

*“What’s the matter?” my father said, the last time I went to Larak. “You look as though you’d seen a ghost.” He wasn’t far from the truth.*

MY MEMORIES of Iran sometimes coalesce into images of Larak, an estate to the north of Tehran, snuggling where the hills turned steep and swelled into mountains. Traveling that far—some twenty miles from the capital—was quite an excursion in those distant days, but we went fairly often, in all seasons. How else would I remember both the smell of fresh-cut wheat in summer and the crunch of snow under my lined boots in winter?

Fridays were open house at Larak. General Arfa and his English wife, whom I called Aunt Hilda though we weren’t related, were “at home” every Friday, entertaining from lunch until late afternoon as many people who cared to make the trip. My parents and my grandmother were good friends of the Arfas. When we didn’t accompany my father on one of his missions abroad, we would go to Larak a few Fridays in each season. I used to do so later as well, when I found myself in Tehran, home for the summer from Paris where I attended the university.

The drive took us through the posh northern suburbs of Shemiran, on to stark mountain scenery. Back then, the only other building in the area was a sanatorium, above Larak. Sanatorium sounded ominous, a

*by Saïdeh Pakravan*

place where people went to die—a fact sadly confirmed when I was old enough to read *The Magic Mountain*. I hear that Tehran has now caught up and sprawls far beyond those neighborhoods.

A little to the right after a fork in the road, a miserable hut housed a general store. To the left started the driveway that led to the estate. The garden itself was enclosed, with the house—two-storied, large, unassuming, whitewashed, with stone walls and floors—sitting square in the middle. The front door opened directly into the living room; an upright piano stood against the wall on the right as you went in and chintz-covered no-nonsense sofas and armchairs filled the room. Framed photographs covered every table and flat surface. I had no curiosity about the Arfas—children are seldom curious about adults—but those photographs, often commented upon, told many parts of the family story.

GENERAL ARFA, promoted to this rank at the ripe age of four in Iran, had been a page at the Czar's court—the elite in Iran often sent their children abroad for furthering their education and turning them into proper gentlemen. The choice was generally between England and Russia, and Prince Arfa, the general's father, felt more affinity to Russia as he knew the country and had a Russian wife—the future general's mother. Prince Arfa had later married a Swede and, later still, yet another foreigner.

From this brilliant beginning at a tender age, General Arfa had gone on to a distinguished career in the Army, adding to his resume several Cabinet and diplomatic posts along the way. He spoke every language—at least the ones I knew: French, English, and Persian—with a strong accent that I remember well but can't place to this day. He was highly cultured and articulate and had published in England a well-received book of memoirs, fascinating for its insights into a vanished world. In it, the general candidly told of his adventures, both military and personal. One such adventure was the time when, barely fifteen, he had eloped with the wife of a Montargis schoolmaster.

During a trip to Monte Carlo, on the Riviera, Hassan Arfa—who, as a young man, must have cut a fine figure with his trim body, his blue eyes,

and his abundant hair—tumbled into love with Hilda Bewicke. In his memoirs, the general describes how immediately smitten he was with the angelic-looking young British ballet dancer who performed with the Diaghilev company and how he had swept her off her *pointes* and brought her back to Iran.

Smitten or not, the general had a roving eye and many adventures. It all happened long before I was born, but I heard the many rumors when I was growing up. Finally, the master of Larak took a second wife as different from Hilda as imaginable; plucked, if I remember correctly, from the ranks of his farm workers. By her, he had children who accompanied him along with this second wife—though not overtly—on various missions. In Ankara, for instance, where he was Iranian Ambassador, Aunt Hilda, ever the gracious hostess, discharged herself of the duties of an ambassador's spouse, while the other wife lived in a nearby house which the general visited every day. The daughters, actually bearing the name of Arfa, attended a local school.

I can't imagine Aunt Hilda was too pleased with the arrangement or ever got used to it, but there must have been great affection between her and the general and the memories of decades of life together. You can't erase that or make rash decisions. Also, Larak was in Aunt Hilda's name. Had he left her, the general would have lost everything. I would speculate that, for this reason and others, he never entertained the thought.

