The Interview

by Saïdeh Pakravan

Rather than a bridge, it looked like a large, oddly shaped town square at the foot of the mountains, but as one corner spanned the bed of a torrent—dry in the summer months, briefly roaring in the spring—for generations of Tehranis it was the Bridge.

In summer, people drove ten, fifteen miles there to enjoy the cool mountain air and the modest, simple entertainment the bridge offered. Bahram remembered evenings in his childhood when his family would go up there, on Thursday nights, before the weekly holiday, and stroll around with the leisurely crowd coming alive after the heat of the day. Bahram and his little brother would eat corn-on-the-cob and fresh peeled walnuts, dipped in salt water and arranged in clusters round an oil lamp set on a round metal tray. Street vendors fanned thin wedges of liver on skewers roasting on charcoal braziers. Ice cream stores, with their large vats set on the sidewalk, attracted customers like so many flies. For a few tomans (difficult with the present inflation to remember days when anything could have cost just a few tomans), you could buy the rosewater-flavored stretchy ice cream sandwiched between two pale yellow wafers.

The stores had less to offer nowadays and the crowd was maybe more subdued, but otherwise things hadn't changed much in the last decades and Bahram still liked to drive up north—as he had this evening—giving himself time away from the incredible hardships of life in post-revolutionary Tehran.

He now sat on a low wall by a geranium flower bed and closed his eyes. He liked the smells of the bridge, a mixture of the pungent plane trees, the newly watered earth of the sidewalks, the smoke from the burning charcoal.

A woman shrieked. Shocked out of his mellow mood, Bahram made his way to the group that had gathered on the sidewalk a little further up. As so often these days, revolutionary guards were admonishing a woman for letting her scarf slip immodestly to the back of her head, and asking her to follow them to the *komiteh* where she would be interrogated.

"Come on, *khahar.*" They called her sister though their expression indicated clearly enough that in their eyes she rated hardly higher than a whore. Didn't these devout Muslims mind having a whore for a sister? "Don't cause any problem and everything will be fine."

"Fine for whom?" she shrieked at such a high pitch that Bahram thought her voice would break. She turned to the crowd watching the scene. "People! Don't let them take me away! You know what happens when these sons of prostitutes take you away!"

One of the guards grinned stupidly, looking around at the wooden faces surrounding them. The other guard glowered. "Come, sister, don't make your case worse by cursing. Let's go, now!" Bahram stepped forward, not thinking.

"Hey!" he interposed in what he hoped was an authoritative voice. "What do you think you're doing with my wife, pestering her in the middle of the street?"

The *pasdars* turned to him, pursing their mouths in speculation, while the woman jumped on the occasion. "Parviz!" she screamed. "Thank God you're here! Thank God you arrived in time! These men want to drag me to the *komiteh*, pretending my scarf wasn't properly tied. What's wrong with my scarf, I want to know!"

She had rearranged it in the meantime and it now demurely covered her hair.

"Your wife, eh?" said the grinning *pasdar*. He caught Bahram's arm and pulled him away from the crowd. "What's your wife's name?"

Bahram had already panicked and was cursing himself for becoming involved.

"Homa," he said, the first name that popped into his head.

"We'll check that. What about yourself? Do you have some identity papers with you, your driver's license or something?"

Bahram's hand was trembling as he pulled out his wallet. He could have gained time by saying that he had left his papers at home but that would only make them follow him there.

He handed the man the plastic card.

"Here," he said.

"Bahram, eh? Didn't your *wife*,"—his stress on the word surrounded it with quotation marks of suspicion—"call you Parviz just now?"

"I'm called Parviz at home. Bahram is my official name."

"Yeah, you said it and I believed it," the *pasdar* said with good humor. These days, people always go by another name in their family. Hey, Ghadar," he called out. "What's the wife's name?"

"Mina," the other guard replied over the heads of the crowd that turned to one side, then the other, as if following a tennis game. The *pasdar* turned to Bahram, unexpectedly grim.

"So you don't even know her? Where were you going to take her? To some quiet corner where you could have your way with her, where you could both behave like animals?"

"After that," Bahram went on, "there wasn't much I could do. Mina they forced into their jeep and took away. An old gentleman with a suit and tie told the *pasdars* they should be ashamed of themselves. They told him to shut up and get lost if he didn't want to be taken to the *komiteh* as well. Another jeep arrived and they pushed me in with the butt of a machine-gun."

The unsympathetic gaze of the U.S. immigration officer left the face of Bahram and she turned to the interpreter.

