

The top half of the cover features two large, red, textured footprints, one on the left and one on the right, set against a light beige background with a delicate blue floral and vine pattern. The footprints are oriented downwards, with the toes pointing towards the bottom of the page. The red color has a slightly grainy, ink-like texture.

A NOVEL

FABIO GEDA

IN THE SEA  
THERE ARE CROCODILES

BASED ON THE TRUE STORY OF ENAIATOLLAH AKBAR

In the sea  
there are crocodiles



a novel

Based on the true story of Enaiatollah Akbari

Fabio Geda

Translated from the Italian by Howard Curtis

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## Author's Note

I met Enaiatollah Akbari at a book presentation where I was speaking about my first novel, the story of a Romanian boy's life as an immigrant in Italy. Enaiatollah came up to me and said he'd had a similar experience. We got talking. And we didn't stop. I never tired of listening to his experiences, and he didn't tire of dredging them from his memory. After we'd known each other for a while, he asked me if I would write his story down, so that people who had suffered similar things could know they were not alone, and so that others might understand them better.

This book is therefore based on a true story. But, of course, Enaiatollah didn't remember it all perfectly. Together we painstakingly reconstructed his journey, looking at maps, consulting Google, trying to create a chronology for his fragmented memories. I have tried to be as true to his voice as possible, retelling the story exactly as he told it. But for all that, this book must be considered to be a work of fiction, since it is the *re-creation* of Enaiatollah's experience—a re-creation that has allowed him to take possession of his own story. At his request, the names of some of the people mentioned have been changed.

*Fabio Geda, Turin 2010*

# Afghanistan



The thing is, I really wasn't expecting her to go. Because when you're ten years old and getting ready for bed, on a night that's just like any other night, no darker or starrier or more silent or more full of smells than usual, with the familiar sound of the muezzins calling the faithful to prayer from the tops of the minarets just like anywhere else ... no, when you're ten years old—I say ten, although I'm not entirely sure when I was born, because there's no registry office or anything like that in Ghazni province—like I said, when you're ten years old, and your mother, before putting you to bed, takes your head and holds it against her breast for a long time, longer than usual, and says, There are three things you must never do in life, Enaiat *jan*, for any reason ... The first is use drugs. Some of them taste good and smell good and they whisper in your ear that they'll make you feel better than you could ever feel without them. Don't believe them. Promise me you won't do it.

I promise.

The second is use weapons. Even if someone hurts your feelings or damages your memories, or insults God, the earth or men, promise me you'll never pick up a gun, or a knife, or a stone, or even the wooden ladle we use for making *qhorma palaw*, if that ladle can be used to hurt someone. Promise.

I promise.

The third is cheat or steal. What's yours belongs to you, what isn't doesn't. You can earn the money you need by working, even if the work is hard. You must never cheat anyone, Enaiat *jan*, all right? You must be hospitable and tolerant to everyone. Promise me you'll do that.

I promise.

Anyway, even when your mother says things like that and then, still stroking your neck, looks up at the window and starts talking about dreams, dreams like the moon, which at night is so bright you can see to eat by it, and about wishes—how you must always have a wish in front of your eyes, like a donkey with a carrot, and how it's in trying to satisfy our wishes that we find the strength to pick ourselves up, and if you hold a wish up high, any wish, just in front of your forehead, then life will always be worth living—well, even when your mother, as she helps you get to sleep, says all these things in a strange, low voice as warming as embers, and fills the silence with words, this woman who's always been so sharp, so quick-witted in dealing with life ... even at a time like that, it doesn't occur to you that what she's really saying is, *Khoda negahdar*, goodbye.

Just like that.

When I opened my eyes in the morning, I had a good stretch to wake myself up, then reached over to my right, feeling for the comforting presence of my mother's body. The reassuring smell of her skin always said to me, Wake up, get out of bed, come on ... But my hand felt nothing, only the white cotton cover between my fingers. I pulled it toward me. I turned over, with my eyes

wide open. I propped myself on my elbows and tried calling out, Mother. But she didn't reply and no one replied in her place. She wasn't on the mattress, she wasn't in the room where we had slept, which was still warm with bodies tossing and turning in the half-light, she wasn't in the doorway, she wasn't at the window looking out at the street filled with cars and carts and bikes, she wasn't next to the water jars or in the smokers' corner talking to someone, as she had often been during those three days.

