

Bond Benton

Conquest at the Maiden Tower

hekayə

It sort of looked like the Pink Panther, but he seemed to be lacking some fur and a head. He did have a head; it just wasn't the right one. It was a kid, probably sixteen, dressed up in a costume and holding an old Polaroid camera hoping that someone passing by would pay a Shirvan to get a really-for-real photo with the cartoon trickster. After a moment, I found his head sitting on a bench beside him. I couldn't help but think the lack of a head may have been hurting the illusion necessary for the enterprise to work, but Baku in September could still be pretty hot.

The sun hit the green glass of the Hilton Tower Hotel just behind me and I was smoking a cigarette. I was an ex-smoker (at least as far as my wife knew), but when cigarettes cost seventy-eight cents a pack, it just didn't make sense not to. Fountain Square was in front of me with its funhouse stairs of cement platforms breaking up pedestrian walkways. I suspected (though I hadn't put in the effort to be certain) that this was some sort of an old Soviet statement. The steps were huge with bold angles suggesting power and the supreme authority of the designer. They were also missing large chunks from their corners where rusted support wires jutted out from neglect and disrepair.

Having not been a regular smoker for some months, I inhaled a long drag and felt the buzz that made the whole thing new and worthwhile again. I scanned what I believed to be some kind of metaphor in the decay of the bold Soviet architecture of Fountain Square and collected it as the sort of anecdote that I would use in conversation to demonstrate how much of the world I'd seen and how my worldliness had informed a more developed opinion about how things really were. I probably should work in the Pink Panther somewhere, too.

I'd been a trainer for the last couple of years, going to places like Baku.

I was asked about the purpose of my visit to a country like Azerbaijan. I said I'm a trainer. The official asked if that was like with horses. I said, "No, like with people."

Some computer that sat fifteen hours and three layovers away held within its wires two-thirds of my completed dissertation that I planned on finishing, but only after I'd had the chance to see the world and make a difference. Because that's what I was doing. I'd been making a difference by offering courses in customer service for countries where the principles of service and customers were ineffectively executed. Companies bought my courses (or more literally, bought my company's courses) because they knew that when folks like the Azeris learned people could hear a smile or a frown over the telephone, things would inevitably get better for everyone. As I went through security at the airport, I was asked about the purpose of my visit to a country like Azerbaijan. I said I'm a trainer. The official asked if that was like with horses. I said, "No, like with people."

An oil pipeline going through Azerbaijan and Georgia was about to be completed and a major company here knew that a lot of Westerners would soon be calling Baku expecting the locals to have the required efficiency and chipper enthusiasm. I was making a difference today by teaching my three-day Client Focused Communication (CFC) class about the importance of teamwork. I'd taught them the importance of teamwork by providing several teams containers of cotton swabs and a ring of Scotch tape. Utilizing teamwork and creativity, the teams competed to build the largest tower in less than twenty minutes. Having done this exercise dozens of times, I kept expecting some new result, but it was always the same. Regardless of culture or job title, teams always experimented with cubes and elaborately organized triangle structures. But the design all teams wound up with was the only one that ever got very high—three long strands taped together creating an Eifel Tower of cotton swabs. When each team eventually figured this out, I began my extended speech about innovation and working together and not being afraid to fail, for which I almost always received nods, smiles, and sincere thanks for not being yet another boring trainer—for really showing them something, for making a difference. I didn't volunteer the fact that I used precisely the same activity to show effective management, dealing with crisis, consolidating resources, supervisory skills, and out-of-the-box thinking. People always seemed to feel as though building Eifel Towers out of Q-tips must mean something. At least Suad did.

The company I worked with always required a group photo on the first day of a new course. Later in the week, everyone would get a gold logo-embossed picture of the class as a lasting reminder of the wonderful and productive time we'd shared. In the picture, Suad looked stout in a strong

sort of way and deadly, deadly serious. During the course of the training, however, I had found him to be hilarious and strong-willed enough to sabotage his group's cotton swab tower. He was in his sixties and played the part of a befuddled senior whose zealous certainty about building structures was matched only by his incompetence in putting them together. Having seen so many groups, I recognized what he was doing instantly—he was having a go with us. I was a little surprised when Suad asked me if I'd like to have dinner that night and meet his wife. This was far more appealing than watching CNN International with its dubiously produced commercials about travel and business opportunities in countries that probably lacked both. It was Baku, and having authentic experiences was why I was here. And Suad seemed to be one of the more authentic people in the group.

