

Eddie and the Princess

Eddie Norouzi and I both grew up and studied abroad and returned to Iran around the same time. We met when we were doing our national service. His Farsi was even worse than mine. I at least could read it in print. He couldn't read it at all. Whenever we had to pass tests, someone sat in with us to transcribe the exam answers that we gave orally. Then Eddie went on to become deputy minister of information, all because he was the princess's lover. And you wonder why there was a revolution.

His father was a clerk in my uncle's office. Eddie was a good-looking guy. When he came to see his father, usually to borrow money, the secretaries all fluttered around him. As for the princess, she met him while she was on her third husband and between lovers.

One of her ladies-in-waiting had seen Eddie at a party and thought he was the princess's type – a broad category – so she invited him to a party she was giving. Now, the princess was nothing if not blunt. At the party, after checking out Eddie, she thought he looked okay and walked over. He tried to get up but she put a hand on his shoulder and kept him down. You know the princess – five feet tall, weighs about a hundred and ten. Petite is the word. But Eddie recognised authority when he saw it and remained seated. She caught his chin between two fingers, forced his mouth open, and checked his teeth. People around them went on talking as though nothing special was going on, though nobody could fail to notice. Apparently, Eddie had no cavities for the next thing he knew, he was in the princess's bed where he remained for thirty years, earning the sobriquet Golden Cock.

During our national service, we often showered together and I'm ready to testify under oath that although Eddie's cock was okay as cocks go, it wasn't golden. Hell, I was more of a ladies' man than he was, and *my* cock wasn't golden. It never landed me in a princess's bed, a fact that I've always regretted, seeing how Eddie's life took a turn for the better and just stayed on a straight course after she picked him. I have to say

this, the princess was good to her lovers. When a guy caught her fancy, she pulled him out of whatever backwater he was rotting in and he became, if not actually heavyweight, someone to be reckoned with. As well as her favours, she gave him a position, a title, money. To her credit, she never pushed her lovers back down when she was done. They were set for life. She was pretty much the only generous person in a family whose members' claim to fame was their exalted position and the tightness of their fists rather than exceptional human qualities or sharpness of intellect.

Anyway, Eddie became *l'amant en titre* and stayed so, even though the princess had a fling from time to time, as was to be expected from someone with her temperament.

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Before the revolution of 1979, Iran was a fun place to be in. For one thing, people were very rich. Rich people have more fun than others, that's a fact. Money is good, makes you see things differently. When I'm broke, which is more often than I'd like, my whole outlook changes. When I hit a lucky streak, I have a hell of a good time. People in Iran – the people that counted – were rich and they had fun. Taking a walk down memory lane, I see them, those satellites of the imperial court flitting around, acting so *dégagé*, as though they were born to Lagerfeld and Cartier and all that wealth and luxury and endless partying – which very few of them were.

Designer clothes do not give breeding. The Iranian imperial family and their toadies were coarse. True aristocrats found the court distasteful. Not that they were asked, except to major receptions where everyone was asked. The Shah, diffident and afraid of being found wanting, mistrusted quality. He paid a lot of lip service to building the Great Civilisation but in reality he must often have felt he was crashing a party to which no one had invited him, or, more to the point, giving a party to which nobody came. Hugely insecure – as sons of forceful fathers often are – he didn't relish having around him people whose long faces told him that he was not the genuine article. He wanted to believe that he was painting the great masterpiece of the future and he didn't want anyone to imply that he lacked technique or that the tentative splotches he put on canvas (with the help of States-bred technocrats who spoke Farsi with an accent and couldn't have found Kashan or Yazd on the map if their life depended on it) did not make him an artist.

The Court partied while the people of Iran waited for the ayatollah. Eddie partied with the princess, discreet enough to make himself scarce by taking off to Paris or the Seychelles islands when she was otherwise engaged.

The parties were simple affairs. Everybody knew everybody. The atmosphere was one of comfortable jollity, where people could parade clothes and jewelry and let their glossy, impeccably uncoiffed hair down. They could initiate or end affairs, gossip viciously, and play pranks, specially when they were gathered in the villas by the Caspian sea, where anything went.

