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The

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Refugee

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Dina Nayeri



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For Sam and Elena.  
You make every country home.



*Why did you lie to me?*

*I always thought I told the truth.*

*Why did you lie to me?*

*Because the truth lies like nothing else and I love the truth.*

– Mark Strand, ‘Elegy for My Father’

*No Way. You will not make the Netherlands home.*

– Geert Wilders, message to refugees, 2015

*To make someone wait: the constant prerogative of all power,  
‘age-old pastime of humanity’.*

– Roland Barthes





## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have tried to recreate events, locales and conversations from my memories and interviews with others. I have changed the names of some individuals and places, as well as altered identifying characteristics and details, such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence. In general, if I have not provided a last name in the text, the first name is changed to protect the individual. Examples are Darius, Taraa, Farzaneh, Majid, Valid, Minoo and all the children. My family, for obvious reasons, is an exception to this rule.

In recounting the escape stories of others, I have dramatised, putting as much as I could in-scene. I have only written about events that were carefully recounted to me. Afterward, I researched the times, places and context around each story, and brought the stories to life using sensory details that I found and imagined. Any mistakes are my own.

I have kept my language true to particular times and places. For example, though I use the word 'undocumented' now, I didn't in the 1980s. Our word then was 'illegal'. Even now, in the casual talk of refugees and lawyers, the word I hear is 'illegal'. Sanitising language has its dangers. I tried not to do that, even with my own thoughts. For

DINA NAYERI

example, I don't use the word 'pussy' now to describe weakness. But I did at sixteen.

Regarding the story of Kambiz Roustayi, the scenes before his arrival in Europe are imagined using what little he told his friends and supporters. Scenes from later in his life, after he had met the people I interviewed, are their accounts of his years in Holland.

The line of poetry from the parliament petition in March 2018 is quoted from a public reading. The poet's name is withheld since she may not be documented.

In the portions of this book about my own life, my accounts are true according to my memory and perspective.

# PART ONE

## ESCAPE

(on good faith, credible risk and opportunism)



## I.

We became refugees. Somehow it felt more settled than what we had been for the past ten months, hiding out in the United Arab Emirates. There, we were illegal: all the same dizzying displacement, uncertainty and need, but we had to find our own shelter. Without a state to say, ‘Yes, we will be responsible for you,’ we were so unmoored it was hard to fathom a next step. Maybe that’s why every move had been last minute, someone’s kindness or a stroke of luck. Miracles. And so, when we landed in Rome in winter 1989, I bubbled with love for Italy and every Italian; it was unlike anything I had felt for Dubai or Sharjah. This airport was so European, so brimming with leisure; I wanted to run to every kiosk and smell the Western chocolate and touch the expensive fabrics. But a man in a black suit held a sign with Maman’s name and we were led away to a car.

My mother, younger brother and I bundled in the back seat, cold and dirty from the long flight. I tried to stay awake for the ride through the Italian countryside. Finally, after an hour, we spotted a house on a hill, breaking up the rolling valleys in the distance. We had been told that we’d be taken to ‘a good refugee camp’, a temporary safe space for transients seeking asylum outside Italy. It was

called Barba and it had once been a hotel. The Italian government had leased this building to house the likes of us, political and religious asylum seekers and passers-through with particular need: elderly family, children. It was exciting to watch Barba appear and to know that, even though our clothes and bedding and daily routines would be those of refugees, though we would be confined there, our house would be on a hilltop, in the husk of a pretty hotel.

We pulled up a winding hill road after dinnertime. Our room was small, perhaps even smaller than the cockroach hostel in Sharjah, and we had no fridge or hot plate this time. Only a bathroom and a bed. We sat on our bed and wondered where we'd get money, if we'd find friends among our neighbours. Would we meet Farsi speakers? How long would we stay? Which country would finally take us? We wondered about that night's meal.

