asked Tennyson.

The answer is, it shouldn't. It should include *mahi-va-maigu*, served with fresh spring salad available in Teheran by the middle of February; and it should include a remark, casually delivered by Victoria as she was serving *makhlut* as dessert, ice-cream with rosewater starch and wild cherry sauce, “I was not intending to go anywhere tonight. But tomorrow night I will be busy.”

She had not said, I had not asked, if there was again a man in her life or a woman in mine. Her statement told me that there was indeed a man, but he was *in* her life and not her life. And he would not be here tonight.

Her bedroom reflected her tastes, and no one else's. The only photograph on the bedside table was of her dead parents. Much later, in companionable darkness, I finally asked if she had heard any random rumors about a big Iranian scientific discovery.

“Discovery of what?” she asked.

“Of fusion.” I used the English term, and she said, “Fusion? I don't know that word.”

“Fusion is like *zoub*.” I switched to Farsi, but realized as soon as I spoke that this would not work. Technical terms often do not translate well, and *zoub* means more like melting, or merging.

She reached out to switch on a little night-light, and turned to stare at me quizzically. “Isn't that just what we have been doing?” She smiled and stroked my chin, bristly with a one-day beard. “I have no interest in science, Christopher. You know that. But if I remember I will ask my friends tomorrow. *Zoub* tonight, and *zoub* tomorrow.”

* * * *

Roland Pierce, had he been able to see me, would surely have complained. He had sent me all that way, at large expense, expecting me to work—and look what I was doing instead.

Actually, I was working. I was feeling my way back into the country and the language after a long absence. The meeting with Abdi Radegan had helped a lot, but for real immersion there is nothing that compares with what Iranians call *afarhang-e-mu-e-boland* —a long-haired dictionary. You learn faster, and you enjoy it more.

The following afternoon, though, Victoria kicked me out with orders not to appear again until the following evening. I was forced to change my working mode to one that Roland Pierce would approve.

I went to the Khedmat Hotel and checked for messages from Abdi. As I expected, nothing. It was too soon. I went to my room, took a sponge bath, and shaved. And I thought.

Before I left Washington, I had set one absolute rule with Roland Pierce: I would tolerate no interaction of any kind with his Iranian sources, and they would not contact me. In fact, they were not to know of my presence.

He didn't like that, but he understood why. Some of the in-country contacts were surely taking money from both sides.

It was safer this way, but I was reduced to my own resources. I lay down on the bed, and reviewed the “bits and pieces” of informer data that Pierce had found so unsatisfying. It was impossible to make them

into a coherent whole, but I could go well beyond any analyst sitting in a Washington office.

First, any new development would surely be in Teheran. I would have made that bet even without information from Pierce. There are universities in Tabriz and Mashad and Isfahan, but they were weak in science even before the Ayatollahs took over. Now, as a high-level Iranian who had fled the country just four days before the Shah (and been forced to bribe his way out) said to me, "The technical programs are being run by Ph.D.'s in theology from the University of Qom."

So it was Teheran if it was anywhere. Roland Pierce had come to the same conclusion, but at that point his analysis had taken him in the wrong direction. He knew that the United States had spent billions of dollars on fusion research. As a long-time federal employee, he assumed that the only group with enough money and talent to do the work in Iran must be part of their government.

"If you can provide us with exact coordinates," he had said just before I left, "we'll make a quick strike and pick up the team members and as much equipment as we can. This could be another Peenemunde."

At the end of the Second World War, the Americans and Soviets had between them scooped up the whole German rocket team from Peenemunde and laid the foundation for both nation's space programs. Pierce did not say, and I did not ask, how his strike would be performed. He surely had his people in place in Teheran, but what I did not know I could not tell.

Pierce's Peenemunde analogy sounded impressive, and I have no doubt that it went down well in briefings to his bosses. But I disagreed with him for two reasons. First, the government ministries here, even in the old days of near-unlimited oil wealth, had not employed first-rate creative talent. But second, and more important, I knew that Iran had never engaged in research into magnetic confinement and tokamaks. They had no "big fusion" projects. If a path to commercial fusion power had been discovered here, it must be along some new and untraveled road and employ a new physical insight.

To me, that did not suggest large teams and massive equipment. It suggested pencil and paper, and the lonely inside of one person's head.

I could imagine Roland Pierce's skeptical reaction. "The Iranian school system today is terrible for science training. Are you suggesting that some half-educated unknown is behind this?"

