

# I

## A Curious Invitation

**I**N THE FIRST week of December 2011, in London, I was approached by a stranger with a proposition that would eventually lead me on a journey of thousands of miles to a land of secrets, fear and an irrepressible lust for life.

The incident occurred in the exclusive district of Kensington – not an area I frequent often, but I had a lunch date nearby and with a few other errands to do, I rode my motorcycle into town and parked in a bike bay in the consular district, close to the Royal Albert Hall and Hyde Park. Above me, the spectrum of embassy flags brightened the wintry sky while around me a glossy stream of diplomatic cars slid in and out of coveted parking spaces. But on that day there was one embassy that definitely wasn't open for business, although its green, white and red flag still hung limply above its locked doors. Black-clad figures in bulletproof vests stood guard, silhouetted against the white stucco building, but there was nothing to see here. Everyone at the Embassy for the Islamic Republic of Iran had gone home – not to their diplomatic London residences but all the way home: 4,000 miles away, to Tehran.

A few days earlier, on the 29 November, the British Embassy in Tehran had been stormed and set on fire in a protest over sanctions imposed by the British government. Hundreds of protestors had scaled the walls, ransacked the buildings and thrown firebombs into the embassy compound. The British staff were commanded to leave Iran and two days later William Hague, then Foreign Secretary, took his revenge, ordering the closure of the Iranian

Embassy in London and expelling its staff from Britain, giving them forty-eight hours to leave the country. All diplomatic and financial relations between the two countries were severed with immediate effect. The British papers featured images of angry, bearded men in Tehran burning the Union Jack; solemn newscasters delivered fear-laden prophecies and the Foreign Office declared Iran unsafe for travel. The ever torrid Anglo-Iranian relationship had hit an all-time low, with accusations that the Tehran protest had occurred with the tacit support of the Iranian authorities.

I had followed the story with the curiosity of a traveller who keeps an interested eye on world affairs. Iran featured somewhere on my to-do list and I was acquainted with a few British Iranians in London, but that was about the extent of my involvement. Or at least it was until I returned to my bike after lunch and found a handwritten note tucked behind the speedo. It was in English, in an untidy script, from someone called Habib.

I didn't know anyone called Habib and, judging by his opening line, he didn't know me either. But he had an invitation for me, or was it a challenge?

*Dear Sir.*

*I have seen your motorbike and I think that you have travelled to many countries. But I wonder, have you been to my country? That is Iran. It is very beautiful and the Persian people are the most welcoming in the world. Please do not think of what has happened here and in Tehran. These are our governments, not the Iranian people. WE ARE NOT TERRORISTS! I wish that you will visit Iran so you will see for yourself about my country. WE ARE NOT TERRORISTS!!! Please come to my city, Shiraz. It is very famous as the friendliest city in Iran, it is the city of poetry and gardens and wine!!!*

*Your Persian friend,  
Habib*

It wasn't so unusual to find a note on the bike. Riding in London you get to recognise certain motorcycles and in the small community of overland riders it is not uncommon to know someone's bike by sight, whether or not you are acquainted with the owner, and to make comradely contact. Mine had all the identifying marks of a well-travelled machine – large capacity 'desert' tank, sheepskin seat, scruffy panniers, a few foreign stickers and a general tatty, battered appearance, not to mention an oil leak that was currently soiling the streets of SW7. For a fellow motorcycle traveller to say hello in this way wouldn't be considered strange. But the mysterious Habib made no reference to his own motorcycle travels or ownership. I wondered if he was a member of the embassy staff, but as far as I knew they had all been bundled on to a hastily chartered Iran Air flight out of Heathrow a few days ago. Maybe he was just a regular Iranian living in London, distressed at the recent bust-up between his homeland and his adopted country. Although there was no official 'Persian quarter' in London, there were plenty of Iranians in this part of town, where those with the necessary funds had settled after fleeing the Islamic Revolution of 1979. They tended to be of the well-heeled brigade, more likely to inhabit the high-end boutiques and restaurants of Knightsbridge and Kensington than to be found sticking notes on random ratty motorcycles.

The discovery of this message added a certain air of mystery to an otherwise routine day. I enjoyed the oddness of it and told a few friends about it over the next few days; just another funny tale of biking in London. And maybe that would have been the end of the story if the newspapers and radio hadn't still been full of angry rhetoric about Habib's homeland. His note didn't just disappear into my 'peculiar incidents' file; his words kept coming back to me whenever I heard a politician denouncing Iran on the news or referencing George Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech. What kind of man would be so distressed at how his home country is perceived as to make a written plea to a complete stranger to seek

out the truth? Did he do this all the time? Was he an overzealous employee of the Iranian tourist board? Was there even such a thing as the Iranian tourist board? So many questions. All unanswered, and, it seemed, unanswerable.

