

Arkady Petrovich Samsonov

by Ali Allawi

I would never have known of Arkady Petrovich Samsonov were it not for my love of water. The sight of water fascinated me. It really did not matter in what form it came. It could be flowing in mighty torrents or quiet streams; rushing through gorges or tumbling down hillsides; brooding in dark lakes or surging in waves on giant inland seas. But the water had to be fresh. The oceans held no interest for me. And each year, I found myself in some corner of the world indulging this passion, and nowhere was this passion more rewarded than in the lakes and rivers of North America. It was there not long ago that I met Alicia Samson, a fellow passenger on a sight-seeing boat on the Ottawa River. She was in her late fifties, a plain, tall, bony woman. She wore a long, loose skirt and had a scarf casually tossed over her shoulder. She had an altogether frumpy look. She was visibly tired when she plunked herself next to me on the bench. The boat was half full and there were plenty of empty benches around, but she did not appear much concerned about where she was going to sit. That she ended up next to me was purely by happenstance. I shifted a bit to accommodate her. She placed a book that she was carrying right next to her on the bench, and she perched a large tote bag awkwardly on top of the book. I turned to face her and politely smiled. She returned the smile. I introduced myself and told her where I was from.

“I suppose you would call me a tourist, but I really do like the river. All rivers actually,” I said.

“I am Alicia Samson. I live right here in Ottawa,” she said.

“You must see the river every day. Why would you want to take the cruise then?” I asked offhandedly.

“Whenever it gets too much on land, I take to the water.”

The boat started to move. A packaged recording introducing the tour in four languages, including Japanese, sounded out from giant speakers. After a few minutes, a tour guide took over, mechanically repeating for the umpteenth time a deadly dull commentary on the river, interspersed with mirthless, rehearsed jokes. She seemed obsessed with the value of the houses on the riverfront.

‘..And this beautiful home recently exchanged hands for \$5 million.’

And on it went. I simply switched off and stared at the water, trying to imagine how the first voyageurs would have experienced the river.

“What a wonderful river,” I said to my fellow passenger.

“Yes it is. Have you seen any of our other rivers? The St. Lawrence?” she asked.

“Indeed. I have seen nearly all your main rivers, except the ones up North,” I replied.

“I love the river, but I wouldn’t travel halfway around the world just to see one. The Nile perhaps, or maybe, just maybe, the Amazon. I don’t know. I must say that I have never met a person before with this delight in rivers. My father though. He always talked about the rivers of Russia. But that was because he hardly saw a river where he was living for most of his life.”

She bit her lower lip and turned away. She looked straight ahead, stone-faced. She looked immensely weary. I waited a few moments before drawing her back into conversation.

“So your father was Russian?” I asked lamely.

“Yes, he was born there, but he really was an exile all his life. First Persia, and then here. We came here after the Revolution in Iran. In 1984 actually.”

“A Russian in Iran? What took him there?” I was genuinely intrigued.

“He loved Iran. He really loved the country. He said it was the land where souls bump into each other and greet each other like long lost friends. By souls he actually meant souls. That was how he saw his world. But actually he escaped from Russia just after the War. It’s a long story.” I sensed that she didn’t want to continue the conversation and for the rest of the tour I kept silent. As the boat was negotiating the final stretch of river before docking, she turned to me and said,

“I am sorry if I appeared a tad unfriendly. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Oh no, I shouldn’t have pressed you on personal matters. It is I who should apologise and I do. Please accept my apologies.”

“Listen, you are a stranger in this town and you must be tired of hotels. Would you like to have dinner at my house tomorrow night? I am inviting a few friends from the University, colleagues actually. By the way I teach at the University.” She handed me her card. It said

‘Alicia Samson, Professor of the History of Art’.

It had her office and home addresses.

“Seven o’clock, then?”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Of course! It’s settled then. I’ll see you at seven. Take a cab. Ottawa is a small town and my house isn’t too far from downtown. You are staying downtown?”

“Yes. I’ll be there. And thanks really.”

The following day was spent in anticipation of the dinner party that evening.

I arrived promptly at seven o’clock at the house of Alicia Samson. The house itself was a neat, two-storey brick building, with a very small driveway. A huge oak tree partly obscured the house from the road. I was in a pleasant inner suburb of the city, the kind of place which would attract senior civil servants and professors. I rang the doorbell but no one responded. I tried again. This time I could hear footsteps making haste towards the door. A flustered Alicia Samson opened the door.

