
Swallows of Kabul

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One

Atiq Shaukat flails about him with his whip, trying to force a passage through the ragged crowd swirling around the stalls in the market like a swarm of dead leaves. He's late, but he finds it impossible to proceed any faster. It's like being inside a beehive; the vicious blows he deals out are addressed to no one in particular. On souk day, people act as if in a trance. The throng makes Atiq's head spin. In thicker and thicker waves, beggars arrive from the four corners of the city and compete with carters and onlookers for hypothetically free spaces. The porters' effluvia and the emanations of rotting produce fill the air with an appalling stench, and a burden of relentless heat crushes the esplanade. A few spectral women, segregated inside their grimy burqas, extend imploring hands and clutch at passersby; some receive a coin for their trouble, others just a curse. Often, when the women grow too insistent, an infuriated lashing drives them backward. But their retreat is brief, and soon they return to the assault, chanting their intolerable supplications. Others, encumbered by brats whose faces are covered with flies and snot, cluster desperately around the fruit vendors, interrupting their singsong litanies only to lunge for the occasional rotten tomato or onion that an alert customer may discover at the bottom of his basket.

"You can't stay there!" a vendor shouts at them, furiously brandishing a long stick above their heads. "You're bringing my stall bad luck, not to mention all kinds of bugs."

Atiq Shaukat looks at his watch and clenches his teeth in anger. The executioner must have arrived a good ten minutes ago, and he, Atiq, is still dawdling in the streets. Exasperated, he starts hitting out again, wielding his many-thonged whip in an effort to part the flood of humanity, futilely harrying a group of old men as insensible to his blows as they are to the sobs of a little girl lost in the crowd. Then, taking advantage of the opening caused by the passage of a truck, Atiq manages to squeeze into a less turbulent side street and hastens, despite his limp, toward a building that stands oddly upright amid an expanse of rubble. Formerly a clinic, but fallen into disuse and long since ransacked by phantoms of the night, the building is used by the Taliban as a temporary prison on the occasions when a public execution is to take place in the district.

"Where have you been?" thunders a large-bellied, bearded man stroking a Kalashnikov. "I sent someone to fetch you an hour ago."

Without slackening his gait, Atiq says, "I beg your pardon, Qassim Abdul Jabbar. I wasn't home." Then, in a resentful voice, he adds, "I was at the hospital. I had to take my wife. It was an emergency."

Qassim Abdul Jabbar grumbles, not at all convinced, and puts a finger on the face of his watch, indicating to Atiq that everyone's growing impatient, and all because of him. Atiq hunches his shoulders and heads toward the building, where armed men waiting for him are squatting on either side of the main door. One of them stands up, dusts off his behind, walks over to a pickup truck parked about sixty feet away, climbs inside, guns the motor, and backs up to the prison entrance.

Atiq Shaukat extracts a ring of keys from under his long vest and rushes into the jail, followed by two militiawomen hidden inside their burqas. In a corner of the cell, in a pool of light directly under a small window, a veiled woman has just finished her prayers. The other two women, the ones from the militia, ask the prison guard to withdraw. Once they are alone, they wait for the prisoner to rise to her feet. Then they approach her, unceremoniously command her to keep still, and begin to bind her tightly, pinioning her arms to her sides and trussing her legs together at mid thigh. Having verified that the cords are pulled taut and solidly knotted, they envelop the woman in a large sack of heavy cloth and push her ahead of them into the corridor. Atiq, who is waiting at the door, signals to Qassim Abdul Jabbar that the militiawomen are coming. He, in turn, tells the men in front of the jail to move away. Intrigued by the proceedings, a few onlookers form a silent group at some distance from the building. The two militiawomen step out into the street, seize the prisoner by her armpits, push and haul her up into the back of the truck, load her onto the bench, and sit beside her, so close that she's pinned between them.

Abdul Jabbar raises the truck's side rails and fastens the latches. He takes one last look at the militiawomen and their prisoner to assure himself that all is as it should be, then climbs into the cab beside the driver and strikes the floor with the butt of his weapon to signal the beginning of the procession. The truck pulls away at once, escorted by an enormous 4 ´ 4 topped with a rotating light and packed with slovenly militia soldiers.

Mohsen Ramat hesitates for a long time before he decides to join the crowd gathering in the square. The authorities have announced the public execution of a prostitute: She is to be stoned to death. A few hours earlier, workers came to the execution site to unload wheelbarrows filled with rocks and dig a small hole about two feet deep.

Mohsen has been present at many lynchings of this nature. Just yesterday, two young men--one of them barely a teenager--were hanged from a traveling crane mounted on the back of a truck; their bodies were not taken down until nightfall. Mohsen loathes public executions. They make him conscious of his vulnerability, they sharpen his perception of his limits, they fill him with sudden insight into the futility of all things, of all people. At such times, there's no longer anything to reconcile him to his certitudes of days gone by, when he would raise his eyes to the horizon only to lay claim to it. The first time he watched someone put to death--a murderer, whose throat was slit by a member of his victim's family--the sight made him sick. For many nights thereafter, his sleep was dazzled by nightmarish visions. He started awake more than once, shouting like a man possessed. But time has passed, and scaffolds have come to seem more and more a part of ordinary life, so much so that the citizens of Kabul grow anxious at the thought that an execution might be postponed. Now expiatory victims are dispatched in droves, and Mohsen

has gradually stopped dreaming. The light of his conscience has gone out. He drops off the moment he closes his eyes, he sleeps soundly until morning, and when he wakes up, his head is as empty as a jug. For him and everyone else, death is only a banality. Moreover, everything is banality. Apart from the executions, which are the mullahs' way of setting their house in order, there's nothing at all. Kabul has become the antechamber to the great beyond: a dark antechamber, where the points of reference are obscure; a puritanical ordeal; something latent and unbearable, observed in the strictest privacy.

