

## *Yeki bood... Yeki nabood*

**By Victor Dabby (Class of '66)**

Yeki bood. Yeki nabood, once upon a time... So begins every Persian story. My story is about Tehran in the 1950s and 60s, a time of magic. Not just the best of times - but the VERY best of times.

Its sights and smells come back to me in a flash. Just a whiff of rose water and my mind goes back to an icy bowl of *faloodeh*... at my favorite sweets shop on Pahlavi.

I see steaming rice and I think of mixing in butter, raw egg yokes and sumac. Then digging into a plate of *chellow kebab*. I close my eyes and I see Shamshiri, the noisy, always-crowded restaurant on Naderi.

The smell of corn roasting on hot charcoals - *balal* - takes me back to the sidewalks of Shemiran.

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Tehran is where I began sinning... at age 16, getting tipsy on *ab-joh* - Persian beer - while eating *kalbass* – pork – at the Armenian shop. Pork and beer... Two sins in one.

Then there was my beloved nut store - next to the Cinema Diana on Shah Reza Avenue near Tehran University. Getting a bagful of *tokhmeh* - roasted salty watermelon seeds - then buying a ticket to the latest Jerry Lewis

comedy, dubbed in hilarious Farsi, was my idea of heaven.

My fondest Tehran memories: Sleeping on the rooftop during hot summer nights, gazing at the stars; huddling around a bonfire at the foot of Mount Demavand; riding a *dorosh-keh* - a horse-drawn buggy – to go shopping with my mother on Lalehzar.

I loved Tehran... I loved the Alborz mountains to the north, and the deserts to the south. Back then, it was a charmed city with only a couple of million people. It had wide, tree-lined boulevards and mazes of narrow alleys - *kutchehs* – that went on forever.

Many houses were surrounded by high brick walls, which hid perfect Persian gardens with small pools and fruit trees.

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But to me, the essence of Tehran was Community School, where I started in kindergarten.

You had to drive deep into the city to get to the sprawling compound on *Kucheh Mariz-khaneh* - Hospital Drive – near Jaleh street in the city's southeast.

We were in the heart of the downtown action, close to the *Majlis* or parliament buildings.

I would ask our driver - Gol Agha - to pass by the *Majlis* now and then, to see if there was a hanging in the square

that day. Often, the body was left dangling on a rope till noon. This was the very dark side of Tehran.

But there was light as well: Community School, a place where boys and girls, kids from 28 countries, mingled freely.

We were Muslim and Hindu, Jew and Catholic, Protestant and Zoroastrian, Bahai and Russian Orthodox. We spoke Farsi and English, Arabic and French, plus a gaggle of other languages.

We were cosmopolitans, raised on a heavy dose of idealism, big on the United Nations: We knew the words to the official UN anthem, Song of Peace, and regularly recited the pledge of allegiance:

"I pledge allegiance to my country, and to the United Nations of which it is a part, one world brotherhood of peaceful nations, with liberty and justice for all."

We also grew up on a rich dose of culture. We staged Gilbert and Sullivan operettas; recited poetry by Hafez and Saadi in Farsi class; we formed a choir to sing Christmas hymns under the chandeliers of the Hilton Hotel.

Still, all around us, we saw narrow-mindedness. Corruption. Repression. But we always had the feeling that - somehow - we were still moving forward... and that we would all see a better world when we became adults.

The thought of leaving Tehran forever... never crossed my mind. It seemed inconceivable that I would give all this up to live elsewhere.

But that is what happened.

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June 5th, 1963, was a Monday that started with just another math class.

Mid-morning, we heard roaring crowds and gunshot outside the school gate.

Our fire alarms started clanging and a nervous Miss Sahakian, the school's vice-principal, scurried from class to class, telling teachers to bring their students to the main auditorium.

There, we were told not to panic... that there was "trouble" outside, that our parents were arranging to get us back home. Mr. Laster said a prayer, led us in hymns to calm us down.

Meantime, the crowd noises outside the school were punctuated by gunfire. Someone whispered there was a mob at our gate... held back only by a handful of soldiers.

It felt like an eternity, but we were finally led out of the auditorium and into the courtyard to find our rides home. I saw Gol Agha, our family driver, and ran to our yellow Opel sedan, happy to escape the madness.

The drive home was surreal. Soldiers, troop carriers and tanks everywhere. Burnt-cars. And bodies. The half-hour journey home to Queen Elizabeth Boulevard... was tense as we slowed down at military roadblocks.

Safely at home, I surveyed the city skyline from our balcony. There were plumes of smoke and the radio played martial music. Then, a dusk-to-dawn curfew was declared. My father joined me on the balcony, looked out at the city and shook his head.

The next day, everyone talked about the "troubles," set off by the arrest of an obscure ayatollah.

It was the first time I heard of a man called Khomeini. It was also the beginning of the end. Eighteen months later, we emigrated to Canada. The unthinkable had happened. I left my beloved Tehran to never return.

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Yeki bood. Yeki Nabood.

The final date in this story is 1980. The events were recounted to me by a student who didn't want her name used. Still traumatized, she was part of the last graduating class of 1980. There were 125 students before the revolution; only 25 remained by graduation time.

The Community School campus was no longer safe. There were hostile crowds around the school gates. Fires were set.

Then, the last straw: Students from a neighbouring boys' school, climbed the walls and occupied the grounds.

Classes had to be moved to an embassy near Shemiran, far from downtown. Gone were the extra-curricular activities. Now, it was all work and no play. There was fear in the air.

Someone from the American embassy came to help students with applications to colleges in the U.S. He was among the hostages when the American embassy was occupied. All through this time, our old family driver, Gol Agha, continued to transport students to the school in his mini-van.

I remember this much about Gol Agha. He was a devout Muslim. He always carried a prayer rug in the car. Five times a day, he would stop whatever he was doing, go to the side of the road, and perform his prayers. He was deeply religious... but never made a big show of his faith. He just lived it. To this day, I still don't know if he survived the Revolution - or not.

Meantime, the students at Community school began to adapt to the new world order. Girls started wearing stockings, stopped using nail polish, and had little or no make-up - though they still resisted headscarves.

Now, graduating became difficult. Students had to learn the Koran and pass a test before getting their diploma. A private teacher was hired, and eventually everyone passed the Koran test and got a degree. No one went back to the

school after the final exams.

For some, it was time to escape. It took a year for one student's family to find a smuggler. Only 18 years old, she left Tehran alone with 11 other fugitives, crossing the border with Pakistan in the dead of night.

They made it to Karachi, then on to England, where she waited for her family. Five years later, they arrived with fake birth certificates. She loves Iran but remains shaken. All these years later, she won't speak about her experiences in public. She was the final witness to the Community School story as it ended - not with a bang - but with a whimper.

Community School itself may have died, but its spirit lives on... within each and every one of us. It made us who we are today - idealists in a universe of cynics, cosmopolitans in a small-minded world, tolerant as intolerance grows. For that, I am grateful.

Community School gave me a curious mind that led to a career in print and television... and a love of travel - lots of travel - all over the world. I remain a proud cosmopolitan. And try to pass on those values to my family.

I've had a long career in journalism. And, really, what is journalism? It's story-telling. And coming from Community School, we have the best stories...

Yeki bood. Yeki Nabood... Salaam, I'm Victor Dabby, class of '66. Thank you.