

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

John Krieg

Stranded: A Debacle in Doha

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Tuesday July 15th, 7:30 p.m.

So here I am halfway around the world, stranded in the airport baggage claim. No ticket to get home. Broke. What else could go wrong? I was about to find out.

Anza, CA. The backstory.

This whole bizarre fiasco all started because I was desperate for money. Like a silent dog whistle, desperation is an imperceptible stench to most normal humans but reeks for those humans that are attuned to it. It draws them to me like a magnet, and the closer they get the harder they stick. My \$15,000 fee with \$2,000 down (which I ultimately never received) and the remainder payable when I was back on U.S. soil was supposed to cure a vast variety of economic ills plaguing my family. Like James Carville likes to say, "It's the economy – stupid." I needed that money, and unfortunately, in the end, I felt that the only one that was truly stupid was myself.

Palm Springs, CA, Palm Springs International Airport Monday July 14th, 3:15 a.m.

My client was nervous and wanted me at the airport three hours early virtually guaranteeing that no one would be working the counters, and that I would have to deal with those awful kiosks which I hate. So here I sit – alone – waiting in the airport for someone with a heartbeat to show up. They don't appear to be coming anytime soon so I try to tackle the kiosk against my better judgement. The kiosk wants me to download an app on my flip phone which I don't know how to do. I feel about as useful as a calendar with the dates missing. Take a seat geezer and wait for that counter person who will be annoyed because they always are at my country bumpkin ways. With an air of utter revulsion one finally assists me and I go off to the gate without any further incident.

Palm Springs, CA, Monday July 14th, 6:07 a.m.

Wheels up! Damn the torpedoes, and full steam ahead. Why worry because I'm finally on the American Airlines plane commencing on the first leg of my journey to Dallas, Texas to connect with a Qatar Airlines mega jet to Doha. There's a six-hour layover, and try as I might, I just can't sleep. If all goes well I'll be in Doha in 32 hours. A long journey, I know, but my desperation drives me ever onward.

Doha, Qatar, Hilton Hotel, Wednesday July 16th, 11: 55 a.m.

Well...this is turning into a first-class shitshow. My contact person is growing ever more disgusted by the minute. We were supposed to be at the bank completing the transaction at 10:00 a.m., but my client has failed to send the necessary seed money to keep the ball rolling. Is this deal about to fall apart? Dear Lord, it looks like I've really stepped in it – again.

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

Doha, Qatar, Hilton Hotel, Wednesday July 16th, 9:37 p.m.

No seed money has arrived, and the contact person is apoplectic over it. My creditability is taking on water. This has gone from merely amusing to a farce of colossal proportions. Or is it folly chasing fate or fate chasing folly? Fuck them if they can't take a joke. I'm exhausted and going to bed soon. Nothing is going to happen (if it ever does) until the morning, anyway. Sleep – the perfect formula for stress relief if I can obtain it. Or should I call it what it really is? The perfect form of denial.

Doha, Qatar, Hilton Hotel, Thursday July 17th, 6:26 a.m.

I achieved sleep last night and awoke at 5:00. My client says he is pulling the plug and that he will e-mail my itinerary today. I want to leave posthaste. It looks like the contact person isn't going to get any cash after all, and I wouldn't want to go anywhere with him. Various negative scenarios are crashing about in my head not the least of which is that people do get kidnapped in foreign countries, and if he can't get money one way then why not another? I'm on my guard. A 74-year-old grandfather ready to duke it out in a hotel corridor if he has to just to get home to his loved ones. I console myself by telling myself that I'm merely overreacting, and we will all laugh about this around the dinner table in just a few short days. Like beloved Joni Mitchell, all I can say is, "California, I'm coming home to you." I hope and pray that's true.

Doha, Qatar, Hilton Hotel, Thursday July 17th, 10:30 a.m.

The plot thickens, and not in a good way. Now my client has asked the contact person to purchase my ticket home, and the contact person keeps insisting that he wants his cash. This whole fiasco is starting to smack of some "Nigerian Prince" advance pay scam bullshit that I was just too blind to recognize from the very beginning. I am deeply concerned for my safety. My client has extended my room another day. I have thought about going to the airport, but when I was last there my computer locked for some reason; so how could I receive my itinerary if it is even sent to me? I'm a sitting duck. Did you ever hear Steelers Wheel "Stuck in the Middle with You?" Well...take it all in.

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Friday July 18th, 5:24 a.m.

