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**BIOGRAPHY**

**David Hoddeson, Special Editor**

## Enchantment and the Biographical Passion<sup>1</sup>

It is my belief that a burning desire to write seriously and at length about the life of another is the product of enchantment.

Perhaps that is overstating the case a little. Still, from a purely subjective point of view, "enchantment" is hardly too strong a term for that intense, curious, insidious form of possession that besets writers smitten by what James Atlas, Saul Bellow's biographer, calls "the biographical impulse."<sup>2</sup> What the psychoanalyst points to as an example of transference, the newly mesmerized biographer experiences as the seductive bewitchment exerted by somebody else's life. Passion, for a biographer, means falling in love with another person's story.

That is probably because the impulse is a kind of seismic echo. In appropriating someone else's history and producing a narrative about it, one seizes hold of an external story that resonates with some inchoate psychic drama of one's own. Biographers, like novelists, are story junkies, and narrative—a linear story with a beginning, a middle, and a definite end—has the power to address and resolve, if only temporarily or obliquely, the ill-defined, intangible tale that lurks, often unacknowledged and unrecognized, in the writer's own soul.

Hence the spell—a tenacious, all-but-irresistible urge to capture someone else's literary, political, or other peregrinations in the tangible and gratifyingly conclusive form of a biography. Like love, the biographical passion owes little to whether the object of literary fixation arouses admiration, respect, or even much personal liking. Modern biography begins with the complex, ironic portraiture of Boswell, not with *The Lives of the Saints*; as a source of inspiration, admiration counts for a good deal less than those features of the life and personality that seem important—important, that is, to the biographer. For writers, as for many psychotherapists,

becoming deeply engaged with another person's past is a way of wrestling with the chimera of meaning in one's own.

This is not to say that every biography is inspired primarily, or even at all, by the hidden power of reverberating personal issues. But whenever one is, the biographer can expect those issues to have an impact that is all the greater when she is unaware of them. Moreover, biographers who do write in the grip of the siren's song may be luckier than those sober captains of their souls who invariably seem to steer clear of its magic. Writing a life is the literary equivalent of toiling in a rice paddy. A biographer must spend years getting inside the mind of someone who may start out as a complete stranger (often a dead one at that) and who may not always seem to repay the effort in any obvious or conventional way.

This is where the spell becomes useful—perhaps even essential. It can inspire empathy and insight (as well as subtle and not-so-subtle antipathy), encourage the massive mobilization of inner resources, and help sustain years of research and writing. Yet because the siren-song is barely audible, the writer generally takes little notice of it, believing all her decisions perfectly rational. She may never fully realize—at any rate not until years later, long after the enchantment has worn off—how profoundly the spell influenced the way she saw the story, the insights she gained into the subject's life, and her view of how to tell the tale.

As an extreme but perhaps not atypical demonstration case, I offer my own. More than ten years ago, I came under the spell of a life. The onset was abrupt.

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The life's owner was an Iranian princess, known—in roughly equal parts—for her distinguished achievements in the field of international social work and for the iron will that produced them.

Born in 1921 to a wife of a wealthy, elderly prince of the ruling Qajar dynasty, Sattareh Farman-Farmaian enjoyed a seemingly idyllic childhood within the walls of the huge Teheran harem compound of her progressive, benevolent, but

autocratic father. Her enclosed world included her mother and three stepmothers, more than two dozen siblings and half-siblings, and about one thousand servants. Soon after Sattareh's birth, however, the Qajars were supplanted by the father of the last Shah, the brutal Reza Shah Pahlavi. Sattareh's father was placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life, and the possibility of the imprisonment or murder of a figure on whom more than a thousand people literally depended for their survival hung permanently over the compound. Finally, when Sattareh was sixteen, Reza Shah had the compound destroyed, scattering the prince's four families and those of the impoverished, illiterate servants who had given her the love and attention she had craved as a little girl.

After her father's death a few years later, Sattareh made her way to the United States. There, inspired by the concern he had always shown for the health and well-being of his dependents, she studied social work. Over the course of the next three decades, she returned to Iran, launched the country's first professional school of social work, and founded a nationwide network of desperately-needed community and maternal health centers to introduce the birth control movement to Iran, all the while battling appalling conditions in slums and villages and fighting tirelessly for laws to improve the lot of women and children, prisoners, and the illiterate poor—people like the affectionate servants in her father's compound. But early in 1979, when the Shah left Iran and the Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile, Sattareh, by then in her late fifties, was, before an unprotesting faculty and staff, summarily arrested on trumped-up charges by revolutionary students from her government-sponsored school, sent to Khomeini's headquarters, and told that she could expect to be executed for "counterrevolutionary" activities. Released at the last moment, she went into hiding and managed, after several months, to flee into exile. Since 1980, she has lived in California, where she first studied social work. However, her school and network of clinics crumbled in the wake of the Revolution, and for all intents and purposes, her life's work has ceased to exist.