From outside came the din of Quetta, which is much, much noisier than my little village in Ghazni, that strip of land, houses and streams that I come from, the most beautiful place in the world (and I'm not just boasting, it's true).

Little or big.

It didn't occur to me that the reason for all that din might be because we were in a big city. I thought it was just one of the normal differences between countries, like different ways of seasoning meat. I thought the sound of Pakistan was simply different from the sound of Afghanistan, and that every country had its own sound, which depended on a whole lot of things, like what people ate and how they moved around.

Mother, I called.

No answer. So I got out from under the covers, put my shoes on, rubbed my eyes and went to find the owner of the place to ask if he'd seen her, because three days earlier, as soon as we arrived, he'd told us that no one went in or out without him noticing, which seemed odd to me, since I assumed that even he needed to sleep from time to time.

The sun cut the entrance of the *samavat* Qgazi in two. *Samavat* means "hotel." In that part of the world, they actually call those places hotels, but they're nothing like what you think of as a hotel, Fabio. The *samavat* Qgazi wasn't so much a hotel as a warehouse for bodies and souls, a kind of left-luggage office you cram into and then wait to be packed up and sent off to Iran or Afghanistan or wherever, a place to make contact with people traffickers.

We had been in the *samavat* for three days, never going out, me playing among the cushions, Mother talking to groups of women with children, some with whole families, people she seemed to trust.

I remember that, all the time we were in Quetta, my mother kept her face and body bundled up inside a *burqa*. In our house in Nava, with my aunt or with her friends, she never wore a *burqa*. I didn't even know she had one. The first time I saw her put it on, at the border, I asked her why and she said with a smile, It's a game, Enaiat, come inside. She lifted a flap of the garment, and I slipped between her legs and under the blue fabric. It was like diving into a swimming pool, and I held my breath, even though I wasn't swimming.

Covering my eyes with my hand because of the light, I walked up to the owner, *kaka* Rahim, and apologized for bothering him. I asked about my mother, if by any chance he'd seen her go out, because nobody went in or out without him noticing, right?

*Kaka* Rahim was smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper written in English, some of it in red, some in black, without pictures. He had long lashes and his cheeks were covered with a fine down like those furry peaches you sometimes get, and next to the newspaper, on the table at the entrance, was a plate containing a pile of apricot stones, along with three succulent-looking, orange-colored fruits, still uneaten, and a handful of mulberries.

There's a lot of fruit in Quetta, Mother had told me. She had said it to entice me, because I love fruit. In Pashtun, *Quetta* means "fortified trading center" or something like that, a place where goods are exchanged: objects, lives. Quetta is the capital of Baluchistan: the fruit garden of Pakistan.

Without turning around, *kaka* Rahim blew smoke into the sun. Yes, he replied, I saw her.

I smiled. Where did she go, *kaka* Rahim? Can you tell me?

Away.

Away where?

Away.

When will she be back?

She's not coming back.

She's not coming back?

No.

What do you mean? *Kaka* Rahim, what do you mean, she's not coming back?

She's not coming back.

At that point I ran out of questions. There must have been others I could have asked, but I didn't know what they were. I stood there in silence looking at the down on *kaka* Rahim's cheeks, but without really seeing it.

It was *kaka* Rahim who spoke next. She told me to tell you something, he said.

What?

*Khoda negahdar*.

Is that all?

No, there was something else.

What, *kaka* Rahim?

She said not to do the three things she told you not to do.

My mother I'll just call *Mother*. My brother, *Brother*. My sister, *Sister*. But the village where we lived I won't call *village*, I'll call it Nava, which is its name and which means *gutter*, because it lies at the bottom of a narrow valley between two lines of mountains. That's why, when I came back one evening after spending the afternoon playing in the fields and Mother said, Get ready, we have to leave, and I asked her, Where? and she replied, We're leaving Afghanistan, that's why, when she said that, I thought we were just going to cross the mountains, because as far as I was concerned the whole of Afghanistan lay between those peaks. Afghanistan was those rushing streams. I had no idea how vast it was.

We took a cloth bag and filled it with a change of clothes for me and one for her and something to eat, bread and dates, and I was beside myself with excitement about the journey. I'd have liked to run and tell the others, but Mother didn't want that and kept telling me to be good and keep calm. My aunt, her sister, came over and they went off into a corner to talk. Then a man arrived, an old friend of my father's, but he didn't want to come into the house. He said we should go now, because the moon hadn't come out yet and the darkness would deceive the Taliban or whoever else we might run into.

