

HOW

by Lanna Joffrey

How are you here?

A question I am asked all the time.

How are you here?

Not

How are you?

HOW.

ARE YOU.

HERE?

Sometimes, I play vapid and make 'em work for it.

"Uhh I'm here at this birthday dinner because my friend invited me to her birthday dinner. How are you here?"

"Ha ha" they chuckle at my feigned stupidity.

"No, no I mean how are you able to live in London?"

Translation:

"How are you allowed to be in this-my country?"

Even more plainly,

"how are you allowed to be in this-my country because you don't look like a tourist even though you sound like one?"

The subtext is thick.

"Ohhhhh. I have a UK Artist Visa."

That usually satiates their Sherlock appetites, but no so fast oh curious one.

Pandora's box has been opened.

How am I here?

Well your country and the country I grew up in trashed the country I was born in.

They orchestrated a coup in Iran in 1953 and overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh.

And apparently it only cost about 60K to do it.

Only 60K to trash a whole country. (beat)

After Mohammad Mossadegh nationalized Iran's oil claiming their own resource and profit of that resource for themselves.

Ooooo the UK was not happy about that.

They, the Anglo-Iranian Oil company, now known as British Petroleum aka BP, huffed away.

They had been monopolizing that oil and its profits for years taking over 80 percent of the revenue for themselves.

And Mossadegh's actions of redressing the extreme imbalance and making what was unfair, fair was unacceptable.

The UK left Iran and refused to purchase that oil at a fair/reasonable price.

How dare Iran have a fair/reasonable share of the oil in its own country?

How dare Iran want to profit from its own resources to benefit its own people?

How dare it? (beat)

The UK issued a world embargo on Iran's oil blocking Iran from selling its oil to other countries.

We won't play with you anymore if you play with Iran.

Iran's economy tanked.

Poverty and anger rose so high that when the UK/US paid poor Iranians to riot and revolt against Mohammad Mossadegh, they did.

We are capable of anything when we are hungry

even if the hand that pays/feeds us is the reason we're hungry in the first place. (beat)

So, for a mere 60K, our hopes for a democracy and a self-sustaining country were burned up and in its place a Shah,

a King was put in power by the UK/US.

He was called the Puppet King.

His strings pulled and the imbalance was restored in favour of the puppeteers.

He knew he had to behave or he too could have his strings cut.

Our Iran simmered in this unfair imbalance for years

and slowly it raged into a fire.

Some say that fire was covertly fueled

by the US/UK who had become displeased with the Shah.

Some say it was solely the People's Revolution.

No matter what, that fire raged and roared and pushed the Puppet King out forever.

But the Revolution's replacement was no Western educated Prime Minister dedicated to democracy - Time's Man of the Year in 1952, Mohammad Mossadegh.

Did I mention Mossadegh spoke fluent French from his studies of law in Paris and Switzerland and applied those studies to Iran's government that could not survive when so many were set on destroying it and destroying him?

How dare he?

No, the replacement of the Puppet King Shah

was a charlatan that promised freedom and economic stability,

but created a strict religious regime with little freedom

especially for women.

SO

My family fled from our country to your country,

which was the reason we had to flee in the first place.

How strange/horrific to flee to the people who caused you to flee in the first place.

Who knows?

Some say Mossadegh was going to be unseated anyway

That he was not a man of the people, but an odd aristocrat, the son of a princess

Who behaved strangely meeting officials in his pajamas and

Could be stubborn refusing any compromise.

And some say he was a Father to the people who refused to compromise,

An anti-imperialist icon who was just a bit quirky.

Who knows?

Maybe Mohammad Mossadegh would have established a thriving democracy.

Or maybe Mohammad Mossadegh would have done a terrible job.

My Father tells me this as a consolation to himself when I ask him to tell me about this history.

He consoles himself with the possibility that our present reality was inevitable.

Maybe Iran would still have become what it is today.

