

Code Peking Duck by Max Claro

Readings for BUCHSZENE.DE

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“Fans of classic espionage thrillers will be gripped by Code Peking Duck, a heart-pounding journey through the 1970s. Our daring escape agent navigates betrayals and global chaos, from the jungles of Vietnam to the streets of Tehran.”

Author’s Profile

Max Claro learned and practiced more than ten professions, garnering experience in all of them. Among other occupations, he has worked as a postman, sleeping-car conductor, nurse, paramedic, journalist, and helicopter pilot. In the 1970s and 1980s, Claro worked for the CIA and the German Foreign Intelligence Service in the former Eastern Bloc countries as well as in the Middle East and Central America, generally using one of his occupations to go undercover.

Prologue

... I regret nothing. And I would do it all again, exactly as before. Everything I did, I reconciled with my conscience.

Even today, I’m occasionally agonized by uncertainty about whether—as a result or consequence of my actions—people might have come into harm’s way. But to the extent that any human being’s life can even be offset against that of another, one thing is certain: I saved far more lives—lives that were confronted with the utmost peril—than I ever jeopardized or destroyed.

The events in this novel took place between 1971 and 1979. They are based on true occurrences.

In the Vietnam War, a proxy war among three superpowers—the United States, the Soviet Union and China—millions of people lost their lives. The Vietnam conflict ended in 1975 with the victory of the Communist Viet Cong.

Mohammed Zahir Shah peaceably ruled the Kingdom of Afghanistan for nearly forty years, until 1973. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi autocratically ruled Persia—Iran—until he was expelled by his people in January 1979. A month later, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini installed the regime of the mullahs and proclaimed the Islamic Republic of Iran on 1 April 1979. At this time, a Siemens subsidiary, Kraftwerk Union AG, had been constructing a nuclear power plant in Bushehr, on the

Persian Gulf. Block 1 was 85% complete; Block 2 was half finished.

In those days, things were different than they are today; some were simpler, others more difficult. It was commonplace and legal for companies to bribe foreign politicians and to deduct the bribe payments from their taxes. You could still take fluids, scissors, and knives aboard commercial airliners, and smoking during the flight was allowed. The digital age still lay in the distant future. We had neither the internet nor emails, nor cellphones, apps, GPS, nor DNA analysis. From a technological perspective, video surveillance of train stations, airports, border crossings, public spaces, and dwellings was no more feasible than a worldwide data exchange. Cameras still had to be loaded with emulsion film; the most popular spy camera was the Minox C, a masterpiece of German engineering. It was an easy matter to forge passports by swapping the photographs and making the official seal look genuine using a hand-cut rubber stamp. In most countries, including Germany and the United States, a caller's telephone number was never displayed, and you could place anonymous phone calls from any telephone booth. As for the calls themselves, it was a breeze to eavesdrop on them using swapped-out mouthpiece microphones or induction coils, or by tapping the lines. Vehicles, regardless of make, manufacturer, and size, could be easily repaired, manipulated, and hotwired using simple tools. Door locks could be opened with a master key, and safety locks could be picked using two staples or hairpins. The most greatly feared alarm system was a dog.

The Cold War prevailed between the Western powers, led by the United States, and the Eastern Bloc, led by the Soviet Union. The Iron Curtain, as Churchill famously called it, divided Germany and separated the West from the Soviet Union and its satellite Eastern Bloc countries—Poland, Czechoslovakia (then a single country), Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria. ...

CHAPTER 2

Uncle Sam wants you

Fifteen months earlier

... It was a breathtaking feeling, soaring high above the clouds in this enormous metallic bird, flying from one continent to another. As we descended, looking out the window I could see the Statue of Liberty, the symbol for the promised land.

How did that old song go? *New York, New York—if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere!*

In this country, anyone could go from rags to riches.

Surely it was worth a try, at least!

Just a couple of hours after we landed, I found myself overwhelmed by the Big Apple. I wandered a few blocks eastward from Times Square to the Empire State Building, up to Rockefeller Center, back to Times Square, and all the way up Broadway. Then I walked eastward again along 54th Street, doubling back to Seventh Avenue, and continued north until I reached Central Park. After intensively comparing the rates at the numerous currency exchange booths on Broadway, I finally chose one and traded my hard-earned 200 Deutschmarks for the princely sum of \$57.25.

