

The People Smuggler
Robin de Crespigny

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Extract from Chapter 7
Clutching At Straws

The Kurdish militia seem disinterested when we are handed over in Sulaymaniyah. All they ask for is our names and then they let us go. I am ready to head back to Iran and my family as fast as I can, but Mustafa likes alcohol and wants to get as much drinking done as he can while he is here.

Then there is the problem of paying for a smuggler. I now know

that while it is not difficult to get across the border into Iran, it remains impossible to get any further on your own. I had hidden fifty American dollars and some Iraqi dinars in my shoe, but it is hardly going to be enough to live on.

At first I remain patient but on the third night Mustafa staggers into our tiny hotel room singing. It is three o'clock in the morning, and he wakes me up to ask for money to keep drinking. His alcohol breath and maddening behaviour remind me of my wayward youth and I am unable to contain my fury. 'What are you doing? I hardly have enough left for us to eat!'

'No alcohol in Iran,' he says with a hiccup, 'so we have got to drink as much as possible before we leave.' He leers at me and I have to stop myself from hitting him.

'Are you out of your mind?' I yell, but as I watch him stagger around with a ridiculous smile on his face, I remember that complete abandonment of any responsibility and the glorious sense of freedom that alcohol brings. For a moment I wish I could say, 'To hell with it all,' and join him. But instead I grab Mustafa and throw him on the bed.

I cover him with a blanket, but he flings it off and tries to struggle back onto his feet. I raise my fist to him and he slowly shrinks back down. Then I restore the blanket and command with one hand still clenched, 'Sleep!' and he quickly shuts his eyes. Within minutes he has fallen into a deep drunken slumber and snores so loudly that I give up on any chance of further rest and sit at the window waiting for the sun to rise over the city.

I must have dozed off because the call to prayer begins to waft mournfully out from the mosques and my eyes snap open to see Mustafa sitting, head hanging low, on the edge of the bed. I go to the bathroom and get him a glass of discoloured water from a rusty tap in our cheap hotel. He gulps it down and looks at me. He is not about to apologise but he is clearly full of remorse.

'Do you still have the \$US50?'

I stare back at him, wishing I had never told him what was in my

shoe.

‘Yesterday, before I was too drunk,’ he says sheepishly, ‘I met a smuggler who can take us to Qom.’

‘Even if we get ourselves across the border, \$US50 will hardly get us around one checkpoint and there are at least five or six before we would be out of the woods,’ I say sceptically.

‘If we give him your \$US50 up front, he is prepared to trust us to pay him \$US150 when we get to Qom. I have someone there who will lend us the money for him when we arrive.’

I look at Mustafa, wondering what sort of smuggler would make that kind of risky deal. There is no way of knowing what condition Mustafa was actually in when he made it, so I am understandably uneasy. ‘Is he any good? I mean, why would we trust him?’

Mustafa shrugs. ‘Do we have any choice?’

I want to shout at him, ‘If we had gone immediately, and not had to pay for three days of drinking, hotels and food, we may have had more options,’ but I don’t, because I know the price of blame, and I just want to get back to my family. Besides, I identify with Mustafa’s need to salve the pain.

The smuggler, Fadi, is friendly enough. A tough, swarthy Kurdish Iranian in his forties. We meet him in a small village on the Iraq side of the border. Considering how Fadi came our way, I am slow to trust that he knows what he is doing and am already wary when he says, ‘Tomorrow we go by car and then by bus.’

I had assumed we would be going the same way as when I finally escaped from the border camp in ’97.

‘Isn’t it safer through the mountains?’ I say, trying not to show my irritation.

‘I always go on the road,’ he replies casually.

‘Great,’ I say and glare at Mustafa. ‘I appreciate your deal,’ I tell Fadi, ‘but it’s worth nothing if you can’t get us there.’

‘Don’t worry.’ He waves his hands dismissively. ‘You get there.’

I feel as vulnerable as I used to with the resistance, when they would organise our papers then leave it to us to get ourselves out of trouble.

Next day a car arrives to pick us up. As we approach the border Fadi turns to us in the back seat. ‘When we get there you say nothing. Even if they ask you something you don’t say anything. You ignore them.’

With the prospect of another jail term or deportation looming ahead of me, I join Mustafa in nodding compliantly.

A bull-headed guard leans into the car and looks us over. I am waiting to be dragged out, when he exchanges a few words I don’t understand with Fadi and waves us on. I put my head back on the seat and breathe again. Despite my pounding heart, that certainly was easy.

At the first checkpoint the same thing happens and I begin to feel a little embarrassed that I doubted Fadi. He is smarter than I had given him credit for, and whatever deals he has in place with the authorities are being respected. My confidence in him has grown to such an extent that I settle into my seat and fall asleep.

I am woken with a jolt by Fadi issuing new instructions. ‘We eat and sleep here in Marivan, then tomorrow we go by local bus.’ I don’t know what had tempted me into becoming so complacent; of course this dream ride couldn’t last. Now the nightmare begins. Fadi sees my face and laughs reassuringly. ‘No problem, you will get to Qom.’

But I doubt it.

Next morning, before we leave to catch the bus, Fadi says, ‘We’ll have to get off the bus to get around the checkpoints. The driver will find a way to let you off and on without the passengers knowing, or they might tell the police as we pass through.’

I stare at him, astounded. ‘How?’

‘Don’t worry, we will work it out,’ he says, again waving his hands.

