

Into the Fire

—**London Heathrow Airport, November 2, 1972**

Twenty-four-year old Redwan Moqbel sits in an airport waiting room. He is staring at a wall, a magazine open on his lap. He reflects over the past year, a year that though challenging in many unexpected ways, has been the best year of his life. Now, with his Master's Degree in Medical Parasitology from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine completed, and the promise of a full scholarship to do his PhD in the Department of Helminthology, he couldn't be more pleased.

The bonus of returning to Iraq to attend his sister Sharaf's wedding is that he can tell his mother in person about his bright future and his new girlfriend, Ann Macleod. He is excited to let his mother know that she'll no longer have to sacrifice her meagre pension for his stipend. She'll be thrilled to learn that he is going to become a doctor, albeit a medical research doctor and not a physician as he'd hoped. He shudders as he relives the moment when a fellow student threatened him with a switchblade during his university entrance exams. That incident botched any chance of getting into medical school. His reverie is interrupted by the boarding call for his Iraqi Airways flight to Baghdad.

Once in the air, a flood of memories from life inside Iraq's repressive regime engulf him. Although Iraq was more secular than religious, the government demanded its citizens pledge allegiance to the Ba'ath Party. Redwan found himself on the wrong side of the law. The teachings of his religion, the Bahá'í Faith, eschew party politics because of their divisive nature. Regret and foreboding about his decision to return to Iraq wash over him. He tries to console himself imagining the wonderful time he'll spend with his family

before returning to England to settle into life as an expat. When he disembarks at Baghdad International Airport he can't help but recall the five bloody coups d'état he'd witnessed since 1958.

Redwan allows himself to enjoy life in the embrace of his loving family who are delighted to see him. In no time he is absorbed in the wedding preparations but the day before the wedding he can no longer bear the anxiety of delaying the steps he must take to ensure his departure. He sets out for the Ministry of Higher Education to have his University of London admission documents certified so he can leave Iraq in two weeks. He assumes it will be a straightforward task.

Inside the Ministry, he hands over his passport and watches the clerk flip through it. "Where's your Security clearance stamp from when you left in 1971? I don't see it."

"I don't think I had one."

"What? You can't leave the country without one. That's illegal!"

"I didn't know," Redwan exclaims, "What am I supposed to do now?"

"You'll have to go to the passport office to get an application to submit to the Security Police for a permit to leave."

Redwan sets off immediately for the passport office aware of the potentially devastating consequences that may await him. En route, he passes the Bahá'í National headquarters confiscated two years earlier by the Iraqi government after its crackdown on the Bahá'í Faith. *How odd that those two buildings should be so close together*, he thinks.

Redwan joins a line up at the passport office. Eventually a clerk dispatches him to the Security Police Office to retrieve his file. He obtains it easily but is shocked by its size. *I'm only 24. How could my file be so big?* he wonders. A hand-written note stapled to a corner of the folder reads, "Sir, should this person be allowed to travel outside Iraq since he is a Bahá'í?"

Though tempted, Redwan can't bring himself to rip off the note and thereby commit a criminal offence. He dutifully returns to the passport office where he hands his file to the same clerk who sent him to fetch it.

“You’ll have to go back to the Security Police Office again and get your passport verified and obtain the requisite exit stamp,” the clerk says.

“But I’m a Bahá’í!” Redwan blurts out. “Will that interfere with getting a visa?”

“Probably,” the clerk replies nonchalantly.

The next day Redwan’s mother, Hajer, conscious of her son’s anxiety, puts him to work on wedding preparations. That night, dressed in a brown and yellow plaid shirt and grey suit, and trying to bury his feelings, Redwan greets the fifty to sixty guests, mostly relatives, that begin to arrive. After the guests have settled in the packed living room, the happy couple, Sharaf and Aqeel enter. On cue, Redwan starts up the record player and plays Cliff Richard’s hit song, “Congratulations.” He had brought it with him from England for the occasion. In a simple ceremony the couple exchange the Bahá’í wedding vow, “We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God.” Then, coin by coin, Aqeel places Sharaf’s dowry, today’s equivalent of nine dollars, into her hands in a symbolic gesture of respect. Afterwards the wedding party dines on “bo’ragg,” bread stuffed with meat. Later, Sharaf and Aqeel depart by train for their honeymoon in Mosul in northern Iraq.

