

New Fiction by J. Malcolm Garcia: “An Arrangement”



Houston Skyline from Midtown

I escaped to America after my fiancé, Farhid, died. He was an officer in the Afghan National Army in Bagarm when he was killed by a roadside bomb. His friend Abdul called and told me the news. He and Farhid had attended school together and had joined the army at the same time. Abdul used to visit us, but I hadn't seen him in years. When I got off the phone, I felt like still air on a clear day. Nothing stirred. No sound and no one around me. An emptiness engulfed me that was not altogether unpleasant. I was adrift but not grieving. I had never wanted to marry him; it was my father's wish that I do so. Farhid was my cousin.

His father, my Uncle Gülay, was my father's brother. Gülay died in a car accident before I was born, and my father took Farhid and his mother into our family. I saw Farhid as an older brother—someone I played hide and seek with as a child—and not as a husband, but my father said he wanted to have grandchildren, especially a grandson. He also thought our marriage would honor Gülay, and he made it clear I didn't have a choice. I don't like Farhid, I told my father, not in that way. Oh, you are a big shame, he scolded me. I didn't ask for your opinion. I decide. I ran to my room. My mother followed and sat beside me as I wept into my pillow. Your father has decided as my father decided for me when I was your age, she said. It will be fine. Your family wouldn't make a bad decision. Farhid is a good boy. Open your heart and you will see him as your father sees him and learn to love him.

After Farhid died, I mourned the boy I knew but not the man I hadn't wanted for a husband. I remembered when he stood with

me on the second floor of our home in Jalalabad when the Taliban left Afghanistan after the Americans invaded. We watched them drive away, their faces grim, angry. After that, my father allowed me to leave the house without a burqa. Farhid and I would walk to the downtown bazaar, and he'd hold my left hand as he guided us through the crowds. He liked to make puppets, and some mornings I'd wake up and find him crouched at the foot of my bed with socks on his hands imitating sheep and goats. Get up, baaa! Get up, Samira, baaa, he'd say and I'd duck under the sheets giggling as he pinched my toes. These memories made me sad. Farhid—my cousin, my brother—was gone, but I felt a certain lightness too because now I'd never have to marry him. I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling and saw hill-shaped shadows rise out of the dark and spread across the ceiling and loom over me and I knew it was the spirit of Uncle Gülay, enraged that Farhid's death had denied him the honor of our marriage.

My father hung a photograph of Farhid in his army uniform in the entrance of our house. I hadn't seen this picture before. He looked older than I remembered. He had a sharp chin, a firm mouth, and a stern look that gave the impression of someone gazing into their future. He wasn't the boy with the puppets. Perhaps I could have loved him, I thought, and for the first time I felt despair but it was a distant kind of grief toward someone I had never really known.

After his funeral, my life resumed as if he had never died. I woke up early and attended classes at Jalalabad State University from seven to one. After school, I took a computer course and studied English so that one day I could get a good job with a Western NGO. One of my favorite memories: accessing the internet for the first time and establishing a Yahoo email account.

Those leisurely days didn't last. Eight weeks after Farhid's funeral, I began receiving death threats from Taliban supporters. Some of them sent text messages: *We know your*

fiancé fought against the army of Allah. He is dead and you'll be next. Some mornings, my father would find notes tacked to our front door: *Whore! You have betrayed Islam by becoming engaged to an infidel. We will eliminate you and all infidels who betray Allah.* Whoever wrote these notes, I believe, set off bombs near our house, too many to count, and sticky bombs on cars belonging to our neighbors. It became normal to hear an explosion and the panicked screams that followed. I became afraid to leave the house and stopped attending school.

My father was a physician. One day he went out with the Afghan National Army to treat sick soldiers when a bomb exploded and shrapnel tore into his left arm and both legs. A neighbor heard the news but didn't want to alarm my family. He asked for some clothes to take to the hospital treating my father. Why do you need his clothes? my mother asked; but instead of answering her, he rushed off without explanation. Then my cousin Reshaf called from Kabul and asked my mother about the bombing. He had read about it on the internet. It killed ten government soldiers, he said. My mother tried to reach my father but he didn't answer his phone. Finally, someone from the hospital called and said he had been injured. We rushed to the hospital and wandered halls where injured soldiers lay on gurneys and stared at us with dazed, hollow eyes. My father lay in a bed in a small room with peeling green paint that overlooked a courtyard. Families sat under trees. Roaming dogs snapped at men who chased them away. A white sheet covered my father up to his chin. His blood-stained legs were raised in slings, and his injured arm was wrapped in gauze soaked by iodine. Dozens of cuts ruined his face. He tried to speak but his voice caught in his throat and I looked away as tears rolled down his face.

He recovered but he couldn't walk without help and often used a wheelchair. Nerve damage in his left hand prevented him from using medical instruments. He spent his days in his small

clinic sitting at his desk and offering advice to colleagues. He watched them work, and when he grew bored he scrolled through his computer until he grew tired and rested his chin on his chest and slept.

