

Chapter 7. SURVIVAL SERVICE in ASHKHABAD

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Prelude:

For a few years I worked at the Desert Museum, established the Research Department, and kept active in international conservation. Set in a majestic saguaro desert it was where people wanted to work, or fantasized it was where they wanted to be. More than one director had his hand in the cookie jar and fired people for petty reasons. Probably just like elsewhere, where there is never enough money except for top dog administrators. Eventually I realized many museums, botanic gardens, zoos, and such places cared little for their employees, and working at such places was too often a poor idea if you wanted to be creative and treated with decency. The best part of the Desert Museum was the opportunity to do interesting things away from the institution. That was when I still wanted to go to faraway places. Before I realized I don't want to leave home place.

There was a special events trip for museum members to the Grand Canyon in early fall. I was interpretive guide, the expert. I knew the plants and critters though I had not been down the canyon. Almost a week floating the river. The boatmen who were supposed to be the leaders were show-off rock climbers. When we stopped for lunch, a side canyon, or some scenic place, they would daredevil scale a canyon wall like a gecko.

No way I would go up or down a cliff unless it meant some prized specimen. I don't like scrotum-tightening scary places. Once when I was young and naïve the only way I could get newly found specimens of cliff-dwelling orchids and bromeliads was over a canyon-cliff on a rope. We were near the entrance to Arroyo Gochico, a narrow gorge at an opening to the Sierra Madre Occidental. These deep, narrow canyons hold moist air and shaded walls afford special niches for tropical plants. You don't find those plants in the surrounding, open dry tropical deciduous forest, scorching hot and dry

before the summer monsoon. Tall slender palms grow from crevices in sheer rock. Rock figs cascade white roots down the walls as if melted, reaching canyon bottom water to grow into large trees, often so top-heavy they break away and crash into the canyon.

It wasn't a big cliff, but the plants were too high to get with a pole and I didn't have a rifle, and shooting them down like botanists do in the tropics would be dangerous in a narrow canyon. We went way around to the top, tied a rope to a small stout tree, and I slid down. It was easy with toe and finger holds. Halfway down, after bagging some specimens, I found myself eye to eye with a pointy-nosed green rattlesnake coiled on a tiny ledge, flicking a shiny black tongue, cat eyes in a black bandit stripe across a scaly face. I suddenly realized what was going on and slid down fast and saved emotions until standing a few feet from the rope. I yelled to Ramón to move the rope but he couldn't hear because of the silvery water running through the gorge. Some places so narrow you can almost touch both walls. Bright red and green squawking military macaws made fun of me standing with my feet wet and wondering what to do.

I walked back up to where Ramón was smoking a cigarette while the pack burros nibbled dry grama grasses. Later in the day, in the same canyon, the same orchids and bromeliads, as well tropical cacti, palms, and ferns, grew within easy reach.

The other memorable cliff event was on San Pedro Nolasco Island, a steep-sided granitic mountain sticking up from the sea northwest of Guaymas. We had been camping at Bahía San Pedro before it became a favorite rendezvous for drug runners heading up the Gulf of California. In the early morning we crossed the channel to Nolasco, anchoring at the southeast cove called Cala Guina, meaning chigger cove because is it so tiny and narrow. I climbed the high cliff above the cove, but in my enthusiasm for new specimens failed to note my route and couldn't retrace a way back to where Ike and Alice were waiting in the *Ofelia*. They were only tens of feet away but hundreds of feet below.

I yelled to Ike to meet at the northeast canyon where the way down is not difficult. Only about a mile, and I thought it would be an interesting walk. I didn't know it entailed numerous descents and ascents of steep hanging canyons. At one point a rock gave way and I was sliding to a high sea cliff. Instinctly I grabbed a big cholla, spines and all, and held on tight and felt intense pain only after halting. I stood on solid rock after half an hour inching up spread-eagle over unstable guano-white loose rocks. And then pulling out cholla spines, painfully and thankfully. It was midnight by the time we got to the once-elegant Hotel Casa Grande in Guaymas. Sleep was interrupted by bedbugs. We waited for dawn on metal chairs in the interior garden patio.

Our quiet passage down the Grand Canyon was like seeing new friends pass by in reverse, peeling time as we progressed downriver through geological time to older and older cake layer cliffs. I imagined Mesozoic swamps and plants and creatures in reverse evolution fast-forwarding to the desert plants now growing out of cliff cracks and canyon bottom. Fremont cottonwoods, coyote willows, and aromatic seep willows. Three big rubber rafts tied together bobbling down the tamed canyon river. Slow good times with nice people and careful lovemaking when everyone else was supposed to be asleep. The river was low because there wasn't much water being let out of Glen Canyon Dam—until the last day when water surged.

