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IN THE LIGHT OF WHAT WE KNOW

PICADOR

1. Arrival or Wrong Beginnings

> Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.
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> – Edward W. Said, 'Reflections on Exile'

> Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look like that) I would put my finger on it and say, "When I grow up I will go there."
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> – Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

> It is not down in any map; true places never are.
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> – Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

In the early hours of one September morning in 2008, there appeared on the doorstep of our home in South Kensington a brown-skinned man, haggard and gaunt, the ridges of his cheekbones set above an unkempt beard. He was in his late forties or early fifties, I thought, and stood at six foot or so,

about an inch shorter than me. He wore a Berghaus jacket whose Velcro straps hung about unclasped and whose sleeves stopped short of his wrists, revealing a strip of paler skin above his right hand where he might once have worn a watch. His weathered hiking boots were fastened with unmatching laces, and from the bulging pockets of his cargo pants the edges of unidentifiable objects peeked out. He wore a small backpack, and a canvas duffel bag rested on one end against the doorway.

The man appeared to be in a state of some agitation, speaking, as he was, not incoherently but with a strident earnestness and evidently without regard for introductions, as if he were resuming a broken conversation. Moments passed without my interruption as I struggled to place something in his aspect that seemed familiar, but what seized me suddenly was a German name I had not heard in nearly two decades.

At the time, the details of those moments did not impress themselves individually upon my consciousness; only later, when I started to put things down on paper, did they give themselves up to the effort of recollection. My professional life has been spent in finance, a business concerned with fine points, such as the small movement in exchange rates on which the fate of millions of dollars or pounds or yen could hang. But I think it is fair to say that whatever professional success I have had – whatever professional success I *had* – owes less to an eye for detail, which is common enough in the financial sector, than it does to a grasp of the broad picture in which wide patterns emerge and altogether new business opportunities become visible. Yet in taking on the task of reporting my conversations with Zafar, of collating and presenting all the material he provided, including volumes of rich and extensive notebooks, and of following up with my own research where necessary, it is the matter of representing details that has most occupied me, the details, to be precise, of his story, which is – to risk putting it in such dramatic terms as Zafar would deprecate – the story of the breaking of nations, war in the twenty-first century, marriage into the English aristocracy, and the mathematics of love.

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I had not heard the name of the twentieth-century Austrian-American mathematician Kurt Gödel since a July weekend in New York, in the early 1990s, when I was visiting from London for a month of induction at the head offices of an investment bank into which I had recently been recruited. In some part I owe my recruitment to the firm, of which I later became a partner, to Zafar, who was already a derivatives trader in the bank's Wall Street offices and who had quickly established a reputation as a bright though erratic financial wizard.

Like Zafar, I was a student of mathematics at Oxford, but that, to put it imprecisely, was the beginning and the end of what we had in common. Mine was a privileged background. My father was born into a well-known landed family in Pakistan, where he met and married my mother. From there, the newlyweds went to Princeton, where they had me, making me an American citizen, and where my father obtained his doctorate before moving to Oxford so that he could take up a chair in physics. I am no genius and I know that without the best English schooling, I would not have been able to make as much as I have of the opportunities that came my way.

Zafar, however, arrived at Oxford in 1987 with a peculiar education, largely cobbled together by his own efforts, having been bored, when not bullied, out of one school after another. His family moved to Britain when he was no more than five years old, but then, at the age of twelve, or ten, by the new reckoning, he returned from Britain to rural Bangladesh for an interval of some years.

To him, Oxford must have seemed, as the expression goes, a long way to come. In our first term there, as we lounged in the Junior Common Room beside windows that gave out onto the garden quad, I observed that Zafar's pronunciation of the names of various Continental mathematicians – Lebesgue, Gauss, Cauchy, Legendre, and Euler – was grotesquely inaccurate. Though my first reaction, I am a little ashamed to say, was to find this rather amusing, I soon grasped that Zafar's errors marked his learning as his own, unlike mine, which carried the

imprint of excellent schoolmasters. I must confess to a certain envy at the time.

The greatest difference between us, however, the significance of which I did not begin to ascertain until two years after our first meeting, lay in our social classes. As I mentioned, my father was an academic at Oxford, and my mother, after seeing off her only child to university, had returned to practising as a psychotherapist, throwing herself into the retraining necessary to make up ground lost while raising me. My maternal grandfather had been Pakistan's ambassador to the United States and had moved in that country's elite internationalist circles; his closest friend had been Mohammad Asad, Pakistani ambassador to the UN shortly after 1947, a man who had begun life as Leopold Weiss, an Austro-Hungarian Jew born in what is now Ukraine. On the paternal side, my grandfather was an industrialist whose fortune, based on landholdings and tenancies, he augmented with the profits of shipping enterprises.

More than once during term time, Zafar came with me to lunch at my parents' home, a large double-fronted, three-storey Victorian house like many in that part of Oxford, though somewhat more capacious than the homes of most academics. To this day, whenever I return there, I feel an ease and lightness suffuse my being as I tread across the sweeping arc of the driveway, the gravel crunching underfoot, up to the stained glass of the wide front door.

On his first visit, Zafar stood at the threshold, wiping his feet over and over, his eyes darting about the large hall, his mouth slightly open. Evidently, he was, as people often are, astonished by the books, which were everywhere: shelves hanging wherever a wall would allow, books overflowing onto the floors, even leaning accordion-like on the staircase along the wall. In the family room, old issues of science magazines and journals, my father's subscriptions, sat in box files on shelves that scored the walls like lines on a writing pad. More recent issues lay about in small piles on a sideboard and on the floor. Zafar surveyed all this but his eyes settled on the far wall that was covered with my father's collection of old maps,

mounted and framed, of the Indian subcontinent under the British Raj, an area that today stretches from Pakistan across India to Bangladesh. Zafar drew up to the maps and it was apparent that his focus had fixed on one in particular, a map of the north-east corner of the subcontinent. Minutes passed as he stood silently gazing at it. Only when the time came to move to the summer room for lunch, and my father rested his hand on Zafar's shoulder, was my friend roused from his intense study.

When we left, Zafar suggested that we walk back to college, rather than take a bus, and I agreed, assuming that he wanted to discuss something. The mathematician Kurt Gödel used to walk, setting off at sunset and returning after midnight, and found that his best ideas came to him in this stretch of time. Albert Einstein, who was deeply fond of Gödel, and who was also at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, used to say in his later years, when he no longer engaged in much research, that he went to the institute daily only for the privilege of walking home with Kurt.

I thought Zafar wanted to talk but in fact he was silent all the way down the Banbury Road. I sensed that he was searching not so much for a form of words but for clarity of thought. I recalled the map to which my friend was obviously drawn, and though I wanted to ask him what it was that had held his attention, I was reluctant to break the contemplative silence. On reaching Broad Street, as we approached the college gates, he spoke. You must meet my parents, he said, and that is where he left it.

More than a year passed before I did. On the day Zafar finished his final exams, in two years rather than three, when my own were still one year off, he informed me that his parents were to arrive at seven thirty the following morning. He asked me to meet him at the college's north entrance, to help him load his things, after which I was most welcome, he said, to come with them to a cafe in Headington for some breakfast, before the three of them, he and his parents, set off on the journey back to London.

At seven thirty on the Saturday, Oxford was, and I expect it still is on every Saturday morning, perfectly quiet. It was odd that his parents should arrive so early; after all, the trip from London would have taken only an hour or thereabouts. The only explanation I could imagine was that Zafar was ashamed of his parents and did not want others to meet them, and that it was for this reason he had arranged to be collected at such an hour.