Aren't my brother and sister coming with us, Mother?

No, they're going to stay with your aunt.

My brother's still little, he won't want to stay with my aunt.

Your sister will look after him. She's nearly fourteen. She's a woman.

But when are we coming back?

Soon.

When soon?

Soon.

I have the *buzul-bazi* tournament.

Have you seen the stars, Enaiat?

What have the stars got to do with anything?

Count them, Enaiat.

That's impossible. There are too many of them.

Then start now, said Mother. Otherwise you'll never finish.

The area where we lived, in Ghazni province, is inhabited exclusively by Hazaras, who are Afghans like me, with almond-shaped eyes and squashed noses, well, not exactly squashed, but a bit flatter than others, flatter than yours, for example, Fabio: typically Mongol features. Some people say we're descended from Genghis Khan's army. Some say our ancestors were the Koshan, the ancient inhabitants of those lands, the legendary builders of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. And some say we're slaves, and treat us like slaves.

To leave the area, or Ghazni province, was extremely dangerous for us (and I only say *was* because I don't know how things are today, though I don't suppose they've changed much), because what with the Taliban and the Pashtun, who aren't exactly the same thing but both used to treat us badly, you had to be careful who you ran into. I think that's why we left at night, the three of us: me, Mother and the man—I'll just call him the man—because Mother had asked him to go with us. We set off on foot and for three nights, under cover of darkness, with only the light of the stars to guide us—and in a place like that, without any electricity, starlight is a very powerful light—we walked to Kandahar.

I was wearing my usual gray *pirhan*: long trousers and a knee-length jacket of the same material. Mother walked in a *chador*, but she had a *burqa* in her bag to put on for when we met people, which was useful for hiding the fact that she was a Hazara, and also for hiding me.

At dawn on the morning of the first day, we stopped at one of the huts

where caravans of traders break their journeys, though to judge by the bars on the windows, it must have been used for a time as a prison by the Taliban or someone. There was no one there, which was a good thing, but I was bored, so I used a bell hanging from a beam for target practice. I gathered some stones and tried to hit it from a hundred paces. I finally managed, and the man came running, grabbed me by the wrist and told me to stop.

On the second day we saw a bird of prey circling over the body of a donkey. The donkey was dead (obviously). Its legs were trapped between two rocks and it was no use to us at all because we couldn't eat it. I remember we were near Shajoi, which was one place in Afghanistan that Hazaras really had to avoid. In that area, it was said, passing Hazaras like us were captured by the Taliban and thrown alive into a deep well or fed to stray dogs. Nineteen men from my village had vanished like that on their way to Pakistan, and the brother of one of them had gone to look for him. He was the one who'd told us about the stray dogs. All he had found of his brother was his clothes, with a pile of bones inside.

That's how things are in my country.

There's a saying among the Taliban: Tajikistan for the Tajiks, Uzbekistan for the Uzbeks, and Goristan for the Hazara. That's what they say. *Gor* means "grave."

On the third day we met a whole stream of people on their way to some unknown destination, escaping from some unknown threat: men, women and children on wagons filled with hens, rolls of fabric, barrels of water and so on.

Whenever a lorry appeared going in our direction, we would ask the driver for a lift (even for a short distance). If the drivers were nice people they would stop and pick us up, whereas if they were unpleasant, or angry with themselves or at the world, they would speed up and drive past us, covering us with dust. As soon as we heard the noise of an engine behind us, Mother and I would run and hide in a ditch or among the bushes or behind some stones, if there were big enough stones. The man would stand at the side of the road and signal to the driver to stop, just like a hitchhiker, but he didn't use only his thumb, he waved his arms, to make sure they saw him and didn't run him over. If the lorry stopped and everything was safe, then he would tell us to come out of the ditch, and Mother and I would climb aboard, either in front (which happened twice) or in the back, with the merchandise (which happened once). The time we climbed in the back, the trailer was full of mattresses. I slept very well that time.

By the time we got to Kandahar, after crossing the river Arghandab, I'd counted three thousand four hundred stars (a pretty good number, I'd say) at least twenty of which were as big as peach stones, and I was very tired. Not only that. I'd also counted the number of bridges blown up by the Taliban, and the burned-out cars, and the blackened tanks abandoned by the army. But I'd still have liked to go back home, to Nava, and to play *buzul-bazi* with my friends.