Maybe Mohammad Mossadegh would not be the saviour we see him as today.

But we'll never know because your country and the US didn't let us find out.

They did not live and let live.

They shaped the history and lives of millions of human beings because of their greed and first world imperialist beliefs.

How strange/horrific to flee to the people who caused you to flee in the first place.

At this point the questioner is shocked.

It's a lot of new information that was never taught in their studies,
so I am met with wide eyes and awe.

I should mention, this bit of history is overplayed in many generations of Iranians.

They are tired of this what-if game where we speak of what could have been if Iran had been allowed to govern itself completely.

To fail and succeed as it saw fit.

Most of my family is not interested in documentaries of what happened.

They don't want to dwell any longer on what happened.

They say,

"Why should I watch a documentary about that?"

I lived it.

I lived this history.

Why would I want to live it again?"

But I can't let it go.

I can't stop imagining the Iran of before.

The Iran of Mossadegh.

The Iran where my Mother could listen to Iranian ballads without pain in her eyes.

In our American home, she could not bear to listen to the music of her childhood or of when she got married.

The music made her remember all that had been and would never be.

The Iran where most of the 9 brothers and sisters of my Father's family would still be in their original home.

Where the family tree didn't shatter and scatter into so many far-off places with hundreds or thousands of miles between them.

An Iran where we could all vacation near the Caspian sea.

Where Agha joon, Maman joon,

all my amehs and amoos and their children

could all gather together to enjoy and witness the majesty of our country.

Can you imagine?

I can't let it go.

And by this point, the questioner fully regrets having asked the question.

They try their best to make I'm listening and engaged faces,

but inside it has dawned on them this question might be rude and ridiculous.

They try to softly interject to end the unwelcomed monologue, with

"Oh wow, I had no idea. So, what are you ordering?"

But ah ah aaaa, not so fast there's more.

How am I here?

Well, I went to your sister country after y'all trashed my country.
And with a mountain of paperwork, we got our green cards.
We tried to make it a home and we did to an extent.
We became US Citizens with a mountain of paperwork and tests and interviews.
To the best of our abilities, we embraced thrived made a second home because
Say it with me now,
you trashed our first home.
How strange/horrific to flee to the people who caused you to flee in the first place.

And then I got into grad school in this country
by way of auditioning and filling out extensive paperwork and getting a student visa,
which cost hundreds in visa fees
and then thousands in university fees
and thousands in living expenses.
Despite a hefty student loan with horrible interest rates,
I still had to work a job while studying to survive and stay,
to be allowed to be here.

After the student visa,
I got a graduate entrepreneur visa
where I had to create a comprehensive extensive business plan
of how I would contribute to UK society using the skills I had obtained from my studies.
Plus, a 40 page application vetting me thoroughly.
And hundreds in visa and NHS fees.

The next year, I had to apply for the same visa
updating the progress of my business in another comprehensive extensive business plan.
Plus, another 40 page application vetting me thoroughly.
And hundreds in visa and NHS fees.

AND THEN

I got a 5 year UK Artist visa where I had to list ten examples of artistic excellence
in awards, positive reviews and proof of performances.
PLUS, three letters of recommendation:
One from a UK arts organization,
one from a US Arts organization
and one from a UK organization or individual in the arts.
All of it to be approved by the UK Arts Council.
Plus, a 40 page application vetting me thoroughly.
And hundreds in visa and NHS fees.

I am extremely fortunate to have access
to that giant terrible loan, which I will be paying off for decades
and to have worked enough to pay
for all these application and NHS fees,
but as you can see.
It's not an easy process.
Most of us jump through a multitude of hoops and demands to be here.

Most of us can't afford it.

The lucky few do.

How strange/horrific to flee to the people who caused you to flee in the first place.

SO.

That.

Is how I am here.

How are you here?

No,

no don't answer that.

Actually.

How are you?

Yeah.

How are you?