



There and Back Again: The Khyber Pass Rose Trip

I was the sole customer on the verandah of a fly-blown cafe in south Persia, footsore and sweaty, stuck in the desert halfway between the towns of Bam and Zahedan in the spring of 1967. No traffic had passed by all day, in either direction, not even a camel caravan. An hourglass-shaped glass of tea was on the rickety table before me, and I was composing a poem in my head, slouched on a hand-hewn chair scored from long years blunting the desert's dust winds. The cafe proprietor was not friendly, and he alternately stared at me suspiciously or pointedly turned his back and ignored me. He had insisted

on payment for the tea upfront, which was a shocking breach of desert etiquette. My grimy appearance may have had something to do with it. I had walked out of Bam at dawn, and continued under the beating sun until I thought I could walk no more, and I was ripe.

The salt flats surrounding the cafe receded from view into a shimmer born of the setting sun. To the northeast a range of wryly twisted crags enjoyed the fade of day; their boiled stone bones shrank slowly cooler. I needed to get to Zahedan to meet a friend and catch the cross-border freight train into Pakistan. I was Quetta bound; not for any particular reason, but simply because the name was capitalised on my tattered map in bold type. I had 16 US dollars hidden in my socks, a litre of water in a tin canteen, and two bouillon cubes in my rucksack for sustenance.

The cafe closed at dusk, and I was shooed away by the surly proprietor. I began walking east again, keeping to the middle of the barren highway. The wind picked up and spat fine gravel across the pot-holed asphalt. Dusk fused to moonless night and the sky filled with improbably bright stars. I nibbled on a bouillon cube and washed it down with swigs of lukewarm water. I continued walking, keeping a slow but steady pace, my head filled with nonsense rhymes to keep me company. The words to the poem I was searching for eluded me.

As midnight approached I came to a caravanserai that had cubicles to rent and my heart leapt. Six chambers faced the roadway, a curving brown progression of soft mud walls. They had no windows, just gaily-painted wooden doors secured by pastel-coloured Chinese padlocks the size of boiled sweets. There were no vehicles parked in the courtyard, and no recent tyre tracks in the dust. I awakened a clerk who yawned theatrically and informed me a bed would set me back 60 rials for the night. There were 76 rials to the dollar at the official exchange rate back then. Next to his desk was an alcove with eggs, stale flat bread, and warm soft drinks displayed for sale. I splurged on an orange Fanta and a piece of bread.

My room was dismal. There was a soiled straw sleeping mat on the floor, a wicker chair, and a pink plastic table with a candlestick at its centre. The table was tattooed with old cigarette burns. The cubicle was hot and airless, even with the door open. A traditional squat toilet was located at the end of the row of rooms. I could smell it from where I stood. My elation dissolved.

I had an accordion-page insert in my passport to accommodate the hodgepodge of visas and border stamps that marked my progress. I flipped through it and studied the visa stamps while I sipped my Fanta and chewed on the dry bread. I wondered who had baked it, and where it had come from, and I mused about what might be in store for me in the future. I wasn't homesick yet, but the time would come. I exercised restraint and saved my last bouillon cube for emergencies, then rolled out my sleeping bag on the filthy mat and went to sleep. The following morning I left as dawn broke, walking east on the deserted highway with my thumb outstretched.

In those days the freight-train from Zahedan to Pakistan traversed the Baluchistani wilderness three or sometimes four times a month, depending on many unknowns. I was planning to meet up with a German I had met at the YMCA youth hostel in Baghdad. We had literally run into each other escaping from the dormitory after a wild-haired Spaniard went crazy inside with a switchblade and threatened to gut everyone in the room. We hitched from Baghdad to Bam together, and he stopped off to study the ruins for a day or two while I continued on my inefficient way to Zahedan. We had agreed to meet at the train station in four days time, and quite miraculously we did. He had negotiated a ride the entire way from Bam in a businessman's air-conditioned Mercedes in return for conversation in Teutonic-flavoured English, while I had made do with the roofs of decrepit lorries and shoe leather.