Things have become abrasive between my client and I. It is readily apparent, to me at least, that this contact person has duped him a 'la some variation of the aforementioned "Nigerian Prince" scam, and he's just too proud to admit it. I ultimately advised him not to send the seed money funds, a minor amount of \$5,000, which is miniscule in comparison to the 300 plus million dollar proposed deal because I'm fearful that I will be attacked and robbed. There *is no* deal, and I have saved my client that \$5,000 at least. He accuses me of blowing everything. I feel that I have every right to be fearful because I wouldn't put it past these guys to kidnap me and demand a ransom. My client insists that I'm delusional and just not that important enough to kidnap. And besides, he has hired a Seal Team to, "keep eyes on me." Oh really? A Seal Team? It dawns on me now that my client is batshit crazy. Fearful for my life, I flee for the airport under cover of darkness at 4:30 a.m. only to find my client has cancelled my ticket incensed that I disobeyed his order to stay put at the hotel that arrived after I got here. What a guy. At least I know, that with high secu-

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

rity, that at least I'm safe here. I call him and we engage in a screaming match but I think that I have reached him on a moral level saying that man-to-man it's his responsibility to get me home to my family. Will he? Fuck if I know. Now, where's that Seal Team? To make matters worse, my computer locks up and shuts down because of that airport high security. Shit like this could only happen to me.

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Friday July 18th, 7:53 a.m.

Thankfully, my computer has become unlocked. It occurs to me that I'm going to have to be here for a very long while as my client licks his bruised ego and possibly has a change of heart, and finally does the right thing. This is just not a mere shitshow anymore but has become an ocean of festering raw sewage. My wife wants me to call my relatives and beg for a ticket home. This is my client's problem, and my pride is hurt so I resist. Nothing has gone as planned because his plans were built on the shifting sands of greed and gullibility. A vain egomaniac that I was naïve enough to follow into the jaws of ineptitude. What does it say about me? Easy everyone, my self-respect has already been covered in bruises. Don't pile on. I know I drank the Kool Aid in massive insatiable gulps.

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Friday July 18th, 8:22 a.m.

There are no book stores on the entrance side of this cavernous airport, only on the gates side after the customs barrier. So it's boring as the hours creep by. Steelers Wheel is playing inside my head again: *Clowns to the left of me. Jokers to the right. Here I am. Stuck in the middle with you.*¹ I only wish that were true. There is no "you." Only a room full of strangers jabbering a strange language. I'm disgusted and I am beating myself up again. Everything is ass-backwards. I did this to make money to support my family and be the hero, and now I won't get paid and I am causing them great anguish. I feel like such a fool. The loneliness envelops me in a fog of self-loathing. How could I have been so stupid?

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Friday July 18th, 1:07 p.m.

Well...it looks like this petty and vindictive bastard is taking his sweet time having a change of heart, if he ever does. I swallow my pride and admit to myself that my wife was right all along, as she most usually is. I send out the S.O.S. to my relatives, friends, and anyone else likely to help a poor credit risk. My sister is willing to bite and purchases my get-out-of-jail-free card. Consulting with the ticket agent I come to realize that there are precious few flights available, and if I had waited much longer I wouldn't have gotten out of here for another three days. I'm going home! Or as the grandkids like to sing, "Home again, home again, jiggety-jog." It will be so good to see and hug my loved ones again.

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Friday July 18th, 8:03 p.m.

My client and I are engaging in an e-mail war, and I'm kicking his fucking ass. Keep em' coming buddy because I now write for a living, and I've got nothing but time, and I can go tit-for-tat with you all night long. What a petty egomaniacal dick. He quickly tires and goes dark. Good riddance. What fun for me. Now, I'm bored. This jousting is not without some element of peril as he's a big dude. A former state trooper and supposed special ops military guy (thus the Navy Seal hoax) and a well-

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

practiced bully used to pushing people around. Well...the bigger they come the harder they fall, and I'm not stupid. If he wants to fight when I get back, it will be on my turf and I'll fight scientifically – I'll smash him with a baseball bat square in his big dumb stupid balls. This guy left me in a foreign country twisting in the wind and fearful for my own safety and forced to buy my own plane ticket home. What a guy. And what a pleasure it would be to hear his balls go splat!

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Saturday July 19th, 12:22 a.m.