I stopped counting the stars when we arrived in Kandahar. I stopped

because it was the first time I'd ever been in such a big city and the house lights and streetlamps would have been too distracting, even if I hadn't been too tired to keep count. Kandahar had tarred roads. There were cars and motorbikes and bicycles and shops and lots of places where men could drink *chay* and talk, and buildings as much as three stories high with aerials on the roofs, and dust, wind and dust, and so many people on the streets, there couldn't have been anybody left in the houses.

After we'd been walking for a while, the man stopped and told us to wait while he made arrangements. He didn't say where, or who with. I sat down on a low wall to count how many colored cars passed, while Mother just stood there, so still it was as if her *burqa* was empty. I could smell fried food. A radio was broadcasting news about lots of people disappearing in Bamiyan and the discovery of a large number of dead bodies in a house. An old man passed with his arms raised to the sky, crying *khodaia khair*, begging God for a bit of peace. I was starting to feel hungry, but I didn't ask for food. I was starting to feel thirsty, but I didn't ask for water.

When the man came back he was smiling, and he had another man with him. This is a good day for you, he said. This is Shaukat and he'll take you to Pakistan in his lorry.

*Salaam, agha* Shaukat, said Mother. Thank you.

Shaukat the Pakistani did not reply.

Go now, said the man. We'll meet again soon.

Thank you for everything, said Mother.

It was a pleasure.

Tell my sister the journey went well.

I will. Good luck, little Enaiat. *Ba omidi didar*.

He took me in his arms and kissed me on the forehead. I smiled as if to say, But of course, we'll meet again soon, take care. Then it struck me that *Good luck* and *We'll meet again soon* didn't really go together. Why wish me good luck if we were going to meet again soon?

The man left. Shaukat the Pakistani raised his hand and signaled to us to follow him. The lorry was parked in a dusty yard surrounded by a metal fence. In the back were dozens and dozens of wooden poles. Taking a closer look at them, I realized they were electricity poles.

Why are you carrying electricity poles?

Shaukat the Pakistani didn't reply.

This was something I only found out about later. Apparently, people came from Pakistan to Afghanistan to steal things: whatever there was to steal, which wasn't much. Electricity poles, for example. They came in lorries, knocked down the poles and carried them across the border, to use them or sell them, I'm not sure which. But for the moment what mattered was that we were getting a good lift, in fact, more than good, an excellent lift, because at the border they didn't check lorries from Pakistan so carefully.

It was a long journey, I couldn't tell you how long, hours and hours across

the mountains, bumping along, past rocks and tents and markets. Clouds. At some point, when it was already dark, Shaukat the Pakistani got out to eat, but only him, because it was better for us if we didn't get out. You never know, he said. He brought us some leftover meat and we set off again, with the wind whistling through the window, the pane lowered just a crack to let in a bit of air but as little dust as possible. Looking at all that land rushing past us, I remember thinking about my father, because he'd also driven a lorry for a long time.

But that was different. He was forced to.

My father I'll just call *Father*. Even though he's no longer around. *Because* he's no longer around. I'll tell you his story, even though I can only tell it the way it was told to me, so I can't swear to it. What happened was that the Pashtun had forced him—not only him, but lots of Hazara men from our province—to drive to Iran and back by lorry, in order to get products to sell in their shops: blankets, fabrics, and a type of thin sponge mattress: I'm not sure what they were used for. This was because the inhabitants of Iran are Shia, like the Hazara, while the Pashtun are Sunni—it's well known that brothers in religion treat each other better—and also because the Pashtun don't speak Persian whereas we can understand it a bit.

To force him to go, they said to my father, If you don't go to Iran to get that merchandise for us, we'll kill your family, if you run away with the merchandise, we'll kill your family, if when you get back any of the merchandise is missing or spoiled, we'll kill your family, if someone cheats you, we'll kill your family. In other words, if anything at all goes wrong—we'll kill your family. Which isn't a nice way to do business, in my opinion.

I was six—maybe—when my father died.

Apparently, a gang of bandits attacked his lorry in the mountains and killed him. When the Pashtun found out that my father's lorry had been attacked and the merchandise stolen, they came to my family's house and said he'd made a mess of things, their merchandise had got lost and we had to pay them back for it.

First of all they went to see my uncle, my father's brother. They told him he was responsible now and he had to do something to compensate them. For a time, my uncle tried to find a solution, like sharing his land, or selling it, but nothing worked. Then one day he told them he didn't know what he could do to compensate them and it wasn't his business anyway, because he had his own family to think about. I don't blame him for that, because it was true.

