

It Must be Pomegranate Season Soon

I know something Ariana doesn't know. Something she should know. Something I can't tell her. I know it as she chooses the present from Chicken Street, where we often shop. I know it as she picks up a solid polished rock of amethyst. I know it when I tell her I can't take it back to London (I make up an excuse – it's too heavy, I tell her). I can't let her spend so much money, almost \$100, on something I know will be tossed away, abandoned. And I know it as she chooses a lump of lapis lazuli instead. The truth is, I know it even before I meet Ariana – before I go to Afghanistan. I know something that will wreck her life. And I know I need to be there when she finds out. To explain. Yet what she doesn't know keeps her alive. This hope, this illusion of hope, is her lifeline.

In the months before I leave for Afghanistan I hear many stories about Ariana from Brian, but they revolve around what he should do. What I never hear is how he loves her, or even what he likes about her. They barely speak the same language and have nothing in common. Least of all a future.

This dream that Ariana has, this thing that keeps her alive, is the idea that Brian will rescue her, as he promised. That he will take her from Kabul and marry her. That he will set her free. His irrelevant fling – a meaningless flirtation – has already altered the molecular and physical structure of her life. Yet regardless of what he says, his actions – to me, at least – speak loud and clear: instead of an engagement ring or an airline ticket, he has sent her a suitcase of cheap clothes, which I bring from London. He has cast her aside.

This is what I know when Ariana and I are shopping on Chicken Street. He is not coming back. He never had any intention of coming back. Why should I have to be the bearer of this news – to tell her that somehow life must go on, that she must forget about him and abandon her dreams in the same way that he has abandoned her? I think gloomily of her shattered hopes and the long, bleak future that stretches out ahead of her.

The first time I met Ariana she was painting the sharpened nails of a client. She had looked up and a sense of hostility seemed to emanate from deep inside her, a sneer spreading across her face and beneath her skin. In other circumstances I would have been polite and left. She was contemptuous and bitchy and, quite frankly, I was not sure I liked her. But then there was the sisterhood and this was Afghanistan, so there was a sense of duty. I also felt a certain loyalty to Brian, and a misplaced sense of responsibility for Ariana. But Ariana was not entirely the tragic operative innocent left behind by her lover; she was a woman who desperately wanted out, and Brian was her passport.

In London we'd talked of little else except what he should do about the Ariana situation.

'I think you need to bring her here,' I told him at his rented flat near Notting Hill. 'You don't have to marry her, but get her out of the country.'

'She could have the spare room,' he mused. But he didn't really want the responsibility. And what a huge one it would be. He would have to house her and support her, and it would have cramped his style. Besides, in a few months, his job would take him to somewhere in the Pacific, on another mission, to another life.

Nevertheless, the game continued, and the further away I got from Brian and Britain, the more I wondered why we were friends, although I knew that wasn't fair. He was smart and interesting, well-travelled and knowledgeable. But my anger and disappointment

took hold, because this was not the West and the rules here were different. Casual affairs with Afghan women have consequences.

Brian always maintained the relationship was Ariana's initiative, but so what? He should have known better because, of course, the nights of sex turned to talk of marriage. But he never wanted to marry her, and knew when he left that he wouldn't. Still, he could never bring himself to tell her. So when he was posted back home, he stalled. He told her it was difficult to get her a visa; that he was trying, but dealing with his government was proving tricky. He said he couldn't meet her because of work constraints, but called and lulled her into a false sense of security. He palmed her off with excuses that anyone who wasn't desperate could have seen through, and this went on for two years, until I met her in the winter of 2007.

Life for Ariana is not like life in London or New York. You can't just ring up a friend and say, 'Hey, let's grab a pizza.' If she's not home by 6 p.m., alone, in her empty flat with random electricity, no TV and often no heat in the harsh winter months, people talk. Talk costs lives. Neighbours, colleagues, men, women, have already branded her a prostitute – an easy but deadly accusation. Young women, women in general, don't live alone.