The following day, Redwan, file in hand, incriminating note still attached, reluctantly returns to the Security Police Office. As he waits in line he rehearses his plea, then hands the file to the officer. “I must get permission to return to England to finish my education,” he says. “I’ve been accepted into a PhD program with a full scholarship and I’m committed to being there.”

The officer ignores Redwan as he thumbs through his file. Finally he looks up, a deadpan expression on his face. “Well,” he says, “I’m afraid that’ll be impossible.”

“Impossible?” Redwan cries. “Why? What have I done? I was studying there last year and I worked hard and did well. And I came back. I want to get my PhD to better equip me to serve my country. Why can’t I return there?”

“Look, you might have been there last year, but you shouldn’t have been! Looks like you left illegally. Now you’d better accept that you aren’t going anywhere, especially England. Now move along.”

Speechless, Redwan stares as the man turns away from him and slams the window wicket in his face. Redwan stumbles out the door, his hopes dashed.



Over the next two weeks, despite consuming anxiety and a sense of impending doom, Redwan visits with friends and shares stories about his experiences in the UK and mainland Europe. At home, he paces in the front garden praying silently for a door to open by which he can squeeze out of Iraq. He has already refused to join the Ba’ath Party and is terrified he might “disappear,” be imprisoned, or barred from employment. Sensing worsening conditions for Bahá’ís in Iraq, Hajer insists Redwan leave by any means. Their discussions focus almost entirely on his escape.

Redwan’s despair continues to deepen until his brother Sarmad’s best friend makes an astonishing offer: his uncle works at Security Police Headquarters and is willing to try to retrieve Redwan’s passport and obtain the required stamp. This man understands that, as a Bahá’í, Redwan is a victim of religious persecution. But his offer comes with a condition: should he succeed in his mission, Redwan must leave Iraq within 24 hours. There’s another catch: Redwan can’t purchase a plane ticket without a valid passport.

For the ten days, Redwan remains entirely preoccupied. He tries to will the phone to ring. Finally, the call comes; mission accomplished. Sarmad immediately sets off to retrieve his brother’s passport and then to drive Redwan to Lufthansa Airlines ticket office. (Redwan had already ruled out Iraqi Airways for fear it would increase his chances of getting caught.) Much to his relief, he secures one of the last seats on a flight leaving for London via Vienna and Frankfurt the next morning at 7 a.m. His spirits soar as he allows himself to imagine returning to England.



—Baghdad, November 30, 1972

In a darkened bedroom, lit only by a reading lamp, Redwan, brow furrowed in concentration, bends over an open suitcase and meticulously folds and stacks his clothes in the weathered case. Hajer watches in silence.

Redwan looks up as Sarmad enters the room and playfully attempts to punch Redwan on the shoulder. “Hey! Wait a minute you little brat!” Redwan cries. “I’ll teach you to...”

Hajer breaks in sternly, “Hush, keep it down and stay away from the windows, Sarmad! And don’t turn that light on!”

“Okay, okay, I’m almost finished,” Redwan says to his mom.

“Where’s the document?” she asks.

Redwan points to the centre of his case to a neat pile of folded cotton dress shirts. “Here in the middle. It will protect me.”

His mother nods silently, “Inshah Allah,” she says quietly. “Now get some sleep. We have to leave for the airport at 4:30. Your sister and Aqeel will be up soon to make our breakfast.”

“The last meal,” offers Sarmad as he pats his brother on the back.