In the fall of 1987, I read a short memoir written by Sattareh Farman-Farmaian at the urging of American friends.

It described her compound childhood, her efforts to establish social work in Iran, and her arrest and exile. A mutual friend had suggested that she send it to me to see if I could tell her how to get it published.

I was a freelance writer and editor in New York, having landed there after growing up in California. I had begun life as a theatre arts major, but, after acquiring a master's degree in creative writing and a Ph.D. in eighteenth-century English literature, I instead taught college for a while and then moved on to work in book publishing. I had been hearing about Sattareh off and on for years. My parents, both social workers, had taught at the university in California where she had studied; once, on a visit to Tehran, they had toured her school. *At the time her manuscript arrived on my desk, my father had been dead for more than a decade, but over the years Sattareh had occasionally been in touch with my mother and they had met again once or twice after Sattareh's resettlement in the United States.*

But although I was sure before I began that her life would make interesting reading, I was less than optimistic about the manuscript's chances of finding a publisher. The only thing I knew about Iran was that, harems or no harems, any book with it as a subject could count on a chilly response from New York editors. More than six years after the humiliating national ordeal of the Tehran Hostage Crisis (which had begun the November after Sattareh's departure from Iran), Americans were in no mood to hear about Iranians, even "good" Iranians. I was therefore wholly unprepared for the profound impact of the story I was about to read.

That story was, withal, somewhat opaque. Sattareh had been trained to write English as an academic researcher; she seemed interested in describing her professional and educational activities but stiff and ill-at-ease in discussing her personal history and relationships. At the same time her account was skimpy on the numerous details about Iran's political and historical development that an uninformed general public would need to visualize and understand the larger context in which she had carried out her work. Although there was a long, fascinating description of her father's Tehran com-

pound, a memory on which she dwelt with deep and unmistakably tender nostalgia, on the whole the manuscript's tone was detached and prim, often to the point of emotionlessness. Most surprisingly, the account made no attempt to explain her sudden arrest or her subsequent ordeal at revolutionary headquarters. This entire episode—Kafkaesque from start to finish—was presented as if it had taken place for no reason. The *shocking betrayal that led to Sattareh's loss of her career and homeland* seemed to have come out of left field and occurred in a vacuum. There seemed to be no convincing motive on the part of her persecutors, no suggestion that the event was linked to anything that had come previously, no attempt to invest the incident with any significance, political or otherwise.

I knew from what I had heard over the years that Sattareh had been a figure of unusual integrity in Iran, famous for her fierce commitment to the poor—surely, I thought, someone like this must understand better than most people why ordinary Iranians had embraced Khomeini's fanaticism? She had enjoyed the patronage of the Queen and several of the Shah's most important ministers. Her family was highly-placed, influential, and well-informed—one of the Farman-Farmaian men had been the head of the Shah's planning organization; another had been president of the imperial lending bank; still another had helped found OPEC. Yet it was clear that the writer had not anticipated anything like what had occurred. Even now, long after the final events the manuscript described, she seemed unable to find meaning in them. They were simply facts; they had just *happened*. The sole impression I came away with was one of shock, pain, and bitter incomprehension.

The seeming absurdity of Sattareh's fate baffled me. Her single-minded quest to help the Iranian poor—to accomplish which she had made lasting personal sacrifices—was little short of epic. Her life, which began the same year the Shah's father came to power, was both a window on the personal evolution of an extraordinary Middle Eastern woman and on the tragic history of modern Iran. It was as though I had been given the briefest glimpse of a lost kingdom—a description as applicable to the razed patriarchal compound of Sattareh's girlhood (which sounded like something from a Persian miniature) as it

was to the vanished Pahlavi monarchy. What was the larger significance of this woman's harsh fate? How had the kingdom been lost?

As if seeking the answer to a riddle, I hurried to the library to find a history of twentieth-century Iran. But the one or two introductory surveys there had been written by Western experts and had originated well before the revolution, while more recent books for Americans were on such specialized topics as Islamic fundamentalism and the Tehran Hostage Crisis. No account existed to tell Westerners like me about Iran's fateful modern evolution as Iranians like Sattareh Farman-Farmaian had witnessed it.

