

The Border
Martha Mylona

They have been walking for weeks now, or has it been months? She has lost count. She can't tell what day of the week it is. Each day, as she weakens, her bag feels heavier. She tries hard to hide her exhaustion. As time goes on she feels less and less hungry. Some figs or berries that they pick here and there, along the way, last her for a while. At least it is summer and they don't have to worry about the cold weather, though the nights are still chilly. One of her shoes has a hole in it. Sand and gravel are getting in, making walking more difficult. Now and then she stops and stuffs the shoe with some grass to cover the hole.

She is the only woman in the group. In fact they are the only couple. All the others are single men, some from other countries. Most of them are only in their teens and twenties. They have left their loved ones behind. Only a few of them speak her language. She can hear them telling stories about their ordeals. She can hear the fear in their voices. Their shoulders are hunched over with worry, from loss and uncertainty. Fear and a common goal is what they all share, what unites them, what brought them together.

They have to stay out of sight as much as possible. By day, they hide in the woods or crouch below whatever foliage they can find and wait for nightfall. Then they set out again. It is risky to be on the road in daylight. They are taking a mountainous track, far away from the main roads, from the army patrol vans and the police. They try also to avoid the mountain villages, by following remote mountain trails. Some of the villagers are hospitable, offering them water or bread, some even fresh figs, apricots and walnuts. But others are unfriendly and suspicious of strangers and can turn them over to the local authorities at any time. They shot at a young Hazara man travelling with them the other day for picking some apples from an orchard. They have to tread carefully.

The one in charge knows the way and he bargains their passage through the different countries. He promised to get them across the final border. They sold everything they had for this journey – their plot of land and her dowry.

The old man, at the bazaar back home, arranged their passage. He was the one who managed to hide them from the militia. He assured them of a safe passage. They had nothing to fear, he said. Once they were over their border a new guide would lead them. He is trustworthy; he won't betray them. But he warned them that the travel across borders was to be on foot and would take days, weeks, maybe months, depending on the routes available along the way.

It had been heart-breaking leaving home. Many a night she felt like slipping out and finding her way back home, no matter whether terror was still awaiting, lurking behind every corner, behind every knock on the door.

How people's fortunes change, she thinks. One moment you are home with your loved ones, the next you are at the mercy of others. As a child she felt safe and happy inside her large family compound. The mud walls ran all around, enclosing their house, the yard, the cherry blossoms, their apricot trees and the garden with the well. Beyond, in the distance there was the desert, hazy and burning. Large,

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tumbleweed balls flew in the wind, rolling and dancing. Heading for the desert; the desert was calling them. In summer, dried figs and peaches were spread out on the roof tops. In the courtyard, her old great-grandfather, sitting cross-legged on a rug, would play his tambur. The music reverberated throughout their neighborhood. In those moments they were all wrapped up in a silk cocoon of melody, of warmth and closeness. Now trudging through this foreign terrain towards the unknown she tries to hold on to that memory a moment longer.

Will this journey take them to safety? She doesn't know. Everything is kept secret from her and from the others. No one from the group knows the exact plan. The less you know the less you can tell, if you are captured, they have been told. Only the guide leading them seems to know. They have to trust him; they are all at his mercy. She also knows that women are unwelcome. Some of the men don't feel comfortable with her around but neither does she. She tries hard to keep out of their way and they keep out of hers, as much as it is possible under the circumstances. But as time goes on, they are too exhausted to worry about her presence. She becomes part of the group and they get used to her. The further away they go from their homeland, the closer they all get to each other. Slowly she becomes like family to them. She is the sister they have lost or left behind, or their aunty, as most of the young men call her.

They are still high up in the hilly area, but descending little by little every day. Far down in the valley she can see minarets rising above the roofs of the villages, covered softly in the morning mist. Sometimes the breeze carries a faint *Allah Wakhbar* up the mountain ridge.

Some mornings, at the break of dawn, she walks to the edge of the ridge, from where they are camped, to look at this new countryside so far away from home and to get a sense of where they are and where they are heading. Down below the sleepy villages spread out in twisting alleys, encircled by garden plots and slithering waterways. On rocky cliff faces nearby, mountain goats perch fearlessly; hawks and eagles glide gracefully across the sky, scanning the waking land below. She and the eagles together, looking down at a world below coming alive.