Hajer tenderly places her arms on Redwan’s shoulders, pulls him into a hug and then kisses his eyelids as was her habit with her children whenever she caught sight of the first sliver of the new moon. Teary-eyed, she turns and leaves the room. She knows she may never see her son again.

Outside Baghdad International Airport, Sarmad pulls the car up to the curb and parks. Redwan climbs out of the back. Sharaf follows. She places her hand on his shoulder. He turns around with an inquiring look and puts his arms around her.

“I know I’m not going to see you for a long time, Redwan, and I don’t like that.” Tears stream down her face as she hugs him.

“Don’t cry, Sharaf, it probably won’t be that long,” Redwan offers without conviction.

“Maybe the longer the better,” Sarmad jokes before adding, “Just kidding.”

Redwan smiles and shakes his head at his brother, “Guess you were just born to be a pest.” Hajer smiles at her sons. Redwan places his arm around her shoulders as they walk towards the airport.

Once they locate the check-in counter Redwan says, “I think it best if you go now. I’d better do this alone.” The family nod in agreement. Redwan whispers into Sarmad’s ear as he hugs him, “Take care of Mom.”

Sarmad’s eyes tear up. “I promise.” Sarmad collects himself and adds mockingly, “And you have fun studying worms!”

Redwan turns to shake hands with Aqeel who pulls him into an embrace. “You know I’ll do whatever I can to support your mom and brother and, of course, Sharaf.”

“I know you will and I’m so grateful.”

Sharaf, still teary eyed says, “I’ll miss you so much, and so will we all, but don’t worry about us. We’re strong.” Redwan nods in agreement.

Hajer studies Redwan as if trying to engrave his face in her memory. “Redwan, I want you to promise me that you’ll always do the right thing.”

“I promise, Mom.”

Mother and son embrace. Redwan watches his family pass through the exit doors. Then he turns around and slowly makes his way to the check-in counter. He feels his heart quicken and his stomach cramp. Checking in goes off without a hitch but, as he heads towards the security counter, he is overcome with nervousness. He discreetly drags his sweaty palms down his pant legs and instructs himself to breathe in and breathe out.

“Next,” shouts the officer behind the counter as he stretches out his hand for Redwan’s passport. The officer studies it carefully. “There’s something familiar about your name,” he comments.

Redwan’s stomach sinks as the officer’s gaze settles on him. “Thank you,” is all he can think to say. Inwardly he is dying. *Oh, please, please God, let me out of this country. I’ll do anything to get out of here. I need to return to England. I should never have come back for Sharaf’s wedding. I made a huge mistake. Please help me out of this country.* But he stands there, breathing in and out and trying to look calm and nonchalant.

The officer turns to his desk and picks up a document with what appears to be an extensive list of names. He studies it intently. “Well,” he says finally, shaking his head, “I must be mistaken.” He hands Redwan his passport. “Take your suitcase over there for inspection,” he says, pointing to another line-up.

When it is his turn, Redwan hoists his suitcase onto the counter and pops open the locks. The inspecting officer regards the contents with obvious surprise and whistles under his breath. “Wow! Do you always pack so neatly?”

Redwan giggles nervously and prays silently. *Oh God, please don't let him find that document. If they discover I'm taking information about the persecution of the Bahá'is out of the country they'll kill me for sure and maybe the rest of the Bahá'is too.*

The officer picks up the pile of clothing on the left side of his case and places it gently on the counter top, still clucking in amazement at Redwan's packing job. He gingerly thumbs through it, taking pains not to disturb its perfection, and replaces the clothing in the suitcase. His hands hover momentarily over the middle section of clothes, where Redwan hid the document, as if undecided, and then settle on the pile on the right. The officer does a rapid and non-exhaustive investigation of those clothes. “Well, I guess that's it then,” he says as he snaps the lid shut.

Redwan, shaken and still terrified that the first officer will find his name on the “no fly” list, tries to navigate his jelly-like legs to carry him down the long hallway to the transit lounge. Once there, he eases his body into the first available chair and tries to shrink into invisibility.