I'm tiring and go to get a latte. The credit card my client gave me for incidentals comes up as "stolen" and the kid at the counter looks at me like I'm Jessie James on a crime spree. I quickly pocket the card saying, "It's mine, you have seen me using it all evening buying coffee. I don't know why this is happening." He knows he has so he just shines it on. But I know exactly why it's happening. My client is trying to get me arrested because of his petty vindictive bruised little ego. What a dick move! I e-mail him and let him know that no matter how pissed I was at someone, I wouldn't leave them hungry. That's true. I at least have a little class. Now, I know that I am definitely not going to get paid or reimbursed for any expenses before I ran out of what little cash I had at the outset because he just can't stand someone standing up to him. A fucking bully, and I hate fucking bullies! Get me home. I'll be broke and hungry for the next 44 hours, but I can take that. That has happened before in my life and I have weathered it. Dear Lord I just want to stand on Cali soil again. But I will say it again – what a dick move. And while I'm in a foreign country, no less.

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Saturday July 19th, 6:00 a.m.

I'm at the check in line for Qatar Airways desperately needing a boarding pass before I can go through customs, and the thought of that makes me nervous. The airline's policy is not to issue them until four hours before boarding, and I want all the time I can get to clear customs. The Qatari people were showing themselves to be pretty decent human beings overall. Several had helped me, some financially by going into their own pockets. *But not the custom agents.* The last time through on the way in a girl working the counter kept shouting at me, "Visa! Visa!! I kept saying, "I'm only here for a few days. I'm not trying to go to work." "Visa! Visa!!" she barked again and then pointed to the higher security counter where the agent said, "Visa card, please." It's all in the presentation. A little bit of power in the wrong hands can be a very ugly thing. As I walked away I kept hearing, "Visa! Visa!!" as she shouted high above the din of the crowd. These people stand between me and getting home, and until I'm through; I'm not. This makes me very nervous, anyway. *Clowns to the left of me. Jokers to the right...*¹ Dear Jesus, just get me through customs and I ain't never going to sin again. Yeah – sure.

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Saturday July 19th, 6:17 a.m.

I'm through! Jesus you know I was just kidding, don't you? *Here I am. Stuck in the middle with you.*¹

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Saturday July 19th, 6:22 a.m.

I have now been at the airport 24 hours and am feeling worn out and haggard. Got my boarding pass. Got through immigration and customs. Got to get out of this place. I take a bird bath in the rest room and feel mildly rested. I am, of course exhausted because I haven't slept a wink and I know that I will crash heavily on the plane. But I have to stay awake another two hours. The design of these gated areas seems dumber than a baboon's ass. All the seats are behind glass enclosures and there are no creature comforts, including seats outside of them. Just gleaming sterile hallways and bathroom facilities in the corridors. When they finally open the enclosures passengers streaming in are advised that they can't go back out. And then they search us again after we were already searched when we entered the terminal after customs! Jesus, these guys sure take security seriously. Well...I am in the heart of the Middle East with Americans under travel advisory so I guess it all works in my favor in the end. Then, glory hallelujah, I finally board the plane.

Doha, Qatar, Hamad International Airport Saturday July 19th, 8:05 a.m.

Wheels up! Hide the women and children and pass the ammunition. Come hell or high water, California I'm coming home to you. I'll be sleeping in my own bed late tomorrow night. *It's so hard to keep this smile from my face. Losing control, yeah I'm all over the place.*¹ I'm so relieved to be getting out of here I could just cry. Time to get some shut eye. The plane arcs up over the Arctic Circle and then plummets down into Seattle. We are served three shitty meals which I only selectively eat just to stave off the hunger pains, but it's something, at least. The bare minimum just to get by. That's a microcosm of my life after retirement. Barely hanging on. This joker knew my situation and played me for a fool. But I do not suffer fools and have even worse feelings for those who try and/or succeed at making one out of me. Just wait till I get done with you you domineering, demeaning, dismissive, and condescending bully of the worst stripe. You are now threatening a defamation of character lawsuit? Bring it on bitch! In my last e-mail I inform him that his threat is laughable in that it fails to meet the criteria, and even if he decided to pursue it, I could request a court appointed attorney that would cost me nothing except gas, time, and aggravation. Even the lowest ranking member of any second-rate law office could cut his claims to ribbons in a half hour. Additionally, I asked him if he really wants a judge in any capacity to really hear this deplorable tale? It would become a matter of public record whether the case goes forward or is even dismissed for the entire world to see. The only one defaming his character at that point would be *him*. What a dope.