Meanwhile, the UK was still reeling from the protests in Tehran and its subsequent tit-for-tat actions. 'A poll reveals the majority of British people believe Iran to be a negative influence and support military force to prevent their development of nuclear weapons,' declared the BBC World Service one morning.

The presenter didn't bother explaining why we all believed this; the reasons were taken as read. Somehow, our little island had reached the point where we considered Iran to be our greatest enemy and a genuine threat to civilisation. No wonder Habib had taken to writing messages to strangers. How else could he make his point? I began to acquire a sneaking respect for his grassroots approach to international relations. If you can't make the people at the top talk sense, then spread the word on the street.

Habib had me intrigued, and my growing interest saw me lurching between chilling reports of torture and executions, and alluring tales of an ancient, sophisticated civilisation. As Habib pointed out in his note, and as common sense will tell you, the citizens of a country and their government are two entirely separate entities. After all, I wouldn't want a foreign visitor to Britain to associate me with my government. Why should it be different anywhere else? But, countered my inner doom-monger, maybe Iran was different; maybe it really was that bad. I didn't know what to believe.

This turn of events forced me to admit that, like most Brits, my impressions of contemporary Iran came entirely from the British and US media – and it wasn't pretty. A sinister mash-up of rogue nuclear physicists, inflammatory rants at the UN, women being lashed for adultery, chart-topping numbers of executions; the horrors of Iran seemed endless. The current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was not helping the cause; he seemed

intent on furthering Iran's pariah status with his outlandish statements on topics ranging from homosexuality in Iran (it doesn't exist), to the Holocaust (it didn't happen), memorably dismissing the crippling US sanctions as being 'annoying, like used tissues' and even supporting a fatwa against the wearing of ties – a symbol of western decadence, apparently. The British and US media lapped it all up; Ahmadinejad made for tasty headlines – there were even allegations that he had been involved in the taking of American hostages in the 1979 US Embassy crisis. Whether this was true or not, it further compounded the image of Iran the western media liked to project – a bunch of ranting religious lunatics that needed to be kept on a tight leash.

But as I dug a little deeper, seeking out reports from less mainstream sources and asking British-Iranian acquaintances about their families and backgrounds, I found there was another, quieter story to be told – a story far removed from the shouty business of international politics, sanctions and religious fundamentalists. There were tales of Iranian artists and film-makers making a stand, underground musicians and bands putting on illegal gigs, activist poets and lawyers risking their lives, and young sportswomen standing up to the regime – stories on a human scale that offered a glow of hope and a whiff of intrigue. The internet, although strictly monitored and painfully slow, had brought the world to the youth of Iran via illegal private networks. Unsurprisingly, they liked what they saw and wanted to be part of it. The sealed-off world of the Islamic Republic could reign supreme when the only information was via state-controlled media, but here was a new threat. With a vast youth population – the result of Ayatollah Khomeini's state-sponsored baby boom in the early years of the revolution – the kids of the 1980s had come of age in the internet era and were not impressed with the restrictions imposed on their lives. Unlike their parents, this was not what they had signed up for.

The more I researched, the more fascinated I became – and the

more convinced I was that the only thing to do was to go and see Iran for myself. In London, the opinions on the ground were as you would expect. Iran was a dangerous destination, especially for female westerners, a view that was compounded by the official Foreign Office advice, which coloured the whole country in no-go red. Very occasionally, on the underground telegraph of overland travellers I would hear real-world reports from a few rare folk who had actually been to Iran, and the message was quite different. 'The Iranians are so kind and hospitable,' they would say, echoing Habib's words. 'It was my favourite country, the people are fantastic.'

But their travels had mostly been transient, a few days passing through on their way from Europe to India or the Far East. I never met anyone who had been to Shiraz, so they couldn't testify to Habib's claims about his home town and, although endearing, I suspected his statement had been fuelled by nothing more tangible than homesickness and patriotism.

But what did any of us in the UK really know for sure about life in Iran nowadays? There was a time when Britain and Iran had been inextricably linked, but the era of real British involvement in Iran's business was long gone, and the relationship could not be said to have ended happily. In my lifetime alone there had been numerous diplomatic spats, with our respective embassies being attacked, opened and closed, ambassadors being expelled back and forth, not to mention the infamous Salman Rushdie fatwa in 1989. But it went way back before that, most significantly, to the beginning of the twentieth century when Britain had taken control of Iran's oil. Even that wasn't the start of it; the British influence, or some would say, interference, dated back to nineteenth-century Persia. And in recent years Tony Blair had hardly helped, with his constant Iran fear-mongering. *I see the impact and influence of Iran everywhere*, I remembered him saying, his glassy, maniacal eyes staring out from behind a lectern at some international summit. Really, it was no wonder it was hard to get a visa.

