

New Fiction by J. Malcolm Garcia: Pleasantries



Wasi couldn't sleep. He looked at the wall clock: four in the morning. He rubbed his stiff neck, wincing at a dull, persistent headache. He sat up in the dark, kicked off his blankets, stretched, and looked out the window to guess what the coming day would be like, sunny or cloudy, but he saw only stars, which he thought predicted a cloudless day. He listened to the rising chorus of birdsong as he felt the back of his head. The gauze bandage had come off in his sleep, and he touched a bare patch of warm skin and the tight line of ten stitches with the tips of his fingers. He was conscious of the wound, its need for protection. His naked scalp beneath the gauze, its exposure now with the gauze off. Healing will take time, the doctor had told him.

He walked into the bathroom, chips of paint from the water-stained ceiling sticking to his bare feet. He opened a drawer in the fractured vanity, pulled out a square piece of gauze, covered the stitches, and taped it as the nurse had done. Then he took two ibuprofen. Mindful of the doctor's warning not to get the stitches wet, he washed his face and body with a washcloth instead of showering. He held a plastic baggie against the gauze with one hand to keep the wound dry while he shampooed and rinsed his hair. Glancing out the bathroom window, he noticed the stars had dimmed. Light frayed the farthest reaches of sky.

Coming into the kitchen, he adjusted the cracked blinds above the sink. He heated water for green tea, and put two slices of bread in the toaster. By the time he finished eating, the sun had risen, revealing a clear blue sky—just as he had thought—and he put on sunglasses and walked out of his

apartment, pausing to put a mask over his nose and mouth. Shirts and pants hung over railings above him and he heard the voices of people from Syria and Iraq, who like him were refugees placed in the apartment complex by Interfaith Ministries of San Diego.

He opened a gate to the sidewalk and waited for a garbage truck to pass. It stopped and picked up a black trash bin with a mechanical arm, dumped its contents into the hopper behind the cab, and set it down. The noise bothered him. Wasi pressed a hand against his bandage to make sure it was secure and hurried across the street. A small dog yapped at him from behind a fence and its owner screamed at it, but the dog ignored her and the noise vibrated up Wasi's spine until he thought he might burst. He clenched and opened his fists. The humid air weighed on him and fallen palm leaves, gray and dry on the sidewalk, broke underfoot and that noise, too, bothered him.

He walked a few blocks into a neighborhood of single-story, ranch-style homes and noticed an elderly man sitting in his kitchen by an open window. The man waved. Wasi hesitated, and then waved back. In Kabul, he had done his best to avoid his neighbors. They would often stop and ask him what sort of work he did that took him from his home for weeks, sometimes months, at a time. Construction, he would answer. A company out of Dubai. It has a big project in Ghazni. He presumed some of his neighbors didn't believe him, perhaps because they would overhear him speaking English when he received calls from the Americans at Bagram Air Base, and mention their suspicions to the Taliban. How else did the insurgents suspect him of being an interpreter? The pipe bomb he found outside his house one morning had malfunctioned, sparing him. He knew he had been lucky, but he also was certain he had been found out.

I see you every morning, the old man shouted.

I walk before I go to work, Wasi said. I drive for Lyft. It's good to walk because I'll be sitting most of the day.

I'm stuck in the house because of COVID.

Are you sick?

No. Just social distancing.

Wasi removed his sunglasses and mask to show his face and not be rude.

I used to have a lot of business at the airport but now it is too slow, he said.

COVID, the old man said.

Yes, Wasi said, COVID.

He knelt to tighten the laces on his left shoe. The old man watched him.

What happened to your head?

Wasi looked up and then returned his attention to his shoe.

I'm sorry but I noticed the bandage.

Accident, Wasi said, standing up.

I see. Something fell on you.

Yes, Wasi said. Something fell on me.

Where are you from?

Why?

The old man shrugged and smiled.

Yours is not a Southern California accent.

Does it matter?

Not at all. I'm sorry if I upset you.

Afghanistan. I was an interpreter for U.S. forces but I had to leave. The Taliban found out about me and it became too dangerous for me.

I am sorry.