He was not here for me to remind him that Newton, an unknown isolated from all scientific colleagues by the Great Plague of 1664-5, had in those years laid down the physical laws that created modern science; that Einstein, a half-educated unknown hidden away in the Swiss Patent Office in Berne, had produced the papers on relativity and quantum effects that led to today's world; that Ramanujan, a self-taught unknown isolated in Madras, had devised formulas that staggered the best mathematicians of Europe when they saw them.

Teheran University, isolated for years from the rest of the scientific world, was just a couple of miles from my hotel.

I put on older and shabbier clothes and went outside again. I walked north. Yesterday's dusting of snow had disappeared, and a warmer breeze was at my back. I could taste spring in the air.

The fine weather brought many people out of doors. When I came to the campus the walkways were busy with students and faculty, walking and talking. The days of riots and armed guards were a distant memory. No one took any notice of me as I moved from building to building, reading the signs. That was it: *tabiyat* —natural sciences; somewhere in there would be the physics department.

I went in and wandered around, wondering what I expected to see. If my logic were valid, I should see nothing special. Men and women would be teaching and taking classes, or quietly working in their rooms. Perhaps the oddest thing about geniuses is how ordinary they look.

I made my way to the office of the secretary, an older man carefully dressed in a shiny suit and a shirt frayed at the collar. If anyone respected the old traditions, he was a prime candidate. But you have to be very careful in these things. It does not do to offend someone who is proud of his professionalism.

"I am looking for a friend of a friend," I said. "His name is Dr. Manoucher." The banknote I was holding, twice what I had given the desk clerk at Victoria's apartment building, was discreetly tucked away in my fist so that only the end showed.

He looked at it, looked away at the wall, looked back at my hand. And nodded. I moved my hand forward.

As he turned his eyes again to the wall, I dropped the note onto an open book in front of him. He closed it—still without looking. He must have had a lot of practice.

"I don't know any Dr. Manoucher," he said. "He is not in this department."

"I am not sure that he is even at this university. This is the department of physics?"

"Yes, sir."

"It is possible that he is at Shiraz. I was given other names at this university, who also know Dr. Manoucher, but I do not remember them. Perhaps if you had a directory, to refresh my memory..."

He shook his head, but before I could feel disappointed, he pointed to the wall behind me. "No printed directory," he said, "but everyone in the department is shown there."

It was a huge blackboard, with dozens of names neatly written on the right in green chalk. To the left were days and times and room numbers, what I assumed to be class schedules.

"May I?"

He waved his hand. "Certainly."

I stepped closer to it and carefully read down the list. Five of the faculty showed blank schedules. I pointed to the first. "He is not here?"

"No. Mr. Ashrafi is away in Baluchistan, on a two-month trip."

"The others also?"

"No. They are taking time off for private activities, but I do not know where they are. They did not leave a forwarding address."

"If I may." I took out a pad and wrote down the five names. I did it in English. When in Rome ... don't write your private notes in Italian. "That is the most likely man." I pointed at a different name, fourth from the bottom.

“Dr. Azimi. His class will end in five minutes.”

“Thank you. I will speak with him.” Before he could offer to show me the man's office, I dropped another note on his desk and walked to the door. “You have been most helpful.”

I left while he was busy tucking away the money. I am sure that so far as he was concerned we had just conducted business on traditional, satisfactory, and fully honorable lines. In the East there is a huge difference between bribery and corruption.

I walked through the building again on every floor, confirming my first impression. There were lecture rooms and private rooms, but there was no experimental equipment. Roland Pierce had been quite specific: *a working* fusion reactor.

It could not be built here, even if it was small and simple. I examined my list of names. Anyone who worked night and day to build a new reactor would work, eat, and live at that site. They would need time away from the university, and money for equipment. At this point government resources might enter.

Before I left I dropped in on Dr. Azimi and confirmed that he did not know the fictitious Dr. Manoucher. I did not want to plant a question mark in the secretary's mind if he ever asked Azimi about me.

In a sense I had gained no new information, but I was operating on the dog-in-the-night principle: that a physicist's absence was significant.

I took my five names to the central records office of the university. They did have a printed directory of faculty members, and permitted me to consult it after I explained that I was trying to find out if Mr. Ashrafi of the Physics Department, now away in Baluchistan, was the same Ashrafi as the one who had studied with me many years ago, at London University.

