

Maybe One Day

J. Malcolm Garcia

A fghan police officer Said Amir doesn't know how long he'll guard Farkhunda Malikzada's home. After her murder, her family received death threats. They were accused of being atheists and fled Kabul. Amir heard about Farkhunda's death from his younger brother. It upset him that this would happen in Afghanistan, a young woman beaten to death, dragged and burned. He couldn't look at photos of her that appeared on Facebook after she had been assaulted by a mob. Her battered and bleeding face. Her stunned look. Her palpable fear. He could not believe something like this would happen. She was a good girl. She wanted to be a teacher. He believes her death is a metaphor for the insecurity that has taken over Afghanistan. What happened to Farkhunda could happen to anybody. Get out with your family, his friends tell him. The threat is great.

September 2015. The editors at Progressive Magazine and The National Catholic Reporter have asked me, a freelance reporter, to write about families leaving Afghanistan because of the rise in violence. I have worked regularly in Kabul, the capital, since 2001. Through news and human rights reports, I know that indiscriminate bombings and shootings have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians. Taliban fighters control wide swaths of the country and U.S. officials admit that mounting casualties among Afghan National Army soldiers are unsustainable. As a result of insurgent gains, more than forty thousand Afghans have sought sanctuary in Europe, the third largest refugee group entering the continent. Syrians and Eritreans make up the largest groups of refugees.

The killing of Farkhunda Malikzada on March 19, 2015, had also galvanized many Afghans to leave for the sake of their children, especially daughters. She had been wrongly accused of burning pages from the Koran in a shrine near downtown. The false accusation was enough to set off the mob that killed her. I did not see the videos of Farkhunda's death posted on Facebook but I did see photographs of her battered face as she pleaded for her life. She was just twenty-seven but looked much younger. Her hijab had been torn off her head and her hair hung limp and askew over her face. She looked dazed, fearful, confused. Police officers stepped in and fired warning shots, and some people in the crowd encouraged her assailants to desist. The police pulled and pushed Farkhunda onto the corrugated metal roof of a nearby building in a failed effort to get her to safety but Farkhunda fell, or was shoved, back into the crowd and the police backed off. After she died, her killers dragged her body from the back of a Toyota hatchback, dumped the corpse in a dry patch of the Kabul River and set it on fire.

I accept the assignment and call Zabiullah Fazly, an Afghan colleague in Kabul who has helped me on previous trips as a translator. He knows many people intent on leaving Afghanistan. Together we make a list of potential interviews. Then I book my flight.

Now, three weeks later, Zabiullah picks me up at Kabul International Airport. As we drive to my hotel, The Park Palace Guest House near city center, I roll down my window and the dust from the street and the shouts of vendors and the heavy, plodding sound of donkeys pulling carts past storefronts made from mud, and the noise of cars and belching trucks and slow-moving traffic rushes upon me combining with the intense heat and I think, I'm back in Kabul, as if I'd never left and my life in the U.S. a mere twenty-four hours earlier seems to have been

conjured from some other time. Zabiullah laughs when I tell him how I feel. He reminds me that I can enter and leave Afghanistan as I please. He, however, cannot. He tried once and failed.

It had been a simple plan: In November 2014, Zabiullah's wife, Sweetra, was pregnant with their first child. They knew a smuggler with contacts in Italy. He got Sweetra a counterfeit passport. Sweetra would leave for Rome and have the baby there, making him an Italian citizen. Then she would send for Zabiullah. Borrowing money from family and friends, they paid the smuggler six thousand dollars.

Zabiullah drove Sweetra to Kabul Airport the morning of her departure. They tried to stay calm so no one would suspect what they were up to. Don't cry, Zabiullah told Sweetra, or security will know. He watched her board a plane to Dubai without mishap. From there, after a long layover, she'd fly to Italy. Zabiullah returned home and waited for her to call him. When she did, Sweetra was crying. He thought she just missed her family but it was much worse than that. Airport security in Dubai had detained her. She was about to board the plane to Rome when a guard pulled her aside, took her passport and walked her into a room with only a table and two chairs. Who made this? Where did you get it? the guard asked, waving the passport. He spoke Italian and then English. Sweetra insisted the passport was legitimate. The guard kept her in the room for hours before he put her on a flight back to Kabul. He never told her what he found suspicious about the passport.

—Don't ever try this again, he warned her.

Zabiullah called the smuggler.

—You have to do something, he said.

—I have connections. Don't worry.

—I don't want her taken off the plane in handcuffs.

—Don't worry, the smuggler said.

Zabiullah remained worried. He had seen people arrested for drugs on TV, shackled from head to foot, and he feared Sweetra would be removed from the plane like a criminal. He felt as if he had lost everything. He had expected to meet Sweetra in Rome. Now, she was returning twenty-four hours after she had left.

The smuggler picked her up at the airport. He paid off the necessary people so he could take her directly from the plane rather than walk through the airport with the police. When they got outside he called Zabiullah.

—I'm here. I have your wife.

Zabiullah finishes his story and we drive in silence. Then he curses. I glance at him. He's looking in the rearview mirror. I turn around and see a policeman waving us over. Zabiullah stops and reaches for his registration in the glove compartment. The officer gets out of his car and walks to my window. Ignoring Zabiullah, he asks for my passport. I give it to him. He thumbs through a few pages before he drops it back on my lap and gestures for us to go.

—Why do you come here, he shouts as we start to pull away, when everyone else is leaving?

Zubair Fazly, a cousin of Zabiullah's father, lives near the Park Palace. We stop by his house on the way to the hotel. He doesn't meet us at the door but instead stands at the top of a flight of stairs and waves for us to come up. He suffers intense back pain and wears a back brace, he explains. Afghans always experience some kind of physical pain, he believes, as a result of stress. Hurt your back and a man feels older. He does not appear as old as he sounds. His black hair and beard carry only the slightest hints of gray and despite his pain, he stands erect, but his lined face and the sadness in his eyes suggest a troubled, restless mind.

