

BY DEBORAH ELLIS

FICTION

Looking for X
The Breadwinner
Parvana's Journey
Mud City
The Breadwinner Trilogy
A Company of Fools
The Heaven Shop
I Am a Taxi
Sacred Leaf
Jackal in the Garden: An Encounter with Bihzad
Jakeman
Bifocal (co-written with Eric Walters)
Lunch with Lenin and Other Stories

NO SAFE PLACE

NONFICTION

Three Wishes: Israeli and Palestinian Children Speak
Our Stories, Our Songs: African Children Talk About AIDS
Off to War: Voices of Soldiers' Children
Children of War: Voices of Iraqi Refugees

NO SAFE PLACE

DEBORAH ELLIS

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To those who can't get on the ferry.

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ONE

The sound of peeing woke him up.

Exhaustion had let Abdul slip into a half-sleep in spite of the pounding music from the disco up the street, but the tinkling of water hitting cement just a few feet away broke through his slumber.

He turned his head away.

He was well hidden in the shadows, down in the gully under the ruins of the old tower. The drunk couldn't see him, just disgust him.

The sound of a zipper, the uneven footfall staggering away. Abdul kept his eyes closed. If he didn't open them, maybe his brain would think he was still asleep and let him drift off again.

Then the disco music changed. A techno version of a Beatles song flooded the Place d'Armes. "Penny Lane."

Abdul didn't even try to get through it. He tossed back the filthy blanket, rolled it away into a corner and climbed the steps out of the gully, checking again to make

sure the light chain with the thin medallion was still around his neck, under his clothes. He'd spend the rest of the night playing cat and mouse with the Calais police. It was a dangerous game, but it was a whole lot safer than remembering.

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"How much?"

"Does it matter? It's more than you've got."

"You don't know how much I've got."

"I can smell you. Your stink tells the whole story."

Abdul clenched his toes inside his torn sneakers. It helped him control his temper.

At least my stink is honest, he thought, from months of hard travel and living rough. He wondered what the smuggler's excuse was.

"I'll owe you the rest," Abdul said.

The smuggler scratched himself in places that weren't supposed to be scratched in public. He exhaled cigarette smoke into Abdul's face.

"Don't like dirty Arabs."

"I'm Kurdish," Abdul said, then wanted to snatch the words back. He'd just played into the man's prejudice. Should he say that he was part Arab, his mother's family from Baghdad? Why bother.

"I'm sixteen," he said instead, lying just a little. "I'm

strong. I'll find work in England and pay you what I owe you." He spoke in English, which was better than his French. He knew the smuggler knew both.

"You'll work. You'll pay. You'll do as you're told."

My grandmother carried a gun in the mountains fighting for a Kurdish homeland, Abdul thought, and here I am in a back alley of Calais, negotiating with a fool.

"Just tell me how much," he said. "I'm too tired for games."

The smuggler spat on the ground, then held out his slab of a hand, wiggling his fingers.

Abdul dug down into his right front trouser pocket, the one with the pouch sewn inside it. He took out a roll of British pounds that had, until recently, been wrapped in plastic and shoved up his rectum. Not even that place was secure. He'd come across bodies with the bellies sliced open.

He took off the elastic band and put the bills in the smuggler's hand.

"Count it," Abdul said, "and give me a receipt."

The smuggler sneered and made Abdul's money disappear into his own pocket. He was a big man. He used to be muscled but had gone to flab, every meal he'd eaten attaching itself to his belly and his arms.

"You want a receipt, you little Kurd-turd? Ask the CRS. Get your receipt from them. And when you're finished, meet me tonight, two o'clock, where the campers park, back of the Au Côte d'Argent hotel. Do you know the place?"

Abdul knew it. It was by the pedestrian pier, where tourists stood to watch the ferries passing.

“Don’t be late. I’d be happy to leave without you.” The smuggler started to walk away. “You’ll be eating lousy English food for breakfast.”

Abdul was thin from too many months of being on the road, but strong from too many fights with other migrants. He flung himself at the smuggler’s back, wrapping his arm so tightly around the bigger man’s throat that the smuggler began to die, right there on his feet.

“Count it and give me a receipt,” Abdul said.

The smuggler tried to shake him off, but his bloated body didn’t function well without oxygen. He reached into his pocket and threw the wad of pound notes to the ground. Abdul released him and went after his money.

The smuggler’s boot smashed into Abdul’s head, sending him spinning into the gutter.

“Keep your money, Kurd-turd,” he said as he stomped away. “I don’t want you on my boat.”

For a moment Abdul was too stunned to move. The kick, then his skull crashing into the curb put his brain on temporary lockdown. But he could feel his fingers, curled tightly around his money.

He let the smuggler go. There was no point running after him. Abdul had dealt with men like that in Iraq and all across Europe. They had no honor, and they could always find another customer.

His head was still buzzing, but he got to his feet anyway to escape the pile of dog dirt he’d nearly landed in. Everywhere in Calais, there was dog dirt. He used to wonder what was wrong with the French that they couldn’t clean up after their dogs. Now he was beyond wondering. Now he just tried to watch where he stepped.

Abdul shoved the money back into his deep pocket without taking the time to rebind it. He’d have to find a place where he knew he was alone to roll it, wrap it in plastic and shove it back up his backside until he could find another smuggler. This alley looked deserted, but there could be people hidden among the garbage bins, waiting for their chance. He got out of there fast.

It had taken him weeks to find that smuggler. Calais was full of people eager to make money, but it was also full of cargo.

