

VERTIGO IN KABUL

AN AFGHAN FAMILY SHORT STORY

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Zemar frequently leaves his house early in the morning and spends the entire day wandering the streets and alleys of Kabul. Kabul is the capital city of Afghanistan, located in the eastern half of the country.

Modern Kabul city is located high up in a narrow valley between the Hindukush Mountains and is bounded by the Kabul River. Old Kabul, which comprises districts one and two, is said to be over 3500 years old. In 2022, Kabul is a sprawling city. Roughly five million people now live there. Kabul's burgeoning population, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the mid-1970s, the population was only around one million.

Zemar meanders outside until dusk. He has become very accustomed to doing this, because it benefits his frivolity while providing him with interesting opportunities to speculate about the personalities and jobs of those who populate the street. Today he has walked slowly from the other side of the Mahmood Khan Bridge, which is built over the Kabul River and connects the second and ninth districts of Kabul city, toward the Macroryan intersection, where he now stands.

About seven months have passed since the Taliban took over Afghanistan and people still have not accepted this fact. Zemar can still see the distress on their faces – that they are still afraid to look at the Taliban. It's as if they are observing creatures from another planet. So much has been forbidden by the Taliban – music, dance, the education of girls – that no-one can look at them.

The Taliban pass through Kabul on motorcycles and US-made military vehicles. Some walk on foot and hold American M16 weapons in their hands and some with Ak47. Others are wandering around in heavily armed pickup trucks and Humvees. The distinctive Afghan clothing they wear, known as the Shalwar Kameez, long turbans, and long beards and hair, make them stand out among the local population.

The streets are less crowded than in the previous republic time. Some stores are open, but there are fewer customers. As Zemar walks down the sidewalk, he can hear some of the shop-owners complaining about the lack of work and customers. In the distance he can make out Khane-Noor Private University, now converted into Dar al Hafaz Islamic Seminary. He glances at his Casio wristwatch – it's a quarter to five. Almost evening.

At the corner of his eye, a flicker – he looks more closely at Khane Noor University. A group of Taliban are sitting on one of the walls like a murder of crows, talking to some more Taliban standing on the pavement. This was a university where boys and girls studied computers, economics, law and political science. Now, everywhere Zemar looks, there are no signs of women. He feels like he is in a sci-fi movie – as though aliens have come and invaded his city.

Engrossed in these thoughts, he is suddenly overcome by pain. A thump to his back. A Taliban motorbike has struck him.

The impact of the bike throws Zemar to the ground. He manages to stand back up. The motorcycle has fallen too. Two Taliban are riding it, one of them wearing an M16 gun on his shoulder.

“Why did you hit my motorbike?” demands the first Talib. He slaps Zemar across the face. The other Talib just stares. “Let him go – it’s getting late.”

They seem to be in a hurry.

Zemar breathes in the stench of their incense -odor. Their sweat makes it painful for him to breathe. It’s as if they have not bathed in months. He watches as they restart the motorbike and disappear down the road.

He wipes the dirt off his clothes and checks himself for injuries. Finding no serious harm, interlacing his fingers, Zemar stretched them, and the joints of his fingers cracked. This habit of cracking his fingers was just a pretense, but it always soothed him and helped him to gather his thoughts, which was particularly necessary at this moment. Once he was ready for his walk, he continued on his way.

After walking for two more hours, he finally nears home. It is now dark and cold.

He is amongst people again, like a child lost in a crowd. For a while he walks in the crowded and dusty streets without will, catching glimpses of passing faces in the light of a street lamp, a shop window. The faces are sad. He can’t think clearly – he starts to cry deep in his throat. He now considers the adults of the city street to be wiser and bigger than himself – he yearns to be one of them, instead of himself. But he thinks: *Who knows? Maybe some of them are even less lucky than me.* He tries to comfort himself with the thought that a beggar with a few cents might be happier than the richest person. But the fact is that all the money in the world could not reduce his pain.

Zemar closes his eyes, reflecting on his recent past. All the scary nightmares that used to wake him up at night are these days coming harder, faster, more frequently. It seems to him that his life has been spent in vain, the turbulent and confused memories of thirty years passing before his eyes now as they do all day, every day. He feels himself to be the most miserable and useless animal.

While walking he thinks about his past. He sees his past as though from behind the dark clouds. Some of its pieces suddenly shine before dipping back behind those clouds, offering him an empty and brief happiness. But most of them are monotonous, depressing, and shaped by war.

What a futile struggle! He bites his lip. Heaving deep sighs. The thought that he had spent his youth in seclusion and darkness hurts him. He had spent his youth in vain, without joy, without love, disgusted with everyone and himself. *How many people sometimes feel more lost and displaced than a bird that moans in the darkness of the night?* he silently asks himself. But he can no longer believe in this idea. The victory of the Taliban has taken its toll on him, overturning all of his thoughts. He is tired and thirsty. A demon has been awakened within him and is now releasing poison into his body.

