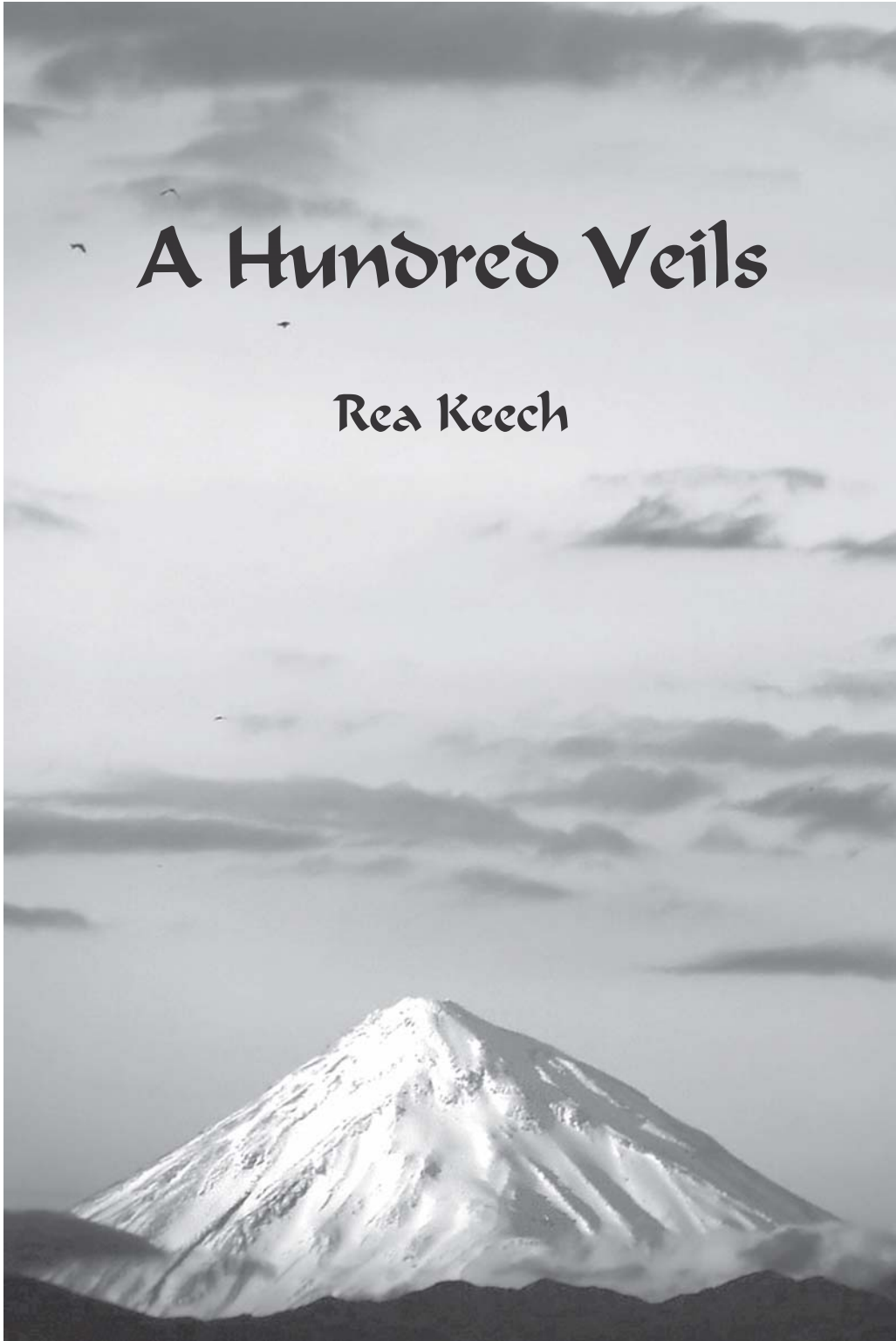


A Hundred Veils

Rea Keech



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