

TOURAN AALAM

November 11, 1914 - June 14, 2010

or

Paris revisited



Foreword

I am not sure why I am writing this. The main reason must be as an excuse to thank my aunt Jahan¹ and my cousins Mariam, Fati and Leila one more time for having so kindly and generously contributed to my mother's expenses during the (many) last years of her life.

I went to see mother at her residence in Hotelia² Tuesday, June 8. I had a feeling it could be the last time. I sent this mail to my brother Farid a few days later:

*salam farid joon,
i went to see "maman" tuesday. she seemed ok and in a good mood although only a fading shadow of her former self.
on june 8 mother's general health was reported as ok...*

from what i gathered she now doesn't recognize anyone - or maybe slightly monjaze³. he was at hotelia the day before my visit and still regularly goes there twice or thrice a week. who would have

thought he would turn out to be her most faithful friend?

he's the one i will feel most sorry for if something happens to mother. she is still his best and probably only friend. her loss will be very difficult to bear for him.

last time when i saw them together - during now-rouz holidays it must have been - they seemed both happy and were communicating with eyes, smiles and light touches.

¹ My mother's youngest sister. She left us a few years ago. She is buried in Geneva.

² Luxurious home for the elderly in one of the most exclusive arrondissements of Paris

³ A student at the Maison de L'Iran during my mother's tenure in the late sixties and a faithful and helpful friend since

Just one week after my visit, on Tuesday, June 15 I opened my email in the morning to read the following from my cousin Mariam:

I just heard the sad news of Khaleh⁴ Touran's passing. Nader, Yasmin and I extend our deepest condolences to you and your families.

Khaleh was an extraordinary person and she played a very important role in my life for many many years. She leaves me with many souvenirs of the good times we had together and a vivid memory of her laughter, her sharp comments, her love for life, her brilliance and her energy. I will greatly miss her...

By then I was back in Tehran.

A few days later my friend Yves, in Geneva sent me the copy of the obituary notice as it appeared in Le Figaro of June 19. My brother was not among the signatories although his son Dimitry was. I knew that my sister, who organized the funeral and my brother did not get along but I did not think it would go to this extent.

The burial was set for Tuesday June 22 - always Tuesday!

I flew to Paris the day before to attend the ceremony.

Monday - The Day Before The Ceremony

I took the Austrian Airlines flight via Vienna which landed me in Paris at about 10 a.m. It was hot humid and sticky. The sky was slightly overcast with the sun filtering through; meteorologists call it "inversion." It felt heavy.

Having no luggage and the entrance formalities to Europe having been taken care of in Vienna, I was out of the airport fast. I took the Air France shuttle to l'Etoile and from there walked to the boulevard de La Tour Meaubourg to meet my old friend Bernard who was having lunch with his younger brother Régis whom I would meet for the first time.

Bernard and I had met ages ago at the Shiraz Arts Festival⁵. We have kept in touch fairly regularly since.

We had fixed to meet at a restaurant, near their apartment, on the corner of La Tour Meaubourg and St. Dominique. The place was akin to their private canteen. It was your typical Parisian café-restaurant with seating inside, on the veranda and on the sidewalk.

Arriving early, I had the opportunity of experiencing the usual Parisian waiter's "curtesy" as of day one. I now knew for sure that I was in Paris. Most garçons in Paris are as Parisians as I am from the moon but rudeness is what they must think is typically Parisian so they have embraced it first and well without taking on any of the characteristics of the true or maybe I should say, former Parisian waiter, which would be at least some style, a correct manner of speech and a sense of humor.

Although Bernard and Régis weren't that late, I thought that, I flying from Tehran to Vienna, then to Paris, then riding the bus downtown and then walking for about an hour, I still arrived first at our rendezvous. It felt like I had won a race while starting way behind; childish thought...

⁴ Aunt in Persian

⁵ Baroque, avant-garde festival held in Shiraz and Persepolis from 1967 to 1977. It was one of the contributing factors to the 1979 revolution

When Bernard and Régis arrived, I did not want to eat but I ordered french fries and green beans anyway - I avoid eating animals - just to keep them company. We had some wine which I would have also rather shunned but had a glass or two of anyway - again to keep Bernard and Régis company, I guess. It was a light fresh Rhône type, pleasantly refreshing. The “frites” were of the imported from America kind or at least they tasted so while the beans were just plain thick and mushy.

