
Terminal Man

Sir Alfred Mehran

Chapter 1

23rd May 2004

I am sitting on my red bench from the Bye Bye Bar in the middle of Charles de Gaulle airport, waiting to leave.

I am waiting for a green card so I can go to America. I am waiting for a British passport so I can go to England. I am waiting for my documentation so I can go anywhere.

I have been sitting on my red bench from the Bye Bye Bar in the middle of Charles de Gaulle airport waiting to leave for fifteen years.

Charles de Gaulle airport is 30km north of the city of Paris. My red bench is on the lower floor of Terminal One - a slab of 1960s concrete shaped like a doughnut ring.

Behind my red bench, a large glass window looks out onto the little open-air section at the very centre of the ring. It used to contain a fountain spouting water eighteen hours a day. The water kept getting dirty, so a few months ago the fountain was replaced by a garden planted with an uneasy mixture of palm trees and Christmas trees. I do not know if the garden will stay. I like the garden better because it makes less noise than the fountain so it is easier to get to sleep.

Above the new garden, escalators in silver walkways cut across the skyline, carrying passengers towards the planes that sit docked and waiting around the exterior of the terminal. You can get to anywhere in the world from here.

Passengers are reminded to keep their personal baggage with them at all times.

A tall woman with a mass of dark hair walks past my bench. I see her looking at me out of the corner of her eye. She is pulling a small suitcase on wheels and carries another bag slung over her shoulder.

I check my clock. It is 10:17 a.m. Around my bench are my possessions - my boxes, my bags, my newspapers. I reach behind my red bench and pick up a wad of A4 paper. On the top page I write: '23rd May 2004' and underline the date.

The tall woman walks past my bench again. She looks over, more obviously this time, hesitates, then pulls her suitcase and walks towards me.

'Excuse me, are you Sir Alfred?'

I tell her yes. She smiles.

'My name is Mandy Pink. Could I . . . could I talk to you for a few minutes?'

I tell her to sit down. In front of my red bench are a round black table and a chair, also from the Bye Bye Bar. When the bar closed down a few years ago, they gave me a special dispensation to keep the bench and the table and chair.

'I understand you've been here for quite a while?'

I nod. 'Fifteen years.'

'Fifteen years? And the whole time you've been . . .'

'Here.' I point to the red bench.

'Did you know you're quite famous?' asks the woman.

I say yes.

'I've just come from Australia. I work for a radio station in Tasmania and I've got a connection to London to catch in two hours.'

I ask her if it's hot in Australia.

She says sometimes.

'I read about you in a newspaper and I wondered if I could ask you a few questions? If you don't mind.'

I tell her I don't mind. I have many visitors. Many people asking questions. She takes out a radio microphone and puts it on the table. Also on the table is a plastic drinking cup; standing inside the cup are two McDonald's drinking straws in paper wrappers, three sachets of sugar, one sachet of salt, two sachets of pepper, one sachet of ketchup, two sets of plastic cutlery - a knife, fork, spoon, napkin - each sealed in a clear plastic wrapper.

'I'm really thirsty. Would you like a drink? A coffee or something?' she asks.

I say I would like an espresso and I tell her where the coffee bar is.

While she's gone I quickly take out my diary page for today and write down her name and what she has said to me. When I see her coming back, I stop writing.

'I didn't have any euros, but luckily they take English pounds.' She smiles and puts down my espresso, then she takes off her coat and leans forward to switch on her recorder.

'How did you come to be stuck here? In the airport?'

She puts the microphone under my nose and I tell her I am here because I do not have the correct documentation to leave. I cannot get on a plane because I do not have a passport, and I cannot leave the airport and go into France because I could be arrested by the French police for being an illegal immigrant and put in jail.

I tell her that in 1987 I was passing through Gard du Nord station, on my way to the airport to catch a flight to England. Gard du Nord is a big main-line station in north Paris, where people change from the metro to the overground lines that go out of the city. I was standing on the platform waiting for a train when I was mugged and my documents were stolen from my bag. I came to Charles de Gaulle anyway and caught my flight to London; in those days you could get on a plane without a passport, but you needed one at the other end. The authorities in London refused to allow me entry to the UK and I was returned straight back to Charles de Gaulle.

'And you've been here ever since?'

'Yes. Without my documents I could not prove who I was or where I should be.'

'How do you . . .'

Passengers are reminded to keep their personal baggage with them at all times.

The airport announcement system cuts over the voice of the woman. She grimaces.

'Does that repeat a lot?'

'Every ten minutes.'

'Even at night?'

'Even at night.'

'That must drive you a bit, you know, nuts?'

