

The Crossing · *John Briggs*

IN JUNE OF 1975, I crossed the Persian Gulf from Kuwait to Khorramshahr, in Iran. I wanted to travel to Eastern Turkey by car, to see for myself the mountain towns—Van, Bitlis, Batman—which even then were still named uneasily by those who had passed through them.

The logical route, north through Iraq, was not possible. Iraq was closed to Americans. I could cross the Saudi Nafud on the pipeline highway, turn north across the Jordanian ax-handle, and transit Syria to Turkey's southern border at Nusaybin, but over the previous months I had had my fill of desert driving. As I blocked the flat route on the map and in my mind, I could anticipate too clearly my nightly camps and the following day's journey.

I raised the problem with colleagues at the university and with other acquaintances. Most of them advised me to fly to Turkey and rent a car there. A few disagreed. Ship your car to Iran, they said; to Abadan. It was simple: go to the dhow port, find a boat, negotiate a price, get the clearance papers, put the car on the boat, fly the shuttle over, and meet it. Then I could drive up through Iran. "Americans have no difficulties in Iran," Bryce from the embassy told me. "We are popular there."

Bryce was right. I thought of his words often that summer, and I have thought of them many times since. In those days, the Shah reigned in Iran; he was Iran, as solid and as grim as the Kremlin, yet well-disposed toward America.

From the vantage point of the present, Bryce may seem naive, but he was as new to the region as I, with no experience beyond diplomatic conversation, and he merely repeated the facts as they were understood within the circle of his profession.

I decided almost casually to accompany the car on the dhow. As no one I knew had done it or had heard of a Westerner who had made that trip, it would be a mild adventure. "But why?" Bryce wondered. "Why not just fly? I've not heard of anyone but peasants on the dhows. . . ."

I might imply now that I, like Indiana Jones, unlike my easeful friends, thrust myself knowingly into peril, but the truth is I was hoodwinked at the port. I accepted my captain's promise that the trip would last a restful day.

Too, it seemed less trouble to go along, and much cheaper than flying, particularly as I was taking my collie. At the airport, I would need a cage, and in Iran, with her, I would have problems finding transportation to the dhow port.

I was never in peril. I was uncomfortable, but mostly I was annoyed at myself for having placed Sonia in such danger. She nearly died; I, as Bryce expected, was treated well.

At the time, I just wanted the trip to end. In retrospect, it was good I made the crossing. Just a few years later, when the Ayahtollah demonized America and the Shah, I understood his ruthlessness as though I were one of his. Later, though, during the long years of the Iranian war with Iraq, because I could picture the destruction and the Iranians who died, I began to appreciate the virtues of the power the Shah had held, and that was magnified when Iraq, unchecked, seized decent, smug Kuwait. I progressed, that is, from a personal horror at what I had seen to a belief that I had not looked far enough.

The crossing, the first of many such trips, stripped from me the ease of academic generalities. "The Shah" became a policeman on a barge; "despotism," Abdullah's scream. The realists who helped the Shah to rule were wrong: he was a tyrant. We humanists who cheered his fall were also wrong: his successors have been worse.

At my current free-world university some time ago, I needed to see a dean to resolve a trifling problem. It required wheedling to pass without an appointment the high-heeled guardians who shield him from the tumult of the campus, but finally I was ushered into his plush office and seated, as petitioners always are, in a low chair, so that I peered upwards to him, across his broad desk. He listened gravely to my request, tapping his soft finger lightly at the ticking away of his valuable day, and then he fluttered his hand in dismissal: Nothing could be done; policy was involved. Mrs. Jones, summoned invisibly, smiled impatiently at the door, her eyes empty with the boredom of her day, and the dean, as I last glanced at him, had turned already to the papers in a folder. This exercise of what was merely obstructive power had not much aroused him.

"Ah," I might have said, "you remind me of that official I met years ago on a steel barge in the Shatt-al-Arab. You could trade places."

I often have such flashes now. Witchy insights. The civilized locutions, circumlocutions, are just the pufferies of our style. The dean would fit on that barge. I see it in his face. I see it in his manner. I have no proof, and I have no hope to demonstrate that I am right, yet I am right.

On the anchored customs barge, or looking into the eyes of a Party cadre in a grey office in Shanghai, or negotiating for passage with an army colonel east of Van, or questioning the superintendant at a school meeting, or speaking with the dean, I have slowly learned the parallels.

Returning to what was my world, no longer of it, I see the faces of border crossings, and familiar posturings and familiar menace, as though the panoramas of history and progress were illusions and we are, as we have always been, a blink from savagery.

Such insights are not entirely logical or defensible. I am not unmindful of our Constitutional ethos. The dean left me with a familiar feeling, that is all: that the logic or merit of my request was immaterial; that the weight of precedent relieved him of the need to consider my personal case; that he would change his position readily, without regret, if an authority superior to his own interceded on my behalf. His inflexibility was a posture; he was infinitely flexible.

My meeting with the dean reminded me, and I looked again at the sweat-darkened notebook I filled on the dhow. As I made the crossing, passing deeper into the Shah's realm, I had few insights; I was merely frightened, as though I had stepped into a king's tale from the brothers Grimm. As I write this, I am less sure than then just where the tale ends.