His back did not hurt in Russia and later Germany. Those countries presented challenges, of course, but not stress. At least not the stress he knows today. A moment does not go by when he doesn't think of his life in Moscow and Europe. He had left Afghanistan in Taliban time when he was much younger and willing to take chances, and there were as many problems in Afghanistan in those days as there are today. The vice police with their questions: Why don't you have a beard? Why don't you cut your hair? Why do you have TV and videos? He'd had enough of this nonsense and the endless days of sitting in tea shops because he had no work. He thought of living in Pakistan or Iran but everyone was as poor there as they were in Kabul. Russia, he'd heard, had many opportunities and he felt the country owed Afghanistan after it invaded and then left ten years later abandoning Afghans to fight amongst themselves. Had they not left, there would not have been a civil war and the Taliban would not have risen to power.

He packed a few clothes, some water and bread and spare shoes. The first leg of his journey took him to Iran and then Turkmenistan. From there, he had just enough money to catch a train to Moscow. He worked twelve-hour days in restaurants, shops, anywhere he could find work. Shopkeepers asked him, What can you do? Whatever you give me, he answered.

Zubair never had money for anything but food. For an apartment, he rented a storage container. It was damn cold in winter but cheap. In the bazaars, he met an Afghan who told him he was leaving Moscow for Europe. How are you going? Zubair wanted to know. How much will it cost? Twenty-five hundred dollars, the man told him. Zubair didn't have that kind of money but he asked to be introduced to the man's smuggler so he'd have a contact for the future. The Afghan introduced him to one man who turned him over to another man who turned him over to another man and then another and another. He met more than a dozen intermediaries who

suspected he might be an undercover cover policeman. After he allayed their suspicions, yet another man drove him to a shed miles outside Moscow and introduced him to the smuggler. The smuggler, wrongly assuming Zubair had already paid, told him to join a group of migrants standing behind him.

They left for Germany in June 1998 on foot and walked west through woods and mountains. The smuggler gave them nothing to eat. Zubair heard the calls of animals and was afraid. He squeezed water from grass and plants and licked it off his fingers. Men and women who fell behind fended for themselves. It snowed and six people froze to death. Somewhere between Ukraine and Czechoslovakia, the migrants sank in snow up to their waists. An infant died and her mother buried her in the snow. She was ready to abandon her two other small boys before Zubair offered to help. He carried one of her boys on his shoulders and took the other one by the hand. The woman had no husband. Widow? Did she leave her husband? Zubair didn't know and didn't ask. He was afraid one wrong question, one wrong move, and she'd lose her mind entirely. One morning, he woke up and learned she had gone into the woods with her kids.

The migrants continued without her. Zubair walked bent over, almost crawling, his feet were so sore. At the Czech border, they rested for three days. Then they crossed and walked along a road, running and hiding in ditches when they saw the lights of cars. The smuggler took them to a house where they changed into fresh clothes and shoes and then they resumed walking. Their trek led them through woods to a river where they got in a raft and rowed for one hour before they reached the opposite shore. Zubair asked questions. What's the name of this river? Where are we? But the smuggler said nothing. They hiked through more woods until they crossed into Germany.

—You're on your own now, the smuggler told the group.

He turned and left the way they had come. Zubair collapsed with exhaustion and other migrants fell around him. Those who remained standing staggered like zombies. When a police officer approached them, they no longer had the energy to run. We're Afghans, the migrants told the officer, and he radioed for help. More police came and they carried some of the migrants on stretchers to ambulances and a few of the exhausted men and women opened their eyes and asked if they were alive.

Zubair lived in a detention camp for six years and shared a room with four other Afghans. A camp volunteer taught German. When Zubair walked past shops, he asked, Do you need help? Just like he did in Russia. Do you speak German? Yes, he lied, a little bit. What can you do? Whatever you give me. OK, come wash dishes. The jobs paid poorly but since he was not a citizen Zubair did not complain.

Germany left him speechless. He could not help but compare it to Afghanistan. The roads were paved, the buildings sturdy and not made of mud. Traffic flowed. The police did not ask him about the length of his beard. Germans struck him as very relaxed. The country had many laws — speed limits, no litter, small things that produced an order he had not known in Afghanistan.

Zubair shows me a photo. In the picture, he stands in a mall, mirror balls suspended from the ceiling. The bright lights cast a gold sheen across the tile floor and glass counters of a jewelry display. He wears a jean jacket, sunglasses, a shirt unbuttoned to his chest and tight blue jeans. At that time, he worked at Hotel Durant in Munich cleaning rooms. The hotel had thirty-five floors. He had just been promoted to supervisor of maintenance. It was always very busy, especially during soccer matches when many tourists checked into the hotel to watch the

games. He remembers a flower shop and nearby cafe. Stone paths led to seating in a garden. Guests sat under umbrellas and ordered salads, wraps, pizzas and Mexican food.

He sent money to his wife but she grew impatient. She wanted him to send for her. When he didn't, she showed his photo to the German embassy in Kabul. He has escaped Afghanistan, she told an official, and left me. He was in the process of getting his citizenship when the German police arrested him in 2006.

On the flight back to Kabul, Zubair thought he would lose his mind. At home he wept and punched the walls. He fought with his wife. I was saving money to send for you, he yelled at her. You have ruined our lives. He sunk into a depression. He slept alone. He woke every morning impatient for the day to end so he could go back to sleep and dream of Germany.

After the mob killed Farkhunda, he thought, What the hell is going on? Who will die next? Although he no longer speaks to his wife, he worries about her. If she goes to the market and someone accuses her of something, what will happen? Will she too be beaten to death? Will they come for him?