Any mention of Glen Canyon brings me back to the drowning of that special place. Phoenix and Las Vegas satiating thirst and power, moving mountains of concrete and steel to plug the canyon. When I was twenty the evil professor sent me with another student to document the plants, reptiles, and amphibians before they drowned. I started collecting plant specimens with enthusiasm, but puked and fled when encountering brown ooze creeping up-canyon. You don't see the connections, flipping light-switch neurons to electric towers rising above the dam. I suppose for most people it's like world wars before you were born, remote and unfelt. You don't have much empathy for animals wiped out before you were born. Who cares that our ancestors wiped out the last mastodons, that Vitus Bering's men slaughtered the last greatest biggest gentlest sea cows?

Who cares that Glen Canyon is dead under Lake Powell (we called it Lake Bowel), marble canyons beneath sludge? Someday the dam will crumble and floodwaters will cut the Grand Canyon deeper and the Colorado River Delta will return to an epicenter of life.

USSR:

Grand Canyon was 100 degrees in the shade but in and out of water made for good times. From the boat landing we drove back to Tucson. It seemed like only the next day, I stepped off the plane in Moscow and it was snowing. It was early evening and I got shuttled to a short customs inspection line while the rest of our party went through longer lines. I was behind a stout young woman going to Russia as an exchange librarian. Cold War academic exchanges were considered safe and controllable. She had a suitcase full of copies of her new book for exchange. Those unsmiling inspectors went through every book, page by page. I tried to change lanes. Nyet. They finished after midnight and did not even open my suitcase. Welcome to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

The librarian and I found a taxi to our hotel, the Rossiya on Red Square, then the biggest hotel in the world, and since torn down. I was issued a special hotel pass card and told not to lose or forget it; without it no admission, even if freezing cold. The world of “nyet” was unfolding.

Next day was sightseeing with IUCN Survival Service Commission friends. Red Square. Babushkas stooped over sweeping prairies of cobblestone with short-handle brooms of bundled sticks. We walk along wide avenues eerily quiet with unbelievably sparse traffic. No smog. Occasional dark-windowed black ZiL limousines zoom by. No siren, no stopping, everyone knows to get out of the way. Our little multinational, multiracial group must have stood out. A big car screeches to a stop in front of us. Two guys jump out, run up and ask if we have any pot for sale. Of course not. The Keystone Kops run back to their car and zoom off. I didn't think to say nyet.

We gathered at cocktail time and were deciding about dinner when a tall wildlife expert from an African nation asked if we would wait for her; she would be right back. She had a bundle of new Levi jeans, coveted status symbols. She was selling them to a man in Red Square. The papers were full of examples of Westerners arrested for contraband and someone reminded her that her buyer could be an undercover agent. “Oh no, I asked him and he said he wasn't a policeman.” She was soon back with a thick wad of US \$100 bills.

Up and packed at 4:00 for a 9:00 am flight to Ashkhabad (Ashgabat). Have to be four hours early for a flight. Sheremetyevo airport for internal travel. Flight delayed. When do we leave? Soon. Can you tell us when? Nyet.

The main waiting room filled one gigantic square building with maybe 4,000 dreary people. Travel in the Empire was free, everyone supposed to get a vacation, but the ordinary folks wait for the next available flight after applying for travel permits. Not uncommon to spend half your vacation trying to get to where you are going. Looked like some folks had been there for days. No sign for the restrooms, didn't need one, the stench unmistakable.

We were in the cozy VIP waiting room and had our own restrooms. We could stretch out on fake leather seating in our unstinky cove. No barrier or private door from the main waiting area, but no one unauthorized wandered in. Plenty of time to make friends, interesting people. By afternoon the only place selling food was closed. I had been forewarned and most of my suitcase was full of snacks for sharing: cashews, peanuts, dried fruit, jerky.

Again, when is the flight leaving? In a few hours. In four hours. Soon and so forth, and nyet. We spent the night. Much later we learned it had to do with copy machines airlifted from IUCN headquarters in Gland, Switzerland. The meetings are conducted in at least four languages and the endless translations had to be available quickly. Public access to copy machines? Nyet. Inappropriate use could threaten the government. It was a few years before faxes helped bring down the Empire.

The Russians really wanted this IUCN meeting. It was a big propaganda coup. It was supposed to be held in a Third World country. The Soviets finagled Turkmenistan to qualify.