“Do come in! I was just trying to call you at the hotel but obviously you had left.”

“I am sorry. Is anything the matter?” I asked.

“Well, yes and no. Do you remember the people who were supposed to join us tonight? They were a couple from the University but their baby-sitter cancelled at the last minute and they can’t join us. I called you to let you know in case you may not have wanted to come. I mean I wasn’t sure,” she said rather apologetically.

“Why on earth would you think that?” I said. “I hope you haven’t gone to too much bother.”

“No, its fine. Just a few steaks anyway. Come in.”

She ushered me into a tidy living room with just enough evidence of her professional interests. The sofa and matching armchairs had some tribal rugs draped over them, and the walls had excellent reproductions of paintings by 19th century Orientalists. One, which I had seen in the original in a 1985 exhibition in London, was a well-known piece by Gerome of a whirling dervish. I sat down in one of the armchairs with my eyes still gazing at the Gerome piece.

“So, are you an expert on Orientalists?” I hesitatingly suggested.

“No, it’s not my period or genre. I am actually interested in Byzantine iconography. But I am impressed. How did you know they were Orientalists then? Are you interested in this kind of painting?”

“It fascinates and repels me at the same time. This one in particular is quite exceptional,” I said. “But if this is not your main field of interest, why do you have them on the walls?”

“They were actually my father’s. He, on the other hand, was very much an expert on this sort of thing. You are right. He always said that Gerome’s whirling dervish was an

enigma for him. Was he an ecstatic or a fraud? He never made up his mind. Sometimes he would say that he was both- an ecstatic and a fraud. My father could never decide. This painting was done up for him by an incredibly talented painter in Iran. My father showed him a postcard of the painting and gave him its dimensions. Within six months the artist produced this painting. I have compared it to the original and it's perfect in every detail. All this from a postcard! What extraordinary talent! But it was wasted where he was. My father discovered him as it were, but in the 70's this fellow became a fashionable artist, avidly pursued by the nouveau riche and supplying them with dozens of lush paintings on sentimental subjects. After the Revolution there was no demand for his talent, so he turned to poster art. He is one of those responsible for the lurid, gigantic posters that you see all around you in Tehran these days. I'm sure you have come across them on TV or in magazines. I heard also that he may have turned to churning out high quality forgeries for the western art market. That's only a rumour though. My father kept a polite relationship with him after his discovery by the elite. What you see around you are all commissions from the fifties- the heydays of my father's sojourn in Iran."

She left me alone in the room while she went to prepare the final touches to the meal. I stood up to examine the artwork. Nearly all the paintings were of Orientalists, but intriguingly, all of them seemed to have a common subject. There were no paintings of slave markets or harems; none of caravans or bloodletting; imagined seraglios or exotic marketplaces. All the paintings were either of dervishes or people at prayer or some other form of devotion. Alicia Samson interrupted me while I was deep into another Gerome, this time of people at prayer on a rooftop in Cairo.

"Dinner is ready," she said.

We moved to a softly lit dining room. She had arranged that we sit facing each other at the small dining table. The conversation throughout the meal was quite wide-ranging and altogether pleasant. We spoke about my travels in search of rivers and lakes, her university career and her travels. As we reached the end of the meal, a very accomplished affair I might add, I felt that she had given me license to guide the conversation elsewhere. By this time, we were on a first name basis.

"Alicia, you mentioned your father a lot. I remember on the boat yesterday, you said he was a Russian. What took him to Iran and what brought you here? And the artwork? It all seems to be about prayer and dervishes."

She pondered what I had said for a few moments. I was unsure how she would react. Finally, she pushed her chair back slightly and fixing her gaze at the wall behind me, she began her story.

