

Chapter Seven

Afghanistan

Jimi Hendrix: *Highway Chile* > *Lyrics*

We entered the Afghan government customs facility at the border near Herat, crossing from Iran. A white late model VW bus with prominent Swiss plates was pointed in the opposite direction and leaving Afghanistan, or attempting to leave. We could make out several Western tourists in the typical clothing of people who had been hanging out in the country for a while. Several guards had them grouped together, away from the bus. The place was abuzz with activity. The commotion around the bus was punctuated with Dari (an Afghan dialect of Persian) and Pashto chatter from the Afghans, with only occasional muttering from the foreigners. A group of onlookers milled about, peering and pointing at the activity. They were likely the customs area occupants and hangers-on, but distinguishing the tourists from the guards proved to be a challenge. The rest of the crowd were Afghan, some of them with the look of authorities. The vibes we picked up were intimidating, and it definitely had the makings of a bust.

To describe this place as a “facility” is much too generous. The squalid, dirty, smoky encampment housed the dregs of officialdom. Discard any thoughts of competency, release mental images of an organized entry procedure to Afghanistan, and think near chaos, bloated bureaucracy, and unbridled graft. As the scene around us further unfolded, the main attraction was the group of unfortunate former occupants of the VW bus. We weren’t even on the playbill as we slowly drove forward into the abyss of that scene, unsure of what to do.

Time slowed as we watched in fascination at the growing melee. However, our focus snapped into clarity when the man unmistakably in charge froze the action with his arrival. His enormous smile belied his complete control over the destiny of those foreigners. His uniform was sharp, but only compared to the slovenly look of his subordinates. We could clearly see the masked look of menace he harbored, even though he was 10 m (33 ft) away from us. His perfected look of composure scarcely disguised it.

At that moment, one of the throng noticed our car—apparently a customs official based on the sidearm that he was wearing. He waved us over to a parking place and motioned for us to wait. We certainly weren’t going anywhere, now trapped in a compound with a crowd blocking the exit. The unfolding drama enthralled us, anxious about its outcome and what it might mean for us.

As the dark man advanced toward the vehicle, the crowd split, and we could spot the partially disassembled bus. The doors were open, and they had pulled the door panels off. Men were lying under the car, tapping here and there; the attendant was finger-pointing and shouting at the discovery of the hidden hashish. Like leaf-cutter ants, a procession of ragtag workers removed similar sized parcels from the car and piled them on the ground a few meters away. The boss glanced in that direction as

he approached. Four foreigners, with looks of despair and an obvious sense of foreboding, stood together in a group, guarded by armed men in uniform. Their furtive glances toward us were telling—they had indeed been busted.

Each of us solemnly took stock of the situation. We were “clean,” but our appearance and a cursory check of our car’s interior would surely uncover plenty of evidence that we had only recently shed some of the natural substances that those guys a few meters away had in abundance. These crazies could easily set us up and deal with us in any fashion they thought appropriate. Allowing overt actions on our part to look around or otherwise appear concerned would likely only worsen our fate.

So we turned our attention back to the movie-like show outside our car just in time to see the dark man walk toward us. The look of satisfaction was still there, but now supplemented with a smile like you’ve seen on a crocodile’s face.

He waved us out of the car and said, “Come, come, gentlemen, to my office,” with an impersonation of a British accent.

The border and frontier were indistinguishable in this part of the world. A country’s border demarcates the officially registered and protected line where one country stops and the other starts. The frontier is the undefined zone on either side of the border. In this parched and sparsely populated desert, you could be in Iran or Afghanistan and not know the difference. That’s exactly the way the nomadic populations considered the entire country. They divided it up among tribes, with feuds and unsettled grudges having more sway than governmental regulations. It was impossible for a visitor to identify the tribal area they were in.

It became evident now that the petty mindset and perceived authority of our host, Mr. Croc, authorized him to declare and execute the local laws and regulations.

We were several kilometers into Afghanistan proper and about 75 km (47 mi) still to go to Herat. The buildings were little more than shacks, built with sun-dried mud bricks from the not-too-far-away muddy creek that passed as a river in this desert. The interiors were poorly lit and had open fires for cooking, and in the winter, heating. Animals also commonly shared the tiny, cramped living spaces, which had a particular odor that we would soon become familiar with. We'd been in deserts in North Africa, and now in parts of Asia—they all shared a common trait. You would be in the middle of nowhere with no living creature in sight, but do something, make some kind of noise or distraction not common there, and suddenly, there would be people... Lots of people. It was eerie and abnormal to the Western psyche. You got used to it, though.

