

Journey of a Thousand Storms

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Extract

The bus I'm in is about to cross the border from Iran to Turkey – from my beloved home to an unknown land. I feel simultaneously exhilarated and ashamed. Nobody should have cause to feel happy about permanently fleeing their homeland, ever. I am alone in every sense. My wife crossed the border separately, with our two daughters, six hours ago. Azita is a Muslim and can go to Turkey freely. I'm Jewish, and I am the one they want.

At five in the morning the bus stops at Tabriz, the town on the border. This is the last checkpoint, the last stop in Iran. All the passengers give their passports to the customs officer and for the next two hours we wait for our names to be called. People are excited to be going to Turkey, to a land that allows them to listen to Western music and to dance and drink alcohol without being persecuted, but my reasons for being in this bus are very different.

I pace up and down outside the immigration office, chainsmoking. I try to stay calm by telling myself, Get ready to be shot, don't be scared, death is nothing to be afraid of. When my name is finally called, my heart races even faster and my palms are wet. I try to hide my tense expression, but no mask can cover a man's dread when he's tossing a coin for life or death. Although in many ways death would be a blissful relief, I'm still frightened. I haven't enjoyed my life so far but I'm worried about my daughters. I don't want them to grow up without a father.

But miraculously, the Iranian border officer hands me back my passport, duly stamped. Not having the slightest clue what's going on in my terrified mind, he gestures to me to move on. A voice inside me whispers, *You are free. You can go.* But I cannot. I am transfixed. I turn my head and glance at the mountain through the window. This will be the last time I see Zagros, the summit on which ancient Persian heroes fought with evil forces to protect our land. Farewell, my Iran! Goodbye, my beautiful home, I say to myself, and force myself to leave the office.

I step onto the Turkish side of the border in a state of shock. My joy is so intense and my sorrow so profound that I can hardly breathe.

'Welcome to Turkey,' says a Turkish police officer. Despite his fake formal smile, these three simple words immediately become the loveliest of lyrics.

When I join my family later that day, at a bus stop halfway to Istanbul, they hardly recognise me. I can barely contain my emotions, nor can my older daughter, Newsha, when she finally realises that the malnourished ghost smiling at her is her father. I've lost so much weight I look like a dead body pulled out of hot sand. This is the first time I've seen my younger daughter, Niloofer, who was born while I was on the run. She has big black eyes, plump lips and a gorgeous smile. I hold her in my arms and whisper, 'I will never leave you again. Never.'

The bus to Istanbul passes through villages with satellite dishes on every roof. I am struck by the contrast with Iran, where you are arrested if you attempt to watch foreign TV. Big Brother doesn't want you to know what's going on in the outside world. Marrying someone not approved of by your parents or criticising the Supreme Leader are also serious crimes, as is a woman allowing a few strands of hair to show from under her scarf. These laws are based on what the Prophet Mohammad dictated fourteen centuries ago and are upheld by old men who have no idea about modern technology or civil rights, men who are intolerant of any form of change because it makes them disoriented. That's why Iran isn't progressing, and why there are innumerable reasons to be publicly hanged there: homosexuality, blasphemy, adultery, apostasy, or, God forbid, questioning the

Prophet Mohammad's decision to allow his nine-year-old daughter, Fatima, to marry his 25-year-old cousin, Ali. Iran has one of the highest rates of execution in the world. In my homeland, expressing curiosity is like wandering blind through a minefield.

I have made no plans beyond reaching Turkey and have no idea what the next step will be. I know I'm far from safe even here, as the Iranian and Turkish governments regularly exchange political prisoners and dissidents. Fugitives like me disappear in this country every day. But still, I have never been so thankful – I am alive.

I can't stop looking at my daughters. Five-year-old Newsha is asleep on her seat, and baby Niloofar is quietly lying on Azita's lap. I sip Scotch from the bottle I bought at the Turkish border, silently celebrating my escape.

As the bus winds its way through the unfamiliar countryside, the significance of what I've done really hits me for the first time. There can be no turning back from here. And I can't help thinking about everything that's led me to this point.