"My father was the late Arkady Petrovich Samsonov. You may not have heard of him but in his time he was something of a celebrity. Not for what he was but because he made a daring escape, with my mother and I in tow, from Russian-occupied Azerbaijan into Iran, at the beginning of the Cold War. He featured in a spread in Life magazine about 'those who chose freedom'. It was actually a daring escape. He was then a Professor of

Philology at Baku University. He had to make his way to Tabriz, then occupied by the Russians, and then cross the lines. But it wasn't because he 'chose freedom'. It was because he was looking for an ancient Sage in Iran, and he knew that this was his chance, perhaps the only chance, to ever see this man. It would not be a cliché to say that his entire previous life was a preparation for this moment. We are related to the General Samsonov who presided over Russia's greatest defeat in the First World War. He shot himself you know, after the battle was lost. My father frequently talked about that Samsonov. He thought we were a family of doomed causes. Anyway, he, my father, was born in 1910 into the minor nobility- that's his term not mine. But no sooner was he weaned than all was lost in the Russian Revolution. Two revolutions in one life time, first Russia and then Iran. A record of sorts, don't you think?"

Alicia got up from her chair and beckoned me to follow her back into the living room. I settled in my armchair while Alicia returned to the kitchen for tea. She reappeared a few minutes later carrying two steaming glasses of black tea. The glasses were of the Russian kind, set in holders with curved metal handles. She set both the glasses on a small oblong table- more like a footstool actually- and carried the table towards me. She then sat down on the sofa.

"So what did he do in Russia, your father I mean?" I asked.

"Well, he seemed to have had an extraordinary talent for languages, especially Eastern languages. I don't know where he picked these up, but he seemed to have been fluent in Persian and Arabic when he was barely ten. He was then picked out of hundreds to follow a special curriculum that led to the Oriental Institute. He studied under the greats and by the late 30's he had become a full professor of philology, with an unrivalled knowledge of mysticism. How he squared this with the rampant atheism of Stalinism, Lord knows, but he seemed to have been spared the purges of the times. Anyway, he always said that he should not have been born in Russia but elsewhere; Iran, Central Asia, the Near East. There was no way for him to move out of the gilded cage of the Oriental Institute. He wanted to be with the people he studied- not the mass of the people, I mean- but those whom he called the "illuminated ones". His chance came just before the war. He heard of an opening in Baku, Azerbaijan, where he thought that there still might be a chance of meeting one of his illuminated. How wrong he was! He somehow finagled this position. The secret police were naturally curious why a person would want to leave the relative comfort of a prestigious sinecure to move to a backwater. They probably put it down to academic eccentricity. He got his job in Baku, but he couldn't find any of his illuminated. They had all disappeared it seemed, through attrition, neglect and exile. I don't know, but this was the worst period of his life. A wretched town with a veneer of glum modernity, and none of its traditional virtues intact. There is nothing worse, he always said, than seeing the qualities that you thought a people possessed replaced by their negation. He never could understand why anyone would embark on such a profitless trade. He should have known better, but he was always an idealist. The miserable Baku years abruptly ended. When the Germans invaded, he was recalled as a special adviser to the commander of the Soviet forces in the Caucasus. He seemed to have acquitted himself well, although he never talked about the war years. The Soviets and the British

partitioned Iran between them, and when the war ended he was in Tabriz, in the Russian occupation zone.”

Alicia stopped and looked at me. With her eyes, I could sense that she was soliciting some sort of reaction to her story. I needed no prompting for my question.

“What about those “illuminated ones” that your father was seeking out? Who were they? Did he ever tell you?”

"Yes, he did mention them, but in the end there was only one left in Baku. They were the living connection with what he had spent decades studying. That was my father's real problem. He knew it and it gnawed him for nearly his entire life. It's not like art or any other subject for that matter. You could become an authority on something or another without necessarily becoming a practitioner. Take me for example. I think I know a lot about Byzantine iconography and I am quite content with my knowledge. But I don't need to become an actual iconographer. I am simply untalented in this regard and it would be foolish to make this a prerequisite for teaching Byzantine art. Historians don't have to be makers of history. But in my father's case it was different. He used to say that he was studying the secrets of being, so what was the point of detachment. But he never quite made it. I remember how he used to pace up and down our apartment in Tehran and mutter to himself over and over,

Wherever you turn there is His Face

It was a verse from the Quran. I asked him once what it meant and he became very agitated and said to me,

'Alicia, they held the secret of existence. I know what I am saying. They know the truth and I should know the truth, but I don't. I have spent years studying this. I am the founder of the Institute of Philosophic Gnosis, a full Professor, a friend and intimate of any number of "wise" men and women, but I know nothing. I am being driven to distraction. I teach the stuff, write learned books and articles on it, but I have only seen a glimpse of it—only a glimpse. It's not a glimpse of fantasy; it's a glimpse of reality.'

