
Chapter 18

A VIEW FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP

Our journey began at about six in the evening. I rode one of the horses and Ghader rode the other. Our guides would walk most of the journey. There were no stirrups to rest my feet, but they had thick blankets on their backs which made it very comfortable to sit on; that is as long as they walked! They also did not have regular bridles with a bit in their mouths, only a rope halter with reins, so controlling them was not easy for me.

The horses would walk most of the time and seemed to know the trails well. Sometimes my horse would stop to eat some grass or perhaps it was just tired, but when I made him move with a small kick to his side, he would take off fast and I would yell for help! Fortunately, Ebi and Javad were walking ahead of us, so that when this happened they could stop my horse!

The trails were narrow, the mountains were steep, and sometimes rocky, which made me afraid that the horse would slip. However, it appeared that these horses had traveled these trails before and knew where they were going.

Ebi and Javad knew the mountains like the palm of their hands. Just like the horses, they knew this trail and had traveled it many times. During the entire trip, they only

rode the horses with us a few times, and then it was only because of the terrain.

As we were traveling, we ran into a group of teenagers, who were heading back toward their home. They all seemed to know each other and were there to pick wild vegetation for food. I also noticed a farmer plowing a field with his tractor on the side of the mountain a distance away. Although this land did not belong to any one it was being used by all the people there. They were far from any town and their livelihood was mostly farming.

Before we left my parents' house, I didn't even think about checking to see what the weather forecast would be for the next few days. I suppose I was expecting our guides to be in charge of that and to tell me how to dress accordingly since they were familiar with the climate and terrain. But they never told me how to dress or what to expect. During the daytime it was calm and pleasant, but as night approached, it became very cold! Fortunately I had a light jacket with me, which was helpful in keeping me warm as long as we were moving.

At 9:00 pm, the sun left us and a beautiful full moon lit our path. It got cooler but was still comfortable. The stars were out and you could hardly see any clouds in the sky.

During the trip, I was constantly thanking and praising God, and at the same time praying for His protection. I felt His presence the whole time.

When we got across the first mountain, it became darker and harder to see since the moon was not shining on that side. However, it was not any problem for our guides or the horses, as they knew every inch of those mountains. I was

not worried at all even though it was there that we saw a couple of wolfs. One of our guides spotted them and told us what they were. Our horses were also sensitive to their presence as you could see their ears perk up and their heads turn toward them. Javad threw a rock at them and spoke loudly to let them know we could see them, and they ran off. They never came closer or created any danger for us. Thank God!

We continued up and down the mountains, walking over the snow and watching streams of water going downhill. At times, we had to get off the horses and walk because of the steepness of the mountain and at other times we doubled up on the horses to move faster. We had to pass over at least three mountains to get to our destination. Before we climbed the last mountain, Ebi proceeded ahead of us by using a shortcut in order to catch up with a group of people who were also traveling ahead of us. They were carrying merchandise to the other side. He was also prepared to pay off the border patrol if needed.

After a couple of hours, we finally caught up to Ebi. He was sitting down on the side of the last mountain. He told us that we needed to be cautious from this point on and very quiet. Therefore, we quietly went up to the top of the mountain and saw the rest of the horsemen there. I counted at least thirty-five of them, all gathered in one place, waiting for the final run. I was not sure who they were or what they were doing at first, but later I learned that they were trading commodities their own way.

It was about 12:30 am, just after midnight and I could see the Iranian border patrol building that was behind us, but there was no movement or activity. In front of us, I could

see the Turkish border patrol building, and there were some lights on and I could see some activity. The border patrol would go back and forth with their vehicles equipped with a searchlight, shining it toward the mountains.

So now all we could do was wait. The temperature had dropped and it was getting colder by the minute. We were not moving and I was not dressed appropriately for this weather. I was experiencing my weakest point, and at times ready to give-up. I was so tired and sleepy that I could not think rationally, and wished to end this fight. I also felt like a failure because if I had to face the Iranian interrogators, I was afraid I would not be able to be courageous or bold enough to confess my new faith knowing that if I did it could result in severe punishment or even death. I could tell them a lie just to save my neck, but then I would be lying to myself and my God by denying Him. Either way I was not ready to be tested. A soldier is tested after having much practice before going to war in order to mentally and physically face tough challenges, even death as war demands. But not me, I have never been tested nor faced that kind of challenge before. All I could do was pray that God would give me the strength I needed if it came to that.