Nearly dark, I fell asleep dreaming. Nobody stopped me when I went out for a walk to look at the trees and breathe fresh air. If there were any signs they were in Russian and I didn't think I had gone far when it started snowing and Russian soldiers yanked me aside. I showed my airplane ticket and someone grabbed my passport. Amerikanski! Amerikanski! I dimly saw guns stacked like cornstalks as more snow fell. Amerikanski! They pulled out vodka bottles from snow flecked great gray coats. I was getting cold. Amerikanski, drrrink! Not much choice. They were drunk around a bonfire singing to vodka. Sure glad they were guarding the airport. More vodka and I wasn't cold. It was a blur when I stumbled into the terminal, not sure if I was even going in the right direction. The flight hadn't left.

The next morning we and the copy machines boarded Aeroflot for Ashkhabad fifteen hundred miles away. Someone called it Aeroflop due to credible rumors of recent crashes. I foolishly looked in the seat pocket in front of me. The contents should not be described.

Stella and I were more than friends and I looked forward to an interesting time. That evening I headed for her room on the other side of the elevator that divided each wing of the hotel. I hadn't noticed earlier, but sitting at a desk between the two wings was a babushka who stood up and stopped me with a loud Nyet. "I'm just going to see a friend." "Nyet!" Maybe she didn't understand English, and Spanish didn't work, and I knew not to try German in post-WWII Russia. "I am just going to see a friend." "Nyet!" Single men and women were assigned different wings.

Not long after I returned reluctantly alone to my room, Stella knocked on the door. "How did you get past Brunhilde at her desk?" "We women have our way." Stella always

had a twinkle in her eye. Ashkhabad is the transliteration from Russian, originally from the Persian meaning “City of Love.”

Workmen were still pounding nails when we arrived at the hotel. This multistory hotel was built just for our meeting. The ubiquitous unsmiling Lenin statue had just been installed. The nearby meeting hall was likewise being finished as the sessions started. Fascinating and significant reports and information after getting through the endless speeches by Soviet politicians followed by IUCN bureaucrats. Stella discovered the best thing going in Ashkhabad. Along the London plane-tree shaded street from the hotel to the meeting hall was a sidewalk kiosk where a smiling woman sold homemade ice cream.

The globally critical Survival Service Commission creeps along. The French: Mr. Chairman, it is a matter of verb. The English: Mr. Chairman, there is a split infinitive. The simultaneous translators say “the infinity is split.” While species hover at extinction, they bicker over rules and regulations far from the struggles of people displacing the planet’s biodiversity. What to do for the last 27 Sumatran rhinos? The English gasp and snort at suggestions of cutting off the horns that would wreck their economic value. Desperation to stop the trading of turtles and crocodiles, monkeys and elephants; see how we carve up the planet. Yet there are conservation gains not possible without the Survival Service Commission.

The brand-new hotel was designed in Moscow and as usual the architects had not seen the site. Across the street was a substantial area surrounded by high walls. Someone said it was a gulag. All rooms on that side of hotel were blocked off.

Our hosts treated us to sumptuous banquets, but you had to sit through endless speeches extolling the glories of Soviet achievement. They get people to be on time by putting out the finest wines and vodka and hors d’oeuvres, but never enough. I remember spending time by the caviar with Lady Scott. Poor Sir Peter, chairman of the Survival Service Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, had to sit up front and stay awake without fine wine and caviar.

The North Korean delegates were thugs posing as scientists. They had recently killed South Korean scientists at a conference in Prague. The Russians were doing everything possible to prevent a repeat. Every night the South Korean delegates would be

smuggled into Americans' rooms and the door bolted. I made sure the in-group knew I wasn't the only one in my room.

America has lots of subcultures; Russia has listeners. Monolithic Soviet apartment blocks have an entire floor of listeners. If you look under the table in the few upscale restaurants you see a bunch of wires. It's hard to talk because of the blaring music so people could say private things. Smoke detectors in our rooms had multiple wires. In the privacy of their room, Lady Scott said to Sir Peter something to the effect of "If another Russian shoves another glass of vodka in my face, I will kick him in the balls." Next day no Russian tried to make Lady Scott drink vodka.

Birdwatchers vs. the KGB. The birders planned early morning outings for unprecedented life-list opportunities. The best nearest place was south of town, between Ashkhabad and the treacherous Iranian border. Off limits. Nyet. Being denied birdwatching was not acceptable for well-connected birders. Cables to royalty and heads of government flew around the world. Sir Peter to Prince Philip to the Kremlin. KGB relented, "but on condition we go with you for your protection. We meet you tomorrow at 9:00 am, that's one hour before the meetings start." No way. The birds are active at dawn; we leave at 5:30 am. Nyet. 9:00 am. Not acceptable, we go at dawn. And that did it; no hung-over Russian security agent is going to get up for 5:30 am. So, "All right, go look at your birds."