What I was looking for was simple: I wanted to know the age of the five absent faculty members. The dates of their degrees would give me a good first estimate.

Four of them, including Ashrafi, had foreign graduate degrees obtained in the sixties. The fifth one, Ali Mostafizi, had a bachelor's degree in physics from Teheran University, obtained just three years ago. He was now a teaching assistant.

Scientists, even in their seventies, can do first-rate work. But it is almost always a broadening of trails first blazed in their early twenties. If any of the five was the man I was looking for, it had to be Ali Mostafizi.

And with that conclusion, I came to a dead end. I did not know where to find Ali Mostafizi. Conventional methods did not work. The records office, like the physics department secretary, had no address for him. A call to the telephone company proved useless.

I returned to Fereshte Avenue and again paid my respects to Abdi Radegan—this time with the taxi waiting. He listened carefully, and then he laughed. “In the United States, possibly,” he said. “Where there is no true concept of family, a person can disappear. Here, it is impossible. Come and see me tomorrow afternoon at five. I will be surprised if I do not have news. Now you should go and rest. You sound very tired. A tired brain is an inefficient brain.”

Abdi, blind, saw more than most sighted people. He was exactly right. Between airplanes and Victoria it

was three days since I had enjoyed a full night's sleep.

I returned to the Khedmat, consumed a huge *juje kebab* , and dropped into bed.

A tired brain is an inefficient brain. I had certainly proved it, and I felt like a fool. I knew as well as Abdi Radegan the overwhelming importance of family in Iranian affairs.

Ali Mostafizi might be able to do extraordinary things; but one thing he could not do in Teheran was disappear.

* * * *

One other thing you cannot do in Teheran is get right down to business. There is an obligatory few minutes of tea and polite greeting, and Abdi insisted that it be observed even though he must have known that I was dying to hear what he had to say.

“Do not miss the importance of this,” he said, as a plate of sweet almond cakes was offered to me. “If you are to succeed in Iran, you must think like an *Irani* .”

We sat for fifteen minutes, chatting of general world affairs and local politics. I sipped a glass of sweetened tea, nibbled on an almond cake, and commanded myself to be patient. I was feeling a thousand percent more alert. Abdi had been right about my condition yesterday, and he was probably right today.

At last he said, “How can someone, eight thousand miles away, know more than I of what is happening in my home town? Yet this is true. What you told me two days ago was correct. There is a story in the city of a great invention, of a new source of power. The ears tell me of excitement, of a rumored return by Iran to the center of the world stage. My young ears share that excitement.”

“But you do not.”

“Very good. My son, you are beginning to listen. I do not.”

I waited. The old, deeply-lined face was brooding, and at last he went on, “The problem with Iran is not the Ayatollahs. They were merely the people's reaction to the Shah. But the problem was also not the Shah. It was the world's thirst for oil, and the greedy dreams that brought to us. We used to be a wise and thoughtful people. In the old days, I taught my students the works of our great poets and writers, Hafez and Sa'di and Ferdowsi. Yes, even Omar Khayyam, although he is greater in your translations than in our tongue. In turn the old writers taught us, me as well as my students, about life.

“But what do we learn from oil? Only that it is a source of temporary wealth, which will one day, not far in our future, be exhausted.

“This new source of power that you told me of could help to conserve our oil and restore our civilization—but only if it can be used by the whole world. If it is kept as an Iranian secret, it is far more likely to prove our destruction. I do not wish to see Iran again a pawn on the world scene, with our government made and unmade at the whim of foreign powers. My country has been changed too much already by outside influence.”

In his youth, Abdi had been noted as an orator. As he grew older his speeches and comments had become shorter and more compressed. This was one of the longest utterances I had ever heard him make.

I laid my hand on his. "Father, I will do nothing to hurt Iran, or you."

"Do you think I am unaware of that?" He smiled. "Would we be talking together, were it otherwise? Let me go on, now that I am sure we understand each other, to the question that you asked me yesterday. A fourth cousin of my brother's wife is a Mostafizi. It is not a common name in this part of the city. Most of the family live in the south beyond the railway station. I will give you their address. Ali Mostafizi is a source of concern to them, because he shows little interest in women—and no interest in business. He spends all his time in his studies, at the university."

"He is not at the university."

