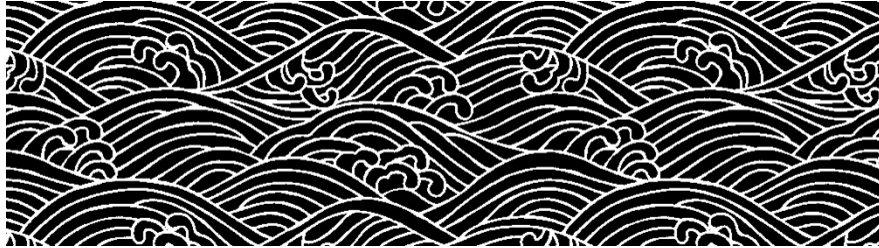


# Afghanistan



The thing is, I really wasn't expecting her to go. Because when you're ten years old and getting ready for bed, on a night that's just like any other night, no darker or starrier or more silent or more full of smells than usual, with the familiar sound of the muezzins calling the faithful to prayer from the tops of the minarets just like anywhere else ... no, when you're ten years old—I say ten, although I'm not entirely sure when I was born, because there's no registry office or anything like that in Ghazni province—like I said, when you're ten years old, and your mother, before putting you to bed, takes your head and holds it against her breast for a long time, longer than usual, and says, There are three things you must never do in life, Enaiat *jan*, for any reason ... The first is use drugs. Some of them taste good and smell good and they whisper in your ear that they'll make you feel better than you could ever feel without them. Don't believe them. Promise me you won't do it.

I promise.

The second is use weapons. Even if someone hurts your feelings or damages your memories, or insults God, the earth or men, promise me you'll never pick up a gun, or a knife, or a stone, or even the wooden ladle we use for making *qhorma palaw*, if that ladle can be used to hurt someone. Promise.

I promise.

The third is cheat or steal. What's yours belongs to you, what isn't doesn't. You can earn the money you need by working, even if the work is hard. You must never cheat anyone, Enaiat *jan*, all right? You must be hospitable and tolerant to everyone. Promise me you'll do that.

I promise.

Anyway, even when your mother says things like that and then, still stroking your neck, looks up at the window and starts talking about dreams, dreams like the moon, which at night is so bright you can see to eat by it, and about wishes—how you must always have a wish in front of your eyes, like a donkey with a carrot, and how it's in trying to satisfy our wishes that we find the strength to pick ourselves up, and if you hold a wish up high, any wish, just in front of your forehead, then life will always be worth living—well, even when

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your mother, as she helps you get to sleep, says all these things in a strange, low voice as warming as embers, and fills the silence with words, this woman who's always been so sharp, so quick-witted in dealing with life ... even at a time like that, it doesn't occur to you that what she's really saying is, *Khoda negahdar*, goodbye.

Just like that.

When I opened my eyes in the morning, I had a good stretch to wake myself up, then reached over to my right, feeling for the comforting presence of my mother's body. The reassuring smell of her skin always said to me, Wake up, get out of bed, come on ... But my hand felt nothing, only the white cotton cover between my fingers. I pulled it toward me. I turned over, with my eyes wide open. I propped myself on my elbows and tried calling out, Mother. But she didn't reply and no one replied in her place. She wasn't on the mattress, she wasn't in the room where we had slept, which was still warm with bodies tossing and turning in the half-light, she wasn't in the doorway, she wasn't at the window looking out at the street filled with cars and carts and bikes, she wasn't next to the water jars or in the smokers' corner talking to someone, as she had often been during those three days.

From outside came the din of Quetta, which is much, much noisier than my little village in Ghazni, that strip of land, houses and streams that I come from, the most beautiful place in the world (and I'm not just boasting, it's true).

Little or big.

It didn't occur to me that the reason for all that din might be because we were in a big city. I thought it was just one of the normal differences between countries, like different ways of seasoning meat. I thought the sound of Pakistan was simply different from the sound of Afghanistan, and that every country had its own sound, which depended on a whole lot of things, like what people ate and how they moved around.

Mother, I called.

No answer. So I got out from under the covers, put my shoes on, rubbed my eyes and went to find the owner of the place to ask if he'd seen her, because three days earlier, as soon as we arrived, he'd told us that no one went in or out without him noticing, which seemed odd to me, since I assumed that even he needed to sleep from time to time.

The sun cut the entrance of the *samavat* Qgazi in two. *Samavat* means "hotel." In that part of the world, they actually call those places hotels, but they're nothing like what you think of as a hotel, Fabio. The *samavat* Qgazi wasn't so much a hotel as a warehouse for bodies and souls, a kind of left-luggage office you cram into and then wait to be packed up and sent off to Iran or Afghanistan or wherever, a place to make contact with people traffickers.