I found that I was beginning to be consumed by an obscure but powerful wish to "rescue" Sattareh's story from the muddle in which time and revolution seemed to have left it. When I took up the manuscript again, I could read it for only a few minutes at a time before becoming so flooded with excitement that I had to put it down, get up from my desk, and pace the room until I calmed down. I even felt as if I had been "meant" to tell the intertwining stories of Sattareh's and Iran's abortive journey through the modern era.

Could I persuade Sattareh to let me take over as the teller of her tale? Perhaps she would let me recount the story of her life in the first person, as an as-told-to (the publishing term for a memoir concocted from interviews "with the help of" a professional writer). An as-told-to would let me reconstruct her history and Iran's for myself just the way she had seen them and get the answers I wouldn't find in any library. That way, I could imagine the vanished world I had read about and find an explanation for its disappearance that made sense.

This plan seemed so obviously right that I saw no reason to question it. Nevertheless, I did perceive that it contained certain drawbacks. For one thing, to carry it out in the way I envisioned, I would have to have a firm grasp of Iran's modern political history and be able to ask Sattareh intelligent questions about its people, their culture, and their world-view—all matters of which I still knew almost nothing. I would also need to document Sattareh's own life in painstaking detail, a process that would take months—perhaps, I thought uneasily, rather

more than months. But no matter how ambitious a book I wrote, co-authoring a collaborative memoir wouldn't bring me any literary glory. Not only does the as-told-to, artistically speaking, command about the same degree of respect from reviewers as painting by numbers, but a memoir, however self-evidently beyond the capacities of its nominal author, clearly cannot be published as the work of anyone but the official memoirist. For at least several years, or until the book was firmly established in the marketplace, I would be unable to present myself publicly as anything but, at best, a glorified ghostwriter.

At the same time, telling the story in the first person had an inescapable, if eccentric, charm. I was entranced by the possibility of seeing Iran through Sattareh's eyes, as well as by the technical challenges of depicting her life that way. If, I reasoned, I was careful not to invent anything and presented what she told me in interviews with strict accuracy, kept my own Western prejudices and preconceptions out of the narrative, and made sure that she herself read and approved every word, the book could be both by and about her. In any case, even if I had wanted to write a conventional biography, no major trade publisher was going to be interested in a third-person account of the life of an Iranian social worker. For every reason I could think of, this story had to be told from the inside. That, therefore, was how I would tell it.

Oddly, perhaps, nothing about this feverish desire to concern myself for an indefinite length of time with the past of a woman I had never met and the history of a strange and unfamiliar society struck me as extreme, or prompted me to examine why I felt compelled to do so. On the contrary, what I wanted seemed so natural as to need no examination. After all, I would be combating ignorance and prejudice while learning about a great deal of interesting and important world history. And if I found myself attracted to the life of someone who had dedicated herself to helping the helpless, that wasn't surprising. I had cut my intellectual milk teeth on books about crusading reformers—my mother and father, children of Russian-Jewish immigrants, had gone into social work in the depths of the Great Depression and later, like Sattareh, had

had successful careers as educators. Besides, no writer could resist a story like this.

On the other hand, I was a little unsettled by the sheer force of my wish to abscond with it. The impulse itself seemed vaguely rapacious, like wanting to steal someone else's bicycle. Yet that was also the best argument in favor of my writing Sattareh's life as an as-told-to. If my collaborator received the lion's share of the credit, I would be taking nothing away from her—she could become the published author she aimed to become and I, with a clear conscience, would have what I wanted, in just the way I wanted it. I could restore the kingdom without stealing the bicycle.

Two or three days after my trip to the library, I called Sattareh, nervously introduced myself, and, having explained the difficulties of finding a publisher, asked whether she would consider letting me write a memoir for her, one in which American readers would watch Iran's modern history unfold through her eyes. I explained that to insure the book's accuracy and authenticity, I would submit everything to her as we went along—I must be responsible for the writing, but she would have full veto power over the content. I would be coming to California soon on a family visit. If she wished, we could do some interviewing then and discuss the plan in more detail. Then I would return to New York and start working on an experimental first chapter to show publishers.

Shortly thereafter, we spoke again: Sattareh said that she was willing give the idea a try. At once, I began organizing interview questions for a chapter about her childhood and launched myself on a rapid self-study course on Iran.