One evening a bunch of us went to the opera. Well supported by the State, even in this backwater capital the singers were professional stars although the sets and theatre were shabby. We were almost the only ones in the audience, admission a pittance, but classical opera was not popular even if mandated by the State. (Contraband western rock 'n' roll cassettes were ubiquitous.) Tonight's opera: Boy Meets Girl by the Karakum Canal Driving the Collective Farm's Soviet Tractor.

Everyone was a specialist. Well, almost everyone except the North Koreans and one jock-looking American. There was Ms. Freshwater Otter, Mr. Stork expert, Ms. & Mr. Elephant expert, Mr. Crocodilian expert and so forth, and well-known NGO bigwigs and ecologists. But this American dude was no expert. I asked where he worked and what was his interest and he mumbled something about environmental policy at some Middle American college nobody ever heard of. Our Russian hosts would pick us up for field trips and banquets and leave Mr. CIA

standing blank-faced in the hotel lobby. Once after returning from the Botanic Garden, Mr. CIA cornered me and wanted to know, “What kind of equipment do they have? What are they doing there?” and other clueless questions.

Mikhail was assigned to a few of us Americans, likeable and helpful. I presume KGB. He knew where I went to high school and had my bio down pretty well. After the usual amount of vodka at an Ashkhabad nightclub that seemed like a nightclub just about anywhere, he said the stupidest thing he ever did was to come back to the USSR after he did his service in India.

Someone offered \$300 for my Levi jacket, “No, not rubles, dollars,” opening his wallet to show me a wad of C-notes. The Iron Curtain was no barrier to the well-oiled well-known black market that ran on American dollars.

One afternoon was a field trip south of town into the mountains near the Iranian border. Ashkhabad sits on the southern margin of the great Karakum Sand Desert and the southern border is a series of intriguing mountains. Just like the desert-edge grasslands of Arizona and New Mexico, the trees huddle along canyon-bottom riparian places. The steep rocky slopes were heartwarmingly brown with perennial grasses and some old friends like a species of a stubby *Ephedra* and a dwarfed pistachio shrub, and the rare Afghan fig, *Ficus afganistanica*. At the botanic garden I was given cuttings of this rare fig and Stella smuggled them out of Russia under her blouse. I got the cuttings home in time and they took root and developed into handsome shrubs thriving in Tucson.

The best excursion was to Repetek Sandy Desert Reserve outside of Chardzhou (Türkmenabat) near the Uzbek border, now known as the Repetek Biosphere State Reserve, in the East Karakum Desert. Due to our visit and the IUCN meeting, it became an International Biosphere reserve that same year. A short flight from Ashkhabad to Chardzhou in the Lebap district. Walking down the street to our restaurant people stared at us as if they had never seen Westerners, and of course we were more than conspicuous—Europeans, Latin Americans, Africans, Asians.

There were the usual faceless slabs of Soviet apartment blocks, cement gray and balconies strung with laundry. But with some outstanding features. In this windblown sandy desert there were no gardens or trees in front or back. Instead, in front of many of

the doorsteps fat furry brown two-hump camels sat sphinxlike waiting for something to happen. In back there were rickety jerry-rigged multistory wood and tin outhouses.

We were bussed to the Sandy Desert Reserve. Pale moving dunes like the Gran Desierto of the Sonoran Desert. The plants and animals were different although ecological analogs. The northernmost cobra, the Central Asian cobra, the northernmost monitor lizard called *zemzen*, agamas instead of chuckwallas, and the rare, endangered *Gazella subgutturosa*. We were taken to an area of high moving dunes in a straggling fleet of great multi-wheel open military trucks. Awaiting us was an array of mouth-watering melons, like you see in every Turkmen open market.

The dry desert made me feel at home. In addition to our military transport trucks were two elderly Soviet military ambulances with a big red cross painted on each side. There were a bunch of Russian women, apparently the organizers of the event, tottering around in the sand on high heels and low-cut city dresses. The Russian research staff looked like anywhere in western U.S., Israel, or Australia, knowledgeable and providing meaningful info. The 100° desert proved too much for the Norwegians who turned pink and were treated by the medical staff.