He has to get out. Return to Germany or somewhere else he can live in peace, but he has no job. Every plan no matter how simple depends on money. He'll see what he can save. He can't stay in Kabul.

The shopkeepers of Timor Shahe near downtown Kabul still talk about Farkhunda. Their small businesses surround the yellow, two-story mosque on Andarabi Road where the mob attacked her. The Kabul River, less a river than a wide sewer where women wash clothes and refuse lies in fetid piles for opium addicts to pick through, steams in the heat now as it did that day.

The doors of Dunja Optics open to the crowded sidewalk. A slow day, the sun blinking off the dusty counters where the owner, Abdul Whaham, displays an assortment of glasses. He had just opened when Farkhunda was attacked. He heard yelling and hurried outside to see what the commotion was about. A crowd moved toward him and he stepped back inside. More people rushed over from across the street. He closed the doors to his shop and watched the crowd shouting and shoving down the street. He saw a woman's face covered with blood, her clothes torn. Men tied her to the back of a car and dragged her on the street, people striking her with sticks and kicking her as the car raced forward, and other men with cell phones filmed her being dragged.

Kill her! Kill her! men shouted.

They threw her body in the riverbed, collected sticks and started a fire over her. He can't say how long it took for the police and ambulance to arrive. Their cars could barely move through the crowds, so many people converging on the river while others leaned over the guardrails parallel to the river and watched men hitting her body with sticks. So much blood. He got sick and hurried back to his shop. He heard men shouting that she had blasphemed Islam. That she was an atheist. That she was a Christian. Come hit her and get your reward in Paradise. Abdul saw black smoke rising from her body as they burned her. The next day he returned to work as if nothing had happened, but something had. Everything seemed the same but it was all different, a shared secret no one wanted to discuss. Abdul felt involved somehow although all he did was watch. Still, he could not escape a sense of his complicity. He washed his hands but felt dirty. He doesn't understand. Afghans take care of girls more than they do boys. They care for girls as if they were a precious stone.

The next morning, Zabiullah meets me in the courtyard of the Park Palace. I recall being here just twelve months earlier chatting it up with expats from Britain, Germany and India. Most of them were contractors of one sort or another. They occupied a majority of the guest house's one hundred rooms. I'd listen to them shout at waiters insisting on more coffee, more kabob, more of something now, while feral cats fed off scraps they tossed to on the ground, and the cats ate hurriedly, scattering as waiters rushed forward in their rumpled white shirts and black slacks that they often wore to bed so they would be available 24/7, leaping up from mattresses in the small rooms they shared in the main building, Yes, sir, Yes sir, how may I help you? Erect and alert and subservient, standing almost at attention at the now empty and dust-covered tables around me.

—Good morning, brother! Zabiullah shouts above the *whump, whump* of army helicopters flying low overhead. Because of recent bombings, Kabul government officials travel by air rather than drive. The whump, whump noise of rotor blades has become a constant and overwhelming irritant. After the helicopters pass, Zabiullah tells me about a friend—Jamshid—who left Kabul for Russia but returned. He suggests he'd be a good interview and I agree. Taking out his cell phone, Zabiullah calls him and makes arrangements to pick him up.

Before we leave, Zabiullah gets on Facebook. Months earlier he started an account he calls "Afghanistan Security" to record news and social media reports about the latest insurgent attacks. He posts new information from notes scrawled on a scrap of paper:

Kabul, September 8 at 2:15 p.m.: A magnetic bomb exploded and injured one Police Officer and destroyed a few vehicles in the area. It was attached to a car.

Kabul, September 11 at 5:15 p.m: An explosion took place in Airport Residential Apartments.

Ghazni Province, September 14 at 10 a.m: A group of armed men attacked Ghazni's prison and almost 400 prisoners have escaped the jail.

—What's a magnet bomb? I asks him, reading over his shoulder.

—It's an explosive device that insurgents attach to trucks and cars.

—We should check your car.

—With you here, I will every day, Zabiullah assures me.

We pick up Jamshid and drive an hour to Qargha Lake. It's Friday, the equivalent of Sunday in the United States. No stores or tea shops will be open. The lake will be as good a place as any to spend the morning.

Parking near the shore, we get out and gaze out at the placid water. On a nearby road, cars lurch through valleys of ruined pavement toward a distant hilltop destination. Brown mountains flecked with snow pierce a hazy horizon. Thin, leafless shadows cast by spare trees point toward pitted dirt paths that we follow down and where vendors sell fruit, flies swarming the discarded rinds, and we settle in a sliver of shade. Children run toward the water and scream delightedly when waves lap their bare toes. A boy asks us to pay for the spot we chose to sit. Jamshid waves him away.

—The poor will try to make money any way they can, he says.

The sun shines on the boy as he hurries off and the lake sparkles, the light leaping off the water in glittering patterns, and a man fishes from a boat amid the dancing light as if a cluster of faeries has burst upon him. Jamshid opens a cracker tin and we pass it between us.

—This is the only place for sightseeing in Kabul, Jamshid comments, sipping from a can of Red Bull. We have this lake and the zoo. We don't have anything else to do in Kabul besides these two things and avoiding dying in a bomb blast.

A young couple sitting on a plastic mat not far from us discreetly kiss and then glance our way. They must have concluded that we're watching them because they get up, take their mat and give us a resentful look before they walk to a more inconspicuous spot. Jamshid rolls his eyes.

—Afghanistan is so backward, he complains. Everyone is worried about being watched. And we are watched. Once I was asked by a guy at work, 'Do you have a rug to pray on?' I said, No, I don't. 'Why not?' the guy said. I told him my prayers don't need a rug and my praying doesn't need an exact time each day either. The guy told a friend of mine he will kill me for desecrating Islam. For what? Because we disagree? I avoid him at work now. These guys just do what they do to do it. They don't know why. Farkhunda is a perfect example of that. Do you know about her?