"Ask him," she said, "why he hadn't said until now that these men were armed."

The interpreter complied.

Bahram made an angry gesture, then checked himself, determined to remain ingratiating.

"*Khanom*," he said to the interpreter, "you tell her. You know the answer as well as myself. Has anyone ever seen a *pasdar* without weapons? They always carry their G. 3 or their Kalashnikov. It's part of their setup."

"What's he saying?" the officer asked impatiently. "I asked a simple question."

The interpreter bit back a heated response. It always harmed the interviewee's cause to side with them strongly, and all she wanted was to have them all accepted. If they thought heaven awaited them on the other side of the Atlantic, if they thought they'd find there a life they couldn't find here in Paris, she wanted to do what she could to help them. Still, she dreaded it when she was called to the U.S. Embassy to act as interpreter for the people who were scheduled for an interview. She hated seeing them pour their life on the laps of bland officials who were not here to throw wide open the gates of the New World for these pathetic supplicants but, on the contrary, to allow only a select few to squeeze through. And they knew it only too well, these applicants who, from across the table, desperately wanted to prove how worthy they were, what ties—if any—they had to the States, and recited their tales of woe as though nothing as bad had ever happened to anyone, whereas someone like the jaded officer knew all the horrors

that people are capable of inflicting on other people, given half an opportunity.

"He says they always carry arms."

"Okay. So he's taken away. Where to? The committee?"

They kept Bahram in the *komiteh* for two days, then transferred him to Evin prison. He'd had the bad luck of having a Mojahed cousin who was close to the leader of the movement, hiding somewhere until he could join his comrades in Paris. That made his case much worse. He was held for three months, interrogated, sometimes brutally, made to attend *ershad* or guidance sessions, half-hearted brainwash by the prison *mullah*, an easygoing man who coyly wore his white turban pushed back on his head, allowing a few strands of hair to escape on his forehead, and who took the prisoners in little groups for hour-long sessions during which he discussed moral principles, not looking convinced himself.

"Was he beaten?" the immigration officer asked the interpreter.

"Yes, of course," Bahram said.

"Why didn't he say so?"

The officer kept her eyes on Bahram, waiting to see how he would wiggle out of this one. She didn't enjoy tripping applicants, but she wouldn't allow them to earn entry to the United States through falsehoods. And this guy seemed to be embellishing his story as he went along.

"Prisoners are always beaten, at least people like me," Bahram said. "Everyone knows that."

The interpreter didn't translate the last part. No point in antagonizing the immigration officer.

Through the tall windows of the embassy, the magnificent *hotel particulier* that had been residence to Talleyrand, prince and turncoat *extraordinaire*, she looked at the Tuileries gardens, frozen in the deserted black and white picture of winter. There was silence for a while, as the officer scrutinized the documents Bahram had given her. The rustle of paper was the only sound in the vast, high-ceilinged room with its splendid wooden parquet and gilded friezes.

Applicants always came in subdued, humble before this representative of the United States, this mighty human being who literally held their fate in her or his hands. Not once had the interpreter seen them glance at their grandiose surroundings or make a comment. As though it was only normal that a person as exalted as the immigration officer should receive them in such a magnificent setting. (Not once, either, had she seen any of them, in their hasty, awkward rearrangement of themselves, their belongings, their spouses or children if any, on the chairs set before the desk—the sum total of furniture on the shiny parquet in the otherwise empty rooms—wonder at being told to stand up for the oath.)

"What does he mean by people like him?" the American asked. "What's special about him?"

"I don't think they beat everyone," Bahram answered after the question had been translated. "Maybe they don't beat the older people or the officials of the Shah's regime. Those they prefer to kill outright." He laughed feebly at his own joke, then stopped, seeing that the officer looked as stern as ever. "I don't know, but the young people they catch in the street, they always beat up."

Upon his release, he had applied for a passport. He had a real estate agency with his two brothers, not doing badly, but this was more than he could take. He wanted to leave the country never to go back.

The passport authorities made him return dozens of times. There was always a document missing, something not right. Incomplete file, they said, without giving him more explanations, though he took care to grease paws along the way.

"Does that mean he bribed officials?" the American asked, her question heavy with distaste. Clearly, this unethical action on the part of the applicant weighed heavily on a scale already badly tipped against him.

The interpreter held back a sigh. Why couldn't they have officers familiar with the ways of the country whose citizens they interviewed? Was it unavoidable for administrations everywhere to breed obtuseness?