Abdi held up his hand. "Patience, my son. He is not at the university at the moment, but spends all his days, according to my brother's wife, at the research unit of the Department of Power. I have an office location there for you—and, should you need it, the address of a single room that he rents in a house off Takht-e-Jamshyd. I am told, however, that he is seldom there."

"Father Abdi, you exceed yourself."

"I have not finished. One of my ears works at the Department of Power. Most of the staff leave there by seven. Most of the entrances are locked, naturally, against pilfering, but the front entrance remains open with a guard."

"I can deal with that."

"I am sure. One admonition, although I know it is unnecessary. There must be no violence."

"There will be none."

"And one warning: Take care."

"I promise. I will take care."

It was almost seven o'clock. I had a tremendous urge to grab the information and rush off at once to the Department of Power. My promise to Abdi held me. Taking care meant taking time. I could certainly spare an extra day.

The knowledge that it was evening, and I could now return to Victoria's apartment, had nothing to do with it.

* * * *

"How long will you be staying in Teheran?"

Victoria was sitting cross-legged on her bed, wearing the top half of black silk pajamas. She was brushing her hair and looking at me as I lay beside her staring vacantly at the ceiling.

It was a perfectly reasonable question. What it really meant was, we are together after a long absence, and this is very nice. But how long will it last? Two days, or two weeks, or two months? I have other people to deal with, and a life to live.

I had been wrestling with a problem of my own, one still too deeply buried for my brain to formulate in

words. I could feel connections forming, but her question interrupted the process and brought me back to earth.

“A few more days,” I said.

“You are making progress?” She had heard nothing of a new science discovery in Iran, which did not surprise me. As she had pointed out, her interests did not include science even peripherally.

“I think I am making progress,” I said. “I will know tomorrow.”

I had spoken in English, and she laughed. “Is that an American tomorrow, or one of ours?”

The Iranian word, *farda*, carries with it the same feeling of indefinite extension as the Spanish *manana*.

“I ask for a reason,” she went on. “I must make a business trip to France, and I would like to leave in the next day or two. I was thinking, when you conclude your work here we might spend a few days in Paris together. But we would need to plan times and places now.”

It was a great prospect, but a lot depended on just *how* my work was concluded. If Roland Pierce made a strike at my suggestion, I did not want to be in Iran one minute after that.

“Let's make plans,” I said. “I'll get there, one way or another, and I'll call to tell you when. Paris sounds wonderful.”

We went on to talk of restaurants and museums, where we would stay, what we would do. Victoria stretched out on the counterpane, a presence to push any other thoughts to one side.

But long after midnight those thoughts returned to trouble me, and in the silent hours before dawn I made a decision. I would go to the Department of Power. Not secretly, as Abdi had suggested, at night after the regular staff had left; I would go openly, during the regular hours of business.

And I would test the soundness of my instincts.

* * * *

During the time of the Shah's rule, the Department of Power had been known as the Ministry of Power. The Minister did not so much hold meetings as grant audiences. Foreign businessmen, moguls in their home offices, had groveled and fawned along with their local partners to win big construction contracts.

Approaching that same white-walled building, I wondered who occupied that huge seventh floor office today. Did he share those same delusions of grandeur?

Probably. The city had descended a long way from the glory days of the Peacock Throne, but human nature does not change.

I was relying on that. When I walked confidently into the building foyer and headed for the elevators, the two men behind the desk on the left glanced up only briefly. My clothes said prosperity, my attitude suggested that I had every right to be there and knew exactly where I was going.

The room that Abdi had told me how to find was long, wide, and apparently deserted. At its center stood a ten-foot cylindrical pipe that ran through the center of a torus no more than two feet across. One end of the pipe stood in a big tank of water that bubbled with steam. The other end was flat and

polished, and was marked FUSION REACTOR MODEL TWO-A.

I walked to the end of the room. Beyond it lay a separate chamber, complete with cot, table, chair, and a small lamp. It too was empty, but there were signs of recent habitation. The cot was neatly made up, and textbooks in English and Farsi stood open on the table.

All I had to do was walk back to my hotel, take out the little tape recorder from my case, and record a message. The machine had a dual function. At the appropriate time, when it was optimal for one of the orbiting ferret satellites, the signal would be encoded and transmitted. Roland Pierce would have it within the hour.

And then?

And then the strike force would arrive to pick up the miniature fusion reactor, together with its inventor, Ali Mostafizi.

But if I were right, the reactor would be a fake. And Ali Mostafizi would not be Ali Mostafizi.

