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From IM GRENZLAND (IN THE BORDERLAND)

Editor's note:

Im Grenzland is the story of a Kurdish man who comes into possession of a map of landmines planted during the war in the no man's land at the border. With this map, the smuggler is able to negotiate a path through the border region and bring back rarities that have become luxury items because of an embargo against the country. The smuggler finds less success, however, in negotiating the labyrinth of secret police and armed forces when he learns of his son's involvement with Islamic fundamentalism.

-John Beer, Associate Editor

He tried hard to hide his fear, especially from his buyers. He delayed the next tour as long as he could. He came up with excuses, got sick, had to take a short trip. But it just isn't possible to hide for long in a small city. Finally he had to take off, without having imagined a satisfactory resolution to this horrible situation.

Contrary to his expectations, everything went fairly well. When he came upon the boot tracks they had almost blown away, as if something had closed over the changes that had shocked him. The gray earth that had held their imprint appeared to have tightened, smoothing out the impression. Of course the smuggler did not forget what the footprints meant. But he wanted to be reassured that all that was now past, and since it was quiet again and only the wind surround him, a calm light mood did in fact set in.

Only the next time or the time after that did it all come back to him again. He had been on the road long enough by now to remain calm and concentrate at the same time. The night was mild. The wind was strong and seemed to change direction every ten minutes. That annoyed him because he could hardly hear anything else.

He remembered how he had looked at the dark river which that night seemed to him like an enormous solid shape; the longer he stared at it, the more motionless it became. His glance wanted to stay glued to the surface of this creature. Back then he could still hear the village dogs before he went on. By the time the cliff plateau came into view, he had long since sunk into his isolation, into the sound of his steps and his own breathing. The horror that would turn him to stone the next moment only became apparent after a second glance. The smuggler had here riveted on the dark outlines of the cliff as he looked up and ahead along the path. The cliff was simply his biggest obstacle. Out of the corner of his eye he had become aware of a protrusion by the side of the road, perhaps two hundred meters away. He looked in that direction, then turned away again. He forced himself to look once more. He approached and it remained what it had appeared to be from a distance--a leg growing up out of the ground. It was unnaturally thin, as if the earth had swallowed a large doll head first. The shoe on the end of the leg was clearly recognizable.

As he stood in front of it, the wind enveloped him in the last of the sweet odor of decay. What irritated him was the slightly **brut twig**; on which the shoe had been skewered. Someone had shoved the twig far enough into the ground that it stood upright. The smuggler looked at the misshapened, earth-colored leather shoe with its open buckles hanging down. It wasn't so much the horror of it that disgusted him as it was the comical air

about it. This leg on the side of the road looked like something children would put up to shock adults. The smuggler immediately felt like this sick joke was meant for him. He took it as an invitation to play.

That night he kept going, almost out of spite. At least now he knew something about the humor of these nameless people. But now he felt as if he were being observed by them, *yes*, even followed. At each step he expected new signs of their presence, perhaps another body part from the corpse. But he found nothing more, and on the way back the skewered shoe was still there.

At first the smuggler told no one about this. But that only reinforced his feeling that it was meant strictly for him. Now he had to pass by that shoe over and over again, probably until the foot in it lid completely decayed or the wind had ripped it down. He was the only one who'd seen the sign and could brood over its meaning.

"You can't assume you're alone out there," Beno said when he finally had to tell someone about it. A messenger had come to fetch him, and he'd blurted out the story right at the beginning of their conversation. "To the northwest, dozens of villages have been destroyed. How many people do you think have had to escape into the mountains with nothing but the clothes on their back? Nobody knows how many" When the smuggler still said nothing and just stared attentively, the other continued. "Well, there is one way of moving about freely in no man's land. It's just forbidden to tell you or any other civilian how, but there is one possibility. And something else--has it ever occurred to you that it could be the foot of a landmine victim?"

The smuggler shook his head.

Beno nodded, "Of course someone had to stand it up like that. But that doesn't mean that person also killed him."

No matter how hard he tried, the smuggler couldn't decide if that made things any better. He examined the sterile desk and said nothing.

"I want to tell you something, just you. A Man whom we all know to be a very important person summoned one of his very highest men to him. When he stood before him, the man didn't raise his hand against him; no he just grabbed him and threw him into the dog kennels with the Airedales. Do you know what dogs do when you really starve them? They don't kill, they start right in feeding, like hyenas. The man was ripped to pieces in front of everyone. 'I made you and so I destroy you,' the important man said. Can you imagine the man's face, as long as he still had one? That's a true story, not a bad movie. It's just as true as a shoe along the side of the path, a nasty prank by mean kids. You have to realize what you see is not all there is.

The smuggler felt like he was being challenged to say something. But he couldn't think of anything so he just sat up in his chair. Finally, he thought to himself, here, in front of him, was an actual source of all those rumors that spread no matter where he went.