Larak was mainly a dairy farm. The General, retired for many years by the time I was going there regularly, ran it according to the most advanced methods of production and in a strictly sterilized and hygienic environment. He enjoyed taking his guests on tours to display the modernized stables and describe the latest milking, bottling, and distribution methods. The farmhands wore a uniform and had their days regulated by a bell rung at intervals to signal various activities. Everything took place under the direct supervision of the General who, it was said, was a stern taskmaster. If I recall correctly, physical punishment was not unknown. But I don't want to slander a man long gone and of whom I was always in awe.

THROUGHOUT THE YEARS, my going to Larak was accompanied by a sense of what the Germans call *anerkennung*, knowledge and gratitude. I have never belonged to any place—save, of course, my beloved Paris—as much as I belonged to Larak, a place to which I had no claim and no family link. It was like going home, in those days when home and family meant the world: secure, certain, present, and immutable. I often took friends of my own age with me, but don't recall attempting to convey to them what Larak meant to me. Did I even know it myself? Unpretentious as it was, Larak represented taste, stability, and unequivocal gentility. As a teenager, I might have admired the vast stone mansions sprouting in the chic northern neighborhoods of the city, I might have resented the fact that my father, despite his prestigious positions, never made enough that we could live in one, whereas all my peers did. I might have envied—or thought that I envied—the neat lawns, the abundant flowerbeds, the ostentatious furniture of those mini palaces. But even then, I knew better and cared more for Larak. Larak which, in contrast, was nothing like the homes of Tehran's *nouveaux* or *anciens riches*. The garden ran fairly wild, the bushes were not often trimmed, the chintz-covered armchairs sagged, and the furniture bore scuff marks, but I sensed that life there was lived as it should be. Even now, it remains my standard for a perfect home.

FRIDAYS BROUGHT a variegated cast of characters, from a handful to a dozen or more. Anyone with an English connection who visited Tehran eventually found their way to Larak, either on their own or brought by hosts they were staying with. The missionary, the English nurses, the odd British scholar, the poet, also friends of the family and visitors from other European countries, they all came. Added to the mix were Iranian army and government colleagues of the general, university professors, writers, artists, as well as people whom I perceived as assorted shady individuals—probably quite innocent of intent and deed. One minion always in attendance wore miserable strands of hair, dyed a deep black, carefully combed over his bald pate. The absurd effort made him appear a fraud and therefore deeply suspect in my attentive child's eyes.

Aunt Hilda was as understated and impeccable as any country estate hostess who ever poured tea and passed watercress sandwiches. Her husband, thoroughly military in bearing, with his brush moustache, his shock of now white hair and his surprisingly blue eyes, smiled benevolently upon his guests. Actual conversation was a great strain for him, because of his deafness. It had been brought about through unusual circumstances: In 1934, he had accompanied Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, on the only trip the sovereign ever made abroad, to Turkey, to visit the great Ataturk for whom he had tremendous admiration. During military maneuvers, warned beforehand that the cannon was going to be shot, the two heads of state covered their ears with their hands. Not so the general, who stood at attention throughout, a noble attitude rewarded with two ruptured eardrums. If memory serves me right, he wore a hearing aid when particularly honored friends such as my parents or my grandmother visited.

Conversations were rarely dull. Aunt Hilda knew how to draw out even the occasional stodgy guest, and the surroundings did the rest so that, somehow, things became interesting. I suppose those melancholy *fin-de-siècle* cosmopolitan cities we read about must have been like that—Constantinople, Cairo, Trieste, islands of civilization where the last urbane people on earth held onto life as they knew it in a world from which values that had once gone without saying were fast disappearing, replaced by nothing.

THE FRIDAY ROUTINE was the same in all seasons, except that guests congregated outside in warm weather and, in winter, didn't stray far from the living room fireplace. In summer, meals were served outdoors, lunch on the lawn and tea near the pool, of which I will say more later.

People generally arrived before lunch, in time for sherry or some fruit juice; in summer, sour cherry sherbet was served in the tall, stemmed, brown, blue, or green glasses that would be all the rage in later years when handicrafts and going ethnic became trendy among the elite.

