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# London Review of Books

## Diary

Christopher de Bellaigue

I'm wearing tails and waistcoat for my wedding, but this isn't the Home Counties. I'm getting married in Tehran to Bita Ghezelayagh, an Iranian architect who studied in Paris, and I'm determined to express my 'cultural identity'. What has my identity got to do with *Four Weddings and a Funeral*? Not much, but the Iranians will get the point. Better to be mistaken for Hugh Grant than a cultural doormat. As we walk to the Ghezelayagh house in the centre of Tehran where a bus will pick us up, I feel a mild sensation of dread. My people – my father, Nicholas (brother), Rory (oldest friend), Christina (cousin) and Camilla (relieved ex-girlfriend) – are undeniably different from the Ghezelayagh family and appendages.

It would be foolish to expect the two families to bond instantly when the son of a retired City stockbroker marries the daughter of a Tehran architect, but that's not the point. It's important that my people like these Iranian surroundings and the Iranian people who inhabit them – that they approve of what I'm getting myself into. If they don't, I run the risk of feeling I have made a mistake.

'Hello, Mr Ghezelayagh.'

'Hello, son-in-law.'

Bitá's father is standing outside the house he built twenty years ago. It's the first time I've seen him wearing a tie. He kisses me on both cheeks.

'Now, son-in-law,' he menaces, 'no running away.' This is a reference to the case of Miss Ebrahimi, one of his former tenants. Miss Ebrahimi married an Englishman, who abandoned her as soon as she got pregnant. My people smile, not because they understand what Mr Ghezelayagh is saying, but because they feel they should participate in whatever jollity there is to be had. They're standing close to one another in this narrow Tehran street, a phalanx of grinning English people. Until they arrived in Tehran yesterday, their Iran was made up of footage of the crowd that rushed like lava around Ayatollah Khomeini's funeral cortège, the Rushdie fatwa, carpets.

Mrs Ghezelayagh comes out of the front door, down the steps and into the street. She's accomplished what the mothers of brides are meant to accomplish: an illusion of serenity after a week of sleeplessness. I have told my people not to shake hands with members of the opposite sex in public, for the Islamic Republic frowns on physical ambiguities of this sort. When I introduce Mrs Ghezelayagh, my father loiters obediently, his right arm behind his back, where it can do no mischief. But Mrs Ghezelayagh is in extravagant mood: 'Bonjour, Monsieur de Bellaigue!' Vous êtes tous les bienvenus à Téhéran!' she exclaims, and holds out her hand. My father takes it gratefully. Mrs Ghezelayagh's French, learned thirty years ago when she was a student in Paris, returns elegantly. My father was English enough when he married my mother in 1962. Now, 16 years after her death, he is even more English. But he was born in Paris. He knows Mrs Ghezelayagh's quartier well.

Now the pavement is filling with guests. There's Parvaneh, sometime resident of Tucson, Arizona, with her lively daughter. There's Gilly, the London-trained interior designer. There's Fereshteh; how could she be the mother of Vafa, who works for Deutsche Bank, and still look so young? They are followed by more women, and by the men belonging to these women, who seem somehow anonymous, bystanders at a parade of meaningful looks and strong perfumes. In theory, these women shouldn't impress their femininity on you; that's what the dress code imposed by the Islamic Republic is designed to prevent. Their hair and the shape of their breasts and buttocks are all considered incitements to depravity, and must be concealed. The scarf and the coat – it must billow, remember – are compulsory; the idea is to protect women from men, and men from themselves. But what if this dress code is subverted? What if, for example, rather than tie up her black scarf so that it clings to her forehead, the Iranian woman exchanges it for a Versace silk, which she then allows to ride halfway back on her head, revealing luscious inches of hair? What if the coat happens not to billow, but hangs slinkily? What if a split up the side reveals a morsel of calf? The result is the opposite of what the Islamic Republic intends.

Bitia is emerging from the Ghezelayagh house. She wears a strict coat that hides her wedding dress entirely, but her headscarf is red and gay. When she smiles at me, fine lines fan across her skin from the corners of her eyes. Ghezelayagh is a Turkish name, but Bitia is as pale as the Iranian archetype, her face the moon of the poets. 'Beautiful,' says Camilla, and now Bitia has spotted the English contingent. She calls out: 'Nicholas! Rory! Camilla! Christina! Monsieur de Bellaigue! Welcome to Iran!'

There is the sound of revving; the driver is impatient to be on his way. Mr Ghezelayagh shepherds us onto the bus. He sits down next to Nicholas. My future father-in-law is a large man and my brother is squashed up against the window. Mr Ghezelayagh learned his French in the 1960s, along with English and Italian. He is conversing with Nicholas in a kind of

Esperanto. As we drive through the city towards the massive mountain that lies behind it, Iran is becoming two quite different places. Imagine the wall of a house built in the old style – Iranian bricks, slim and coloured like nougat. Behind the wall, the women comb their hair and gossip while the servants keep them supplied with dates and long pipes. This Iran is the *anderouni*, the ‘inside’, and it’s not for general view. Now imagine the women as they emerge from the same house a few hours later. They’re in the other Iran, the *birouni*, or ‘outside’. Their smiles become more formal, their lips dry, their eyes unwavering. If they perform a kindness, they do so ostentatiously. The *birouni* is the field of pride.