And the strike force, including most or all of Pierce's Teheran contacts, would be scooped up by Iran security.

You see one layer, but there is another beneath.

I had done a little good work at Teheran University, but after that everything had been far too easy. Names, places, entry points, suggested times to act—they had been dropped into my lap with no effort on my part. Had I come at night, as recommended, I felt sure that I would have seen “Ali Mostafizi” at work on the reactor. Now I looked at it more closely, that “fusion reactor” seemed about as real as if it was made of cardboard.

I did not blame Abdi Radegan. He was perhaps the wisest man I knew, but he was old, and blind, and dependent entirely on his ears. It was not his fault that his ears now had their own agenda.

I went straight to my hotel and packed my bag. The intelligent thing to do was to head at once to Mehrabad Airport and take the first plane out of Iran. I made my reservation, for a flight that left for Rome at nine p.m. I called Victoria's apartment building, and left word that I would see her in Paris.

And then I paused. What stopped me were Abdi's own words: “If you are to succeed in Iran, you must think like an *Irani* .” When I tried to do that, the whole set-up did not feel right. The Iranian mind can be infinitely devious, but it has its own patterns of thought. When I tried to think that way, the idea of a fake fusion reactor to trap the agents of a foreign government was *wrong* . It had an alien feel and an alien flavor.

I left the hotel and began to walk south toward the railway station. I wondered about the seed from which the installation that I had just seen might grow in an Iranian mind.

To protect a secret, place it among a million falsehoods.

I realized that my instincts were taking me in the right direction, but I would be too conspicuous in business clothing. I returned to the hotel, changed into the shabbier outfit that I had worn to the university, and hailed a cab to take me south.

As I had expected, the neighborhoods became poorer the farther we went. Few foreigners ever penetrated beyond the railway station, though I had been taken there by Abdi to one of the strangest dinners of my life, at a restaurant deep underground in an abandoned water cistern that had once served the southern part of the city. No alcohol was served, but the *ghalian* water-pipes were everywhere, and the air was blue with the smoke of opium on the beds of hot charcoal.

At Abdi's insistence, I had tried it. Before you can think like an *Irani* you must first behave like one.

Even though a cold, thin rain had started to fall, I asked the taxi driver to drop me one kilometer short of my final destination. I went the rest of the way on foot. It was not the poorest part of the city, which I had been half expecting. The buildings were three and four story walk-ups of brown brick. I suspect that the area normally bustled with life, but the rain and a chilly wind was keeping most people indoors.

Absentee landlords are rare in Iran. As in most houses, the landlord occupied the ground floor apartment. He was standing in his doorway and stared at me suspiciously when I entered the building, until I said, "Is Ali Mostafizi in?" Then his suspicion changed to a gloomy resignation.

"Ali is always in," he said. "His mother says she can't get him out of his room."

He nodded toward the bare wooden stairs, and I went on up to the fourth and top floor, past cooking smells that brought back a hundred memories.

A woman, overweight and in her mid-forties, opened the door. I assumed it was his mother, and she showed more pleasure than surprise when I asked to see Ali. "It's about time he had some company," she said. "Are you from the University, or the Department?"

"Neither," I said. "I'm interested in Ali's scientific work."

"Well, maybe you can get him to take a break and go out somewhere." She gestured to a door that was cracked open just a few inches. "I know I can't."

The room I went into was small and crowded. A single bed ran along the left-hand side, and beyond it sat a little table and chair in front of the window. Behind the chair notebooks were piled untidily on the floor, and next to them was a square wooden box filled with books and papers.

Seated in the chair in profile to me was a dark-haired young man who turned his head slowly as I entered. I looked at him with interest and, if I am honest, a good deal of disappointment. My imagination had built its own picture of what he ought to look like if he was what I thought he might be. He didn't match up. He was thin-faced, with a big nose beneath which sat a thin apology for a mustache. His hair needed cutting and straggled down over his watery brown eyes. He brushed the lank locks away with a bony ink-stained hand, and showed no signs of speaking.

A genius can look ordinary, but surely not *that* ordinary.

"I would like to discuss with you your scientific work," I said. Already I sensed that conventional introductions would not take me far. "Is there somewhere we might go where I could buy you tea or coffee?"

"We can talk here," he said, and waved his hand to a second chair with a frayed back and a seat piled with books.

Well, I could tell his mother that I had tried. I moved the books, and saw that although several were in Farsi most were printed in English.