I nod.

'Sorry, I was asking you, how do you survive? How do you pay for your food?'

'In the beginning some members of the Lufthansa staff gave me food vouchers so I had a regular meal every day. Other companies as well, like Aer Lingus. They were very kind. Sometimes I earned some money by doing jobs for people in the airport, like translating when someone can't speak a language. Lately, I have money from television and film companies. So I can survive.'

'Where do you sleep?'

I point to the red bench. It's two and a half metres long and curved - designed to go

round a large table in a bar.

'Is it comfortable?'

'Not really,' I say.

'How did you get to be called Sir Alfred?'

'Alfred was a nickname that I liked and then one day, many years ago, I had a letter from the British authorities which began with a mistake: "Dear Sir, Alfred . . ." I told a few people who thought it was funny and the name has kind of stuck since then.'

She asks how I spend my time. People always want to know how I spend my time. Whether it gets boring sitting in an airport for fifteen years on the same bench every day, looking across at the same shop window every day. I tell her it never gets boring. I have many things to do.

'Like what? What's an average day for you?'

'I wake up around 5:30 a.m. every morning. The sun comes in through the windows of the terminal. There are no curtains. I go to the men's washrooms early, before there is anyone else there, so I can wash myself. There is no hot water so I have to wash myself every morning with cold. I have to be quick because I don't like to leave my possessions unattended. Anything could happen because I am not in a secure area.

'I spent the first eighteen months upstairs in the Departure hall. There was a Burger King up there with benches nearby - very comfortable. I only had one or two shoulder bags then, so I could move around fast. I could sit wherever I wanted in different bars, and different restaurants. I could move very quickly about the terminal, to anywhere I wanted, but over the years I have got more possessions, more bags, so that now it is not so easy.

'After I have washed, I usually get breakfast on my way back from the washroom. I used to buy a coffee and croissant, French breakfast, from Burger King, but they closed so now I have to get it from McDonald's. The airport starts to get really busy from about 8 a.m., with people coming down into the boutique level to buy newspapers or food.

'In the morning I might listen to the radio - maybe a French news station, to improve my French. Later I might write in my diary for an hour. I record who I see, what happens in the airport, my experiences, big news that I have read in newspapers. I have kept a diary every day since the middle of 1990. Dr Bargain from the Medical Centre gives me new paper whenever I finish a packet. There are four thousand sheets of past years' diaries in the Lufthansa storage boxes.'

I point to a pile of five grey boxes by the side of my bench.

'At lunchtime I have a Filet-o-fish from McDonald's and maybe an order of fries.'

'Do you have that every day?' says the woman.

'I must be their most loyal customer.'

She smiles.

'What else do you do?'

'In the afternoon, I read a book or a newspaper like the Herald Tribune, and maybe buy another coffee. Sometimes I have a visitor like you who wants to interview me. Sometimes I have a letter or official document that I have to reply to. I used to receive many letters. Whenever there was an article featuring me in a newspaper then I would get mail, from England, from America, from Canada, from people all over the world.'

'So you can receive letters here?' asks the woman.

'Not now. They used to keep my mail at the post office on this floor, and I would go along every few days and collect my letters. The postmaster was very helpful, but a few years ago in 1999 they stopped and now I can't receive mail any more.'

'So you don't get mail from your family? Or from friends?'

'I don't have any family. They are lost.'

12th April 1955

I am a child and there is water dripping down the back of my neck because Kaveh has just hit me with a damp cloth. Kaveh is my friend. He sits behind me in school and sometimes he makes me laugh in a lesson and we get into trouble from the teacher.

Kaveh laughs because now I have water running down the back of my neck.

I say, 'I will get you later.'

I am ten years old and my father has sent me to clean street signs because it is something useful to do. My name is Mehran Karimi Nasser. I live in Masjed Soleiman with my family, where my father is a doctor for the company. The town of Masjed Soleiman is about 1,000km from Tehran in the west of Iran, quite near the border with Iraq.

I take my cloth from the bucket and as I raise my arm I send a spray of water towards Kaveh. He ducks. The sign we are cleaning says 'Naftak', which means 'little oil'. Most of the streets and areas are named after the oil wells. My father says that Masjed Soleiman is a 'company town', which means a whole town that is owned, designed and managed by a single company.

We finish cleaning the sign, pick up our buckets and walk towards the next one. Cleaning signs is a pointless job because everything always gets dirty again.

Masjed Soleiman only exists because of oil. In 1901, an Anglo-Australia prospector called William Knox Darcy bought the first oil concession in Iran. An oil concession is the right to look for and exploit oil in a certain area.

