

Letter from



Nov. 25, 2008

Having just graduated from the **Notre Dame** American High School of Rome in June 1967, September of the same year was my first trip to America. The senior year at **Notre Dame** was one of my few successful academic years, so its difficult to let it go uncovered. Coming from the **Lycée Chateaubriand**¹ which I had to leave because of tragi-comedy adventure², I covered the junior and senior year in one go. American high schools being at a much lower academic level than the French lycées, it was practically a free ride, but still. I went from Rome to Austin, Texas to study, of all things physics, at **St Edward's University** which was a medium size catholic university whose claim to fame was its association with a famous also catholic university, **Notre Dame**. The Indiana university had a high academic reputation but in those years was celebrated by my peers for a much more important reason namely its football team³ being # 1 in the nation - God acts in mysterious ways since **Notre Dame** being a comparatively small university, it was not logical for its football team to be that good.

"This opiate for the masses"⁴, American football was and remains a puzzle to me.

Flying from Rome to Austin with TWA⁵ for the first time at age eighteen, was as exotic an experience as if I were going to the moon. Landing at the Dallas / Fort Worth airport, my first outlandish experience was funnily similar to one astronauts were confronted with: restrooms. Not being familiar with the word and the American liking for euphemisms, I thought at first that they were just a resting area or what one would call lounges today!

I would later have many further minor cultural "shocks" but at the end, contrary to most of my compatriots, America left me fairly indifferent; I neither loved it nor hated it.

I liked jazz concerts and 100% black jazz clubs which gave me even more pleasure if I went accompanied by a pretty, sexy and preferably platinum blonde girl. Blacks really appreciated seeing a young white couple so fond of their music to come to a place where most other Caucasians did not dare to even get close to. I often went to an old concert hall on Charles Street in Baltimore called **The Famous Ballroom** which I enjoyed very much. It was way past its prime. You could bring your own booze - hidden in brown bags⁶, of course; the ballroom provided soft drinks, ice, snacks and most important the great music. You could even dance between the big round wooden tables and in front of the stage if you wanted to - many did.

¹ The French government school in Rome.

² With 3 schoolmates we painted what we thought were "pretty" pics on the one way road towards the school and on the walls the night before the graduation ceremonies day. One of us got caught.

³ "Notre Dame Fighting Irish".

⁴ "tuesdays with Morrie" / Mitch Albom ("tuesdays" is not capitalized in the original book title).

⁵ Trans World Airlines has been so long out of business that the name of a very ordinary airline now has an exotic ring to it.

⁶ American version of Hejab?

I saw several great jazz musicians there but can only remember **Dizzy Gillespie** and **Rahsaan Roland Kirk** now which is not surprising since by the end of the concert I, along with most of the audience, must have been pretty high.

In those days the term “nigger” was already a no-no except among blacks who often used it between themselves. I was proud to be one of the very few whites - the only one that I know of - that used the word with one of my black friends. He accepted it from me while he might have knifed another one for it. He returned the compliment by addressing me by the same epithet. It brought us closer, a good feeling.

There were many great rock concerts. The greatest was the open air **Doors** concert in Columbia, Md. **Jim Morrison** half naked dragged “**This Is The End**” for what seemed an eternity that no one, especially himself, wanted to end. Truth be told there are many fond memories from America but none were strong enough to make me want to stay there.

Having spent the night in Dallas at the airline’s expense, I reached Austin sometime before noon or early in the afternoon the next day. My main and most obviously peculiar luggage were my 210 cm long Kneissel White Star skis, in their blue zipped canvass cover which I was very proud of. I had a hard time skiing with them because they were way too long but they were in fashion. It was the time of long skis for the pros which all of us aspired at least in our imaginary world to become and were prepared to suffer for.

In a way I was unknowingly already in tune with America. It was the days of big cars and “the bigger the burger the better the burger” type of advertisements, zillions of Mc Donald hamburgers sold if put in line would get you to the moon and back... and of course coffee cups the size of buckets - they still are, etc...

The skis turned out to be useless except to give me some prestige among a few Texas redneck schoolmates who thought the canvass cover was protecting guns! On second thought the skis or at least their cover did accomplish their mission.

It was the beginning of the drugs and hippies scene. The times of:

- Woodstock, The Doors, Janis Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, John Coltrane and still Elvis...
- The assassination of Robert Kennedy, Chappaquiddick⁷, Martin Luther King, The Black Panthers, Nixon and even Spiro Agnew.
- The Vietnam war, protests in Washington, DC, etc...

I still remember the focal point of the demonstrations which was Dupont Circle near Georgetown.

- AND of course landing on the moon.

I didn’t think much of all that in those days but in retrospect certainly a historic and creative period in music, arts and sciences.

⁷ See Edward Kennedy.

I was lost in the middle of this turmoil, immersed in the tide, participating in marches and experimenting with drugs but since I was going to school and working⁸ on weekends, I did not get fully involved with either and stayed at an amateurish level in both.

I tried most, if not all the non-intravenous drugs a few times.

As usual with me, it was not the drugs themselves that bothered me so much but that you sort of had to be in them to be "IN". Americans and others to a lesser extent try to be IN at all costs; I try to be OUT, maybe unconsciously hoping that going full circle will bring me, in my own way, even more IN!

Except for some summer vacations when I came back to Paris and Switzerland where our family was living at the time, I stayed in the US till completing my studies in December 1971⁹.

Then I came back to Tehran for a few months. I stayed at one of my aunts whom I loved very much. It was spring of 1971, I think. She was dying of cancer.