Lunch, served at one, was a buffet of heaped platters of white rice

with the accompanying stew or *khoresh*, others of colored rice—dill with fava beans and lamb in winter, green beans or, again, sour cherries and tiny meatballs in summer—and other Persian dishes; then casseroles, stuffed vegetables, salads, including the *salade Olivier*—a potato-and-chicken salad in mayonnaise that Ali Agha, the chef, was particularly good at making—ensured that no one would go hungry. Looking back, though, I remember that I always found the food more decorative than tasty.

Ali Agha, whose kitchen, an outbuilding, was set not far from the main house, was a true artist who produced not only these beautiful-looking dishes but presented his best *oeuvre* at tea-time, with ravishing small pastries and sandwiches.

In warm weather, lunch was served on the lawn. That lawn never did well, but on it stood the tallest trees that I have ever seen—plane trees, I would guess now—a swing with long thick ropes hanging from one of the heavier branches. It could swing terribly high and I was terrified when people propelled themselves or were pushed so far up that they were completely upside down before the swing returned to its original position. I sat on it only when no one was around to give me a wicked push as I always set limits on the amount of fear I could endure. I've never been on a ferris wheel or any other of those contraptions that have people shrieking with delight and that surely would make my heart stop if I attempted to ride them.

After lunch was roaming time for me. Was I as sullen as children and teenagers today? I may have been. I don't remember enjoying conversations with adults. Even if I did, my churning interior world wouldn't allow much socializing. I was always living out my latest crush, my latest passion, writing my grand masterpiece—I was queen of the world, I was a celebrated writer, I grew wings and soared above mere mortals. I never went on vacation without a pad and pencil, I never took a walk without taking something to write with, in case I felt inspired to sit under a tree and jot down some profound insight. To be alone was great, to be alone to write was the best possible state. So I took off right away while the grown-ups lounged about and later went off in groups for leisurely strolls.

The Arfas had only one child, Leila, as flawlessly English in speech and manner as her mother. Some ten years younger than my own mother, she was a big flirt, with more than a hint of naughtiness. She had married an attractive pilot from the Iranian Air Force, a scoundrel who, according to more snatches of gossip that I overheard, caused grief all around, particularly to his wife whom he later divorced after siring three delicate pre-Raphaelite-painting-like daughters.

Wary then as now of too much seductiveness, I don't think I liked Leila's husband much, though he never gave me cause to actively dislike him. Pilot buddies of his did, though, when, one Friday, he had invited what seemed a huge contingent—and must have, in reality, numbered five or six. I was in my early teens. After lunch—it was summer—a friend my own age and I made our way to the pond at the bottom of the central alley. I never listened to my mother's warning about swimming right after a meal and the risks of hydrocution, so I jumped in, as did my friend.

Were a couple of the elderly English nurses doing their laps? Was my grandmother, a heavyset woman, making her stately progress across the pool? I don't remember. All I know is that there we were, two adolescent girls having great fun, suddenly finding ourselves surrounded by the pilots who, perhaps not realizing how frightening this could be for us, started teasing us noisily. They romped and jumped, laughed and yelled amidst much splashing, grabbing a thigh here, a budding breast there. My friend shrieked, not entirely displeased, while I was stunned speechless. We clambered out and made our escape.

That's one of my rare unpleasant memories of Larak. The other one, I brought entirely upon myself. I must have been fifteen, probably after we returned from India where my father had been a military attaché. As I passed through the dining room to go outside, I saw a mound of fresh eggs, just brought in, painstakingly piled on a big round platter set on top of the buffet. I stood there, admiring the soft curves of the shells, the translucent shades of white with the hairline veins mapping them. I was so taken with the perfection of those eggs sitting in a shaft of light from the window that I filched one—heaven knows why—and hid it in my

purse, a young girl's prize possession, a round velvet purse from India, in red velvet with gold threads running through it, with a drawstring to pull it shut.