People here were different than Germans. Friendlier, more talkative, and, above all, more outgoing! People I had never seen before in my life simply asked me—right on the street, or while waiting in line at the currency exchange booth, or even in the middle of Times Square—how my day was, how I was doing, where I was from, or where I was headed.

The sun was setting in the horizon as I began getting tired and sat down on a bench in Central Park. Hendrix, who resembled Bob Marley, joined me. He offered me a joint and gave me a couple of tips for surviving the concrete jungle—in which, he was absolutely convinced, I wouldn't survive very long without him. He said he was now my brother, I could tell him everything, and he would personally protect me for the next few days. It sounded as though the Godfather of Upper Manhattan was extending a protective hand over me—a most reassuring feeling!

Hendrix advised me to distribute my money by putting

\$20 into each shoe—that, he said, was the most secure hiding place—while keeping the rest in my left and right jeans pockets. Then he showed me the safest place to sleep in Central Park, one that had a “built-in alarm system.” This consisted of birds that were nesting in a nearby bush and would start shrieking if anyone approached at night. Oh, man, was I glad to have met Hendrix. He was a true pro who was familiar with every angle and really knew his way around.

The next morning, my shoes had disappeared. With all the money, naturally. Two huge globs of bird shit had landed on my jacket. Luckily, there were enough water fountains in the park for me to clean the jacket and freshen myself up a bit.

I resolved to apply for a job in a restaurant, more precisely, as a busboy and dishwasher—since in German, we use the expression “from dishwasher to millionaire” to describe the journey from rags to riches.

...

CHAPTER 4

An Unwilling Agent

... In the early dawn light, I washed my face in the icy river. I would have all too gladly taken a gulp. But in Basic Training we had always been warned about drinking water of unknown origin without boiling it first. I was so hungry that my stomach hurt; it was growling audibly. I climbed up the embankment to the bridge and discovered a plaque with Korean and Chinese lettering on it, as well as an inscription I *could* read—*Han River*.

At some point I stumbled onto a street with several food stands. None of the things sizzling and steaming there in the early morning hours even vaguely recalled anything like a Western breakfast. All the dishes looked instead like hearty lunch items. I ordered a soup they called *pollock*, a hot broth with dried fish, bits of tofu, scallions, and egg whites. I also bought a large bottle of water. My five-dollar bill occupied an entire armada of friendly Korean men and women with calculating the exchange rate and making change in Korean won. The warm soup did me a world of good. Now I only had to get rid of the damned Army uniform. Surely I would be

able to scare up a simple T-shirt, a regular collared shirt, and a pair of jeans. Far from it! I frittered away half a day in an unsuccessful search for clothing. There simply wasn't anything in my size.

I had to keep going. Far, far away. To the airport, to observe how it operated and the people there, to sound out my chances. But where was the airport? Nobody I talked to spoke English. I didn't understand Korean, nor could I read the writing, all of which drove me to the brink of despair.

Salvation approached in the form of a house sign: *Mrs. Kim's English-Korean Language School*. The neatly dressed school head, a middle-aged lady, received me on the first floor. She seemed like an angel to me. Unshaven, unwashed, and in a filthy olive-drab uniform, a bit shamefacedly—but with a friendly smile—I poured out my woes. Mrs. Kim's perfect Oxford English reminded me of my school days. In this situation, it sounded as buoyant as the first movement of Mozart's Night Music. The teacher didn't ask where I came from. She appeared to ignore my outfit, and even went to the trouble of drawing a small map of the town for me. Going down to the Han River, over the first bridge to the other side and then farther downstream, I would reach Gimpo International, the country's largest airport. On foot, the trek would take a good four hours, maybe even five. Then Mrs. Kim took another slip of paper and wrote down a couple of words, in case I had to ask for directions along the way or wanted to take a taxi. The Korean money I still had as change from breakfast ought to be enough. She also wrote that down on the note.

Two worlds were battling in my heart as I tried to reconcile my feelings of exuberant gratitude with discreet Asian reticence. At last, I simply bowed, very slowly, deeply, and submissively, whispering: "Thank you so much! You have just saved my life!"

The teacher nodded only a brief farewell, with a barely perceptible smile that I more or less interpreted to mean, "Don't exaggerate so much! That was simply Asian politeness. Perhaps you've learned a life lesson."

I hailed a taxi on the *Saechang-ro* and handed the driver Mrs. Kim's note.

During the taxi ride, I tried to forge together a plan.

