

False Narrative: How the Vermont Trial of an Alleged “Terrorist” Revealed the Danger of Guilt by Association, and the Way Disinformation Creates a False Narrative.

The Persecution of Kristina Berster

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Kristina Berster got out of the brown Mercury and began to say her goodbyes. It wasn’t what she’d hoped for, but she thanked them anyway for bringing her this far. Mostly, she spoke to Ray, who looked pretty gloomy in the back seat.

“Are you sure about this?” he grumbled. He doubted that the idea would work. But indecision was a hopeful sign. After previous refusals, the Americans might wait for her on the other side of the border after all, and then drive her to Plattsburgh.

She would have to be shrewd. The driver didn’t know much about the real situation, only that she wanted to enter the US secretly — in other words, illegally — and needed a lift to Noyan, near the border, to check things out. Ray’s girlfriend Maria probably knew more, and she was nervous. She’d helped rent a room at the Noyan Inn. But now she wanted to move on to sightseeing. And she wasn’t at all eager to take unnecessary risks for a stranger.

Persuading Ray, appealing to his sense of chivalry, seemed like a viable strategy. It was certainly preferable to hitchhiking at night to someplace she had never seen.

Or maybe guilt would work. “The least you can do is wait on the US side,” she pleaded, and grabbed the roadmap she had been using to direct the driver, Michael, since they left Montreal. She pointed to a spot on the US side where, according to some friends back in France, there was a gas station called the Alburg Truck Stop. They could pick her up there after she made her way around the Customs station.

“It’s crazy, not a good plan,” said Ray. She had made up her mind, but he continued to discourage her. He wasn’t even sure why she was running. What had provoked such a

desperate move? In the end, however, he knew it was her decision and the only humane thing was to try to make sure she made it safely.

She'd decided. No more refusals. And no more time to argue. Her Canadian visa ran out in August and there was no telling when she could get a ride this far again. Better to try now. It was as good as any other option. There was a good chance that Ray and the others would wait for her.

"Thank you for helping," she said, giving Maria a kiss. Then the car headed back as she watched from the roadside, surrounded by trees and pastures. Her route was in the opposite direction. To her right, sometimes through the branches, she could see the setting sun. It was cloudy, interrupting an orange glimmer of the puddles in her path. She didn't notice much, instead reviewing the choices she had made since flying from Lyon to Mirabel airport. As usual, she was preoccupied with her shortcomings and mistakes.

She knew one thing. If she couldn't make it to Plattsburgh today her chances wouldn't improve by returning to the Inn. The room had been a security measure at best, in case someone questioned her presence near the border. "Just a student," she could say, "visiting wonderful Canada and staying in the countryside." They might just believe her. But the prospect of another night at the Inn, alone, without a ride or her luggage, wasn't appealing.

Leaving her bags back in Montreal was probably one of those mistakes. It would take weeks to get them back. They might even be lost or seized if Ray didn't return to pick them up. On the other hand, they had been useful as collateral to get this far. When Ray balked at providing a ride to Noyan, she said, "Here, I'll leave my clothing in Montreal to prove I'm not planning to cross today." The small lie had worked.

She was 90 percent certain that Ray would convince the others to make the pick up in Alburg. Still, he was skeptical about the whole idea, and Maria's presence limited her ability to persuade him. It had been different back in France, where they first met. Last year he seemed suave, independent, and eager to help. But she wasn't ready to leave Europe. Since then Ray had turned cautious, although she still sensed his underlying generosity.

Many things had changed — friendships, the political scene, the intelligence dragnet descending over the continent. It was harder to find a helping hand, especially from someone like Ray, a boutique owner in Greenwich Village who avoided intrigue and had something to lose.

She was walking along an unmarked road. It felt like this was taking longer than necessary. On their map of Canada and Vermont, the Chileans had noted that the walk from Noyan to Alburg was no more than a few miles. But she'd been walking for an hour without a sign of the border. Maybe she was headed in the wrong direction. The last thing she needed was to get lost in the dark.

On the farmland beside the road she noticed someone, probably the owner or a worker. She waved and walked across the grass, greeting the Canadian in French. She was visiting the area, she said, and had become lost. She asked for directions back to the Inn and the location of a river to the west.

The farmer's advice took her to the corner she had been looking for since about eight o'clock. The map called it Line Road. She assumed the name came from its location parallel

to the border. But she wasn't sure which side she was on. There was no sign of a Customs station in either direction. She decided to stay on the road. It couldn't be far from the truckstop and the likelihood of being noticed in the dark was slim.

But she was afraid now. There was a chance of being stopped for "routine" questioning. In Europe it happened too often. Questions that led to detention while the authorities checked out her story and her passport. And detention would mean fingerprints, detection, identification, and questions she couldn't afford to answer. If they used a computer they might discover who she really was.

For the moment she was Shahrzad S. Nobari, a 19-year-old citizen of Iran with German ancestry. A student with a five-week visa to visit Canada. To friends like Ray and others she knew abroad, she was Rita. That was usually enough, Rita Mueller. At the youth hostel in Montreal she had signed in as Nobari and told people to call her Rita. It was painful to remember when she had been herself, a 27 years old West German. A fugitive, moving from place to place, country to country, for more than five years.

While she walked west along Line Road, Customs Agent John Ryan was heading east in his patrol car with the headlights off. He had covered this zone for about four years, normally on the lookout for drug smugglers. He had been parked at the corner of Line Road and South Shore Drive, sitting out his shift, when he decided that something was up.

What he had noticed through the rear view mirror was a brown car, with three passengers, moving slowly along the road, then turning back in the opposite direction. It was just enough to arouse his suspicions.

Kristina noticed the car heading in her direction. The fact that its headlights were off nudged her fear up another notch. When the car reached her it stopped, and the man in the driver's seat called her over to talk. Refusing would be suspicious, but speaking to a stranger could be risky.

While she weighed the alternatives Ryan stepped out of the car. Then she caught a glimpse of his badge, pinned to the shirt of his blue uniform. He asked where she'd been and where she was heading.

"I am out for a walk," she said.

"Anything to declare?"

"No." Then he asked to see her purse.

She handed it over and the agent examined its contents on the hood of his car. Aside from the beam of his flashlight, the road was dark. He found some notes, a wallet, a candybar, and a passport. Paging through it, he noticed the Canadian visa and Iranian citizenship. But there was no US visa.

"Would you step inside the car?" He said. It wasn't a request.

To be continued...

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