I found Zafar and his father already loading bags and boxes into a Datsun Sunny. His father had a beard and was wearing a skullcap. Standing in grey trousers, Hush Puppies, and a green V-neck sweater, he greeted me with a smile, tilting his head in what seemed a rather deferential way. Asalaam-u-alaikum, he said, before breaking into Urdu, a language that I know Bangladeshis of a certain age could speak but that is today, in the main, the language of Pakistanis. I supposed that Zafar had mentioned to him that my family was Pakistani originally. When I responded that my Urdu was very poor, Zafar's father looked disappointed, but then he took my hand into both of his and, rather unconfidently, repeated hello a few times.

Zafar's mother, standing by the car in an indigo sari that was pulled over her head, also greeted me with Asalaam-u-alaikum, but she bore herself with a self-assurance I did not see in his father. Pointing to the sandstone buildings around us, some of which had stood there for several hundreds of years, she commented on how old everything in Oxford looked. Can't they afford anything new? she asked earnestly. I looked at Zafar, who I am quite sure had heard this, but his eyes avoided mine. I understood then that in the two years he had spent at Oxford, a town less than sixty miles from London, this was the first time they had visited him, and this only as he was leaving the place stealthily one morning.

His parents' pronunciation of Asalaam-u-alaikum seemed rather affected, although I was able to recognise it as the one adopted by certain pious Muslims, particularly by many of those who have undertaken the pilgrimage, the tour of duty, to

the holy city of Mecca. There, amid the throng of thousands of Muslims from across the world, this greeting presumably acquires a special significance as mediator in a Babel of languages, the Nigerian greeting the Malaysian and the Bangladeshi greeting the Uzbek. Perhaps an Arab pronunciation of the phrase proclaims the spirit of brotherhood. Standing there, as he and his father finished loading the last of the boxes, I wondered if it was his parents' religiosity of which Zafar was ashamed, though I understand now, having learned something of Zafar's own religious turn, that this was unlikely. I believe that while he was ashamed of his parents, he was more ashamed of being ashamed.

My own father had encouraged in me a sympathy towards the numinous claims of faith without ever surrendering the authority of science. He is a Muslim, my father; not a zealot but a quiet believer. He has always attended Friday prayers, which to him serve a social function, helping him to retain a link with his roots. While some connections gave in to the attrition of time and distance, others he deliberately let go because, as he explained, he was keen to see his son set his feet in the West. Apart from the Friday ritual, my father does not pray, not even once a day, let alone the five times ordained by Sunni Islam. He has never worn a skullcap, my father, and has never shown a drop of guilt for drinking alcohol. He drinks only on occasion, 'certainly at christenings and bar mitzvahs', he likes to say. 'Oh, look,' he will remark, as he takes a bottle of fifteen-year-old single malt from the cabinet, 'this whisky has certainly come of age. Let us baptise it in the name of the father and the son.'

Despite these impieties, which, it is fair to say, stand in the lee of a great Pakistani tradition, going back even to the country's founder, Jinnah, who was known to be rather partial to whisky, my father described himself then and does so now as a follower of the faith. When I once asked him how a physicist could believe in God, his answer was that physics did not explain everything and it did not answer the question, Why these laws and not others? For him, it was not enough to

regard the world as being simply as it is. I would have to decide, he told me, whether science was enough for me.

My mother, on the other hand, had only disdain for religion. Islam, she said, oppressed women and encouraged people to accept their abysmal lot in this world in exchange for the promise of some fanciful happily-ever-afterlife. Not for her such opiates.

Zafar's mother interested me more than his father did. As I write this, I remember an intriguing article, which I came across in a journal in my parents' home and which is now easily obtainable on the internet. The article, written by the primatologist Frans de Waal, concerns his studies of kinship recognition among chimpanzees. De Waal and his colleague Lisa Parr, the article stated, presented their subject chimpanzees with the task of matching digitised portraits of unfamiliar female chimpanzees with portraits of their offspring. Astonishingly, they found that chimpanzees could match the faces of mothers and sons, thereby establishing kin recognition independent of previous experience with the individuals in question.

Had I been set the same task, I'm quite sure I would have failed to match Zafar to his mother, for I saw no resemblance between them. In his father's aspect, a softness of the eyes, a roundness of face, and a tilting of the head – all of these I recognised in Zafar. But his mother seemed entirely alien to my friend, her eyes sharp and determined, the face long and thin, and the mouth tense.

When we encounter a face we view it as a whole, by a process of integration of the parts, which takes place, as some scientists and physicians understand it, in the optic nerves long before any transmission reaches the brain. The otherwise dizzying abundance of information that hits the retina is distilled in this tract of fibres behind the eye into a sign that our intelligence can absorb. When we see a strip of letters, a billboard slogan, for example, we cannot help but read the word; we do not see each letter separately, but rather, instantly, we grasp the whole word and, moreover, its meaning. As I stood

there, on that June morning in Oxford, my friend's mother's face offered no sign of resemblance to Zafar, as if their respective faces were words written in different languages.

My lasting regret is that I made my excuses and did not go with them to Headington for breakfast. At the time, and immediately afterwards, I told myself that I had sensed that in his heart my friend did not want me to. But the truth is that I myself, to my own shame, felt embarrassed for my friend. Sharper still was the disconcerting feeling I had in those few minutes that a distance had opened up between him and me for reasons I did not grasp in their full subtleties. After that day, Zafar did not mention his parents again. If friendship has a cost, then perhaps it is that at its heart there is always a burden of guilt. I don't deny that I've failed to do certain things, failed, for instance, to provide support in the hour of need, or step in when that's what a friend should do, failed as a friend. But my regrets for the things I did not do pale against the guilt I bear for an act of commission and its consequences.

All the same, it is not guilt alone that brings me to my desk to put pen to paper and reckon with Zafar's story, my role and our friendship. Rather, it is something that no single word can begin to describe but which, I hope, will take form as I carry on. All this is quite fitting really – how it ought to be – when I call to mind the subject of my friend's long-standing obsession. Described as the greatest mathematical discovery of the last century, it is a theorem with the simple message that the farthest reaches of what we can ever know fall short of the limits of what is true, even in mathematics. In a sense, then, I have sat down to venture somewhere undiscovered, without the certainty that it is discoverable.

When he stood before me on the doorstep of our home, my dishevelled friend uttered the name of Gödel clearly and correctly, and I recalled instantly the bright afternoon of a Sunday in New York when I suggested to Zafar that I had caught up with him mathematically. I had assumed that Zafar's grasp of mathematics must have slipped, for after taking a first-class

degree at Oxford, he left the study of mathematics entirely, quite to everyone's surprise, to study law at Harvard, while I, on the other hand, after completing my third year and then taking a year off, continued with graduate studies in economics and applied mathematics.

My suggestion to him, as we walked along a tree-lined street in Greenwich Village on that Sunday all those years ago, invited from him what seemed then the cryptic response that mathematics was full of beauty. I felt compelled to ask what he considered the most beautiful mathematics he had come across, and perhaps that is what he had intended, that I ask this question – I cannot tell. Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem was his unhesitating answer, and though I remembered the statement of the theorem well enough, I nevertheless failed to perceive why he regarded it as particularly beautiful. Within any given system, there are claims which are true but which cannot be proven to be true. So states the theorem. So simple. In its implications, it is a shocking theorem, granted, and some time later, that is to say in the weeks following his sudden reappearance on our doorstep, years after that July day in New York, Zafar would explain to me in simple terms why Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem mattered so much to him and why, if I may be allowed to interpose my own view, the world was foolish to ignore it in an age of dogma.