As we were leaving, later that afternoon, saying our goodbyes outside, the Arfas standing by the car to see us off, kissing us in turn, one of the embraces proved too much and my stolen egg was crushed. The velvet of my purse was too thin to contain the running yolk and white that broke through. I found myself with the horrendous trail staining my clothes. Oh, the mortification! I don't remember if anyone stared or made a comment. The fact of the egg breaking in full sight of the people assembled there has stayed with me but the consequences are, blessedly, erased from my memory.

MOSTLY, THE LARAK of my mind basks in the glow of perfect memories. I loved every corner of it, took long walks—by myself or with any friend I'd brought along. The pond, already mentioned, was naturally a center of attraction. A large oblong body of rather brackish water, it was usually covered with leaves from the nearby willow trees. Tadpoles swam with us. There were no filters in those days so the pool sometimes had to be emptied. I remember the crushing disappointment on those Fridays when we found it empty of water, filling up at a miserably slow pace, and knew that there would never be enough water for us to swim in before the day was over.

Beyond the pool, on the south side, ran a slope with a rock garden where lavender grew. The hot dry Tehran summer was perfect for lavender and I have never since smelled any of such powerful fragrance. Any walk in summer was accompanied by the smell of the flowers that I crushed between two fingers to release more. I learned to dry them and sew them up in small cotton pouches that I stuck in my drawers.

On the left, outside the gate, was a produce garden. I have pictures of me, grinning widely, my head sticking out of a huge cabbage, my body hidden behind the vegetable, an illustration of the French story that babies

are born in cabbages. The cabbage in that photograph is big enough to hold at least triplets.

Right after the produce garden came a short incline with a couple of saplings, and then the strawberry patch. In my several decades of existence, I have never tasted anything like those strawberries that we picked in the warm sun and ate almost to the point of making ourselves sick.

Beside the strawberries, another great treat of summer at Larak was riding on the *kharman*, the old-fashioned threshing machine. The wheat was strewn on the ground and a cart dragged by a pair of patient cows drove over it, in circles, pulling a metal shaft to which were attached several sharp steel circles, rather like giant pizza cutters. A wooden bench sat on the contraption that a farmhand rode. The end product was grain separated from chaff, to be then run through sieves and packed into gunny sacks.

I loved riding on the *kharman*. The farmhand, generally a gaunt man in peasant garb or in the Larak uniform, would call *whoa* to the cows, slide off the bench and wait till I had climbed up, then prod the cows with a stick to make them start again on their endless circling. I rode around half-asleep, mesmerized by the metal circles cutting into the wheat, by the smell of hay and dust in the dry air. Even to my inexperienced eyes, the process didn't seem very effective, but then, people had all the time in the world. The *kharman* took me round and round, Larak spread as far as the eye could see, and the world was forever.

BESIDE GOING TO Larak on Fridays, we sometimes attended dinner parties there. One was on Christmas night. The tradition was that we, in my family, celebrated Christmas on Christmas Eve, with relatives and friends—including the Arfas. They reciprocated on Christmas night, at a more formal black-tie, sit-down affair. It was all quite splendid. When dessert arrived, always a plum pudding in a blaze of brandy, the general would announce the toasts: to His Majesty the Emperor (that was the Shah); to Her Majesty the Queen (that was Queen Elizabeth). Dozens of tall candles burned in

pleasant little apartment in the 7th *arrondissement* of Paris, near the *Bon Marché*. To do justice to that friend, an amusing character, I should some day give him a story of his own. Stanley was a charming old English gynecologist who performed clandestine abortions in his apartment and was regularly hauled away to jail, came back quite undaunted, delighted with life and with the very young mistresses he managed to attract—God knows how, he was both really elderly and quite, quite broke. At Stanley's, we did the breathing and counting exercises that made us slip into various levels of consciousness, we played mind games, made collective art, went back to previous lives—I once saw myself as a huge gray wolf stalking the woods and literally felt the strength coursing through my body. We had a grand time.

A common exercise in mind control is the laboratory. You put yourself in a receptive alpha mood (when supposedly the alpha waves of your brain kick in) and visualize a place that you like, where you feel comfortable. (In my case, I alternated between a vast study lined with books, with three large windows and a spot on the grassy banks of the river Cam in Cambridge, England.) Then you could either conjure someone or let whoever would come to you do so, generally a person whose wisdom you appreciated, who could give you advice, or help you sort out problems. Several times, my grandmother, a writer who had died when I was still an adolescent, came to visit and told me about the writing life, about my writing and hers. I took notes afterward. I re-read them recently, finding there deep insights—hers or mine, who knows?