We considered walking to a store in Mentana. Then someone knocked. An Italian woman, young, with a punkish haircut gestured to us that we had missed the dinner call. That night, for the first time, I saw the canteen, a glass circle overlooking all that lush valley. Now empty and dark, in the morning it would fill up with displaced families like us, Iranians, Afghans, Russians, Romanians. It would buzz with many languages, many kinds of prayers. There would be children, mothers, grandmothers. But for now, the room was silent. We ate bowls of leftover pasta in semi-dark and heavy silence and thanked God that meals were provided here.

Despite its grand skeleton, Hotel Barba was a refugee camp and we had to stay put, as we had no status in Italy. We were served soup, pasta, coffee, bread at precise times

## THE UNGRATEFUL REFUGEE

each day and we sat in the winter chill, praying that by summer we'd be gone from there. Every day when the postman arrived, we would swell outside the mail cubbies, jostling for a good view. We wanted to know, 'Who got his letter today?' When someone did, the crowd would hush as he opened the envelope, fingers trembling, eyes scanning, then either wept quietly into his palm, muttering curses, or loudly on his knees, thanking his god. Everyone was frantic for a letter from America or England or Australia or Canada (roomy anglophone countries). A letter would mean the wait was over; our lives could now begin.

In the absence of work or school, all we did was dream, a maddening state, and battle loneliness. We ate with people from our own countries; we prayed in our own ways, some before eating (sitting, heads bowed) and some after (standing, holding hands). On cool days, the children snuck into a neighbouring orchard to steal unripe peaches and plums, because our tongues were itching for something sour and there was nothing else to soothe the craving. I tried to teach some English words to a handful of burly Russian men, skipping around the yard in my pink skirt and pointing to a tree, a fence, a chador, a babushka (the men indulged me by taking notes).

We fought boredom in increasingly desperate ways: an Afghan grandmother collected bricks from a nearby construction site and carried them back to her room under her chador. Her daughter read our fortunes from the left-over sludge in mugs of instant coffee. A young Iranian soldier with his face half-bleached from a wartime chemical burn taught us how to play soccer. Despite his new kind of whiteness, he was as interesting to me as the princes in my storybooks. Perhaps I sensed that he was



attracted to Maman. And wasn't she just *me*, in another body? Here was a man who wanted *us*, who wanted to play games with me, to make me laugh and then to look out of the corner of his eye to see if Maman was watching.

We had left Baba behind in Isfahan. I began to understand, bit by bit, over years, that I would never live with my father again. I was beginning to understand other things, too, to peek out from inside my own skin. I spent time with loving grandmothers from many countries. I joined Maman for tea and oranges in the rooms of Russian Christians. I read English books and played hopscotch and became obsessed with having a home again, with ending the wander days, rooting, and with the mysteries of adulthood. I craved everyone's stories – I was becoming some later version of myself.

In a refugee camp, stories are everything. Everyone has one, having just slipped out from the grip of a nightmare. Everyone is idle, without permission to work or run away, reckoning now with a new place in the world. Everyone is a stranger, in need of introduction. And tea is cheap (at Barba, we all came from tea-drinking countries). What better conditions than these to brew a pot, sit on pillows around a low table and talk? At Barba, I learned to listen and to savour startling details, byproducts of a strange confluence that may never recur: a grandmother hiding bricks in her chador, a splash of cream across a handsome face, a stampede for jam.

It wasn't just a pastime. Our stories were drumming with power. Other people's memories transported us out of our places of exile, to rich, vibrant lands and to home. They reminded us of the long, unknowable road. We couldn't see yet, fresh from our escape, but other sharp

## THE UNGRATEFUL REFUGEE

turns lay ahead. We had created our life's great story; next would come the waiting time, camp, where we would tell it. Then struggle for asylum, when we would craft it. Then assimilation into new lives, when we would perform it for the entertainment of the native-born and finally, maybe in our old age, we would return to it, face it without frenzy: a repatriation.