A car passes by, too fast, too close. He sees his angry face, trembling lips and expressionless eyes reflected in a shop window. There is a pressure in the bottom of his heart that stretches up to his forehead and temples. It has creased his eyebrows.

He has known pain throughout his life. Hours of despair, happy hours, days of wandering and moments of misery – deep, uncompromising pain that other people are not familiar with. Complexity has never scared him, and he once had a brain capable of sorting through every intricacy. But now he feels extremely alone and lost. His whole life has been a mockery, a lie. *What is in my hand from the fruits of life?* he asks himself. The answer rises up to haunt him: *Nothing.*

This proverb makes him mad now. It's as though a bright moonlight is coming out from behind the clouds, but he is just passing through. This moonlight, which used to be so charming and mysterious for him in the long hours he would spend alone with the moon, talking to it, is now a cold, spoiled and meaningless light that makes him angry. Zemar peers into a disused, damaged bookshop and remembers the hot days, the long hours of study and the longer nights. He remembers his youth, most of his peers passing their time in recreation while he and a handful of driven classmates spent the day sweating as they pored over their books. At the end of it he would go to the debate meeting with his professors, who would sit in tight pants with a glass of water in front of themselves, their voices progressively rising. The veins in their necks straining, shouting about economic terms.

He was once a university professor himself. Every morning, at 7 am he would leave the house in his ironed navy blue trousers and shiny black shoes, coming out of one of the alleys on the side of Ghabelbai before passing the Ghabelbai Mosque. He would turn through Kabul's Customs Alley that went toward the highway, where he would take a taxi on the public road and go to the university in the Shahar-now Kabul, half an hour away by car. In the car, he never looked out the window – he used the time for thinking. He can still remember his professorial face – noble and dignified, small eyes, prominent lips and dark moustache. He used to shave his beard. He was humble and quiet.

Inside the university, he would clasp his hands behind his back. He liked to walk very slowly, head down, as if he were searching for something. Sometimes he would stop; sometimes he talked to himself.

The dean of the faculty and the other teachers had neither liked nor disliked him. But he had had an agitating effect on them. On the contrary, the students were satisfied with him, because he did not get angry and was not seen as the type to whip or fail anyone. He had been calm, gentle and friendly with his students, who were polite and respected him. If asked to describe Mr Zemar Khakrizwall, their esteemed professor, they would say that he had graduated from Kabul University and had worked in the public sector for two or three years. They would note that since his last trip, when he returned from a work mission from Kandahar province, he had stayed in Kabul, where he had found this job in a private university so that he could devote some time to his personal interests ...

In the midst of the mud and through the fog, Zemar finally locates his house. He has been renting this mud house for six years now. It is the nicest house in the Ghabelbai neighborhood because it has glass windows. This area of Kabul city is called Ghabelbai and is mostly composed of houses made from mud. It faces the Kabul Customs Department, rising up on the other side of the Kabul-Jalalabad Highway. At the south end of Ghabelbai, there are vast agricultural lands where the Kabul River flows, bringing water to these green meadows. Zemar likes living here because the spirit of both the city and the village is present, and powerful.

He enters the narrow alley that leads toward his house. At the small store on the corner, he can see Rasoul in his shop. He enters. "Salam, Uncle Rasoul."

"*Walikumasalam Ustad Zemar* (Ustad in Dari means Teacher or Professor and is used as a title to show respect). How are your wife and daughter?"

Zemar shrugs. "They are okay."

Rasoul knows everybody in this area. From dawn to sunset, he sits in his shop speculating on the characters of everyone passing by. A barrel-chested man with bright eyes and an irrepressible laugh, he has a friendly face and a salt-and-pepper mustache. His beard gives him a quiet dignity.

Everyone calls him Uncle or Kaka Rasoul. Aged in his seventies, he has witnessed almost ten regimes collapse and new regimes rise to power through armed rebellion. If given the chance, he will fondly recall the time when King Zaher Shah was in power as King of Afghanistan – he returns to the memory now, his eyes softening.

"The quality of life was so much better then than it is now, Zemar. Afghanistan was a diverse country. Hindus, Sikhs, and even Jewish minorities – they all lived in Afghanistan peacefully. Whenever our Hindu or Sikh neighbors had a wedding they would hold the ceremony for seven

nights, and all of their non-Hindu or Sikh neighbors would be invited to attend. But one night was reserved just for other, non-Hindu Afghans. On this night, they would perform their best traditional dances and music as a way of showcasing their culture. And then the king was ousted from power in 1973, and a destructive factional war followed ... since then, Afghanistan has not known peace.”