As part of my sisterhood campaign, I have taken her out – for coffee, on shopping expeditions and one time for dinner at Le Bistro, an expat hangout. Quite honestly, each moment we were there was painfully eked out. I felt the seconds ticking by, astonished at how long a second could be, willing the evening to end quickly. There was this air about Ariana that nothing was quite good enough and her haughtiness put me on edge.

We spoke haltingly to each other in English: mine is pretty good, but Ariana has not yet mastered it. On the other hand, her Dari is pretty good, and mine is non-existent. She managed to let me know that she didn't like the vol-au-vent she'd asked me to order. She poked it quite violently with her fork as it sat helplessly and blamelessly on her plate. The vol-au-vent was also something I wanted to rescue. She irritated me.

In local Afghan restaurants women are shunted to a corner. They sit apart from men (who eat in the main space), tucked away from view, from unwarranted stares, from prying eyes. In the Kabul-posh French restaurant, where beautiful kilims hang from the walls, we ate together at a square table covered by a starched white linen cloth with fresh spring flowers in a small, deep blue hand-made Herat glass vase.

Herat borders Iran, where Ariana grew up. Like millions of Hazaras, the Shia Muslim descendants of Genghis Khan, her family fled when the Soviets came, when civil war broke out in the 1990s, when the Sunni Taliban took power later that decade. But since the overthrow of Mullah Omar and his government, many Afghan refugees have returned home.

Only in Ariana's case, the return was not her choice. She had worked as a nanny for a foreign family in Tehran, and when they were posted abroad they wanted her to join them. As an undocumented Afghan in Iran, she needed to go back to Afghanistan, a country she hadn't seen in more than thirty years, to acquire an identity. But while she was in Kabul, on what was meant to be a brief stay, the husband of the family she worked for lost his job. Ariana was stranded.

She'd hated Iran, where Afghans were referred to as dogs, and she hated Afghanistan too – a country full of dirty, illiterate peasants, she said. Ariana wanted out (before she went out of her mind) – anywhere would be better than this backward hellhole. Then she met Brian.

When I talk about Brian, Ariana blushes and is coy. I tell her what he says, which in this case is true: 'He cannot return to Afghanistan.' (He could, of course, meet her in India or Pakistan or Dubai – all places Afghans can go without too much hassle.) Still, I continue with my reams of excuses, interjecting as we talk that she must think of other things, must make alternative plans – just in case. I can see the tears welling up. I cannot do this.

When finally I no longer know what to do, what to say – when I am frustrated by Brian's lack of transparency or decency, by his refusal to call her or to return her calls, I ask my Kabul friends for help.

We all want to come up with solutions, to find options for Ariana, and make her realize she cannot wait for Brian or rely on him to rescue her. We suggest ways to improve her English; we offer to pay for lessons so she can find better employment than working as a beautician. My worry is that she might kill herself when she finally acknowledges that the small line of hope has been withdrawn and she has been cast adrift with no life raft.

My ability to help is limited, genuinely constrained by legal and financial parameters and, possibly, emotional ones too. Ariana has unrealistic expectations and thinks I should be able to work miracles. She thinks I should be able to get her a visa to Canada, take her to Pakistan (because Afghan women aren't allowed to travel alone) or find her a job in the UK. I don't tell her, but I have left my magic wand behind.

I try, but I'm going in circles, spiralling downwards, down to the centre of the earth.

But there is always hope.

It is Afghan New Year, Nawruz, the first day of spring, and to celebrate Ariana and I plan an outing. Life must go on.

The traffic is terrible when Fahim and I pick Ariana up. The roads are chaotic; mobs of people are out celebrating. Men in vans sing and dance, listening to outrageously loud music, dizzy on the excitement or possibly on the drugs produced here. Near the university, in the district where Ariana lives, police have blocked the roads with juggernauts, a security precaution. It takes forever to negotiate a way out. At the back of everyone's mind is the possibility of being trapped in this mess if a bomb goes off.