"No one asks you whether you understand what's going on around you or not. Everything already happened long before you'd even begun thinking about it. And it all keeps on happening. You have to..."

The smuggler sensed that Beno was enjoying overwhelming him. He moved away from him, leaning back against the bare wall like an absent-minded stroller. He pressed the palms of his hands against the stone on either side of his thighs.

"It's like an awakening. One day you're confronted with something new. It's like an unknown alphabet, a labyrinth, yes, a minefield. It has a system, but not yours. It needed time to develop, but it wasn't your time. It has an internal order that makes it obvious, if you only knew it at that moment of discovery, you're smarter than you were before. But instead

of staying smart, you put everything into your time, your order, you want to be the one who understands, who overcomes. That's nothing more than actively limiting yourself." He pulled away from the wall, a nervous smile crossing his face. "And perhaps you'll discover such an order someday. And then you'll be frightened."

The smuggler leaned back in the chair again, stretching out his legs and keeping his eyes aimed at the stone floor where Beno's shadow moved about. He was happy to have something to look at.

"Why did I ask you here? Just say so that we can get to know each other a little better." He came around the desk and stood in front of the smuggler. "Watch out for your oldest son:"

The smuggler sat up. "He's thirteen years old!"

"Not too young to have the wrong kind of friends. You may think they're really pious people with a habit of spray-painting walls. But they're deluded and they're agitators. They have political ties abroad, people say." Beno shook his head slightly and looked down on the smuggler with disapproval.

"Ties abroad?"

"They're financed by Iran. How can you send your son to a Koran school year after year and think he won't be influenced by it? Where do you think the Islamic fundamentalists come from, if not there?"

"I thought the 'Islamic Movement' was a legal party."

"An organization. An organization that is tolerated. That doesn't mean anything. They could be illegal tomorrow and sent to hell. You got your children through the war, now get them through the peace."

The smuggler left the building with its big watchful windows that were never draped, even after dark. He strolled back into his world of low shops and small houses pressed tightly against each other. He was himself again once outside the barren rooms and echoing hallways. And his insides were churning. There was the matter of the paths through no man's land. At least in the Red House he'd gotten a small indication of the information that he'd wanted for some time. So someone knew about it. He organized what he'd heard. Now he was certain that the shoe was the remains of someone looking for mines.

If he had known back then what danger the kid was in, nothing else would have mattered to him. He had underestimated the urgency of Beno's warning. He should have beaten the boy, locked him in, tied him up. But he didn't do any of that, for the simple fact that he hardly ever saw him. Everyone who was old enough had to start fending for themselves, and many were younger than his oldest. The kid was old enough to leave home, for some time now he'd only stopped by to visit. The organization was legal, of that the smuggler was certain. And it took care of his boy. He knew where he could go, he studied all day long, even if no one knew what, and he had enough to eat. That was a relief, one less hungry mouth to feed. The smuggler just couldn't see the danger in a situation that worked so well for him. But he made up his mind to talk to his son the next time he visited.

That conversation turned out completely different than he expected. Years later he could still remember that afternoon perfectly because, without his knowing it, it marked their farewell.

The boy appeared in the house without a word, as he almost always did. He took his place on the wooden bench and looked pensively out the window, as if something important were happening on the short pathway to the gate. Of course he couldn't do that for long, since his brothers soon gathered around him expectantly, pulling at the legs of his

pants, chattering at him. He probably just wanted to put in his time at his parents' house anyway, so their demand that he come play suited him well.

The smuggler watched him at play, and it occurred to him that despite his son's involvement with the little ones, he still kept his distance. Of course, the smuggler said to himself, that's how youths are at this age, already more grownups than children. Still, his son seemed more like a stranger to him as he sat there under the window, on the farthest edge of the bench.

As always when he was there, they ate together. The kid was measured in everything he took; his movements had something of studied dignity about them, briefly interrupted by flashes of his true age.

His mother began the conversation, or rather the attempt at one. She was the real authority in such things. With hope in her powers of persuasion, the smuggler had mentioned to her what Beno had told him. At first she was shocked and became overly nervous, as she always did in that state. But then a thoughtful furrow across her brow indicated she was thinking it over. Even before the kid came she had begun shaking her head slightly, expressing her aversion to this threatening news from the outside world.

At dinner, she started out harmlessly, "Do you get enough to eat at your school?" "More than enough," the boy replied, glancing proudly at his father. "But we need little."

"You need little," she repeated after him, growing visibly nervous, "but you and your group want a lot, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" He immediately shifted into fighting mode, probably unconsciously despite his acute sense of what was coming next.

"Your father spoke with a man from Internal Security. You never said that you get money from foreigners." Her tone grew reproachful with that last sentence. But she was really only worried, and her gaze seemed to probe the youth's face.