I of course used to see her as a child in Tehran at her house and at family gatherings - our extended family: spouses, children, family friends and entourage gathered every Friday at my grandmother's. Later on in Geneva and Paris and maybe also Rome when we were living there. Many years on, when she was already in very poor health in America where she came to undergo treatment at a famous cancer center in New York. I remember it was on one of the avenues on the way to Harlem.

Homa was one of those rare people who are gifted in many ways: beautiful, elegant, intelligent, witty, very classy in the good sense of the word and at the same time simple, unpretentious and kind, in one word noble. Coming from a prominent family and having married first a prince and then a successful entrepreneur she was even wealthy and enjoyed a leisurely and glamorous life.

As I discovered during her illness she was much more: courageous and altruistic. Along with her voice with a slightly stuttered speech, smile and natural elegance these are the qualities I remember most vividly after almost forty years.

I went back to the US one last time to "catch" her before she died but I was late by a day or two and sadly only got to see her in the morgue. She was in her early forties.

She used to repeat the Iranian saying "it is better to live the breadth of life than its length" and so it was for her.

For our family her death was comparable to 9/11.

⁸ I had left Texas and was now going to college in Baltimore. I worked weekends in a Restaurant and Disco in Georgetown. I even had a short spell as cab driver but that didn't last very long since the day even then had only 24 hours.

⁹ I had to come back later in June for the graduation ceremony but I had my credits in by December.

I forgot about the US for a very long time, till the year 1995 when I returned with my wife Nini for a family and friends visit. Even that now seems to be ages ago. I returned for the same purpose again in 2000, 2007 and just recently in 2008. I am planning to continue these short yearly visits until 2015 when I will be 66. Then I thought it would be fun to take at least a month off go to the USA and ride the **Route 66**¹⁰ from Chicago to Los Angeles on motorcycle with a few friends. Let's see...

The main purpose of my trips to America is to see my uncle Majid A. He lives in La Jolla near San Diego. He turned 90 in October.

This time I had planned a big birthday party for him with family and friends but unfortunately it did not work out and with my only five nights in America, I even did not manage to go and see him. So much for my plans.

My only excuse is that after many back and forth emails with my friend Shahriar K¹¹ who happens to live in San Diego not far from my uncle and my hopes of seeing my uncle and him at our party, I just did not manage to fit in an extra day to go to La Jolla. I thought that with me having flown halfway around the world, they could have taken the fairly short drive to LA - they didn't. In Persian we say "ghesmat nabood" which is similar to "it was not in the cards"; next time, inshallah...

Nini has three sisters and one brother living in LA / Beverly Hills. They all work and have been US citizens¹² for some years already. Such is the prestige of a green card¹³ let alone a US passport among Iranians still in the old country that unless you are hopelessly poor and old you can be a prime candidate to marry a pretty, young and willing to be imported Iranian girl. Kami¹⁴, what are you waiting for?

In Beverly Hills, we spend most of our time with Nini's younger sister, Ellas. Most of her "entourage" are Jewish Iranian-Americans whom I have learnt to appreciate very much. What I like most about them is their friendliness, hospitality and attachment to their Iranian heritage. The richest one gave Nini and I a ride back from the restaurant where we were her guests in her new Bentley; I think she knew the little boy in me would enjoy it.

"Rich people are the same as poor people, they just have more money"¹⁵ in this case also nicer cars!

We see them only when we go to America still, they make us feel as welcome as if we were relatives. I am told that in a way us Iranians are somehow cousins with the Jewish people with whom we share a long common history in the same part of the world. It must be true since I felt closer than that even-though politically I am more on the Palestinian side, but that's another story...

¹⁰ As the song by Bobby Troup goes: *If you ever plan to motor west travel my way, the highway that's the best. Get your kicks on Route 66!*

¹¹ I had "appointed" him to help me organize the event.

¹² It is convenient if you live there. It is also a status symbol for most Iranian émigrés!

¹³ Residence permit.

¹⁴ Nini's younger brother.

¹⁵ Cahiers / Vaslav Nijinski.

To be able to see as many of our friends as possible in the short time we stay in America, Nini and I usually throw a party. This trip, it was at our hotel, the Mosaic in Beverly Hills.

The service at the Mosaic is friendly and efficient. Everything else is at an acceptable level or above. The location is superb; right in the middle of Beverly Hills but slightly off the main thoroughfares thus remaining quiet and free of traffic.

If you stay in and around¹⁶ Beverly Hills they have a courtesy limousine service (a normal Mercedes not the usual wagons common in LA) with a friendly driver which is great. If you are just a little sports inclined you can borrow or rent a bike as I did to complement it. With this combination you should be well set and need a ride with friends only for evening outings to Santa Monica or some other far away place.

The hotel staff managed our party well. We had the bar and lobby to ourselves. For Nini and especially me with my only five nights in the US, it was great to be able to gather our friends in one place.

I returned to Tehran the next day thinking America hasn't changed much in 40 years. It has only become a lesser¹⁷ version of its former self.

Nini stayed another two weeks.

On the flight back, I thought that Beverly Hills is definitely a pleasant place to visit once a year.

Links

[Lycée Chateaubriand](#)
[St. Edward's University](#)
[Woodstock](#)
[Dupont Circle](#)
[Georgetown](#)
[Mosaic Hotel](#)

J-M Houtcieff

Thank you

Masoud G and Fred G for proofreading and editing.



Nini & I with my uncle Majid and his daughter Marjan in La Jolla 2007

¹⁶ Americans with their usual euphemisms call it "adjacent".

¹⁷ Since going to "print", Barak Hossein Obama is the new president, thus recent opinions about America must be reviewed.