—Yes, I say.

—Those guys who killed her, they are the same as the guy who wants to kill me. They didn't know why. They're brainwashed.

Jamshid had been checking his Facebook messages when Farkhunda was murdered. He read posts about it but didn't know whether to believe it. Maybe it was just rumor. Then he saw the photos of her beating. Oh my God, he thought. He wept. For what reason did they do this? Those men were like the Taliban. Worse. Even though they are young. Even though they wear blue jeans like he does. They hurt from the old ways of their parents and their interpretation of Islam and from the anger of having nothing. They behave without thinking. Like saying prayers. They don't know why. They just pray. Pray in Arabic and they don't even understand what they're saying. There is no end to the fighting. Why do people make weapons, sell guns? Because they don't want to end the insecurity. They want to fight and get more power.

He stops talking when he sees Zabiullah aim his camera at him. He taps out a smoke from a pack of Esse Black cigarettes and strikes a pose, showing Zabiullah his profile, unsmiling, chin

jutting toward the lake, the lean, chic cigarette raised to his lips. Zabiullah takes a few snaps. Then they huddle together and upload the pics to Facebook. Jamshid posts them immediately and shows them to me. The expression on his face, imitation sultry male model, makes me swallow a laugh.

I'm impressed how, in just a few minutes, we've gone from the tragedy of Farkhunda to selfies and Facebook. Like the men he criticizes, Jamshid, too, acts without thinking. Yes, he was disgusted by Farkhunda's death but not so much that Facebook hadn't diverted his attention. And yet, the posting of his photo provides only a temporary distraction from the tragedy that is Afghanistan. At twenty-eight, Jamshid has never known peace. He remembers the Taliban but the memories do not weigh on him because he was just a boy then. The present worries him; however, the rising instability and lack of jobs make him fear for his future. He's married. He wants to raise a family but not in Afghanistan.

—Did Zabiullah tell you I left for Russia in 2014?

—No.

—Well, I did.

He pauses and stares at the lake. Clouds drift in, darkening the water with a patchwork of shade. Jamshid lights another smoke and begins talking without taking his eyes off the water.

He had left Kabul through the most conventional of means: a travel agency. A sign in the window advertised visa applications for Turkey, Iran, Russia and Pakistan. In Afghanistan such promotions provide cover for some travel agents to connect customers with smugglers. An agent told Jamshid he knew a smuggler in Moscow. He'll sponsor you, the agent said. Jamshid paid the travel agent fifteen hundred dollars for the connection and the Moscow smuggler three thousand dollars. He asked Zabiullah to join him but Zabiullah didn't have money to pay the smuggler.

Over a period of months, the Moscow smuggler filed the forms necessary to claim Jamshid as a cousin easing his entry into Russia. Jamshid then applied for a visa. He also bought a roundtrip ticket to avoid arousing suspicion. He flew to Moscow in November 2014. He spent his first night in Russia with the smuggler. He called friends in Afghanistan and apologized for not saying goodbye. He explained he would have started crying.

On his second day in Moscow, the smuggler introduced him to another smuggler who, he said, could get him into Europe. This smuggler told Jamshid he would have to wait six months until the snow cleared. They spoke in the smuggler's electronic shop, surrounded by swivel fans, power cords and coils of wire. The trip would take four or five days and cost \$8,500, the smuggler said. Jamshid would be one of many migrants the smuggler would take by van into Austria and he'd have to bring his own food supplies. Once in Austria, they would walk until they reached the German border. Winter made the trip more dangerous. There was the cold. They'd be making their way not on roads but through woods. The trees would be bare and they would risk being seen. Better to wait until spring, the smuggler advised, when the woods would be dense with foliage. Do I wait or leave? Jamshid wondered.

After one week in Moscow, the first smuggler told Jamshid he could no longer stay with him and the second smuggler said he had no room for him. Where will I stay? Jamshid asked. The smuggler shrugged. Jamshid's problems were not his. With no good options, Jamshid returned to Kabul with the intention of leaving again as soon as he raised enough money.

—Everyone here thinks of their own life and how to make it better, he says. Nobody pays any attention to other people. The war makes people think only of themselves, of surviving. No one knows how long they will be alive. They leave for work, they don't know what will happen. You don't have a chance here. You're either not working or you're working but you could get

killed in a bomb explosion. I want to feel free and walk free and not be afraid. I want to be happy. That would mean a lot to me.

We finish our crackers, get up and walk to the car. Zabiullah drives us back onto the highway, blasts of black diesel exhaust from passing trucks replacing the cool lake air. Shuttered vendor stalls stand like the vacant buildings of a ghost town and dogs jog down the sidewalks, pausing to rummage through garbage floating in gutters, competing with boys scavenging through the same refuse.

We've not gone far when an Afghan policeman waves for us to stop. Jogging to the driver's side, the officer asks Zabiullah to take him to a bus station. Afghan police earn little and often stop cars and request rides when they're off duty. Turn them down, you pay a fine. I'm not in a hurry and I certainly don't need the hassle of upsetting an Afghan cop.

—Get in, Zabiullah tells him.

The cop climbs in the back seat and introduces himself. Like many Afghans he has just one name, Naim. He's starting five days of leave. He got a ride into Kabul from the police station in Sarobi in eastern Afghanistan, about a five-hour drive, and now needs to catch a bus to his home in Bagram, more than sixty miles away.

He's earned his leave, he tells us. One week earlier, he and other members of the Afghan police, Afghan National Army and American Special Forces participated in a firefight in Uzben, a village near the Tora Bora mountains close to the Pakistan border. Coalition forces lost Osama bin Laden there in 2001.

By the time Naim reached Uzben, insurgents had set fire to trees. American soldiers looked through binoculars but could see nothing beyond the burning trees. It's safe, they said.