We had been in the *samavat* for three days, never going out, me playing among the cushions, Mother talking to groups of women with children, some with whole families, people she seemed to trust.

I remember that, all the time we were in Quetta, my mother kept her face and body bundled up inside a *burqa*. In our house in Nava, with my aunt or with her friends, she never wore a *burqa*. I didn't even know she had one. The first time I saw her put it on, at the border, I asked her why and she said with a smile, It's a game, Enaiat.

Covering my eyes with my hand because of the light, I walked up to the owner, *kaka* Rahim, and apologized for bothering him. I asked about my mother, if by any chance he'd seen her go out, because nobody went in or out without him noticing, right?

*Kaka* Rahim was smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper written in English, some of it in red, some in black, without pictures. He had long lashes and his cheeks were covered with a fine down like those furry peaches you sometimes get, and next to the newspaper, on the table at the entrance, was a plate containing a pile of apricot stones, along with three succulent-looking, orange-colored fruits, still uneaten, and a handful of mulberries.

There's a lot of fruit in Quetta, Mother had told me. She had said it to entice me, because I love fruit. In Pashtun, *Quetta* means "fortified trading center" or something like

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that, a place where goods are exchanged: objects, lives. Quetta is the capital of Baluchistan: the fruit garden of Pakistan.

Without turning around, *kaka* Rahim blew smoke into the sun. Yes, he replied, I saw her.

I smiled. Where did she go, *kaka* Rahim? Can you tell me?

Away.

Away where?

Away.

When will she be back?

She's not coming back.

She's not coming back?

No.

What do you mean? *Kaka* Rahim, what do you mean, she's not coming back?

She's not coming back.

At that point I ran out of questions. There must have been others I could have asked, but I didn't know what they were. I stood there in silence looking at the down on *kaka* Rahim's cheeks, but without really seeing it.

It was *kaka* Rahim who spoke next. She told me to tell you something, he said.

What?

*Khoda negahdar.*

Is that all?

No, there was something else.

What, *kaka* Rahim?

She said not to do the three things she told you not to do.

My mother I'll just call *Mother*. My brother, *Brother*. My sister, *Sister*. But the village where we lived I won't call *village*, I'll call it Nava, which is its name and which means *gutter*, because it lies at the bottom of a narrow valley between two lines of mountains. That's why, when I came back one evening after spending the afternoon playing in the

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fields and Mother said, Get ready, we have to leave, and I asked her, Where? and she replied, We're leaving Afghanistan, that's why, when she said that, I thought we were just going to cross the mountains, because as far as I was concerned the whole of Afghanistan lay between those peaks. Afghanistan was those rushing streams. I had no idea how vast it was.

We took a cloth bag and filled it with a change of clothes for me and one for her and something to eat, bread and dates, and I was beside myself with excitement about the journey. I'd have liked to run and tell the others, but Mother didn't want that and kept telling me to be good and keep calm. My aunt, her sister, came over and they went off into a corner to talk. Then a man arrived, an old friend of my father's, but he didn't want to come into the house. He said we should go now, because the moon hadn't come out yet and the darkness would deceive the Taliban or whoever else we might run into.

Aren't my brother and sister coming with us, Mother?

No, they're going to stay with your aunt.

My brother's still little, he won't want to stay with my aunt.

Your sister will look after him. She's nearly fourteen. She's a woman.

But when are we coming back?

Soon.

When soon?

Soon.

I have the *buzul-bazi* tournament.

Have you seen the stars, Enaiat?

What have the stars got to do with anything?

Count them, Enaiat.

That's impossible. There are too many of them.

Then start now, said Mother. Otherwise you'll never finish.

The area where we lived, in Ghazni province, is inhabited exclusively by Hazaras, who are Afghans like me, with almond-shaped eyes and squashed noses, well, not exactly

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squashed, but a bit flatter than others, flatter than yours, for example, Fabio: typically Mongol features. Some people say we're descended from Genghis Khan's army. Some say our ancestors were the Koshan, the ancient inhabitants of those lands, the legendary builders of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. And some say we're slaves, and treat us like slaves.

To leave the area, or Ghazni province, was extremely dangerous for us (and I only say *was* because I don't know how things are today, though I don't suppose they've changed much), because what with the Taliban and the Pashtun, who aren't exactly the same thing but both used to treat us badly, you had to be careful who you ran into. I think that's why we left at night, the three of us: me, Mother and the man—I'll just call him the man—because Mother had asked him to go with us. We set off on foot and for three nights, under cover of darkness, with only the light of the stars to guide us—and in a place like that, without any electricity, starlight is a very powerful light—we walked to Kandahar.

