

Sarah Marty, *Soixante Jours*

Chapter 11

Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint, Bulgaria

The bus has been driving for nearly three hours now. A worried look on his face, the smuggler is constantly turning to the passengers behind him. He has taken note of which ones he would be guiding; they are all sitting at the back. Erdouan had discreetly pointed to each one, but the smuggler could have identified them regardless. Their bodies are sunk into the seats as if to become invisible, yet they cannot help but crane their neck around and look at the road up ahead, toward a new destiny that they dare not dream of.

Azra shuts her eyes. She wishes she could share her secret, a secret that weighs heavy on her, that gives her hot flashes, that forces her to lie—but she cannot. She must remain focused on her flight.

Beritan is unable to look away from the landscape rushing by, his mind constantly replaying the final few minutes before his building exploded. He can still see that damn spider and its nimble legs, running all over his skin. His last memory before everything came crashing down.

Now he thinks of those he loves more than anything, and whom he is leaving behind: his wife Merve, and his little boy Miran. They had gone to stay with his aunt for a few days, and had escaped the worst. He had bought a brand new sofa as a

present for them, a sofa whose cushions may have saved his life by creating a pocket of air above his head. Death had refused to take him that morning: he was the sole survivor, together with old Soliman's little dog. Still today, Beritan cannot understand how the dog, which lived in the apartment on the fourth floor, had ended up at his side, on the second floor. It was like a magic trick. So, two survivors: a dog and a man. He always mentions the dog first, because he has long considered animals to have more humanity than people. As a way to thank the heavens for sparing his life, Beritan stayed with the dog. The grocer down the street had taken care of the dog while they amputated Beritan's arm properly, then Beritan had given the dog to his son so that he could watch over it. Just like Soliman used to. If Beritan is sitting in this bus today, it's for their sake. For Soliman's dog, for his wife Merve, for his son Miran. He repeats this as if to convince himself. Once he is settled in Europe, Soliman's dog, Merve, and Miran will join him. Things cannot go any other way. There is a house waiting for them, somewhere, somehow, and then spiders will not be a problem: he will let their long legs scurry anywhere they please.

Suddenly, a few yards from the border checkpoint, the bus lurches to a halt. A line of policemen, rifles pointed to the sky, are blocking the road. The bus' doors open, then three officers quickly climb aboard and stand in the aisle.

"Everyone out."

Their hearts now pounding uncontrollably, their bodies hidden amongst the other passengers', they walk down the aisle and disembark, paralyzed with fear, head down, eyes to the ground. Ferhat, the painter, finds himself thinking that if he were sent to the gallows, he would keep looking at his shoes for as long as possible in order to meet the executioner's gaze only at the very last moment. Because he is twenty-five and doesn't want to die. Because he must paint this trembling world onto his canvas,

and because he must once again hold his fiancée Nihal's waist in his hands.

"Line up and have your passports ready," barks an officer while his colleagues have the driver open the side doors to the baggage hold for inspection.

The smuggler steps out of the line and walks up to the officer. The two men immediately stroll away, talking animatedly. Judging by the way they give each other slaps on the back, they are already acquainted. The officer nods and starts checking passports, then approaches Azra. She hands him her passport, tensing her fingers to keep them from shaking, maintaining eye contact. It's not just her: there are two of them. Her baby's heart is pounding alongside her own.

Nobody is moving; time is frozen to the passport held in front of her. A passport that—just like her travel companions'—is missing the visa required to enter the Schengen area and freely travel between almost all European countries.

Osman squints in the bright light, his feet firmly planted on this Turkish soil he wants nothing more than to leave. He watches his friend Welat with intensity. He must fill his eyes to the brim, here and now, as though his life were about to end suddenly. His avid gaze takes in everything around him, eventually locking on four border guards leaning against a tall wall. Each is resting his hand on his thigh, ready to draw the pistol whose grip can be seen protruding from the holster. The other hand of each guard is gripping a leash, with a dog tugging hard and barking and growling with excitement. Or rather anger. Under the pale sky, Osman inhales deeply. Will they be lucky enough to get another shot at life?

The officer walks away from Azra and towards the line of desperate eyes, quivering at his mercy. People whose precarious

future hinges upon the presence or absence of a stamp, of a sticker. The silence that swallows them is too thick. Suspicious. Slowly, deliberately, the officer lights a cigarette, takes a slow drag, and watches the smoke billow up into nothingness before walking up to Citseko. The minutes seem endless; finally, without having inspected each passport, the officer nods and motions the passengers back onto the bus.

On board, Yusuf sits down wearily and holds the children's hands tight. Ferhat stares at his passport—in which he is two years younger, and with a different name—, his brother Mirkan sitting next to him. Yoldas, too, looks at his passport and smiles. How old is he really? Her mother had waited until her fifth child was born before registering them all at the same time, so she wouldn't have to do the trek five times. And to make things even simpler, she had proudly declared they had all been born on Bastille Day.