Then Taliban fighters swept down from three different directions through the smoke. Naim ran. He saw police officers and some Americans gunned down. Naim hid in the woods until dark, the heat from the fire searing his face.

At ten, maybe eleven at night, Naim crept out of the woods and made his way to the police station in Sarobi, just outside of Uzben. The dispatcher on duty nearly fainted. I thought you were dead, he told Naim. I'm not, Naim said. We've told your family you're dead, the dispatcher said; I'm sorry for this. Naim punched him in the nose. Now it is my turn to apologize, he said.

He stayed at the station two nights. He called his family but his wife thought he was someone pretending to be Naim because the Naim she knew was dead. By the third day, Naim no longer cared about the Taliban and told his commander he had to see his family. The commander gave him two bodyguards and he drove home to Bagram. When his wife opened the door, she screamed, You're a ghost! Naim insisted he was not a spirit and walked toward her and she began to cry and wail and sank to the ground. He looked around his house. The tables were filled with flowers. A coffin took up a table. Everything had been prepared for his funeral. He started to cry. For two days, he stayed with a friend until his wife believed that he was indeed Naim. After two weeks, he returned to Sorobi and resumed his duties.

—Have you thought of leaving Afghanistan? Zabiullah asks.

—No, Naim says. If I don't have money to get to a bus stop, how will I have money to get to Europe?

—Good point, Jamshid agrees.

—I had the money one year but still I could not get out, Zabiullah says.

When we reach the bus station near downtown, Zabiullah parks beside a table where three men sit drinking tea beneath the awning of a restaurant. Two yellow buses pocked with rust stand at the curb low to the pavement on nearly deflated tires. A few feet away a bearded man shouts, Why don't you accept Islam? Do you not want to go to Paradise? Why do you dress like Westerners? Are you not Afghan? Are you not Muslim? The Holy Koran is the ultimate book of Allah. It's the one true book. Like technology, the Holy Koran is the final update to everything that preceded it. Do you believe the other books are irrelevant now? Whoever does not believe in the Holy Koran is not following Mohammad and will not go to paradise. The Holy Koran is the last book. No one has the right to change it. People who don't have faith in the Koran don't go to Paradise. The day of doom is for everyone. God will judge us all. I am telling you this because on the day of judgement I will be asked by God if I told the people about the holy book. So now I have tried. People will be divided between heaven and hell. I will be rewarded with good things.

The bus drivers listen to him rant. They notice Naim, Zabiullah, Jamshid and me watching him. Crazy man, a driver named Mukhtar mutters. He gestures for us to join him and offers us tea. We sit. He looks at his watch. Slow day. It may pick up because many people are escaping Afghanistan. He's had passengers who have sold everything they have to buy a ticket to Iran, including other bus drivers. He knows of two drivers who just reached Europe. A lot return. They spend all their money and then they get caught, deported. Iran, he's heard, is not kind to refugees but some people never give up. They collect money and go again. Mostly couples or single men. He rarely sees single women leaving. He gets only good girls on his bus, girls who travel with their husbands. He feels sorry for them when they don't make it. His brother,

Mohammad, sitting across from us, tried to get out but got caught in Turkey and deported. He wants to try again.

—You're crazy, Mukhtar tells him.

—You're crazy to stay, Mohammad responds.

Mohammad left Kabul in 2014 after he graduated from Bakh University in Mazār-e Sharīf, a city hours north of Kabul. He had grown tired of living day-by-day and by chance. The chance of being struck by a bullet. The chance of being killed in a bomb blast. He survived a bombing in May in Mazār that killed a small boy. Someone had placed an explosive in front of a pharmacy. The boy was walking past, pushing a cart when the bomb went off. At that moment, Mohammad decided to leave Afghanistan. He knew English. He did not have a wife or other obligations binding him to Kabul. He had no reason to stay. He hired a smuggler and the smuggler put him in a group of sixty-five Afghans fleeing to Europe. He knew some of them. They took a bus to Herat and then walked four hours through mountains to cross into Iran. A falling boulder mangled one man's foot and he was left behind. Another man fell but got up and kept walking. They carried bread and fruit with them and little more. Some of them threw away their food to lighten their loads. A driver the smuggler hired met them in Iran. Sixteen people squeezed into a car and so tightly that their faces turned red. Six others, including Mohammad, piled into the trunk. It was very hard to be inside the trunk. There were some holes so they could breathe but it was impossible to breathe well and it grew very hot. When Mukhtar asked him what it was like, Mohammad told him, If you want to know more, try it yourself. Twelve other people got in a second car. The rest shouldered their way into two other cars. The smuggler said it would take three days to reach Tehran. When they noticed a police checkpoint, everyone

scrambled out of the cars, spread out and crept forward on foot and waited for the smuggler to pass through the checkpoint. They got back into the cars, the smuggler shouting, Hurry, hurry! and drove on until the next checkpoint where they got out again. A few people lost their way each time they stopped and were left behind.

Iranian police caught the Afghans in Yazd, a small town outside Tehran. They had passed the main checkpoint but police were patrolling the road and intercepted them as they tried to reunite with the smugglers. The police spoke to them worse than a farmer beating a mule. They cursed and hit them and the migrants cried but did not resist or try to escape. They had accepted all the risks and knew capture was a possibility. Inshallah, they had said when they left Kabul, God willing we will reach Europe. God had not willed it and they were subdued in their failure. The police took them to a custom house where they worked unloading imported goods. After three days, they were taken to a camp for Afghan migrants near the border with Herat and fed once a day. The Iranians held migrants with no money indefinitely. Mohammad had nearly two thousand dollars. The police took it when they turned him over to Afghan police.

Now, Mohammad wakes up in the middle of the night furious with the way the Iranians treated him. As if he were illiterate, an idiot, an animal. He is twenty-one. He has a degree in economics. He stares into the dark and imagines himself as an animal in the Kabul zoo, unblinking, enraged, trapped.

