

I am on a bus traveling through the desert between Kerman and Yazd when we pull over to a checkpoint. Checkpoints are common along Iranian highways and I've grown accustomed to stopping every hundred miles or so to watch the driver climb out, papers in hand. Sometimes a guard in dark green uniform enters the bus and walks up and down the aisle, eyes flicking from side to side, pistol gleaming in the shadowed interior light.

This is one of those times. The bus falls silent as a young guard enters, and we all determinedly stare straight ahead, as if by our pretending to ignore the guard, he will ignore us. We listen to his footfalls sound down the Persian carpet that lines the aisle, turn, and come back again. He reaches the front of the bus and makes a half-turn toward the door. But then, (1)just as we begin a collective deep breath, he surprises us by completing his turn and starting down the aisle again, this time to tap various passengers on the shoulder. They gather their belongings together and move slowly out of the bus and up the steps of a cement block building.

I sit frozen, hoping that the guard will not notice me and the blond hair sticking out of my rusari, or head scarf. I've seen guards pull passengers off buses before, and although it never seems to be anything serious — the passengers always return within five or ten minutes — (2)I'd just as soon remain in my seat.

The guard climbs out of the bus and I relax, wondering what, (3) anything, he is looking for. I've been told that these searches are usually about drugs and smuggling, but to me, they seem to be more about the (4) of power.

The guard is back, and instinctively, I know why. He points to me.

Me? I gesture, still not completely convinced that he wants me. After two months in Iran, I've learned that — contrary to (5)what I had expected — foreigners are seldom bothered here.

You, he nods.

Copying my fellow passengers, I gather my belongings together and stand up. Everyone is staring at me — as usual, I am the only foreigner on the bus.

I climb out, nearly falling over my long black raincoat — it or something (6) women in public in Iran. My heart is knocking against my chest. The guard and one of his colleagues are waiting for me on the steps of the guardhouse. At their feet is my bag, which they've dragged out of the belly of the bus. It looks like a fat green watermelon.

'Passport,' the young guard barks in Persian.

I hand him my crisp, dark blue document, suddenly feeling that United States of America is printed across the front much too boldly. I remember someone back home (7) entering Iran. Too late now.

'Visa?'

I show him the appropriate page in my passport.

'Where are you coming from?' His Persian has a strange accent that I haven't heard before.

'Kerman,' I say.

'Where are you going to?'

'Yazd.'

‘Tourist?’

I nod, thinking there’s no need to complicate matters by telling him that I’m here in Iran to write a safarnameh, the Persian word for travelogue or, literally, ‘travel letter.’ But then immediately (8). My visa says Journalist.

Slowly, the young guard flips through the pages of my passport, examining the immigration stamps and the rules and regulations listed in the back. He (9) my picture long and hard, and then passes my passport to his unsmiling colleague, who asks me the same questions I’ve just been asked. ‘Where are you coming from?’

‘Kerman.’

‘Where are you going to?’

‘Yazd.’

‘Tourist?’

I nod again. I can’t change my answer now.

The second guard hands my passport back to the first, who reluctantly hands it back to me. I look at his smooth boyish face and wonder if he’s old enough to shave.

‘Is this your suitcase?’ he says, looking at my bag.

‘Yes,’ I say, and move to open it.

He shakes his head.

All of the other passengers are now back on the bus, and I wonder how much longer the guards will keep me. What will happen, I worry, (10)?

We’re out in the middle of the desert; there are no other buildings (11). Hardened dust-white plains, broken only by thin grass, stretch in all directions. The sky is a pale metallic dome sucking the color and moisture out of the landscape.

Clearing his throat, the first guard stares at me intently. His eyes are an unusual smoke blue, framed by long lashes. They’re the same eyes I’ve noticed before on more than a few Iranians. He looks at his colleague and they whisper together. Sweat is slipping down their foreheads, and down mine.

(12)Then the first guard straightens his shoulders, takes a deep breath, and blushes. ‘Thank you,’ he says carefully in stiff, self-conscious English. ‘Nice to meet you.’

‘Hello.’ The second guard is now blushing as furiously as the first. ‘How are you?’ He falls back into Persian, only some of which I understand. ‘We will never forget this day. You are the first American we have met. Welcome to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Go with Allah.’