I didn't understand then, I was too young. But then all had changed when he met the great Sage of Dasht-i-Kabir."

Alicia stopped abruptly. She had an enormously sad expression on her face as if she was watching her father play out his tortuous path right in front of her. She slumped forward and covered her face with both her hands. I got up from my chair, not knowing what to do. I thought that I should leave, but she looked up at me and beckoned me to return to my chair.

"I will tell you the rest of the story of Arkady Samsonov. Never was a man more possessed than he. But what a goodly possession! In the end he came very near to finding the prize and died with that little bit of knowledge of the certainty that he needed. It

vindicated his entire life. You see, he insisted that there must be a whole other reality behind the visible, the manifest and that this applied to the realm of the Unseen itself. But the way to the Unseen, he complained, at least the formal, traditional way, had always been in fact through the seen, through what is apparent and what is reported. He could never accept that. This could not be, he said, and I agree with him now. How can the Unseen – the universe that is engulfed by Reality-turn itself inside out as it were through what is comprehensible. The comprehension of mind and memory cannot be sufficient. At least they were not for him. He called this the ever-present paradox, the divine riddle. He wanted to crack this paradox so that he would be caught and spun in the orbit of the Unseen. Actually seized. Actually possessed. He knew it was possible. And he wanted to experience this possibility that had driven him on his quest for decades. He only had fleeting glances of it but they were enough to tantalize, to beguile him. He used to say that the whole business was about bringing and reconciling opposites. That was what all the greats that he studied had done. Not in a silly synthesis but in a higher form which is from but not of each. Not through cancellation or augmentation, but an entirely new unity. And finally, through this bringing together of opposites, bringing together of the conflicting and contradictory, he could see through them and beyond them. A point of infinite expansiveness and denseness simultaneously. He wanted to know where this came from, this realisation that is so bare in its utter simplicity but that carries the profundity of the ages. And perhaps the insights and states of the others- those great beings who lived in this unity and lived the unity and whom he spent a lifetime studying – will point the Way. It was to do with seeking. And ultimately finding Reality, Truth, *the Haq* as people had called it. The whole journey for him was about finding *Haq*. That was why he went to Baku and finally what brought him- and us- to Iran."

Alicia spoke in a haunting tone. I could sense that she was talking about her own anguish and not only of her father's. She continued her story.

"When the Soviets occupied Tabriz, they needed trusted Azeri and Farsi speakers and my father was given charge over a whole department overseeing translators and researchers. One day, a man, a dervish, walked into his office and without further to do informed him that a certain Sage of Dasht-i-Kabir sends him his felicitations and says that in a few weeks, he, my father, will be confronted with the greatest decision of his life, and when the time comes, he is to seize the moment and escape into Iran. A short and stark message. True to the dervish's message, the Soviets, buckling under American pressures, prepared to abandon their Iranian Azeri enclave. That was in 1947- or late 1946, I don't quite remember. Tabriz was in turmoil as the Soviets began to pull out and their erstwhile allies panicked. We moved out of our house into a shack on the outskirts of Tabriz, arranged by our house guard, a person who was fanatically loyal to my father and made the escape with us. The KGB and a hundred other Soviet agencies were on the prowl looking for us. There was quite a lot of street fighting between various factions and groups, but this house guard seemed to know everyone of them. One night, we piled into a rickety car- I still remember the bitter cold of that night- and the house guard, doubling up as our driver, managed to work his way through any number of checkpoints, none, remarkably, manned by communist troops. We got to the Iranian lines in the morning, and the following day we were taken to Tehran by special transport. We went straight to

the US Embassy, where the press corps was assembled to hear of the intrepid journey of those "who chose freedom"! One of the journalists asked my father about our seeking asylum in the US. My father, to the shock of the assembled American officials, said he had no intention of seeking asylum in the US but would rather stay in Iran to pursue his academic career! They were all horrified and after this episode we were quickly forgotten by the Americans. The embassy wrote us off, but not after ensuring that a number of articles were written about our ordeal, none of which, I might add, mentioned the asylum business. My father was quickly adopted by his Iranian academic colleagues and was offered a teaching assignment at the university. In time, he co-founded the Institute of Philosophic Gnosis with a few Western academics resident in Iran."

