

## EDUARDO CARRILLO

*The Artist Dreaming of Immortality in the House of His Grandmother, 1990*  
oil on canvas, 42 x 48 in.



COURTESY COLLECTION OF THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA,  
GIFT OF ROBERT KEELER AND THE JOSEPH CHOWNING GALLERY

## PAUL SKENAZY

# Distant Relations

An American travels to Iran

*You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

—Exodus 22:20

**T**his is a love story. It is the story of a month I spent in Iran thirteen years ago—a chapter in my life when doors to another world opened to me and I managed to walk through some of them. It is not enough to call Iran a foreign world; it is distinct from any other country I had visited before. It's not true to call it an exotic world; the cities especially are industrialized, the population well educated. And it is unfair to call it a dangerous world, as I might have myself before I went. What to call it: that is more difficult to say. For now, let's start with the word *family*.

### May–June 2003

Before Farnaz and I began living together in 1999, Iran was a news blip: the hostage crisis, Iran-Contra. By 2003, after four years of my getting to know Farnaz and her family, Iran had a more substantial, more confusing, role in my life. It was the country where her grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles were born. It was *Noh Ruz*—Persian New Year—each March equinox; Persian food and massive family get-togethers at Christmas; conversations in Farsi I couldn't understand. In the Bay Area where we lived, it was part of our home life. It was her Persian traditions awkwardly blended with my Jewish celebrations, a sometimes exciting, sometimes dissonant combination of half-practiced beliefs and cultural inheritances.

In 2001 Farnaz went to Iran with her grandmother, mother, and twin sister and brought back stories, kilim, and the desire to return: alone, to live with relatives, study Farsi, and attach herself to the country; and together, to introduce me to this part of her world.

So in April 2003, Farnaz traveled to Iran to stay for five months. She had planned to start her visit in late March but delayed the trip because of the Iraq invasion. I met her in mid-May for a month.

My father's family came from Turkey to the U.S. in 1912, a century ago. Turkish baklava was not the same as Persian baklava. But a trip with my sister to Turkey in 2001 was about all I had to go on to imagine what Iran would be like.

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San Francisco International Airport. I sit toward the back