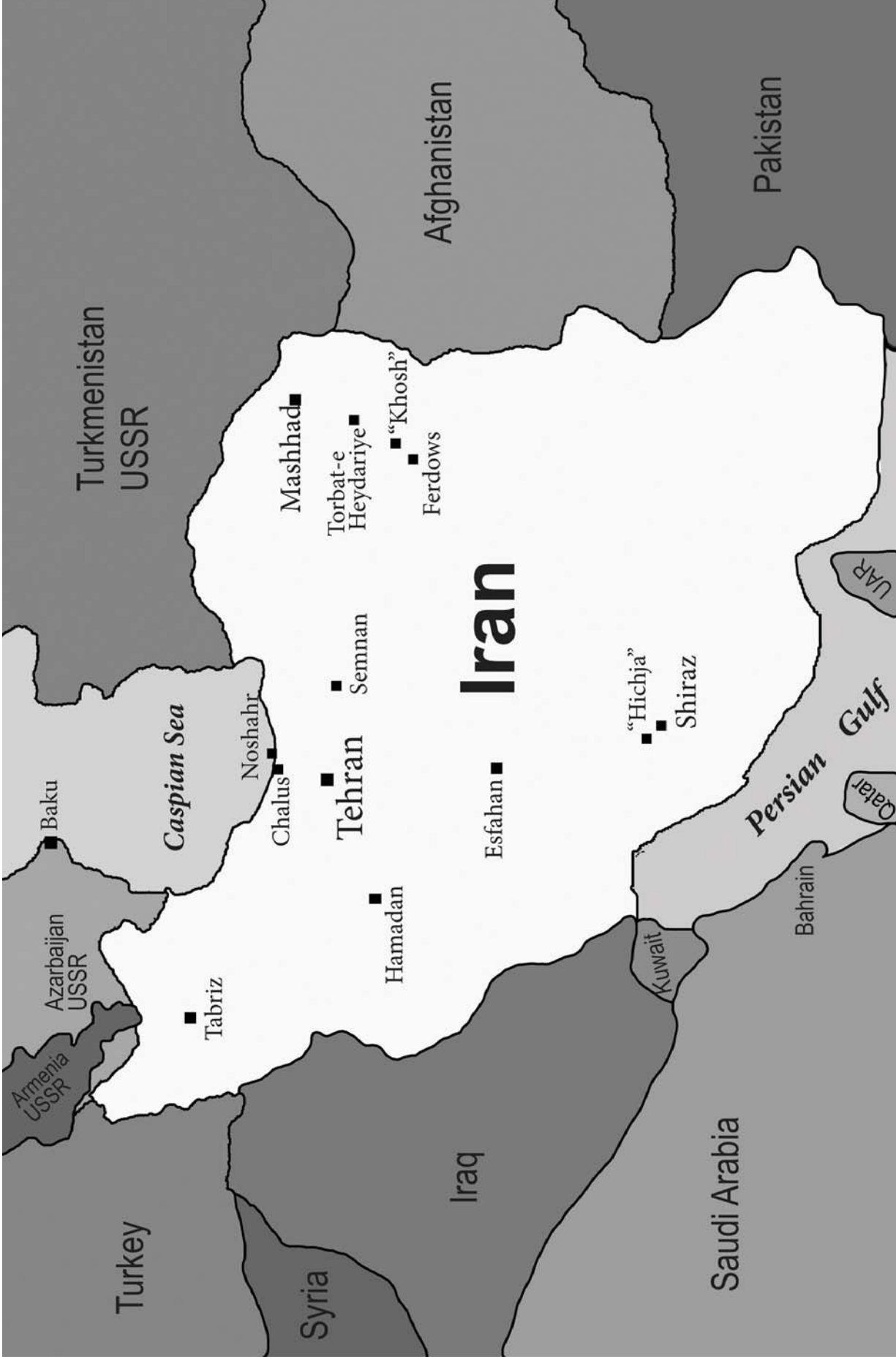
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