"Because it's not true," came his curt reply, "that's just what the government says." Turning to his father, he continued, "But what do you have to do with the Red House?"

"Business," the smuggler said, not at all inclined to explain any more than that.

The boy just stared at him, not daring to say what he was thinking at that moment.

The smuggler remembered how he flushed when he realized the suspicion he had suddenly brought upon himself. She put down her silverware too, fiddled with her sleeve and waited for some word from him. He was silent. He refused to respond, even though he knew that now she would just have one more reason to criticize his dealings.

And something else struck him now, looking back: never before had they attempted to talk to the boy with such urgency. He must have felt quite threatened in this strange situation.

She interrupted the silence, "The man talked about your foreign connections."

The boy laughed out loud, putting his hand in front of his mouth like a child would. For a moment, the smuggler was overcome with rage.

"What do you have to say about that?" he demanded.

As he often did at such moments, the boy turned away from him and stared obliquely to the side. The smuggler felt strange playing the father. He sensed that others had long since dismissed him in that role. Out of anger about that, and perhaps sensing the truth of Ben's words, he emphasized his paternal authority by pushing away his plate and standing up. He walked to the door, opened it and looked down across the blank stone floor in the hall, bathed in soft light shot through with shadows. He turned around. The boy was still staring to the side. His clothes were clean, even the shoes seemed

polished, if worn. He reacted to his father's intent gaze.

"There are no foreign countries for us," he said softly.

"Perhaps not for you, but there certainly are for Internal Security."

"That's what they say about everyone they don't like. But we're peaceful. There's nothing they can do."

"Why do you spraypaint walls?"

"I don't know anything about that. That's someone else." He looked at his mother and tried to smile.

She made a somber face, which always made her look despondent. She didn't even seem anxious, just sad and helpless. Instead of returning his gaze, she rearranged the dishes on the table.

The smuggler stood next to the boy's chair. "Don't you get it? Internal Security wanted to warn me."

"Warn you? About what?"

"Perhaps to them your group represents some kind of danger."

"Every true Muslim is a danger for the half-hearted and the exploiters of the faith." He'd taken a deep breath before speaking that line. To the smuggler's ear, his tone took on that strangeness of all phrases learned by rote.

"You must listen to your father," she said, mainly because she couldn't think of anything else to say.

The two little ones were yelling in the hall. She softly wiped the tip of her nose with her sleeve and stood up. The smuggler wondered what thought could have soothed her so, or whether her capacity for worry was simply exhausted for the time being. She walked passed him into the hall, and he turned back to the boy.

"I know you don't do anything illegal. But the man from the Red House wanted to tell me something, something about your group."

"Who is this man? What does he know anyway? He should just come visit us." He smiled insolently and stood up, ready to leave.

"He may well do that," the smuggler said, making sure they couldn't be heard in the next room. "But by then it will probably be too late."

The boy shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

What finally reassured the smuggler was the sight of the school itself. He could no longer remember if he had followed the kid that same day or sometime later. At any rate he passed the blackened floors and walls in the street with the car repair shops until he came to the three-story buildings with windows like a factory and stopped in front of it. It stood alone in a courtyard, set apart by the large, colorful fabric over its entrance. Nothing grew in this part of town, wherever once looked, the ground and the streets were dried and cracked. The smuggler looked at the windows for some time. He didn't dare go into the building because he didn't know what to say once inside. He thought he saw people behind those windowpanes blind with dirt, but he wasn't even certain of that. Now and then men strolled by, but no one seemed to go into the school, and no one came out.

What he had struck him about the boy was his quiet determination in sticking to his cause. Apparently he had no fear at all of the Red House. How could it be, the smuggler asked himself now, that this child was so different from him and almost everyone else? The certitude that his Islam gave the kid made him like only one other person, and that was Beno, who was just as unswerving. As the smuggler saw it, this was evidenced by the fact that the boy too never spoke about his real motives, as if a question at that most basic level was meaningless to him. At bottom, the smuggler was thoroughly

convinced, Beno and his own son were more than just similar. They were two misbegotten creatures born of a common force, or they were destined to be enemies, and Beno knew it. For now, time was on the side of the Red House, which a mere comparison of the two buildings showed. And that was what reassured the smuggler. It was simply inconceivable that a few people in that hole could endanger an organization that occupied the huge wings of the Red House, which in fact was just the visible portion of an even larger headquarters. And yet, the smuggler thought to himself on the way back as he saw the greasy engine remains in the repair shops, lying like incinerated bodies in the sand – they would be able to do it at some point, they would use the same weapons with the same certitude and conviction, and no one knew that better than Beno and his people. It's always kin who battle each other, he thought, and someone like me is destined to be run between the fires.

Translated by Janice Becker
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