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## The Book Lady of Kabul

By J. Malcolm Garcia

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Block by block she maneuvers through the teeming sidewalks of Kabul's Shar-E-Naw shopping district until she enters Ice-Milk Restaurant, stops at tables.



Juan Gris, *Book, Pipe, and Glasses*, 1915. Oil on canvas.

She walks without hurry, somewhat stiffly, sore, a diminutive woman unnoticed, burdened, using her chin to clamp down on a column of books she holds against her chest. Thin paperbacks most of them, a few hardcover. All written by her husband. The books appear worn as she does. Her tired eyes, lined face. Her forehead wrinkled into streams. Maybe from long, nightly exposure to the humid, grainy air, the white smoke rising from kabob grills wafting around and powdering her with ash. Maybe from seventeen years of selling her homebound husband's books. She does not know, does not really consider her fatigue any more than she reflects on how she sees and breathes. Block by block she maneuvers through the teeming sidewalks of Kabul's Shar-E-Naw shopping district until she enters Ice-Milk Restaurant, stops at tables.

"Would you like to buy a book?" she says.

The twentysomething customers talk to one another staring at their iPhones and ignore her. Outside, more young people gather, dressed in tight blue jeans and dazzling, multicolored shirts reminiscent of the disco era. They talk loudly, with an air of *We are special*, laughing, hurrying past storefronts promoting Mastercard Premium, Marco Polo Garments, Alfalah Visa, United Bank, Body Building Fitness Gym, New Fashions Kabul Shop. Their shadows converge and fade into the glow of so many green and blue and red blinking lights dangling from awnings, unfolded above advertisements for pizza and club sandwiches and chicken fingers, and those same shadows cross a boy standing in the middle of the sidewalk and leaning on crutches, his left leg gone, his right hand out for money, and the young people swerve around him as if he were standing in the center of a traffic roundabout, and amid this confusion the book lady leaves Ice-Milk Restaurant without having sold one book and stops at another restaurant, Fast Food Pizza and Burger.

The West's influence can be seen throughout Shar-E-Naw in the kaleidoscopic displays of consumerism and high prices that for a moment render the decades of ongoing war here as obsolete as the donkey-drawn carts plodding next to black Hummers stalled in traffic. But the sight of a maimed begging child, injured, she presumes, by a mine, reminds her that beneath the sequined mannequins and suggested affluence and rush to catch up with the Twenty-First Century, Shar-E-Naw is still Afghanistan.

*Her outburst, she remembers now, prompted him to write an essay about self-delusion.* "Shar-E-Naw is a lie," she told her husband one night when she came home, the unsold books heavy in her hands, her mood dark from the long hours of being on her feet in threadbare shoes and walking from one restaurant to the next. "A fairytale of success," she continued, "concealing the fear people feel."

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Neither her expression—mouth downturned but not quite a pout—nor the slow shuffle of her walk changes as she stops at a table in Fast Food Pizza and Burger. She exudes a kind of passive, stalwart acceptance, seeming to anticipate rejection, and sometimes it even prevents her from asking, Would you like to buy a book? Instead, she looks at the people seated at the table, their arms sticking to a red, plastic tablecloth, and a few of them look at her with blank expressions, and then without another word she walks to the next table, an empty one. She sets the books

down, sits, rests her hands and arms in her lap, and orders tea. The books get heavy and she feels pain in her back. Perspiration dampens her cream-colored hijab. Sometimes she stuffs the books in a small pack, shifting the pack from one shoulder to the other through the night. The strategy does nothing to alleviate the pain other than to move it around. Her back still hurts, feet still ache.

She supposes the young people around her, if they reflect on her at all, see her as no different than the begging child outside. A poor woman trying in vain to make money selling books. How surprised would they be if they knew she was married to a man of ideas?

Her name is Dijon, her husband Mohammad Rasoul Jahanbin. He has written and self-published twenty books. Books that cover a range of topics. Family matters. The right way to raise children. Politics. His book *The President Is Like a Squash*, a farcical commentary on the incompetence and corruption of the Afghan government, sold better than all of the rest. He avoids no subject. Women stoned to death in Badakhshan; government soldiers killed fighting the Taliban. He shies away from nothing. He makes people laugh and cry.

Around Dijon, the tables crowded with young people buzz with conversation. Conversation about the insecurity of the country. The increasing strength of the insurgency in the north. NATO's withdrawal. The throngs of families leaving the country for Europe. How they, too, want to go.

One young man complains of how backward Afghanistan is. He says that one day a guy at his job asked him, Do you have a rug to pray on? The young man said, No. Why not? The young man said his prayers didn't need a rug, his praying didn't need a precise time or number. The guy threatened to kill him for not being devout.