The most adventurous thoughts whirled through my head. Could I, perhaps, sneak into the freight processing

area, empty out a large suitcase, climb into it, and fly somewhere? Did the hold of a freight plane even contain enough air pressure and oxygen?

I just had to get away from here as fast as possible—to Australia, Europe, North or South America, whatever the cost! Anything was justifiable, except murder. But no matter how I looked at the matter, any practicable plan required three things I lacked: a passport, credit card, and an airplane ticket. The passport would have to be one issued to a white male between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight. Everything else was secondary. I figured that Koreans would have just as much difficulty distinguishing one white face from the next as white people do with Asian ones. So I could expect some degree of leeway there. It would also be very nice, if not absolutely necessary, to get a cold Coke to keep me awake and to sharpen me up, as well as some cash, a shower, and civilian clothing.

At Gimpo International Airport, I handed the taxi driver the remainder of my Korean won. With a friendly look, he nodded, and remained just as silent as he had throughout the entire trip, even as I exited the cab.

I decided to spend a great deal of time observing and analyzing everything going on at the airport—the flight schedules and destinations. Which service counters were most heavily frequented? Where did the baggage end up after check-in? Where do they check passports? What kind of routine and schedule did the guards have, and what routes did they take? Where did the cleaning crews work? Were there waiting areas?

Even before I could obtain a proper overview of the place, I discovered a long bamboo wall just to the right of the entrance. Behind the wall, there was a restroom that I headed for immediately. Being able to empty my bladder made my reconnaissance of the whole airport a lot more relaxing. Right next to the restroom, I was surprised to notice a sign reading *Shower*. I had expected any number of things, but certainly not an airport shower. Exactly what I needed now! The stench of my own sweat had been revolting even to me for quite some time. A cool jet of water blasting down, maybe a bar of soap—now that would be paradise on earth!

In the shower facility, which apparently could be used at no charge, there were three cabins next to one other

along the wall, and a long row of clothing hooks along the opposite side. One of the cabins was in use, but the other two were available. Each shower cabin was furnished with a small washcloth and soap bar. I tore the clothes off my body, all set to jump into the empty shower. But just then, my eyes locked on the beige suit coat hanging on the hook next to mine, together with a white hat, beige pants, and a brown satchel. In one of the suit's inside coat pockets, I quickly discovered, was a ticket indicating merely a flight via SFO that terminated at IAD, whatever that meant. The passport had been issued in the name of a Mike Love. The suit also contained a wallet stuffed with baggage claim stubs, cash, credit cards, and business cards. The man in the photograph was a good ten years older than I was, and heavier. He also had a mustache.

Some opportunities come along only once in this life; they've got to be seized immediately. I forgot all about the shower, and as fast as possible I slipped into Mike Love's shirt, pants, and suit jacket. Then I grabbed the satchel, rolled up my Army uniform, and jammed it under my arm. All that I left on the hook was Mike's underwear. I'm not a monster, after all.

While Mike continued whistling away, enjoying his shower, I got the hell out the room. I was pouring sweat. I stuffed my Army gear into the large trash can in the adjacent restroom. Mike's clothing, which was somewhat too big for me, hung loosely, and the belt buckle pin seemed to be longing to get a new hole punched into the leather.

Suddenly, a flash of insight made me shudder. I had made a mistake—a really big one! Maybe the biggest mistake since joining the Army. A mistake that might decide everything!

I dashed back to the shower room, where I heard Mike shutting off the water. Just as the shower cabin door was opening, I grabbed his underwear—the sole item of clothing remaining—right off the hook. For a fraction of a second, our gazes met. I will never forget the combination of sheer outrage, anger, and helplessness in Mike Love's eyes as he saw me in his beige suit, with his brown satchel, and his white hat perched upon my head. Would he dare—stark naked—to chase me through the airport concourse? Would he be able to catch up with me? Whose side would people—and the police—take if I

were attacked by a naked man?

After sprinting a hundred meters without even bothering to look around, I slowed down to a brisk run and made it to the men's room in the part of the airport diagonally opposite, where I tossed Mike's underwear in the trash. Then I locked myself in one of the toilet stalls so I could take inventory in peace and acquaint myself with my new identity.