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Iranian Arabs crew the dhows that make the runs to Abadan. As my car turns from the Arab Gulf Road and passes the gate into the old harbor, lounging shillabers from the different boats, alerted by the quickest among them, surround it, shouting in at the windows, "Abadan? Abadan? Mister, Abadan?" (Brown unshaven faces, grey robes, soft brown eyes.) The car is guided by hands on the hood. Numbers are shouted, absurdly high; hands beat the back as if this were a reunion of old friends, as if Iranian boatmen take naturally to sweating Americans in small brown Toyotas. Below the jetty edge, the dhows are tied together, making a walkway over cargoes and gunwhales to the other side of the tiny harbor. When a boat moves to the

loading jetty, the others are unlaced and pushed aside; ropes break, crewmen scream warnings, gunwhales splinter from collisions, and the remaining boats drift slowly back together.

The captain appears, yawning, led and prodded by his hireling. As Commander, he is Bargainer-in-Chief.

We squat in the dust beside the pier and I follow local custom: Argue loudly (there is no fixed price), so that the idle run from all corners. Employ logic, patience, sahib boredom. Appeal to reason, to sentiment; lie outrageously, scoff and whine. Leave in livid anger cursing all Iranians, threatening to abandon the trip; come back the next day, cut the demands in half, add ten percent for the sake of getting out of the sun, shake hands. The final numbers indicate the winner, who is not you, ever, here.

This I do, and the promise is a journey of a day. The dog may go for free. Two Pakistanis are already on board in a Mercedes. They have paid double and believe the trip will begin immediately and last a total of seven hours.

Perhaps within the nearby palace someone regrets that the rest of old Kuwait has been bulldozed into memory, the someone who has stayed the destruction of the dhow port, leaving a corner of the ancient country nearly as it used to be: a maze of boats lashed together, tin-roofed customs buildings in a long yellow line, idle stevedore-hamals waiting for a job, trucks pulled up by the jetties' edges receiving or disgorging air conditioners or flower pots or crated shoes to men who carry the cargoes on their backs up and down steep ramps.

It is all bounded off from new Kuwait by fences and the sea, separate and considerable, a creaking raft-like reticulation; and on the decks, the sailors in filthy underwear squat over deck stoves boiling rice or tea, slapping out flat bread. Garbage flies overboard; excrement plops from stern toilets; and beneath, where the thick, greenish water laps on the muck at low tide, the men wash their clothes. Life without women; passed days; burdens; slow, hot trips to other ports.

The crane, a skeletal arm, lifts and turns and drops the cars onto the low boats. The noisy crowd swarms between the buildings and over the boats. Vendors call out. The harbor is smoke rising from cook stoves, dirt, piss, men prone in prayer, others lying snoring in the shade of the cabins or on the dirt along the warehouse walls.

Beside the jetty nearest the palace, where two sixty-foot dhows are discharging their cargoes of cotton bales, a black kitten has been caught and crushed beneath a falling board. As the feet of the porters brush the wood or step on it, the kitten shudders and arches its body, its eyes fixed violently and sightlessly on the sky, the small tongue lapping the dry air.

A group of hamals see the kitten and bend over it, their hands on their grey-robed knees, pointing at the smear of blood. Their dark eyes and faces are expressionless; they neither hurt nor try to help the cat; they straighten in unison after several long seconds and pass on, leaving it as they found it.

After a moment, the kitten's front rises again; the animal whistles with pain and spreads its paws, as though acknowledging applause for a performance of local life, then it lowers its head one last time and dies.

Find a boat. Agree on the price. Then, drive bitter miles in the steaming mid-town traffic and with thousands of others park your car and hike in the desert sun across the parking lots and streets where traffic swirls dangerously, to the police traffic bureau, and wander from office to office until one of the casual Kuwaiti Directors with his feet on his desk agrees that he is the proper Kuwaiti Director to scrawl out an export permit for the car. Return, then, to the port, and hand in hand with your captain scurry back and forth lengths of dark corridors pressing through thick shouting tangles of people at each office door, the papers accumulating bookishly in your hands.

At each door is a riot. Within, the Customs Kuwaitis hold jamboree with their friends, slouching in white *distashas* at barren desks, occasionally admitting one of the mob, while those outside bang and shout of emergencies and demand special favors and stick their arms through the crack each time the door opens.

The captain is very tall for an Iranian Arab and built like a heavyweight. "Be here at nine o'clock in the morning!" he shouts. "We sail then and you will be left behind if you are not here!"

Here, one sometimes has the feeling after accomplishing something that it was not really so bad as it seemed. Now, the closed doors and absent officials and mislaid stamp-seals blur into the symmetry that a climbed mountain offers from its highest peak. "After all," I say, "I have my permissions!"

So, in the springtime sun of Kuwait, with temperatures at 120 in the morning, I look again at the map and see comfortingly that regardless of the course the captain chooses, Abadan is no more than a hundred miles from Kuwait. And, shaking hands with friends, gathering the suitcases, roping the tent and chairs on the rooftop, stashing boxes of books in the trunk, putting the collie on her leash, I set off from the shaded house in plenty of time to arrive at nine o'clock, to go by dhow to Abadan.