I was wearing my usual gray *pirhan*: long trousers and a knee-length jacket of the same material. Mother walked in a *chador*, but she had a *burqa* in her bag to put on for when we met people, which was useful for hiding the fact that she was a Hazara, and also for hiding me.

At dawn on the morning of the first day, we stopped at one of the huts where caravans of traders break their journeys, though to judge by the bars on the windows, it must have been used for a time as a prison by the Taliban or someone. There was no one there, which was a good thing, but I was bored, so I used a bell hanging from a beam for target practice. I gathered some stones and tried to hit it from a hundred paces. I finally managed, and the man came running, grabbed me by the wrist and told me to stop.

On the second day we saw a bird of prey circling over the body of a donkey. The donkey was dead (obviously). Its legs were trapped between two rocks and it was no use to us at all because we couldn't eat it. I remember we were near Shajoi, which was one place in Afghanistan that Hazaras really had to avoid. In that area, it was said, passing Hazaras like us were captured by the Taliban and thrown alive into a deep well or fed to stray dogs. Nineteen men from my village had vanished like that on their way to Pakistan, and the brother of one of them had gone to look for him. He was the one who'd told us

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about the stray dogs. All he had found of his brother was his clothes, with a pile of bones inside. That's how things are in my country. There's a saying among the Taliban: Tajikistan for the Tajiks, Uzbekistan for the Uzbeks, and Goristan for the Hazara. That's what they say. *Gor* means "grave."

On the third day we met a whole stream of people on their way to some unknown destination, escaping from some unknown threat: men, women and children on wagons filled with hens, rolls of fabric, barrels of water and so on.

Whenever a lorry appeared going in our direction, we would ask the driver for a lift (even for a short distance). If the drivers were nice people they would stop and pick us up, whereas if they were unpleasant, or angry with themselves or at the world, they would speed up and drive past us, covering us with dust. As soon as we heard the noise of an engine behind us, Mother and I would run and hide in a ditch or among the bushes or behind some stones, if there were big enough stones. The man would stand at the side of the road and signal to the driver to stop, just like a hitchhiker, but he didn't use only his thumb, he waved his arms, to make sure they saw him and didn't run him over. If the lorry stopped and everything was safe, then he would tell us to come out of the ditch, and Mother and I would climb aboard, either in front (which happened twice) or in the back, with the merchandise (which happened once). The time we climbed in the back, the trailer was full of mattresses. I slept very well that time.

By the time we got to Kandahar, after crossing the river Arghandab, I'd counted three thousand four hundred stars (a pretty good number, I'd say) at least twenty of which were as big as peach stones, and I was very tired. Not only that. I'd also counted the number of bridges blown up by the Taliban, and the burned-out cars, and the blackened tanks abandoned by the army. But I'd still have liked to go back home, to Nava, and to play *buzul-bazi* with my friends.

I stopped counting the stars when we arrived in Kandahar. I stopped because it was the first time I'd ever been in such a big city and the house lights and streetlamps would have been too distracting, even if I hadn't been too tired to keep count. Kandahar had tarred roads. There were cars and motorbikes and bicycles and shops and lots of places

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where men could drink *chay* and talk, and buildings as much as three stories high with aerials on the roofs, and dust, wind and dust, and so many people on the streets, there couldn't have been anybody left in the houses.

After we'd been walking for a while, the man stopped and told us to wait while he made arrangements. He didn't say where, or who with. I sat down on a low wall to count how many colored cars passed, while Mother just stood there, so still it was as if her *burqa* was empty. I could smell fried food. A radio was broadcasting news about lots of people disappearing in Bamiyan and the discovery of a large number of dead bodies in a house. An old man passed with his arms raised to the sky, crying *khodaia khair*, begging God for a bit of peace. I was starting to feel hungry, but I didn't ask for food. I was starting to feel thirsty, but I didn't ask for water.

When the man came back he was smiling, and he had another man with him. This is a good day for you, he said. This is Shaukat and he'll take you to Pakistan in his lorry.

*Salaam, agha* Shaukat, said Mother. Thank you.

Shaukat the Pakistani did not reply.

Go now, said the man. We'll meet again soon.

Thank you for everything, said Mother.

It was a pleasure.

Tell my sister the journey went well.

I will. Good luck, little Enaiat. *Ba omidi didar*.

He took me in his arms and kissed me on the forehead. I smiled as if to say, But of course, we'll meet again soon, take care. Then it struck me that Good luck and We'll meet again soon didn't really go together. Why wish me good luck if we were going to meet again soon?

The man left. Shaukat the Pakistani raised his hand and signaled to us to follow him. The lorry was parked in a dusty yard surrounded by a metal fence. In the back were dozens and dozens of wooden poles. Taking a closer look at them, I realized they were electricity poles.

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