Walking with him down that New York street, I thought to myself that perhaps such beauty, as he perceived, might lie in the theorem's proof rather than in the statement itself. Yet I could not recall the proof of Gödel's disturbing result – I am not sure I ever knew – and I assumed that after his departure from mathematics some years before, Zafar would also have lost all memory of it. I was wrong, of course, for when I prompted him, he began in the manner of an excited child to describe an argument, setting down apparently irrelevant pieces of the puzzle in all its corners. Barely a few such pieces had been laid, before the fragmentary image of a proof reared up towards me. I caught something then of beauty, unfortunately a beauty so nascent that I cannot tell if I had truly seen

it or if I had merely been carried away on my friend's euphoria. Presently his animated exposition was interrupted when we ran into a colleague and, so to speak, lost our way.

We had many walks on the streets of New York, a city to which I returned on business nearly every month, and in the streets of London later. Many of those walks abide in the memory, but if any of them stand out from the rest, then a good claim may be made by two others.

The first was near Wall Street, and, while arguably of little consequence insofar as Zafar's story goes, it remains a fond memory for me, despite present circumstances. For the better part of the walk, my friend coached me, helping me to commit to memory a poem by e. e. cummings, *somewhere i have never travelled*, as he discussed its rhythms and cadences and parsed its images into a sequence. His memory held a prodigious store of poetry, and this poem was his answer to my request for something with which I could woo the woman who was to become my wife.

The second was of an altogether different kind, disconcerting, for it revealed a side of Zafar that I had not the slightest knowledge of until then, when I had known him already for close to a decade. It was 1996 and my wife and I were settled into our new home in South Kensington, while Zafar had returned from New York and was living in London. At the end of the working day, our ties slack around our necks, the two of us met for a quick drink at a pub in Notting Hill, though our meeting up was by then less and less frequent. I had a few beers and Zafar, as always, ordered one glass of champagne. His choice might have seemed rather pretentious but for the fact that Zafar could not hold his drink, did not much like alcohol, and, moreover, as he once explained to me, found champagne agreeable because it had all the fun of fizzy lemonade without the latter's unsettling effects on the stomach. At college, as was to be expected, his predilection attracted some mocking, but I like to think that over time his habit was seen as an endearing quirk.

After an hour, we set off on the Portobello Road towards

the crossroads where we were to part, I to catch a cab home and he to join Emily. I later learned that the troubles with Emily were already in full throe by this time, and I marvel now to think that as we sat in the pub and talked he had disclosed nothing of those difficulties.

We were walking along the road when a voice boomed: Oi, mate. Zafar and I turned to see two men leaning against a railing, looking at us. Both had closely shaven heads and wore jeans, and both had a certain bar-bell muscularity. The first man, the one who had apparently spoken, was several inches taller than the other and wore only a white T-shirt despite the time of year, while the second wore an open leather jacket, ineffectively obscuring some of the excess weight around his torso. The tall man in the white T-shirt, so obviously the alpha male of the pair, fixed his attention on my friend. A quizzical expression spread across the man's face.

Do you speak English? he asked Zafar.

Zafar looked at him, turned his head towards the shorter man, and then turned back to the alpha male, before replying in the haughtiest Englishman's accent, affected to perfection: Terribly sorry. Not a word. Good day.

Zafar touched my elbow and we both turned and walked on. After a few steps, I asked him under my breath, What the hell was that about? When Zafar replied, he told me that from where I had been standing, I could not have seen what he saw.

Which was? I asked.

The shoulder of the man in the T-shirt, he said.

What? That the sleeves had been rolled up to the shoulder?

Revealing the tattoo of a swastika and beneath it the characters C18, he added.

I knew what a swastika meant but I had no idea about C18.

C18, explained Zafar, stands for Combat 18. The 1 corresponds to the first letter of the alphabet and the 8 to the eighth.

So what? I asked.

AH are the initials of Adolf Hitler and Combat 18 is a notoriously violent neo-Nazi group.

Oh, I said limply.

After three blocks, Zafar turned sharply into a mews leading us away from Portobello Road, saying that he wanted to take a detour. This seemed odd to me, given that he was already running a little late for supper with Emily.

Halfway down the empty mews, I heard the sound of footsteps on the cobblestones, and I turned to see the two skinheads now following. Zafar told me not to say a word and pulled to a stop. The men came up to us.

You being funny? said the man in the white T-shirt to Zafar. Bit of a smart aleck, eh? You dirty little Paki.

Are you a racist? Zafar asked the man.

Bit lippy, aren't we?

Zafar didn't reply but turned to me and said, Do you see this gentleman's shoulder? I looked at the man's shoulder, as did this man, the alpha male. He looked at his own shoulder.

And then suddenly the man was on the ground. He was choking and coughing and clutching at his throat, the most hellish, rasping sound coming from his mouth.

The man in the leather jacket stood stunned. Zafar told him to listen.

I punched your friend in the throat, said Zafar. You can pick a fight with me or you can call for help and save your friend.

The man did not move.

Do you have a phone? he asked him.

The man nodded.

Zafar then touched my elbow and we carried on down the mews, at our backs the dreadful gasps of the man on the ground and his friend's gabbling into the phone. I was stunned.

Back on Portobello Road, I asked him if he thought they'd go to the police.

In court, it would be the word of two suits, two meek South Asians, against the word of bullyboy skinheads, one with a swastika and Combat 18 tattoos. What would they say? That we picked a fight?

We parted ways then. Only later, as images of that evening came back to me, certain questions presented themselves. Had Zafar sought to avoid the two men or had he in fact picked a

fight? Had he turned into the quiet mews in order to evade the skinheads or to confront them?

That evening in 1996, I saw an aspect of Zafar that was new to me. But I didn't know what to make of it. What had happened seemed almost ridiculous, but it was real. If anyone had told me about it, I would have disbelieved him.*

As I write this, I see that Zafar's return on that September morning in 2008 was welcome not only because it stirred the embers of our early friendship, which had never ceased to glow, but also because it afforded me a chance to shift the focus of my own thoughts. Habits of mind are not easily broken from within. His arrival coincided with a time of reflection in my life, precipitated in some measure by the turmoil in the financial markets and the looming prospect of being called before a congressional or parliamentary committee, all of which had left me, as a junior partner in the firm, with feelings of helplessness. Such feelings are, I am sure, foreign to many men and women in my business, who, like matadors, acquire enormous self-belief from subduing the great beast, the bull or bear, that is the market. Yet in 2008, my dreams were not for greater wealth but for the recovery of a sense of control in my personal life.

To a large degree, my introspection grew with the increasing distance between me and my wife, a woman for whom I no longer felt any passion and for whom, at bottom, I struggled to find respect. When I met her, she had come to finance after a year of teaching in a school in a Kenyan township near Kisumu, by Lake Victoria. She spoke then of the children, whom she obviously loved. She told me of eight-year-old Oneka, who would valiantly thrust up his hand to answer a question put to the class, and when my wife acknowledged him with a nod,

* The following year, I read in the press of the arrest and conviction of a number of members of Combat 18, although two of its ringleaders absconded to the United States, where, curiously, they claimed political asylum.

little Oneka would say, *I don't know.* She spoke of the children by name, she sent them cards, and she would tell me how much she wanted to go back and spend more time there, that she was going to squirrel away her earnings in finance for the freedom to do so soon. As our love blossomed, she became certain that when the day came, she would persuade me to go with her. But fifteen years later, with her idealism faded, she approached finance with the vigour of the convert. The last time our conversation had alighted on the topic of her days in Africa, of her dreams then, I caught in her eye the look of embarrassment. If that embarrassment had been for her failure to return to those children, I would have comforted her tenderly: Don't they say that when mortals make plans, the gods laugh? I saw instead that her embarrassment was for having ever felt so idealistic; it was scorn for her own naivety.

