

Twelve

SADRADDIN HAD LOST his job again – the manager at the marble factory had only kept him on for a short period so we were back to square one. I knew that our landlord worked in a carpentry factory with his brother, and that he was looking for someone to do some labouring. So after a short discussion he gave Sadraddin a start. Of course he had a vested interest in ensuring we had an income – his rent. Our landlord's brother lived across the road from the room we rented. I could see from our window the comings and goings in the street and could see the brother's house. It was a very saturated Turkish neighbourhood and I think, apart from Ari's uncle, we were the only Iraqis.

One day, shortly after Sadraddin started at the carpentry factory, he observed, by accident, our landlord's brother stealing something. The brother noticed that Sadraddin had seen him and he approached him menacingly to demand he lie for him by telling the manager that the brother was not there that day, and therefore could not have stolen anything. As our journey has already revealed, if Sadraddin has a fault, it is that he is too honest sometimes. He was consumed with guilt for the fact that he thought he had to lie about something in order to keep his job, and keep the peace. The repercussions

could be massive: if he lost his job we would have no money, couldn't pay the rent, and couldn't feed ourselves. Not only that, this man could quite easily inform the Turkish police about us and we could be raided. It was a huge responsibility making the "right" decision. So, when the manager came to him and asked if he'd seen anything, he vaguely said, "I don't know, not really." The brother saw this exchange from a distance and assumed that Sadraddin had betrayed him.

That afternoon, when Sadraddin came home from work, I heard a massive thud and banging outside our front door. I looked out the window and saw that the brother had crossed the road to menace Sadraddin once more, but it had turned physical. He was a large man and he began beating Sadraddin. Ari's uncle was not home to call on for help so I gathered Mustafa to me and ran down the stairs and out the front door, screaming, "Leave him alone! Leave him alone!" I was instantly transformed from a peaceful human being to one frantically wanting to protect my husband and family. I couldn't put Mustafa down – he would be trampled underfoot by the commotion in front of me. He had also begun to cry hysterically at my screaming for the fighting to stop. He was clutching me and I could basically do nothing but scream to help my husband. This man kept pounding into Sadraddin, but what he was not aware of was that Sadraddin was a black belt in karate, which he had achieved in Iraq. He was much smaller than his opponent, but gallantly and passionately he began to defend himself despite being a pacifist.

I was desperate; by then the neighbourhood had heard the commotion and came over to see what was happening. They stood around the fighting like they were witnessing a professional boxing match. Unbelievably no one did any-

thing! Men, women – they just stood there. I was screaming at them to please help, yelling and crazily gesturing for this man to stop beating my husband. Mustafa was screaming and crying. The brother then picked up a piece of wood and came at Sadraddin again. I was hysterical that no one would help and, still clutching my son in my arms, I rammed myself into one man who was standing watching the fight, who then lost his footing and fell into the path of the abusive brother. At that point our landlord heard the commotion and came out. He yanked at his brother and pulled him off Sadraddin.

The following day my husband valiantly went to work and resigned. We couldn't take the risk that this brother would not direct the Turkish police to us and to deport us.

The day after, Sadraddin was recovering from his injuries when there was a knock at the door. To our immense delight Ari was standing there. He had heard from others in the community that his uncle and we were living in the same house that Ari used to live in before he was offered asylum in Holland. It had been about a year since he had left Turkey for Holland and he told us that he was now a naturalised Dutch citizen and was travelling on a Dutch passport. He was so happy! It had worked out well for him. He was returning to Iraq to visit his family and had a three-day layover in Turkey before he ventured on to Iraq. It was lovely to catch up with him, and wonderful that he could visit his uncle as well.

A few days after Ari left, Sadraddin had still not recovered from his injuries. In fact, he was worse. Ayad came to see us and insisted that he take Sadraddin to the hospital. He gave him enough false identification so he could get in to see a doctor. We thought Sadraddin's appendix had burst because of the savage beating; but the doctor insisted that he needed

a night's bed rest and some medicines to aid his recovery and he would eventually be well again. I was very relieved. I remember Ayad told me not to come – I didn't speak Turkish that well and it could be dangerous. But I could not keep away; I walked and walked and walked with Mustafa on my hip to get to the hospital. I was relieved that he was going to be well again.

When Sadraddin got home, a co-worker at the carpentry business who had befriended him sent him to a furniture painting business and gave him the name of the manager. He was given a spray-painting gun and training, and he was working again.

Sadraddin – or Kareem, as he was still known – was soon offered permanent work back at the marble factory; it paid more than spray painting so he took it. We knew we could not stay in our house any more, so we made plans to find a different place to live.

We began another journey and came upon a village only a kilometre or so away. I asked Sadraddin if he would let me investigate and I started quietly asking some children who were playing to see if they knew any family that wanted to rent a room. Eventually, a little boy said that his grandmother had a room to rent, so I asked him to take me there. She was a very nice person and asked me all sorts of questions. Sadraddin introduced himself as Kareem. She was quite forward; I was so protective of Mustafa after what we had been through that my little boy was constantly in my arms. She commented to me that in her opinion I shouldn't be carrying him constantly; I should put him down. I politely declined, but we continued talking. Coincidentally, her son was also named Mustafa.