For two decades, our escape defined me. It dominated my personality and compelled my every decision. By college, half my life had led up to our escape and the other half was spent reliving it, in churches and retreats where my mother made it a hagiographic journey, on college applications where it was a plea, at sleepovers where it was entertainment and in discussion groups after public viewings of xenophobic melodramas like *China Cry* and *Not Without My Daughter*, films about Christian women facing death and escaping to America. Our story was a sacred thread woven into my identity. Sometimes people asked, *But don't a lot of Christians live there?* or, *Couldn't your mother just say she was Muslim?* It would take me a long time to get over those kinds of questions. They felt like a bad grade, like a criticism of my face and body, an unravelling of that sacred thread: *I am rescued cargo; therefore, I am enchanted. I have purpose. With every good work, I repay the universe.* If I didn't have that, then I would be faceless, an ordinary person toiling for what? Soulless middle-class trifles?

Once in an Oklahoma church, a woman said, 'Well, I sure do get it. You came for a better life.' I thought I'd pass out – a better life? In Isfahan, we had yellow spray roses, a pool. A glass enclosure shot up through our living room and inside that was a tree. I had *a tree* inside my

house; I had the papery hands of Morvarid, my friend and nanny, a ninety-year-old village woman; I had my grandmother's fruit leather and Hotel Koorosh schnitzels and sour cherries and orchards and a farm – life in Iran was a fairytale. In Oklahoma, we lived in an apartment complex for the destitute and disenfranchised. Life was a big grey parking lot with cigarette butts baking in oil puddles, slick children idling in the beating sun, teachers who couldn't do math. I dedicated my youth and every ounce of my magic to get out of there. A better life? The words lodged in my ear like grit.

Gradually, all those retellings felt like pandering. The sceptics drew their conclusions based on details that I had provided them: my childhood dreams of KitKats and flawless bananas. My academic ambitions. I thought of how my first retelling was in an asylum office in Italy: how merciless that, with the sweat and dust of escape still on our brows, we had to turn our ordeal into a good, persuasive story or risk being sent back. Then, after asylum was secured, we had to relive that story again and again, to earn our place, to calm casual sceptics. Every day of her new life, the refugee is asked to differentiate herself from the opportunist, the *economic* migrant.

Like most refugees after a life-threatening escape, my family and I were compliant, ecstatic, grateful. But we had sustained damage. If the rational mind is a clean road, ours had potholes, pockets of paranoia and fear. Yes, I could summon joy and logic and change. But a single triggering word could trip me up for a day, a week, make me doubt my worth, my new place in this world. Am I a *real* refugee? The implication burned.

Why do the native-born perpetuate this distinction? Why

## THE UNGRATEFUL REFUGEE

harm the vulnerable with the threat of this stigma? It took me decades to know: the instinct to protect against competition from a talented horde. To draw a line around a birthright, a privilege. Unlike economic migrants, refugees have no agency; they are no threat. Often, they are so broken, they beg to be remade into the image of the native. As recipients of magnanimity, they can be pitied. I was a palatable immigrant because I programmed myself with chants: *I am rescued cargo. I will prove, repay, transform.* But if you are born in the Third World and you dare to make a move before you are shattered, your dreams are suspicious. You are a carpetbagger, an opportunist, a thief. You are reaching above your station.

There's something unnatural and sinister going on here.

My mother didn't think to question people's hardwired distinctions. Were we really refugees? She fended off that question by telling our story: she was almost murdered by the regime, so she shouldn't have to deal with people's prejudices. She fumed at stories of religious asylum seekers who had lied and she asked new arrivals about the Bible and their underground church – but unlike the native-born around us, she never asked anyone to prove their fear. A tortured mind, terror of a wasted future, is what enables you to abandon home, it's a prerequisite for stepping into a dinghy, for braving militarised mountains. No one who has lived under a dictatorship, who has scooped up their children and run to a bomb shelter, doubts the fear. To my mother, Christianity is too sacred to lie about and it's hard to accept that a rigid, illogical system leaves some no other choice, but, at the same time, she knows that the reasons for escape are complex and muddled. They always include a fear *and* a tangible hope. It's a reinvention that

grows out of your nightmares, but also your drive and agency. And so, the bureaucratic parsing of dangers from opportunity is grating and absurd. Where is the humility? The compassion?