Mukhtar grips his shoulder as if to shake away the memories of his failed flight. Mohammad looks down the road at the heat lines rivering the distance into murky waves. He intends to try again. One of his neighbors sold their house to pay a smuggler. Mohammad will go with him and twenty-one members of the man's family. He has heard that Denmark is accepting of refugees while Germany has begun to crack down.

—You're crazy, Mukhtar says. Our family is here.

—I will send for all of you later.

—It's too dangerous. Many are thrown into the sea. You have seen all these things on the news.

—I'm going, Mohammad says.

He looks at us.

—How about you? he says to Jamshid, Zabiullah and Naim.

They all shrug. Jamshid and Zabiullah tried but didn't succeed. Naim has no money to pay a smuggler. I feel bad for them. They must get exhausted thinking about it. Tired of dreams. Tired of plans. Everyone just wants out. They just want a visa. A piece of paper. That's all it takes.

Naim asks Mohammad which bus goes to Bagram. Mohammad tells him and Naim stands. He thanks Zabiullah for the ride. His light blue, sweat-stained uniform sags off his thin body and his sunken eyes droop with sleepless nights. He looks forward to seeing his family and forgetting for a while the risks of his job. He receives threatening phone calls from the Taliban. If he returns to Uzbekistan they will kill him. He avoids traveling outside of Sarobi.

—Good luck, Zabiullah tells him.

Naim shakes his hand. He won't let threats deter him. When so much could go wrong, it's important, he says, to keep his life simple.

Abdul Rahman teaches Sharia law at Bebe Ayesha-E-Sedeeqa in Kabul. Farkhunda attended his class for nine months. He recalls her as very eager. She walked to school and went right home. She had a good heart and always helped other students. Now, some of the other students are talking about leaving Afghanistan. Without her, they've lost their strength.

Like a prophet, Farkhunda spoke about right and wrong but many people didn't believe her, Abdul says. They wanted to live selfish lives. This has always been part of the history of Islam. Say the truth and people kill you. This is why Allah took her to the sky.

In the evening, following our afternoon at the lake, Zabiullah and I meet with his friend, Gety, at the guest house. A breeze tugs at her headscarf and she wears a sparkling blue blouse and black slacks as she sits with us in the courtyard. She smiles shyly, breaking into a nervous giggle when I introduce myself. She and Zabiullah exchange small talk. When she's ready to answer my questions, she turns very serious.

Every night, Gety says, she prays that the next day in Kabul will be better but it only gets worse. Everyone wants to leave, especially young people like her. They have no jobs and security is almost nonexistent. Her parents want Gety to go but of course they feel sorrow at the idea of losing their daughter, and they worry about what would happen to her alone in a country not her own. Gety has no idea when she'll leave or how she'll reach Europe. She might go to Iran then Turkey. Friends have told her that it takes thirty minutes to reach Greece by water from Istanbul. Finding a smuggler won't be hard. She's sure one of her relatives knows one. She'll pay a smuggler to get her out of Afghanistan and then she'll hire another smuggler and another, and another, a new smuggler each step of the way until she reaches her destination. At least that's how she sees her plan unfolding. She's sure she'll be traveling with other families. She'll have to bring her own food and water. She'll wear camo pants, a blouse, a face scarf, a hijab, and a jacket. She'll keep in touch with her family by Facebook. In Greece, she's heard migrants live in detention centers. They're asked where they want to go, Austria or Germany, and then they're told how to get there. Gety doesn't know where Austria and Germany are in Europe. She

presumes she'll learn the language, get educated and find a job. She'll bring makeup but use it only when she's settled and looking for work.

Up until now Gety has lived a fortunate life. After high school, she worked at TV stations but a colleague who shot commercials encouraged her to model. You're a good-looking lady, he said. You'll get a lot of work. She felt very nervous at first posing before a camera. When she started, maybe ten people knew who she was. Now, many do.

When she was young, she never realized how vulnerable a woman could be. She spent her days in school and always wore a white and blue uniform and black shoes. All the girls looked alike. After school they kept on their uniforms. Once she reached her teens, her parents allowed her to change into normal clothes after school. By then, the Taliban had been out of power and girls could wear blue jeans and Western-style tops. Women her parents' age disapproved. They said, You're not in Europe. Don't wear clothes like that. Under the Taliban, her mother told her, women had to wear body-length veils just to leave the house. The Taliban would follow them to see if their faces and feet were covered and lash them for the smallest infraction. Gety is too young to remember that time. She knows only the stories her mother tells her and the threat she herself faced just months earlier.

On a Friday night in January 2015, she caught a taxi home after work. The driver had not gone far when ten men and some boys blocked the car and began shouting at Gety. Who are you? Are you having sexual relations with this driver? Why are you traveling alone without a husband? They called her a whore and rocked the car and threw stones, breaking a passenger window. Glass and stones fell over her. The driver accelerated but the heavy traffic prevented him from moving very far and the men chased after him and other men joined them and although they were on foot they kept up.

Afraid they would reach her, Gety got out and ran. She fell and the men closed in. She got up and fled into a bakery. The mob pursuing her had grown and they lobbed rocks at the shop and the owner locked the doors and shouted at the enraged, distorted faces glaring at him through the windows until finally he called the police. An hour passed before an officer arrived. What did you do? he asked Gety. Nothing, she said. I just want to go home. That's all. The officer took her to a police station and called her parents. Her father arrived at one in the morning. A senior officer, however, told him Gety could not leave until the commanding officer ordered her release.

Hours later, the commander confronted Gety. He could not find the cab driver or anyone willing to confirm her story. He allowed her father to take her home but her home became another kind of jail. Her father would not let her leave the house for two months. Men won't blame a boy, he told her, but they'll say you're not a good girl. They'll shame you to me. After two months, Gety demanded to be let out of the house. I'm going crazy, she said. Her father relented. I'll take you wherever you need to go, he said. He drove her to work and picked her up. If she was running late, he beat her. She lived like this for a long time until she convinced her father that she had done nothing provocative that night and he finally let her go out alone.