We boarded the train in the late afternoon, and a few hours later it shuddered to a halt in the middle of a bleak, featureless salt plain. The sun was setting. An unpainted cinderblock building sat on a barren hill some two hundred meters from the railroad tracks. Darkness fell and the desert cooled. We assumed this was the frontier outpost where we had been advised to get our

passports stamped. We were riding on an open, flat-bed freight wagon at the tail-end of the train. Two dozen homeward-bound Afghan labourers and their belongings were packed in around us. There were a number of tethered goats and squawking chickens among their plastic-wrapped bales of goods, which livened up the monotony. When the train stopped my friend hopped off and marched briskly into the growing darkness with his passport in hand, aiming for a pinprick of light emanating from the distant bunker. He left his backpack behind on the caboose and disappeared from sight. No one else disembarked, so I didn't either. Moments later the train clanked and groaned and heaved off again, quickly picking up speed. No German to be seen, and we were rolling through the most desolate moonscape you can imagine. I called out and raised the alarm, but the Afghans just laughed and plugged their nostrils with pinches of green naswar from filigreed snuffboxes and chewed sunflower seeds, spitting the empty husks on one another. There were no railroad officials on that part of the train. I watched the tiny pinprick of light fade from view as we rounded a curve, hugged my knees, and wondered what to do.

Two hours later the train squealed to a stop again, this time at an illuminated platform attached to a whitewashed building equipped with a flagpole. The Afghans carefully re-wrapped their turbans and dismounted for passport and customs control. Someone was selling fresh figs, mounds of sunflower seeds, and melon halves from a handcart. Another man touted glasses of hot orange Tang, and poured them for his customers from a steaming brass samovar. There were no women to be seen.

I explained to the border officials that my friend had been left behind, but no one took any notice at all. They did wonder what I was doing with two backpacks, but aside from that they were utterly devoid of curiosity or initiative. They wouldn't even take a formal statement from me. After getting my passport stamped I shouldered both packs, clambered back onto the caboose, and thirty-three hours later we chugged into the pandemonium of Quetta station. I found a room of sorts at a shabby flophouse near the station for 75 paisa per night. The exchange rate was roughly 12 rupees per dollar,

and there are 100 paisa to each rupee. I left the backpacks in the room, went out for a meal of fried eggs and chips, and upon my return the flimsy lime-green Chinese padlock on the door had been twisted open and the backpacks had been ransacked of anything remotely valuable. Even my new toothbrush was gone. I never found out what happened to my friend.

A week later I was out of money, plagued with dysentery, had reported the missing German to the authorities twice, and wanted nothing more than to leave Quetta far behind me. I ventured into the bazaar and sold both backpacks and their remaining contents, along with my down-filled ski jacket. In exchange I was given 150 rupees, an embroidered Pakistani waistcoat, and a tooled leather ram-testicle pouch containing a six thumbnail-sized cubes of black resinous hashish. The saturnine Pathan I haggled with had a drooping, weepy eye and scratched at some hidden ulcer beneath his robe. We stroked palms instead of shaking hands to seal the deal when I left.

I arrived in Karachi several days later perched on the roof of a produce truck's cab. Once again I was flat broke, but good fortune led me to the Karachi YMCA hostel. They were kind enough to give me a bed in the dorm on credit, and agreed to wait until I somehow wrangled some cash to pay them back. I hoped that if my German friend had somehow survived his misadventure he might eventually end up there too. There was a tiny canteen near the entrance and the staff took pity on me, keeping me going with tea and leftover rolls each day. The dorm was choc-o-block with myriad ruffians, vagabonds, and long-haired freaks coming and going, but it was graced with ceiling fans, hot showers, and immaculate toilets. I felt like I had stumbled into heaven. That first night I lay on my bunk staring up at the ceiling fan and finally admitted to myself that I was tired of adventuring, and desperately homesick for my eccentric mother's house in Istanbul.