So one evening the Pashtun came to see my mother, and said that if we didn't have money, instead of the money they would take me and my brother away with them and use us as slaves, which is something that's banned all over the world, even in Afghanistan, but that was what it amounted to. From that point on, my mother lived in fear. She told me and my brother to stay outside the house all the time, surrounded by other children, because on the evening when the Pashtun had come to our house we hadn't been there and

they hadn't seen our faces.

So the two of us were always outside playing, which we didn't mind at all, and the Pashtun who passed us on the streets of the village didn't recognize us. For nighttime we had dug a hole in the fields, next to the potatoes, and whenever anyone knocked, even before going to find out who it was, we would go and hide there. But I wasn't very convinced by this strategy: I told my mother that if the Pashtun came for us at night, they certainly wouldn't bother to knock.

Things carried on like that until the day Mother decided I ought to leave because I was ten—maybe—and I was becoming too big to hide, so big that I could hardly get into the hole anymore without squashing my brother.

To leave.

I'd never have chosen to leave Nava. My village was a good place. It wasn't technologically advanced, there was no electricity. For light, we used oil lamps. But there were apples. I would see the fruit being born, the flowers opening in front of my eyes and becoming fruit. I know flowers become fruit here, too, but you don't see it happen. Stars. Lots and lots of them. The moon. I remember there were nights when, to save on oil, we ate in the open air by the light of the moon.

My house had one big room for all of us, where we slept, a room for guests, and a corner for making a fire and cooking, which was below floor level, and in winter pipes would take the heat from the fire all through the house. On the second floor there was a storeroom where we kept feed for the animals. Outside, a second kitchen, so that in summer the house didn't get even hotter than it was, and a very large courtyard with apples, cherries, pomegranates, peaches, apricots and mulberries. The walls were made of mud and very thick, more than a meter. We ate homemade yogurt, like Greek yogurt but much, much better. We had a cow and two sheep, and fields where we grew corn, which we took to the mill for grinding.

This was Nava, and I would never have chosen to leave it.

Not even when the Taliban closed the school.

*Fabio, can I tell you about when the Taliban closed the school?*

*Of course.*

*You're interested?*

*I'm interested in everything, Enaiatollah.*

I wasn't paying much attention that morning. With one ear I was listening to my teacher and, with the other, to my thoughts about the *buzul-bazi* contest we had organized for the afternoon. *Buzul-bazi* is a game played with a bone

taken from a sheep's foot after it's been boiled, a bone that looks a bit like a die, although it's all lumpy, and in fact the game you play with it is a bit like dice, or like marbles. It's a game we play all year round, whereas making kites is more a spring or autumn thing, and hide-and-seek a winter game. When it gets really cold in winter, it's nice to hide among the sacks of corn or in the middle of a heap of blankets or behind two rocks, huddled up close to someone else.

The teacher was talking about numbers and teaching us to count when we heard a motorbike driving round and round the outside of the school as if looking for the front door, even though it wasn't all that difficult to find. Then we heard the engine being turned off. A huge Taliban appeared in the doorway. He had one of those long beards they all have, the kind we Hazaras can't have because we're like the Chinese or the Japanese, we don't have much facial hair. A Taliban once slapped me because I didn't have a beard, but I was only a child and even if I'd been a Pashtun and not a Hazara I don't think I could have had a beard at that age.

The Taliban came into the classroom, carrying a rifle, and said in a loud voice that the school had to be closed immediately. The teacher asked why. My chief's orders, the man replied, you have to obey. And he left without waiting for a reply or giving any other explanation.

Our teacher didn't say anything, didn't move, just waited until the noise of the engine had petered out and then picked up the math lesson exactly where it had been interrupted, in the same calm voice and with the same shy smile on his face. Because my teacher was actually quite a shy person, he never raised his voice and when he shouted at us it was as if it hurt him more than it hurt us.

The next day the Taliban came back, the same one, riding the same motorbike. He saw that we were in class, and that our teacher was giving a lesson. He came in and asked the teacher, Why haven't you closed the school?

Because there's no reason to close it.

The reason is that Mullah Omar has given the order.

That's not a good reason.

Don't blaspheme. Mullah Omar says the Hazara schools have to be closed.

And where will our children go to school?

They won't go. School isn't for the Hazara.

This school is.

This school is against the will of God.

This school is against *your* will, you mean.