I was now Mike Love, twenty-nine years old, hailing from Lexington, Kentucky, the United States of America. According to my business card, I was a journalist with the *Washington Post*, the same newspaper which, in cooperation with *The New York Times*, had published the Pentagon Papers ten months earlier. These documents were a study proving that preparations for the Vietnam War had been made long in advance, and that the American people had been deliberately lied to by their government about both the cause of the war and the reasons behind it. I had a Master Card and an American Express Card, and I was a member of the Pan American Airlines WorldPass club. In my pocket, I found a copy of the *Washington Post* dated a few days earlier, some cookies and chocolate bars, and a paperback novel entitled *The Good Earth*, by Pearl S. Buck. My flight was departing from Gate 3, heading to IAD via SFO, wherever these destinations might be; I was yet to find out. My baggage had already been checked through, and the Pan Am flight would be ready for boarding in twenty minutes.

The gate was easy enough to find. A uniformed Korean man glanced at my ticket and my dark blue passport, embossed in gold with the American eagle and the lettering reading *United States of America*. Without looking any further, he waved me through.

Waiting to board the aircraft, I settled down in one of the rows of seats in front of Gate 3, unfolded the *Washington Post*, and pretended to read it. In reality, my thoughts kept dwelling on the naked man standing in the shower. Mike Love! A hell of a name! If you mumbled or slurred the name a little, it sounded like "make love," which reminded me of the hippies at Venice Beach, with their slogan, "Make love—not war!" How right they had been, indeed!

The real Mike Love, stark naked, would undoubtedly have a hard time of it, at least for the next few hours,

probably even days, or perhaps weeks. The Korean police would wrap him in a towel, then want to take him into custody and interrogate him, in Korean, of course. At some point, they would consult an interpreter and perhaps even a consular officer from the American embassy. But all that could easily drag on for days. Verifying his identity without any kind of papers, in light of the tenuous channels of communication between Asia and the United States, would require a lot of time. The only way to dispatch a photo of Mike Love from the United States to Korea was via air mail. The journalist would survive the whole affair and perhaps even fashion a good story out of it someday. For me, it was a matter of sheer survival. Each additional day spent in this senseless war could have forced me to shoot or even kill someone. And on top of that, I could have easily ended up like Private Coolidge or Bill McPherson.

The *Washington Post* had booked Mike Love in First Class. Very pleasant, indeed. The first thing I did after takeoff was make my way to the airplane lavatory. It was my body's first contact with soap in sixty hours. The soap bar was small, with the airline's logo on it, but at this moment felt as valuable as a chunk of gold. The water tap ran only ten seconds at a time. It didn't matter. Passengers in First Class also received a little toilet kit containing, among other things, a disposable razor, a disposable toothbrush, and some toothpaste. Personal hygiene—at long last—was a real treat! The final glimpse in the mirror was astounding: I looked old. *War and sleep deprivation make you old*, I had heard somewhere along the line.

It's probably true. I wondered...was the process reversible? SFO, I had already pretty much guessed, stood for San Francisco. At the immigration window, the officer, a black woman, said I looked different without the mustache and ought to have my passport photo updated.

Otherwise, she remarked, I might run into trouble at some later date.

"Or I could grow a moustache again," I smiled, taking back the passport and waltzing through the checkpoint. Now, I still didn't know what IAD stood for; it was the airport where my baggage had been checked through. Dallas? Denver? I let myself be surprised, and a few hours later I landed at Dulles International Airport, in Washington, D.C.

At the exit, a man was holding up a sign reading

Washington Post – Mike Love. My head lowered, I scurried past him. Washington, D.C. would have actually been the ideal place to give Richard M. Nixon a good dressing-down. But the President wouldn't grant access even to a Mike Love together with his press pass. I decided to take the next Greyhound bus and travel to Nashville, Tennessee. Once there, I would rent a room in a cheap motel, have a couple of beers in one of the numerous saloons, bars, or clubs there, and ponder what to do next. Maybe Elvis Presley, Dolly Parton, or Johnny Cash were singing there at the moment. And besides, I already knew my way around Nashville a little, thanks to a few weekend excursions during my training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, which is only an hour's drive away. I found a room at the Nashville Legends Motel on Second Avenue, near Broadway. I shut the door, put down my suitcase without even knowing what it contained, and threw myself on the king-sized bed—fully dressed, face down, and legs spread out—and slept for a full twenty-six hours. After all, I hadn't had a decent night's sleep for the past eighty-eight hours, except for a couple of brief, half-assed naps with my eyes half-open. Still wearing Mike's baggy clothes, on Nashville's Broadway I indulged myself in an American breakfast par excellence: pancakes with maple syrup, hash browns, eggs sunny side up, and fried bacon. To flush it all down, I had some orange juice, a glass of ice-cold water, and a steaming hot cup of bottomless coffee. I loved poking the fried eggs and watching the yolks flow slowly over the hash browns.