The threats against my life continued. That summer my father began making inquiries, and through a friend in the Ministry of Interior he secured a visa for me to emigrate to the United States that was given to families who had either fought or worked with Western forces. Her husband was an Afghan soldier, my father told his friend. She can't stay here. That night while I was in my room preparing to go to bed he called for me. I followed his voice out to our garden where he stood in the light of a full moon. Cats yowled and the distant barking of dogs rose above the noise of car horns and of voices in the shopping centers of Shar-e-Naw. My parents' bedroom window opened onto the garden and I could hear my mother crying. Without looking at me, my father said I'd fly to the United States in the morning. Arrangements had been made through an NGO to take me to Houston, Texas, where an American aid organization would help me. You will leave us to start a new life, inshallah, my father said.

I ran from the garden to my mother's room but she had shut the door and wouldn't let me in. There is nothing I can do for you, she called out to me. I slid to the floor and wept. In my bed that night, I wondered where Texas was in the United States. I thought of Farhid and the resolute look on his face in the photograph above our front door. I decided to have that same kind of determination, and I embraced his image, ignored my fear, and withheld my tears until something inside me retreated to a far corner.

My father and mother took me to Kabul International Airport. I held my mother for a long time, our wet faces touching. A plane carried me to Qatar and then to Washington, D.C. That evening, I flew to El Paso and stayed in a tent in a U.S. Army camp near Fort Bliss. I couldn't count the number of tents and

the number of people filling them. Like a gathering of nomads stretching without end across a white desert. The suffocating summer heat, I thought, was worse than Jalalabad. Sand and dust swirled endlessly. There wasn't a single second I didn't hear babies crying, heavy trucks driving past, and announcements over loudspeakers. One morning a soldier took me to a room in a square, concrete building where a man sat alone at a table. He said he was from the Department of Homeland Security. He asked me about Farhid. I told him how we used to play as children. I know nothing about his life as a soldier, I said. But he was your fiancé, the man insisted. My father arranged our marriage, I explained. He asked about my parents and if they had ever traveled outside of Afghanistan. No, I told him, they hadn't. He thanked me and the soldier returned me to my tent.

I lost my appetite and would sit on the floor of my tent and spend hours rocking back and forth as I had as a child when I was scared. A nurse told me I suffered from panic attacks, and she gave me medication that put me to sleep. I had dreams of bomb blasts. In one dream, I told my father, Let's go away from here. You're in America, he said, don't worry. Another time, I dreamed my father was in great pain. When I called them, my mother said, Your father's legs were hurting him. That's why you had the dream.

Two months later I flew to Houston, where I was met by a man named Yasin from the Texas Institute for Refugee Services. Welcome to Houston, he said, and then he led me out of the airport and into a parking lot. The hot, humid air wrapped around me so tightly that my arms felt stuck to my body. My clothes clung to me like wet paper.

Yasin told me he was my caseworker. What is that? I asked. It means you are my responsibility, he said. He had dark hair and brown eyes and he wore a white shirt with a thin tie and a gray suit. He said he was from the Afghan city of Herat and had worked for an American NGO until he came under threat from

the Taliban. He got a U.S. visa like mine and had flown to Houston three years ago. I told him about Farhid. I'm sorry for you, he said. When I think of Afghanistan and everyone I left behind, I shake with fear. His sad look touched me.

He led me to his car, a hybrid, he told me proudly. Turning a knob, he switched on the air conditioning and a chill ran through me as the cold air struck my sweat-dampened clothes. He gave me a bottle of water and told me I could remove my hijab; in America, he explained, women don't have to cover their heads. I told him I felt more comfortable keeping it on. I wore your shoes once, as the Americans like to say, he said, but don't be scared. After a while the U.S. won't feel so strange and you will take off your hijab. He smiled and showed all of his teeth.

We drove to a Social Security office where I signed up for refugee benefits and Medicaid. He said these programs would provide a little bit of money to pay for housing, food, and health care. He took me to a small apartment in a five-story building owned by the institute. A swing hung motionless in an empty playground and large black birds hopped on the ground, and the noise they made flapping their heavy wings reminded me of Jalalabad merchants when they snapped carpets in the air to shake off dust. We took an elevator to a second-floor apartment. It had a sofa and a table with two chairs. A small bed with sheets and a blanket took up most of the bedroom. Blue towels hung from a rack in the bathroom. This will be your new home, Yasin said. I looked out the living room window and saw nothing but the doors of apartments across the way. Through my kitchen window I noticed people sitting on steps leading to the floors above me. Shadows converged over them and I became depressed, and I thought of Farhid's spirit rising toward paradise—a dark journey toward light—and I decided this was my dark journey and eventually, inshallah, I'd find light and happiness in this my new home.

