

The News International

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Tehran or bust

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

I woke up early this past Monday morning and sat down to read the newspapers only to be greeted by an ominous and worrying headline: "Israel plans nuclear strike on Iran". It was worrying for many reasons; first of all because the unrelentingly belligerent Israeli government is said to be mulling over plans to send laser guided bombs, followed by your conventional nuclear warheads, into the country west of our border and secondly because I am supposed to be travelling to that country west of our border rather soon. Israeli government spokespeople refused to comment on the story printed in England's Sunday Times while Iranian officials made sure the Zionist state was aware that they would rue the day they messed with Iran. Good planning Fati, said friends bemused at my serendipitous bad timing, where are you planning on going next -- Mosul? Mogadishu? Not enough action for you here in Karachi?

Very funny.

I had, along with my editor, been planning a trip to Iran for three months now. In October I poured over any and every book I could get my hands on earmarking pages and underlining passages. I read good books on Iran --Shirin Ebadi's biography, Marjane Satrapi's graphic novels, and Hamid Dabashi's work on Iranian cinema were my favorites. I also read some bad books on Iran, Afar Nafisi's 'Reading Lolita in Tehran' being at the top of that list.

In November I filled out a visa form and giddily answered the business or pleasure section: neither! Journalism! My enthusiasm was not matched a hundred per cent. Journalism you say, ah, we'll see...

It took me almost two months to get a visa. Though the people at the Iranian consulate were exceedingly kind, helpful, and patient with me (I ask a lot of questions, my editor will confirm this) there were a few instances when I wished I had just answered pleasure. A fact checking phone call with a visa official in December was one of those moments. "Who will you be writing for?" I was asked. "The News and Daily Jang". "How long have you been writing for them?" "Since July" I answered, again chipper. "And what is your media experience?" I paused for a moment. My media experience? I wanted to say that I'm a big fan and read up to five newspapers a day along with following regular TV broadcasts but wisely didn't. "I have been writing a weekly column for several months now and my articles from Lebanon, where I covered the recent Israeli invasion this past summer, were picked up by a variety of

English, Urdu, and Sindhi papers," I replied. No answer from the other side, I could hear him breathing. "And I have published two books, one of which was released just months ago and is printed in both English and Urdu," I rambled on quickly. I was certain that last bit of information would seal the deal. "That's it?" came the disappointed reply. I felt slightly wounded. I was about say "I'm only 24..." in a sad voice when I heard him clear his throat and announce that he would get back to me in a week's time. Before he shut the phone I managed to fit in that I majored in Middle Eastern languages and cultures as an undergrad, which I thought might help.

"Ok".

That's all I got.

I might not be a media superstar, but I am going to go to Tehran regardless. Undeterred, I went to take my visa photo, for which I had to wear a full hijab. The photographer, eager to do his job perfectly, insisted I pull the hijab down to my eyebrows before he would snap the picture. I did and smiled. 'Don't smile' he said, peering out from under his camera. I compromised and half smiled. I couldn't help it – I was terribly excited.

I grew up hearing the beautiful lilt of Farsi spoken by my grandmother, Nusrat. I called her Joonam, or 'my life' in Farsi. Joonam would talk to me about Isfahan the central Iranian city her family hailed from. 'Isfahan, nafs-e-jahan' they say. Isfahan, the soul of the world.

Joonam fed me gaz, Persian nougat candy, when I was good and made me fisin jun, a chicken dish with pomegranate sauce, alongside pulao with cherries and burnt rice on top when I was very, very good. I haven't seen my Joonam for nine years now, she is kept away in Dubai and my brother Zulfikar and I are strictly banned by her keepers from seeing her, but my memory is so fused with things Iranian from time spent with my grandmother that just the mention of her country makes my heart skip a few beats.

Eating yellow foods on Nowruz or Persian New Years in March, looking at grainy photographs of the beautiful blue and white shrines in Shiraz and Isfahan, listening to Googoosh's music -- an Iranian Madame Noor Jehan, if you will -- with Joonam in her bedroom as a child, music that I would not hear again until college when my best friend Cyrus played me songs by Morteza and Darius. He would play them when we were on the phone and we would stop talking to listen to the music. I would feel sad sometimes after hearing those pained and tender songs that reminded me of the music my Joonam must have loved. It courses through your veins, Cyrus would say to me.

It does.

It is to my Joonam's Iran that I am traveling. To the land of these memories, sounds, and flavours.

In my imagination, and in fact in reality, Iran is so many glorious things all at once. It is spiritual and radical, political and artistic, orthodox and vibrant; it is complex to say the least. I couldn't possibly sum it up in one pithy sentence, so let me turn back to that Monday's newspaper. Besides that dreadfully jingoistic headline were the following ones: 'Iran to cooperate with IAEA', 'Iranian gas deals with Pakistan held up by bureaucracy' (any bets on whose bureaucracy they're talking about?), 'Iran arrests

'Sunni militants', 'Iranian man flogged in public', 'Khamenei in good health', 'US tries to block development of Iranian oil fields' and most colourfully 'She was a he: Iranian man wants divorce'. And that's just one day's worth of stories.

It's going to be an amazing journey.

I do not have a place to stay yet and I'm not so certain that I've been booked on a flight. But I'm going to Tehran. Try and stop me.