

# Six Sugar Cubes

*The Taste of Freedom*



*Kosta Gara with Dr. Michael Gonzalez*

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I was seven years old when my world began to crumble. My father, a career military officer, was arrested and falsely accused of being an enemy of the state during the Iranian Revolution. After a twenty-minute trial, he was sentenced to three years in Evin prison, known as *Hell on Earth*. The financial hardships my mother faced paled in comparison to the unimaginable mental and physical brutality my father endured. Within a few years of his release, he died of a massive heart attack.

Shortly afterwards, the Basij, fanatical disciples of the new regime, came to my school wearing a green and white headband with the words, *To Die for the Glory of God*. They recruited young men and boys by enticing them with special privileges and instant access to heaven when they died. Millions of young males were slaughtered by willingly running across Iraqi mine fields in the Iran-Iraq war. When I came home wearing a Basij headband, my mother knew she had to take drastic measures. She pulled me out of middle school, sold everything she owned, and hired a smuggler.

My smuggler and I travelled by bus to a northern mountain range, and then journeyed by foot and horseback for seven days. I suffered bleeding blisters on my feet and saddle sores that bled through my pant, freezing weather, hunger and exhaustion, while evading military patrols and bounty hunters. I thought my misery had ended the night I crossed into Turkey to a safe house, hours from meeting my mother. At three o'clock in the morning I was wrenched from a deep sleep when Turkish police smashed down the doors. I was arrested and handed over to the Iranian authorities. During an interrogation, I refused to divulge information regarding my smuggling operation and was brutally tortured, and then sent to a maximum-security prison. On my thirteenth birthday I was sitting in solitary confinement with a hood over my head, wondering if any of my relatives would ever find me and if I would ever see my mother again.

Six months later an uncle located me and arranged a bribe for my release. Although I was no longer incarcerated, Iran became my prison. I was forbidden to leave the country, and over the next six months I moved from relative to relative, playing a cat and mouse game to avoid the revolutionary guards. Tired of constantly looking over my shoulder, living in tyranny, and not having a place to call home, I was determined to reunite with my mother and live free. With the help of my uncle, I hired a second smuggler, knowing if I were caught the consequences would be unforgiving. After safely being reunited with my mother, we travelled through Turkey, evading military patrols and bounty hunters, reached Istanbul, hired a smuggler, and in a small, inflatable raft under an inky black sky my mother and I crossed the Evros River into Greece and spent the night hiding in a cornfield. All we had in our possession were six sugar cubes. As the sugar cube melted in my mouth, to me it was the sweet taste of freedom.

The next morning, two farmers found us and took us to the local police station. Not knowing what to expect, we were put up in an unlocked jail cell for two days, fed and treated with dignity. To our amazement, two kind police officers took a day off from work to drive us to Athens to secure immigration documents. Having made a promise to my father to support my mother, my first job in Athens was cleaning the filthy overflowing toilets on Greek ships. I later landed a job as a waiter in a restaurant, and then worked for a fiberglass company.

Realizing I wanted more out of life, my mother and I immigrated to Canada. We were given government support, and at eighteen I enrolled in high school as a non-English-speaking freshman. I struggled with English but graduated and was awarded a scholarship to attend university. In my senior year I dropped out to make my fortune selling vacuum cleaners. Undaunted by my failure to make a single sale in six months, I went to work selling electronic hardware and quickly worked my way up the corporate ladder, but I was unfulfilled. I came to understand my journey from tyranny to freedom would not be fulfilled until I was in total control of my life. I quit my job and invested every penny I had in starting a software business. The business was just beginning to make a profit, when the September 11, 2001, tragedy impacted the economy and I was forced into bankruptcy and lost everything.

I started another business in the cosmetic industry, developing a marketing strategy in the Pacific Rim, where I made my first million and have since multiplied that beyond my wildest dreams. I retired when I was thirty-three and travelled the world. As my journey continues, my goal is to pay forward the opportunity freedom has afforded me.