I was on the edge of that society. Sometimes accepted, sometimes not, sometimes accepting, sometimes less so. Once, I was spending the weekend at the palatial villa of one of the minor princes. Before lunch, the air buzzed with the news that the Empress Farah (*Ollie*, some called her playfully, short for *Oliabazrat*, the Persian title for 'Her Imperial Majesty') had just arrived. After the agitation of greetings, reverences, kissing the air around cheeks, and making an even bigger show of nonchalance, people settled down. I looked around me. The men were discreetly athletic, their bellies flat, their feet encased in Italian sandals. All the women had their hair coloured the same nuance as the Empress's, a light golden brown. Clothes were the latest and flung with abandon on sleek, tanned shoulders, jewelry was casually outrageous.

I helped myself at the lavish and permanent buffet and sat down, throwing covert glances at the Empress whom I always enjoyed observing. She consumed vast quantities of food, alcohol, and cigarettes, managing somehow to remain slender and classier than most people around her, even those born to much higher echelons of class.

Someone brought a bowl of pink jelly dessert and set it in front of the Empress. She dug into the bowl but had trouble taking a spoonful to put on her plate. Then she saw the eyes and the tentacles and realised that she had been served jellyfish gathered on the beach. Everyone held their breath. In her throaty voice, the Empress said, 'I almost ate this crap,' and threw her head back in indulgent laughter. The company laughed with her. I laughed too, so I'd be asked again, but I thought then, not for the first time, that despite my willingness to participate, I might not be good court material.

For one thing, I shocked too easily. Once, as I sat on a terrace not far

from the Shah and the Empress at another party, I saw her pull out the last cigarette in a pack and ask a waiter to bring her some more. The man soon returned, bearing a pack of Winstons, the brand she smoked, on a silver tray. A few moments later, the Empress lit up, coughed, then pulled out the cigarettes from the pack, looked at them, then turned and said to the Shah, without undue surprise, 'Look at what he's brought me: *Zars* in a pack of Winstons!' *Zar* was a local brand, much cheaper than the imported Winstons. The Shah called the waiter and asked for an unopened pack of Winstons. I wondered at the casualness of the proceedings, at the lack of anger. Hell, the guy had pulled out the good cigarettes and replaced them with shit, yet nobody reproached him! Do you get used to being duped and deceived at every step?

The younger elements revelled in less harmless ways. There was the drug scene, the pornography scene, even the murder scene. Scandals involving the names of princes were hushed. A girl's body, gang-raped, covered with cigarette burns, a broken Coke bottle stuck in her anus, was thrown in front of a hospital. Other unpleasantnesses occurred, rumours were rampant. The Shah imported one-night stands, would-be actresses, classy whores, whom he serviced at night – some said with the help of aphrodisiacs – while during the day he worked hard at what he dreamed of as a wealthy, modern, powerful Iran. He would have succeeded, too, had not other nightmarish figures been emerging from the shadows. He was deluded, but so was everybody else.

As the revolutionary breeze caressing the drapes on the palace windows turned to harsh winds, the Imperial Court and its satellites started packing. The princess and her entourage, Golden Cock included, left for an indefinite stay abroad. Before the ayatollah returned, the entire court had safely relocated in various countries of the Western hemisphere.

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The princess had pots of money from various dubious sources. The kernel came from her father, Reza Shah, and had grown from there. Even now, more than sixty years after Reza Shah's death, people wax lyrical about him, about how he was one of the rare true leaders of Iranian history, powerful, a hard worker determined to turn Iran into a modern state, taking no nonsense and heeding no obstacles, and a magnificent figure of a man. All of that, he was. But when people get carried away

and start talking about his honesty or his integrity, that's pushing it. Let's face it, when Reza Shah came to power, in 1921, he was an army officer with an officer's pay. When the Allies forced him to abdicate in 1941 and exiled him to South Africa, he was an extremely rich man with extremely rich children. In the intervening years, his wealth had increased in direct proportion to his power, and that power was enormous. All that money had to come from somewhere. But no Iranian seriously faults him for filling his pockets, I certainly don't. You don't get nothing for nothing, and the guy set Iran on its way to prosperity. Though that doesn't do us much good now.