For most of my lifetime Iran had been closed to the world. Over thirty years had passed since the 1979 revolution, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had returned to Iran from exile and successfully overthrown the Shah, who was viewed as a puppet of the West. The Iranians had had enough of the Shah's excesses and brutality, and welcomed their new leader with open arms. Khomeini had turned plain ol' Iran into The Islamic Republic Of, had cut all ties with 'Great Satan' and 'Little Satan' – his names for the USA and Britain – and, unsurprisingly, the 'Visit Iran' ad campaigns had been a bit thin on the ground ever since. In my lifetime this ancient civilisation had become a mystery, our knowledge based on whispers and propaganda.

I had made my decision. I would take up what I had now termed the 'Habib Challenge' – I would travel to Iran on my motorcycle and have a look for myself. Destination, Shiraz, supposedly the friendliest city in the world's unfriendliest country. I would travel alone, not with the entourage of a guided tour, or as a journalist with a suspicion-arousing press pass, but just as me, a regular Brit, talking to regular Iranians. As a freelance travel writer, this was my preferred *modus operandi* – getting on the ground, to the heart of the action, making myself open to whatever came my way. My many thousands of miles on the road over the years had shown me that the combination of autonomy and vulnerability that is to be found by travelling alone on a motorcycle is the best way to achieve this kind of intense immersion. I wanted to know where the myths and the truth overlapped and, most of all, I had to admit that I had my own ingrained prejudices and fears about Iran that would benefit from a reality check.

Naturally, the naysayers were out in force when I announced my plans. It was hard to ignore them, despite knowing from my previous travels that what you see on the news isn't what you get on the ground. In my darker moments I got sucked in by the doom merchants and fully expected to be arrested and banged up by Iran's infamous 'morality police' upon arrival. After all, here

I was, a British female, with no religion and a fondness for gin and tonic, heading alone into an Islamic theocracy on a motorcycle, an illegal form of transport for Iranian women. It was hard to find anyone in the wider world who thought it was a good idea, but I did find approval close to home; my mum and my husband were right behind it. Mum had spent time as an international observer in Palestine, where she had acquired an interest in Islamic cultures and was currently learning Arabic. Her interest extended to all things Middle Eastern, and I think she was hoping I would bring her back a nice Persian carpet. My husband, Austin, as a fellow motorcycle world traveller, is a fervent supporter of my adventures, and his gung-ho approach to just about everything is one of his many endearing traits. At our wedding, back in 2005, we had persuaded the registrar to let us write our own vows. When we had exchanged rings and made the standard pledges of love, respect and friendship, the registrar had solemnly read to each of us in turn our own home-made one: 'Do you promise to embark on a life together of hair-brained schemes, crackpot plans and ill-thought-through adventures?' To which we had both replied, equally solemnly: 'I do.' It looked as though the time had come, once again, for Austin to let me come good on that promise.

Whenever I felt a bit wobbly, I also took inspiration from Freya Stark – the British explorer and author who had spent much of her life in the Middle East – and particularly from her adventurous travels in what was then Persia during the 1930s. Outspoken, wilful and not in the slightest bit concerned about doing things by the book, she had trekked through remote and dangerous terrain to map uncharted territory, often tackling hostile and doubting locals, battling serious diseases and regularly riling the British establishment, who disapproved of her unscientific, maverick approach to expeditions. A fluent speaker of Persian and Arabic, she immersed herself with the natives in a way that was considered distasteful by British society of the time, and wrote several brilliant and entertaining books about her adventures, which were hailed



as instant classics. Her gung-ho approach meant that she was always ready to throw herself into the thick of the action with an exuberance not normally associated with the rather serious geographical expeditions of the era. I admired her rebellious spirit and the way she embraced indecision, solitude and vulnerability as well as risk and her fellow humans. Most of all, I liked that she was entirely unpretentious about the motivation behind her unconventional lifestyle: 'For my own part I travel single-mindedly for fun.'