You teach things that God doesn't want taught. Lies. Things that contradict his word.

We teach the boys to be good people.

What does that mean, to be good people?

Let's sit down and talk about this.

There's no point. I'm telling you. Being a good person means serving God. We know what God wants from men, and how to serve him. You people don't.

We also teach humility.

The Taliban passed between us, breathing hard, the way I did once when I got a stone stuck up my nose. Without another word, he walked out and got back on his motorbike.

The third morning was an autumn morning, the kind when the sun is still warm, and although the first snow is blowing in the wind, it doesn't chill the air, just gives it a certain flavor: a perfect day for flying kites. We were practicing a Hazara poem in preparation for the *sherjangi*, the poetry contest, when two jeeps full of Taliban drove up. We ran to the windows to look at them. All the children in the school leaned out to have a look, even though we were afraid, because fear is seductive when you don't really know what it means.

Twenty, maybe thirty armed Taliban got out of the jeep, and the same one we'd seen twice before came into the classroom and said to the teacher, We told you to close the school. You didn't listen to us. Now *we're* going to teach *you*.

The school was a big building and there were a lot of us, maybe more than two hundred. Years earlier, when it was built, every parent had contributed a number of days' work, each person doing what he could, some making the roof, others finding ways to stop the wind coming in at the windows so we could have lessons even in winter, although they never really managed to do much about the wind: whenever we put up sheeting, the wind always tore it off. The school had several classrooms and a headmaster.

The Taliban made everyone, children and adults, go outside. They ordered us to form a circle in the yard, the children in front, because we were shorter, and the adults behind. Then they made our teacher and the headmaster stand in the middle of the circle. The headmaster was pulling at the material of his jacket as if trying to tear it, and weeping and turning this way and that, looking for something he couldn't find. But our teacher was as silent as usual, his arms hanging by his sides, and his eyes open but turned inward. I remember he had beautiful eyes that dispensed goodness to everyone around him.

*Ba omidi didar*, boys, he said. Goodbye.

They shot him. In front of everyone.

From that day on, the school was closed, and without school, life is like ashes.

*This matters a lot to me, Fabio.*

*What does?*

*Making it clear that Afghans and Taliban are different. I want people to know this. Do you know how many nationalities they were, the men who killed my teacher?*

*No. How many?*

*There were twenty of them in that jeep, right? Well, there may not have been twenty different nationalities, but almost. Some couldn't even communicate among*

*themselves. Pakistan, Senegal, Morocco, Egypt. A lot of people think the Taliban are all Afghans, Fabio, but they aren't. Some of them are, of course, but not all of them. They're ignorant, ignorant of everything, and they stop children from studying because they're afraid those children might come to understand that they don't do what they do for God, but for themselves.*

*We'll say it loud and clear, Enaiat. Now where were we?*

*In Kandahar.*

*Ah, yes. Kandahar.*

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Let's get back to Kandahar.

It was morning when we left—did I already say that?—on the lorry with the electricity poles in the back. We passed through Peshawar on our way to Quetta, but Mother and I didn't get off. In Quetta we went looking for somewhere to sleep, one of those places we call *samavat* or *mosafir khama*—house of guests—with large dormitories where travelers stop on the way to Iran and look for guides for the rest of the journey. For three days, we didn't leave the place. Mother was talking to people, trying to organize her return journey, but I didn't know that. It wasn't difficult. Getting back to Afghanistan was much easier than leaving it.

In the meantime, I had nothing to do but wander around the place. Then, one night, before putting me to bed she took my head in her hands, and hugged me tight, and told me three things I shouldn't do, and that I should wish for something with all my soul. The next morning she wasn't there on the mattress with me and when I went to ask *kaka* Rahim, the owner of the *samavat* Qgazi, if he knew where she was, he told me yes, she had gone back home to be with my brother and sister. Then I sat down in a corner between two chairs, not on the chairs but on the floor, squatting on my heels, thinking that I had to think. My teacher always said thinking that you have to think is already a big step. But there weren't any thoughts in my head, only a light that swallowed everything and stopped me from seeing, like when you stare straight at the sun.

When the light went out, the streetlamps came on.

# Pakistan



*Khasta kofta* means “as tired as a meatball,” because the women where I used to live made meatballs by rolling them and rolling them and rolling them for a long time in the palms of their hands. And that was how I felt, as if a giant had taken me in his hands and made me into a meatball: my head hurt, and my arms, and another place, somewhere between my lungs and my stomach.