She repeats this story to herself until she knows she will remember it and tell it to her husband. He would appreciate its potential, she thinks, use his sardonic sense of humor to adapt the story and mock those who would use Islam as cudgel.

*"What is in front of my eyes?" he said. "Everything is red."*

Dijon rubs her face, sighs, and stretches her legs beneath the table. Her frayed, leather sandals slip off her soiled feet. A man pauses to glance at her books and she turns to him but he says nothing and neither does she, and she watches him continue toward the back of the restaurant.

She starts selling books at four in the afternoon, once her youngest daughter comes home from school. If her husband feels ill, as he often does, she won't go out at all. His health deteriorated during Afghanistan's civil war years in the 1990s. So many bombs fell then on Kabul. One night he went to sleep, woke up in the morning, and could not see.

"What is in front of my eyes?" he said. "Everything is red."

Dijon saw nothing wrong and wondered if he had become mentally distracted. A doctor told them he had internal bleeding in his eyes from chemicals released in the bombing. He gave him eyedrops and his vision cleared only slightly.

One week before the Taliban entered Kabul in 1996—before her son and daughter were born—she and her husband fled to Mazar-i-Sharif in the north. They knew no one there, had no relationship with people who had influence, had no work. But Dijon was a good cook. They opened a one-room restaurant in the garage of the house they rented. University students and teachers came by, sat, and talked, creating a relaxed academic environment. More like a gathering of friends than a business.

Two years later, the Pashtun-dominant Taliban overran Mazar. Dijon's husband was arrested and put in jail for associating with the Hazara, a people from the central highland region of Afghanistan engaged in a decades-long feud with the Pashtuns. At Dijon's urging, he had allowed two homeless Hazaras to stay in their house. She had told him, "We know what it is like to be alone. We should help other people who are alone."

The Taliban released Dijon's husband two days later, his body bruised and swollen from beatings. A friend told them, "You will be okay now. You have been arrested once. They won't bother you again."

But Dijon and her husband thought, No, we should leave for Pakistan. They took books, clothes, and some family photos wrapped in rugs so the Taliban would not destroy them. The Taliban criminalized the taking of pictures as a violation of the Holy Koran.

How different it is today, with young people using their phones for cameras, she thinks. She watches a group of boys lean into one another for a selfie. One young man heavily perspires. He talks fast, complaining of the lack of jobs. He says the Taliban controls many Afghan provinces because the people there don't care. They don't have jobs so they have no loyalty to the government. If the Taliban offers them work, they will support the Taliban. If the government offers them work, they will support the government. He would do the same if the Taliban offered him employment. A friend gives him a napkin to wipe his damp forehead.

Dijon knows from her own children that often young people make comments they don't mean. No one in their right mind, especially someone as Westernized as this young man, could ever contemplate joining the Taliban. Frustration makes you say nonsensical things. That would be a good subject for her husband. She lodges the thought in her mind.

*"Being Afghans won't make us happy," he told Dijon. "We have to make ourselves happy."* What is he doing now? she asks herself. Writing. He writes every day despite his eyes and two heart operations that have left him weak and some days confined to his bed. How many doctors has he seen? Too many. The best doctors were in Pakistan. His eyes improved there but their lives did not. They were seen only as Afghan refugees. No one offered them work. Dijon cooked and catered food again. But one day her husband said, "No. There'll be no more restaurant. We have done that once already. We are in a different country and have to think in new ways."

He decided they would survive by using the academic skills he had acquired as a university professor teaching Afghan literature. They would start a magazine.

They called it *Takahnak*. Shock. He wrote the stories, funny, absurd tales of refugee life. Stories of collecting cans to earn a little money, of police shaking refugees down for money, of living on top of other families and overhearing the most intimate things. He wanted to make people laugh.

“Being Afghans won’t make us happy,” he told Dijon. “We have to make ourselves happy.”

They published seven issues of *Takahnak*, until it ran out of money. Dijon returned to cooking. She and her husband packed up for Kabul after the Taliban fell in the wake of 9/11.

A young woman behind Dijon interrupts her thoughts. She complains that everyone has forgotten Farkhunda Malikzada, a 27-year-old woman who was falsely accused of burning the Koran and killed by a mob... when? This year? Last year? The young woman stammers self-consciously. So many deaths. She can’t recall the exact date. Her friends laugh, point their fingers at her.

“You have forgotten her, too!” they shout.