“Do you speak English?” I said, in that language.

“A little bit. Not very good. But I read it good.”

He spoke slowly and awkwardly. I nodded, and switched back to Farsi. I explained that I was merely a visitor to Teheran, but one who had heard that he was doing important original work in physics. I had a science background myself. Would he be willing to describe his work to me?

He nodded, and for the first time his eyes showed excitement. He began to speak, in the odd language mix that I had encountered many times in meetings with Iranian scientists. Technical words that do not exist in Farsi are not translated; the English terms are simply imported wholesale, and used where needed.

Within ten minutes I knew that what Ali Mostafizi was saying was quite beyond me. He spoke comfortably of his extensions of superstring theory, and emphasized how his work used broken symmetries as they had never been used before in physics. To illustrate his points he pulled a sheet of paper to where we could both see it, and scribbled on it incomprehensible diagrams and relationships. A mousy, diffident young man in casual pants and a rumpled striped shirt was transformed to an assured and confident authority.

He could be spouting absolute nonsense—no one is as self-assured as a crank. Maybe that's what his associates at Teheran University had thought. I certainly found it hard to believe that they could have had much idea what he was talking about.

He shrugged when I asked him.

“There is no one,” he said simply. “No one who understands.”

“You have published abroad?”

He shook his head, and shyly lifted from a stack three thick notebooks. “I have done a writing-out, very carefully, from my original notes. It is all here, in these books. But to publish...”

He shrugged. I opened the first notebook, and saw the problem. He had written out his ideas indeed—Farsi text, written as usual from right to left, densely interspersed with unfamiliar equations and formulae written Western-style from left to right. Occasional unintelligible diagrams and the scattered English technical terms did nothing to help. It was a combination likely to baffle anyone on earth.

“But people believe in your work,” I said. “Here in Teheran, it is becoming famous.”

“Not my *real* work.” He shrugged. “No one would listen, as you are listening. The university asked always for *apactical demonstration*, a proof that what I am doing can be useful. I give them one, a trivial application, and they act as though it is far more important than the theory itself.”

A trivial application. I caught my breath, and at last said, “The application—it is a working nuclear fusion reactor?”

“You saw it? I thought it was not being shown to anyone. I was told to work here at home, and not to

talk. But since you know already ... There is of course nothing new about nuclear fusion.” His voice was casual. “My design is compact, though, and cheap, and it provides net energy production at room temperatures.”

“It could transform the world.”

“Do you think so? Surely not.” He shrugged that idea away, and added, “I do not want to see my world transformed. My mother says that Iran has been transformed too much already in her lifetime. I agree, even within *my* lifetime. Too much change.”

He and his mother had probably never met Abdi Radegan, but they spoke like two of his disciples.

I sat back in my chair and looked at him. In half an hour I had gone from total skeptic to total believer. Weedy mustache and all, the man before me was a true genius. His value was incalculable.

In less than an hour I could be back at my hotel. The signal could go to Roland Pierce for a strike early tomorrow morning, after I was safely on the way to Rome. Ali Mostafizi and the secret of cheap commercial fusion would be in Washington within three days.

And then?

Then fusion power would be an American secret as well as an Iranian one. Both countries would feel international pressure to share that secret, and both would try to keep it hidden. There would also be American interest in other “trivial applications.” Ali Mostafizi would still work in hiding, this time for a different and an alien country.

I thought again of Ramanujan, isolated and self-taught, doing his profoundly original work in mathematics. But that is not the end of the Ramanujan story. After his talent was known, he was brought in 1914 from India to Cambridge, England. Five years of prodigious mathematical collaboration followed, but in those years Ramanujan was lonely, heartsick, homesick, and in physical decline. He returned at last to India and died there in 1920, at the age of thirty-two.

“I know people who will take you seriously,” I said. “I can make sure that your work is translated for them to read. But I cannot do that here, in Iran.”

I tapped the three notebooks. “You say that these were created from your original notes. Do you still have all those notes?”

“Of course.” He gestured to the mess on the floor, as though he never dreamed of throwing anything away.

“Then might I take these with me? I promise that I will treat them with great care, and make sure that scientists pay attention to what is in them.”

He stood up. “Of course you can take them. I would be ... be ...” He shook his head. “What can I possibly do to repay you for this?”

“You can do two things. Tomorrow I would like you to pay a visit to an old friend of mine, Abdi Radegan, up north on Fereshte Avenue. I know that you and he will find much to talk about.”