The bus gets back on the road. They have left Turkey, but they must still pass the Bulgarian border. Brakes squeaking, the bus stops again and all eyes turn to the smuggler, to the man holding their fate hostage, who stands up abruptly. He walks up to them, demands their passports, and—clutching their existence between his hands—tells them to stay inside while he disembarks with the other passengers.

Silence pounces on the group.

A few long minutes later, the smuggler gets back on board.

“You have to give me 50 euro each. For the policeman.”

Tekin protests: they have already given 2,000 euro in advance. The smuggler cuts him off.

“It’s either that, or go back to Turkey.”

They each give the 50 euro, which the smuggler slips inside each passport before heading back out to the policeman.

Ferhat is irritated. If Tekin keeps acting up, they could be caught, and he doesn’t want to spend the rest of his life in prison. With his sleeve, he wipes the sweat off his brow.

A heavy, dread-filled silence once again descends upon the group. Citseko looks out the window and sees the policeman walking away with their passports.

A few minutes later, the smuggler gets back on the bus with the other passengers, and walks to the rear.

“We’re good for now,” he whispers as he hands them their papers.

Her back sore from hours on the road, Azra asks to switch seats. She goes to sit next to Yoldas and, as soon as she is in the seat, she starts confiding in him. She needs to share a small piece of her story with this stranger who, like her, has decided to reach for a new life. Azra pulls her sleeping baby’s face away from her neck.

“Look at him. See his smile?”

Yoldas does not look at the child, but rather at Azra’s shielding hands.

“My husband is dead,” she adds.

Yusuf leans towards her. He has heard her speak. He asks exactly when she lost her husband. Azra whispers uncomfortably: “Only a few months ago.”

Her voice is trembling. Yusuf regrets his eagerness and puts his hand on the young woman's arm. His eyes ask for her forgiveness for having reawakened her pain. He regrets asking her to put a date on her anguish like an archeologist digging up artifacts, labeling them, and hiding them away in a drawer with a date, a place, and a stamp. But Yusuf needs to know, so that he can solve a puzzle that escapes him. Azra shuts him away, looks at the floor, pulls down on her long skirt. The conversation is over. Perhaps she has said too much already. She has just thrown a rope bridge between the two men and herself.

She cannot reveal what she is hiding.

Exhausted, she falls asleep. As the bus splutters and bounces its way across Bulgaria from east to west, Azra's head occasionally brushes against Yoldas' shoulder.

With every one of the bus' frequent stops, Citseko and Tekin's faces betray increasing irritation: too long have they been dreaming of a triumphant arrival on new land, and each interruption has them bite at their lips and stomp their feet impatiently. Azra, on the other hand, savors these breaks, where she can change her baby, give him his bottle, and stretch her legs.

The farther they drive to the northwest of Bulgaria, the more they are gripped by the cold. Their bags grow lighter from all the sweatshirts that they put on in layers then, through some strange sort of instinct, they fill up with bread rolls, tomatoes, cheese, crackers, and water bottles that they stock up on during stops at gas stations along the way.

The bus finally comes to a halt fourteen hours after leaving Istanbul. They don't know where they are; after Sofia, they left the highway to make their way north towards Botevgrad. Cevdet is preoccupied: why did they go to northern Bulgaria, instead of heading south towards Macedonia?

The doors open and the cold descends upon them. A thick bluish snow takes them by surprise, covering the ground and hiding the roofs of houses. The smuggler announces that they are near a Bulgarian village, and immediately vanishes as though taken away by a mysterious force. Another smuggler takes over, wearing a heavy coat and boots made for walking through snow. He doesn't shake hands and keeps a certain distance between himself and this group of illegals who must remain anonymous. He addresses them in English, avoids eye contact, and tells them to follow him to a house hidden in the woods, where they will spend the night.

"I'll come get you tomorrow morning, and you'll get on another bus," he adds before going into the forest.

The group draws closer and starts walking in the harsh cold and the dying light. Sibel's shoes are slipping in the snow, but she resolutely hangs on to Cevdet's arm. Azra is one with her baby, walking with determination between Ferhat and Mirkan, the two brothers.

Beritan puts on a brave face and keeps up with the others, but the pain in his arm grips his entire body. Yildiz and Dervis squeeze their uncle Yusuf's hand, two terrified children feeling like they have been swallowed whole by this forest of thin, tall trees that huddle together and reach to the infinite sky. Welat and Osman stay together, speaking in hushed tones. Citseko, the strongest in the group, suffers the most from the cold. He is hunched over, teeth chattering. Tekin is at the rear, snow getting into his shoe through a hole, frozen wet feet slowly growing numb. He empties his mind. All that's left of what he stole from the garage's cash register and borrowed from friends is 1,600 euro, in a tight wad at the bottom of his pocket.