At four o'clock, I return. My friends are not surprised; they knew I should have flown. They see the humor of the tale: sitting in the sun for long hours, waiting for the car to be hoisted on; the *sprong* as a fender chrome-strip, struck by another car, descending, flies into the water; carrying a kicking eighty-pound collie over the four-foot gunwhales of four dhows, past eighty boatmen convinced she is a lioness. "Stay off! Stay off!" they shout. "Beware!"

Because there is only a near-empty dhow at nine o'clock. And it isn't until noon that the car is swung on, or 12:15 when the next car bangs the chrome-strip off, and it isn't until 3:30 that the captain admits that he never intended to sail today, the conversation taking place loudly, boatmen from all the port leaning in to hear, eyeing the froth-mouthed beast sprawled on a chain at the feet of the maddened American. For the dog has been in the sun these hours, the boatmen not allowing her the shade of the cabin, and now the captain says, as they stand in the narrow space between the cars, that if the dog should be in the way on the trip, over she will go, and in front of two hundred witnesses, this ugly American promises in a mean and rasping Arabic that anyone looking sideways at the dog will die a slow and terrible death, and I bang my car hood with a frozen fist, so that the captain loses face by ducking.

In a Persian Gulf version of a forgotten campaign promise, the picturesque dhow on which I negotiated passage has altered. My tiny Toyota lands just in front of the cabin, hard against the starboard rail. Immediately in front, with six inches between the bumpers, a white Toyota. To the left, its radio blaring American country music, the huge cream-colored Mercedes containing the two Pakistanis (repeating that they are rich, that the trip will take only seven hours). In front of the cars, reaching to the bow, high-piled baggage and beds and tricycles, a single, chromed floor lamp, and, on a small patch of bare deck, the crew's cook stove. Between the Toyotas and the Mercedes, open hatches.

The captain's last words: "Be here at eight o'clock tomorrow or you'll be left behind!"

The captain's first words the next morning: "Where are your papers? We cannot sail without your papers!" The crew presses close to me and shouts about papers. I hold poor, bewildered Sonia on a close leash, and through the haze of voices and waving arms, learn from the Pakistanis, who are both very haggard now, that the idiot captain has lost their passports and the papers for all the cars.

And as the hours of this next day slowly pass, I sit on my hood under a canvas awning, the sun glowing through, and watch the captain screaming from office to office, accusing even the ice-cream vendor of stealing his papers, and I listen to the Pakistanis describing their onyx quarries and textile mills. I agree with them that the seven hours have long since passed, and hear of how a new Datsun slipped yesterday after I left and landed on a Buick Electra ("a very attractive conveyance"), and how, a short time later, as a second huge lorry was lowered beside the first on the tiny deck of a dhow just like this one, the avaricious captain screaming directions, the weight was suddenly too much, and the whole boat flipped over— whoosh!—sending the lorries to the bottom of the harbor. The crane operator, they say, spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness and shook his cables loose and then went on, loading the next dhow in line.

Besides the car owners, the captain has booked passage for twenty Iranian workers. It is their baggage which fills the holds from stem to stern and makes the front deck look like a laundry truck. They have everything they have accumulated in their two or three years in Kuwait, tied in huge bundles. They have presents for the village children, portraits of themselves for their mothers, electric hair dryers and blenders and coffee tables . . .

Thirty people sit in the heat and watch the captain as he alienates even the easy-going Kuwaitis, so that when he finally finds the papers where he left them, under a bench on the dock, the Kuwaitis refuse to clear him and order the boat to leave the harbor and anchor just outside; and at four o'clock on this second day, having memorized the clean lines of the Emir's palace and photographed many of the workers many times and seen the sun shimmering on stagnant water until the vision is surely a permanent one, I find myself leaping from the boat as anxiously as the workers when the Kuwaitis finally call it in, to a steaming wharf, to stand in a ragged line like a new

recruit, while an official dressed like a field marshal stamps the passports and grants clearance.

Suddenly and efficiently the motor is running, and the boat is moving through the gap in the breakwater toward Abadan. A hawk-faced passenger—"His name is Abdullah," wheezes Mohammed, the fatter of the two Pakistanis—is singing out in a familiar minister's voice the traveler's prayer, toward the lowering sun, and, for a moment, everything is precisely as promised.

It is not seamanship. The gulf is flat and featureless. Dhows reach the horizon in front of us in a sluggish line—a foul segmented worm making its way across the hot sea. A child could not get lost. The captain, whose desperation disappeared with the port, points to the glimmering Tourist Towers of Kuwait falling beneath the straight line of the shore and offers them as proof that he has done as he said he would. He is my friend again, and I nod to him and smile.

The trip now is pleasant. The motion of the boat causes an artificial breeze to wash the face; and even on the gulf the lowering sun casts a soft light on the one small cloud and changes the white light of day to pinks. The water becomes blue-green. The motor thumps softly, and the white wake ripples the flatness. The people on board are settling into nooks of conversation, discovering how to sit comfortably.

Two workers laugh in the car window at the dog and then settle noisily on the hood, causing a smooth dent to appear. I chastize them; they lower their eyes and move away, unwilling to offend the American, who is a car owner.