ONE DAY I WAS in my mind-control laboratory and had summoned to this imaginary world an acquaintance. I thought that she led her life well and might give me some tips on how to lead mine—a mess as usual. But unexpectedly, the scene changed. Instead of being in Cambridge, I found myself in Larak, precisely where the strawberry patch used to be. I sat there, on the ground, with Aunt Hilda next to me. She was so real, I could see every line in her face and the texture of her hair that she generally wore piled on top of her head.

silver candelabras. Everything gleamed softly, against the deep brown furniture with its touches of red—a silk cushion, a wreath of holly—the lace table linen, precisely the mood that I recognize in films where the director wants to depict a resplendent family reception, a festive occasion. Ingmar Bergman has scenes like that, I’m sure.

THE YEARS PASSED. Although I was a better correspondent then than I am now, I don’t remember exchanging any correspondence with the Arfas. I don’t even remember sending them Christmas cards from Paris where I lived. Even when I heard that Aunt Hilda had died, in 1970, I didn’t send condolences to the general. Was I too sad to put words on paper? Were the Arfas part of an irretrievable past? I could find a hundred excuses for my rudeness.

BUT I HADN’T seen the last of Aunt Hilda.

In those years, the fads were transcendental meditation, mind control; later still, in the early 1980s, ESP came along. I learned all the techniques, conveniently leaving out the faith thing. I have never been happy following a path drawn by others; true belief appears to me absurd at best, dangerous at worst. For what happens when my belief clashes with yours, as it occasionally must? Faith and ideology, rather than transcendent, generally strike me as a limitation of the spirit.

I found the psycho-spiritual teachings of the pompous leaders of these movements ridiculous, but I did acquire some practical tools for everyday life, as well as relaxation techniques and a certain honing of the mind. The techniques were helpful and the results sometimes astounding. I never ascribed anything that happened to other than some inner knowledge that I possessed without being conscious of it or to a kind of tapping into a general source—call it Emerson’s oversoul or Jung’s collective unconscious. As I said, I’m not big on faith.

ENTER AUNT HILDA. She had been dead for several years when I started practicing mind control with an informal group of people, in a friend’s

Surprised, I said, "Aunt Hilda, why are you here?"

We generally spoke French together but that day, she answered in English, saying, "Because all this" (I assume she meant mind control) "interests me. I want to hear more and maybe try to help."

I don't know what we talked about that day, but in subsequent sessions—maybe two or three—that I had with her, she talked about her life. Once, she actually gave me a message for the General who lived in Larak at the time. I was to tell him about a box hidden somewhere. I should have written to him but I never did.

One day, she looked tired and mentioned that she was. I started saying, "But you're..."

"Dead?" she said. "Is that what you were going to say? Tiredness comes from the soul, not from the body. When we die, it's our body that dies. The soul remains."

I was aghast. "You mean this wretchedness goes on?" I asked. I don't remember the answer.

ALL THIS TOOK place, as I said, around the mid-1970s. In 1978, I was in Tehran for a few weeks. Iran was in the midst of the upheavals that would eventually lead to a revolution the following year. One Friday afternoon, my father expressed a desire to go to Larak and spend a moment or two with General Arfa. I said I would go with him, taking along my older son, Ali, who was seven at the time.

On the drive over, I asked my father if things hadn't changed too much over the years. Specifically, I asked, could I leave him to his conversation with the general and take a walk by myself? I have never avoided any remembrance of things past or going back to old haunts when circumstances allow it, though, at the same time, I find it indescribably sad to return to a time when no promise had yet been broken and all of life was still ahead. I wanted to take a walk around Larak, alone. My father said yes, of course I would be able to get away.

General Arfa and his family, the second wife and her sundry and nondescript relatives, greeted us by the side of the pool. Leila, the daughter,

had long since remarried and moved to the United States. I was struck by how the general had aged.