And what is a credible danger in a country that hangs apostates and homosexuals and adulterers and where a hateful finger in your direction is enough to make you one? A country so corrupt that one mullah's whim can send you to the firing squad or the crane, your gallows, and the sunrise after challenging a *pasdar* can find you framed for drugs? A country where record keeping is a farce; where, in whispers, the land's riches are divided among a few; where young men languish without work; where young women wither with unspent ambition and desire; where the enchanting whisper of opium is always in your ear and despair fills your lungs so thickly that your best chance is to be your own executioner?

What is escape in such circumstances and what is just opportunistic migration? Who is a true refugee? It makes me chuckle, this notion that 'refugee' is a sacred category, a people hallowed by evading hell. Thus, they can't acknowledge a shred of joy left behind or they risk becoming migrants again. Modern Iran is a country of refugees making do with small joys, exiled from the pre-revolutionary paradise we knew. With the Iraq war over, their plight is often considered insufficient. Syria is hell. Afghanistan, South Sudan, Eritrea are hell. Iraq is . . . a bit less so? And Iran? What is hell enough for the West to feel responsible, not just as perpetrators of much of the madness, but as primary beneficiaries of the planet's bounty, who sit behind screens watching suspicious and limp-fisted as strangers suffer?

## THE UNGRATEFUL REFUGEE

Meanwhile, we assign our least talented, most cynical bureaucrats to be the arbiters of complicated truth, not instructing them to save lives, or search out the weary and the hopeless, but to root out lies, to protect our fat entitlements, our space, at any moral cost – it is a failure of duty. More infuriating is the word ‘opportunism’, a lie created by the privileged to shame suffering strangers who crave a small taste of a decent life. The same hopes in their own children would be labelled ‘motivation’ and ‘drive’.

And while we grumble over what we are owed and how much we get to keep, the displaced wait at the door. They are painters and surgeons and craftsmen and students. Children. Mothers. The neighbour who made the good sauce. The funny girl from science class. The boy who can really dance. The great-uncle who always turns down the wrong street. They endure painful transformation, rising from death, discarding their faces and bodies, their identities, without guarantee of new ones.

A Dutch officer asks an Iranian refugee, ‘Do you fear for your safety?’

He says, ‘Yes, my two friends and I were arrested as communists twenty years ago. Each week we check into the local police headquarters. Last week, both my friends disappeared after their check. I ran.’

‘Have you become involved with underground communists again?’

‘No,’ says the petitioner. He isn’t a dissident. But he *is* hunted.

‘Then you’re safe,’ says the officer. ‘It seems your friends resumed their political activities. But you didn’t, so you have no reason to fear.’

The assumption of the office isn't just thoroughness and justice on the part of the Iranian government (laughable), but also infallibility. How is one to honestly navigate such a dishonest, self-serving system? The savvy ones who have asked around know not to explain how the Islamic Republic works, how often innocent people disappear. They simply say, 'Yes, I got involved again,' so that the officer can check a box.

Escape marks the first day of a refugee's life. On the day we left home, I was told that I could live however I wished, that my gender would no longer limit my potential. And this was true. I was born out of Maman's Three Miracles. But already a limit had been imposed. Until now, the world waited for me to define myself. Would I be artistic or analytical? Shy or bold? Religious or secular? But now, my first category had been assigned: refugee, not native-born. I didn't realise it then, because **escape is euphoric**. It is a plunge into fog, a burning of an old life, a murder of a previous self.

Escape creates a chameleon, an alert creature always in disguise. What does that first blush feel like? An itch. For me, it was a daily, unrelenting discomfort in my mind and skin. It inflamed my OCD. I developed a tic in my neck. Changing colour soothed those pains for a time.

Now, thirty years have passed; I have so much to say. The world no longer speaks of refugees as it did in my time. The talk has grown hostile, even unhinged, and I have a hard time spotting, amid the angry hordes, the kind souls we knew, the Americans and the English and the Italians who helped us, who held our hands. I know they're still out there.