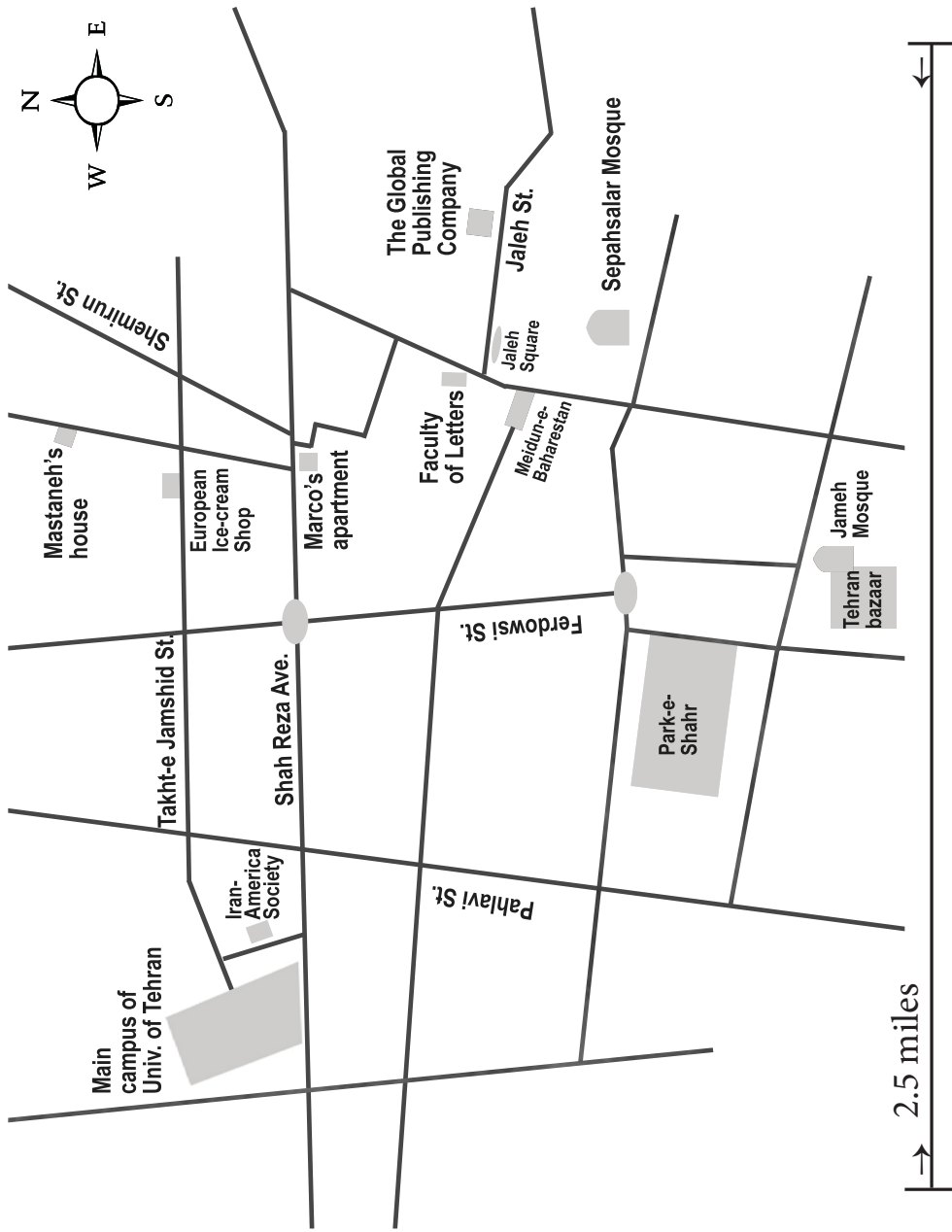
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I



