

Saïdeh Pakravan

Farrokh

Farrokh was an Iranian film director, a generation older than I. His girlfriend of several decades, Leyli, was an artist who did watercolors and acrylics of traditional Persian designs, such as the plate of sprouted barley or lentils that we decorate our *haft sin* table with on our New Year, which is celebrated with the vernal equinox. Leyli added to these decorative cards, sketches, or calendars a touch of whimsy so sweet and delicate that her work created its own enchantment. I don't know if she ever sold enough of her art to make a living, but she did carry around a hobo bag from which she would pull out work for sale if anyone showed an interest. Although we moved in the same circles, I hadn't known the couple well in Tehran in the years before the revolution, meeting them, or at least Farrokh, only a few times. But I heard about him often enough, on the occasion of the screening of a new film or during the famous Shiraz Festival of the Arts, which he spearheaded. (The Festival was later denounced as infamous by the Islamic Republic as a symbol of the moral bankruptcy of the previous regime. Even as it took place, in the mid-seventies, it was wildly avant-garde theater, with performances by the Grotowski or Peter Brook companies that caused scandals. One store window hosted a couple mimicking copulation, before an audience of stunned Shirazis, including veiled women).

Some time later, during my Paris years, I became part of a fairly close group of a dozen Iranian luminaries in exile, arts and letters people all. It was a mixed group. Some members I didn't care about either way; some I liked. Farrokh I not only liked but admired and

looked up to. The group met for dinner at one or the other of our apartments, caught up on news, ate, then went on to the discussion of the evening. The topic had been decided in advance—history, poetry, cinema—and the speaker designated. A poet would read poems, a sociologist talk about recent changes in Iran, an art historian discuss miniatures. Shortly after the Iranian revolution of '79, I presented what, in retrospect, must have been a rather incoherent picture of revolutions and their effect. Time passed, bringing with it distance and dispersion. I moved to the States with my family, going back occasionally, always stopping by to see Farrokh in his small, book-filled apartment in a massive, nondescript block of buildings behind the Gare Montparnasse. I became editor of a cross-cultural quarterly in English, *Chanteh*, and was absurdly serious about the venture despite no pay and no support and a miserable lack of success. I contacted people, came up with layouts and ideas for special issues, one of them about the Iranian cinema that was just then beginning to emerge—real-time, navel-gazing films, mainly about kids, the one subject the touchy Islamic regime couldn't take exception to—that fed on each other and reaped major awards at festivals. I got in touch with young and old directors, film historians, actors, various established and newer figures. Obviously, Farrokh was at the top of my list. I interviewed him over the phone. He was reluctant to talk, having just been invited to do the same for a special issue of an academic and well-regarded journal that he probably considered more prestigious than *Chanteh*, my quarterly—as though there were a finite number of things he could say about his films and giving me too much meant not giving enough to others.

I was surprised, wounded, even, by his lack of enthusiasm. The other people I had talked to for this special issue had responded with gratifying enthusiasm, even though several had mentioned having been contacted by the same academic journal. I had to be satisfied with the few clichés that Farrokh handed me rather curtly. Did he think I wanted to imitate the editor of the academic journal? Then, as too often when hurt, I didn't speak up, say what was on my mind. I should have been curt, too, explained that I would offer no apology for coming up with the idea of a cinema issue of *Chanteh* at the same time as the exalted journal, that copying or emulating anyone didn't come into the equation, and that given the buzz caused by the Iranian

cinema at the time, bringing out a special issue on the subject seemed fairly obvious.

That special issue turned out quite well, given our small means. I sent it off to all concerned, including Farrokh—and never heard from him again. I gave him time, faxed him a couple of times, left a couple of messages on his answering machine asking whether he had any comments, but no, nothing.

Snubs rub me the wrong way. Over the years, when faced with what I perceived as a brush-off, I have written off any number of people, some once relatively close. So I gave up on Farrokh. It wasn't easy, and I often went back in my mind to better days, when I had looked up to him for approval on any of the myriad balls I always keep up in the air, for my meager achievements, for my ongoing projects that so often come to naught. I remembered visits to his cramped apartment where, among books and paintings, often by Leyli, I would embark on an intense exposé of what I was aiming for in this or that venture. He listened, he gave sound advice, he didn't encourage needlessly, but neither did he discourage outright. I had always found him insightful, logical. I had always thought him a dear friend.