Yet, amidst the fear of being caught, there are moments when she is overtaken with the beauty of this new landscape, which is not dry and barren. The desert and the dust storms have all been left behind. This is all so different to her homeland. Being part of a venture like this has given her new purpose. Part of her, secretly, enjoys every moment of this journey, no matter how weak she feels, no matter how hard and dangerous it is. In a way it feels like breaking free, like breaking out of prison and there is freedom waiting ahead. This and only this is enough to make her forget her exhaustion, to keep her going.

'There is the river,' Ikmat points out to her one day, 'We should be there in about a week, God willing.'

Far away, the river uncoils hazy and grey in the heat and then gradually vanishes into nowhere. Beyond the river is the promised land. That is their destination. They will be safe there. People have a better life there. That's what they have been told. Only one more week and the worst will be over, she tells herself. This mood of hope gives her a burst of energy. Back home there was no future. They didn't know whether they would be around tomorrow. When we have children, she thinks,

our parents will be pleased and their spirits will rest in peace.

The idea of having a family warms her heart. Ikmat is a good husband. He cares for her. And he is young, not like those old men in the village, who wanted her for a wife. She is lucky to be married to a young husband.

When she first met Ikmat, she liked him immediately. His large, dark eyes looked kind. His smile was generous. She knew, right then, that she would marry a gentle man, though he tried to hide it. She knew that for a man to look tough, to be unyielding was a matter of honour, of pride. Yet from her woman's point of view too much pride often got in the way of things and the women-folk had to pay the price for it. She knew that well and she didn't like it.

It's midday and they are all resting under some large oak trees. Their branches are heavy with green acorns. The men have finished their prayers and are asleep. It's quiet, and only the cicadas break the silence. A small lizard crawls out from some brown leaves and gazes sleepily at her. Some ants are still going about doing their work. In the crevice of a rock, next to her, a scrawny plant with small lilac petals is hiding. In the summer heat its scent claims the space. She is impressed by how this tiny plant turns its hardship into such greatness, this wonderful scent. She suddenly feels in awe of it. Nature is blessed with so much wisdom, she thinks.

By dusk they are on the road again. The bare mountain ridge is completely transformed in the full moonlight. The craggy edges of the mountain peaks look menacing. They remind her of peaks back home that flamed red in the sunset or emerged like giant dragons from the clouds of dust. They were the only loved thing that had remained standing, after everyone had gone, standing upright over the rubble and the bodies. Always defiant, so that one doesn't lose hope. She remembers the wooden gate of her family home, riddled with bullet holes, half standing, still resisting, hanging from one hinge, a ghost among the ruins. Guarding. ...what? Her family gone. Her mother and her loom burnt, the loom weights and spinning whorls poking out from the ashes.

To carry on walking, she tells herself that none of this has ever happened, that it is only a bad dream. She grips onto her bag for support. It's the only thing she's got left from home. Her fingertips feel its texture, her mother's neat weave, their home-spun yarn, dyed to perfection. Mother was most meticulous about the colour of her dyes; her crimson medallions and intricate floral borders were matchless.

No, we mustn't lose hope, she tells herself.

'It doesn't help to dwell upon the past,' Ikmat tells her, hearing her sigh. 'You only make matters worse and become weak.'

They can't afford to weaken. They have a long way yet ahead. They know if they are caught here, they would be sent back and that would be the end of them.

They are almost down in the valley now. Woods are thinning out and further down, ahead of them, spreads a patched quilt of cultivated land, all the way to the riverbank. The border is not very far now. She can sense an air of restlessness and fear amongst the group. The men huddle together planning. They are to split into smaller groups, so they look less conspicuous. The younger men are becoming more and more impatient and nervous. She can hear the anxiety in their raised voices as if they can't wait for this march to end. It has already taken far too long, they say. Some of them seem to

disagree with the guide as to the manner and point of crossing. They believe they are too exposed. Others dismiss the danger of being caught and want to cross the border in daylight. They are eager to arrive. Arrive *where* exactly? The thought of *arrival* suddenly starts to unsettle her. What will happen once they cross over the river? There is a knot in her stomach.

Ikmat is silent.

‘If we perish today, who will know of our fate? No-one,’ Ahmed tells him. He looks worried. He has lost a lot of weight since they started their journey and looks much older with his beard long. ‘We are nothing, brother. Just some unwanted trespassers walking through other people’s homelands. They don’t even know our names.’

‘Don’t lose hope now, Ahmed. We are almost there, Allah is merciful,’ Ikmat tells him, patting him on the shoulder.

‘Is there something wrong?’ she asks Ikmat.

‘No,’ he tells her.

Once they cross the open strip of grassland that lies ahead of them, they will be able to find cover beyond in the cornfields, near the river, and then they can head straight for the border.