I invite them back. The tall man, Wulam, is twenty-three. He has worked for three years as a tea-carrier in a camera and radio store. The short man, Kalim, has been a laborer with construction crews. Both are from Baderun, a tiny mud-hut village close to Isphahan. They are very happy to be returning home. They make the complaint common to foreign workers in Kuwait, whether rich and Western or poor and Eastern. The money, they say, is very good. Work is good. The Kuwaitis are not bad. But there is nothing to do but work. There are no women. There is no place to go with friends. One gets up and goes to work, eats, sleeps. There is nothing else. They extend an invitation to their village, where the girls are beautiful, so beautiful, and where the food is better than anywhere else, and the people

are friendly and will let the stranger stay as long as he wants and make him comfortable. Baderun is wonderful.

Men like them go to Kuwait and work for several years and then find they are no longer fit for their villages. These on board, called coolies or hamals, defer, from habit, to anyone who announces his authority. At the Iranian embassy in Kuwait, while I was bowed inside for tea with the First Secretary under a huge portrait of the Shah, they were shouted into long lines outside. Having bought their passports in Iran for exorbitant fees, and paid numerous bribes, when they want to return home they must stand for hours in the sun, battling each other, waiting for a permit. When I look at them, they avert their eyes.

We thread between freighters anchored far out, waiting for berths. The Iranian *Arya Pas*, a large blue bulk-carrier, is pointed out by every Iranian on board. Even the captain says again and again that it is Iranian, they are Iranian. Hawk-faced Abdullah, who began the traveler's prayer, points out with glittering eyes a Greek ship beyond the *Arya Pas* and says, "Iran, Iran," over and over, supposing all the ships are theirs. Wulam, standing just beside me, laughs aloud. "He is so stupid," he whispers to me.

Abdullah is a peculiar man. On the wharf, when we handed our passports to the official for his stamp, he stood slightly apart, his arms folded, glaring. When the Kuwaiti came to him, he didn't move. He didn't answer, even when the Kuwaiti spoke slowly. Finally, the official reached out, patted his shirt pockets, found the passport, removed it, stamped it, and returned it to the shirt pocket with a glare of his own; Abdullah might have been an angry statue. The Mercedes driver, Mohammed, says that he is from a village to the east of Kerman. He speaks no Arabic, only Farsi, and now, his voice, like the engine, is a constant noise.

In the small Toyota, the collie has finally found some relief from the port. Still, she is hot. She sucks water from her dish. She pants.

Supper is made. The most emaciated crewman, a very old man, stirs the rice into water and meat with the unwashed hands with which he has flushed his bottom after going to the toilet. The Eastern custom is to eat with only the right hand, and this man will do it unthinkingly, just as he unthinkingly uses both hands to prepare the food.

At night on the gulf, lights glow from both the eastern and western shores. Steady beacon signals form a runway for the large ships moving north and south. The dhow runs it slow, without lights, and in the starlight

and the far electric glows, other dhows, some beside us now, are seen as shadows, almost memories, of what it has been for ages in these waters. Their silhouettes have not altered in recorded history.

The river and the sea merge quietly near Al Faw; the land closes gradually as the dhow approaches the apex of a triangle of lights. Three hours up a wide, dark corridor, in the sleepiness of late night, at Khorowasbad, we thump past a long line of anchored and quietly sleeping dhows, and then our engine slows. In the dim light we circle a large steel barge with a square cabin structure on it and anchor nearby.

According to the Pakistanis, who are both drunk, it is a government barge where customs formalities will be observed in the morning. There is no abrupt end to this first long day of travel, just a lessening of noise as the crew finds rolled blankets and curls under cars and on the cabin roof, or wherever there is any space. Wulam and Kalim sleep upright, side by side, leaning against the trunk of the front Toyota with their feet on the bumper of the kindly American's car.

Finally, we fall into quiet on the river, with only the current against the boats making any noise; but soon, so soon that one cannot know if there has been sleep, shadows on nearby boats rise to spit loudly and cough, and gradually more figures rise in the greying light and stretch, and an engine far down river chokes into life. Movement livens all the boats as though a stone has been turned, the crews raise anchors with shouts and threats, and the dhows begin to descend on the barge, tying to it all around. The later boats make fast to those first there, crashing into them, splintering rails, as if not one among the many captains has ever before moved his boat.

By five o'clock, the new day, fallen misshapen at birth from the east, has become unavoidable. Once again the crews and passengers begin circulating through the boats, raising angry shouts of "Machine! Machine!" when someone steps on a car. Conversation ends. Everyone is tense and anxious. Not even the captain seems sure of procedure.

The Shatt-al-Arab is as wide here as the Ohio at Louisville, but banked with date palms. The Iranian flag hangs limply in a grainy light, unfluttered by the noise. A short, thick man emerges sleepy-eyed from the barge house and brushes his hair in a steel mirror outside, oblivious to the many eyes on him.

At the sight of the official, the boatmen begin to swarm toward the barge, each pushing to be first, the passengers crowding in with the captains, all of whom clutch bundles of documents.

Another man, nearly identical to the first, emerges, buttoning his short-sleeved green uniform shirt, a heavy revolver swinging in its holster. An older, wispy-haired man with spectacles swings up the shutters of his office windows, and as he opens his office door it is immediately plugged with pushing, shouting boatmen, each demanding to be first. It is six o'clock and the sun is hot. The awnings are down, because the officials cannot see the cars with them up. On the shores, people are moving now by the river. A small pointed boat skims around a fishing net by the Iraqi shore.

