

AN ESCAPE JOURNEY

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It was 11:30 P.M. in Kabul. We were all waiting for my uncle to return from a meeting with his collaborators. Every night before the curfew, they distributed *Shabnameh* (*The Night Letter*), a pamphlet mimeographed or copied by hand and secretly left in public places. Many people had been arrested, tortured, imprisoned, and killed for the possession or distribution of antiregime *Night Letters*. Usually, my uncle got home by ten, but now the clock was about to strike twelve midnight. What could have happened? Had he been arrested? If he didn't get home before the midnight curfew went into effect, he could be shot.

Suddenly, a pounding at the door broke the silence. My heart beat faster and faster as I rushed to the door. Who could it be? Could it be my uncle—or soldiers coming to arrest my dad after they arrested my uncle?

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Open the door," a voice replied from the other side of the door. I didn't recognize the voice.

"Open the door," the voice repeated.

As I turned the knob, the person pushed the door open, throwing me back against the wall. My uncle rushed into the living room. I slammed the door and ran after him. Trembling and gasping, he looked toward my dad and said "Abdulla and Ahmed have been arrested . . . they could have given my name under torture . . . I'm next."

"We have to leave immediately," my dad replied.

I helped my mom pack canned foods, clothing, and the first aid kit. We were told to take only the things that we would need for our journey, but Mom slipped the family photo album between the clothes. After a frantic hour of rushing from room to room, gathering our supplies in bundles, we had to wait until the curfew was lifted at dawn. At the crack of dawn, we abandoned the house forever, setting out on an uncertain journey. As Mom shut the front door, she looked for the last time at her great-grandmother's teapot.

We took a bus from Kabul to Nangarhar. Along the road to Nangarhar were two or three checkpoints where soldiers would search the bus for arms and illegal documents. At the first checkpoint, a soldier got on the bus. From the hammer and sickle on his cap, I knew he was Russian. He wore a big army coat and held a rifle, an AK-47 Kalashnikov, to his chest. His boots shook and rattled the windows and the metal floor of the bus. Suddenly, he stopped, pointed his gun at a man, and signaled him to get off the bus. The man ignored him. The soldier stepped forward and tried to pull him out of the seat, but the man clung to the seat and wouldn't let go. My heart was racing. Drops of sweat were forming on my forehead. Finally, the man let go and was escorted by two other soldiers to a jeep parked beside the bus. The pounding of the boots against the bus floor started again, and this time, the soldier stopped at my dad and me.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To my uncle's funeral in Nangarhar," Dad answered.

"Your ID?"

Dad gave him his ID. The soldier opened it to see the picture. I felt a drop of sweat drop from my forehead. Finally, the soldier handed back the ID. He looked around the bus once more and gave the driver permission to pass.

We made the rest of the journey in fear of getting blown up by antipersonnel mines. I saw six passenger buses that had been destroyed by mines on the road to Nangarhar. Finally, after eight hours of traveling, which should have been four, we reached Nangarhar.

From the bus station we took a taxi to a friend's house and waited there two days for someone to smuggle us across the border. After two days, my dad's friend introduced us to the Smuggler. His six-foot height, bushy beard, upturned moustache, and dark eyebrows made him look dreadful. He wore baggy trousers and heavy red-leather slippers with upturned toes, and he had a carbine slung over his back. He was a Pathan. The Pathans, an Afghan ethnic group, are warriors who obey

neither God nor man. Their law is the law of the rifle and the knife. He told us that he could take only three or four people at a time. My parents decided that I should go with my aunt and uncle.

We had to dress like the Pathan peasants who lived near the border, so that our western clothes did not advertise the fact that we were from the capital and trying to escape. My uncle dressed like the Smuggler. My aunt and I were given dresses with colorful patterns and sequins (which made the dresses very heavy) and dangling jewelry. In addition, outside the city, the women were obliged to wear a Chaderi, a veil through which we could see but not be seen. It comes in three colors: yellowish brown, gray, and blue. Ours were yellowish brown.

We left the house at dawn and walked a mile or two to reach the main road. While walking, the Chaderi twisted and clung to my legs. As I looked down to unwrap it, I stumbled over a rock and fell to the ground, injuring my right knee slightly. It burned, but I managed to catch up with my aunt and uncle and acted like nothing had happened. After a short time, a lorry arrived for us, and we spent the next few hours with sheep and goats, covering our faces with a piece of cloth to keep the smell and the dust out.

The sound of a helicopter approaching got our attention. It was an MI-24, a kind of armored helicopter that the Russians used to bombard villages, agricultural fields, and mosques. We feared that this time we might be its target, but fortunately it passed us. After a few minutes, we came upon a village. From a small opening in the side of the lorry, I witnessed the aftermath of a bombardment. The air attack had reduced the village to rubble, and those who survived it were running around shouting and screaming. An agricultural field outside the village was burned to ashes, and a pall of smoke and dust drifted over the valley. The images of those people and their ruined village haunted us the rest of our journey.