I saw my first living *Ammodendron* trees (*A. conollyi*) cresting low dunes. Skinny legumes with silvery leaves reminded me of a cross between Sonoran Desert smoke tree and ironwood. But the outstanding elements were the saxaul trees (*Haloxylon aphyllum*). Fat succulent trunks, like Sonoran elephant trees, but leafless like an ephedra, the twigs photosynthetic gray-green. This endangered tree is a chenopod related to the invasive tumbleweed (*Salsola*) of western America. Stella and I sat in the sparse shade of a saxaul tree that capped a small dune and savored succulent slices of pale melon. A perfect afternoon on the other side of the world in a desert wilderness with Stella. One expects occasional desert mirages but this one was different. The ground in front of us was quivering and heading for us. A sea of long-legged ticks running toward our warm bodies.

One afternoon back in Ashkhabad we were treated to horse races. Horsemen on the steppes of Russia are famous but the camel races were the real attraction. You wouldn't think those furry brown lumbering two-humpers could move so deftly. As the second race was underway a wall of dark sky was moving our way. Didn't need an explanation, it was time to leave. One day in five is a sandstorm like out of Dune. The traditional

houses and stores have double windows about a foot apart to trap sand and dust—you see windowsills deep in sand. Before the time of Christ the land was forested, then horsemen torched the forest for grassland that was still holding at the time of Omar Khyyám. Later the grasses went with overgrazing and even the microphytic crust gave way as dunes spread thousands of miles across the steppes. Russian researchers at the Repetek Reserve were having moderate success in stabilizing dunes with 1.5-meter waffle-like straw squares, allowing a microphytic crust to establish as microhabitat for new vegetation. But the effort seemed dwarfed by the magnitude of de-vegetation.

I thought it would be interesting to return to Moscow by train. Nyet. By bus? Nyet. Only by plane. Nobody allowed across the county except by plane. Military secrets. I forgot to tell you about the endless hills at the edge of the plains near the Iranian border mountains. Those hills were evenly spaced all the same size and shape, housing unseen mega-weapons.

I hated it that Stella was always last-minute making a plane connection. My Ashkhabad to Moscow ticket was supposed to be in her purse for safekeeping since I am always losing things, and she couldn't find it. Everyone else was on the plane ready to leave and I had no ticket. Yikes, stranded in Ashkhabad. Solution: run into the ticket counter and buy another ticket, "You can get your refund in Moscow when you find your original ticket." Sure, I could stand in line somewhere for a couple of days to be told "Nyet." (Last day in Moscow she found the ticket in the bottom of her purse.)

The Russians arranged for the South Korean delegates to sit up front among the Americans. As soon as the plane landed and before anyone else, meaning the North Korean thugs, could get off the plane, we got off in a tight group surrounding the South Koreans and were whisked into U.S. Embassy vans and sped off across the tarmac circumventing the airport terminal. The South Koreans were taken to the U.S. Embassy and the rest of us to the Rossiya Hotel.

Stella had an introduction to a famous Russian nature filmmaker. He met us at the Rossiya in the late afternoon and we were chauffeured across Moscow to the 540-meter-tall Ostankino TV tower, the central broadcasting nerve center housing the All-Union Radio Television Transmitting Station of the USSR Ministry of Communications. The nerve center of the Empire was well guarded. I lost count of the number of locked doors we passed through, each time clearing increased security with our filmmaker friend. In a

small plush theatre high up in the tower we were treated to a private showing highlighted by his film of polar bears, swimming underwater close up without a telephoto lens. He was a young boy during the 900-day siege of Leningrad. His parents put him between them at night and one morning he woke shivering between his parents who froze to death.

After the viewing we were chauffeured across an endless sameness of faceless nameless Soviet apartment blocks. We halted at one that looked like all the others, went to an unmarked door and through multiple security checks, up an elevator, through another locked door and security check in a deserted maze and down a nameless faceless hall to double doors. Like stepping into a magic world we were in the Soviet filmmakers club, a great open space of high ceiling opulence the likes of which one sees in Beverly Hills, like Hillcrest Country Club where the liberated Hollywood film folks set up a club of their own after being excluded from the restricted country clubs. The most remarkable difference from the outer Soviet world was the sound and sight of cheerful smiling people talking freely.

The hors d'oeuvres table sported ice sculptures holding bowls of caviar and reminded me of Sunday night at Hillcrest and the members looked the same. After all, many of their parents and grandparents had fled the Tsar's pogroms. The notable difference was that these middle aged Russians fat cats wore Levi's instead of custom tailored attire. The Russians wore their red Levi tag carefully starched out for plain view and had their Levis dry-cleaned. High-end dinner followed cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. Unlike France where wine bottles adorn the table between every four of so guests, there were vodka bottles in ice jackets, as well as wine bottles. After the multi-bottle vodka of the many course dinner, our Russian friends said, "now Amerikanskis, vee go drrrrink."

Everyone aboard clapped when the Lufthansa plane took off from Moscow.