Cold, unfeeling statistics tell us that marriages are now about as likely as not to end in divorce. Many of our friends were separating or had already divorced, but my wife and I had long regarded ourselves as shielded against whatever foul wind was driving apart so many couples around us. We even comforted ourselves with invented true stories of how those failed marriages had been doomed from the start, that this divorced couple had not had sufficiently similar interests, or that another had been doomed by a rivalry we believed we could detect from the very beginning.

The seat of our faith in the endurance of our life together, it is plainly visible to me now, was the store we set in the similarity of our cultural backgrounds. My wife and I were both the children of Pakistanis, immigrants, Muslims, and we had faith that our union was of things greater than ourselves, that it would survive, even flourish, because of a history of generations that intertwined in us. We could never imagine that the strength of our faith might merely have been conjured from longing.

Weeks of such rumination had fed a growing fear of what the future held, when Zafar's reappearance came as a relief and diversion, though later it would come to mean much more than that. Seeing him again restored in me a sense of continuity with

something older than my marriage, older than my work – a period of limitless possibility. There was the revival of things forgotten over years of pounding the professional treadmill while watching life ebb away from the home. Seeing him was enough to set off in me an electrical firestorm of associations that had lain dormant for years, and I felt a renewed sense of the timeless beauty I had known during my studies. Mathematics, as Zafar had said many moons ago in New York, cannot contain its own beauty.

It had seemed extraordinary to me in those days that my brilliant friend had ever chosen to give up a career in mathematics to study law, and when I once asked him why he had switched gears so sharply, he replied merely that it could be an interesting thing to do. Kurt Gödel had edged towards madness over the course of his life, near the end relying on his forbearing wife to taste his food first, for fear that it might be poisoned, so that when she herself was taken gravely ill and was unable to perform this function, Gödel starved to death. I think that Zafar had some premonition of the madness that might await him in mathematics, though this danger, I see now, never actually left his side. This, then, is how I understand him now: a human being fleeing ghosts while chasing shadows. This also accounts for the twists and turns in his working life, changes of direction that I came to observe largely from afar, as in time our friendship lost its moorings, in the way perhaps of many college friendships.

Through a web of friends and acquaintances, I maintained some notion of Zafar's path, but even before he disappeared there seemed curiously little known about him. Sometime in 2001, Zafar vanished from sight altogether, thereafter to become, from time to time, the subject of rumours, some apparently preposterous, that he had converted to Roman Catholicism and married an English aristocrat, that he had been spotted in Damascus, Tunis, or Islamabad, and that he had killed a man, fathered a child, and, absurdly it seemed, spied for British intelligence.

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That day in 2008, when Zafar resurfaced on my doorstep, he stood there, for one hovering moment of stillness, waiting to be let in, and I perceived the spark of recognition in his eye. The house had not changed much since he had last set foot in it nearly a decade before. He asked me if I had fixed the leg of the ottoman in the study. I laughed. One corner of the ottoman was still propped up by books.

Do you have the leg?

It's still there under the desk, I replied.

I'll mend it – but not today. I have to sleep.

An hour after I left him in the guest room, I went back to collect his clothes and found a small pile beside the duffel bag. Zafar was murmuring in his sleep. For a minute, I tried to decipher his words but I couldn't.

I took his laundry to the cleaners, where I noted the sizes of his pants and shirt (I wish now that I had checked the pockets but I didn't). Then, before heading to the office to put in a few perfunctory hours, I stopped off at the Gap intending to buy some new clothes for him, like the ones he was wearing, cargo pants and flannel shirts. I'd got as far as the checkout before realising I'd absent-mindedly picked up a pair of khaki trousers and a blue cotton shirt. A banker's taste in clothes is about the only thing predictable in banking.

That first day he slept late into the afternoon and then took a long bath. Sitting at the kitchen table, clean-shaven and dressed in a bathrobe, he ate a ham and mushroom omelette I had prepared, washing it down with coffee and orange juice. He ate slowly, even carefully. He still looked older than his years, though now younger than he had appeared standing on our doorstep. Lines radiated from his eyes and his jowls hung from his jaw like the worn-out saddlebags on an old horse, and I wondered what, in the matter of a decade, had come to pass in the life of the man I once knew that he should look so used up. When he finished eating, he brought together the knife and the fork, pushed the plate forward, and began his story.

2. The General Welfare of Our Eastern Empire

The subject of our policy on the North-West frontier of India is one of great importance, as affecting the general welfare of our Eastern Empire, and is especially interesting at the present time, when military operations on a considerable scale are being conducted against a combination of the independent tribes along the frontier.

It must be understood that the present condition of affairs is no mere sudden outbreak on the part of our turbulent neighbours. Its causes lie far deeper and are the consequences of events in bygone years.

In the following pages I have attempted to give a short historical summary of its varying phases, in the hope that I may thus assist the public in some degree to understand its general bearings, and to form a correct opinion of the policy which should be pursued in the future.

– General Sir John Adye, *Indian Frontier Policy: An Historical Sketch*, 1897

When Mahmoud Wad Ahmed was brought in shackles to Kitchener after his defeat at the Battle of Atbara, Kitchener said to him, "Why have you come to my country to lay waste and plunder?" It was the intruder who said this to the person whose land it was, and the owner of the land bowed his head and said nothing. So let it be with me . . . Yes, my dear sirs, I came as an invader into your very homes: a drop of the poison which you have injected into the veins of history. "I am no Othello. Othello was a lie."

– Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, translated by Denys Johnson-Davis

On Friday, March 22, 2002, I climbed aboard a twin-engined Cessna at an airfield outside Islamabad. Already settled in were three passengers and, separated by a curtain still tied back, two flight crew. Mary Robinson, the UN high commissioner for human rights, sat with a thick file on her lap, her precarious coiffure touching the curved hull of the plane. Sila Jalaluddin, wife of Mohammed Jalaluddin, was seated facing her, and as I climbed aboard she nodded her recognition but after that there was no engagement. Just beyond them was another pair of seats. In one was a young man I did not recognise, dressed in a suit and tie, with a metal briefcase against his lower leg. The other seat was empty for me. I was on my way to Kabul, still with only a vague purpose. I had been asked to go by the UN rapporteur for Afghanistan, and by Emily, who was working for Jalaluddin in the new reconstruction agency he headed. But my commissions had been so lacking in detail that I could not avoid the thought that I was coming so as to meet Emily. My stated business, at least as documented, was to act as adviser to a department of the new Afghani administration. Advisers were numberless in Kabul, like stray dogs in Mumbai; even the advisers had advisers, and none of them were less than 'special advisers' or 'senior advisers'.

Shortly after we took off, a US Air Force jet rose up alongside us. A bolt of sunlight glanced off the glass dome of its cockpit and flamed out before shrivelling away. The plane was to escort us throughout the journey. An F-15 Eagle, I want to say – but what do I know? It was a fighter plane. It was a perfectly familiar sight. Yes, it rose up alongside us exactly as those fighter jets do in movie after movie. You experience the power not through the moment but through the focused light of umpteen filmic depictions of US military might. What smart senator doesn't know he can marshal the support of a people primed to believe they can do the things their boys, their heroic selves, do on the big screen? Reality is no match for the fantasy. But don't suppose the senators and congressmen know any better; how many of these same senators, themselves reared on a diet of satellite images of laser-red targeting crosses hovering

over enemy bases, of crouching silhouettes of special ops entering enemy tents in the desert, a diet of stealth and victory, how many senators have taken their conception of what America can do from what they've seen on the American movie screen?