The officer took a few notes, then looked at Bahram directly, as though through these few moments of hearing English, the applicant had acquired knowledge of the language by osmosis.

"How did you finally manage to leave the country?" she asked.

"With a fake passport," Bahram answered through the interpreter. "I paid 50,000 tomans and was taken over the Turkish border by smugglers."

The officer nodded, secure in her knowledge that in the year Bahram was talking about, the going rate was 100,000 tomans.

"So how did you get a discount?"

He shrugged, not understanding the question or finding it unimportant.

"Your application says you're not married?" the officer asked, changing her line of questioning.

She made it sound like either an accusation or a lie. Bahram waited for the interpreter to translate, then

said, "Tell her I'm not married now but I will be soon."

The interpreter's congratulatory smile stopped when she saw the grim look on the face of the officer who, of course, would interpret the news in terms of quotas.

Nonetheless, the American said, her dry tone belying her words, "Well, congratulations. Where's your fiancee at the moment?"

"She's in Germany with her brother and his family."

The interpreter instinctively clenched her fists. Didn't the man know better than to come out with things like that? The American would immediately envision an endless string of relatives coming to join the one who was accepted. But Bahram was on a subject that obviously pleased him and he went on to give additional explanations.

"Actually," he said, "I'm going to marry the woman I met on the bridge, Mina."

Both women stared at him. Even the officer relaxed enough to allow the shadow of a smile to across her dour expression.

"How did that happen?"

"I saw her again, quite by chance, after getting out of jail. They hadn't held her long. I'd thought about her sometimes, how she'd stood her ground, screaming at the *pasdars* instead of pleading with them or crying. I arranged to have her invited by relatives, we went out several times, and that was it."

"Has she applied for U.S. refugee status in Germany?"

"I don't know." Bahram, telling his story with relish, persuaded that it was captivating, was taken aback by the practical question bluntly put to him. The interpreter smiled at him in solidarity.

"I hope she won't," the immigration officer said. "She wouldn't qualify. She'd have to prove persecution of some sort, and after all, if it's the rule in your country for women to wear a veil, everyone has to abide by it."

"There are unfair rules," the interpreter said indignantly, breaking her self-imposed rule of refraining from involvement and personal comments.

"The law's the law," the officer snapped back.

The officer had seen too many of these people. She found them difficult to deal with. They should see some of the things she had seen, like refugee camps in Asia or in Africa, then they'd know how bad things can become. But here they were, escaping to Turkey through the mountains in the west, through Pakistan on the east, or the Persian Gulf into Iraq or the Gulf States—none at all crossed the border into Russia; they didn't escape the *mullahs* only to run into the constraints of communism. But whatever the route, they all beat a path to the American Embassy door, claiming persecution. They came from all walks of life: university professors, lottery ticket vendors, generals, janitors. Some of them, the little people, should never have left their country.

When lunchtime came, the interpreter thought she'd have a sandwich at Smith & Sons, the bookstore in the Rue de Rivoli, and look at the books. She found Bahram downstairs.

"*Khanom*, I've been waiting for you."

She hated that. She hated being waylaid by people who had come in for an interview and she hated it when they thought she knew something she didn't. They couldn't accept that her status here was just as alien as theirs, that in the eyes of the immigration officer she was working with, she was no different than the applicants, and would never be informed of the outcome of the interview. What could she tell this man?

"I'm sorry. I'm like you, in the dark. They don't tell me anything."

He didn't believe her, she knew. How could she not know, working in the American Embassy, wearing an employee identification tag? She couldn't explain that she had not been bought by the Americans, that she wasn't siding with them against her own fellowcountry people, all assertions that the saw plainly written on his face, with a contempt he held in check as long as there was hope of getting some information out of her. He wouldn't believe that she was called in only for the three days the immigration officer came in from Frankfurt for the interviews, that she was paid a measly fee for her services, and was searched herself just as thoroughly as the applicants every time she presented herself at the entrance of the consulate in the Rue Saint-Florentin.

Bahram made a last pitch.

"All right, then, give me your opinion. What do you think? Will she accept me?"

We are all way past the age of passing tests and exams, she thought, way past the age of being at someone's mercy. Or is there no age for that?

"I really don't know," she said.

Bahram's now openly hostile expression was her reward. So much for honesty, she thought. Why not tell the man that he was all set, make him happy and grateful? She'd never see him again anyway. But she didn't say anything and, nodding good-bye, walked away, heavy with guilt for she knew not what sin.