Each captain leans over the backs of the others surrounding the official at the desk and thrusts his papers through between their jammed bodies—"Look out! Make way! Watch out there!"—pushing his body as far toward the official as he can. The official, never looking up, reaches upward randomly for the first set of documents. He shifts his glasses and reads out the selected captain's name in a soft snarl. The crowd parts, then closes again. While the captain stands at respectful attention answering questions, those behind him and around the table jostle constantly, to get into position and stay in position.

As it becomes understood on the dhow that we cannot leave until the papers have been processed, a demand slowly spreads that I, as an American, go to the official and ask for special treatment, and as this is debated, sweat already a sheen on all the faces, one of the two green-shirted policemen on the barge—the one who half an hour earlier went out of his way to help a child up over the high rail—pushes a man. The man has done something wrong. His head snaps a little with the push. No one takes any notice. No one turns to watch, but the deck clears there of men somehow, and the policeman and the man he is interested in stand by themselves. By our cabin, two men shush Abdullah, whose insistent voice in the sudden quiet is apparent.

The policeman is no older than Wulam from Baderun. He wears a gun and a badge and a green uniform, but he has no indications of rank on his sleeves or epaulets. He had been standing at the railing with his thumbs in his gunbelt, looking at the people on the boats, walking the length of the barge, back and forth. He takes the middle-aged man easily by the hand and

leads him toward the back of the barge, his face set and glowering, like a father taking his child to be spanked. The man follows, but halfway, angrily, he jerks his hand away and says something to the policeman's back. Perhaps it is, "You have no right to treat me like this."

The policeman turns and stares at him, standing slackly with his face close. He places his hands gently on the older man's shoulders and pauses for a moment; then, suddenly, he bangs him against the steel bulwarks, the head slapping the metal with an audible thud. The man staggers and nearly falls, but the policeman holds him up by the hair. Using the hair as a handle, he slams the head again against the steel wall.

The policeman's shirt has come untucked. He turns the man and with a hand at the neck and another at the small of the back shoves him in the direction of the back of the barge. The other policeman appears and the two of them help the man along with hard pushes in the small of the back at each step. At the back of the barge, they turn him against a waist-high rail and talk to him and push his face and jam him again and again against the rail.

The man says nothing now unless they demand a response, and then he answers sullenly, a slight smear of blood on his forehead. He no longer glares, or raises his hands to fend off the shoves. Both of the policemen are standing almost on his feet.

Hundreds of Iranians watch from the boats. When the head official looks up occasionally, no one is watching. The cluster of captains around the desk is quiet. They have stopped jostling.

It ends as suddenly as it began. The man is released toward the front of the barge, and the first policeman trips him. He falls to his knees and scrambles wildly to get up, expecting a kick. He is breathing hard. He stands at the rear of the cluster of men readjusting his clothing, rubbing his bruised face. The captains do not look at him, and the head official does not look up, but adjusts his glasses from time to time and writes in the ledger. The now-disciplined man had offended him, perhaps by pushing a bit too much, or answering with insolence when told to back off. The policeman intervened from behind, and this mild-looking man in charge had made his point.

At the back of the barge, the first policeman is trembling with emotion, tucking in his shirt, hard-faced, his eyes passing like radar back and forth over the boats.

"What was that about?" I ask Mohammed.

He frowns and shakes his head to silence me. "They say we must remember this is not Kuwait," he whispers across the hatch. "We are arriving in Iran now."

By ten-thirty, only one boat has been checked. The baggage was dragged from its depths and from its decks and across the other boats to the front deck of the barge, where a fourth official pawed slowly through it. Each bundle was untied and spread out and checked and then retied and sealed with a metal customs tag. The first boat has left now, after all the bundles were checked and restuffed, all the presents and electrical gadgets examined, all the cars sealed and cleared. They are beginning on another boat.

Our captain is sitting in the shade. He is tired of trying to get the attention of the head official, who now has a stack of papers beside him. Our boat cannot be cleared today, unless we reach the official soon, and the sun is too hot; inside the car, the dog is unhealthy, though I've drawn a piece of canvas over the roof and windows as a shield. If the car is sealed, she will die; she cannot survive on the deck.

An expression of mild surprise appears on the head official's face when the policeman tells him an American wants to speak to him. The policeman's eyes became nervous when the request was made. Mohammed, the Pakistani, translates, for the official speaks only Farsi.

"He has a valuable dog in his car. If the car is sealed and the beast must come out in the sun, he says, she will die. He says, can the car be left unsealed? Can you notify the authorities up the river that you made an exception because of the dog?"

The crowd hushes now as the men listen. They would not confront the official in this way. He would not consider such a request from them.

The Pakistani, though a rich man in his own country, is nervous under the eyes of the man at the desk, the King of the Barge, whose powers reach into misty distances beyond the knowledge of the rough boatmen; and though the Pakistani is vaguely aware of proprieties elsewhere and the assumptions under which the American makes his request, he is of this region and understands and lectures to me later that whim and caprice govern official conduct.