The next thing I did was buy myself a pair of jeans, a blue shirt and a white one, a couple of T-shirts, some underwear, a dressy sports jacket, and a pair of shoes. I was finally human again!

Except for a copy of the previous month's issue of *Penthouse*, the contents of Mike's suitcase were useless: dirty laundry, socks, a roll of toilet paper, a collection of Asian hotel soaps, various toilet articles, and a Kodak camera loaded with color film. Without dwelling much on the matter, I shoved the camera into the pocket of my new sports jacket.

A walk along the nearby Cumberland River ought to clear my head, I thought. Had Elvis ever strolled around here to find inspiration for a worldwide hit?

With each step, it became clearer to me that I did not

want to be on the run forever. And I did owe something to Mike Love and Bill McPherson, or at least to their families. At the riverbank, as the sun went down, I put my plan together.

The next morning, I went to the same restaurant, on Broadway in downtown Nashville, and ordered exactly the same breakfast I'd eaten the day before. It was simply too good to resist! I relished every bite, for I realized that it might well be my final breakfast as a free man.

Then I took a taxi to Fort Campbell, right up to the barriers at the enormous Army post's front gate. I flashed my press ID and claimed that I had an appointment to interview the commanding officer, Brigadier General Thomas McKee Tarpley.

One of the two watchstanders made several phone calls while holding my press ID and turning it over and over in his hand. After what felt like an eternity, a young soldier in a jeep picked me up and brought me to a room in one of the barracks. The place didn't exactly look like a commandant's office. It was a spartanly furnished room containing a desk with a typewriter and telephone on it, three chairs, and a bookcase with a few newspapers and some Army literature.

"My name is Collins," said the soldier. "I'm the press officer in charge here. Go ahead and ask your questions, Mr. Love, and I'll see how I can help you."

"Please understand," I replied, "that I have to conduct the interview with the post commandant personally," I replied, opting to first attempt the obliging tack.

"Unfortunately, that's impossible without an appointment," Collins replied.

"But I've got an appointment. Today, at 11:30!" I insisted.

"For one thing, the general is in a meeting at the moment. And we haven't found any appointment with you in his calendar. So you'll just have to make do with me," the press officer said.

I fumbled for the camera in the pocket of my sports jacket and decided to up the ante:

"The *Washington Post* is one of this country's most important newspapers. My assignment is to conduct an exclusive interview with Brigadier General Thomas McKee Tarpley. It's supposed to be printed on the front page of the paper the day after tomorrow, along with his portrait. My secretary made the appointment and had it

confirmed a good two weeks ago. I don't think the general is going to like the story I'll have to write if his office screws up the appointment—and if you, Press Officer Collins, send me all the way back to Washington without letting me do my job.”

The press officer mulled it over for a moment, then said, “Please wait a moment, Mr. Love.”

...

CHAPTER 9

The Oil Minister

... We had just finished breakfast in front of the hotel when two disguised men in black Kurdish dress drove up on an off-road motorcycle. The man on the passenger seat had a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder. They inquired after the man who wanted to speak to Sheik Akar Ahmad, and I answered, but resolved that all three of us would ride to the Kurdish leader, mainly because I didn't want to let my traveling companions out of my sight.

“Have you got a car?” the Kurds asked.

I pointed to the Datsun. The pickup truck had a front bench seat for three people, as well as the cargo bed. I didn't have to worry about who would sit where. The Kurds peremptorily decided that one of them would drive while the passenger with the Kalashnikov would ride in the bed with us. However, there was still a minor matter that they could not dispense with: we all had to wear black blindfolds, so that we would be unable to take note of the route to the tribal chieftain.

Ali and Hassan began panicking. Both the Shah as well as Ayatollah Khomeini had led their opponents to their deaths wearing black blindfolds. I asked for a moment of quiet and did some thinking. A trap could not be ruled out, but was rather improbable. What worried me more than the blindfolding was the notion of leaving Ali and Hassan alone, because I was afraid that upon my return, Ali would be on his way home and Hassan would be walking around the market, undisguised. Then I suddenly thought of the “naked man trick,” which had stood me in good stead right at the outset of my career. I had Ali give me the car key, asked the Kurds to wait a moment, and went up to our room

with Ali and Hassan.