In the following days, Yasin took me to a job preparation

class. The instructor was impressed I knew so much English and I explained I had studied it in Jalalabad. That is a good start, but you don't know everything, he said. He told me that when I met someone, I should shake their hand and look them in their eyes and say, How do you do? Nice to meet you. I told him in Afghanistan this wouldn't be possible; a woman would never shake a man's hand or look at them unless they were their husband or family. You aren't in Afghanistan, he reminded me. After class, Yasin would always walk ahead of me and when we came to a door he would stop and open it for me. I told him he didn't have to do this, but he insisted. He was very kind. Slow, slowly, in the evenings in my apartment, I began to think that I might like America. I thought I could love Yasin.

After four weeks, Yasin told me he could no longer see me. Catholic Charities worked with refugees for only one month. He was very matter-of-fact. He told me to stop at a flower shop near his office. It was owned by a friend of his, Shivay. He had spoken to him and Shivay had agreed to hire me. You are fully oriented to the city, he told me, and now you will have a job. You're set. Go and live your life. He smiled his toothy grin and stuck out his hand to shake mine. I don't understand, I said. What don't you understand? he asked. That stillness I felt when Abdul called me about Farhid returned, but this time it was Yasin's absence I began to feel and I didn't want him to go. He looked at me without understanding. I resisted the tears I felt brimming in my eyes and took his hand. Thank you, I said, looking at him. It was nice to meet you.

The next morning, I met Shivay. He told me he was born in Houston but his parents are Afghan. They came to the United States after the Russian invasion. I tried to speak to him in Dari as I sometimes had with Yasin, but he shook his head. My parents always spoke English around me, he said. They wanted me to be an American. That is what you should want to be too, Samira. He provided me with a table and a calculator to ring

up sales. I inhaled the fragrance of red roses that filled buckets on the shelves by the door as I waited for customers, prompting memories of my childhood in Jalalabad. In those days, Farhid and I helped vendors put roses in pails of water outside their stalls on narrow streets hazy with dust. Orange trees bloomed in the summer and after the fruit had set, Farhid climbed them and dropped oranges down to me. The Kabul River passed behind the bazaar and we dangled our bare feet in its clear water. The frigid winter weather made us shake with cold and we stayed inside under blankets, eager for the comforts of spring. The sun blistered the sky in summer making the days impossibly hot, but no matter the heat we'd be back in the bazaars helping the vendors with their roses, deep red and cool in their buckets.

The flower shop took up a corner lot in a quiet neighborhood near a park where people gathered in the afternoon. I'd see men walk up to women and hug them and after a brief conversation they'd walk away. In Afghanistan, a woman would never hug a man outside of her family. Who were these men, I asked myself? The women wore slim dresses that revealed too much of their bodies, and I wondered how they felt, almost naked in public pressing their bodies against a man, some of whom didn't wear shirts, and I saw the men's bare chests and my heart beat fast and I blushed when I caught Shivay watching me. He laughed. Here, there are many men and women who aren't Muslim, he said. In America, it isn't shameful to look.

One morning Shivay surprised me with a cup of green tea. My parents always drink green tea, he said. They say it's an Afghan custom. Is it? I told him it was and from then on he made green tea for me every morning.

At midday, Shivay would buy us lunch and after work he'd walk me to the nearby bus stop, and he'd wait with me until the bus arrived. I told him he didn't have to do this but he insisted. You are a pretty girl and shouldn't go out alone at night. When the bus arrived, I'd get on and watch him walk away. I

felt warm all over. I thought I could love this man.

Two months later, however, Shivay told me he no longer needed me. He had hired me as a favor to Yasin, he said. That night when he walked me to the bus, he suggested I apply at a nearby Wal-Mart. He promised to give me a good recommendation and then he handed me a half empty box of green tea. I don't drink it, he said.

Wal-Mart didn't have any job openings. I applied at other stores, but no one called me. I called Yasin. He said he'd try to help me, but I was no longer his client. I stayed in my apartment and when I grew bored I drew henna tattoos on my hands and feet, and at night I took the pills that helped me sleep. Then one afternoon, my father called. He said Farhid's friend Abdul had received a U.S. visa and would be arriving in Houston soon. He has visited your mother and me many times since Farhid died so that we'd know he honors Farhid's memory, my father told me. He is a nice boy. I have spoken to his family, and we are in agreement that he'd make a good husband for you in Texas.

I didn't know what to say. After a moment, I hurried outside and took the elevator down to the playground and sat in a swing, gripping my phone in my left hand, and rocked back and forth, thrusting my legs out to gain momentum and stared at the sky through the sparse trees. Motionless clouds blocked the sun. Lean shadows cut across the sidewalk. I rose higher and higher, lulled by the rhythmic creaking of the swing. Hello, Samira, are you there? I heard my father shout. No other sound but his voice disturbed the resigned stillness until I was ready to emerge from its quiet consolation. I ceased pumping my legs, let my toes drag against the ground. I slowed to a stop. Yes, Father, I'm here, I said into my phone. I asked him to text me a photograph of Abdul. Seconds later, a young man with a smooth face stared out at me from my phone. He had a distant, moody look that conveyed a seriousness of purpose, of someone who believed he was performing his duty. As would I.

Over time, I was sure I could love this man.