Waiting outside my hotel was an excuse to smoke. Doing so inside my room meant my clothes would smell and that smell would lead to conversations about responsibility and judgment back home that I didn't really feel like dealing with. So I smoked and waited. The warm sun of late-afternoon Azerbaijan drifted toward the other side of the city and the half-Pink Panther called it quits. The long wail of the Salatu call for prayers echoed out and I was reminded immediately that I was somewhere else. Thanks to a steady diet of brutal international news, I suddenly felt as though I was at the center of some dangerous margin where cultures meet. I was in a place where the call for evening prayers could be heard on a park bench.

Dinner with Suad tonight, I suspected, would be particularly grand since it was Ramadan. Doing courses in the Middle East during Ramadan brought a few unique challenges. While not technically in the Middle East and not especially observant, about half the men in the course were devout enough to look miserable by day's end. Those fasting typically started the day in good form, but by the end had a sort of George Romero look about them, like those old cartoons where one hungry dog looks at another and he magically morphs into some mega-steak. I immediately noted the idea as being anecdote-worthy and continued smoking, which is something else good Muslims aren't supposed to do during Ramadan.

Suad had told me that I should be prepared because a little while after sundown we were going to eat well, and I didn't object. I looked up to the parking lot by the hotel and saw Suad standing there. He gave me a polite, short wave and I put out my cigarette. Suad was an intense smoker which I suspect was at least as hard as food (or probably closer to water) to give up. While his allowed time to light up was fast approaching, I didn't want to be too rude by blowing too much smoke in his direction. I don't know if it helped much because he seemed to sniff me like the dog turning into a steak as I walked up to him.

"Good to see you, sir," he said. For whatever reason, I was given the title of "sir" by all of the people I had met. This seemed to jump interchangeably with

“my friend” and I wasn’t totally certain of what to make of it all.

“Thanks so much for inviting me,” I said smiling a bit too hard and elongating my words a bit too much. I had this sort of friendly, approachable, and clear trainer persona that was irritatingly hard to drop even in informal situations. He smiled as much as it was possible with his nature and I figured that it was okay.

“We have a saying in my country that the guest is best. We have to always extend an invitation,” he said.

I smiled and made empty chitchat about how wonderful everyone had been to me here and how this friendliness was something I wished my culture had more of. I wasn’t entirely sure I meant all of that as it occurred to me that going to dinner with every cousin and moron and moron cousin who comes into town would ultimately not be that much fun. But I was having an authentic experience and I was genuinely grateful for the offer.

tüüstü

We walked to his tiny bulldog of a car, a Lada Niva. These had been the pride of Soviet manufacturing in the late ’70s and that explained a lot. They looked something like a boxy eggshell and had suspension pushed high enough to require a small jump to get inside, with a noticeable bounce as soon as you sat down. Like every other Niva I had seen, Suad’s was as white as was possible in a country where road paving was inconsistent and parking spaces were improvised. The engine came to life with its bad puppy temperament and I was delighted to be in Baku in a Niva.

“May I ask, sir, what part of Baku you wish to see?” he asked.

“Really, I’m interested in whatever you show me,” I said, trying to be deferential. “But I would really love to see the Ateshgah Fire Temple, if it’s not too far.”

My knowledge of Baku had come largely from the in-flight magazine I looked over. I wanted to have some sense of the place I was headed to and I had seen a small blurb about the Fire Temple. Apparently, there was an area just out of the city where so much natural gas was deposited that just digging into the ground allowed flames to shoot upward. Naturally, ancient peoples had assumed God was involved somehow and the site had been sacred to Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. A temple had been built in the area and the photos in the magazine showed mannequin replicas of exotic pilgrims and dramatic flames lighting up the entire complex.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” replied Suad. Speaking almost no Azeri, I had still figured out that this sound meant “no.” Between conversations with cab drivers and the hotel’s front desk, I inferred that the real meaning was more like “no and your asking speaks against your potential intelligence.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“You see, sir, some years ago when the companies begin to dig out all the

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gas there's no more fire, you see. When we are there, it would be too dark to see nothing."

"Oh," I said. "I saw a picture and it looked pretty bright."

"Yes, they have put like big gas barbeque under it to make fire sometimes for tourists. But I think he's not working."

"Oh," I said. "When does he, uh, it get turned on?"

"Mostly never, usually," replied Suad.

"Oh," I said.

"I think if you are coming to Baku, it might be good to see the Maiden Tower."