During the next few weeks I often felt so elated that whenever I sat down to work I would start humming a short melody. I couldn't recall its name, but it was a piece I had known from early childhood. For some reason, this scrap of song—wild, exuberant, gleeful; welling up unexpectedly, like a leitmotif, from whatever subterranean channels usually contained it—filled me with happiness and made me feel as if I had been "practicing to tell this story for years." Some time passed, however, before I was able to identify the mysterious music. It was (*pace* Edward Said and other intrepid foes of

Orientalism) Saint-Saëns' "Bacchanale," from *Samson and Delilah*.

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Reality was rather more prosaic than the operatic accompaniment I had conjured up to go with it. Sattareh lived in a modest balcony apartment with several well-tended plants outside the front door and no possessions of obvious value except several good Persian carpets. A handsome, fit-looking woman in her sixties with a straight back and a slight, intent frown, she greeted me in casual clothes. She had a low, dark voice whose English, though marked by a strong Farsi accent and occasionally fractured by Persian usage, was fluent and colloquial. She seemed both unpretentious and reserved, forthright but guarded.

The carpets, she said, had been given to her in America as gifts; when she left Iran, she was allowed to take nothing but a suitcase. She had finally found a job with the county juvenile system—stressful work, but for a foreigner her age, there had been nothing else. To relax, she went for long hikes in the mountains on weekends, often alone. Even as a child, she had always been someone who expressed her feelings in actions, not in words. I could write the book, she said, as I thought best—she was a professional, and I was a professional, too. She knew my mother and trusted her, so she would trust me.

I was touched by this reminder that Sattareh did not easily find words to express herself, even in her native language—because of the risk of spies in her father's household, she and her brothers and sisters had been trained from infancy not to speak openly of their feelings.

I was also touched by the complimentary reference to my mother, to whom I am close. As a matter of fact, I could see a few interesting parallels between my mother and Sattareh—superficial, admittedly, but real nonetheless. Not only did they share the same calling, but Sattareh had attended the same graduate school where my mother had studied and, until her recent retirement, taught for most of her life. Like my mother, Sattareh had only one child, an American-born daughter from

an early marriage. And while their social backgrounds, cultures, and personalities were very different, both were capable, energetic women whose cautious demeanor could mask strong feelings and a resilient will. When, a dozen years earlier, my father had died, my mother, at about the same age Sattareh was at present, had coped with her grief and the abrupt ending of a happy marriage and professional collaboration of four decades by throwing herself into research that enlarged not only the dimensions of her own career but also the scope of her field.

My mother, I reflected, had been luckier than her Iranian colleague. Perhaps talking about the past would help Sattareh by giving her some relief from the grief and pain it had brought her.

My hostess set out refreshments—tea for me, hot water for her. She herself, she explained, usually drank only hot water with a little lemon juice. Her father had believed in simplicity, and so did she.

A number of Sattareh's relatives, including her daughter, now lived in the United States. Anxious for details about her childhood, especially about her father—Sattareh had written that he was referred to simply as "Shazdeh," or "the Prince"—I asked if I might interview other members of her family.

Only her daughter, Sattareh replied. She preferred not to let anyone else know that she was writing a book, including her family.

Taken aback, I waited for some explanation, but none was forthcoming. I pointed out that, while I wanted her to feel that the book was her own, I needed to learn as much as I could about her life, her early experiences, and Iran itself. Drawing a vivid picture of her years there, as well as conveying an authentic sense of Persian culture, would be an important part of our task. Since it was still unwise for Americans to visit Iran, my only hope of acquiring a more visceral feeling for her upbringing and for Persian culture itself lay in talking to others in her family.

Sattareh was polite but adamant. She would be happy, she explained graciously, to provide me with the required materials, including articles about oil politics, Islamic fundamental-

ism, and so on. But until the book was finished, I could not talk to anyone else. She would supply any information I needed.

With that, the issue appeared to be dead. After some useless attempts to exhume it, I gave up. I would either have to honor her stipulation or not write the book. I noted with chagrin and some amusement that Sattareh's decisions were evidently not open to discussion and debate. Growing up as a member of a recently overthrown dynasty might have had a chilling effect on self-expression, but neither had this member been raised to feel that she need explain herself to just anybody. Not for nothing was Sattareh the woman who had introduced sixteen million fervently traditional Iranians to the birth control pill.

We decided to begin our first interview with the old Tehfan compound. Inviting me to sit beside her, Sattareh, with obvious pleasure, produced several pencil drawings she had prepared to show its dimensions and layout.