One afternoon I was dawdling over a cup of tea when a scrawny young American dressed in traditional Pakistani attire entered the canteen. A tasseled red fez was perched on top of his head, and a wispy beard was doing its best to sprout from his chin. We got to talking. He was a rebellious New Yorker, he

informed me, and had asserted his independence from his prominent Jewish family by converting to Islam. He was now on a pilgrimage to pray in as many different mosques as he could visit within the span of six months, or until his parents stopped sending him money, whichever came first. He confided that he carried four knives on his person, two folding knives well-hidden under his kurta and two straight blades tucked into his cowboy boots, which were the only items of western clothing that he wore. I wondered how his feet could endure being crammed into boots, considering Karachi's brutal mid-summer heat, but his internal thermostat was evidently set lower than the norm. The rag-tag denizens of the dorm knew him well...he wasn't staying at the hostel, but he visited regularly to quaff pitchers of iced tea and dine on grilled cheese sandwiches in the canteen. He frequently paid the outstanding meal tab for one or two of the most impoverished waifs in residence. They called him "the Mad Mullah", but never to his face. I privately nicknamed him "Mack the Knives". He called himself Daoud, and he was keenly interested to discover that I had been raised in Istanbul and was fluent in Turkish.

Daoud offered to pay travel expenses for both of us from Karachi to Istanbul if I agreed to be his guide and interpreter once we got to Turkey. He wanted to experience prayer in the grandeur of Istanbul's famously splendid mosques. By then I was pining for home, so I readily agreed. A few days later we were jammed in the back of a Land Rover owned by a seedy pair of Brits and headed for Afghanistan via the Khyber Pass.

What I remember best about the Afghan mountain passes are the muted colours that butter the peaks during evening's light at sunset, although the stark glory of sunrise comes a close second. Who knew that crumbling mud-brick walls and bleached boulders and distant plumes of beige dust on the horizon could so energetically capture a person's soul? I only went over the Khyber Pass that one time, but on that memorable occasion the Mad Mullah was handed a rose by a stoned tribal warrior carrying a rifle and grinning a macabre grin. I still don't know if he wanted to kidnap us or befriend us.

The Land Rover's transmission gave up the ghost and seized shortly before we headed into the pass itself, and we limped into the dusty frontier town of Wali Khel for repairs. Daoud and I took the opportunity to stretch our legs and have a wander around the local scene, which consisted of butcher shops displaying the flayed carcasses of sheep, more butchers and more carcasses, even more butchers, a scattering of chai-shops, and a row of the infamous Tribal Area gun emporiums. The gun sellers were of immediate interest of course, so we headed across the road to have a gander at their wares. Every type of gun, knife, rifle, machete, pistol, sword, shot-gun, dagger, revolver, and machine-gun imaginable was available to purchase, including grenades, land-mines, artillery shells, and mortar rounds, all hand-engineered and manufactured by the local Pashtun craftsmen. Daoud's New Yorker eyes lit up like Christmas trees. He was in weapons heaven, but thankfully he didn't buy any. I was still puzzling out how to divest him of his four knives before we hit the eagle-eyed customs officials at the Turkish border. Blades longer than two-and-a-half inches were illegal to carry in Turkey. The police sometimes measured confiscated knives by sliding the blades between the offender's index and middle fingers. If they extended beyond the middle finger they would shove them into the flesh until the exposed part of the knife was flush with the tip of the middle finger. It made you think twice.

A towering Pathan in a faded blue turban stalked up to us, his kohl-lined eyes blazing cherry red, his dark pupils as wide as lakes, and he worked his jawbones into an unhinged grin. He had a Martini Henry rifle tucked under his left arm and a long-stemmed red rose in his right hand. He offered the rose to the Mad Mullah with a flourish, brooking no refusal. Daoud accepted the unexpected gift with good grace, albeit with a panicked side-eye at me, and I prayed he wouldn't go all loopy New Yorker and clench it between his teeth or anything silly. We both shook the warrior's hand. He grinned even wider, baring his blackened teeth, and shadowed us for the next hour. He never uttered a word, he just loomed over us and stared. Unnerved, we finally sidled back to the garage and he lost interest. He turned his back on us and strode silently

away. We spent a chilly night in Wali Khel on rope charpoy beds in a chai-shop sandwiched between butcheries and left for Kabul at dawn the next morning with a rebuilt transmission. And one red rose.

Daoud and I eventually became good friends. I convinced him to ditch his knives before we arrived at the Turkish border, and he lived with us for a month at my mother's house overlooking the Bosphorous. His parents continued sending him money, and he prayed in some of the most beautiful mosques in the world. Until I introduced him to a firecracker Italian chick I had once been friendly with. They had a whirlwind romance, he converted to Catholicism, and they got engaged. They split for Italy a few weeks later to meet her family and get married. I never saw either of them or the German ever again.