The official raises his voice and calls for my captain, and the man arrives, pushing the crowd aside with his borrowed authority. The official takes his documents and announces to me that my boat will be next.

"He says can the dog stay inside the car?" Mohammed's voice is nervous.

“The cars must be sealed.” The official turns to his papers.

I prod him, and Mohammed reluctantly asks again. I fold my arms and try to look bored and confident. By the table, the captain motions me to shut up, but the official relents. “The windows can be left open a little.”

“They must be wide open, he says. He says seal everything in the trunk, but leave the car open for the dog.”

“We will see.”

On the boat, the crew and passengers surround me and grin and pat my back, and as the barge’s deck is cleared of bundles from the last boat, the policeman shouts to get our bundles up. As the antlike labor begins and the huge bundles are pushed up from below, a woman begins screaming from a boat near the barge, and the hundreds of boatmen and passengers stand and lean out to see. “What’s wrong? What is happening with the woman? Who is bothering the woman?”

She is climbing over the barge’s rail. The same policeman who beat the man angrily tells her to go back; she pushes him out of the way, kicks him, and staggers, still keening, to the office door of the head official. Both policemen are close behind her but they do not interfere, for instantly a wild tension is in the air.

Mohammed, too, is angry. “The woman says why can’t she go? She has been here for two days. Her baby is dying. They won’t let them go. She says they are animals . . .”

The woman is young and has thrown back her cloak and veil. She is pulling her hair and scratching her face so that it bleeds, and hitting her breasts with her fists, shrieking. Another, older woman, climbs aboard holding a still baby. The crowd of men is growling softly to itself.

The woman tears her clothing now, exposing her breasts, and rolls on the hot steel of the deck. The official stands above her and orders her to stop screaming and to cover herself. He is working as hard as he can, he says. He is in the middle of another boat, the American’s boat. He will take her boat soon. He raises his voice: “I am telling the men of this woman to control her. This is not permitted!”

The men nearby, to spare the family men more shame, gather the woman and take her to the shade at the front of the barge house, rearranging her cloak to modesty; and minutes later, as we prepare to leave, the mother, swaying in deep sorrow, encircled by her men, patted by the other woman,

is trying to force a breast into the thin mouth of a still, grey baby, whose head is cold to my touch.

The baggage is returned beneath the deck, each piece wired with the customs tag. The white Toyota in front is sealed completely, as is the Pakistanis' Mercedes, at the trunk and at each door, with string and metal tags. The officials ignore my car.

As our lines drop, we fall with the current briefly downstream and turn beyond the circular net of a quiet fisherman. The official stands from his desk, pushes through the boatmen, and waves good-bye to me in a friendly way, a broad smile on his face, sending the visiting American onward, as he supposes, with a fond memory of the customs barge at Khorowasbad.

The Shatt-al-Arab, from near the gulf until at least as far as Khorramshahr, is lined on both sides with deep groves of date palms. The channel for boats winds intermittently close to both shores; high towers with machine guns line the Iraqi shore, and through the trees are occasional, low, thick-walled houses. On the Iranian side, it is the same.

A hundred meters beyond the barge is a navy patrol boat to which we tie for a military security inspection. I am immediately invited aboard and two enlisted men stand at attention and grin broadly as I take their picture. Mohammed follows, uninvited, and also takes a picture. "It is forbidden to take pictures," says the young captain, glowering at him, and he motions to an enlisted man, who seizes the camera, opens it, and removes the film. The captain greets me by coming to attention and saluting.

All the passengers and crew stand on the dhow's deck in a line while I am led to a shady spot and offered tea. A sergeant jumps down to check the car seals, but he says nothing about my open car.

The captain stands surveying his countrymen, his hand on a .45 in a US holster, motioning them where he wants them with an impatient flick of the hand. He orders a patrol while we are there, and two enlisted men drop into an American speedboat armed with a machine gun and disappear with a roar downstream. He asks about conditions in America and says that he likes America very much. He will not hold the boat at all, he says, so that I can quickly finish my trip.

I thank him gravely, for by now I understand my importance. Americans do not enter Iran as I am entering; therefore, I may well be someone important. Perhaps I am inspecting the security of this frontier. Slipping easily into the mannerisms of a superior officer, I remain slightly aloof, even

as I wonder how our strategic alliance with such thugs colors me (and all Americans) in the eyes of the commoners standing below on the dhow.

The boat is now free to move, and we pass for bright hours up the river, weaving in a slow chug past low, double-ended boats with fishermen casting nets, past the unending date plantations, where traces of life flicker and an occasional worker waves languidly, past Abadan and the anchored ships waiting their turn to unload and steam out.

The boatmen have two distinct natures. While they deal with officials, they are anxious and servile, avoiding even a hint of independence. On the move, in their boat, they are loose and easy to talk with, inviting everyone in for tea.

The captain puts a man on the bow to warn us off fishing nets, and we wave as we putt by. For long stretches there are no military boats or soldiers on the shores, or towers with spotlights, and the green of the palms over the brown river must be as it has been for many years. Despite the heat, it is a beautiful moment near sunset as the sky absorbs the warmth and casts a gentle pink light; the voices are quiet for a moment and everyone is at ease. On the cabin roof, obnoxious Abdullah and the old crewman perform their prayers; on the shores, scattered lights begin to blink on.