Zemar purchases some eggs, leaves the shop and heads home against the darkening sky. He stops in front of the old wooden door with its gender-specific knockers; the right one for men, the left one for conservative Muslim women. He gently taps with the right door knocker.

A soft voice. “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Nilofar.”

Nilofar recognizes her husband’s voice, she opens the door and scolds him for being late.

He nods. “Let me come in. I’ll tell you everything. But first, tell me what we are having for supper – I’m starving.”

“Potato soup,” she shrugs. It’s the only food they can readily afford.

Inside, Zemar’s daughter Fatima reaches out and hugs him tightly. She is five years old and has curly hair. The little girl, her father’s favorite, laughed as she hung around his neck, delighting in the familiar scent that wafted from his whiskers. She kissed his face, which was flushed from bending down and radiated tenderness. Her father gently held her back as she loosened her grip and prepared to run off again. Today, like her mother, she is wearing a pink and green dress. Zemar thinks they looked like hope – like springtime.

He goes to his room, furnished with an Afghan rug and a mattress. Nilofar goes to prepare the food, but Fatima lingers. “I missed you today. Where were you all day?”

“Let me change out of these clothes. Then we’ll talk,” smiles Zemar.

He closes the door. He takes off his clothes carefully, hanging them up in the wardrobe. He puts on gray Afghan clothes and goes to his library. He has reserved the largest room in the house for this. A white chair sits in the corner next to the window, a small table in front of it. There are some books, a pack of paper, a pen. The books on the table have passed through many hands and some are faded from use. The rest of the books are stacked on shelves around the room.

Fatima used to play with the neighbor’s daughters, but it’s been a long time since they left the country. Being from the Panjshir province of Afghanistan, they were more afraid of the Taliban than most in this area. The Panjshir was the one province that had remained free of the Taliban during their previous stint in power, and the Taliban had been especially cruel to Panjshiris this

time around, quickly imprisoning thousands and killed untold others. Zemar's neighbors had always said that if the Taliban returned, they would leave the country at any cost. Today, they are nowhere to be seen. He shuts his eyes, remembering how on August 15, 2021, the Taliban took over Kabul and the next day their Panjshiri neighbor disappeared. Some in their area claimed they had fled to Kabul Airport like the thousands of others who raced there in the hope of escaping the Taliban's harsh rule and potential retribution. As he has done countless times since that fateful day, Zemar hopes they made it to safety.

When dinner is ready, Nilofar brings it to the hall of the house and calls Zemar and Fatima. Together, they sit on a mattress in front of the tablecloth, laid on a rug. They start to eat.

Zemar looks up, eyes warm. "Do you remember," he says to Nilofar, "how my family repeatedly sent our best representatives to knock on your door, asking for your hand in marriage? This was six years ago," he told a wide-eyed Fatima, "when your mother's family lived near us in Khair Khana, District 11. That's in the north of Kabul."

"And what did Mommy say?" asks the little girl.

Nilofar stares into the distance, dreaming. As Zemar twirls his spoon around the bowl, the memories return to flood his mind.

They had come from different ethnic backgrounds -- he was Pashtun and she was Tajik - and her family had been hesitant to accept his family's proposal, citing the cultural differences between their communities. Zemar could still remember the look on the faces of Nilofar's parents when they rejected his proposal for the sixth time. Insistent on retaining their traditions, they were of the belief that Pashtuns hit their wives and would often remarry multiple times. A neighbor of the time, Haji Farid, had contributed much to Zemar's in-laws' perception. Every morning Haji would confidently step out of his house, straightening his coat and adjusting his Azar band before running his fingers through his reddish-brown dyed beard. He would call for his butlers, Sefatullah and Mirwais, then put on his yellow coat and black long turban before stepping out. The sound of Haji's new shoes could be heard as he walked. As he passed by, his neighbors would respectfully acknowledge him as 'Haji', recognizing his prestigious title, which he proudly embraced, despite not having made the journey to Mecca. His only spiritual pilgrimage had been to the local shrine in Jalalabad with his mother after his father died in his youth. Following his father's passing, Farid along with his mother had travelled to Kabul to join his uncle, a well-known merchant known as Haji Shepon Gardiwal. As part of Pashtun culture Haji Shepon married Farid's mother. But after a while Farid's mother died and then After the death of Haji Shepon , who had no heir of his own, Haji Farid inherited his fortune and his honorable title in Kabul. From his modest beginnings in Jalalabad, he had built a new and impressive life.

In less than two years, Haji Farid had married four times. However, his home life was plagued by discord, with frequent arguments with his wives that often culminated in unfortunate outbursts of violence. His wives were beaten and whipped for going out without his permission, for not wearing their Hijab properly or for failing to become pregnant. This made his neighbors, especially his Tajik neighbors, look down on him. The lack of children cast a shadow over his marriages, his angst compounded by the advice of friends to consider yet another marriage. This was an idea Haji Farid rejected, not wanting to further entangle his life and knowing, after marrying four times, that the reason for his childlessness might lie with him.

