

A Mile in My Shoes

Eskandar – Size 5

“As a blind person, I have to shape my own world. This world consists of various sounds with sensory dimensions.”

My name is Eskandar, like Alexander in Persian.

I am 60 years old, and I have lived in Germany for 40 of those years.

I come from Southern Iran near the border with Arabic countries, like Iraq for example....

My wife and I have a lovely flat with a lift, but I always take the stairs.

I have been blind from birth, and I on paper I am 100% disabled. But I can deal with it very well.

I no longer try to imagine a life without blindness, that's long gone! But I have made attempts in various fields of knowledge: in journalism, in music, in literature... There is more than one meaning to my life.

If you love people, your life will always have meaning.

It may sound a little “grandfatherly”, maybe it sounds too sentimental. But it's like that.

On my wife's birthday, I wrote her a poem: [Reads in Persian]. It means, “Your birthday is spring in my winter” because she was born on the 30th of January.

As a blind man, I must craft my world together.

The world then exists of various easily felt sounds.

The cars in Isfahan drove differently and they sounded different to the cars in Germany, and also the smell of the exhaust is different in France, in Spain, in the US and in Iran.

Even when people watered plants or poured water in the street during the warm weather, it smelt different than it does here.

Even the rain smelt different. I can imagine each city precisely according to its scent. And sound.

When my daughter was born, my mother came to Germany.

She left behind her chador, her veil, at our house.

And whenever I went into the bedroom, I smelled something that transported to the world of my childhood.

Then one day I came home, and the smell was no longer there.

And I asked my wife Eschart and I said “Eschart, did you wash my mother’s scarf?” and she said, “Yes, why?”

And I was so annoyed, that I got a bit aggressive and said “Why did you do that?”

At the age of 4 I had to go to Isfahan and my mother had to leave me at the blind children’s home, she was told that she could always come, but only to look in through the window from the outside. There were two windows that were shut, and whenever she was there, even though I couldn’t see her I would scream wildly and cry that my mother was there, and the blind people said, “no there is no mother”, and the seeing were astonished that I noticed it.

And when the moment with the veil happened with my mother in Germany, I realised it was my mother’s smell.

When I tell about my life, many people are sad and say, My God, what you had to go through.

I don’t see it as a curse. I was born and grew up in a poor family. I was in a blind children’s home, where we were regularly beaten in an “unpedagogical” manner, we always had rationed food, so that if we found something in the bin, we would eat it with pleasure.

When I grew up in, the sliced bread you can buy nowadays did not exist in Iran, at least not in my circles. They had little packages of toast and they didn’t last so long, so they had to throw it away because it had expired. Aged 12, 13, 14, we would eat those up and it tasted like a meal for a king to us.

When we were caught we would be scolded and they would box our ears, all sorts!

I worked in radio, and strangely no one asked me whether I was underage and wasn’t allowed to work. Working meant rehearsing till 1am in the morning until we had produced a piece of music. Then I would walk to the home on foot, but there was a man at the home who was in charge of discipline, who ensured that no one left.

He waited until I arrived back, and I was so excited that I didn’t smell him at first, he was at the gate and he pushed me down, so that I fell 2 meters. My parents

lived in Isfahan, but I lived at that home, after that I went to my mother, to my parents.

My father would probably have beaten me too if he knew I had got home at 4 am.

When I got home my mother noticed someone had come in, and she came up to me and didn't say

"Who is it? Where have you been?" or something.

She said: "Hello, have you eaten?". I said: "No." And she heated some food up for me.

[sigh]

I always missed her so much. When I first came to Germany and didn't have any money, I saved up the little money I had to call Iran, and I always saved up 50 Deutschmarks in coins, so I could speak to her for a few minutes.

My mother and father both had good voices. They sang folk songs from South Iran.

Although my father was very fanatical and thought that music would lead you away from the right path in life, I always wanted to go to the left one - the wrong path.

[laughs] At home, everything was Islamic, and in the home everything was Christian, that means I could not only read but recite the Koran in song, I also learned to sing Christmas songs.

One time, I was 12. One day, some blind people were making music, there was a tin can, and I played a rhythm on it.

And someone asked, "who is making such a beautiful rhythm, you should learn a proper instrument."

I said, "A proper instrument is expensive." "Yes, but if you work in the summer, maybe you can save up and buy a violin".

And I had always dreamed of a violin.

It seems obvious that I am lucky to be an acoustic person. I must say I have practically perfect pitch; I learned the notes little by little, but today I play more by ear than by notes.

I think it's a fear I have, that humanity has become too individualist, everyone takes care of themselves.

And I wish that there was a bit more solidarity, in Germany too, and I think it is beautiful when people notice that the world won't collapse, if a blind foreigner is so Germanised, that they don't only give him a German passport, they just accept him.

That they tell him off when he breaks a law but accept him if he swears on the constitution and respects it.

We blind people live in a hyper-real world. When you come into this room, it is like a painting, or a drawing, but with me it is like a symphony.

I must listen to the symphony in its entirety.

Blind people imagine what a person is like from their scent and their sounds. There are sounds like the smiling noise, this... not smacking the lips... but it's like this [makes a noise]

Blindness is not the end of the world, but you shouldn't become blind if you can help it.