Summer was still going full strength. We were offered cool refreshments and my father engaged the general in conversation about present events. After a while, I discreetly moved away from the group and walked to the little gate at the bottom of the garden, past the rock garden where lavender used to grow with such abandon. I heard the general's wife call out for him to come and open the gate for me. I told him not to bother but he had already reached me and I noticed then that the gate was padlocked, which it had never been in the past.

He opened the padlock. As I turned to start walking toward the fields, he surprised me by falling in with me. A little girl with curious eyes, about Ali's age, possibly a granddaughter, followed us. We walked along that path and, speaking in French, as he always had with me, the general told me about Hilda. Did he want to talk about her as an apology for the presence of the second wife, now fully installed as mistress of Larak, or was it only because, as he told me that day, Hilda had been so fond of me?

He told me that he had kept her room as it was when she died. That, at night, the covers were turned down, her bathrobe laid on the bed, her slippers on the floor next to it. He went there every morning. "We don't use that room," he said, meaning with his second wife.

As he spoke, I was struck by the palpable grief that emanated from that man whom I would never have thought sentimental or emotional. I then noticed that he held a key, larger than the one he had used to open the padlock and I wondered if there was perhaps another gate. As we reached the end of the path and turned right, exactly in the direction where I had intended to go, I noticed that things were different from the way I remembered them—trees stood where there had been none, a gray wall stretched along the path and, ahead, a small blue cupola glistened in the sun. It dawned on me that this must be where Aunt Hilda was buried, right there, where the strawberry patch used to grow.

We reached the mausoleum. I stared at the unfamiliar monument and its wrought-iron gate that the general now unlocked with the key

that he had been holding. Before we went in, he showed me another grave outside and told me that Hilda's mother was buried there, but I was too moved by my discovery of the mausoleum to ask when and in what circumstances he had had that Englishwoman's remains brought to Iran.

As we went in, I first saw a large framed photograph of Aunt Hilda, then wild flowers in several vases set beside the elevated stone, a frame with verses of the Quran in English, and a small burning blue light. He stood by the door with the little girl, to allow me to pay my respects. When I started toward the door to go out, I saw to my confusion that he had removed his shoes which I hadn't thought to do.

His old eyes rimmed in red, brimming with tears, he said, "I go to her room every morning, then I come here. It causes me great happiness and immense sorrow." He locked the gate behind us. I then said that I wanted to stay there for a while. My initial thought, when I had started off on my own, had been to go to the strawberry patch, put myself in alpha, and see what happened. I hadn't known then that Aunt Hilda was buried there, nor that the place had changed beyond recognition.

As he turned to leave, I stopped him. "General," I said, "there didn't use to be these trees here. And down there, there was the strawberry patch, wasn't there?" He stared at me and I had to repeat my question, shouting a little to make myself heard. When he understood, he looked lost for a second, then he nodded.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I remember now. You're absolutely right. Hilda and your grandmother used to take walks over there, at the foot of those hills, and I could see them from a distance. It was all open."

He then told me that a few years before Aunt Hilda's death, the two of them had taken a trip to Nishabur and visited Omar Khayyam's tomb. Standing there, Hilda had said that she wanted, like the poet, to be buried where petals would rain on her grave. That's why, the general said, he had planted the cherry trees and the rose bushes. He also told me that she had converted to Islam some twenty years before her death—which I didn't know—and that, after she died, he had found an English version

of the Quran in her room, bearing, underlined, the verses that he had had reproduced for her mausoleum.

He then left me, trailed by the little girl who hadn't uttered a word. I sat there for a while, but, as far as I remember, didn't try to conjure Aunt Hilda. The exercise suddenly seemed pointless.

When I made my way back to the pond, I found my father and the general sitting on folding chairs on the lawn, engaged in a heated discussion. I learned later that the general, like many before and after him during those weeks, had tried to engage my father in a counter-demonstration against the mullahs. I have heard the story from various people, about how they came to my father and told him that, respected by one and all as he was, anything that he sponsored would have weight. My father had shrugged General Arfa off, as he had the others. He knew, as he would tell me two months later in Paris, when I saw him for the last time, that it was far too late.