For an instant, I felt a rush of excitement nearly as heady as I had upon first reading her manuscript. The compound had been no mere collection of houses but a virtually self-contained medieval town, over which Sattareh's father ruled as an aloof, omnipotent, quasi-divine protector regarded as having the power almost of life and death over everyone in it. Its destruction had taken a shattering toll on his health and spirits, and Sattareh felt that this disaster had contributed to his death from a stroke two years later. Her references to "Shazdeh" were almost always in a tone of veneration, softened by a trace of poignant sadness—she was planning to call the book *Shazdeh's Daughter*. In reading her manuscript, I had formed a hazy but strong impression that her final ordeal at the hands of the revolutionaries was, in some way I couldn't yet pin down, a counterpoint to these earlier losses. I did know that in examining her drawings, we were setting out on a long journey together.

One by one, with methodical care, Sattareh pointed out the compound's main features: Shazdeh's mansion at its head; the walled subcompounds of her mother and stepmothers; the large park at its center.

Being in public view, this was not open to women. As a child, however, Sattareh had had no sisters her own age, and

Shazdeh—whose advanced ideas included a belief in exercise for girls as well as boys—had ordered her mother to let her go out to play in the park with her brothers and the servants' sons. For a Persian nobleman's daughter, playing with boys in the men's quarter was a freedom hardly short of scandalous. Even in Sattareh's case, it had been curtailed by the theoretically marriageable age of eleven, when propriety dictated that her movements be restricted to the women's quarter. Sattareh's mother had been shocked. But Shazdeh's word was law, and he had been obeyed unquestioningly.

Once again, I was struck by the note of proud veneration in her voice. Rather too eagerly, I observed that such freedom had far-reaching implications, since she had been singled out as special—temporarily exempt from restrictions that applied not only to her older sisters and half-sisters, but to her mother and stepmothers as well. A few years later, in her early teens, she had boldly demanded to be sent to school in Europe with her brothers, and had been very angry at Shazdeh for dismissing this excessively unconventional request out of hand. Did the freedom her father gave her when she was small encourage her to think of herself as an exception to the usual rules for women after she grew up?

Sattareh gave me a puzzled look. She seemed neither skeptical nor resentful of my off-the-cuff psychoanalyzing—the question simply had no meaning for her. I suddenly felt foolish, as if I had been spouting Latin.

Annoyed at my clumsiness in broaching what I considered an important topic, I tried again. Did she think, I said, that having been the only girl in a group of boys by order of her all-powerful father might have helped her feel that she could carry out her goals in life in spite of being a woman?

No, replied my heroine, with a courteous patience much like that of a teacher repeating herself to a student who hasn't been paying attention. She had just been all alone in her mother's house, and her father thought that girls should have exercise, and she could climb trees better and run faster than any of the boys, so she knew that if she had a real education she could do as well in life as they. That was what she had explained in her manuscript.

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I returned to New York less sanguine than I had been when I left. I had recorded almost seven hours of intensive conversation about Sattareh's childhood, and had more than enough raw material for an experimental first chapter. But I worried about the disparities between our ways of looking at the world.

To overcome the hostility and skepticism of American publishers towards the subject of Iran, I needed to produce a sample chapter whose Iranian narrator American readers could imagine as being someone not unlike themselves—someone whose hopes and goals they could sympathize with, care about, and root for. Furthermore, this narrator would have to have a strong interpretive sensibility. She had to be expressive, observant, articulate—an active guide to both Sattareh's feelings and Iran's evolution. To develop a narrator of that kind, I myself needed to understand and empathize with Sattareh's inner life. But the literalness of her view of life, as well as her obvious disinclination to explain her feelings, were, for me, barriers to empathy.

Sattareh's manifest lack of interest in any theories about the workings of her mind was hardly surprising: social workers in countries like Iran have more urgent things to think about than applying Western notions of psychology to the human condition. Furthermore, I had found that Sattareh cared passionately about her country's politics and the social policies that had brought about a revolution, and I had discovered that, despite her relatively limited English, she could express herself with simple, moving eloquence, especially where her father, mother, and other important people in her past were concerned. (I finally noticed that this eloquence was more likely to show itself when I managed to ask questions without intrusive intellectualizing.)

I was beginning to realize, however, that to my collaborator the facts of her own past were facts and nothing more. She had been co-operative, helpful, and patient throughout our long interview, answering my hundreds of questions with conscientious thoroughness. But she rarely volunteered infor-

mation and did not usually offer an interpretation unless I expressly solicited her opinion on the subject under discussion, or unless it concerned social work. So far, at least, our exchanges contained little spontaneous reflection or analysis.