Roses and nightingales

With an abrupt drop, the plane banked sharply. Through his window, Marco could see men, women, and children in pajamas getting up from mats on the flat rooftops below. They were stretching, yawning, turning towards the red sunrise. None looked up. He was flying unnoticed through the bedrooms of hundreds of families.

Don't look directly at the women—cultural-religious thing. The sight of so many women in their pajamas caused this warning to keep replaying in Marco's head as the plane landed in the Shiraz airport.

At the gate, a rag-tag soldier in khaki shirt and mismatched olive green trousers held a machine gun across his chest, not standing at attention but simply loitering, ogling each disembarking passenger like a star-struck girl.

The airport smelled of sweat. Marco stepped around a carpetful of flowers spread in front of a frail man sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"Salaam aleikum."

Marco turned, pleased he had understood the man's greeting, and returned it.

Being spoken to by a foreigner seemed to be a first for the flower man. He jumped up and asked Marco where he was coming from—and got an answer.

Where he was going—and got an answer.

Men in shiny suits and collarless shirts began edging in close enough to take in the action. They stood with shoulders and arms touching Marco, their faces uncomfortably close to his, encouraging him to talk more.

Some pushed through to get a closer look—all men at first. But then some women in paisley chadors, holding the cloth across their

faces, edged towards the fringes of the circle that was developing. “Listen to him speak,” they said to each other. Marco had pretty much already used up all the Farsi he knew.

A scuffle broke out on the outer edge of the crowd as more and more bystanders tried to shove in to see what was going on. A turbaned mullah had been watching at a little distance but then, as two soldiers carrying machine guns approached the crowd, he shouldered a brown sack and walked away. The soldiers hadn’t come to break up the scuffling crowd, however. They simply wanted to see, too.

Marco was twenty-three years old and had never been the center of so much public attention. Now a few more men elbowed in to try out their English—or any foreign language they knew.

“Hello Mister!” This was the country’s universal English translation of *Salaam aleikum*.

A portly man with amber *tasbih* prayer beads in his hand said something in Arabic to Marco.

“Idiot. Does he look like an Arab to you?” The women on the fringes giggled.

Marco tried to hear what was being said on the airport loudspeakers. “Today, the King of Kings, Light of the Aryans” All he understood was that the Light of the Aryans was going to Washington. Marco looked over the heads of the crowd for the baggage area.

The flower peddler put a red rose into Marco’s hand, took him by the other hand, and pushed through the crowd. “Pardon the *sholugh*,” he said. Marco recognized the word for ruckus or public disturbance.

Huff and Dooley were standing beside their bags at the unloading area. “Hurry up,” Huff said. “There’s a jeep waiting for us outside.”

Marco looked through the remaining bags and realized his were missing.

A burned-out English expatriate named Boggs picked them up

in the shimmering, furnace-like heat. He was apparently in charge now. Nobody seemed to know Boggs's first name. He had something wrong with one arm. It worked, but it didn't hang straight from his shoulder.

Without any baggage other than the thin vinyl briefcase he had carried with him, Marco climbed into the front seat of the dusty Land Rover while the others loaded their bags into the back. They bounced across a bare valley surrounded by jagged, barren mountains. On the highest peaks, huts perched atop wooden towers. Boggs said they were army observation posts. Below each tower stood a thin little soldier in a bleached-out uniform holding a machine gun.

"What are they on the lookout for?" Marco asked.

"Ghoshghai," Boggs told them. "Tribes. They sacked the city of Shiraz twenty years ago. There's some of them over there."

"The guys in the Archie hats?" Huff said. "They don't look that scary."

Boggs grunted. "The Shah likes to be extra careful."

The open Land Rover left a mile-long wake of dust behind it. When Marco blinked, his eyelashes were crusty. He licked his teeth and felt grit on his tongue. He now realized why Boggs's hair stood up like that.

As they entered the city, Boggs said, "You'll notice you have to use the horn a lot more than in England, or the States." He leaned on the horn, and the Land Rover jerked one way, then the other to avoid a white Mercedes coming head-on. It didn't seem to be quite set in stone which side of the street you drove on.

"What are all those strings of lights everywhere?" Marco asked Boggs. "They look like Christmas decorations."

"Getting ready for the Shah's coronation."

As Boggs came to a stop at a traffic light, all vehicles going in his direction lined up side-by-side across the whole road like horses in a starting gate. The sidewalks on both sides of the road were also used. Vehicles coming the other way did the same on their side of the intersection. Now there were two rows of vehicles facing each

other as they waited for the light to change. On either side of the intersection, only one vehicle was in what Marco would have called the proper lane.