"What an extraordinary story! And the Sage? Did he ever meet him?"

"Yes he did, but it was a struggle. Not so much because my father couldn't find him, but more because the Sage was not prepared to see him. There was this cat-and-mouse game that went on for nearly a decade before the Sage agreed to see my father. Meanwhile my father was writing monographs and books and became quite well known. He was invited to all the cultural soirees of the capital, and was an adviser of sorts to the royal palace. But there was always this unresolved tension inside him. The more he researched and wrote, the more anxious he would become. One day, out of the blue, a certain Massoud, the very same dervish who called on us in Tabriz, pops into our house. He was not the Sage's manservant, nor his disciple for that matter. I remember that day vividly. He walked into our living room, a disheveled man with wild hair and a weather-beaten face. He marched up to my father and announced enigmatically, 'If you want to find him, come to the *kharabat*. He will await you there. He informs you that you are now ready.' But my father knew what this man meant. He had been tracking the Sage's every movement. The very next day he announced to my mother that he was going off to find his Sage. My mother was aghast and tried to dissuade him but he would have none of it. She understood well enough what my father's journey would entail. He had talked long enough about the Sage and his retreats into the desert, and not just any desert, but the Dasht-i-Kabir, the Great Desert."

Alicia stopped for a minute, trying to retrieve her memory of those long gone days.

"You know," she continued, "my father had escaped to Iran essentially to be with this man, and this was his opportunity. This was his moment and he had to take it. The Sage used to periodically leave the capital to go to a *kharabat*- ruins- in the Great Desert. The *kharabat* were some ancient caravanserai that had been abandoned for centuries. There was no water. The wells had dried and the caravanserai was left for ruins. My father used to relate that the Sage used to go there alone. He rode the buses to the last stop before the Dasht-I-Kabir, and then simply walked off into the desert in the general direction of the *kharabat*. He carried with him a thermos flask filled with tea, a small parcel of sugar lumps and some dried fruit. That's it. The *kharabat* were a three day walk at least from the last town. And a few miles before the *kharabat*, waiting for the Sage under some shrivelled trees, would be Massoud, the very same Massoud who came to visit us all those years ago. And this was where my father was determined to go. I was young then,

and was uninterested in deserts, sages, and dishevelled, wild men. I was merely curious about my father's strange obsession with this man. My mother though was terrified-terrified at what might happen to my father and to us were he to go ahead with his plan."

"And was she right? I mean was she right to be terrified?" I asked breathlessly. The story of Samsonov and his sage had captivated me.

"No, in fact the opposite was the case. My father came back a transformed man. He took the buses to the great desert. And he stayed a few days in some hovel in the last town before the desert. The townsmen confirmed that the Sage- whom they called the *Majnoun*-the Madman- was there a while ago and he had marched off into the desert. He hadn't yet returned so they assumed he was still in the *kharabat* . The townsmen had no interest in the ruins. Nobody visited them so they couldn't fleece the travellers. Nobody inquired about them, so they couldn't give spurious accounts about them to gullible visitors. Nobody was interested in them, so they didn't qualify as sites with earning potential. The only person who went there was this *Majnoun* and he had nothing of value for them. They were hungry jackals, and jackals have no use for diamonds- not even the Kohinoor diamond! And now there was this other man, this *farangi*, a Russian no less, who seemed to be equally deranged, asking about these infernal ruins.

"My father had wanted a guide to take him to the *kharabat*. He couldn't find one who would even give him the general directions to them. Finally an old woman approached him in the town's dingy souk. She had heard that there was this strange man from the capital who was looking for directions to the *kharabat*. She must have felt sorry for him- or perhaps she was curious. Or for whatever reason. She gave him the general directions and then said to him: 'It's the Sage who has been looking for you. If you don't find him, he will find you.'" The following day my father set out into the great desert.'

"Who was this woman?" I said.

"I don't know. A guide to the guide? I believe so. She was there when she was needed most." said Alicia.

"Amazing!" I said.