I love America for an idea. The reality is important but ambiguous. In Senegal, there stands a building where slaves were stored before they were sent on to the New World. It was built in the same year as the American Declaration of Independence. I love America for the clear idea behind the cloudy reality. Without the idea, the joys of America would be mere accident, the ephemera tossed up by the hand of fate, to disappear in the wind. And what is that idea? It is the idea of hope, that grand audacious idea that makes the Britisher blush with embarrassment. It may be an idea not everyone cares for, but it is one I need, I want. I love her for her thought, first, of where you're going, not where you're from; for her majestic optimism against the grey resistances of Europe, most pure in Britain, so that in America I feel like – I am – a sexual being. Before 9/11, I was invisible, unsexed. How is it that after 9/11 suddenly I was noticed – not just noticed, but attractive, given the second look, sized up, even winked at? Was that the incidental effect of no longer being of a piece with the background, of being noticed, or was it sicker than that? Was this person among us no longer the meek Indian, the meek Pakistani, the sepoy, but fully man? Before 9/11, I was hidden behind the wall of colonial guilt after having been emasculated by a history of subjugation.

Zafar seemed rather carried away with his praise of America and it's quite possible that I let out a smile. After a few moments, he picked up his story.

With the F-15 Eagle at our side, he continued, we flew over some of the most dramatic terrain I had ever seen. Small aircraft do not generally fly at high altitudes, and the shadows of the morning's slanting sun accentuated the relief of the land, the two planes casting darting shadows over the landscape, so that it was hardly a stretch to imagine us wefting and warping between the mountains and hills of north-east Afghanistan.

Somewhere not far away in the vastness of the Tora Bora mountains, we were told in those days, was Osama Bin Laden, a hunted man even before his proud claim of responsibility and, we thought, soon to be found. As I looked out of the window, I saw a land bleaker and more beautiful than anything I had seen in Bangladesh, and I could see how this place of hard habitation bloomed a romance that condemned it to Western intrigue. The Afghanistan below me was austere – there was no grass, not the least blade; it was neither lush and verdant nor wet, as Bangladesh was, but instead it was a land of dusty, earthy tones. Whereas my beautiful Sylhet sang the song of seasons, of a yearly cycle, Afghanistan's barren, ragged desolation moaned a long dirge of ancient wonder, the earth's broken features ready to receive fallen horsemen, the lost traveller, and all the butchered tribes. I understood why the European was drawn to such a place, saw why he would want to walk the numberless silk roads that criss-crossed this stretch of Central Asia, and, in my mind's ear, I heard the homilies of British colonials and post-colonials who broke bread with the natives to return home with wondrous stories of having survived the mountains and the Muslim horde, or to proclaim the Afghan's humanity and to stress with limitless piety the need to build bridges across cultures.

At a safe distance, the plane followed the line of an escarpment, broken here and there by the odd craggy outcrop, and I imagined that if I closed one eye, I could extend my finger and run it along the sharp edge. I thought of the contour maps that mountaineers and orienteers use, maps that by means of lines joining points of the same height gave you a feel in two dimensions for the three-dimensional relief of the known world. There was a time when you saw the same idea on weather maps on television, isobars, those curved lines of equal air pressure, before everything became simpler still with bright-petalled suns, such as a child might paint, and bubbly clouds. Maps, contour maps and all maps, intrigue us for the metaphors that they are: tools to give us a sense of something whose truth is far richer but without which we would

perceive nothing and never find our bearings. That's what maps mysteriously do: they obliterate information to provide some information at all.

Like the London Underground map, I said.

It never tells you, said Zafar, where on earth any given station is. In one sense, it's no map at all but a diagram; it's not topographical but topological, and the question is always: what use is imagined for the map? Harry Beck, the man who designed it, must have realised that when you're riding an underground train, you don't really care about geographical location or distances. Famously, if you kept to the map, to get from Bank Station to Mansion House you would take the Central Line train to Liverpool Street, change onto the Circle Line, and get off five stops later, at Mansion House. But when you got to street level you would look down the road and discover that you'd travelled only four hundred yards. The map helps you navigate your way around its own schematic world and requires you to abandon the reality of tarmac and buildings and parks. Only afterwards do you step out and again find London.*

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* Zafar's discussion of maps continued, but I have chosen to include it here as a footnote. I am reminded of a passage in *The Razor's Edge* by Somerset Maugham (an author I rather liked as a boy), in which the narrator states: *I feel it right to warn the reader that he can very well skip this chapter without losing the thread of such story as I have to tell, since for the most part it is nothing more than the account of a conversation that I had with Larry.* Having dismissed the passage thus, the narrator goes on, preposterously I think, to state: *I should add, however, that except for this conversation I should perhaps not have thought it worth while to write this book.*

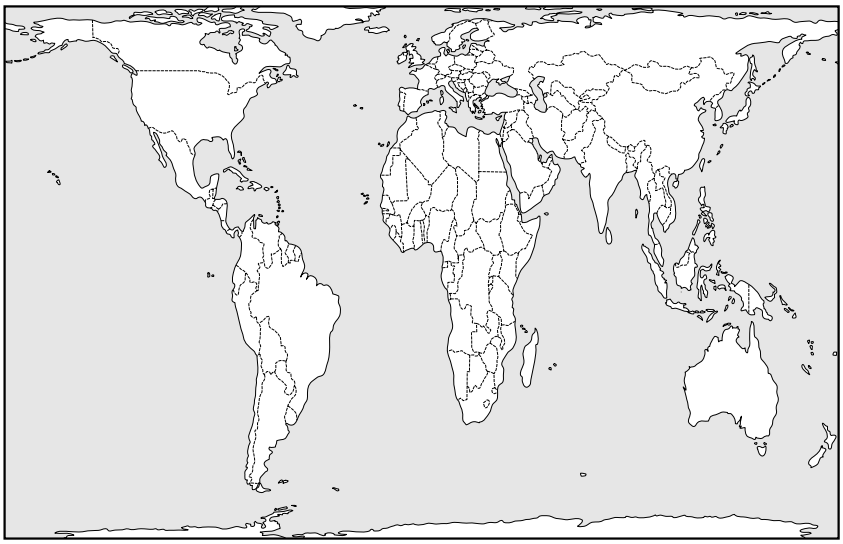
I will forgo Maugham's addendum but include here Zafar's discussion of map projections. I have added two diagrams culled from the internet, which correspond to diagrams that Zafar himself sketched very crudely in the course of the discussion.

Have you, Zafar asked me, ever seen the Peters projection?

I've heard of it.

Have you seen it?

I don't think so.



It's a version of the map of the world in which areas of landmasses are shown proportionately, said Zafar.

It's the one, I interjected, where Africa looks vast. I do remember it.

Africa looks vast because it is vast. In fact, on Mercator's projection, which is the most widely used, the one everyone's familiar with, the one that everyone remembers, Greenland appears bigger than Africa, when in reality you could get fourteen Greenlands into the whole of Africa.

I had no idea.

It gets better, said Zafar. In Mercator's projection, Brazil looks roughly the same size as Alaska, when it's actually five times bigger. Another odd thing is that Finland looks longer, from north to south, than India. In actual fact, it's the other way around.