We leave the river long after dark, at Khorramshahr, the port to the north of Abadan, and slide down a channel lined with heavy cranes and silent wharfs to a yellow circle of light, where we find again the cluster of dhows, tied together alongside a high wooden pier which is the customs police jetty.

The usual yelling and cursing and splintering of adjoining boats signals our arrival, and then silence; no motion after a slow day of faint rocking. The absence of the engine leaves a tear in the universe for long minutes, until the voices on the boats and the harsh commands of the police above fill the gap. It is midnight.

The captain retrieves one of the packs of Winstons he had deposited with me and climbs over the intervening boats to the jetty and up its ladder-like sides to the wooden boards. He greets the head policeman, hugs him, and gives him the cigarettes.

An improvement over the barge, each captain logs his arrival here, and the passengers of each boat are called systematically, one by one.

The policeman stands at the edge of the jetty and shouts the name of the captain and number of his boat, and then, glancing at the passport on top,

calls that man's name. The passengers on the boat being checked wait by the rail, listening for their name, and when it is called, scamper over the boats and up the jetty to stand before the policeman and answer his questions. The policeman jokes with them and slaps their backs. They grin quickly in response.

Fifteen boats lie at the jetty. Except for the Pakistanis and me, all the passengers are Iranian workers coming home. A few have managed to clean themselves and put on a Western-style suit. Their white shirts shine as they clamber over the filthy rails and between the trucks and cars. They wear the jackets over their shoulders, with the arms hanging loose and, on the jetty, stand casually, toeing the wood with shiny shoes, smoking cigarettes.

I take an unauthorized walk over the boats and up to the top of the wharf, but as soon as I leave the car men begin poking in the windows at Sonia, calling others over from the adjoining boats.

She has been in the car for two days. To get her out means leaning with legs widespread in through a door which opens only inches, over the open engine hatch, forcing her to stand, trying to lift her out, despite her terror, falling with her weight back against the Mercedes, and then finding a strip of deck to put her on, all the while the crew and passengers shouting, "Here comes the animal! Beware! Beware!" and shouting to put her back inside before she attacks someone.

The dog has been too frightened during the passage to urinate, barking hoarsely at the men as they pretended to lunge at her from the rails and from up on the cars; so now, with land available, despite the shouts and laughter on the boats, I take her like a sack of wheat over the rails and the high-piled baggage and with one hand, and a helpful boost from Kalim, climb the seven-foot jetty and throw her up into midst of officialdom, calculating that none of them will deny an American what he considers his right. I pass through them without a challenge and walk her in the flower beds of the Iranian state, hoping she will leave her mark. She does not. She has become constipated and cannot even urinate, despite the quantities of water she has drunk; it has all steamed away.

Returning, I am greeted by the customs policemen, who tell me I cannot leave with the dog this evening. They are very sorry.

It is long after midnight when our boat is reached. The returning workers are having their passports stamped. In the morning, their bags will be checked again, and then they will be allowed to leave for their villages. All

are treated as though they have done something wrong; all act as though they have done something wrong. The passports are checked carefully; the slips of paper within are important. The police want to know why they have been in Kuwait, where they are going, how much money they have, what they are taking with them. The questions seem harsh, or perhaps it is the late hour and the stage-lighted circle in which each confrontation takes place.

It is Abdullah the talker who has a problem. He scampers up when his name is called and begins answering the questions, glaring at the policeman as though the man has no right to be questioning him. When asked for his entrance form from the Iranian embassy in Kuwait, he denies that he has it.

As the argument takes place, hardly another sound blurs its impact. The cranes along the dark channel are still; the other boats are checked. We sit on the boats like a theater audience, a circle of tired faces, leaning on the cars, sitting on the lumps of baggage, while the policeman goes through his charade with Abdullah. They stand above on the wood in the yellow light, two other policemen slouched nearby, amused contempt on their faces as they watch. Mohammed provides a soft running translation.

“You must have it. Everyone has it. Give it to me!”

Abdullah is dressed in trousers and a white shirt. He wears a turban. He keeps his arms at his side or clasps his hands behind his back. He looks straight into the eyes of the policeman, who slaps him now: “Don’t you stare at me like that!”

The slap rocks him back on his heels, but still he denies he has the paper. The policeman slaps him again, and when Abdullah raises his hands to protect his face, the policeman shouts at him to keep his hands down and hits him with his fist, dropping him to his knees. Abdullah stands up shakily with a trickle of blood coming from his nose.

The policeman questions him in shouts: “Did you go to the embassy in Kuwait?”

“Yes.”

“Did they give you a paper?”

“No.”

Slap. “They did! Didn’t they?” Slap.

“No.”

Slap. “They stamped your passport! Did you lose the paper?”

“They didn’t give me anything.”

Slap. “Tell me the truth!”

The policeman slaps at unexpected times, so that Abdullah is in constant fear. He loses his turban with one blow and as he bends for it, the policeman kicks him over onto his face. “Get back into the boat then. You can just stay there!” Abdullah crawls to the edge and drops over into the boat beneath. He has a red scrape on his forehead; his nose is bleeding. The policeman stands on the edge and shouts insults at him.