In April 1908, the first oilfield ever found in Iran was discovered at Masjed Soleiman. Darcy formed a company called the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, which later became the Anglo-Iranian Oil

Company when our country changed its name to be better and more modern.

Before oil was found here, there was no Masjed Soleiman. The area was just barren mountains in a very deserted, mostly unpopulated area, where the only visitors were nomadic Bakhtiyari tribesmen who brought their herds of sheep to the hills to survive through the winter.

The first oil well that was discovered is called 'Nomre Yek', and sometimes when important people from the company come to Masjed Soleiman, they are driven to the well to look at it as if it is an important shrine.

After the oil was found, a refinery was quickly

built, and then the town of Masjed Soleiman was planned and built around the wells and refineries so that workers could live close to their jobs.

Everything in Masjed Soleiman was built by the company: the houses, roads, schools, clubs, cinemas, and the hospital where my father works as a doctor. Being a doctor is a very respected job, although sometimes I think that my mother wishes he did not work there.

A few miles away is Abadan, another oil town also owned by the company. I have been there, when my father went to visit the hospital there. When you drive down from the hills, you can see from that distance that the streets of Abadan are in

straight lines and everything is very neat. Masjed Soleiman is completely different because it is built in between hills and mountains, and has to fit around many natural features.

We are cleaning the next road sign which is for the neighbourhood of 'Camp Scotch' when I see Asghar running towards us.

'Come on. Quickly. They've got the bulldozer out!'

He turns and runs back the way he came. I drop my wet cloth and Kaveh and I run after him.

23rd May 2004

'You've been in lots of newspapers, but no-one from your past has ever contacted you?'

'No.'

'I read that originally you are from Iran, is that right?'

I tell her no, I'm not from Iran.

'Then where do you come from?'

I shrug my shoulders and she looks puzzled. I tell her that my point of origin has yet to be decided. I don't have any documentation.

'I was sure I'd read that it was Iran?'

I tell her no.

'So you've been living here at the airport for nearly sixteen years? What's the thing you miss the most? You know, about being trapped here. What do you really miss?'

'Marks & Spencer.'

'You mean the English chain store with clothes and food?'

I tell her that they had very nice things and that I miss walking down the shopping aisles and choosing what I would like to buy. There are not many shops in the terminal so I have little selection to choose from.

'Where do you wash your clothes? Is there a laundry here?'

I pick up a suit that is hanging on the back of the red bench. The suit is on a metal hanger and covered with plastic.

'There is a dry-cleaner opposite the restaurant area. I send my clothes there, and they wash and dry them for me and I collect them a week later.'

Would the last passengers for Flight 235 to Los Angeles please report to departure gate seven immediately.

'For free?'

'No, not for free.'

'Is there anything about Charles de Gaulle airport that you like?'

'Eventually, my departure.'

She smiles. Behind her I see a man loitering, watching us. He has a shoulder bag, and a large black camera with a silver flash is hanging round his neck.

'When do you think you might be able to leave the airport?'

I tell her I do not know. I have no passport. I cannot leave until I have the correct documentation.

'And where would you like to go when you do leave?'

I tell her that I'd like to go to maybe Florida or California.

The woman looks in her notebook to check that she has asked all her questions; then she checks her watch.

'Listen, thank you so much, you've been really helpful. I'd better get over to Terminal

Two for my flight to London. When I get back to Tasmania in a couple of weeks I'll cut that tape into a radio interview.'

She stands up and we shake hands.

'Be seeing you.'

Behind her, the man with the camera is edging forward one step at a time, worried about intruding, but eager for her to leave.

She turns around to go and sees him. They exchange awkward smiles.

'Oh, are you waiting for . . .'

She says goodbye again and leaves, disappearing around the corner with her suitcase on wheels following behind.

The man comes closer.

'Excuse me, are you Sir Alfred?'

I tell him yes. He smiles.

'My name is Donald Trask from Sentinel Radio. Could I . . . could I talk to you for a moment?'

I tell him to sit down. In front of my red bench are a round black table and a chair, also from the Bye Bye Bar. When the bar closed down a few years ago, they gave me a special dispensation to keep the bench and the table and chair.

'I understand,' says the man, 'you've been here for quite a while?'

I nod.

'Fifteen years.'

'Fifteen years? And the whole time you've been . . .'

'Here.'

'Did you know you're quite famous?' asks the man.

Diary extract

'8:05 a.m. I go to the washroom to shave and brush my teeth. Usually it is empty but today it is full because man says there is training course on third floor and their washroom is broken. I hope men will go soon. I like it quiet.'