"Yes, but the story becomes even more astounding. My father sets out into the wilderness, also on foot. He wanted to hire a motorcycle, but no one would give him one. In any case I don't know how useful a motorbike would have been. How far could you have gone with one? He took a fair amount of provisions though; water, dried fruit, some dried biscuits, all carried in a backpack. The great desert is essentially impassable. In parts it is a gigantic salt pan where the ground is covered in a thick white crust. More like a salt swamp, the Daria-I-Nemek they call it, the Sea of Salt. In other parts, a sort of black mud had hardened into a pitted and honeycombed landscape. I've been there; but not in that way. Nobody ventures into it as such. People have skirted around it for centuries and it is along these well-worn tracks that the *kharabat* lays. These tracks pass through red hills and there are quite a few oases on the way. It's very hard to get lost if

you stick to these tracks and you are generally safe if you avoid the fiercest of the sun's rays. Nights are cool, sometimes cold even- and the stars, the stars. I have never seen such nights, and when the crescent moon dominates the heavens, well ..”

Alicia fell silent. She was clearly remembering the stars of the nights of the Dasht-I-Kabir, and the crescent moon that is stamped on its heavens.

“What happened then?” I asked.

“My father never talked about it, until a few months before his death. He never said a word either to my mother or to me or to anyone else. And when he finally told me, it was only on condition that I never speak about it- and I won't,” she said determinedly. “But I can tell you, he returned a different man. A completely transformed man. After that, nothing would faze him, nothing would disturb him, nothing would agitate him. He sailed through the tumult of the Revolution. He never blinked when his students started raving about his being a spy. He was supremely unmoved when he was stripped of his post as the Director of the Institute, and then quickly pushed out of the place entirely. He simply rearranged his time and spent hours, sometimes days, with an obscure holy man in the mountains north of the city. My mother died just before the Revolution and it was up to me to find the way out of the country. Months of petitioning finally led to the precious visas to Canada. He didn't want to leave, but I could not leave him there alone. He finally relented and we have been here since '84.”

“What did he do when he got here? This is hardly the place for his dervishes,” I said.

“You'd be surprised. He didn't seek out anyone, but word travelled fast. Pretty soon, our house was full of visitors seeking him out. Initially they were acquaintances and colleagues, exiles mainly from his Tehran days, but they drifted away. All they could talk about were the good old days and my father had little time for them. But others then came and they were what you would call “seekers”- mainly university types, immigrants but increasingly ordinary people who wanted to make sense of their lives. The meetings became regularised and I noticed that my father had begun to take a guru-like lead in these gatherings. Subtle changes to his demeanour, to his clothes, to his face even began to take effect. He grew a beard and began to deport himself in an ersatz eastern get-up. He hardly looked at his library any more. He had collected a huge range of books on philology, eastern languages and literature, mysticism- but they all sat there gathering dust. It took a huge bribe to get these books out I tell you. He only consulted two things- a Quran with a Persian translation, and the collected poems of some Persian mystic. But he was never happier or more fulfilled than in these last years. He radiated light and joy. I, on the other hand, was too mired in my own life, trying to get ahead. I was completely indifferent to these new visitors and followers of my father. I knew a few of them at the university, but apart from the odd nod to them, and ensuring that when their gatherings took place that they had enough food and drink, I basically stayed away. I really was not too interested in all of this. In the end I believe, my father accepted most of the rituals and beliefs of the dervishes and probably became one of them. When he sensed that his end was coming, he just withdrew into his upstairs room, his retreat he used to call it, and lied

on the mattress for days on end. He refused to see a doctor, saying that the ‘hour cannot be delayed or postponed.’ On the morrow of his death I came into his room and saw him in the most extraordinary posture. He was lying on a small rug, in prostration. He had died in this position.”

Alicia looked up at the ceiling, holding back her tears. Eventually, she comported herself and turned to look at me.