In Quetta there were lots and lots of Hazaras. I had seen them coming and going in and out of the *samavat* in the past few days, when Mother was still there. In fact, she’d spent a lot of time talking to them, as if she had great secrets to confide. Now I tried to approach them, but I noticed that these Hazaras were different from the ones I knew, and that even the simplest words from my country turned into complicated foreign words in their mouths because of the accent. I couldn’t understand them or make myself understood, so after a while they stopped taking any notice of me and went back to their own business, which was apparently more urgent than the fact that I’d been abandoned. I couldn’t ask for information or exchange a few friendly words, a few jokes that would make one of them want to help me, take me to his house, for instance, give me a cup of yogurt and a slice of cucumber. If you’ve only just arrived (and the fact that you’ve only just arrived is obvious the moment you open your mouth to ask for something), if you don’t know where you are, or how things work in a place, or how you’re supposed to behave, people can easily take advantage of you.

One thing I wanted to avoid (one among many others, like dying) was people taking advantage of me.

I’d shut myself up in the kitchen, but now I went to find *kaka* Rahim, the owner of the *samavat* Qgazi. He was someone I *could* communicate with, perhaps because he was used to receiving guests and so knew lots of languages. I asked if I could work there. I’d do anything, wash the floor, clean shoes, whatever needed doing. What I wanted to avoid was having to go into the street, because I was really scared. I had no idea what was out there.

He listened, though he pretended not to hear me, then said, Only for today.

Only for today? What about tomorrow?

Tomorrow you have to look for another job.

Only one day. I looked at his long lashes, the downy hairs on his cheeks, the cigarette between his teeth, the ash from which was falling on the floor, his slippers and his white *pirhan*. I thought of jumping on him, hanging on to his jacket and wailing until either my lungs or his ears burst, but I think I was right not to do it. I blessed him several times for his generosity and asked if I could take a potato and an onion from the kitchen. He said yes and I replied *tashakor*, which means “thank you.”

That night I slept with my knees drawn up against my chest.

I slept with my body, but in my dreams I was awake. And I was walking in the desert.

In the morning, I woke up feeling nervous because I had to leave the *samavat* and go out onto the streets, those streets I hadn't liked at all when I'd looked out at them from the main door or from the window of the toilets on the first floor. There were so many motorbikes and cars that the air was unbreathable, and the sewer didn't run under the concrete, where you couldn't see or smell it, but between the roadway and the pavement, a few meters from the door of the *samavat*.

I went and drank some water and rinsed my face, trying to summon the courage to throw myself into the fray. Then I went to say goodbye to *kaka Rahim*.

He looked at me without seeing me. Where are you going? he said.

I'm leaving, *kaka Rahim*.

For where?

I shrugged my shoulders. I don't know, I said. I'm not familiar with the city. To be honest, I don't even know what difference it would make if I turned right or left when I got out of the door. So I'll just go to the end of the street, *kaka Rahim*, look both ways and choose the best view.

There are no views in Quetta. Only houses.

That's what I thought, *kaka Rahim*.

I've changed my mind.

About what?

I can't give you work here and pay you, pay you in money, I mean. There are too many of you. I can't give work to everyone. But you're a well-brought-up boy. So you can stay here, if you like, and eat and sleep here, until you find a place where you can really work, work and earn money and everything. But until that happens, you'll have to work hard for me from the moment you wake up until you go to sleep at night, whatever I ask you to do. Do you understand?

I smiled with all the teeth I could find in my mouth. May you live as long as a tree, *kaka Rahim*.

*Khoda kana*, he said.

But even though I was happy, happy and relieved, I can't pretend that everything was fine right from the start. I can't not mention that my first day working at the *samavat* Qgazi in Quetta was hell. Firstly, they immediately gave me lots of things to do. Secondly, when they asked me to do those things they didn't explain how to do them, as if I already knew everything, when in fact I didn't know anything, especially not how to do the kind of things they asked me to do. Thirdly, I didn't know anyone. Fourthly, I couldn't chat or joke with people I didn't know because I was afraid that the jokes would be misunderstood since I spoke their language very badly. Fifthly, there seemed to be no end to it. I wondered what had happened to the moon, because I didn't see it rise. I wondered if in Quetta the moon only came out from time to time, when the bosses wanted it to, in order to make people work longer hours.

By the time I went to sleep at the end of the day, I was much more than