When it first came out in the 1980s, continued my friend, the Peters projection set the cat among the pigeons, precisely because it was obvious that the choice of map projection had political implications for how we see the world. Critics of Mercator's projection had pointed out its flaws, and they did have something; after all, how many schoolchildren have looked at maps and asked, Which is the biggest country in the world?

The basic problem of mapping the globe is how to transfer the curved surface of the earth, an oblate spheroid, onto a flat surface. And there's another complication: If you stand on the earth and start walking in any direction and just keep walking, you'll never hit any kind of boundary. You can just keep on going around the world. But if you stand on a map, a rectangular piece of paper, and do the same, you'll eventually hit the edge of the paper. Getting a representation of the curved surface of the earth onto a bounded piece of flat paper, that's the business of projection.

You have the same problem in translating poetry. You start off in one language and you have to project the work onto another. And the similarity is even closer. In map projections, there are a variety of things you want to preserve, such as area, distances, angles in triangles, and so on. But the trouble is you can't preserve them all. The mathematics won't allow it. Your flat map can't reflect every one of these things even approximately. You have to choose among them which ones you want to keep. And that's where the choice of projection comes in.

There's an easy way to show how you arrive at Mercator's projection. Take a ball and slice off the very top and the bottom. Then imagine stretching it out so that the surface looks like a hollow tube. Now cut a slit along a length of the hollow tube. You can roll this out on a table. Notice how you've lost the very top and bottom of the ball and, in fact, if you look at the common Mercator's map of the world, you'll see that it doesn't actually show you the North and South Poles or even small regions around them. That's Mercator's projection, but there are different ways of projecting the world.

And the similarity with poetry? I asked.

The cartographer's job is to take the material on the surface of the globe – lakes, mountains, and cities – and represent these on a flat sur-

face. The translator takes a poem, a piece of text, in one language and has the task of trying to represent aspects of the poem – rhyme, metre, rhythm, metaphor, and meaning – in another language. A cartographer doesn't give you a miniature globe with all the same details on it as the globe of the world itself has. Nor does the translator simply give you the poem in the original language along with a Hungarian dictionary.

Both of them face the same problem, namely, that they cannot capture everything exactly and they have to give up some things in order to convey anything at all. In going from the curved surface of the earth to the flat surface of a map, the cartographer would ideally want to preserve a number of aspects such as relative distances (so that the distance between Islamabad and Kabul should be in the same proportion to the distance between London and Dhaka on the map as it is in the real world); relative areas (so that the ratio of the area of Nigeria to that of the borough of Brooklyn is the same on the map as it is in the real world); angles (so that the angle subtended at Bagram air base outside Kabul by the lines to that air base from the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, home to an American air base, and from RAF Brize Norton in the Royal County of Oxfordshire is the same on the map as it is in the world); and so on. There are a number of such aspects, more than these few that I mention, but the fact is that the cartographer can't preserve them all.

It all depends on what you want the map to show and what use you have for it. People talk about things being lost in translation, but things can, of course, be gained in translation too. A cartographer might add things, such as borders, which may or may not have some physical manifestation on the earth. But even if there is a fence to mark the border in the world, that fence is not the same as the political border represented on the map: a break in the fence doesn't vitiate the political border. After all, the red line on the map doesn't represent the fence and, in fact, the fence itself only represents the border.

But the point of all this is that all these representations or translations begin from needs. Consequently, the loss of information and understanding that every act of representation involves is the effect of an act of destruction that serves a need. We might appear to have taken a step forward, but in fact we took one step back and two steps forward. Every time we want to understand anything, we have to simplify and reduce and, importantly, give up the prospect of understanding it all, in order to clear the way to understanding something at all. This, I think, is true of all human inquiry.

Thoughts of topographic maps visited me in that cabin as I looked over the vales below. I didn't speak to the other passengers, exchanged not so much as one pleasantry, and when the bright sun rushed out from behind a cloud, I hid my face in a copy of Dante's *Inferno*, which Emily had sent to me when I was in hospital. I was once the patient of a psychiatric hospital.

If Zafar's eyes contained a confirmation of the accusation I felt in his words, I did not see it. I remembered, of course. But it was an unpleasant memory, for a number of reasons, and I'm ashamed to say that between Zafar's landing on my doorstep and his reminding me then, I had not once recalled any aspect of that episode. If anything, I'd suppressed it.

We arrived, he continued, at Bagram air base outside Kabul. The line of mountains rose beneath the sun, but it was an impotent sun, bright but without heat, so that when the door of the aircraft opened and I stepped out behind Mary Robinson and Sila Jalaluddin, the cold March air came as a cracking slap across the face. That is how Afghanistan greeted me.

A Land Rover drove me to AfDARI, the Afghan Development, Aid, and Reconstruction Institute, near Shar-e-Naw, an organisation that I came to understand had yet to earn its grand name. The vehicle tore through every crossroad; at that time, ISAF* soldiers had been instructed never to stop on their routes, so mayhem ensued in a city now overrun by Land Rovers, Pajeros, Land Cruisers, and monster Humvees. At AfDARI, I was taken to the guesthouse by an orderly, who motioned directions to me. We passed a shared washroom outside the bedroom, with a toilet and a large bucket of water in which a tin cup floated on the surface. The room was bare apart from a single bed, a pile of blankets, and a small table beside the bed, with three legs, though one, I noticed, appeared to have come from another table, its colour and shape quite

* Zafar is referring to the International Security Assistance Force.

different, and its length too, giving the table a slight tilt. Paint flaking away from the walls suggested another history and already I felt that this place contained an allegation against someone. The orderly pointed to an electrical outlet near the door, waved his hand and shook his head. Either it didn't work or I was not to use it; I supposed it was the latter, since if it didn't work, I'd have found that out myself, and he needn't be fussing. In the opposing corner, a *bukhari*, the kerosene heater that I would see everywhere, had yet to be turned on. Behind me, I noticed that the door to the room had a lock and key. There were windows facing onto the courtyard, with curtains partially drawn. On the other side of the room there was what appeared to be another window, looking out the back. When I took a step closer to it, I saw that the bedside cabinet, a veneered chipboard thing, was wedged under a door handle and that the cabinet itself stood on some pieces of wood, presumably to bring it up to the right height. What looked first like a window was actually the upper part of a door, with the cabinet acting as makeshift lock. It was, I noted, an exit route. Through the glass pane, I saw the outline of a leafless tree, its branches dividing endlessly and dark as if dipped in pitch, and I thought of the X-ray image of a blackened, cancerous lung, the image intended to frighten us.

What I first learned about AfDARI came from the programme manager, Suleiman, who visited me in my room shortly after my arrival late in the afternoon. AfDARI had been established by Australia's overseas aid agency, with Taliban acquiescence, a few years after the Soviet withdrawal in the early 1990s, though its funding had come from a variety of sources. It was involved in a number of small aid and development activities primarily focused on Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar and, of course, Kabul, but was now being sidelined by UNAMA,* he explained. Suleiman was a tall young man, without a beard and dressed in Western clothes, which raised the obvious question of whether his appearance had been different in Taliban days,

* United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

which is to say only a few months before. He had, he would explain, spent two years at Indiana University in the US, which suggested that he came from a well-connected family, and he was now second in command at the institute. Suleiman's most distinctive feature by far was his eyes, not their colour, a tepid grey, nor their great arching eyelashes, but the manner of their movement, the intermittent darting here and there, towards the door, the windows, and later, outside, around about him. They called to mind small mammals, mice or rabbits, the kind that share their habitat with predators and know their only advantages are their alertness and nimble feet, advantages that could win them a few decisive seconds. If there had been any hint of darkness about him, I would have taken it then for evidence of fear.

