“Funny in Farsi”

by Firoozeh Dumas

Text

1 I was lucky to have come to America years before the political upheaval in Iran. The Americans we encountered were kind and curious, unafraid to ask questions and willing to listen. As soon as I spoke enough English to communicate, I found myself being interviewed nonstop by children and adults alike. My life became one long-running Oprah show, minus the free luxury accommodations in Chicago, and Oprah.

2 On the topic of Iran, American minds were tabulae rasae. Judging from the questions asked, it was clear that most Americans in 1972 had never heard of Iran. We did our best to educate. “You know Asia? Well, you go south at the Soviet Union and there we are.” Or we’d try to be more bucolic, mentioning being south of the beautiful Caspian Sea, “where the famous caviar comes from.” Most people in Whittier did not know about the famous caviar and once we explained what it was, they’d scrunch up their faces. “Fish eggs?” they would say. “Gross.” We tried mentioning our proximity to Afghanistan or Iraq, but it was no use. Having exhausted our geographical clues, we would say, “You’ve heard of India, Japan, or China? We’re on the same continent.”

3 None of the kids in Whittier, a city an hour outside of Los Angeles, ever asked me about geography. They wanted to know about more important things, such as camels. How many did we own back home? What did we feed them? Was it a bumpy ride? I always disappointed them by admitting that I had never seen a camel in my entire life. And as far as a ride goes, our Chevrolet was rather smooth. They reacted as if I had told them that there really was a person in the Mickey Mouse costume.

Definitions

- a very big change that often causes problems
- something expensive that you may want but do not need
- clean slates; an absence of ideas
  (singular: tabula rasa)
- of the pleasant aspects of country living
- nearness
- an American brand of car
¶4 My family and I wondered why Americans had such a mistaken image of Iran. We were offered a clue one day by a neighbor, who told us that he knew about Iran because he had seen Lawrence of Arabia. Whoever Lawrence was, we had never heard of him, we said. My father then explained that Iranians are an Indo-European people; we are not Arabs. We do, however, have two things in common with Saudi Arabia, he continued: “Islam and petroleum.” “Now, I won’t bore you with religion,” he said, “but let me tell you about the petroleum industry.”

¶5 Another neighbor, a kindly old lady who taught me how to take care of indoor plants, asked whether we had many cats back home. My father, with his uncanny ability to forge friendships, said, “We don’t keep pets in our homes. They are dirty.” “But your cats are so beautiful” our neighbor said. We had no idea what she was talking about. Seeing our puzzled expressions, she showed us a picture of a beautiful, longhaired cat. “It’s a Persian cat,” she said. That was news to us; the only cats we had ever seen back home were the mangy strays that ate scraps behind people’s houses. From that day, when I told people I was from Iran, I added “where Persian cats come from.” That impressed them.

¶6 I tried my best to be a worthy representative of my homeland, but, like a Hollywood celebrity relentlessly pursued by paparazzi, I sometimes got tired of the questions. I, however, never punched anybody with my fists; I used words. One boy at school had a habit of asking me particularly stupid questions. One day he inquired about camels, again. This time, perhaps foreshadowing a vocation in storytelling, I told him that, yes, we had camels, a one-hump and a two-hump. The one-hump belonged to my parents and the two-hump was our family station wagon. His eyes widened.
“Where do you keep them?” he asked.

“In the garage, of course,” I told him.

Having heard what he wanted to hear, he ran off to share his knowledge with the rest of the kids on the playground. He was very angry once he realized that I had fooled him, but at least he never asked me another question.

Often kids tried to be funny by chanting, “I ran to I-ran, I ran to I-ran.” The correct pronunciation, I always informed them, is “Ee-rahm.” “I ran” is a sentence, I told them, as in “I ran away from my geography lesson.”

Older boys often asked me to teach them “some bad words in your language.” At first, I politely refused. My refusal merely increased their determination, so I solved the problem by teaching them phrases like man kharam, which means “I’m an idiot.” I told them that what I was teaching them was so nasty that they would have to promise never to repeat it to anyone. They would then spend all of recess running around yelling, “I’m an idiot! I’m an idiot!” I never told them the truth. I figured that someday, somebody would.

But almost every person who asked us a question asked with kindness. Questions were often followed by suggestions of places to visit in California. At school, the same children who inquired about camels also shared their food with me. “I bet you’ve never tried an Oreo! Have one,” or “My mom just baked these peanut butter cookies and she sent you one.” Kids invited me to their houses to show me what their rooms looked like. On Halloween, one family brought over a costume, knowing that I would surely be the only kid in the Halloween parade without one. If someone had been able to encapsulate the kindness of these second-graders in pill form, the pills would undoubtedly put many war correspondents out of business.
### Choice A: Explanatory Paragraph

The author describes her early experiences of being in America with great affection. How were people kind or welcoming to her and her family? Write one paragraph explaining some of the kindnesses.

Begin your paragraph with a controlling idea that makes your point about the topic. Include three relevant facts or examples from the text to support your controlling idea.

End your paragraph with a concluding sentence that sums up the topic.

### Choice B: Opinion Paragraph

The author was annoyed by some of the wrong ideas other kids had about Iran. Do you think she responded to these kids in a clever or mean way? Write one paragraph giving your opinion about how she responded.

Start your paragraph with a focus statement that gives your opinion. Support your opinion with three reasons, examples, or facts from the text. Include a reason, example, or fact from one of the Workshop Readings, if possible.

Conclude your paragraph by restating your opinion and making a recommendation to readers.