That is how things were, up to the last day, the day they were all together. Now she is all alone with a deep gash on her left arm. She cuts a piece from a handkerchief and bandages the wound. She feels no pain. She feels nothing.

After the explosion she lost sight of the others. Everyone scattered in different directions. Did the others desert her and Ikmat or were they scared to come to their aid? She can’t tell. It all happened suddenly, as they were crossing the open grassland. They had just left the shelter of the woods. How did they end up in a minefield? She can’t tell that either. Why didn’t the guide warn them? Didn’t he know?

Before she closed Ikmat’s eyes, he murmured faintly, ‘Sima...’ and as she tried to read his lips, ‘You must cross the river...must cross the border’, he said. These were his last words. Ikmat’s last words. His eyes were staring at her. His body covered in blood, shaking, and then nothing. She put her head on his chest. No sound. Shocked, she could not utter a word or a cry. Her voice was gone.

After a while she catches herself digging the earth fast, with her bare hands. The soil is hard and dry. She finds a piece of wood from some dry shrubs nearby and goes on digging frantically. From afar she can hear indistinct voices getting louder and closer. She stops to listen; it’s another tongue. They are coming for her. Terror overtakes her. Quickly, with hands shaking, she takes off her headscarf and tenderly covers Ikmat’s head, his beloved face and upper body with it. She pushes him gently into the hole she dug, though her arms resist letting him go, and desperately she tries to cover him with earth. Is this herself or someone else she is watching? Far down the road she gets a glimpse of figures coming up the slope. Reluctantly, she abandons Ikmat, nearly covered in earth, and terrified she runs away into the tall cornfields beyond, to take cover. She feels weak and confused. She is very thirsty. She cuts a cob of a silky corn, husks it and starts eating it fast. It tastes sweet in her mouth; its milky juice running down her chin and her fingers, mixing with Ikmat’s blood and the dirt. That’s all she has of him now: his blood on her, on her clothes.

For some time now she has been hiding in the cornfields, curled up, her body trembling. Broken verses of the Koran, now and then, float around in her mind and she tries to murmur them without success. She has difficulty pulling herself together. The only thing that stands out in her mind is that she is in danger, hiding in a strange country. The river is not far away; she can feel its moisture; she can smell it.

The sound of a galloping horse reaches her ears, becoming louder as it approaches. Alarmed she tries to flatten herself on the ground. Her heart is thumping loud, against her chest. The smell of fresh earth fills her nostrils. The grass prickles her nose. Through the cornstalks she catches sight of the legs of a white horse. The horse slows down and stops in front of her hiding place and snorts gently towards her, as the rider, oblivious to her presence, urges it on. She realises the horse senses her. It is greeting her. Something stirs inside her. This is her only contact with anything live for days now. 'Be blessed,' she says, silently, to the animal. This exchange startles her and shakes her back to reality. She has to cross the river, now, before it gets dark.

Thick foliage of drooping willows and plane trees cover the river bank. She crawls all the way to the bank through what feels like endless cornfields and dense undergrowth. Dangling creepers, fronds and fallen branches make the passage difficult. From there she catches sight of the sentry tower on the other side of the river, uphill. Soldiers are pacing up and down, in front of it, guarding the border.

'Don't worry,' Ikmat had told her. 'We'll find a log, a branch to get across; you mustn't worry. Once we are over the border they have to protect us, they'll give us asylum.'

The river looks wide and deep. She enters it hesitantly. She cannot swim. The cold water on her body shocks her. Instinctively she takes hold of a branch next to her. Patches of light are shimmering on the water, swaying up and down. It's good there is still plenty of light around. She doesn't like the dark. But where is she going...?

She can hear cicadas singing, loud, all around her. She feels surrounded by trees, their leaves full and moist and she thinks of the silkworms back home. Is she about to weave her cocoon now? She takes another step deeper into the river. Everyone she loved has gone. She tries hard to keep her balance against the current. She needs to be strong, she tells herself, to get through this.

But what is the point of it? To end up a stray dog in the streets of some other country?

She lets out a long cry. The echo brings it back. Can this be her voice? Some shadows move on the other side of the river. Some birds screech and flap away. The strong flow takes her in and down the river. Her shoes are the first to leave her. She can see Ikmat smiling, calling her. She lets go of the bag containing her clean tunic that she was to wear on the other side of the border. She can see herself at home playing hopscotch with her sisters, under the old mulberry tree. The force of the current tumbles her over, and she gasps for breath.