That evening, after Suleiman left, I ventured out into the streets looking for a bite to eat before turning in for the night. I introduced myself to the guard, Suaif, whose English was more proficient than he first let on. He reminded me to make curfew and pointed me in the direction of somewhere I could get a meal. Dusk had settled on the roads and kerosene lanterns had been lit here and there. Suaif called after me as I crossed the road and handed me a shawl. March is cold, when dusk bites deeper, so that those who remained in the streets were swaddled in shawls or, in some cases, ill-fitting Western coats, with dull, lifeless synthetic fur trim. I walked a little in the neighbourhood. In a nearby canteen, sitting with my back safely in the corner, I ate a meal of kebab and a vast stretch of warm bread. On the wall to the side, a tessellation of mirrors gave me a view of myself and of men, young and old, some bearded, their heads covered in lungees or pawkuls, another old man reminding me of my father, all eyeing me suspiciously, my black shoes shining, and the defiant, sharp crease of my trousers sliding down from under my shawl like the blade of a sword. Now there's a metaphor to arouse the orientalist – so trite, so damn obvious, so journalistic, so crude and, in the face of ignorance, so damn effective. I ate my meal and I thought perhaps Suaif had given me the shawl for protection against

more than the weather, a shield to blunt a few of those suspicious looks.

The next morning at seven o'clock there came a knock on the door. I was already awake. I had made the bed, washed and dressed, and had been writing in my notebook for an hour. This was always the best time to write, to reflect and consider the previous day, to discover what I thought after a night of letting the unconscious brain, the better brain, sift through the impressions. Mathematics was like that, wasn't it? Amazing that you could go to bed with a problem, the hardest problem in the world, something you'd been banging your head against all the previous day. But you might wake up in the morning with the answer all laid out. You might even remember a point in your dream when you worked it out, when you even said, in your coma, Eureka! and after waking, for a moment you wonder if it's make-believe, if you've concocted the fiction of having solved it only for the somnial satisfaction, but you know it's real because when you race through this new-found solution, now raised into your conscious mind, when you scramble for a pencil and a piece of paper to jot things down, you see that it works, you confirm the dream.

At the knock, I slipped my notebook into a pocket and opened the door. A boy of ten or eleven came in carrying a tray with a cup of tea and what looked like a biscuit. He glanced at the rickety table before setting everything down on the bed.

He asked me if tomorrow I wanted a bigger breakfast. The boy's English was strong, simple, and clear, with the exuberant confidence of the young, free of the self-consciousness that comes later. He explained that he would clean my room when I went out. I smiled at him but I don't think he would have noticed my embarrassment. What's there to clean? I thought.

I am always embarrassed in the presence of cleaners, never able to shake off the thought that I ought to get up and help. I once admitted this at a dinner party hosted by friends of Emily, a soiree of young professionals preening and posing. One of the party was looking for a new housekeeper, which gave rise to a conversation about that old cliché, the

difficulties of finding help these days, although this particular formula was conspicuously avoided. When I offered my comment – that I'd always felt embarrassed when the cleaner appeared – there was a quick response from a lawyer straight out of the Home Counties, a young man who wore a silk handkerchief in his breast pocket.

But everyone has servants in India. See it on television all the time.

Even the servants have servants, I said.

Really?

But who cuts the barber's hair?

I beg your pardon?

In the village with one barber, I explained.

Quite so, said the young man, looking around the table.

In his mind, I was Indian and my frame of reference for such domestic things must be India. Fair enough, I thought, making excuses for him. How is he to know? For a certain kind of Englishman, the subcontinent remains India. Yet I didn't get a single knowing look from anyone around the table, a glance to say that I was British too. But there was another presumption that was harder to bear, one of class.

There are, of course, cleaners in the service of affluent households in the cities and towns of India and South Asia, cleaners and cooks and guards and gardeners and other staff. But the root of the embarrassment I have in the presence of cleaners has nothing to do with India, nothing to do with ethnicity or heritage, the things they used to call culture, as if that was the beginning and end of culture. For wherever in the world we had lived, London or the village in Bangladesh, my own family never had staff, never had servants; other families did. My family *were* the staff.

As the Afghani boy retreated from the room, he smiled with an insincerity that left me with a surprising sense of sorrow. Alone in my room, as the day opened outside, my thoughts settled on these three men I'd met, Suaif, Suleiman, and this boy, three generations of Afghans now in the service of their saviours. Everywhere in South Asia is a class of men, and in some

parts more and more women, working for the white man, to carry his load and do his bidding in these troublesome corners. They spring from the ground where wars are fought as if the shelling and mortars have fertilised the soil to cultivate this corps of agents, from a cadre of peons to offices of administrative assistants. There will always be locals to buy the foreign peace, and who can blame fathers whose children are dying of war? Sound markets, including financial markets, promote the allocation of resources – in the language of economists. That's mother's milk to the world's affluent. But here it operates in its state of nature. The Toyota Land Cruisers pour in, sacks of treasure in tow, and the rebuilding needs builders and men have families to feed. Belief in the grand project isn't just about choosing one idea over another: the difference, everyone is told, is food and security. What's there not to believe? So that necessity mothers the buffer class of native informants as urgently as a mother will kill to save her child. Will that boy with the tea, or that young man Suleiman, grow up to demand his inheritance, and what will he regard that to be? Will he seek to restore everything he shares with his countrymen or, in his obeisance, has he come to despise himself so much that all he can think to acquire is the authority of his masters, retaining all the same structures, the same commercial contracts, the same foisted governance and culture of power, while hating every man who reminds him of his own vulgar self?

Not five minutes after the boy left, Suleiman showed up bearing yet more tea. He set the two cups down on the bedside table, in a patch of morning light, and insisted that I take the bed, the only place to sit, while he remained standing.

I told him that something about the name of the institute had troubled me.

You mean the Dari in AfDARI? It's clever, isn't it? asked Suleiman.

Cute. But Dari is only one of the languages spoken in Afghanistan.

Indeed, replied Suleiman.

Not exactly inclusive.

I wasn't here when the institute was formed, Suleiman said, but I expect the Australians were pleased with themselves when they thought of the name.

Didn't anyone say anything? I asked.

You mean Afghans?

Yes.

I'm sure they did, he said. Something like: *Well done, a very clever name. Now please give us the money.* We can discuss this as we go.

Go where?

I want to show you the city.

Outside in the courtyard, Suleiman introduced me to Suaif, the guard. I did not mention that I'd already made his acquaintance. Class and status evidently trumped the seniority of age, but I found it impossible to address Suaif by his first name; I hesitate ever so slightly even now. He reminded me of my father. There was that same lost look my father had, out of place, as if waiting for something. Suaif had been an engineering professor, he explained, at Kabul University.

What happened to your job? I asked.

Oh, it's still there, but it isn't worth the money. I am paid more by the UN and these NGOs.

Had I heard distaste in those words, *the UN and these NGOs*? So it was with the drivers I came across and with staff generally; the aid agencies had put a bounty on the heads of locals who could speak English. The professional classes had been taken down from university chairs, schools, and offices, and conscripted into the menial service of the newcomers. Wages rose, production did not, so prices had nowhere to go but up.

Suleiman and I took one of the NGO's Land Cruisers, along with a driver, and drove to a hilltop where the battered Intercontinental Hotel looked out over the city. Outside, we slung the shawls around our necks, puffing condensation from our mouths, moisture that now clung to the cindery dust enveloping everything.