The Maiden Tower had been in the magazine as well, but the picture was less dramatic than Hindu pilgrim mannequins worshipping at a fire temple so I hadn't paid it as much attention. Suad explained that it was the building that defined Baku, like its Eiffel Tower. It was so significant that when the Nazis planned to conquer Baku on their march from Stalingrad, Hitler had his pastry chef make a cake in the shape of the Maiden Tower. As indication of its importance, when Hitler received the cake he poured oil over it to show what conquering Baku would mean. Suad talked as we drove and bounced along and I found my mind wondering at the idea of a Nazi pastry chef and how bad oil must taste, even to Hitler.

The arrival of the big petroleum corporations meant that Baku was under construction everywhere as Soviet housing blocks blended with historic buildings under the dust of rising shopping malls and multiplexes. The sound of machines mixed with the constant whine of car horns, as I had quickly learned the horn here was more communication than warning device. Traffic periodically stopped for long periods and Suad was getting frustrated on our drive through town. It was getting dark now and he lit up the car's interior with the orange fire of his lighter. Apparently, it was late enough that Suad had proven to be devout and he now smoked with vengeful puffs as we sat at each intersection.

A small park eventually split the road we were on and I noticed a giant statue of a woman leaning forward, her right fist pushed toward the sky. It was a little dark but a newish-looking Benetton across the way provided some light. Her hair, arms, and body were flowing back like she was running forward against some sort of cosmic wind. Her stylized face and body seemed like something from a poster for "Metropolis." Her expression,

as best as I could see, was the hateful rage of the oppressed woman who would no longer suffer the subordination of capitalist imperialism. The traffic flow stopped and I was surprised to see that under her spiteful hand she had lost a breast and a half.

“Sir?” I asked. “That statue there . . .”

“Yes, my friend, funny thing about that statue,” said Suad between desperate drags, “you see, she is not having a shirt. When my kids went to this park they were always saying she’s probably gonna get the sunburn.”

My Cold War childhood never included a thought like this one. Missile parades and giant satanic murals of devious looking Communist gods were all the kid memories I’d had when thinking about the Soviet Union. When I visited DC at age ten, my older brother had suggested the Washington Monument was actually the world’s largest rectal thermometer and I thought that was pretty much the funniest thing any human had ever said. The idea that children in places like Baku also read Important Political Monuments in kid terms was enough to make me think for a moment. There was still the issue of the breasts.

“Kids say some funny things,” I said. “Are they fixing it now?”

“No,” he replied. “I think some kids or something took the metal off her to make a jump for skateboarding. She is not in so good shape now.”

I pocketed the idea of a Soviet Worker Woman’s breast being stolen so kids in Azerbaijan could skateboard, knowing that it would make a good story. The traffic began a random period of forward movement and Suad said we were getting close to the Maiden Tower.

qüllə

We pulled into a side street and Suad drove into a semicircle of other cars. They were parked in every conceivable angle with a couple dangling off the edge of steep, sharp curbs. We pulled up next to a black Hummer with gold wheels and got out. A thin man with a mustache so thick it covered his mouth came toward us. His clothes were dirty and shabby, but Suad slipped him one of the red money bills. Through pricing cigarettes I’d more or less figured out the coins, but I hadn’t gotten the link between color and value in paper money. I guessed the bigger red one was probably worth more than a Shirvan. He seemed to be paying for parking somehow but the mechanics of the operation were not totally clear to my foreign eyes. We walked around the block and the Maiden Tower was there lurching toward the sky, splashed in the yellow lights that lit up so much of the city at night.

“That is Baku’s Maiden Tower,” said Suad with some pride.

“It’s beautiful,” I said. “Was it a fortress or something?”

“No, to me, what is so interesting is they aren’t so sure what it is or why the people make it.”

The tower had a cylinder shape, narrower than a castle but much wider

than an obelisk. It sat on a rock ledge near the Caspian Sea and Suad explained this was the confusing part. The rock ledge it sat on was too narrow for a fort and the large openings in the side of the tower would have given no cover in an attack.

“The new idea is the people in the old times with the old gods didn’t bury the dead people. They let the meat-eating birds take away pieces of the dead ones. The professors say maybe the old-times people put the bodies on the tower for birds to take up to heaven.”

“That’s interesting,” I said.

“The story everyone says about it is that a young girl lost her love and jumped off into the sea. Like your Romero and Julia,” he said.

“So that’s why it’s called the Maiden Tower,” I said. Enthusiastically stating the obvious as a demonstration that you care about what someone is saying is another habit of a trainer that is irritatingly hard to get rid of.

“You have said it correct, sir,” said Suad. I thought I heard sarcasm in his tone, but I’m not sure.

Under the lights, I made out that the base of the tower was made of smooth stones that flowed into one another. Above this, the tower continued with rounded bricks that unevenly sat at each side. Toward the top, the tower became something else entirely as perfect horizontal lines coiled the structure upward to its considerable height.

