



Faces

By Chris Villiers

My father's face looks down at me, staring from behind an old frame I found under a pile of papers in the back of my closet.

It's a photograph taken years ago, probably 1943 or '44. His cap is pushed back far on his head, only the letters U and S visible, the word Navy concealed by his still-full hairline. The insignia of his rank — an eagle, a torpedo and two chevrons — proudly sewn on his right arm. He looks as if he just stepped out of a recruiting poster. He smiles a confident yet weary smile.

Looking at his picture, I see a wide range of conflicting emotions. I recognize glimpses of faces I've known through the years.

I see my father's frustration at still being Stateside just a trolley ride away from home long after all his buddies had shipped out.

I see the mischievous look my brother would display twenty-five years later, trying to explain why he'd prefer to stay home and smoke pot and listen to FM radio rather than cross the ocean to fight for something he didn't believe in, in a country he didn't know on the other side the South China Sea from where my father's destroyer was sunk by the Japanese in the battle of Ormoc Bay.

In my father's determination, I see the same hard-working spirit of the people our family met while living in the Middle East in the 1970s. People whose concept of running water were the jubes, an elaborate network of ditches that served as the communal bathtub, toilet, drinking fountain, car wash and sanitation system for two million residents. People who wore multiple threadbare coats to keep out the sub-zero chill of winter yet walked holes in the soles of their shoes.

In his confident smile, I see the quiet dignity of Akbar teaching himself to read, both his native Farsi and the English necessary to work as our building superintendent. We called him our houseboy even though his hair was thinning or gone in most places; even though he had a wife, two sons in diapers, and a host of grown-up concerns. His family lived in the basement, in a single room with no windows. Mats on the floor were their only furniture.



I see the inflated pride of Leslie and Dorothy, an affable aging New England couple who lived across the landing from us in Teheran. Each week, they'd send Akbar out to buy several cases of Coke, beer and 7-Up — heavy wooden crates he'd carry on his back two kilometers from the store to our apartment building. When he'd return, they'd thank him profusely and hand him two 25 Rial coins — less than 50 cents — for his efforts.

I see revenge in the face of the taxi driver who took great pleasure in cheating a 14-year-old kid out of 200 Rials by pretending not to speak a word of English. When I protested, he yelled at me

in the clearest diction, “Rich American want change? Fuck you. Look what you’re doing to our country.” Then he drove away.

I see the puzzled expressions on the faces of the soldiers who halted me by pointing M-16s in my face in front of the Super Salon, the only Western-style grocery store in Tehran, amazed to see a 14-year-old passing out leaflets urging expatriates to vote for McGovern. Amazed that, in America, people are encouraged to advocate current leaders be thrown out of office.

I see the rich Iranian boy who lived down the street. The boy whose face I still remember but whose name I’ve long since forgotten. The boy who taught me how to play soccer and, in turn, I taught how to play football. I remember his pained expression as he explained why so many of his countrymen love Americans but hate America.

I see the desperation of the old woman who grabbed my then 8-year-old brother outside the Pan Am building in Athens while Greece was governed by a military junta. A dark shawl covered all but her face. She clutched tight to my brother’s leg and begged, “You bring me America, no? Take me with you.”

In my father’s eyes, I see the intensity of my cousin Glenn — intensity being a widely-held trait my family. He called his wife that day from the 104th floor to let her know that everything was OK. “A plane just hit our building,” Glenn said. “We’re evacuating. I love you.” Then the phone went dead.

I see the quiet resolve on the faces of people lined along the sidewalks at night, holding small flags and candles against the darkness, mourning the 2,823 who died when two planes hit the buildings.

I see the anger in the faces of college-age students on the TV news. People who say we need to strike back. People who swear they’re prepared to fight but aren’t sure whom they’re fighting. People who, like that Iranian boy I knew many years ago, hate a country without really knowing its people.

When I look at the photograph on the wall, I see that my father’s face is clear and in perfect focus.

The picture is black and white. Nothing else is.