Once we get clear of the crowds and are off, past the little shops where blue wigs on mannequins match flammable blue dresses and long pink tresses match dreadful flamingo-pink outfits, past an open-air school under the cover of a UN tarpaulin, the conversation grows animated. Fahim is busy translating from English to Dari and back.

Fahim is a doctor. I met him while I was doing an interview with female drug users. He had kindly offered to take me out of Kabul over the weekend so that I might see some of the countryside, and I'd asked Ariana if she would like to join us. I wonder if Fahim and Ariana will like each other, even though I know this is not how things are done in Afghanistan – men and women don't date.

Out of the denseness of the capital, idyllic green fields and fresh rushing streams stretch out. Afghanistan is beautiful. 'This is where I would build a house if I stayed here,' Ariana comments. Do I see a spark or is it only my imagination? I want things to work out for

her. I want Ariana to find happiness and security, and I look at her and at Fahim and know nothing will happen.

Leaving behind the oppression of Kabul, the dusty air, the grittiness, a momentary respite has to be good for Ariana as much as for me. Everything seems fun and normal and light-hearted. The weather is magical, and I am falling more and more in love with this country. As the day comes to an end, just before sunset, I am sorry to drop Ariana back home. When the car door shuts, the grind of daily reality seems to begin again.

Then, one night soon after, reality really does kick in. Ariana calls me, hysterical. Someone is going to kill her, she says. I don't understand. She is crying, begging me for help. I hardly know the landscape of the country. I don't know what to do. She calls me again – every few minutes, each time more and more frenzied, telling me I need to get her out of her apartment.

The only thing I can think of is to call a South African I had met a couple of days earlier at a makeshift club in someone's house – more like a speakeasy really, both literally and metaphorically underground. People there were dancing, but Dave had been sitting at the bar and we'd started to talk. He had told me he was a doctor (more like a witch doctor, I thought), but that he'd given it up to start a nightclub in Kabul. He also said he was ex-Special Forces. (Every mercenary and every ex-soldier claimed to be ex-Special Forces; few actually were.) At some point during the evening he'd pulled up his polo shirt to show me the tattoo on his back – a devil with a pitchfork and a cheeky smile. It made me nauseous. We'd exchanged numbers, although I couldn't imagine we would ever see each other again. But then this was Kabul and you just never knew.

So I call Dave and tell him as much as I have been able to establish: that there is this panicked Afghan woman being threatened by someone and that he has to help her. I give him the address and her phone number, then call Ariana back and say assistance is on the way.

Dave calls later to say he is with 'his men' and has rescued Ariana, collected her clothes and whatever documents she has. He tells me that the landlord was screaming at them as they left. Then everything goes quiet.

Dave takes Ariana to his house and makes her turn off her phone, so that she can't be traced. For days I lose touch with her. Dave never answers his phone, which makes me crazy, but at least he calls back. I think he is being ridiculous.

Now that Ariana is safely installed in Dave's villa, I have time to ask myself who exactly this man is who saved her. And what has he saved her from? I can only partially answer these questions. It seems she rejected the advances of an Afghan man she knew. These were persistent and unpleasant but, up until now, manageable. The situation changed, however, when she told him she hated him and found him repulsive. Ariana is now considered fair game.

Weeks pass and I barely hear from Ariana or Dave except on occasion to let me know all is OK. But I have a sense that something is brewing when Dave says Ariana follows him around like a star-struck teenager. This would be an unusual ending, and I wonder if they might fall in love.

The next call I get from Dave is to tell me he has work in Helmand, and that Ariana will have to leave the villa. We are back to square one: he doesn't believe the threat has abated; he thinks she needs to leave the country. I insist that he and I meet, and he

suggests L'Atmosphère. We can sit in the garden there, he says, and figure out what to do. He is not worried that anyone will overhear him.