I picked up the notebooks and stood up. While he watched in confusion I placed money on the table in

front of him. "My other request is more immediate," I said. "Astonish your mother. Take her out for dinner this evening."

* * * *

I arrived in Rome in the middle of the night, and spent much of the next day there before continuing to Paris. From the world's point of view that is where the important part of the story ends; but from my perspective there is a significant bit left.

Once in Paris I went to the agreed-upon hotel and found that Victoria had already checked in. We spent a delightful evening wandering around old haunts on the Left Bank, and dropped into bed slightly tipsy a little before midnight.

I woke an undefined number of hours later, with the covers pulled off me, a bright light shining in my eyes and a voice saying, "I'm sorry to wake you, but we are in rather a hurry."

"What the hell is this?" I rolled off the bed and stood up. It's a bit difficult to act dignified when you are stark naked, but I grabbed the sheet and wrapped it round me like a cut-price schoolboy version of Julius Caesar. "What do you want?"

There were four of them, but apparently only one spokesman. "Let us begin with Ali Mostafizi's notebooks," he said. "The ones you took with you from his home."

"Ah. Well, it's a bit difficult to give you those. I can tell you where they are, though."

He made a little gesture, and two of the men moved to grab me, one by each arm. "Where are they?"

"They are in Rome. To be specific, one is with the American Embassy, one is with the British Embassy, and the third is with the French Embassy." And, when he frowned at me in perplexity, "It may take me a while to persuade you of this, but I acted in the best interests of everybody—including Iran."

"*Tokhmir!* You did not act for Iran. You did it because—because—" But he ran out of steam or ideas. "You will not need to persuade me. You will need to persuade an Iranian court. When and if you can."

I could guess what was coming, but I don't have the physique or the skill to fight four men. I'd also rather wake up after an injection than after a bang on the head. The dose is more reliably calibrated.

So far Victoria had said not a word. She had lain there wide-eyed, with a blanket pulled up to her chin. Now as the needle slid into my left arm she stood up and came naked to my side.

"You do not know what it was like, Christopher, after the Shah left." She was staring at me, pleading if not in words. "For people like me, people who had worked with Americans, it was very difficult. If we wanted to live, we had to do—what we had to do."

I would like to think that I nodded and smiled at her before I passed out, and said "We all do what we have to do." But I doubt it. I think I just dropped my sheet and keeled right over.

* * * *

Now it isn't up to me at all. Inside an Iranian gaol you do not have much say in things.

I gather, though, that things are more complicated than I expected, and that may work to my advantage. I had expected to tell my story, be believed or disbelieved, and in either case be promptly executed.

But it hasn't happened, and if Victoria is right it may not. She was allowed to come and see me (although, regrettably, the concept of conjugal visits has not yet reached Iran). Apparently an international brouhaha is now going on of major proportions. Ali's notebooks have been translated, one in each country, and top scientists have been given access to them. They have asserted, with a single voice, that the work is of paramount scientific importance and they must see the other two notebooks.

Iran, of course, demanded all the notebooks back. But being a remarkably experienced and realistic people when it comes to negotiation, they know they don't have a chance in hell of getting even one notebook. They also know that in the long run, and maybe even in the short run, Iran will benefit if it is not tied to the seesaw of world oil supply and demand. And they still hold the trump card: Ali Mostafizi, who has no interest in leaving the country even if they would let him.

So they are making their own convoluted counter-offer. They will not insist that the notebooks be returned. Instead, a select group of foreign scientists, approved by Ali Mostafizi, will be welcome to visit Iran. However, there will be conditions. There must be emphasis on application of the new ideas, as well as on new theories, and by international agreement the center for the development of those applications will be in Iran—with in-country investment funding provided by the foreign partners.

It's the type of deal that Iranians love to make, one where the other countries can be played off against each other and the real negotiations take place *after* the agreements are all signed. However, it doesn't sound like a bad idea all round.

Especially for me. According to Victoria, Ali Mostafizi, probably with subtle guidance from Abdi Radegan, has laid down a condition of his own. His main interface with foreign visiting scientists must be Christopher Dutton, a man he trusts and the first one to recognize the importance of his work.

It's not true, of course. All I really did was decide that I was not competent to evaluate what he had done.

I'm not going to start an argument, though. As I said before, everyone must die sooner or later. I still have a strong preference for later.