I hear the Four Seasons is coming, said Suleiman.

The hotel?

Yes, replied Suleiman.

How many seasons does Afghanistan have, by the way – or this part of it?

Four.

No less from a long view than at close quarters, fractal-like, Kabul was the picture of a city scarred by war. I had seen many South Asian cities from an elevation, from flat roofs over an undulating ocean of rooftop after rooftop, where sheaves of steel reinforcements still stand, embedded in the protrusions of supporting columns that run the heights of the buildings. Such excess reinforcement, along with foundations of superfluous depth, measures of apparent redundancy, signalled the hope of later adding to the height of a building with time, money, and a growing economy. The books will tell you of Kabul's storied history; it might even once have had a future. But if the buildings were anything to go by, its recent past was inhabited by a beaten people possessed of the knowledge that the future was not to be trusted.

For crying out loud, what was I doing in Kabul? I was in Dhaka when Emily called. I was practising law, trying to sue multinationals and public officials for corruption; I was trying to bring about reforms in the procedures of government institutions, such as the Bureau of NGO Affairs. At the moment Emily called, I was in a meeting with a former finance minister of Bangladesh and a senior British government official, the latter flying in from London solely to finalise the British government's commitment – money – to a project whose purpose was to develop the small business sector, SMEs as they called them, small and medium enterprises. The British government official had felt the two-day trip necessary in order, as was intimated to me, to ensure I would co-head the project; they didn't trust the ex-politician. The parking bay of the premises of the NGO, an NGO that the ex-politician had set up *to give something back to the people*, he had said to me, leaving me wondering what on earth he'd have said his political career had been about – that parking bay came up more than once in tales

of fat brown envelopes handed over by men stepping out from Land Cruisers just long enough to seal a deal. I took Emily's call in the parking bay.

I was in the meeting and it was an important meeting – are we not required to think something is important when everyone else seems to think it's important? – and yet I took the call and stepped out. I never turned the cell phone off. Did I so need to hear from her that I always left it on in case she called? And when she called, I made my excuses – It's a call from Afghanistan, I remember saying to them, to the sound of oohs and knowing aahs, for that's all you had to say in 2002: *Afghanistan*, and the word alone was a conclusive argument. I stepped out into that sullied parking bay of favours bought and sold, and I listened to her voice.

You must come here, she said. You could make such a difference to the lives of twenty-five million people.

Did she think that Afghanistan was the only place that mattered? And did she think that I might be flattered into coming? Worse still, did she believe that anyone could make *such a difference*? She did. They all did, this invading force of new missionaries. They were an army in all but name, not the army carrying guns that cleared their path, nor one carrying food or medicine. But they came bearing advice and with the arrogance to believe that they could make all the difference. Yes, they mean well, but the only good that an absence of malice guarantees is a clear conscience. I knew Emily believed in their creed, and when I saw that she did, when I understood that she did, suddenly, as if a wire had been cut inside, I had in me a thought, not yet an intention, but a question, one set out in the languages of my childhood and in the perfectly clean lines of mathematics. I had a thought as powerful as an idea born in oppression: Who will stop these people?

I'm in the middle of trying to make some difference, I replied, to a population of one hundred and twenty million, give or take. If you're telling me, I continued, that I can make five times the difference per person, then I suppose I can't argue with that.

This was the woman whose call I awaited every moment and yet, on that call, as I stood in the parking bay of an NGO located in Dhaka's Gulshan diplomatic area, as I listened to the voice of my beloved, I began to feel the heave of something inside me turning over, deep within me, and larger than us, the trifling matter of *us*. That was why a month later I was in Afghanistan, no more or less clear an answer than the gut opening.

This part of the world was just another chessboard, as I would be just another piece, but that is the way of this history, from one dark stretch of road onto another. Kabul, a city of war, had had its part of British blood and more. There was the First Anglo-Afghan War, itself just one step in the long march of British military colonial hubris – and by British I mean that the officer classes were British; the rank and file were drawn from the Indian populations. On New Year's Day, 1842, at the war's end, General Elphinstone surrendered to the natives despite the protestations of his officers. Having secured guarantees of safety for the sick and wounded, who were to remain in Kabul, Elphinstone set off on the journey back to India with the rest. But no sooner had the last British soldier left the city than the sick and wounded were slaughtered. As for the departed British soldiers, worn down first by battle and now by the arduous passage in the dead of winter, those sad men were picked off at narrow passes as they staggered knee-deep in snow. Sixteen thousand died. General Elphinstone, in a shamefully un-British display of cowardice, surrendered himself to the Afghans, even as he well knew that none of the soldiers would be spared. One man who managed to reach safety was the surgeon William Brydon, who remarkably survived after having part of his skull shorn off by a sword. Upon arriving in the safety of Jalalabad, when asked where the army was, he famously replied, *I am the army.* When Elphinstone died in captivity a few months later, his body was sent back to the British garrison in Jalalabad, where he was buried in an unmarked grave.

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Laid out below us was the ramshackle city in dusty morning light. Coming up the Upper Garden Road, the same winding road that we'd taken to gain this hilly vantage, an old man pulled himself, one leg in front of the other, until a detail came into view. He was missing a foot.

Suleiman too was looking that way, though I wonder now if he had followed *my* eye, for the image, so commonplace, I would have thought, cannot have been one to have caught his attention.

This is what war has given us, he said.

I asked Suleiman if there was any reason to be hopeful.

For myself I could be, he replied with brutal selfishness.

I am as impressed by honesty as anyone, but when there is a hint that a man is taking me into his confidence, my first instinct is to suspect him. Am I to be flattered? And is he about to break another's confidence? I think Suleiman noticed my unease. He smiled incongruously. Two ways he could go, I thought, both qualifications to what he said: either undercut or extend. He did neither, instead making an observation that might have raised a flag, had I considered more carefully its rather rehearsed, even scripted, language.

Afghanistan doesn't have the oil of the Khazars, he said, and we're not ready to prostitute our women like the Thais. Unlike the Westerner's, ours is not a spiritual poverty but a material one. When our needs in that area are met, we will not have the dilemma or crisis of Western man.

At length, we climbed again into the Land Cruiser and descended back into the city, where Suleiman was eager to take me through Wazir Akbar Khan, an area where foreigners, NGOs, and crooks had already starting buying property. Every so often, he'd bid the driver slow down but not stop as we passed homes that, he explained, were known to be owned by Talibs, even if title was held by Pakistanis who disavowed any connections.

It must be quite easy to get a message to them, I said.

A message? asked Suleiman.

With the Taliban everywhere, even in Kabul, it must be quite easy to get a message to them, no?

Suleiman looked at me as if calculating something before resuming his role as guide. He pointed out other houses, formerly belonging to Talibs but that had been acquired by Westerners for their rocketing market value, including diplomatic missions and their staff, whose real-estate purchases had boosted Taliban funding. Property in 2002, even in Kabul, was booming, as it was the world over.

There's a saying on Wall Street, I said. When there's blood on the streets, buy property.

I like that. Yes, that's exactly right. Now all these foreigners own property here and they have a double reason for wanting ISAF to stay. This is what it is about, isn't it? Breaking eggs to make an omelette.

I glanced towards the driver.

What? You don't think he agrees? asked Suleiman. And what does my view matter? I'm a threat to no one. You see, I'm powerless.

But you're number two at AfDARI, I said.

Well, we'll have to discuss AfDARI, he replied, glancing up at the driver, whose eyes flashed across the rear-view mirror.