Rich as he was, Reza Shah lacked a virtue essential in legendary Iranian figures, magnanimity. Perhaps remembering the restrictions of his childhood and his growing-up years in a family of modest means, he was tight-fisted as they come. Himself a man of few needs, he hated to spend and he hated to give. His children, though brought up in luxury, inherited this ugly flaw and never knew what giving was. That is, all except the princess.

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No matter how much you write about money, you still can never describe all its facets, all it is, all it does, and all it does to you. Recently, I read that a fourth element had been discovered beside the liquid, the solid, and the gaseous. I forget what it is, it's a complicated business, but I would have said that fourth element was money, if only because it behaves like no other element. For instance, if you have a little money or if you make a little, it never increases. If you have a certain amount and know what to do with it, it increases in comfortable proportions. And if you have a lot, there is practically no limit to its progression towards phenomenal amounts. Worth studying.

After the revolution, although the imperial family whined as a matter of course, their lot wasn't one to weep upon. Sure, a few assets were frozen in various disputes with the Islamic Republic. But that was only the tip of the iceberg. The actual money was safe and mainly invested in real estate all over the globe. To counterbalance the hardships of exile, the princes and princesses could relax on the white beaches of Acapulco, sip a margarita in one of their Beverly Hills mansions, have couturiers deliver clothes to apartments in the Avenue Montaigne, or, all this failing to boost their morale, they could sadly repair to their ski chalets in Switzerland, where glowing fireplaces awaited them when they were

worn out after a day of strenuous skiing. They rented and bought and sold luxury apartment buildings, hotels, entire city blocks in prime locations. They also invested in stocks, in flourishing businesses, and if one or another sycophant made off with a few million bucks or an occasional jewelry box from time to time, the losses were easily covered and, as no member of the imperial family credited anyone with feelings of devotion or loyalty that they themselves lacked, they had no illusions to lose.

Reza Shah, father of the princess, had married several times, mostly women from the previous dynasty, which constitutionally barred their male offspring from ruling over Iran. Only the mother of his firstborn daughter, of the twins – the princess and the future Shah, the one who was deposed by the revolution – and of their younger brother who died in a plane crash in the 1950s, was not a Qajar princess. From his other wives, Reza Shah had several sons and, I believe, three daughters. None of his children were highly developed mentally. A couple were downright imbeciles. One story, not apocryphal, goes that one of the princes, travelling to Beirut as a young man – we're talking several decades ago – was told that the red buoys he saw on the surface of the Mediterranean indicated the chains that held the bottom of the sea in place so that it wouldn't shift. The prince had stared blankly for a minute, then slapped his thigh, chortling, and said, 'Hey, you know, you almost had me there! And my brother who is supposed to be even more of a moron would probably have believed you!'

The princes' low IQ didn't prevent them from being part of every deal and every contract so that any businessman who wanted to succeed knew enough to have one of them sit on the company board and get a cut. Though the figures bandied about on the imperial family's combined assets may have been ridiculously inflated, the fact is that the Shah and his brothers and sisters and assorted relatives were stinking rich. But then, so was the country, back then.

After the revolution, Iranian people who also found themselves exiles, though in direr straits than members of the imperial family, turned to these last with this reasoning – not totally unfounded: 'Listen, we've served Iran, we've lived and worked in it, and now we've lost it along with everything we had. You can help us. We would help you if we could and you needed help.' They soon understood, though, that the

members of the imperial family acted on a very sound principle: If you start helping people, there's no end to it. So don't start, and you'll avoid problems.

Except the princess. The princess was as magnanimous with her money as she was with her affections. During the first years, she helped as often as she could. Until she too became aware of a sound principle: No matter how much you have, if you give it all away, you're not going to have anything left.