But then, my wife, my children, and Roman my grandson, would come into my mind, which would give me more hope and desire to fight harder against that dreaded cold morning a bit longer. They were waiting for me and I did not want to disappoint them. I had so much to be thankful for in my life and was not about to give it up so easily!

Javad gave me a blanket to cover myself with to stay warm. I was okay as long as I walked around, but as soon as

I stopped, I would be miserable. Everyone there had several layers of clothes on except Ghader and me. We had not been instructed on how to dress. Javad told me to be careful not to fall asleep or I would get sick, so I then started to move around again to keep myself warm and awake.

I wondered how long we would have to stay here, or if we would have to go back. These questions came to my mind, but no one knew the answers. I could not speak their language to communicate with them, but it seemed our guides were not sure exactly what was going on. All we could do was to wait. At some point, we spread a blanket on the ground, gathered together with a few other people, and shared what food we had brought in the bag. I was not hungry at all, but just to keep my strength up I ate a small piece of bread with cheese. I did not know what to think or what to say. I was confused and did not even know how to pray. At that moment it felt like we were against the Red Sea, with nowhere to go.

One of the guys in the group told us he had received four messages on his satellite phone, but did not know what it meant since they were all in English. They were talking among themselves, wondering what the messages said as he checked his satellite phone to call back those on the ground. Ebi told them to bring the radio to me to read since I spoke English. The messages indicated they were all missed calls. We assumed they were trying to call us to let us know it was ok to come down, but could not reach us because our satellite radio was turned off or on silent! On the mountaintop, they had to be very careful not to have anything light up because it could be seen from miles away and the satellite radio had a backlight. As I read the

messages, several of them made a circle around me to keep the light from being seen.

In the meantime, a small group of men and their horses decided to go down the mountain first and once they got there, sent us a signal by their two-way radio that everything was safe for the rest of us to go down as well. We set out on foot, leading the horses as we began our downhill journey towards the border. As soon as we started down, the rest of the group started to follow us. Javad whispered into my ear to slow down and let the others to get ahead of us just in case we had to run if faced with a trap. I made an excuse, went to the side to tie my shoelace, and as a result, we ended up getting behind several others.

This trail was very difficult and slippery to walk on as we were rushing downhill. I slipped a few times, falling on my hands and knees. At times I found myself walking sideways, but we managed to get down and to a smoother terrain. There we mounted the horses, Ebi and I on one and Javid and Ghader on the other. We started out at a fast trot and then Ebi told me to hang on because we were about to gallop very fast for the rest of the trip! We rode downhill till we reached level ground. We then crossed through a very

cold and rushing river to an unpaved road where we rode for about another 1/4mile. There our rides were waiting for us.

I stood off to the side while they were transferring their goods from the back of their horses to the trucks and vice-versa. I saw some of the horses by the river drinking. I also was thirsty, but I was afraid to drink the water which could have made me sick. They loaded up the trucks with the merchandise they brought, and after a short rest, all of the horsemen went back home the same way we came in. I was introduced to a truck driver who later was going to take me to my destination. [No name provided for security reasons]. I thanked Ebi and Javad and they too, departed and went back home with some goods on the back of their horses.

All the trucks were loaded and had left the area except the truck that I was in. I was already sitting on the front seat when I was told to get out because the truck would not crank! They seemed concerned, yet were calm about the situation. They popped the hood open and drained out the excess gasoline from the carburetor, which was what caused the truck not to crank. It was flooded. They worked hard, sweating even though it was so cold. Then they put everything back in place and cranked it up! Praise God!

Our truck was the last one to leave the area, but we did have a lead car with us with a few armed men. I saw at least two individuals with rifles; one kept it on his shoulder and the other had it hidden under his long overcoat. The lead car was ahead of us for protection and to give us signals.

They could not afford to lose the valuable merchandise they had in the back of their truck. Finally, our truck moved forward with its headlights turned off, waiting to see a signal from the lead car. Once the signal came, we moved forward and out of the area.

Our first stop was a warehouse where they emptied some of the goods they had in their truck. The next stop was at one of the men's home where they unloaded some merchandise, reloaded some other goods, and headed toward the village. By this time, it was about five in the morning and the sun was beginning to come up. I asked the men for some water to drink so I could take some ibuprofen for my backache. Ghader and I were both exhausted and barely could keep our eyes open. I would barely open my eyes occasionally to see where we were. When we got closer to the village, we went to another house where they unloaded the truck, switched to a car, and headed to the village and to a house where we stayed until I could call the US embassy.