Indeed, the Sattareh I was beginning to know was single-mindedly, even startlingly, practical and action-oriented: a woman who had always been concerned exclusively with solving problems and getting things done, not with discussing or explaining them. In Iran, talk was for politicians, it produced only more talk that led nowhere and meant nothing. But while her disdain for unnecessary words and explanations had undoubtedly served her brilliantly in her work, I guessed that it also contributed to the more enigmatic qualities of her manuscript, including the ending. A modest woman in many respects, she appeared to find my relentless and apparently insatiable passion for details about her past, her experiences, and her observations both strange and surprising.

I guessed that to someone from a different literary tradition than the Western, a biographer's need for specifics could well seem puzzling, though I judged that the implications of "having American readers see Iran through her eyes" would become clear as soon as I had written a couple of chapters. Meanwhile, however, neither our long and richly factual interview nor Sattareh's reticent manuscript was likely to furnish the narrator who had to establish herself in the very first lines of the book. Yet how could I depart from my protagonist's real-life words and speech while still being sure that I was expressing what she told me in a way that was authentic and did not do violence to her views, her inner life, or her image of herself?

Fortunately, the tapes contained more than just facts about Sattareh's past. I realized that if I could pick up the emotional tone of her answers to my questions, I might be able to attune myself to what had been important to her over the years and develop the strong sense of identification and empathy I needed. As a theatre student in college, I had learned how actors create an emotional and sensory reservoir to draw on when interpreting a script. If, like an actor preparing to portray a role in a one-woman play, I could develop my own fund of sensory images and emotional "memo-

ries" of Iran, I could draw on this to visualize and depict Sattareh's actual memories for myself and the reader. The resulting voice would not literally be hers, but by using her words as much as possible, and by rigorously confining what was said to views, information, and experiences that she herself described or confirmed as having been true, I would know that I wasn't introducing material that was not authentic. Submitting everything to her for review as we went along would also help eliminate intrusions or distortions introduced by my personal feelings and cultural attitudes. As her English seemed equal to the task, to further insure that I was not misrepresenting her, I decided to explain what I was doing and to ask periodically if she felt that what I wrote was reproducing her emotional experience and the facts of her life in a way she was comfortable with.

With these rules in mind, I began a program of voracious reading. I devoured the scholarly articles that Sattareh sent me, as well as histories, novels about Iran, Persian literature, *old tourist guides, anthropologists' accounts, even cookbooks*—anything that could tell me about her country and its culture. I studied television documentaries about Iran, listened to Persian music, visited museums to look at Persian carpets, bought Persian rosewater to use in cooking. I also began *transcribing the interview tapes, attending carefully to every sentence as I tried to absorb the rhythms and textures of Sattareh's spoken English.* Listening to her tones and cadences as if they were music whose emotional coloring contained hints of the composer's deeper intentions, I played important passages over until, with repetition and in combination with the sensory picture of Iran that was starting to take root in my mind, what was in them began almost to feel like my own memories. Sometimes I would telephone Sattareh to clarify something I had come across in my reading, ask her how she had felt about an incident, or go over material I sent her for review and correction.

In this way, a bit at a time and brick by brick, I built up specific, detailed mental images of my subject's childhood, the compound, and people she had known there. Sometimes this process was tedious for both of us. But as I grew more

knowledgeable about the inner and outer worlds I was trying to depict, and as my ignorance about Iran lessened and my sympathy for Sattareh deepened, the "research" I was doing became more and more exhilarating and rewarding.

I was especially moved by the enduring poignancy of this strong-minded woman's nostalgia for the paternal Eden she had known as a child, and for its distant, benevolent ruler. Shazdeh's influence on her life had been profound: he had instilled his passionately independent, "special" daughter with a deep sense of patriotism and of obligation to her poorer countrymen. Indeed, the haughty old prince had succeeded in making his presence felt long after his death, for Sattareh, who perpetuated his legacy through her school and her network of community centers, had presided over the affairs of this latter-day "compound" with a conviction and a single-minded dedication that did him credit. I guessed also that she had run her school with a firmness and authority not wholly unlike her father's. Her remarkable work had been a lasting, haunted memorial to him.

Thus, when I began to write the book's opening words, "When memory haunts me, above all it is him that I remember," they seemed to emerge as easily as if waiting all along for someone to write them, and the elegiac voice on the page seemed suited to the real Sattareh's longing for the vanished world of childhood. What surprised me was realizing that somehow this plaintive, yearning voice was mine as well as hers.