Ages ago, when I was young, you would have to really try hard to find bad food in a Parisian eating place; now its the opposite: you're lucky if its edible.

After lunch, I walked to the new and glittering Apple Store. It's a monument. It's even more crowded than tourist attractions in Paris usually are. In that respect it's almost as bad as the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre which is next to it.

I thought I would leave any eventual Apple shopping to the Geneva store which is less hectic. The Paris Apple Store, in the Carrousel du Louvre though, is worth a visit for its own sake; as a modern monument. It's at least as impressive as the famous and much written and talked about “Pyramide du Louvre” just above it.

Then I walked and walked like in a daydream. I must have wandered a good four or five hours in grayish Paris streets without any thought that I can recall.

I finally settled in the hotel Méderic on its namesake street, not too far from where our apartment used to be on one of the alleys of the Parc Monceau and practically next to Hotelia where my mother had stayed the last years of her life.

Tuesday - The Day of The Ceremony

I woke up late, settled the hotel - they were fully booked the next day - and started walking again, as usual with my rucksack, containing my Macbook Pro, iPad, iPhone, iPod and yes, a spare shirt and a few odds and ends too. I must have had a cup or two of coffee on the way to the Hôpital Bichat⁶ were we were supposed to take delivery of the corpse and take it to the Russian Cemetery in Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois, about 40 km. from Paris not far from where my brother Farid lives.

Most of our family and some of our friends living in Paris came. The ceremony was short. The atmosphere was as thick as the weather. Condolences, a few “hello, how are you?”, coffee or sodas from a vending machine, a speech and prayers by a priest that had not bothered to wear a cassock. It is a new fashion, I think; ambassadors in Tehran also come to dinner parties attired like teenagers attending a neighborhood rally.

Off we were to Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois.

More people came here than to the hospital. It's a beautiful cemetery with a charming and still active chapel. Many, including my brother Farid and his wife Yvonne, came here directly. As mournful as a burial may be the atmosphere was not at all as macabre as in the hospital. We placed mother down in the same family crypt were my father has been laying since 1981.

⁶ Near the Marché aux Puces

Even in these sad circumstances it was droll to imagine what he would say seeing “Touranchik” as he used to call her the rare times that they were in good terms, back after almost 30 years of having been left in peace, alone.

The ceremony was fairly short; a few macarons⁷ were served, I think, and off we were back to Paris.

I took a ride with my cousins Nilou and Bijan.

Nilou and I get along since childhood. We used to live close to each other in Tehran. I often went to aunt Mansoureh’s - Nilou’s mother - to visit. They had a big living room, a small swimming pool that froze enough during the winter so that we could walk and slide on it and Nilou of course had lots of toys brought from “Farang.”⁸

I have less history with Bijan because he used to live in Switzerland and also because he was subconsciously classified as an “older cousin;” being 7, 8 years older, he was almost an adult while we were still children. Bijan is a somewhat formal. His younger brother Feri⁹, who was my best friend and sports partner was more “my type.” Still, I appreciate Bijan and try to see him when I am in Paris.

Having dropped-off Bijan who had an appointment, Nilou and I stopped to have drinks at a café. I think it was close to the the Boulevard Raspail but I am not sure; I did not pay attention. We reminisced old family stories and anecdotes generously sprinkled with glasses of “Kir Royal” and cigarettes for Nilou. Mainly, we gossiped. After an hour or two we kissed and parted ways. I felt good having spent some tete-a-tete time with her.

Then it was walking again. This time to the avenue Montaigne where I was to have dinner with my Brazilo-Franco-Dutch, living in London, friend John and his German wife, Brita.

They habitually stay at the Plaza Athenée¹⁰ when they come to Paris.

Again, I arrived at our rendezvous a little early.

The only place that’s worth going to in the Plaza is the area with the magnificent bar sandblasted to resemble an iceberg reigning in the middle of it. “Closed, reserved for a private party” a hotel staffer told me. How the hotel’s management got away with their patrons, I don’t know.