Before we got onto the bus, as we gathered by the steps of the Ghezelayagh house, we were in the *birouni*. There were greetings and tentative conversations, and the Ghezelayaghs tried gently to impress on my father their propriety, affluence and generosity. But the *birouni* is dispelled as soon as we’ve boarded and pulled away from the kerb and our guests have shut the curtains on the bus windows. That’s the moment when we all move behind the brick wall, men and women together. One by one, headscarves are removed and the women lean back familiarly to chat with their friends and relations. Every now and then, the bus lurches to one side as it negotiates a corner, and the curtains flap to reveal Tehran, the traffic cops in their green uniforms and three-day beards, the women who reject coat and scarf for the more correct chador. Here people are making do with \$100 a month, struggling to placate family, society and God. Then the curtains flap back, and we, in the *anderouni*, know nothing of all that.

Instead, we are reminded that the Iranians like to have a party. I don’t mean the sort of feverish hedonism visiting journalists document. Not booze and flesh. I mean the combination of goodwill and good music that persuades my father, in his grey pinstripe suit, to rise to his feet and put his arms out in front of him, then to hunch, rocking slightly, over the seat in front. It’s true; my father is dancing in a bus in a suburb of Tehran. From the front, near the driver, a violinist and *tombak*-player regale us with traditional wedding songs. By the time we have reached our destination, all the passengers on board have been cajoled to their feet. Nicholas. Camilla. Mr Ghezelayagh. Each to rapturous applause. The trick is to lean forward, so that you keep your balance as the bus lurches around the mountain bends, with your hands extended and your neck supple. The dancing; the mixing of the sexes – these are criminal offences, of course.

Then we’re at the little cottage built by Mr Ghezelayagh, where the family spends its weekends. It’s on a track high above the main road, snug amid the peaks and currents of cool air. There’s a main room with a view of the hillside opposite and the main road far below. A large tablecloth is spread on the floor, and it is in the preparation of this tablecloth and the objects lying on it that Bitá and Gilly and some of the other glamorous women have exhausted

themselves for the past two weeks.

Bitá and I sit on two cushions facing the tablecloth, flanked by our guests; the midday sun comes in from the far window and hits the ornate silver mirror which is flanked by ornate silver candelabra giving off inconsequential white light. There are two symmetrically placed bowls containing pomegranates and pears. In front of them, hand-embroidered pouches filled with tiny white candies, decorated with blue gauze and scraps of silk. There are eggs painted silver and gold; wheat, laid out as if on the altar at harvest festival; silver plates full of sugary goodies I've never seen before; a Koran. Bang in the middle of the tablecloth green shoots seem to grow from the floor. It's a poem of small meanings: setting down roots, constancy of purpose, tons of children.

Tea is drunk. People talk and laugh. The ceremony begins. From all sides, we feel the gaze of the Ghezelayagh family and their friends. Scattered among them: my father, Nicholas, Camilla, Rory and Christina. Amid the intensity of feeling, the rush of sunlight and the hush, I am pleased that the huddle of Englishness has been broken and its component parts have spun off on their own. Some of the guests are holding a large length of pink muslin above Bitá and me: a roof to protect our love. My mouth is hurting. Stop bloody smiling, I tell myself. It's your wedding. Concentrate on the words.

But this is no help. The words are in Arabic, for the Koran was communicated to the Prophet in that language. Bitá mutters something about not understanding what's going on at her own wedding. I direct my attention towards the ayatollah, who sits in a posture of serene discomfort, his robe out around him like a tent. My eyes rise to his eyes, then to his little mouth and his beard. He switches to Persian. He asks my future father-in-law, who is shedding large tears, whether he'll allow his daughter to marry me. I have the right to four wives. Bitá's eyebrows rise. I say *baleh*, yes.

Then there's a shower of coins and someone rubs two cones of lump sugar over our heads. We're presented with little red boxes that contain gold coins with which we're to buy a washing machine or a second-hand car.

Then Nicholas, one of his legs pulsating with nervous energy, calls for silence. We know it's not really done, speeches in the Orient, but we're English (more or less), and we're jolly well going to have speeches. Not just any old speech. Nicholas has been in touch with my old Persian tutor, and has memorised some words appropriate to the setting. '*Ezdevaj, mobadeleye del be del, va omid, omid ast*' ('marriage is the exchange of one heart for another, and hope is hope'). The Iranians reward him with whooping. Emboldened, he gives them a burst of Hafez, the best loved of all the poets. More exclamations of delight: 'Bah! Bah!'

When the applause dies down, my father calls for attention. He says some polite words about Bitā, which Mrs Ghezelayagh translates into Persian. Then, suddenly, he's talking about my mother, and it's only now, now that I'm unexpectedly going to pieces, that everything makes sense. In that excruciating public moment, the last barrier between my people and her people falls away. I look for the first time into the ornate silver mirror at the far end of the table cloth. Bitā is looking into it too.

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