“If you refuse to wear blindfolds—something I can certainly understand—then I’ll ride to the sheik alone. I’ll be back in a couple of hours. But under no circumstances do I want either of you to leave the room. Do you both understand that?” Both men nodded in relief.

“If you’re quite definitely not leaving the room, then you won’t be needing any clothing. Kindly strip down to your underwear and stuff everything in your pillowcase!” I told both men.

“Why? We’ll stay in the room anyway, just as we are,” Hassan said, outraged, while Ali concurred with him.

“Because I’m not taking any chances! And because our lives are at stake! There isn’t any more time for debate. Either you two do what I say right now, and make it snappy, or I’ll drive off in the pickup truck and never see either of you again,” I threatened sharply.

As the two of them stood before me in their underwear and handed me the filled-up pillowcases, I ordered them to crawl under the bedsheets and hand me their underwear as well. I tied up the pillowcases and took them along with me. After closing and locking the hotel room door, I shoved a wooden match between the door and its frame, a few centimeters from the upper right-hand corner. That way, upon returning I could tell whether the door had been opened during my absence.

The bags of clothing landed on the pickup truck’s bed, and the seating arrangement was clear: one of the Kurds drove the pickup, I sat blindfolded in the middle, and the Kurd with the Kalashnikov sat on the other side, next to me.

Sheik Akar Ahmad somewhat resembled a prince from one of the fables in *A Thousand and One Nights*. He was wearing a white turban, white bloomers, a crimson belly sash and a crimson vest trimmed with gold brocade. His reception room could have competed with a number of museums specializing in oriental art: heavy Persian rugs on the floor and on the walls, delicately carved furniture, a samovar, tea tables, tea glasses, silver spoons, a large bowl full of dates, and tiny porcelain equestrian figurines.

The man, whom I estimated to be in his mid-forties, asked me, in perfect English: “Who are you and what can I do for you?” Meanwhile, one of his servants set about

pouring me a glass of tea.

“My name is Thomas Freeman. Are you Sheik Akar Ahmad?” I wanted to affirm.

The sheik nodded.

“Then I’d like to talk with you frankly. I am supposed to accompany an acquaintance over the border into Türkiye, and I am requesting your assistance. It goes without saying that if you can and wish to help me, I shall reciprocate.”

“Is the man we’re talking about here Ali Reza Khan?” inquired the sheik.

Startled, I attempted to conceal my surprise, replying, “Please understand that I cannot mention any names.”

“Oh, you’ve already done that! I read it in your eyes,” the sheik replied. He continued, “Last week, an American embassy employee—presumably a CIA agent—recruited a taxi driver, who was supposed to drive the former head of the National Iranian Oil Company into Türkiye, along with an escort. The taxi driver is a traitor and wanted to squeeze money from both the CIA as well as Khomeini’s people. They’re already expecting you both at the checkpoint!”

“How do you know this?” I asked, as emotionlessly as I could.

“Two of my men are working undercover as Revolutionary Guards, one of them at the checkpoint.”

“What do you propose?” I asked.

“First off, you’ve got to get rid of the taxi driver. Either execute him or put him safely out of commission for the next thirty-six hours!” the sheik replied.

“I didn’t hire the taxi driver you’re talking about. I told him I would still need more time to procure the money he was demanding, and that I would get back to him. We’ve arrived with another driver, one who enjoys my confidence.”

“That sounds very good. Still, you shouldn’t trust anyone except yourself,” the sheik lectured me. Those were the exact words they had constantly drilled into us during the training at the CIA camp.

“Where are Ali Reza Khan and your driver now?” asked the sheik.

“Esteemed Sheik. You have just now given me good advice, advice that I shall gladly heed. Please tell me first how you can assist me. Then I will tell you where the two men are to be found.”

Sheik Akar Ahmad smiled appreciatively and explained: “There are two options for safely circumventing the checkpoint. One is to use horses. That takes around ten hours, and all of you would have to be experienced riders. One of my men will accompany you. He’ll spend the night in Türkiye and come back with the horses the following day. The second option is to take three off-road motorcycles. My men will drive. You’ll sit on the pillion seat of one motorcycle, and Hassan will take the pillion seat of the second one. The third motorcycle will carry drinking water, gasoline for the return trip, reserve ammo, and emergency repair and first aid kits. The journey will take five to six hours for the two of you, and my men will come back the same day.”