Had she not escaped the mob, Gety is convinced she would have died like Farkhunda. She has nightmares. In her dreams, men hold her against a wall and tear at her clothes. Bullets strike her body but she does not die. She sees Farkhunda's face and then her own. She wakes up sweating and shaking, unable to fall back to sleep.

Her father thinks Farkhunda deserved to die. She would not have been killed had she been a good girl, he says. He had the old mind, the old point of view. The same is true with

some boys. They don't think in the modern way. They think like their parents. They live in the past, not in the future Gety hopes to reach.

Zabiullah and I walk Gety to the street and wave down a taxi. As we watch her leave, Zabiullah calls his uncle, a retired police officer. Zabiullah thinks he might know someone familiar with Gety's case. His uncle suggests we meet with an instructor at the Kabul Police Academy, Lt Gen. Habibullah Ranzour.

At the academy, a cadet leads us through a maze of dark halls to a corner office with a desk and two brown couches. A bare bulb hangs from the ceiling. Through a cobwebbed window above one of the sofas, I can see cadets in ill-fitting uniforms performing drills in a field and as I watch them march, Ranzour comes in and sits behind the desk and shuffles through papers as if Zabiullah and I aren't here. He stacks the papers in one corner. Then he looks at us for the first time, taking us in with his deep-set brown eyes. His green uniform clings to his body, sweat stains forming rings beneath his arms. He strokes his gray beard and shouts for someone to bring us tea. Motioning to one wall where the Afghan flag hangs, he points to framed photographs of police cadets, thirty of whom died in a bomb blast at the academy weeks before my arrival. They were about to graduate. Ranzour was home when the bomb exploded and rushed to the academy. Seeing his students in pieces—he has no words. He and other officers collected the bodies and sent them to a hospital but the hospital had no refrigeration system so the remains were transported to another hospital.

Ranzour does not know Gety or her case but what happened to her does not surprise him, not after Farkhunda. Unfortunately, Afghanistan has been at war for almost forty years, he explains. That much fighting turns people into monsters. They pick on those they believe are

weak. As a woman, Farkhunda was seen as weak. He's glad Gety escaped and sad for Farkhunda but not as sad as he was and still is for the dead cadets because unlike Farkhunda he knew them. He believes that after each dark day, God's light shines and that belief gives him the strength to do his duty and not dwell on bad thoughts. Some police, he knows, take money from drug dealers. Other officers with no skill get promoted because they have a relative in government. Injustice exists everywhere. The police officers who did not help Farkhunda chose not to involve themselves in a religious matter. People don't have the right to kill a woman but they have a right to their beliefs. When they killed Farkhunda, they were practicing their beliefs. It's not what Ranzour believes, but he was not there so he won't judge. If Farkhunda was a good girl, then she is in paradise and her family should be happy for her. If she was not, God will punish her as much as he will the terrorist.

Ranzour leans back in his chair and recalls a 2008 bombing in Kabul that killed a man from Denmark. He met the dead man's mother and told her that whoever killed her son was the enemy of all Afghans now. They kept in touch. She's helping him get a Danish visa. He will never leave Afghanistan but should he change his mind, he will live with her in Denmark.

Everyone, Ranzour believes, has the same destiny. One day they will all meet God and answer to him. God oversees everything. Afghanistan is a poor country that has been fighting for too long. War no longer affects Ranzour. There will be another bombing. There will be another Farkhunda. He lives each day waiting for his moment before God. When he and other officers come to work, they kneel and pray and tell God they look forward to dying and living in paradise. They are willing to die and will therefore never withdraw from confronting the enemy. For those officers who did nothing for Farkhunda, for those officers who accept bribes, for those

officers who have their positions through patronage, God will bring them together in the fight for Afghanistan or condemn them to an eternal death. God will hold them to account.

Khawaja Atiquallah, vice chancellor of Ayeshe Dorany, a high school for girls in Kabul, remembers Farkhunda as a simple girl who was also very curious and had a good sense of humor. She wanted to be famous and show off her knowledge of the Holy Koran, but she was just an average student in all her courses other than religion. In religion, she was excellent. She always mentioned Islam in her conversations and seemed to be searching for a deep truth but about what Khawaja does not know. Perhaps about women and their role in society. In Afghanistan, many people are Muslim in name only. Farkhunda practiced her faith and searched for the meaning of being a Muslim. Farkhunda was a very logical young woman who always engaged in debates without anger. She had a good mind and knew Islam better than most other students.

Her murder weighs heavily on Khawaja. To accuse her of defaming Islam was a lie. She hated NATO and the Americans. She would ask, Why are they here? Why have they conquered us? Maybe that is the reason she died. She became a target for the Americans. Khawaja thinks they might have done something to her. They would have known she was against foreigners. Any reasonable person would be opposed to people coming in and taking over their country.

As we leave Ranzour's office, Zabiullah receives a call from a friend, Naseer Ahmad. Naseer has just been approved for a U.S. visa because of his work as a translator for the U.S. military. We meet with him in a barber shop where Naseer waits to get his beard trimmed. Sweet smelling shampoos and hair sprays irritate the air with their odors.

Naseer tells us he learned English watching Hollywood movies starring Tom Cruise, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. He waited tables at Bella Italia, an Italian restaurant in Kabul frequented by Westerners, where he practiced his English. He began picking up side jobs that included translating for the U.S. military in 2005. He regrets his work for the Americans because now he must leave. People know he worked as a translator. He doesn't know how they knew but they do. Total strangers confront him and ask, Why did you help the Americans? You're an atheist. He has to be careful. Not just in Kabul but all around. He can't drive outside the city without security. If people suspect he was a translator, they will kill him. How would they find out? It doesn't matter. They would. Right now, he's parked on the street and that makes him nervous. He wonders if someone will attach a magnet bomb to his car. He's sick of being careful, weighing everything he does with the question, will this put me at risk of being killed? If I go to the store, if I walk with my wife, if I go outside, what will happen? It's like living in prison.