After a few hours, the lorry stopped, and the driver opened the gate and called, "Last stop." Holding the Chaderi, I jumped to the ground. The desert was covered with the tracks of horses, donkeys, camels, and people. There were many groups of people traveling in caravans: young orphaned boys; a lonely man with a sad expression on his face, all of his possessions packed on top of a camel; and numerous donkeys carrying women while their husbands walked alongside. We were all on our way to Pakistan.

As we waited for our donkeys, my uncle whispered to me: "The Smuggler is a government agent, a Militia." My heart skipped a beat. I knew exactly what that meant—he would turn us in. The government

recruits tribesmen like the Smuggler for undercover assignments. The Smuggler was talking with some other people, looking at us as he spoke. When he started to walk toward us, I thought my life was over. I wanted to scream and run. He stopped and signaled my uncle to come. As they walked toward a mud hut in the distance, my whole life flashed in front of my eyes. I saw my school, my parents, my execution.

"Did they take him for interrogation?" I asked myself. I could see the hut, and I wondered what was going on inside. When my uncle came out the door, I ran to him. He had been bargaining for the price of the mules. We rented four mules and set out with the caravan.

Riding that mule was an experience that I will never forget. It was hard to stay balanced with the heavy dress and the veil, especially once we began to climb a mountain. The trail was just wide enough for the mule to put down his hooves. As we turned and twisted along the mountainside, I wondered whether I should close my eyes, to try to shut out the danger, or keep them open, to be prepared when we fell down the side of the mountain. But the mule was surefooted, and I didn't fall. I learned that if I could relax, I would not fall off.

It was a hot summer day, and I became thirsty. The sun was right above our heads, and my thirst became intolerable. My mouth was completely dry. We could see a village at the bottom of the mountain—four hours away, according to the Smuggler. After a few minutes, however, we got to a small lake. The water was yellow and covered with algae, but the Smuggler drank it and brought me a cup of water to drink. As I looked into the cup, I was reminded of the solution that we prepared in biology class in order to grow bacteria. This was the main source of water for the village. God knows what microorganisms were swimming in that lake.

"I wouldn't drink it if I were you," my aunt said.

But I closed my eyes and drank the whole cup at once. I would worry about the consequences later.

We reached the village just before sunset. After eating dinner and resting for several hours, we started to travel again. The night journey was magnificent. The sky was clear, the moon was full, and millions of stars seemed to be winking at the night travelers. We could hear the bells of another caravan coming from the opposite direction, getting louder and louder as it got close. The ding-a-ling of that caravan added a rhythm to the lonely desert.

Now we were in the territory of the Freedom Fighters. We knew if they recognized the Smuggler, they would execute all of us as communist spies. The Freedom Fighters and the Militia are enemies, and

the Freedom Fighters did not trust anyone who was traveling with an agent.

At dawn we reached a small teahouse. It consisted of a large, bare room with a dirt floor covered by canvas mats. A few small windows, with plastic in place of glass, let in a bit of light. A smoky wood fire in a tin stove served for heating and boiling water for tea. The owner brought us tea and bread, a soothing sight for restless travelers.

We walked on, and soon a signpost got my attention. As I got closer, I was able to read the words: Welcome to Pakistan.

I started to cry, walking backwards to get one last glimpse of my beloved country.

THE CLEAN ZONE

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I still recall the sensations of entering my grandparents' house. Carefully opening the side door where two outside walls meet to form an L, I step in, taste the heavy earthen dampness rising from the blackened cellar opening and, with some apprehension, close the door. In near darkness, I turn a sharp left and bound three steep steps as quickly as I can. Holding my breath so as not to look panicked, I open the next door to the safety of the kitchen. It is there, within the first inch of security, that memories of growing up and of childhood flood back so strongly.

The kitchen was known as the Clean Zone. Like the rest of the house it was tediously clean but smelled curiously of older folks. Full of food canisters and appliances, utensils and pots of every kind, the kitchen was a standard for measuring a grandchild's worth. By heeding the barked instructions, "Check your tops and bottoms twice," we kids had permission to cross over the edge, Grandma's invisible kitchen line separating brown, grass-stained tennis shoes and dirty elbows from everything scrubbed white. On the other side of the Clean Zone, past the empty hallway and hidden behind a heavily draped glass door, lay my favorite place.

It was my goal each morning after pre-breakfast chores to be properly inspected at the invisible kitchen line, cross the Clean Zone without harm and make it to the glass door. Slowly turning the cut crys-