As I drew near, my father glanced up and looked surprised.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You look as though you'd seen a ghost!" Actually, he used a French expression, "*une mine de déterrée*," meaning someone just dug out of their grave. Either French or English expression was perfectly apt in the circumstances.

I don't remember whether, on our way back, I told him about mind control and about the strange fact that Aunt Hilda happened to be buried exactly where I had pictured her in my altered state. I may have, but, as I grow older, I realize more and more how we only *think* that we remember—and how very different the reality was from what we remember. In my case, I see this often, as I write down, in minute detail, so much of what occurs, immediately after it does. I note conversations with shades or layers of meaning, accompanying events, descriptions of places, time of day. Years later, if I happen to compare my memory of an event to what I've written about it, I find major discrepancies.

About that day, of which I consigned all details shortly after, I remembered that General Arfa had taken me up to the house, up to Hilda's room,

that I had seen the bedspread turned down for the night, the bathrobe on the bed, the slippers on the floor... The reality, as I saw from my notes when I dug them up to write this story, is that he had only told me about the room as he walked with me to the small mausoleum he had had built for his wife.

So no, I don't remember talking about mind control and the laboratory to my father but rather imagine I did. He was easy to talk to and always interested in whatever I was engaged in.

What I do remember vividly, though I hadn't noted it, was the passion with which I declared then that I loved Larak so well that I thought it ought to be mine by right. With Aunt Hilda gone, I added, no one could care for it as deeply as I did. A terribly arrogant statement, I see now. How did I know how well the general loved Larak? Or, for that matter, how well Leila loved it, far away though she might be?

My father often asserted that if you wish for something hard enough and work at obtaining it hard enough, you finally do get it. I asked him now if he still held this to be true. He was skeptical and rather thought, he said, that, in the case of Larak, loving well didn't carry the right of ownership.

EVERYONE IN TEHRAN knew Larak and the Arfas, if only from afar. Even now, after so many years, I often meet people who, if they hadn't actually visited the Arfas, at least knew of them and of their famous estate. But news is becoming scarce now. Shortly after the revolution, I heard that the trees were all cut for timber. True to their crass self, the mullahs in power would care little about magnificent plane trees or about enjoying the shade of the old weeping willows by the pond. Leave sentimentality for the dogs—of which, I forgot to say, there were always a good number around. (Aunt Hilda wasn't English for nothing. Dogs and horses were part of life at Larak.)

I also heard that the property was parceled out to various deserving figures of the Islamic regime. The general moved to France shortly before or after the revolution. He and his wife lived in Cap d'Ail, in the south of

France, on next to nothing—which is what they had. They came to Paris occasionally and I saw them at my mother's when they visited her. At the time, I was working with the opposition to the Islamic Republic and the general wrote me informed letters, brushing a realistic picture of the situation and of possible next steps. We also telephoned each other occasionally. I believe that he saw in me not only a member of the third generation of Larak's inner circle but also someone working at pulling Iran from the clutches of the clerics and restoring it to its old self. After all, the revolution had happened only recently at the time, the new structures weren't too firmly in place, and things might perhaps still be reversed.

IN THE SUMMER of 1980, I went to the south of France to see my mother and my sons who were spending a month by the seaside. One afternoon, I paid a visit to General Arfa. With his wife by his side, he lived in a single room, furnished with a sagging bed in one corner and an oilcloth-covered table in the other. The tea and cookies that his wife served were a far cry from the lavish spreads at Larak. The general, though, an aristocrat to the tip of his fingers, didn't find his diminished circumstances worthy of comment. Instead, still straight as a rod, still with his military bearing, with the same glint in his blue eyes and rasp in his laughter, he focused on plans to save Iran.

He died not long after. Because he had been decorated many years before with the French *Légion d'Honneur*, he was buried with full military honors at Monte Carlo where he had spent youthful years in his father's grand home, the Villa Ispahan. He would have liked that. And I would like to think that a ghost bugle sounded for him in Larak when he drew his last breath, and that a petal fluttered to the ground near Aunt Hilda's mausoleum.