The smuggler continues his march through the snow, a march that seems endless. Exhausted, frozen from the snow, terrified in the dark. Osman remembers the border agents and their angry dogs at the Turkish border. He knows that if they are caught, the agents will sic their dogs on them, hit them with their batons, scare them by shooting live rounds, and confiscate their bags, their money, and their provisions to make sure they won't make a second attempt. They will be left with nothing, not even their dreams, and taken back to the Turkish border.

Where are they going? What if this is all a scheme to steal their savings and leave them for dead? In spite of their doubts, they have no choice but to follow this silent, broad-shouldered man. Minutes feel like hours. Now they hear wolves howling in the distance. Tekin walks to the front of the group and joins Ferhat, whose brother Mirkan is helping Azra along; she is also suffering from the cold, in her small shoes not made for walking in the snow, freezing hands gripping the shawl in which her little one is tightly wrapped. Ferhat, too, has a hand clasped on the shawl.

"I'm just helping you carry your baby, Azra. Your hands are frozen and they'll be numb soon. Don't you have gloves?"

Tekin looks at Azra's hands, turned blue from the cold, holding little Ersin. They remind him of his big sisters' hands, rough from working the fields, and tears swell up in his eyes. They are all fleeing through these woods, fleeing that damn poverty that is eating them up.

Azra shakes her head, and Ferhat immediately gives her his own gloves.

"Don't worry, I have two pairs. I'm from Muş province, we're used to harsh winters."



The wind picks up, and Tekin thinks he can hear his mother's voice. He stops. Is he losing his mind? He must not let emotion overcome him. Just keep walking. He chases away Rabia's haunting voice. What does she think of him, now that she has realized her own son has robbed her? Does she blame him? Does she have any idea he left for her sake?

"Your name is Tekin, right?" asks Ferhat.

Tekin is glad for the opportunity to talk, to stop obsessing over memories, to go forwards. He doesn't have a choice.

"Tekin, yes."

"I'm Ferhat, and this is Mirkan, my little brother."

The cold distorts their very voices and seizes their jaws shut. They give up trying to talk any more. So, fists clenched, eyes firmly set on the smuggler's shoulders, they walk. Ferhat would like to sketch these shoulders striding through the woods, and all the men following behind.

After a three hour struggle against the freezing, paralyzing snow, they finally see the silhouette of a large house.

Faint smiles appear on some faces. Could they have arrived?

The smuggler turns to the group and nods towards the house. "This is it. I'll be back tomorrow morning, around eight."

Some houses are like graveyards. Seeing the tears at the corners of Mirkan's eyes, Ferhat realizes the house in which they must spend the night is not a house, but a freezing and pallid place of death, where the cold rushes in from under the doors and through cracked windows. Yusuf cries in desperation, clutching Yildiz and Dervis to his chest. The house must have been

abandoned for years, its walls are covered in mold and its rooms are empty. It looks like its occupants emptied it long ago and never returned. All that is left is one table and two chairs, forgotten in the main room.

Beritan opens the doors, one after another, into rooms with dripping walls. There is a soaked mattress lying in a corner. He leans against a door; how can they even consider sleeping in this place? And the pain in his arm that won't go away... The cold will kill them all.

A look of defeat on her face, Azra walks to the kitchen and finds that the rusted faucet above the old sink still lets out a trickle of water, with a high-pitched whine. She had left with a large canister of powdered milk and another of flour; if her water bottles run out, she will still be able to feed Ersin. At the end of the corridor, Yusuf finds a bathroom, pipes burst by the cold, floor covered in puddles of dirty water. Yoldas refuses to abandon so soon. They were told it would be a five-day journey, and they had to stay strong.

“Citseko, you're a big guy, can you come with me? We'll fetch wood and build a fire in the fireplace. If we drag the mattress there, the women and children can sleep.”

Citseko steps back.

“Not now, my friend. Later. I am in Istanbul, and we hardly get any snow back home. I can't go out there right now. I can barely walk.”

Yoldas looks around. He is used to the snow; he knows how quickly the cold can weave its silent web. The cold is a treacherous adversary that starts by numbing your limbs before inching its way to your brain.

Beritan offers his help, but Yoldas refuses. He is hurt, and his missing arm could slow them down. It's too cold, they'll freeze to death if they don't act quickly. Beritan says nothing, but he resents Yoldas' rejection. If he is good for nothing, why even live? Ferhat doesn't move, though he is from Muş province and used to cold winters. He, too, is terribly cold. His slender body cannot stop shivering. At home, only by drinking cups of scalding *salep* throughout the day can he keep sketching and painting.

Everyone's feet are blistered. They hold a brief discussion and agree to go back out for wood, but only after resting a little while. Osman is the only one who is ready to help immediately, and Yoldas accepts, then turns to Beritan and nods at him to follow along.

Cevdet takes a headcount: there are fourteen of them—not counting the baby—, which he finds himself thinking is a very unlucky number.