“There seems to be some different styles of building at different levels of the tower,” I said.

“Yeah, probably when some new guys come in they always want to put their own new way on top of the old one, it is so,” he said.

A man who looked an awful lot like the parking lot guy came up to us with postcards, guidebooks, and cigarette lighters all displaying some version of the tower. I went to buy one, but before I could, Suad took out an orange bill and purchased a copy of BAKU’S MAIDEN TOWEER for me.

achq

The restaurant was nearby and we were both getting hungry. It was a renovated old stone building that looked like the dream of some entrepreneurial and newly rich Azeri. I had wondered if it was historic, but suspected that if there was money to be made the standards of what could be built on historic property were fairly easily relaxed in Baku. It probably also helped that about every third building near the Old Town part of the city was historic-looking, so one converted into a theme park restaurant of Azeri culture was probably not considered a great loss.

And a theme park it was—the walls were completely covered by sheer curtains of purple silk with dozens of Bedouin rugs and gold trinkets hung everywhere. Orange fluorescent lights were hidden by oriental trim at the top of the ceiling completing the illusion that you’d somehow arrived in some storybook version of Baku interpreted by the designers of Disney’s

Aladdin and decorated by a four-year-old girl and a figure skater. There was a stage where a man in the whitest suit I'd ever seen vigorously played Middle Eastern-sounding folk music on a matching white violin.

"Our table is here, my friend," said Suad.

We sat down on big chairs with bigger pillows that had thousands of tiny beads and mirrors sewn in their fabric coverings. His wife had already arrived and sat next to Suad. I guessed she was probably close to his age, but she looked like an American woman in her late thirties. Her hair was probably dyed, but it looked oddly natural and shined black in the orange glow. She had stunning green eyes and high cheekbones, but she seemed to look around me more than at me when we were introduced.

"So sorry, sir, my wife is glad to meet our very nice American trainer I speak to her about, but her English—tsk, not so good," said Suad.

She looked away nervously as he said this, but the white-on-white violin player was energetic and there would be enough sound to keep the evening from getting too awkward. I let Suad order for us all and a large black frying pan arrived at our table a while after. The pan itself looked perfectly rustic, with dents and chips gaudily announcing the historic authenticity of the food contained within. We shared the meal, grabbing pieces of meat with flatbread served from a gold woven basket. The meat floated with blackened potatoes in some exotically spiced oil. Chunks of pomegranate swam alongside the meat and onions making the dish seem even more beautifully other and magical.

"Is this . . . pork?" I asked. It tasted like pork, but I thought the choice would be odd.

"No, sir," said Suad, "we are good Muslims."

He poured himself a shot of Russian vodka after saying this and drank it down in one gulp. I guess that refraining from smoking all day meant God could be forgiving sometimes and, in Suad's defense, it was very good vodka.

As we were eating, the increasingly hectic music coming from the stage abruptly stopped and I was immediately concerned.

"Good," said Suad, "she is coming now."

"Who?"

"This is the best traditional belly dancer in Baku."

I wasn't certain how traditional belly dancing was to the region, but it seemed to fit. The deep and audible hiss of speakers sounded out. I was preparing for something loud. And I got it.

WOOO!!!! HAAA!!!! WOOO!!!! HAAA!!!!

Recognition came immediately. It was "Dschinghis Khan," a West German Eurovision Song Contest entry from the 1970s. I took German as an undergrad to get my foreign language credit and a guy in the class had an old VHS copy of this song which was a favorite whenever we got high. It told the story of the Mongolian conqueror in German with a bouncy disco beat that aurally communicated chest hair with shiny gold and blue fabrics.

. . . she danced her way closer to us. The music pumped out sex and conquest and her hips jumped wildly with each musical swing.

It described Genghis with lyrics like *Er zeugte sieben Kinder in einer Nacht/Und über seine Feinde hat er nur gelacht* which translates to mean that he fathered seven children in one night while laughing at his enemies. I was uncertain of the song's connection to traditional belly dancing, but it felt mysterious and the beat demanded movement.

The orange lights switched to darker blues and the belly dancer arrived. Our table was away from the door, but she danced her way closer to us. The music pumped out sex and conquest and her hips jumped wildly with each musical swing.

Dsching, Dsching, Dschinghis Khan! Hey Reiter, Ho Reiter, Hey Reiter, Immer weiter!