Mohsen doesn't know where to go or what to do with his idleness. Every day, starting in the morning, he roams through the devastated areas of the city with a vacillating mind and an impassive face. In the old days--that is, several light-years ago--he loved to take an evening stroll along the boulevards of Kabul. Back then, the windows of the bigger stores didn't have very much to offer, but no one came up to you and struck you in the face with a whip. People went about their business with enough motivation to envision, in accesses of enthusiasm, fabulous projects. The smaller shops were filled to bursting; a hubbub of voices poured out from them and spilled onto the sidewalks like a flood of friendliness and goodwill. Settled into wicker chairs, their fans laid carelessly across their bellies, old men smoked their water pipes, occasionally squinting at a sunbeam. And the women, despite wearing long veils and peering through netting, pirouetted in their perfumes like gusts of warm air. The caravan travelers of bygone days used to swear that they had nowhere and never, in all their wanderings, encountered such bewitching beauties. They were inscrutable vestals, their laughter a song, their grace a dream of delight. And this is the reason why the wearing of the burqa has become a necessity, more to preserve women from malicious eyes than to spare men the temptations of infinite allurements. . . . How far off those days seem. Could they be nothing but pure fabrications? These days, the boulevards of Kabul are no longer amusing. The skeletal facades that by some miracle are still standing attest to the fact that the cafes, the eating places, the houses, and the buildings have all gone up in smoke. The formerly blacktopped streets are now only beaten tracks scraped by clogs and sandals all day long. The shopkeepers have put their smiles in the storeroom. The chilam smokers have vanished into thin air. The men of Kabul have taken cover behind shadow puppets, and the women, mummified in shrouds the color of fever or fear, are utterly anonymous.

At the time of the Soviet invasion, Mohsen was ten years old, an age when one fails to understand why, all of a sudden, the gardens are deserted and the days as dangerous as the nights; an age when one is particularly ignorant of how easily great misfortunes happen. His father had been a prosperous merchant. The family lived in a large residence in the very center of the city and regularly entertained relatives and friends. Mohsen doesn't remember much from that period, but he's certain that his happiness was complete, that no one challenged his outbursts of laughter or condemned him for being a spoiled, capricious child. And then came the Russian tidal wave, with its apocalyptic armada and its triumphant massiveness. The Afghan sky, under which the most beautiful idylls on earth were woven, grew suddenly dark with armored predators; its azure limpidity was streaked with powder trails, and the terrified swallows dispersed under a barrage of missiles. War had arrived. In fact, it had just found itself a homeland. . . .

The blast of a horn propels him to one side. Instinctively, he puts his long scarf up to his face as a shield against the dust. Abdul Jabbar's truck grazes him, just misses a muleteer, and hurtles into the square, closely followed by the powerful 4 ´ 4. At the sight of this cortege, an incongruous roaring shakes the crowd, where shaggy adults and slender youths vie for the choicest places. To calm people down, militiamen distribute a few savage blows.

The vehicle comes to a stop in front of the freshly dug hole. The sinner is helped down while shouts of abuse ring out here and there. Once again, waves of movement perturb the crowd, catapulting the less vigilant into the rear ranks.

Insensible to the violent attacks intended to eject him, Mohsen takes advantage of the agitation, slips through the gaps it opens in the throng, and gains a spot near the front. Standing on tiptoe, he watches a fanatic of colossal proportions lift up the impure woman and "plant" her in the hole. Then, to keep her upright and prevent her from moving, he buries her in earth up to her thighs.

A mullah tosses the tails of his burnoose over his shoulders, addresses a final glare of contempt to the mound of veils under which a person is preparing to die, and thunders, "There are some among us, humans like ourselves, who have chosen to wallow in filth like pigs. In vain have they heard the sacred Message, in vain have they learned what perniciousness lurks in temptation; still they succumb, because their faith is insufficient to help them resist. Wretched creatures, blind and useless, they have shut their ears to the muezzin's call in order to hearken to the ribaldries of Satan. They have elected to suffer the wrath of God rather than abstain from sin. How can we address them, except in sorrow and indignation?"

He stretches out an arm like a sword toward the mummy. "This woman knew exactly what she was doing. The intoxication of lust turned her away from the path of the Lord. Today, the Lord turns His back on her. She has no right to His mercy, no right to the pity of the faithful. She has lived in dishonor; so shall she die."

He stops to clear his throat, then unfolds a sheet of paper amid the deafening silence.

"Allahu akbar!" yells someone in the back of the crowd.

The mullah raises an imperious hand to silence the shouter. After reciting a verse from the Qur'an, he reads something that sounds like a judgment, returns the sheet of paper to an interior pocket of his vest, and at the end of a brief meditation proposes that his listeners arm themselves with stones. This is the signal. In an indescribable frenzy, the crowd rushes to the heaps of rocks placed in the square a few hours earlier for this very purpose. At once, a hail of projectiles falls upon the condemned woman, who, since she has been gagged, shivers under their impact without a cry. Mohsen picks up three stones and throws them at the target. Because of the tumult around him, the first two go astray, but on the third try he hits the victim flush on the head. In an access of unfathomable joy, he sees a red stain blossom at the spot where his stone has struck her. At the end of a minute, bloody and broken, the woman collapses and lies still. Her rigidity further galvanizes her

executioners; their eyes rolled back, their mouths dripping saliva, they redouble their fury, as if trying to resuscitate their victim and thus prolong her torment. In their collective hysteria, convinced that they're exorcising their own demons through those of the succubus, some of them fail to notice that the crushed body is no longer responding to their attacks and that the immolated, half-buried woman is lying lifeless on the ground, like a sack of abomination thrown to the vultures.