Minutes later, he cringes at the unmistakable sound of approaching military boots. A soldier rounds the corner and shouts out, “Redwan Moqbel! Is there a Redwan Moqbel here?”

Redwan manages to pull himself up out of the chair. “That's me,” he stammers.

“Follow me!” commands the officer as he spins around and strides quickly back down the hall.

With resignation Redwan follows the soldier. *One glorious year in England and my life is over, he thinks. Kaput, done with. Why did I chance returning to*

Iraq? he wonders for the millionth time. He sees the Security Police sign ahead and braces for the customary slap across the face he associates with the first act of interrogation.

Near the office door, the soldier turns to Redwan and says quietly, “Your uncle and your cousin came to see you off. I didn’t want to embarrass you by announcing that in the waiting room.”

Incredulous, Redwan utters a quiet thank you. The soldier conducts him to the atrium where his Uncle Munir and cousin, Ikbal stand waiting. Their faces light up as they rush forward to greet him. “We brought you some candy, dear Redwan,” Ikbal says tenderly as she presents him with a beautifully wrapped box. Noticeably shaken, Redwan falls into their embrace.

“When I see you next, Ikbal, you’ll be a famous surgeon,” he says with a smile.

“Not at all,” she says blushing. “I’m so proud of you, Redwan.”

“And your dad would have been too,” Uncle Munir offers. “Take good care of yourself and remember to stay in close touch with your mom. She really missed you last year.”

Afraid to utter a word lest he totally break down, Redwan nods and chokes back his tears. He adores his cousin and his uncle Munir. His uncle had counseled him to choose a career path with the “noble goal” of being of benefit to humanity.

Redwan bows silently to his relatives, then backs up a few steps, smiles, waves and returns to the departure lounge. En route, he spots the soldier and hands him the candy. “This is for you, sir, a small thank you for your kindness.”

Once seated in a window seat near the rear of the airplane Redwan studies the airport terminal, intently half expecting to see the first officer rushing towards the plane to apprehend him. After what feels like an eternity, the plane lifts off. For the first half hour in flight he continues to worry that the control tower will order the pilots to return to Baghdad. Gradually he relaxes and falls into a deep sleep.

Redwan wakes up with a start just as the plane is about to land. He looks out the window and is confused not to see Heathrow’s familiar

surroundings. Then he remembers the two-hour stopover in Vienna before another in Frankfurt.

Shaking off his slumber and unfolding his cramped body, Redwan follows the other passengers out of the plane and onto the runway. The moment his feet touch the ground armed soldiers close in around him.

“You!” one of them shouts. “Hand over your passport and ticket!”

“Why?” Redwan stammers. “I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Are you quite sure of that?” shouts another soldier, his menacing face inches from Redwan’s.

Two of the men grab Redwan on each side and march him over the tarmac, into the airport, and down a dark hall where they frisk him, before shoving him into a small cubicle, and locking the door. Redwan sinks to the floor in a sweating, fretting mass. *The Iraqis instructed the Austrians to detain me*, he thinks.

Redwan’s distress deepens further with each repeated departure announcement. He struggles not to cry. Just after the final boarding call he hears the sound of boots rushing towards him and braces for the next assault. The door opens abruptly. One of the men that initially pitched him into this room, thrusts Redwan’s ticket and passport into his hands. “Here,” he says, “You look like one of the Black September terrorists behind the Munich Massacre but you’re not. Sorry about that. If you run you might still be able to catch your flight.”

Redwan sprints off and just manages to make it to the gate before it closes. It is some time before his trembling stops. During the Frankfurt stopover he declines to de-board. Hours later, as the plane moves towards the brilliant pink and orange setting sun, Redwan catches sight of his beloved England and weeps with relief. Once through customs, he is delighted to see Ann Macleod waiting for him.