We, of course, accepted the invitation to the office and walked at our own pace. It seemed we were unguarded, but guessed we were being watched and behaved accordingly. Back in Amsterdam, Hawk had stressed that we should accept any offers of hospitality graciously. To insult a local that was abiding by the age-old custom of hospitality to passing travelers was a huge faux pas, and dangerous.

Mr. Croc greeted us at the door and showed us in. In comparison to the typical hut, this one had electric lighting and an old ramshackle desk. A gesture was made for us to settle on the sand floor, on top of Oriental carpets. He sat cross-legged, so we did too.

He introduced himself as Chief Custom Inspector of the Herat Region. We were ceremoniously welcomed to Afghanistan and asked for our passports. As he set them aside, we wondered if we would ever see them again.

His continued dialogue gave us some reassurance, but his smile made our wariness gauge needle peg at maximum.

We were intensely curious about what had transpired in the customs area and what might be the fate of those guys. I think our host knew that well and let us simmer about it.

He segued into his authoritarian government persona and said, “You should know that possession of substantial quantities of hashish is illegal. Our neighbors (in this case, Iran) are quite upset when it passes from our country to theirs. Therefore, it is our duty and responsibility to see that doesn’t happen.” Another practiced application of his OK British accent. At that he smiled, followed by a chortle. “As you saw, the visitors we welcomed into our country attempted to exit with about 100 kilos [220 lbs] of our excellent hashish.” He shrugged his shoulders and scolded in a nonchalant tone, “Unfortunately for them, we knew of their pending departure from our country and knew where to look. But you gentlemen are arriving and can expect to be treated well.”

With that, he waved his hand and one of his underlings brought him a chunk of hash, at least 100 grams (3.5 oz). It also looked like excellent quality—could be from Mazar-i-Sharif. A couple of other custom agent types entered and prepared a hubbly-bubbly (hookah) with a mixture of tobacco and hash.

All kinds of alarms went off for us. They had just busted a car loaded with hash, and presumably the occupants were about to spend some time in an Afghan jail—not a place one wants to visit, let alone serve time. And now they were inviting us to get high with them like old friends. Shit! This was too weird. But we were on a fast train going somewhere not designated and we had better make ourselves comfortable and enjoy the ride. Double Shit! The hash smelled excellent, which confirmed our visual appraisal. These guys knew their way around a pipe and could

inhale like pros. They were imbibers, not just putting up a façade. When it was our turn, we knew we were being judged by a jury that had the power to treat us as they saw fit.

We clearly passed the test, whatever that was, because the Big Guy handed us that chunk of excellent hash, stamped our passports, and said we could leave.

Shit, shit, shit! Now we were really screwed. We were gifted a chunk of hash by the Chief Custom Inspector upon entering Afghanistan and smoked it with him. The same guy that had busted a bus loaded with it in front of our eyes. He, who told us those poor bastards had been set up and allowed to drive across the country only to be snared a few kilometers from freedom. Of course, they also had to pass through Iranian customs, which also could have spelled doom. The obvious deduction on our part was we too were being set up.

Should we politely refuse? Refusal was not an option in this part of the world. Accept and discard it later? Could work, but also a clear insult if discovered. If it was a setup, they'd simply plant the hash on us anyway.

But most of all, it was a chunk of excellent Afghani hash, and we were out. We weren't about to give it up!

"That's very kind of you, and we appreciate it greatly. Thank you for your gracious hospitality," we offered as we left the office. But we couldn't resist any longer. "What's going to happen to the people you just busted?"

The expected smile said it all, but he offered, "They will suffer the consequences of their poor decisions."

Questions lingered in our minds. Why was an educated and well-spoken man holding court in such a remote and dead-end location and job? Punishment or opportunity? What decisions led to the dreadful

outcome of those guys in the VW van? Did any or all of that have anything to do with us?

And decades later, as I reflect, I wonder if their Guardian Angels were off duty, or otherwise not protecting them. Everyone has Guardian Angels, right? Was their karma bad? Was it simply bad luck? We had already prodded and pushed our “luck”—and our angels, no doubt. We also hadn’t given due acknowledgement for their kind services. Time to pay more attention! We might not have fully understood karma, intuition, instinctive decision-making, or even luck or coincidence, but we certainly could see there was more to it than met the eye. How did all of that fit together?

We were thankful to get our passports back (mine had the visa with the car stamp, which meant I had to leave the country with the car). That was of no concern at the moment. We were free to drive on into the country that we had driven about 7,500 km (4,660 mi) to reach.

We apprehensively drove out of the customs area and headed south to Kandahar, concerned about what the next few kilometers had in store for us.