It's funny about friends. Following the general order of life, now that I see more of them take their leave—especially those like Farrokh, a generation older—I naturally think more about the nature of friendship. Take this last year, which saw die three or four people I once knew well and even called friends. We never know when something like that will affect us. There are people whose passing we regret because of what we once had in common, a trove of shared madeleines. They haven't meant anything to us in a long time, we may even have lost sight of each other, then we hear that so-and-so is dead, and we feel a twinge—or just wonder at the lack of it. We were close once, we belonged to the same circles, shared the same interests, more or less, even had a few drunken evenings discussing the demise of civilization as we know it or whether Tannhäuser is sublime and beauty is important. Then the person dies, and the waters close above his head, her head, immediately. We wake up the next day hardly remembering that they're gone. It wasn't like that when Farrokh died. The extent of my grief surprised me. I was inconsolable for a few days, even bursting into tears a number of times.

Our falling out had had been unexplainable and now, with his death, it would remain unexplained. I once heard, frustratingly, that I could have come close to finding out why he had ended our friendship; a relative told me that a few years back, finding himself at a dinner party in Paris with Farrokh, this last had taken him to the side, knowing we spoke occasionally. “Do you know what she’s done?” he’d asked about me, tantalizingly. Then, just as he was about to spill the beans and finally reveal the hideousness of my crime, another guest had interrupted, and my relative never found out what Farrokh had been about to say.

The only time I saw him, again in Paris, was at a reception at the Sorbonne, following the dissertation defense of a common friend. There he was, thin and upright as always, though truly old (he was in his mid-eighties by then and half blind). He gave me the warmest welcome and spoke jokingly about the fact that I had snubbed him all these years. I said something to the effect that he obviously hadn’t wanted to speak to me. He tut-tutted me. “I was told that you were the one who had some kind of grievance against me,” he said. “That’s what I was told.” There were people around us and no opportunity to clear the matter there and then. I promised I would call him and visit. I never did, though; I don’t know why. The moment had passed, I suppose.

After he died, I called Leyli from Washington to offer my condolences. For many years, she herself had had a brain tumor, which, from what I heard, was in remission. We spoke a couple of minutes. She was, I think, moved that I had called. I told her I would be going to Paris soon and would visit her, which she said she was looking forward to. I called once more, a few weeks later, and was told by a friend tending her that she was not well and couldn’t come to the phone. When I did get to Paris recently, I thought I would make good on my promise to visit her. I spoke to common friends and to her son, who told me she wasn’t doing well at all and I shouldn’t expect much by way of conversation. When I suggested that I should perhaps see her when I next came to Paris, her son hesitated. “It may be better to see her now,” he said.

One cold, rainy evening, I stopped by on my way to a dinner with friends. I couldn’t remember how to find the apartment in the maze of those buildings—it had been too many years since the last time

I'd been there. I called a friend who guided me via cell phone—up these stairs to that other building, to another elevator, and so on, until I found the buzzer to Farrokh's apartment. Upstairs, I was greeted by Elena, an aide with an Eastern European accent, and an Iranian film director I'd known in the past, also visiting, who showed me to a chair next to the daybed Leyli was lying on. Leyli had been a slightly built woman with shoulder-length brown hair and a taste for long bohemian skirts and fringed wraps. I now had before me an unrecognizable, horribly thin old woman with short iron-gray hair, swaddled with blankets up to her chin, her head fallen on her chest, her entire body shaking with a rhythmical tremor. There was not one familiar feature, nothing that told me this was the Leyli I knew. The other visitor signaled me to talk to her. I put a hand on her shoulder, told her my name, said I was visiting as I had promised I would. Her eyelids fluttered; she may have half-opened her eyes. I went on, awkwardly, that I was here for a few days and would be going back soon. There was no response. Elena was trying to make her drink some reddish liquid through a straw, but nothing went through. I stood up, not finding anything else to say.

Outside, on my way to the parking in the grim Paris evening, I remembered that I had wanted to find out from Leyli what had so offended Farrokh that he would cut me off like that. I had no idea that she would be too far gone. Now, I would never have the answer to that question.

Shortly after my return to Washington, her son emailed me that she had died, too.