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*Daughter of Persia* took five years—a hundred and fifty hours of interviewing and reinterviewing, a year of background reading and fact-checking, and the completion and revision of an eight-hundred page first draft, vetted by one Iranian and two American scholars. The book, which was well-received and widely reviewed, was subsequently translated into three European languages. The final interview transcript was around two thousand pages.

Throughout this long, difficult process, Sattareh read

each chapter diligently and with painstaking attention. She remained a somewhat passive interview subject, though I soon realized that this was partly because she had seen herself merely as an ordinary patriotic citizen of her country, not as an expert commentator on its affairs. Even so, I came to feel that her perspective on Iran's modern evolution under the Pahlavis and on the influence of the West, while critical of both, was unusually generous, balanced, and fair-minded.

Sattareh continued to appear perplexed by my demand for what she referred to as "all these details." Once, when I was questioning her about her final months in hiding, she ventured to inquire, with her usual politeness but also with some impatience, whether we really needed to devote half a chapter to her three months underground, when that whole time could easily be summed up in a single paragraph? Nevertheless, she accepted the long wait for the book's completion with a good grace. I was grateful for her tolerance, and happy (as well as relieved) when, having at last read the final version from start to finish, she telephoned and, surprised and pleased, exclaimed that "we had written the whole story of modern Iran for people to read."

But I was not certain that she actually liked *Daughter of Persia*, nor did I feel that I really knew what she thought of the way I had presented her life. In our review process, I had often urged her to be frank and to point out anything that seemed false to her, no matter how trivial. However, her corrections, excisions, and criticisms were usually minor. Only gradually did I awaken to the fact that she never volunteered an opinion of what I was doing. When I asked what she thought of the way I was presenting her experiences, she would reply simply that "it seemed all right to her."

Before the book's completion, I had explained this reserve to myself as evidence of confidence in my abilities, as well as a desire not to interfere or cause delays. As work on the book drew to a close, however, I began to feel disturbed by the implications of my co-author's continuing reluctance to give me an opinion, favorable or otherwise, of what I had written for her and in her name. It was certainly possible that she simply considered it unnecessary to say more than she already

had. On the other hand, maybe she disliked the book or regarded it as an embarrassment, and felt that it would be impolite to say so.

Especially troubling was the thought that I might have gone too far in creating a literary proxy for Sattareh (I still thought of that bicycle with a twinge), or that I had inadvertently distorted or misrepresented her sense of her past in some other way. I was keenly aware, for instance, of the impossibility of my truly being able to understand what she had lost as a result of her arrest after the revolution, and I felt that I could not—and probably should not—breach the stone wall she had erected around events that had deprived her of her school and her country.

This part of the story was, of course, what had led me to write the book in the first place, yet I did not feel that I had really fathomed it. By now I was better equipped to know why my protagonist could not have anticipated the personal catastrophe that had befallen her: not even the shrewdest observer can foresee events in a revolution, while from the beginning of the worst civil unrest, Sattareh had sincerely, if naively, believed herself exempt from the revolutionaries' rage at the government and the privileged classes. Although she was a member of an old and notably proud family and the head of a thriving, government-sponsored institution, she had steadfastly insisted that "no one would hurt a social worker." Despite warnings from friends and colleagues, she had firmly refused to acknowledge the potential dangers of her position. To protect herself by abandoning her school, her staff, and her country would have disgraced not just her father's name but his legacy of duty and patriotism.

I suspected that this repudiation had even deeper roots: to have admitted vulnerability as the head of the school and network of clinics she had devoted her career to building would have been tantamount to recognizing that the great disaster of her early life, the destruction of the first compound, could happen again. I guessed that she had simply decided to ignore what could be neither acknowledged nor controlled and that this second cataclysm, whose possibility she had never admitted, had caught her unawares. But that was only a partial,

theoretical explanation for what had happened. And it was one that I was sure my practical heroine would have considered pointless and irrelevant in any case. Thus, in some respects, Sattareh and her past remained an enigma to me.

Perhaps in some respects I had also remained an enigma to Sattareh; at all events, once the book was done our contacts grew less and less frequent. I knew that a certain distance after the completion of a book like ours was not unusual, and my partner had, after all, waited longer than she thought necessary to take her place in the limelight. Still, as favorable reviews began to come in, I realized that, while I didn't blame her for wanting her bicycle back, the lack of any recognizable acknowledgment of my help in making the ride possible had hurt more than I had admitted to myself.