“Keep your arms inside,” Boggs said. The two phalanxes of vehicles rushed at each other. Bluff—showing no regard for the vehicles coming head-on—was the predominant tactic. Speed and size had the advantage. The Land Rover, on the wrong side of the road but biggish in the current lineup, shot out with horn blaring and claimed a space between two on-coming three-wheelers, which were forced to turn aside, bringing traffic to a stop on either side of them.

“Traffic’s not as bad as I thought,” Boggs said. He swerved to avoid a donkey backing into the street. “You’re going to love Shiraz, the City of Roses and Nightingales. I’ve lived here for fifteen years, and I never want to live anywhere else. The home of the poet Hafez. I hate it when I have to be in Tehran.”

He stopped at a three-story building attached to a cinema broadcasting out into the street the Farsi soundtrack from *The Ten Commandments* at a piercing volume. “Here you are. In there somewhere.”

The City of Roses and Nightingales smelled like urine and garbage. Straw and scraps of greenish vegetables floated slowly along in the dark water of the open *jub* or water-supply sluices that lined each side of the street. Vegetable peddlers were washing their produce in the *jubs*. Donkeys were urinating on the sidewalk.

Huff stood beside Marco on the low balcony of the Pahlavi University dormitory, where he, Dooley, and Marco would stay until Boggs decided where the International Teachers Association would send them. Huff’s face was engraved with a permanent tight-lipped grin, the kind sometimes described as “shit eating.” On the plane to Shiraz he had asked the hostess for Johnny Walker. “It is not,” she had told him.

Below in the street, a Ghoshghai squatted on the sidewalk in a felt hat with the brim turned up on all four sides and canvas clog

shoes with upturned tips. He was weighing tomatoes on a hand-held scale for a hunched-over figure covered completely by a black chador.

Two young soldiers walked past side by side, pinkie fingers linked together, swinging their arms.

Huff rolled his eyes. "Goddam."

Dooley was still down on the sidewalk buying something. When he came out onto the balcony, he had a copy of the *Kayhan* English language newspaper and a huge paper sack of dried pumpkin seeds.

Marco silently stared down into the street. Despite the blazing heat, every man wore at least a threadbare remnant of a suit coat, usually over pajama bottoms. Two nurses in white uniforms walked together arm-in-arm towards a bus stop at the corner. Except for them, the women were completely hidden beneath black or paisley chadors.

Marco thought about the letter in his pocket. He had written it on the plane but was ashamed of the pleading tone he'd used and didn't know if he would actually mail it.

"Look at this," Dooley said. "It's the year 1346. We're going back in time." Dooley had an omnivorous, indiscriminate appetite for facts and food. He took off his gold wire-framed glasses and wiped them on the huge thigh area of his khaki pants. "*Khaki* is a Persian word," he told them. "So is *pajama*." He said *pajama* only referred to the bottoms. "They're baggy, unisex, one size fits all."

It might be fun to wake up on a rooftop in pajamas, Marco thought. Of course, Elaine wouldn't have thought so. A picture of his ex-fiancée in her overpriced pink designer pajamas flashed into his mind. She had met somebody "more attuned to her lifestyle," she had told him. And now here he was in Iran, moving on.

"Not still brooding about that bitch dumping you, are you?" Huff said.

"No. Well, maybe a little," Marco admitted.

"Get over it, I say." Huff rolled his eyes towards several formless female figures squatting on the sidewalk holding dirty black chadors in their mouths to hide their faces as they picked through a pile of

pomegranates. An ironic grin spread over Huff's face. "You're sure to find somebody new here. Oh, yes, I'd say you came to just the right country."

"Not actually," contradicted Dooley, who never understood sarcasm. "Even getting a look at a woman here is difficult. The customs here—"

"We know, we know." Huff cut off what was about to become one of Dooley's rambling expositions.

Marco had a more immediate problem. Boggs had told them to wear coats and ties to a welcome ceremony that evening by the education ministry. "I'll just go down and buy a coat," he said, since all of his clothes were missing.