But Freya Stark's snappy quotes and tales of derring-do could only get me so far. I lived in very different times. Her Iran had been wilder in some ways, but it had also been under the control of Reza Shah, who was actively modernising the country, while the British presence was still powerful, running Iran's oil industry as well as the railways and telecommunications. The ayatollahs of the twenty-first century wouldn't have had much truck with Miss Stark, and I doubted they would think much of me and my motor-bike. At night I would lie awake and wonder if I was making a terrible mistake, if this was one adventure too far. It wasn't as if I hadn't done this kind of thing before; in the last decade I had motorcycled the length of North and South America solo, and also through Africa, riding from London to Cape Town via the Muslim countries of North Africa, so I had some idea of what I was getting into. And I knew from past experience that there is a certain kind of person who likes nothing more than to predict a grisly outcome. But something about Iran brought out a different kind of response, even in people I considered worldly and open-minded. This time it wasn't the usual concerns of 'What happens if you break down in the middle of nowhere?' or 'What will you do if you crash and break your leg?' It was all about the locals, and primarily the men, and what they were going to do to me.

I had to admit that I was not immune to the insidious drip-feed of anti-Iranian, anti-Islam sentiments that had entered our collective consciousness over the years, and I couldn't always

shrug off the concerns of the naysayers. This journey would be more than just an interesting road trip around a foreign country; it would be a painful test of some of my own deeply entrenched fears and opinions, the ones to which I didn't really like to admit. But if fear is a product of ignorance, then that in itself was a reason to go.

So I monitored the political situation over the next year, watching and waiting for news of the embassies reopening. But the freeze never thawed and Ahmadinejad continued to stir up trouble, so in 2013 I decided that hanging around for politicians to cosy up to each other was a mug's game. Would there ever be a 'good time', according to the Foreign Office, for a solo British woman to ride a motorcycle around Iran? Probably not. I took the plunge and applied for a visa.

With no functioning embassy or consular services in London, I employed the services of a specialist visa agent, a brilliantly efficient Lebanese woman. By coincidence, she had recently learned to ride a motorcycle, and therefore thought my idea of a solo bike trip around Iran was a great idea. It was refreshing to finally receive some positive encouragement, but it was soon countered during the second stage of the process – by the man behind the counter in Snappy Snaps who took the photo for my application.

'Iran?' he said, aghast. 'What d'you wanna go there for?' It was becoming something of a mantra. 'Well, whatever floats your boat,' he continued, not waiting for an answer and shaking his head. Then he read me the rules: three concepts that were all entirely alien to me. 'Right, you'll need your hair covered, no make-up and don't smile.'

The resulting photo may not have been my first choice for an online dating profile pic but, I decided with an objective eye, it was perfect for cosying up to an Iranian bureaucrat. With my bare, unsmiling face and tightly wrapped headscarf, I felt like a poster girl for female oppression. I sent it off along with a carefully

constructed application and a large amount of money. But despite my best efforts to appear a reputable and unthreatening tourist, my application was returned a few weeks later with a request for further information. I had been singled out for some suspicious questioning by the Iranian authorities: What was the purpose of my journey? What did I do for a living? By what means was I travelling? I gave some creative responses that I hoped chimed with the ideals of the Islamic Republic, and waited.

Life went on hold. I couldn't make any plans. I was twitchy with nerves and sometimes, in the middle of the night, I secretly hoped my application would be rejected. After about two weeks the call finally came from the visa agent. This was it. My fate would be sealed: was I going to Iran or not?

Her voice was upbeat. 'The good news is that they have approved your visa, but . . .'

I held my breath. That 'but' didn't bode well.

'The bad news is that it has only been granted on the condition that you travel by public transport. They won't let you enter Iran with your own vehicle.'

A muddle of emotions was already coursing through me: excitement, fear, relief. And now, frustration. This news was a major blow. The autonomy afforded by having my own wheels was crucial to my plan.

'You mean I can't go on my bike? Does it mean I have to fly there? And travel by train or bus or . . .? What do they mean exactly?'

She interrupted my protestations. 'You know what? I've never heard of this happening before. They haven't given a reason, but to be honest, I don't think there will be anything actually written on your visa to enforce this rule. Maybe you could put your bike on a train or a truck in Turkey, just to get over the border? Once you're in Iran I'm sure you'll be fine to travel around on your bike.'

'Really? You think I can get away with it?' It seemed sketchy as hell, but I liked this woman's gung-ho style.

‘Obviously I can’t give you the official go-ahead to do this, but from what I know of the system, I don’t think they will have this level of detail at the border post, so I don’t think you will get challenged.’

‘So you think I should just set off on my bike and wing it?’

This was all beginning to sound slightly weird, a bit risky and hugely exciting. I gave a thought to Freya Stark. I knew exactly what she would have done in this situation. My visa lady was speaking again and it seemed as though she too was channelling Freya Stark’s ghost.

‘Obviously, there’s a risk and the decision is up to you, but my unofficial advice would be to give it a go.’

That was all I needed to hear.