I am now having serious qualms, but I am comforted by the fact that he said *we*, so at least we’re not expected to work it out by our-

selves.

When we get on the bus the driver takes no particular notice of us so I begin to worry that while Fadi shone on the previous leg, the deal with the driver may not have been as convincing. Mustafa and I sit together, with Fadi across the aisle. After a couple of hours we are approaching another checkpoint, and I become uneasy.

Then I notice the driver making a show of finding he has run out of cigarettes. He throws the empty packet on the floor and shortly after pulls over into a roadside café. As he gets out he calls down the bus, 'Anyone need cigarettes or anything else, you can get it here.'

Fadi gets up and we follow with a group of other passengers. Some go into the café, use the toilet or stand outside and smoke. It is not difficult for us to sidle off. Then it is a mad dash behind Fadi to get to the pick-up point faster than the bus. We run like maniacs along rough, stony donkey tracks until we see the road again, then sprint towards a bus stop where people are waiting to get on.

The bus is filling up, so it is easier not to be noticed when, later that day, it stops and the driver announces he thinks he has a problem with a tyre. As he gets off to check it, Fadi pushes us out ahead of him and when no one is looking we sneak off.

Fadi knows the fastest route around the checkpoint but we have to really run to keep up with him. The poor bus driver must have thought we wouldn't make it and have actually changed a tyre, because we end up waiting for him. But this gives him a reason to stop again, to check if the new one needs tightening.

And so it goes. Holes in the road, engine problems that require regular attention, and tyres that need checking. Nobody seems to be paying the slightest attention. They talk with each other, play with their kids, read and sleep. Despite myself, I begin to think this is a pretty professional setup.

It is night when we approach the city of Sanandaj. When the bus stops to let some passengers off Fadi nudges us. 'You go with him.' We are near the exit and we see an old man getting off. I now trust Fadi

enough to do whatever he says, so we follow the order. But as soon as this guy hits the ground he takes off like a hare. I thought I was fast but he is something else.

‘Wait, you motherfucker,’ I swear, but he won’t. Mustafa is close to passing out after his three days on the bottle. But when he yells, ‘You’re killing us, you crazy idiot,’ the old man calls back over his shoulder, ‘They have dinner in the city, then the bus will go. If we are not there they will leave without you.’ I must admit, as I gasp for breath and clutch my chest, Fadi certainly has a dedicated team.

After several kilometres up and down uneven hilly country we make it into the city and to our relief the old man grabs a taxi to the restaurant. We collapse into the back seat and try to get our breath back. The old man is hardly panting. When we arrive he beams, ‘We made it.’ I look into the restaurant and indeed the other passengers are still eating. ‘Thank God,’ I sigh and pat his back gratefully.

We don’t know when we will eat again so we are gulping down chicken and rice when Fadi joins us and whispers, ‘Okay. Let’s go.’

‘Where?’ I sigh incredulously.

‘You must hurry,’ he urges.

Mustafa looks as if he is going to faint.

We drag ourselves into another taxi and while Fadi directs the driver we try to psyche ourselves up for another lap. On the edge of town we get out and Fadi points to the lights from a highway nearly a kilometre away. ‘We have to get to that road before the bus does, so come on.’

For the fifth time we begin to run. Fortunately it is downhill but it is so dark we can see almost nothing. We are running full pelt when we plunge into a hedge with sharp thorns. Then as we tumble over it and into the dry soil on the other side the dust is salty so burns our cuts and we howl like beaten dogs.

When we finally get to the road, we don’t know if our bus has gone or not. We wait and wait but there is no sign of it. So when a different bus comes, Fadi pushes us onto it. I am alarmed because I know there

is another checkpoint, which is meant to be impassable, and Fadi has no deal with this new driver.

Everyone on this bus is asleep so we stand up the front, with Fadi hanging over the driver. I can't hear what he is saying but suddenly Fadi is pointing and making him go faster. I peer into the traffic and there ahead of us is our bus.

Our original driver must have been going slow and watching for us, because when he sees us, he pulls over and we get back onto our bus. Everyone is awake, even the kids, sitting up watching us with huge smiles on their faces, glad we have made it. So much for our subterfuge.

Mustafa and I nod and smile back. We are deeply touched that they are on our side. I feel their warm embrace, and for a moment that deep wound of loss for my country, my little city of Diwaniyah, my home, opens like a bleeding flower. They make room for us to sit, and exhausted, we both fall asleep until we reach the last checkpoint. It is as I had heard, up in the mountains with no other way around.

I have no idea what Fadi has planned but I have come to trust he has thought of everything. He passes Mustafa a container and says, 'When we stop, put this water in the radiator.'

Then he gives me a wet cloth and a bucket. 'And you can climb up on the front of the bus and clean the window.'

Knowing that not just the driver but the whole busload are with us makes everything easier. We do what Fadi says and as the police march around the bus, checking the passengers, not once do they even notice us. So miraculously we pass through with no problems, and this time as we get back on the bus and set off everyone claps us, and we are at last on our way to Qom.

When we arrive Mustafa gets the money we owe from his friend and we pay Fadi. I wish I had some more to give him extra. I had misjudged him. He is wily, diligent, clever and professional. Getting us here seemed to matter to him more than the money.

'Thank you,' I say, shaking his hand with admiration and respect.

CLUTCHING AT STRAWS

'You are some smuggler.'

He grins and goes on his way, but I won't forget him.