Fatima frowns, perplexed by this story development. Nilofar suppresses a smile. "Could you please pass the bread?" Zemar hands it over, conscious of his wife's beauty. It was hard not to feel self-conscious sitting next to her. Tall and slender, with piercing blue eyes that sparkle in the light, a round face, and a straight nose. She is 28 years old – almost seven years younger than him. He takes in her jet black hair, cascading down her back, and her smooth, creamy skin, unable to shake the feeling that fate brought them together for a reason.

After dinner, Nilofar excuses herself to go wash the dishes. Zemar sits alone on the mattress, lost in thought. Then he sees it – a small piece of paper, tucked under the mattress.

He reaches for it, unfolding it carefully. After reading it he feels stunned. Confused. It is a poem, a love letter, written in Nilofar's elegant handwriting; it is a stanza from a Rumi poem. His wife reads Rumi in her free time. But why would she write this now?

Zemar's mind races. A year after they married, Nilofar completed her studies and graduated from the faculty of Economics at Kabul University. Before getting married, she was worried whether Zemar would allow her to finish her studies and pursue her dream job. He had made it clear that he would not want to limit her ambitions and dreams. At that time. All of Zemar's thoughts were focused on Nilofar. "If she marries me, I will be the luckiest man in the world!" he used to dream.

He would often wander in the alley near her house for hours on end, in the hopes of seeing her and simply saying: "Salam, how are you?"

Back in their mud house, in their present, the past flashes away from Zemar's eyes like a movie that has come to an end. He looks up to find Nilofar sitting beside him. "Salam, how are you?" he mutters. Nilofar looks at Zemar she glances at him murmuring something in his lips, "how was your day" she asks.

Zemar starts to tell her about his day, but avoids her eyes. He looks at his phone.

He doesn't know how to talk about the letter. Instead, he tries to give his wife some snapshots from his day.

"Around noon, as the sun reached its zenith, I found myself strolling through the busy streets of Mandavi. The air was thick with the aroma of spices and the sounds of chatter filled the air. Life was unfolding before my eyes, Nilofar, in all its vibrant chaos. I set off towards Mandavi, Kabul's old bazaar.

The three- to four-story buildings in this area are constructed in a traditional style and line the winding narrow streets and cul-de-sacs, which lead to additional three- or four-story markets. The Mandavi Bazaar features covered streets and domed halls. Nearby, there are older buildings, including the Pule-Kheshti Mosque, which is one of the most impressive structures in the city, adorned with turquoise-colored domes and minarets.

"I saw a group of boys who were selling gum and loose cigarettes. I barely avoided colliding with a motorbike that had an entire family riding on it - the father, mother, son, and daughter were all leaning to one side as they took a turn. They had wrapped their mouths with handkerchiefs to protect themselves from the exhaust fumes. It looked like a family of brigands on the move!

"On the side of the road, I saw a few old men wearing faded brown Shalwar Kamiz, stacking straw baskets high with ripening fruits. There were also a couple of merchants sitting in front of their open-air store, brushing away flies as they worked on goods. Behind them, I noticed the earth dipping into a smoldering dump where two small children were running after a scrawny black hen. They were slipping in the mud and cornhusks and tree leaves, squealing with pleasure. There were vehicles of all kinds on the road - cars, motorcycles, tricycles, rickshaws, and buses - all filled to twice their capacity. A procession of wheels and limbs all fighting for space in the midafternoon heat."

Nilofar sits forward, her green eyes searching his face. "It sounds like you saw a lot today, Zemar. Then what happened?"

Zemar looks away. "Amidst the bustle, a commotion caught my attention. A group of men with long turbans and long beards were gathered at the street corner. It was the Taliban. They ordered the crowd to gather for prayer at the nearby mosque."

"And what did you do?"

"I just kept watching. As I made my way through the crowd, I came up hard against a Talib. He pointed a finger at me. 'Where are you going in such a hurry?' he said. 'Didn't you understand what we said?'

'I did understand,' I said. 'But I have already prayed in another mosque today.' 'So you don't understand,' he snapped. 'Do you want us to arrest you?'

I didn't want to make the Talib angrier, so I went into the mosque. As I entered I said, 'Why are we compelled to repeat the prayers we have already just performed?' and others in the mosque murmured their agreement, expressing the same dissatisfaction. It seems that a lot of them, both locals and travelers, had been obliged to pray yet again. Some complained they were on their second round of noon prayers, while others were on their third. I completed my noon prayers for the second time, exited the mosque and kept walking.