Seattle, WN Seattle – Tacoma International Airport Saturday July 19th 1:05 p.m. (with the time zone shift)

I'm back in the U S of A baby! There's not the grilling and intimidation at the immigrations counter here that there was over there, and I am much relieved to pass through without incident. Now for the six-hour wait before embarking on the last leg of my journey. Here I sit in Seattle, known for its great coffee, but I'm penniless because of him. There's some misguided poetic justice I suppose in all of that. To paraphrase from the

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

great Samuel Taylor Coleridge: "Coffee coffee everywhere, nor any drop to drink." Buck up and take that on the chin you gullible old fool. I sit at my computer trying to get a jump on tying up loose ends – my bank balance running in the red, my concerned family, friends, and legitimate clients, my passion for sports in general. Sabrina Ionescu killed it in the WNBA three point competition last night, and I missed it. I can tell you this concerning professional basketball in general; the girls are bringing it. They play an exciting physical game and they need to get paid by the league owners who have had it their way for far too long. What's fair is fair and these young women are being taking advantage of and never the twain shall twine.

Seattle, WN Seattle – Tacoma International Airport Saturday July 19th, 7:19 p.m.

Wheels up, again, and for the last time in this most recent of deplorable episodes in my life. When the Alaska Airlines stewardess asks me what I want to drink I order a coke, and I haven't drunk any soda since I was diagnosed with type two diabetes back in 2017. Well...I feel like celebrating, and it's only a 7.5 once mini-can. I toast myself because I can at least take solace in being intelligent enough to see this farce for what it was and getting myself to safety despite proclamations from that nutcase former client of mine.

Palm Springs, CA, Palm Springs International Airport Saturday July 19th, 9:39 p.m.

Wheels down, finally. Home at last! It was a bumpy descent as powerful updrafts can be severe for airports in desert regions, and that's putting it mildly for this landing. I'm none the worse for wear considering I have been in the same clothes for the last 45 hours. That's the least of my worries as home and a hot shower will be welcomed as I decompress and adjust to the time zone change. I am exhausted, and aggrieved, and discom-bobulated, and just plain disgusted with myself – but I'm home. My wife picks me up and we ascend up the Santa Rosa mountain range to tiny little Anza. We have lived here for 29 years and the entrenched oxygenations still look upon us as newcomers. We are behind on our mortgage payments and property taxes and home repairs and a variety of other bills. This "business trip" was supposed to solve all that, and all I have done is put us deeper in debt. All of that can wait until tomorrow as I'm hugging my 11-year-old granddaughter so tight I'm afraid that she is going to burst. Tears are streaming down my face while we sing together, "Home again, home again, jiggety-jog." It's just so good to be home.

Anza, CA, 54460 Cave Rock Road 92539 Sunday July 20th, 8:39 a.m.

When the alarm rang at 6:00 I was so tired it felt like my body was screwed into the mattress. I couldn't lift my head, my muscles ached, and my joints hurt. It was all I could do to crawl to the shower. I went in a beaten man and came out a doggedly determined man. I'm not greedy, but I will fight for what's mine and recoup expenses and get paid for services rendered if at all possible. No piling on with any of that bullshit "mental anguish." My family needs to know that you can't let people treat you like I was treated. My blood soon begins to boil again and I sit at my desk constructing a final billing and a letter concerning my intent to bring

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

suit in small claims court if not paid in full. I have to remain calm. This isn't going to be a quick fix, it will drag out and get ugly and be a royal pain-in-the-ass, but I will prevail in the end. Steelers Wheel is once again playing in my head. Why? *When you started off with nothing, and you're proud that you're a self-made man.*¹ That's why. I'm not a rich man. I'm not a big wheeler dealer. I don't run with the beautiful people. What this trip revealed to me is that I am an old man, running out of options, and holding on financially. But I am a human being, and the child of a wrathful God. So fuck with me and my Lord who protects me will deal with you. I can now see with startling clarity, that what really happened here was that a con man in California tried to con a con man in Qatar and neither wound up with anything, and I was simply stuck in the middle. *Clowns to the left of me. Jokers to the right. Here I am. Stuck in the middle with you.*¹ And since we are stuck here together, I will ask you, if this happened to you, what would you do? Well...despite what any of us may or may not do it sure feels good to no longer be stranded.

Song quoted:

1). Steelers Wheel 1973

"Stuck in the Middle with You"

Songwriters: Joe Egan, Gerald Rafferty.