The uncertainty over my subject's true feelings about what I had written was disturbing enough to finally make me ask whether I had been right to tell the story of *Daughter of Persia* the way I had. Almost without a second thought, and for more than four and a half years, I had submerged myself in another person's identity until I felt exhausted and drained by the effort. Now that the book was published, I hardly knew what to call it when people asked me about it. There seemed no accurate term for it besides "experiment:" it was part memoir, part portrait, part historical novel. Five years earlier, telling the story any other way had seemed unthinkable. Yet now I questioned the very legitimacy of the approach I had taken—could one person really write another's autobiography "authentically?"—and wondered if I had shown poor judgment in impulsively deciding to become someone else's literary ventriloquist.

Surely, I thought, other biographers, normal biographers, had different and better reasons for writing a life than an irrational and childish compulsion to tell a story—anyway, they seemed to be able to find normal ways of telling it. Maybe there was something wrong with me—maybe I sought rejection or self-effacement, or maybe my unconscious ziggled where other biographers' zagged. Certainly I now felt as though I had been under a spell from which I was only beginning to awaken.

Gradually, my life became my own again, but I still could

find no convincing answer for why I had felt compelled to write *Daughter of Persia* as I had, and eventually I stopped asking. Then, as I was preparing to write this essay, I found myself jotting down the words "lost kingdom."

At once, an image came to mind: a house on a wooded suburban estate in the affluent California neighborhood where I grew up. The house had been owned by my mother's older brother, a successful surgeon. He was a generous, protective, domineering man who, with the unquestioning assent of all concerned, played the role of our family patriarch. He bossed and looked after everyone around him, including his own older brother, a jovial, pipe-smoking, and (to me) grandfatherly psychiatrist whom I adored, and in whom I occasionally confided as a substitute for the grandparents who were no longer alive by the time I was born. My parents and I saw my uncles, aunts, and cousins frequently, for the adults were bound not only by the usual second-generation Jewish immigrant ties of consanguinity and family loyalty, but by strongly-held convictions about the importance of service to the community. My mother and father even built a house for the three of us a few blocks from my uncle's in order to be near him and my aunt—a prominent public health physician who was particularly concerned with the establishment of clinics in poor neighborhoods.

Both the geographical and psychological configuration of this small community, I realized, had elements in common with the compound of Sattareh's childhood. But twelve years before I first read her story, this close-knit, vibrant, benevolent circle of older adults began to vanish. The vanishing started with my father, who died suddenly of a heart attack before my mother's eyes. A year and a half later, the family patriarch, who had been closer to my mother than anyone except my father, and who—like Shazdeh—seemed a rock of unchanging strength and authority to us all, died and was followed four months later by his wife. Two and a half years after them, my beloved "grandfather" died suddenly as well.

Thus, in a little over four years, the seemingly unbreakable bonds of our family were broken, one by one. For my mother, work and a large circle of friends and colleagues

helped somewhat to fill the void left by the disappearance of the four members of her generation she had loved most, but for years afterwards, I had remained intensely conscious of the magnitude of her losses. As her only child, I wanted to comfort her, but I lived on the other side of the country and felt helpless. Although we spoke frequently on the phone and visited often, I knew that it was difficult for her even to refer to the four people who were gone. I would have liked to talk about them myself, but I found it as difficult as she did.

With *Daughter of Persia*, however, I had found a way to talk about the past. In recreating my heroine's kingdom, I was reconstituting mine. In "rescuing" the tale of a Persian princess from oblivion, I was saving my mother and myself from the grief we found so hard to discuss. And in grappling with the ultimate reasons for Sattareh's loss of her kingdom, I was struggling to make sense of what had happened to my family—to wrench some meaning from the riddle of death.

Recognizing this put most of my doubts about the book to rest. Whatever the legitimacy of the biographical experiment I had undertaken, I understood that I could not have told Sattareh's story "objectively," or as anything but its narrator. The impulse to imagine someone else's life completely is instinctive: to restore the kingdom, a writer must become the hero who can do that. I had sensed from the first that the story I wanted to tell was also my own.

c/o The Joy Harris Literary Agency  
156 Fifth Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10010

### Notes

1. The "biographical experiment" discussed here was published in 1992 by Crown/Random House as *Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from Her Father's Harem through the Islamic Revolution*, by Sattareh Farman-Farmaian with Dona Munker.
2. Presentation to the Biography Seminar of the New York University Department of English, April 20, 1993.