

I will always have my Esfahan

By: J. Rafael Angel, 2016

I arrived in the afternoon as the sun set.

I could see how the lines of the mountains merged with the outline of the buildings. Sounds invaded me, they were new to my ears: while some sounded familiar, there was some musicality in them that I could not identify. Curiosity took over.

My feet moved, directionless. The sight before me seemed like an overture of life: light and dark; noise and silence; movement, and stillness. It was oneness, I concluded.

Bluest of the blue colonized my sight. There was blue everywhere, from the blue in the water whose sound waltzed in my ears as I hear it fall in the fountains; as I heard it flow in the discreet channels next to the gardens. My eyes travelled as my feet moved. I felt observed, and it's interesting how one body moves when one realized the eyes of others are set on our wandering. One pays attention to the sound of the steps we give, to the way one look at things, to the way one embraces the contemplation that is taking place.

I found myself at the center of the square, one of the biggest one I have seen; almost as Big as *Tian 'An Men* Square in Beijing, although not nearly as big as *El Zócalo* in Mexico City. There I was, at the center of a place that was older than any of the descriptions I could generate; in a place that possibly gave meaning to words I now speak. I could have thought I was witnessing beauty, but a sudden thought stroke me: maybe this grandeur was observing my fascination, and was directing my childish curiosity and ignorance.

It's funny how one's mind keeps moving even if one's feet don't. I suddenly realize I could have been daydreaming for kind phonemes brought me back to reality and asked if they could take a picture of me. I am here to take pictures of you, I said to myself in silence, titling the scene as Woody Allen did in *Annie Hall*. One cannot say no to a pair of eyes that asks with such kindness. So there I was, immortalized in a place that was immortal to my eyes.

A deep breath, and I finally moved again. Forward, though it seemed I was going backward in time. It was time to walk through gates and walk through hallways of always; it was time to confront time and feel small again- isn't that why you travel anyways? - subconscious voices said to me.

As I moved forward, fumbling towards ecstasy, marriages of shapes and silhouettes and structures tempted my arms to open and let my hands touch the walls, in order to read their stories, in order to steal their secrets, in order to see myself there. Echo in my ears; the echo of my feet walking through time. Is this how time sounds? Is this how my mind translates what my eyes cannot comprehend? Meters and meters of beauty above me, below me, around me, behind me and ahead of me, I was in the middle of time and I was moving- what a moment, what a memory, what a gift. Light doesn't always obliterate darkness- it also makes you blind. Blindness in my eyes as I exited the corridor that brought me to another square, a moment frozen in time, a sight untouched by the Islamic revolution, not even the thirst for conquest of the orthodox Muslim leaders had the heart to destroy the soul of this city, Esfahan, the place where the eyes of the worlds gather.

Only great cities would understand, Esfahan finds pride in its long history, in the convergence of past and present, in the marriage of cultures, and in the union of mindsets.... A state of mind, a mindset, not a set mind, the buildings speak of the communion of Iranian and Islamic architecture.

You have appeared in pictures, you have been written about, you have heard the prayers of others and there you are in front of me, Shah Mosque, heart of *Naghsh-e Jahan* Square, and heartbeat of my Iran memories. I have always known luggage is heavy, but I had not experienced how quickly one's can fill. It took less than an hour for my bag of memories to nearly meet its limit, and I had just entered my room.

A city can be as alive as the human body; every street is an artery; every individual moving around is a drop of blood navigating the system of life. I opened the window of my room, and I am seeing through the eyes of the body: magnitude in front of me, grandeur I will never match. The sun has now set and a cool breeze invites me to abandon my solace and be a part of the crowd, a moment, of an experience, of the present.

I left back my baggage, the physical one, and decided to carry the other baggage- the one I had just packed. There are things one cannot leave behind, or do things decide not to leave us? I go back into the square and what a few moments ago was an orbit where stars found their passage, has now become a universe where there are planets of smells, sounds, images and shades. I love the texture my eyes see; I love the way my skin reacts; I love the way my language asks me to remember.

I have been given the opportunity to be a part of Esfahan's summer. It's 2013 and summer had never felt so determined to tattoo my life. Invisible tattoos were being printed on the very skin of my existence as I crossed the square, moved west, and arrived at a bridge that connects space, time, areas, perimeters, remembrances and celebrations.

Gallant, the structure of the bridge reveals the type or architecture that defies time. I sat at the end, on the other side, at the edge of what can be and end or a beginning, saffron-flavored ice cream causing revolutions in my mouth; the Iranian wind, curious at my Mexicanity, attempting to blow away my scarf. My scarf loves my neck, though, almost as much as I love this moment, and it clings to me as I cling to my abilities to eternalize this summer.

I was given a piece of advice as I flew from Doha to Tehran: never say no in Iran, just flow, you won't regret it. And this is what I did next: I did not say no. A group of youngsters approached me to ask me where I was from. I am always happy to realize people know where my country is; I am many times scared to get to know what hearing Mexico evokes in their head. Luckily, this time it was soccer, a topic I am clearly an expert on.... Not.

“*Bismillah* (اللله بسم), I heard one of my newly made friends pronounce and we walked to a traditional café. Our journey, accompanied by questions and foundations of stories that would be written in the days to follow, was both brief and long; one as a fact, one as an experience. At the café, I unlearned what I needed to unlearn, which

is why I travel. I planted memory seeds in fertile land and I was thankful for saying yes.

The doors of the café had closed behind me, and the doors of Esfahan had just opened. I faced the side of the street I would walk upon in a few seconds. *Khuda Hafiz* (حافظ خُدا), my lips pronounced; I waved, but did not say goodbye.