I settled for the gallery leading to the temporarily off-limits bar. Its as pleasant as a railroad station hall. Waiting for John and then having a drink with him waiting for Brita, I had plenty of time to observe the scene: Attractive and very tall East-European type girls passed by, catwalking in front of us, alone or accompanied by mostly balding fat men. They were on their way to “the private party.”

The Plaza Athenée has become a true symbol of today’s Paris: It clings to its past, faded glory as best as it can but the spirit is not there. A couple of years back I went - by force - to “La Coupole”¹¹. It was even more of a disaster.

⁷ Small, round French confectionary. Some think it was brought to France from Italy by Catherine de Medici

⁸ Colloquial Persian word referring to Europe and often France.

⁹ Feri died of cancer about 10 years ago

¹⁰ Famous Parisian Palace. Popular with rich Iranians, among others

¹¹ Mythical Montparnasse restaurant. It was at its peak during “les années folles” (1920-1929) but still ok till the seventies. It is now “un piège à touristes.” Actually it opened in 1927 so there were only 2 years of “les années folles” but by extension they go till at least 1939

Brita, John and I had dinner in a Moroccan restaurant nearby. North African food being bland there is not much to be said about the restaurant other than to say that John and Brita liked it. I didn't have appetite.

When we parted I walked, but not far, again to the avenue de La Tour Meaumont, across the river to have a nightcap with Bernard at a café close to his place. Fortunately their official canteen was closed.

Bernard must have felt that the last thing I wanted to do at 1 a.m. was to go to a hotel just for a few hours so he invited me to his place and I ended up spending the night on his couch. It reminded me of "the good old days" when we stayed here and there.

Wednesday - Leaving Paris

I woke up at dawn to take the metro to the Gare de Lyon. When I got to the La Tour Meaumont station there was no one to sell me a ticket so the guard had to open the gate and I got to ride for free. He had the nerve to ask me to go out of my way to purchase a ticket upon arrival; my honesty having limits, I did not.

Most things usually being affected by some strike or simply not working in Paris, sometime have a good side to them!

At the Gare de Lyon it was the same story. The "Train Bleu"¹² was closed and when at the café below it, I asked the waitress if they had a wireless network. She said "yes but it works sometimes and others it doesn't." I replied "in this case you might as well say it doesn't" and so it was.

Then I went to purchase my TGV¹³ ticket. The new French, in this case a North African lady was nice. She asked me when I would come back to Paris and I said "Le plus tard possible. It's not a place for simple peasants from the mountains like me," I said, referring to Chésier¹⁴ I guess. She smiled knowing I didn't really mean it.

I thought to myself: "after all it's your birthplace, you still have some family and a few friends there. And as unbearable as Paris has become it still has retained its architectural beauty."

On the TGV, I was glad to be on my way to our village in Switzerland where I feel much more at home.

Switzerland

Upon arrival in Geneva, I went directly to lunch with my friends Yves and Emmanuel to the very pleasant Tennis Club des Eaux Vives open air restaurant above the lake. It was a clear and warm summer day; ideal for an outdoors lunch.

In the evening I took the train to Chésier.

¹² It has retained some of the glory of "Le Buffet de la Gare de Lyon" its former name but again, the heart is not there

¹³ Train à Grande Vitesse

¹⁴ "Our village" in Switzerland. It is before the bridge to Villars s/Ollon

At our apartment I did not bother to open the blinds nor did I buy any food, nor did I drive. The weather was perfect. One day the temperature even hit 30° in the nearby Valais, where I had gone to see a Nicolas de Staël¹⁵ painting exhibition.

I mainly rode my motorcycle, visited friends all the way to Geneva and swam in the still cold Lac Lemman at Emmanuel's beautiful "les pieds dans l'eau"¹⁶ place in La Tour de Peilz.



View from La Becque (La Tour de Peilz)

Strangely enough, I enjoyed the trip visiting friends, riding my bike and just being alone.

I returned to Tehran with the project of preparing my mother's fortieth day ceremony which is traditionally mourned in Iran.

¹⁵ French painter of Russian origin 1914 - 1955

¹⁶ I prefer the French expression "les pieds dans l'eau" which is more descriptive than the accepted English translation waterfront