He walked fast trying not to step in donkey droppings or on the piles of fruit, seeds, and vegetables spread out for sale on the sidewalk. He passed a row of shops that sold nothing but square-toed shoes, shops that sold only Ghoshghai hats, pajama shops—he paused, but then went on—and turned into the first tailor shop. The word for coat was coat.

"Hello Mister."

Marco looked around and immediately saw his mistake. Ready-to-wear was an American concept. The reason everybody in the country looked like he was wearing a tailor-made suit was because he was.

The proprietor tried out his English: "You are welcome. Please. You drink the tea."

He poured a little *estekān* glass of tea and put it in front of Marco on a small white saucer along with a bowl of sugar lumps. "You are welcome. Please. You drink the tea." Marco now realized he had already heard all the tailor's English.

The welcome ceremony was held in the Cedar Gardens on the outskirts of the city near the tomb of the poet Hafez. The garden, bordered on every side by long rows of thin, towering cedars, was a peaceful and beautiful oasis walled off from the cacophony, odors,

and heat of the city. Above the deep green of the trees, light brown ranges of mountains loomed in the distance against a cloudless blue sky. In the early twilight, cool air radiated from the trimmed hedges, the vast beds of roses, and the water in the central fountain.

A violin quartet played Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* while waiters in starched white coats stood everywhere with silver trays of hors d'oeuvres. All the guests—men and women—wore elegant clothes that could have come from New York, London, or Paris. There must be two Irans, Marco thought.

"Now this isn't bad," Huff said.

A loud *caw* came from the top of a cedar tree.

Huff smirked. "But that definitely sounds more like a crow than a nightingale."

Beyond the fountain, where most of the dignitaries and guests were gathered, there was a long table covered by a white cloth. Lined up from one end of the table to the other were bottles of Pepsi Cola.

"I see that Johnny Walker is not," Huff said.

Dooley took a Pepsi.

Huff was talking to a gray-haired man from the provincial Ministry of Education. "We have just the person to answer your question about American literature," he said, turning towards Marco. Marco stepped forward wearing a coat with huge padded shoulders, wide stripes, and sleeves that didn't come very far down his arms—a loaner from the tailor.

The minister took in a sharp breath.

"I see he's impressed with your zoot suit." Huff grinned. To the gray-haired man, he said, "I'd like to introduce you to Mr.— No, I guess I'll let him tell you his name himself." Huff's smirk deepened.

"Mark O. Something-or-other," Marco said. The family name was muttered. "I'm pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you Mister Marco," the gray-haired man said.

It seemed to work every time. Since his first Farsi lesson, "Marco" had worked out this way to avoid using his last name, which in Farsi meant *penis*.

Pajama party

ساقیا جام می‌ام ده که نگارنده غیب
نیست معلوم که در پرده اسرار چه کرد

—Hafez

*Sāghiā, jā-m-e-meyam deh ke negārandeye-qeib
Nist ma'lum ke dar pardeh asrār che kard.*

Huff was sent to teach at the University of Esfahan and Dooley to teach at a boys' high school in a northern province. Marco didn't know if he would see either of them again. While Boggs was waiting to confirm Marco's assignment, he sent him on an overnight trip to the nearby village of Hichja in the desert foothills of the Zagros Mountains. The idea was to practice his Farsi. It was there that Marco met Farhad.

The bus was festooned with plastic beads and silk tassels. Above the windshield hung a large picture of the Shah in a white military uniform decorated with about a square foot of military medals and ribbons. On the dashboard was a smaller picture of Mohammad's grandson Hossein Ali in a white robe. The picture of Ali was surrounded by red tassels and decorative script from the Koran. Like a Catholic holy card, Marco thought.

As the bus leaned into curves at the edge of cliffs, several passengers began throwing up in the aisles. Marco noticed others holding flowers to their noses. He tried to open a window, but it was stuck. Never mind. This trip was just a kind of initiation devised by Boggs that Marco had to get through. In a day or two he would get his permanent assignment, probably in Tehran.

Out of the window, as far as he could see were endless plains of