What has changed in three decades? A reframing is in

## THE UNGRATEFUL REFUGEE

order. I want to make sense of the world's reaction to us, of a political and historical crisis that our misfortunes have caused. I feel a duty: I've lived as an American for years, read Western books. I've been both Muslim and Christian. There are secrets I can show the native-born that new arrivals don't dare reveal. I've wished to say them for thirty years and found it terrifying till now.

In 2016, I began a journey to understand my own chaotic past. I was a new mother and confused about my purpose. I had changed my face and hair, my friends, my education, my country and job, so often that my skin felt raw. My memories had grown foggy and I had combed them ragged for fiction. I had prided myself on being a chameleon, as many immigrant children do, but now I felt muddled by it – I felt like a liar.

I spent months travelling. I went to refugee camps in Greece, to communities of undocumented Dutch. I visited immigration lawyers and homes of new arrivals. I drank tea with refugees and asylum seekers and naturalised citizens. I spoke with mothers, lone travellers, schoolchildren. I was looking for stories, for whispers of stories hidden by shame or trauma and for lies too. I searched for people from my own refugee hostel, Hotel Barba. I spoke to my parents, who reminded me of the many complications of point of view. During my travels, I came across dozens of stories; I have chosen a few to follow in these pages, tales all the more harrowing because they are commonplace now and, in the asylum office, often disbelieved.

And so, I've left out the story of the Syrian man I met in Berlin who floated with a child for seven hours then found himself cleaning a slave ship, or the jailed scholars or activists who are hit with public fatwas – even your



everyday Trumpian admits that those guys deserve rescue. I'm interested in doubt, in the feared 'swarms'. These are stories of uprooting and transformation without guarantees, of remaking the face and the body, those first murderous refugee steps – the annihilation of the self, then an ascent from the grave. Though their first lives were starkly different, these men and women were tossed onto the same road and judged together. Some of their stories are far from over, but they have already repeated them so often, practised and recited them so much, that these dramatic few months (or years) have become their entire identity. Nothing else matters to their listeners and all suffering seems petty after the miracle of escape. But did the miracle happen? Now their struggle isn't to hang on to life, but to preserve their history, to rescue that life from the fiction pile.

Though the truth of these stories struck me hard, I know that I, a writer, was peeking in different corners than the authorities. I wasn't looking for discrepancies. I abhor cynical traps that favour better translators and catch out trauma victims for their memory lapses. I don't have accent-verifying software. I saw the truth of these stories in corroborating scars, in distinct lenses on a single event, one seeing the back as vividly as another sees the front – no flat cutouts. I saw truth in grieving, fearful eyes, in shaking hands, in the anxiety of children and the sorrow of the elderly.

And yet, to recreate these stories, I was forced to invent scenes and dialogue, like retouching a faded photograph. Writers and refugees often find themselves imagining their way to the truth. What choice is there? A reader, like an interviewer, wants specific itches scratched. You will see.

## THE UNGRATEFUL REFUGEE

In the meantime, where is the lie? Every crisis of history begins with one story, the first drop in a gushing river. Consume these lives as entertainment, or education or threats to your person. It is your choice how to hear their voices. Use all that you know to spot every false stroke of the brush. Be the asylum officer. Or, if you prefer, read as you would a box of letters from a ruin, dispatches from another time that we dust off and readily believe, because the dead want nothing from us.

## II.

### DARIUS

Darius took a last drag from his cigarette and stamped it out on the tiles outside the tea shop. ‘Has she texted today?’ his friend asked.

‘No,’ said Darius. They were standing under Isfahan’s famous Thirty-Three Arches after an evening coffee and water pipe. ‘Let’s hope this means . . .’

‘Yes,’ said his friend. ‘A shame, though. Such a piece.’

Darius chuckled and said goodbye. On the way home, his pocket vibrated. Nowadays, each text sent an icy rivulet down his back. He glanced at his phone. It was her. *Dariuuuuuus. What’s going on?*

He stopped in the road to reply – quick disavowals. No games. *Please, Miss, stop texting. I’ve had so much trouble.*

She wrote again: *It’s fine. I just want to say bello.*

*Please delete my number. You’ll get me killed.*

He switched off his mobile and quickened his pace. It was already past ten. He was three streets from his house,