In the shadows by the cabin Abdullah rearranges himself and mutters under his breath. Those nearby talk softly to him.

“He is stupid,” says the Pakistani. “All of the returning Iranians are given a customs slip when their passports are filled out by the embassy. They are supposed to give it up at this point. Abdullah is just trying to be clever.”

“Maybe he’s confused?”

Mohammed shrugs, “The policeman says he has to have it.”

In ten minutes, after the rest of the passengers have been cleared, Abdullah climbs back over the boats to the jetty and gives the paper to the policeman. Without a word, he turns to go back. The passengers sitting nearby gasp at his stupidity.

The policeman, a stocky, beer-bellied man, hits him from behind with a fist to the head, knocking him down. “Don’t you walk away from me,” he hisses, standing over him. He seizes Abdullah by the collar and hits him twice in the face and then drags him to his feet.

“Why didn’t you give it to me?” Hit.

“Why did you lie?” Hit.

Hit. “I ought to put you in jail!” Hit.

The fist hitting Abdullah’s head makes only a soft thud. The snap-back of the head and the flowing blood seem out of proportion to the sound. When Abdullah falls, the policeman kicks him until he stands. When he falls again and can only rise to his hands and knees, the policeman kicks him until the other policemen restrain him. Still, he breaks through their arms and kicks Abdullah again, this time making him scream.

In five minutes, the policeman is calm and reappears with two others to take Abdullah from the boat into the office. They put him in a chair and stand over him, filling out his forms and slapping him from time to time; we can see the head rocking through the venetian blinds. As Abdullah leaves the office, clutching his passport, one of the other policemen kicks

him in the bottom so that his turban comes off again, and a murmur of laughter flickers over the boats.

It has been a good lesson in how not to act with an Iranian customs official. Though Abdullah cradles his head in his arms and rocks and moans for awhile, until sleep descends on the boats, by morning he is his normal self, if a bit less talkative, and no record of the trouble exists for the new shift of customs policemen, so he is treated just like everyone else.

The sun rises over Khorramshahr on the fourth morning of the Pakistanis' seven hour trip. The passengers, boat by boat, bring up their sealed bundles and drop them on the jetty, where they are reopened and checked once more. Finally, they begin to trail out past the armed guards at the distant gate, their bundles and cases on their backs, on their way to their villages, many of them hundreds of kilometers farther on.

Lightened, and with only the crews and the car owners on board, the boats begin to chug around the point to the unloading cranes, forming another unruly knot. After an hour of fruitless waiting, the captain squirms through the crowd of men on the shore and announces that he has made special arrangements with the operator of another crane, who will meet us in another place just as soon as he finishes the job he is on. "But, you must each pay five dinars," says the captain, "or he will not do it." He stands humbly in front of us, faintly apologetic, his hand out.

The Pakistanis shrug. "He has us, what can we do?" The car owner reaches for his wallet. The captain is crestfallen at my refusal. His face implies he has seen a cheapness that he will not soon forget. He walks away, muttering about Americans.

The crossing of the gulf has its coda: the "Triptik," a book-like document which identifies an automobile and establishes its ownership, is made out incorrectly for Mohammed. He is identified as the authorized driver on the document's cover, but not on the tear-out page inside. The mistake is the Kuwait Auto Club's and is an obvious error of omission.

Farewells have already been said and I have my final clearance when Mohammed is held up. The official is demanding that he return to Kuwait and have his name written as it should be on all the inner pages of the document. No, the official says, it is not possible for him to make a note on the page because that is for their records and it has to be typewritten on the

same machine as all the rest of the document. "You must go to Kuwait," he says. "It is not my problem."

"But his document is just the same as mine," says Mohammed, pointing to me. "It is an accepted international form."

I have a choice. If I ignore his remark and walk away, no one will stop me; in fact, I will confirm, even to Mohammed, that I am truly important. If I intervene, I must prevail, or I will be returned to Kuwait and Mohammed will be scornful.

It is true, I say. The forms are prepared identically.

"Then you are both wrong. You must both go back to Kuwait." The official is inflexible.

We are dealing with a lackey at the front of a large office. The man in charge sits alone at a large desk beneath a life-size photograph of the Shah in his drum-major's uniform; lesser officials at lesser desks protect him from the unruly public. He is surprised and offended to be personally consulted, but he confirms that the first official is correct. "You will unfortunately have to go back to Kuwait because the entry is not as it should be." He raises his little finger to have the rabble escorted from his presence.

I take a deep breath and narrow my eyes as a general might. "I do not understand this problem. We have been on a dirty boat for four days. We are tired. And now you are delaying us on a technicality which you could correct. Look at me! I am filthy! I had dinner with the Iranian ambassador the night before I left, and he personally assured me my documents were in order. He also said that officials in Abadan were very competent and helpful, but that I should call him personally if there was any difficulty. Please call the Iranian ambassador to Kuwait at the embassy there. And, do you have the number of the American consul, please."

Behind, the room waits expectantly. One does not use such a tone to high officials. This high official scarcely pauses or considers, demonstrating the quality which has allowed him to become exalted. He smiles a kindly smile: "We will photostat the covers of your documents for our correct records," he says. "We must welcome our friends without difficulty to Iran. . . ."