“You know, he was trying, in his own way, to tell me that true knowledge does not come from the accumulation of facts. A few weeks before his death he pulled me aside and said to me:

‘Alicia, you are a bookish person. That’s good enough as far as it goes. But I tell you I have been tormented by such knowledge. From my childhood I knew I was going to be on this strange journey, but I couldn’t take the plunge. I found a substitute for experiencing it by filling myself with knowledge from books. But this I now know was the real barrier. I had embarked on this quest for awakening to realities but I was unable to reach these realities because I couldn’t let go. I was too arrogant- or foolish- to acknowledge that if I wanted to plunge headlong into the Ocean-the Ocean of Existence and Being-I would necessarily have to reach, see, experience the Ocean. And the journey to the Ocean can follow any number of routes. A very few are born on its shores. Most are born inland and carried further into the hinterland- away, often far away from any Ocean or the Ocean breeze. The roar and thunder of crashing waves are nowhere near them. They are told of its existence. Most live their life without even remembering that there is an Ocean. Some, many these days, have no sense that there is in fact such a thing. They are crushed by their reason; by the weight of existence, by the sheer effort of living with no purpose. When I went to see the Sage of Dasht-i-Kabir, it was for this motive. I wanted to be unburdened of this terrible load. I knew that the more I accumulated facts and opinions, the more distant I became from my true goal. I had to break out of this cycle, even if it meant sauntering off into the desert.’”

Alicia suddenly got up from her chair and started to pace the room furiously.

“I didn’t know what he was talking about then. I now know. I just regret that I couldn’t talk to him about it then, to share his grief and then his elation when he returned from his journey into the desert. He had found himself so late in life- but he did find himself. He had talked about those who have felt a stirring to see the Ocean or at least to hear stories about it. Better to hear stories about it than to deny its existence, he said. He had talked about those who out of despair at the unhappiness that has been their lot refuse to accept that they will eke out their lives in ignorance of the possibility of joy. Those whose lives are circumscribed by the hardness of things, of defined facts, who have succumbed to the self-definition of Man. He had wondered whether the bleakness of asserting non-meaning to things and events is a form of self delusion itself. The horrible contours of an unbound and arrogant reason he called it. I can’t think of a better term. He had spoken of the virtues of a courteous mind, one that knows what it does not know and steers clear from what it cannot know. Such a mind is capable of acting as a lighthouse, he said, one that

throws its beam into the dark hoping to catch a glimpse of the Ocean and then point the way for others to follow. I wish I had listened to him then. Now it seems to be my turn. I wonder if we are genetically predisposed to this. The gnawing doubts. Ambiguities. Elation. Fleeting glimpses of reality. Frequent disappointments. The very intrusive nature of our particular reasoning. Yes ,but! The tentative affirmation; followed by the reasoning doubt. The conflicts of an ambiguous mind. I want to fix this matter for myself now! It is my turn! I want to see his Ocean too! I want to die like my father!"

She almost shouted out that last remark. She sat down, exhausted, and sank into a long silence.

Why had this woman invited me over to her house, I asked myself. What could I do in her anguish? I got up to take my leave. As I stood up, I blurted out,

"Your father must have been a great man. I wish I had known him."

She walked me out to the hallway where she called a taxi for me.

"Do you want to see his library before you go?" Alicia asked. "It's upstairs."

We went up to the library. The room was crammed with thousands of books. They were in bookcases, on open shelves, on piles on the floor. On the far side was an ancient writing desk. It had been cleared except for a small picture of an elderly man with a straggly beard, in a white cap. A long string of beads was wound loosely around the picture frame. Alicia picked up the frame and passed it on to me.

"That was my father," she said.

I looked at the picture. There was an inscription written across the top of the picture. It was in some oriental script, probably Arabic or Farsi.

"What does that say?" I asked Alicia.

"It's in his handwriting. He told me it's from the poet Jami and it says:

*Dream not that Truth can be revealed by words
From this fond dream, O Dreamer, find release*

In the end he lived his truth."

The taxi announced its arrival with a timid blow on the horn.

"That was a most interesting evening," I said. "Thank you for inviting me over. But, if you would allow me to ask, why did you tell your story to a complete stranger. I mean our bumping into each other on the boat was hardly an introduction!"

Alicia said nothing until she saw me out of the house. Then, looking straight at me with burning eyes, she said,

“My father said something to us, to my mother and I, when he returned from his sojourn with the Sage. Something I would never forget. He said:

Die before you Die!

Yesterday, on the boat, when I met you, I had already made my decision. Inviting you over was my means of confirmation. I shall die, before I die!”

She was smiling as she waved me away.

I never saw Alicia Samson-Samsonov again.

But a few months later, I did receive a postcard from her. It was of a lake in Sweden. It said, simply:

‘So much water. I thought of you. Thanks for listening. I am not dead yet, but on my way!’