Her hair was long and curly and the quick jumps of her shoulders brushed it back and forth. She was by our table and her blue and black painted eyes pretended long, seductive glances toward Suad and me. Her soft body moved in choppy, beautiful waves, but her dark eyes held still with decisive certainty toward me. As the motion of her body fevered to the music, she blinked slowly, revealing the glow of her eyelids and the possibilities of things unseen. I knew it was probably an act, but her movements promised the wild irresponsibility I longed for. I felt something slide in my stomach and forgotten parts of me awoke.

WOOO!!!! HAAA!!!! WOOO!!! HAAA!!!

Her wide hips and round stomach were near us now. Loose silk barely covered her legs and her breasts were pressed under a beaded bra that looked very much like the exotic pillows we sat on. She wiggled closer to me, her hips shooting long flips as the music got louder.

WOOO!!!! HAAA!!!! WOOO!!! HAAA!!!

Suad took out some cash and moved toward her.

“Sir, you can place money in any spot you wish,” he said.

He grabbed her left breast and pulled back her bra, stuffing a wad of cash and half his hand underneath. I knew it was my turn as she slid her hips near my face. I was uncertain about the expected tip so I went with the red bill, figuring this was worth at least as much as parking.

She closed her eyes again and pushed her hips even closer to my face. I slid the money into the ribbon above her waist that held up her silk pants. Her stomach was near my nose now and I let my hand feel the soft skin above her thigh. Everything about the moment felt hot, but her skin was cold from sweat and movement. I edged my hand farther across her leg and her hip jumped closer to me. Closer, closer, closer, closer, closer . . .

WOOO!!!! HAAA!!!! WOOO!!! HAAA!!!

I pushed farther until I realized I had touched more than I was supposed to. As quickly as she had leaned into me, she jumped back. I pulled my hand away. Her eyes opened and for an instant she was real.

Her eyes closed again and she returned to being the best traditional belly dancer in Baku. She was on to the next table. I looked over at Suad's wife, wondering what she thought of all this. She ate what was left of her salad, looking intently at the bowl. She didn't look sad, embarrassed, or angry. I'm not sure what she looked like, but I do know that she was there. I looked at Suad, wondering if what I had done had been noticed. If it had been, I couldn't tell.

"Do you have a good night, my friend?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

istila etmæk

We finished the dinner and the vodka and hopped into the Niva to take me back to my hotel. We arrived and I looked out to Fountain Square. It was late and seventy-eight-cent cigarette sellers and Pink Panthers were all gone. Suad and his wife got out of the car to say goodbye. I told her "*gay-suh-nees shay-ear*" (my attempt at "goodnight"), which was about the extent of my Azeri. She gave me a quick nod and got back into the car.

"Thank you so much for a wonderful evening. I'll always remember it," I said.

"Yes, it was good to have you," said Suad. He paused for a moment and something about his face looked different, closer to what it had been in the photograph during the course.

"I told you, sir, that we must always give an invitation to guests," he said.

There was a beat and I thought I understood enough about what he was saying that I could give him an authentic reply.

"But the guest doesn't always have to accept it," I said.

He looked down and smiled, as much as it was in his nature.

"Tsk, good night, my friend," he said quietly. I thought it was also said a little coldly, but I don't know if I was reading it right.

I had trouble sleeping that night so I smoked a couple more cigarettes in my room. I figured the discussion about responsibility and choices I'd get from my wife would be worth it, just this once. I looked over the MAIDEN TOWER booklet that Suad had bought from the parking lot guy/souvenir vendor earlier in the evening. I read about the tower's history and some of the theories about why it had been built. Apparently, legend holds that this is the location where Bartholomew was executed for trying to bring Christianity to the region. The etymology of the name of the tower is also unclear as "maiden" can be translated as either "pure" or "unconquered" depending on context. I also saw the full version of the "Romero and Julia" story Suad had mentioned.

According to the story, a Shah fell in love with his own daughter and decided to marry her. This obviously didn't sit well with the girl and she tried to think of a plan that might stop him. Her solution was pretty ingenious—he would have to build her a massive tower for her to consent to his unholy wishes. Obviously, she figured that would take a while. Maybe he would come to his senses. Maybe he would die. Maybe she would run away. The Shah, like most powerful types with lust in their hearts, could get things done pretty quickly when properly motivated. He completed the tower and prepared to take what was promised from his daughter. The girl was out of options and a choice between being pure and being conquered was all she had. She climbed the tower and threw herself off.

It was hardly the stuff of *Romeo and Juliet*. I thought about it, trying to find a clever anecdote in a story of rape and incest. But I couldn't find a good one; not the sort that would amuse people by showing my deeper understanding of the world. I lit another cigarette and decided to watch some CNN.