“It happens to all of us,” she says. “People think only of themselves, not others. That is what war does. You leave for work, you don’t know what will happen. You don’t have a chance here. Farkhunda was a martyr but we’re too preoccupied to think of her.”

“I am planning to leave,” a boy beside her says. “The legal way, by applying for school in Germany. If that doesn’t work, I will leave with smugglers.”

Dijon shakes her head. He has no idea what he is talking about. With a smuggler, he would walk for days and sleep outside with no guarantee of reaching his destination. She and her husband walked five days to Pakistan through steep, wooded mountain passes to avoid the Taliban. With a newborn, no less. No, this boy cannot imagine.

Dijon has more sympathy for the young woman’s point of view. People would not have treated a dog as they did Farkhunda. Dijon was home when she died and heard about her murder on the news. She told her husband, “I will tell you how I feel about Farkhunda. I was like a bird when I heard about it. I wanted to fly away from this country. If I was God, I would have killed all of the people who killed her. Now you can see how I feel.”

“We don’t have good leaders in Afghanistan,” her husband responded. “We have business owners, politicians, but we don’t have good leaders. Farkhunda made a mistake. She didn’t know she was living in a country with no leaders, no laws. She didn’t know this country is one where the only power is with a gun. Not with the tongue. She spoke out but it was a waste of time. Without a gun, her tongue was powerless.”

After Farkhunda’s death, Dijon’s husband wrote a book, *Who Is the Good Leader?*, in which he railed against a government unconcerned with human rights. Dijon prefers her husband’s less

political books. Like *About Myself: Broken Wishes*. In it, he describes goals he did not achieve. Before he studied education and became a teacher, he wanted to be a television anchor. He was actually hired by a TV station during the time of the Russians. But then he had a motorcycle accident and could not work and lost his job. Another time, he wanted to be an actor. He auditioned for a play and got a part. But acting did not pay enough to earn a living, so he did not pursue it. Still, he had followed his ambitions and eventually found something he loved: teaching. *About Myself: Broken Wishes* is a book you can't just agree or disagree with as you can with politics, Dijon tells herself. It makes you examine the choices you have made in your own life.

She has had her own broken wishes. She wanted to attend a university but her mother and father did not encourage her to go beyond the eighth grade. The Holy Koran says, *It is the duty of every Muslim man or woman to seek knowledge*, she told her parents. The holy book also says, *And abide in your houses and do not display yourself*, they countered.

*Now, with suicide bombers, she has no idea who to fear other than everyone.* Looking around at the full tables, her neck stiff, Dijon believes it would be a tragedy if all these young people abandoned Afghanistan, if their naive yet curious, groping minds were gone from here forever for countries that don't need them as much as Afghanistan does. She can understand why they would go, of course. She and her husband left, too, when they were young and the country was imploding. They knew who to run from then. Now, with suicide bombers, she has no idea who to fear other than everyone. She and her husband returned, but who can say they would not leave again? Where would they go? Her husband finds his stories here. The market for his books, such as it is, is here. She does not want to go and see him experience another broken wish.

Dijon stands to leave. Seven o'clock. She won't return home before ten, when the crowds in Shar-E-Naw begin to thin. She looks out the open door at the beggar boy still there, leaning on his crutches, one hand extended in a silent plea for money. Begging children disturb her more than the threat of a suicide bomber. With an explosion, life ends. With begging, life ends, too, but not for a long time, and for children the end comes at the beginning of their lives. They will learn to have no hope. To settle for the begging life, which is no life. Sometimes she talks to the older children and asks to meet their families. She tells their mothers and fathers that it would be better for them to beg than to ask their children to do so.

Children are like plants, she says. Bend them and they will grow in one direction or another. You are bending your children the wrong way. Better that you work even if it is something simple like selling gum and candy for pennies than to send your children out begging. You will earn the same and your children won't develop bad habits. Better they have an education.

But people, Dijon knows, want only money. They don't seek knowledge. Still, she tries not to judge too harshly. Knowledge does not fill an empty stomach. She has lived a privileged life. Her son, a computer designer, supports her and her husband. Her husband is free to write and she is equally free to sell his books for little money. They put aside what she brings home, saving for six months, twelve months, however long it takes until enough money has accumulated to print more books.

The ache in her feet returns and runs up her ankles. Pain settles in the small of her back. She mulls over the strands of conversation she has overheard, runs them through her mind once more as if studying for an exam. After a moment, satisfied she will remember them, she lifts the books against her chest, pressing down with her chin against the uppermost one, and turns toward the door and the beggar boy beyond it, his face a mosaic of color from the chimera of lights illuminating Shar-E-Naw.