Another reason for her helping out was that during the first years following the revolution, she was active politically and truly thought – along with many other misled Iranians – that the Islamic Republic was too gross to have a long lifespan. It made sense to help people who would be with you to rebuild the country once you got it back, so she gave money to various individuals and opposition groups abroad. But as the years dragged on and the Islamic regime didn't fall apart even after the ayatollah bit the dust, it no longer seemed such a good idea. After all, the mullahs might be in power for a long time.

Over the years, the trickle of people beating a path to the princess's door had turned into a regular flood. Now they found that door closed. Those who had received a monthly cheque no longer did. From one day to the next, with no warning and no explanation, a lot of people were cut off from their only source of income.

Obviously, they couldn't reach the princess, so they tried Eddie. But Eddie had strict orders and certainly didn't want to risk his own livelihood. Times were difficult enough and there wouldn't be another princess down the road, so he was hard, and I mean hard. I had to deal with him myself once, when an old uncle of mine who had been a general in the Shah's army and who had counted on his \$500 monthly stipend from the princess found himself in a hopeless situation when it was suddenly cut off. I called Eddie, I tried to sway him, I tried to charm him, I reminded him that we went back a long way. He was the ugliest, coldest son of a bitch. He just said no. He didn't want to discuss it or grace me with an explanation. He was insulting and I felt insulted. Up until that day, I'd always defended him, even when people called him a gigolo. I'd always said, 'Listen, look at it this way. Look at where he comes from. He was nothing. What would he have done with his life? He was lucky to have good teeth and a golden cock, and to know how to please the princess

while she was still woman enough to be pleased. Sure, he's no Einstein, he's done nothing that will change the world, but he has a good life, he has a penthouse off Park Avenue, he had his brothers and sisters and their families come over, he bought them apartments, he put their kids through college, what's wrong with that?

Now, I don't attack him directly because you never know, but I don't defend him either.

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I have some distant relatives who move in the same circles as the princess, so I see her once every other year or so. Although she's never looked at my teeth, she has always been kindly disposed towards me. I confess that in her younger days, as I watched Eddie buck his way towards ever more wealth and power, I'd been a bit peeved that I had no testosterone appeal for the princess. But lately, seeing what she's become, I'm grateful that no physical memories link me to her crumbled, crumpled flesh.

None of Reza Shah's children had his piercing, yellow gaze and his sharp features. None were tall. Surprising, with a father who, they say towered over six feet two, which is tall for anyone, let alone an Iranian. Iranians tend more to Latin build and stature. The daughters were tiny, slim, they all had nose jobs in the years where nose jobs meant a one-size-fits-all, pert, upturned, with pinched nostrils. Even that couldn't mar the loveliness of Reza Shah's oldest daughter, truly a raving beauty with large, long-lashed green eyes, riveting until you saw their vacuousness. Like Elizabeth Taylor's violet eyes. As for the Shah's twin sister, she was no raving beauty but she compensated for that with vivid charm. Young men and the occasional young woman summoned between her sheets may actually have enjoyed the chore but I have no way of knowing. The only one I knew personally, Eddie, never gave details.

Although the princess was relatively intelligent – Reza Shah had supposedly paid his daughter the high compliment of saying that she was the only man in the family – her range of interest was pretty limited to booze, sex, gambling, travel, and the occasional high. The only two things she really cared about were Iran and her twin brother, the Shah, the first embodied in the second.

Once, in the 1950s, as an impressionable young man, the Shah had had to flee Iran with his second wife, the vapid beauty Soraya, following

a power struggle with his prime minister, Mossadegh. Through a sequence of well-documented events, the princess had pushed with all her might to help the CIA stage a coup and bring back the Shah within a couple of days.

After the revolution, eyes again turned to her. People expected her to stage the counter-revolution, to wrest Iran away from the ayatollahs. And she tried, she really did, though her chances of success were slim, to say the least. Did she love the country or was it just a question of getting back her own? Who knows what love of a country is? For me, after twenty-six years, Iran has become an empty word. I still have my memories, but that's all I have.