She revealed she wanted 800,000 Turkish lire for the room. Sadraddin's wages were only 650,000 and even if she would take that, we would be left with nothing to buy food, so we negotiated to see if she would take 500,000. She refused, but just then she told me again to put Mustafa down. I am a relatively shy person, and to please her I did so. She then asked him to come over and sit with her. I think she fell in love with him. She turned to me and told me I could have the room for 500,000. I ended up calling her Anna, which means *mother* in Turkish. She told us to go and collect our things from our old place and settle in. We returned to that uncomfortable place, paid up our rent and left. Ari's uncle, we found out later, also left at the insistence of the landlord.

We returned to Anna's house and when we showed her we had just the clothes on our backs and one bag, she began to cry for us at the futility of our situation. I told her that we were happy that we had met her and not to cry. She came in after we had settled into our room with a bed and a mattress for Mustafa, and a double mattress for us. We were blessed at that stage. Sadraddin turned to me and said, "Please Ibtihal, if anyone comes to us again and says 'Can you let us move in with you?' please say no!"

Thirteen

HOW DID WE survive? We didn't plan anything. It was impossible. Some people think there is a higher power, as do I, and this is the way it worked for us. There is no explanation for it.

At this time I heard from people I repeatedly met at the UN on my regular visits that the Canadian and Austrian embassies had also opened their doors to refugees. Canada was the first. They apparently didn't want too many refugees but you could physically go to the embassy and apply. It was a huge distance to get there but we went with a letter and were prepared to complete any necessary forms. When we went inside we saw crowds of people waiting. Eventually we were asked to complete a form; we handed it in and they said, "You will hear from us".

I took Mustafa's hand, and went to leave. Walking with a little two-year-old boy who was still finding his sturdy legs was a slow process. The embassy was on the corner of a large, busy street. We walked out the gate, ready to cross the road. Sadraddin had already made it to the other side. At that moment, a taxi and another vehicle had a head-on collision just metres in front of us. I knew in a split second that the taxi was coming towards us, spinning out of control. I yanked

Mustafa to me, turned and ran for my life back through the embassy gates. Unbelievably the taxi was still coming towards me, crashing through the embassy fence. I picked up Mustafa and literally threw him in the air then flung myself on top of him. Finally the taxi stopped moving. People were yelling and came running from everywhere – Sadraddin had watched it all happen as if in a scene from a movie. He started running towards me, stumbling and tripping his way in between the debris of the battered vehicles, yelling out to us. I was in shock and Mustafa was crying and screaming. We would almost certainly be dead if I hadn't have thrown my little boy across the sky.

A lady came to me and said, “I saw what happened; you should sacrifice a sheep to God and give to the poor”. Oddly, I remembered just then that when I was a little girl that was something my mother would do, literally, if something bad had happened that we had survived. Some might think me silly, but that is also what I did. After we recovered from this ordeal and found that we were both not badly injured, I bought a sheep and asked the seller to cut it up for me. I gave it all to the poor. I looked at Mustafa and knew that God had saved my son.

The following week I went to the Austrian Embassy, just with Mustafa. Sadraddin couldn't go with me; he was wary of the severe brush with death the week prior, but above all he could not afford to take another day off work, so I went by myself. When I got there I found the same situation – there was a large group of people outside the main gate waiting to be seen. They were shivering with the cold; there was snow everywhere. Some were crying and in pain. They had their children with them. I had already formed the impression that

Turkish people looked down on people like us who looked like beggars. We all had our pride and our dignity, but to see a group of fellow countrymen in this way was depressing. We were all desperately waiting for the same thing – hope. They were all struggling; one refugee was trying to communicate to an embassy spokesman but he couldn't understand anything. It was chaos. There was no one who could speak the same language the embassy spokesman did.

Suddenly someone who was there recognised me as the woman who spoke English and who had assisted with so many refugees' applications to the UN. He brought me closer – "Mustafa's mother, please come over here!" – and told them I could speak English. I became the unofficial interpreter and answered the embassy spokesman's questions. His face lit up when he finally understood what we were all there for. I felt very pleased that I could help out this way, all the while cradling my little boy. He told us all to wait and went inside.

When he came back he requested one of us to represent the group to meet with the Consul to sort something out. I translated this to the throng of people, and they all voted for me to go. Briefly, I gained my freedom. I went in with Mustafa to the embassy and was asked to wait. The Consul motioned me into his office. A very young man with glasses, he asked me to sit and then asked me why we were all here and what we wanted of him. I explained that we needed to apply for asylum as refugees. He gave me application forms for everyone outside, about thirty-six people. He asked us all then to come back in person to hand in our applications. I went back and handed them the forms. The elation shown by these people was as if I had actually handed them a per-

manent visa. Most completed their forms on the spot and returned them. I returned to Anna's house and completed ours, as well as those of a few other applicants to help them out.