He could make another run at the Chunnel, the tunnel that went beneath the English Channel, and try to hop the razor-wire fence around the entrance, if he could find a place out of sight of the security guards and CCTV cameras. Maybe he could latch onto a freight train or even walk the fifty kilometers through the Chunnel.

Or he could try again to climb onto the back of a cargo truck headed for the ferry. For that, though, he needed courage, and his well of bravery had pretty near run dry. His previous attempts had ended with cuts and bruises, and he knew he had been lucky. The truck drivers were on

to them now, and they would swerve wildly and deliberately to shake off any passengers.

He'd seen what had happened to other migrants. Broken bones, head injuries and deep cuts that went septic in the bad living conditions of the Jungle, the migrant camp.

The wad of money felt uncomfortable in Abdul's trousers. It was down deep, but it still felt within reach of thieves. Amassing it had cost him so much, and he'd never have the means to replace it. He had to keep it safe.

If he could at least close his pocket shut with safety pins, maybe he could leave his money there instead of shoving it into the other place.

But he had no safety pins. He kept his hand firmly in his pocket, on his money.

Abdul kept walking. It was dangerous to stand still. Someone could spot him and report him. But he walked without direction. Four months on the road, and he still hadn't conquered the problem of time. In Iraq there had never been enough time. Out on the road there was way too much, and no place to spend it.

The day had only just started, and the free meal wouldn't be served until early in the afternoon. Abdul decided to walk into town. Maybe there was someone looking for a day laborer – at half the legal wages, but it would still be money, money he could spend.

That was his rule. The money from Iraq was for getting into England. Anything else he needed on the way, he had

to earn. That's why it had taken him four months to cross six countries.

Abdul changed directions. He'd been heading toward Sangatte, a suburb in the west of Calais with high sand dunes and long grass to hide in. He didn't stay long on the busy Avenue de Verdun, but turned down a side street and cut through the cemetery.

Calais was a pretty enough town. They worked hard at keeping it nice for the tourists coming and going from England. There was an old lighthouse and a war museum in an old Nazi bunker. The tower he'd slept under had been built in the 1200s, rattled by an earthquake in the 1500s, hit by a cannonball in the 1600s, bombed by the Germans in the 1900s, and pissed on by a drunk in 2009.

A breeze came off the Channel, and it caught him in such a way that it bounced off his clothes and drove his own scent into his nostrils. There wasn't much he could do about it. He had only what he was wearing and nowhere to do laundry.

The shops and hotels of Rue Royale came into view, but even as he approached them, Abdul knew he couldn't face asking for work. Calais had not been kind to him job-wise. He stuck out too much. All the migrants did. The people with money and passports were pink-cheeked and wore pastels. The migrants were the ones with the dark hair and dark skin and dark clothes.

He crossed the street and turned into Parc Richelieu. Sometimes he slept there on the soft grass, sheltered by low

hedges. Not often, though. The police had taken to raiding the park in the middle of the night.

This morning it was quiet. Abdul sat on a bench and listened to the sound of the little waterfall. The sun found his bench and he started to doze.

Not for long. A group of drunken football fans stomped along the sidewalk, chanting loudly for their team. They didn't see him, but Abdul didn't want to wait for them to come back. It wasn't safe to stay in one place for too long.

He headed back toward town, but this time the Channel breeze brought with it the scent of croissants baking in the boulangerie. Abdul turned on his heels and walked away quickly. He was way too hungry to put up with that!

The sound of a police siren made him duck inside the nearest building. It was the public library. He hoped no one would kick him out. A library would be a good place to hole up for awhile.

A woman was sitting at the front desk. She kept her eyes on her work as Abdul came through the door.

He moved farther inside, into the rows of shelves. The library was quiet, with few people.

Why hadn't he come in before? History, travel, cook-books, science, novels. Even children's books, with their bright pictures and promises of good tomorrows.

And then he saw words that were not in French. He thought he recognized Turkish. Then he saw Russian, and Farsi, and something he was pretty sure was Hungarian.

And then, on a single shelf, in a not-very-long row, he saw Kurdish.

Abdul took a book down from the shelf and read about mining, in his own language. He put that book back and read a fairytale, one he recognized from his grandmother. Then another book, about Kurdish history.

You are strong, his people seemed to be telling him. You will survive. You will carry us forward.

He hadn't realized he was grinning until he looked up and saw that the lady at the desk had a clear view of him, and she was smiling, too.

Abdul put the book back on the shelf and approached the desk.

"Please, do you have...?" He didn't know the French word for safety pins, but he saw one scattered among some stray paper clips. He picked it up, and was about to ask her if he could have it when she reached into a drawer and took out a whole container of them. She held it up so he could help himself. He took three, then took two more, and some elastic bands from the box on her desk.

He knew how to say thank you in French.

The librarian smiled again, then went back to her stack of books.

Abdul had spotted the sign for the men's room on his journey around the library. The first thing he did there was to roll his money back up in a tight bundle and wind the elastic bands around it. He fastened the pins over the opening to

his deep pocket, locking the money inside. Then he washed himself quickly, even washing his hair, bending low over the sink and using pink hand soap from the dispenser.

He would have dried it under the hot-air hand dryer, but another patron came in at that moment, and Abdul didn't hang around.

He didn't mind that his clean, wet hair dripped water down his back. Outside the sun was shining, his money was secure, he felt almost clean, and he had read his own language.

Maybe he'd take another run at the Chunnel tonight.

But first, it was time to eat.