I don't know if the princess loved Iran, but about her love for her brother, there could be no doubt. It was more than love, it was reverence, adoration. I saw her in Cairo a year after her younger son, a naval officer, a nice guy, had been assassinated on a Paris street for his activities against the Islamic Republic. She wore a pretty purple dress and what grief she felt was well hidden. Then I saw her in Paris after the Shah, her twin brother, had died of cancer. This time, she wore black from head to toe, and she looked half dead herself.

Last week, after many years, I saw the princess again. She had aged even more. I knew that she had been streamlining her operations. Among other assets, the princess once owned the grandest apartment in New York, a Park Avenue triplex that had belonged to both Helena Rubinstein and Charles Revson, I don't know in what order. Then she had moved back to Beekman Place, selling the triplex to the financier Henry K, for fifteen million dollars – I can't even think what it would cost now – to which the guy had, I'm told, added another eighteen for renovation. I guess I'm too small to visualise the kind of renovations you get for that kind of money. You cover all surfaces with Carrara marble? You get solid gold doorknobs? Would that come to eighteen million or do you have to get the Sistine Chapel replicated? Anyway, that's another story.

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Some years ago, Eddie got married, with the princess's blessing. He became a happy family man – I haven't heard otherwise – with kids of his own. Altogether, he has nothing to complain about. But there are strings attached. There are always strings attached. When the princess is in

New York, as she is six months of the year – for tax reasons, she doesn't reside permanently anywhere – Eddie *and* his wife have to be in attendance.

The princess is more of a night person. She sleeps till early afternoon, gets up, takes care of business, dolls up, and goes partying. Which means going to somebody's place, drinking and eating while the card tables are set up so that the evening can truly begin. All her life, she has been a heavy gambler. Her spectacular wins and losses at the roulette and baccarat table have become part of the legend of casinos on the French Riviera and elsewhere.

People at these parties are too true to type to be interesting. Good jewelry, perfectly cared-for body, skin, and hair, nothing in life except trekking from one place to another, the latest French restaurant, good schools for the children, riding lessons, ballet lessons, the works, camouflage for a desultory family life, desultory affairs. The life of the rich, the idle, and the stupid.

It was cold that evening last week. One woman came in, dropped her mink – which some years back she would have had to put on in the elevator to avoid being spray-painted by PETA people on a rampage – pushed her chest out at me whom she was seeing for the first time, and said, 'How do you like my new boobs, darling?' New or not, they were spectacular and so was her cleavage. She quoted an outrageous price for the surgery. 'And worth every penny!' she said to the company at large, and again asked me, 'Aren't they great?' 'Sure,' I said, and added undiplomatically, 'So are my wife's.' She lifted her perfect round chin, and brushed my wife's *décolleté* with a glance before turning back to me and saying, 'Maybe, love, but mine will never sag!'

I don't suppose Eddie has a binding contract with the princess but the fact is, where the princess goes, Eddie and his wife go. And as long as the princess doesn't go to bed, which never happens before the wee hours of the morning, Eddie and his wife have to be there. That night, after dinner, the card-playing started. And continued. As the hours dragged on, guests who weren't playing made a discreet getaway. I didn't. I wanted to see how these affairs ended. The evening had started with thirty people or so. By early morning only the princess and her card buddies remained with, slumped on a sofa, Eddie and his wife, from time to time one nudging the other awake.

Now Eddie also happens to be the princess's right arm, the head of her political and financial operations. He manages both her huge assets and keeps up with what goes on in Iran, which means that he has to go to work in the morning. So, for six months of the year, he gets two, three hours of sleep a night. Still, I guess it's a small price to pay for a life of security. Make that luxury.

Just before five a.m., having lost one last hand, the princess pushed her chair back and stood up. Without turning her head, she said, 'Eddie!'

Eddie ran to call the chauffeur catnapping in an adjoining room. Then he, his wife, and the other people still around followed the princess as that walking ruin of a woman made her slow progress towards the elevator and held out a dry cheek, a dry hand, to each in turn. I watched Eddie, dapper in his double-breasted three-thousand-dollar suit and his highly polished shoes.

He looked tired.