“I like the motorcycle option better. How quickly can you organize that, and how much will it cost me?” I asked.

“My men can depart tomorrow morning at dawn. What can you pay? What is this man’s life worth to you?” the sheik asked.

“\$10,000 U.S. in cash,” I replied.

“\$10,000? That isn’t much for a human life. And it isn’t much when you’re familiar with the CIA’s budget. But if we Kurds help, we’re not doing it for the money, but rather for ideological reasons. Something much more preferable than money, though, would be a gift you can make to me,” the Sheik said.

“Tell me your wish, and I shall attempt to fulfill it, insofar as it is within my power to do so,” I offered him.

“We had a sand-colored Datsun pickup truck exactly like the one you rode in. Until the Revolutionary Guards stole it from us. We really miss this vehicle,” said the sheik.

“The truck belongs to my driver,” I replied. “Perhaps I can persuade him to sell it. Ali Reza Khan and my driver, by the way, are currently lying naked in our hotel room, covered with nothing but a sheet. That way, they can’t run off. Their clothing is packed in pillowcases, sitting in the bed of the pickup truck.”

The sheik liked the story so much, he had to laugh out loud. It’s probably a rare occasion that anyone has heard a sheik laugh so loudly. It was an opportune moment for me to sum up the situation.

“Your men will come to the hotel with three motorcycles at 5:00 am tomorrow morning,” I said. “Your people

ought to prepare a document for the sale of the Datsun. If my driver is willing to sell, I'll pay him, one of your men can sign the contract, and he'll get the keys. If my driver doesn't sell, we'll have to respect that, and I'll give one of your men \$10,000 U.S. in cash. Then we'll get going. Where in Türkiye will your men drop us off?"

"In Gever. The Turks call the place Yüksekova. It'll be easy for you to continue along from there."

The sheik sealed our negotiation with a powerful handshake, instructed his people to drive me back, then called out, "Once you get to the edge of town, you can take off his blindfold!"

When we reached Urmia, I asked both Kurds to go to a restaurant of their choice and get three roast chickens, a substantial portion of saffron rice, three large bottles of water and a large Coke.

In front of our hotel, both Kurds switched to their motorcycles, while I took the provisions and lifted both pillowcases, which were full to bursting, from the truck's bed and marched up to the room.

The match was still wedged against the upper right corner of the door—a good sign. My two pals were lying there obediently, covered only with a sheet, and snoring—one of them louder than the other. The only reason to wake both of them would have been the freshly roasted chickens, but even those could wait. I decided to go to bed as well. Staring at the ceiling, I pondered what could still go awry, what I had overlooked or insufficiently thought through. Nothing occurred to me. Except for one prank—namely, I had no idea what Iranian humor was like, and it was time to find out.

I locked both pillowcases filled with clothing into the room's only wardrobe, and yelled, "Wake up, people, food!"

Ali and Hassan were sleeping so deeply that I had to repeat my announcement, a lot more loudly, and shake both men by the shoulder.

"Where are my clothes?" asked Hassan, groggy with sleep. Ali was also looking at me inquisitively.

"People," I said with a serious face, "your clothes were incredibly filthy and reeking of sweat. So I took them to the laundry first. They'll be ready tomorrow."

Hassan's face grew red with fury.

"Whaaat the hell? I want my clothes—now!"

Ali, a bit depressed, added, "That wasn't a good idea at

all, Thomas. So how am I supposed to go to the reception desk to call my wife?”

“Aren’t you guys hungry at all?” I asked.

“Without my clothes, I’m not eating a thing!” Hassan protested. Ali was likewise shaking his head.

I allowed myself a little time before announcing, “I’ve got one piece of bad news and two pieces of good news for both of you. Which do you want to hear first?”

“The bad news!” Ali asked.

“The bad news is, none of us will be leaving this room until tomorrow morning. At most to take a leak or for a quick phone call. It’s too dangerous, and it’s putting too much at risk.”

Once again, I made a kind of pregnant pause and waited until Hassan asked, “So what’s the good news, then?”

I opened up the wardrobe, gave each man his pillowcase stuffed with clothes, and said, “The first piece of good news is, you can put on your clothes again, but they’re just as unwashed and full of sweat as when you handed them over to me.”

Ali immediately shot me his mischievous grin, the one that had endeared me to him from the moment we had first met. Even Hassan managed to crack a smile. Both men were so happy that they didn’t even demand to hear my second bit of good news, namely, the successful negotiations with the sheik.

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