A few weeks ago in Jalalabad, he saw a policeman die. He was inspecting gutters for remote control devices. The gutters were clean. He searched through garbage on the road and a mine exploded. Naseer met the suspected bomber in Pulacharki prison.

—How do you work with the U.S. government? the prisoner asked him. Do you not believe in God?

—How do you guys kill civilians? Naseer countered.

—The U.S. is doing the same thing, the suspect shot back.

Naseer sighs after he recounts this debate. Everyone has a position. Everyone is a partisan. He's not going to kill someone if they disagree with him but a terrorist will. He hears there are psychos in America. They walk into churches and kill people the same as terrorists.

Maybe it's the same all over the world. He thinks he understands. If he had no work, he'd join the Taliban. Instead of dying a partial person he'd die a whole person as an insurgent because at least he'd have had a job. He has friends, lawyers and engineers, well-educated people, who are leaving. They don't have money and can't find work.

Zabiullah asks him about getting a visa but Naseer has nothing reassuring to tell him. He has a visa, yes, but now he needs a passport. He's walked to the passport office several times but the situation there is hopeless. The office opens at eight o'clock in the morning but people begin lining up at four. One time, Naseer waited four hours and still didn't get in. A passport costs one hundred dollars and takes forty-five days to process. He has a wife and child. They would need passports, too. That's three hundred dollars. If Naseer had nine hundred dollars, he could get a passports for himself and his family in twenty-four hours but Naseer doesn't have three hundred dollars let alone nine hundred. He has sought help from the U.S. Embassy but was turned away. The embassy doesn't trust Afghans. Don't be scared of me, he says, but he knows it's too late for that.

—Bad luck for you, Zabiullah says.

Naseer shrugs. Like other Afghans he doesn't have goals. Not exact goals anyway. These days, he must be not focus on any one thing but be flexible and earn money any way he can and stay alive.

Farkhunda's friend, twenty-one-year old Tuba, who like many Afghans has no last name, recalls Farkhunda as a nice girl. She had a nice smile and liked to joke. They took classes together. Farkhunda was the class leader. She took attendance and distributed assignments.

When Farkhunda discussed Islam, she always asked questions to make things clearer. She was very knowledgeable. One time, she entered a class and pretended to be the teacher. She fooled everyone. When the teacher finally showed up and asked, What are you doing? Farkhunda ran out laughing.

Tuba was at home when Farkhunda died. At first, she did not realize that the young woman killed was Farkhunda. When she hadn't heard from her for two days, she called her cell phone and her father answered. The dead girl is the girl you knew and my daughter, Farkhunda, her father told Tuba.

Of course, she is afraid. No one asked, why are you beating Farkhunda? They just beat her. What would stop them from beating other girls? When she passes the shrine where Farkhunda died, she gets nauseated and her chest hurts. She would like to leave Afghanistan but the idea of leaving her country also makes her afraid.

Tuba dreamt of Farkhunda one time after her death. In the dream, she wore a black hijab and the two of them were walking together. Farkhunda didn't speak, just looked at Tuba with sad eyes. Then Tuba woke up.

On my last day in Kabul, I take Zabiullah to lunch at Yummy Fast Food, a restaurant modeled after McDonald's. The smoke of kabob grills swirls around us as we walk through the shopping district of Shar-e-Now. Multicolored lights sagging around the awnings of storefronts blink on and off and above the lights signs promote pizza and hamburgers and chicken burgers. Uneven cracks mar the faces of mannequins in the display windows of clothing stores and the shadows of homeless children and beggars bob and weave across the stores and the rutted sidewalks, and Zabiullah and I negotiate our way forward and the children follow us for blocks demanding

money, fingers clutching at our clothes and we keep moving, the grime of the sooty air pocking our clothes, and young men in bell bottom jeans and open shirts hang out around restaurants taking selfies and smoking cigarettes, a skewed combination of 1970s apparel and 21st Century technology, and the same mixing of eras congests the street as horses pull carts loaded with firewood beside black Hummers, and amid the traffic and the pleadings of beggars and the endless confusion we continue making our way until we enter Yummy's.

—You see all this activity going on and you think hopeful thoughts, Zabiullah says as we sit down. Then a bomb goes off. Afghanistan is an unpredictable country.

As we go over a menu, Zabiullah asks me if I would sponsor him for a U.S. visa. His question takes me by surprise and I don't answer immediately. Instead, I look past him out a window and consider what he has just asked of me. I'd have to house and support him, Sweetra and their son while they got settled. How long would that take? When would Zabiullah and Sweetra be eligible for work permits? And what would happen if they didn't find jobs? Or, if they did but their salary wasn't enough to pay for their own place and daycare? How long would I have to carry them?

—I don't have the means or the space, I say finally. I rent a one-bedroom apartment. I live check to check.

Zabiullah nods.

—I'm sorry. I would if I could. It gets complicated.

He nods again. He understands and tries to hide his disappointment with a smile. He hears the stories of families leaving by bus, on foot and not making it. He knows people like Jamshid, Gety and Naseer who like him want to get out. He wishes them well. He and Sweetra didn't make it when they tried but he hopes they do. He wishes he could turn the clock back to

a time when people were happy, before everything changed and the joy in life vanished. But this is Afghanistan. After forty years of war, he can't let fear stop him from living. After all, no one can predict the future.

J. Malcolm Garcia is the author most recently of, *The Fruit of All My Grief: Lives In the Shadows of the American Dream* (Seven Stories Press 2019).