About three days later I went back with Mustafa and found that this time no one was waiting outside the gate. I pressed the intercom on the gate and told them I was back with my application. Surprisingly the Consul remembered me, and wanted to see me again in person. Once again I briefly gained freedom in the embassy. He read my letter and told me that he had to send the application to Austria, and they would let him know whether I was eligible as a refugee. He said he would let me know what happened.

Once Sadraddin obtained permanent work at the marble factory I was able to paint a little. We could now afford a few tubes of paint and brushes; it was a wonderful feeling finding myself again in this small way. I painted weird things; one day I remembered a story my mother had told me about when she was a girl and was given a calf to care for by her parents, but when the calf was "healthy", it was taken away from her and sold. I painted a picture of my mother hugging this cow goodbye.

Another picture I painted was of the letters "UN" in the form of twisted branches with root systems at the bottom of the letters. One person I met during one of my many visits to the UN told me of a case where the parents were so desperate they strapped their small child to the gates and left, to force the UN guards to act and take the child into custody. I painted these letters with a child strapped to the front of the "U".

I also painted vacant footprints embedded in the railway

sleepers of the refugee who was killed while asleep, trying to follow the railway line from Turkey to Greece. The green doors in my painting represented hope for refugees, and the withered trees showed what they had come from – the reason they began their desperate journey.

Why did I keep the heavy and cumbersome Bernard Shaw volume and eventually bring it to Australia and not my paintings? I don't know. What I do know is that I had another dream about my father. In this dream he actually caught up with me and whacked me on the back. I thought that he was angry with me for some reason and it concerned me very much. I approached Anna and told her that I had this dream, and also told her of the dreams I had back in Gaziantep. She confidently interpreted my dream to mean that my father was trying to give me strength. In the dreams before he was pushing me to run, and not to give up. This time he had caught up with me to physically make sure I was strong. Anna seemed so sure of this and it made me feel good to believe her interpretation, so I took what she said as the truth. When you're alone and have no contact with the people you love and who love you, your senses, memories and dreams are what you rely on to keep you sane.

Finally a letter came to our new address from the UN, asking us to come in for an interview! I couldn't believe it. We had finally made a difference. We were determined that they would take us this time. They interviewed us together and individually. At the interview I had alone with the UN representative, he asked me, "Do you know why I called you in?" I said I did not, and he just silently held up the photograph I had sent, saying, "I cannot believe refugees are living like this." I was so relieved! About two weeks later we were advised that we were going to be official asylum seekers. We

were issued with papers to be refugees, and they would pay us \$US100 per month until they could find a country to take us. We couldn't believe it!

While we were happy, especially to receive such a lot of money, we could not help but think of the hardships our family and friends were experiencing back home. The American trade embargo on Iraq had tragic consequences for Iraqi families. Although it was widely reported in the western press that the embargo was for the specific purpose of preventing goods that could be used in building ammunition from reaching Iraq, the reality was that the embargo included a ban on basic foods such as flour, rice, sugar and cooking oil. Difficulties in finding enough petrol to run the family car were extremely common. Car tyres were simply not available as it was assumed the materials used in their manufacture could be used in the making of chemical weapons. Food and medical supplies to Iraq were drastically cut. Many families were unable to feed their children adequately, and thousands of families were forced to remove their young children from school, even at primary level, to assist in augmenting the family income. Many children were consequently malnourished and many others, deprived of essential medicines, were dying. While Saddam Hussein continued to live like a king in his palace and spend billions of Iraqi dinars on military defence, the people of Iraq, especially the women and children, were slowly starving to death.

We knew it was hard for Sadraddin's family back in Iraq. Sadraddin was still working at the marble factory for cash, so we decided to send our UN refugee money home to his family via couriers and truck drivers coming through Ankara until the embargo situation improved.

In our community there was a council *kushk* – a kiosk –

that sold corn bread. Private bakeries sold expensive wheat bread, so the council arranged for the poorer portion of the community to buy bread more cheaply from the *kushks*. I went to the bread *kushk* – with Mustafa on my hip – but came away with no bread. There was a crowd of desperate refugees fighting and elbowing, nudging each other out of the way to fight for some processed corn. I remembered the meat truck in the Chasma Gul refugee camp in Iran, and couldn't bring myself to fight for this prize. The *kushk* operator eventually found a system that worked – you would arrive in the morning and put your name on a list; when the bread eventually arrived he would call your name out and you could receive your bread. If there was no more bread and you hadn't received your ration, you went hungry.

I could not seem to figure out how names were called out – I didn't know about this system and always hoped that there would be some left at the end of the day so I could quietly buy a portion. On the fifth day after trying and coming away with nothing, I was standing there with all the other desperate faces when the *kushk* operator called out: “Kareem Abeh! Kareem Abeh!” To my surprise he meant me! I received my five small pieces of bread and went on my way, Mustafa happily chewing on a piece on the walk home. Eventually I figured out how it all worked and I made sure I was there first thing in the morning to put my name on the list. It was a small neighbourhood and everyone knew everyone else. I found out later that the *kushk* operator had felt sorry for me always missing out and called my name, even though I was not on his list.