He has a plan.

'I am going to take Ariana by donkey over the mountains to Pakistan,' he says.

'Oh, great. Along the well-worn drug-smuggling route,' I reply acerbically. I am dumbfounded and now actively worried about Dave's mental stability.

Brian is suddenly back in the loop. He suggests Ariana returns to Iran, where she can live with her parents, and he has offered to cover the cost of the ticket. For him this is the most sensible, and possibly only, solution. He may be right, but she is having none of it. Dave prepares for Helmand, leaving Ariana alone in the house. It is during this time that she calls me, crying uncontrollably. She is still worried that this leering man, bent on revenge for his thwarted sexual advances, is going to kill her. This is all so dramatic, and with the backdrop of Afghanistan still relatively new to me I have no idea how much of it is real.

Luckily, a new, more sensible plan falls into place, and that is to get Ariana to India. There, she can be with her sister who lives in Delhi; she can work as a beautician and start afresh. People who hardly know Ariana – friends of her employer – generously offer to help.

For a while, peace and calm prevail and all seems to be well.

Then I get a call from Ariana's sister in India. 'My sister is going to die,' she cries. 'They are going to kill my sister. You have to help save her life.'

'I am doing everything I possibly can,' I tell her and wonder how, of all the people in Afghanistan and Iran, I have assumed this responsibility.

Despite knowing that the cause is not only lost but stupid, I end up trailing from one embassy to another, feeling like a complete idiot, pursuing a doomed mission. The Americans just laugh when I explain Ariana's situation – that she once worked for an American woman who had tried to get her a visa but in the end had failed. They hoot as they tell me she is like millions of others and will have to join the queue.

I can only stand so much humiliation, and before we go to yet another embassy I take Ariana for tea at the Serena. It's Afghanistan's only five-star hotel and I think it might cheer us both up.

In all fairness, I don't think Ariana knows what to expect; she has an air of worldliness about her, but in reality her world is very small. I understand why Brian couldn't marry her.

She has bought me a scarf, a transparent black one with colourful embroidery, because I'd said previously I liked one that she was wearing. I want her to find a way out.

Our next stop is the Canadian embassy. These are my people, but when I go to register they are not particularly hospitable, leaving us out on the street. It is cordoned off, a guard sitting in a shack on the dusty road. Ariana fills in the forms and when we finally get inside, they tell us that she must go to Pakistan to apply for a visa. I knew all this before, but am going through the motions anyway. I don't think she realizes what a hopeless pursuit this is; people have made promises to her, and she has believed them.

At UNHCR, they tell her she cannot apply for asylum in her own country and that she must do it from a third state.

Ariana does eventually make it to India, but only for a few months, after which time her visa expires. She doesn't like the Indians; she doesn't like the accommodation; she doesn't find any suitable work. Nothing is good enough. 'It's dirty,' she says, and she is happy to leave, even if it means coming back to Kabul.

And now it is my turn to decamp.

I am due in London. I can do no more for Ariana.

On the day of my departure the sun shines as usual, the donkey carts heave under the weight of fruit and vegetables – oranges, watermelons, cauliflowers. Sheep heads are piled up outside shop fronts on Butcher Street; skinned animal carcasses hang from meat hooks above them, attracting as many flies as customers. Men and boys, whose adolescent faces are heavily lined, their skin hard-baked by the fierce sun, sell phone cards on the street. Women float by, their burqas billowing behind them – images framed by the jagged mountain range encircling the capital. Piles of rubbish lie heaped and rotting on streets whose houses are hidden behind gates, concealing beauty as well as horror. On Flower Street, the garish plastic flowers so beloved of Afghans fill the windows. The shops on Chicken Street compete with each other selling jewellery, rugs and clothes . . .

On the way to the airport it occurs to me that it must be pomegranate season soon. And now what I know, Ariana knows too.

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