I miss my country. In Afghanistan, the Americans paid me seven hundred dollars a month. I thought that was so much money but here it is nothing. Where are you from?

Touché, the old man said and laughed. I'm from here. I've lived in San Diego all my life. I'm retired now. My grandparents were Japanese. They emigrated from Japan to Hawaii, where my mother and father were born. When they married, my parents moved here. My grandparents spoke about Japan all the time.

The old man pushed up from his chair and stood.

Do you mind if I walk with you? I can't stay in the house all day, every day. My wife wants me to, but I can't just hate sitting here around.

Wasi shrugged. He preferred to be alone but he did not want to be impolite. He waited and put on his sunglasses and mask again. He recalled Kabul's winters, when he would cover his nose and mouth with his hands to warm his face. He would stand still, watch his breath spread like gray smoke from between his fingers.

After a moment, the old man walked out the front door. He paused on the porch and removed a mask from his pocket. Wasi pressed his bandage. He again felt the bump of stitches beneath the gauze and the warmth of the wound. The old man approached him, stopping a few feet away.

I'm Mark Sato, he said. I'd shake your hand but we aren't supposed to with the pandemic.

No problem, thank you. Wasi covered his heart with his right hand and bowed. Good morning. I am Wasi Turtughi.

Good morning, Mark said.

He put on his sunglasses and mask.

No one can see our faces, he said. We could be anybody.

Wasi started walking and Mark fell in behind him. Wasi listened to his steps, the steady pace of his shoes striking the pavement, and when he couldn't take it anymore he stopped and told Mark he would prefer to follow him.

I think you walk faster than me.

I don't think so.

Please, Wasi said, waving him forward.

From time to time, Wasi and Mark got off the sidewalk to keep their distance from other pedestrians. They said hello, raised their hands, and some of those they met did the same while others hurried past or crossed to the other side of the street. When they reached the end of the street, Mark paused to decide which direction to take. I always go left, Wasi said. They began walking up a hill. A canyon of dry brush stood off to one side. Wasi leaned into the hill and stared into dry, rocky streambeds choked with weeds. Someone had used chalk to write, *We Miss Seeing Our Neighbors* and *Smile This Will Be Over Soon*, on the sidewalk. He stopped walking when Mark sat on a guardrail to catch his breath.

Do you always do this hill? Mark asked him. It's steep.

Every day, Wasi said. It reminds me of Kabul. Just a little. The mountains outside the city and the fields beneath them where we'd fly kites and play fútbol.

Voices rose from the canyon. Three young men sauntered down

one of the streambeds. They fanned out in a clearing and began throwing a Frisbee. They did not wear masks. They cursed without concern about who might hear them, mocking one another when one of them missed a catch. Wasi stiffened and felt his heart race. His breath got short and he couldn't move. Then he stood and told Mark he had to leave. Without waiting for an answer, he began walking back the way they had come.

What is it? Mark asked, hurrying after him.

Wasi didn't answer. He pulled his mask down to his chin and wiped his face and sucked in air as if he had been holding his breath. He kept walking, finally stopping by a tree. A wrinkled, faded flyer with a picture of a lost cat hung nailed to the rough bark. *Black and gray tabby. Whiskers. Call 619-874-2468 if you see her. Reward.* Mark wheezed behind him. Leaning forward with his hands on his knees, he sucked in air.

What is it? he gasped.

I recognized those men, Wasi said, their voices.

What about them?

I was walking last week, this walk, Wasi said. No one was around so I took off my mask. I'd gone up and then down the hill. I followed a nice little side street. Then I heard people running behind me. I thought they were joggers. I moved over expecting them to go by and I started putting on my mask. They started shouting, You fucking Arab! and that's all I remember. I woke up in the hospital. A doctor told me I had been hit in the back of my head with something very hard, maybe a pipe or a bottle. I had a concussion.

Mark stared at his feet. He wanted to say, I'm sorry, an automatic response he knew would mean nothing. But he was sorry, sorry and grateful that these same men had never assaulted him on those rare days when he left the house. They might have. Many people blamed China for the pandemic. They

considered—more like accused—every Asian person of being Chinese. They were someone to hate. Mark knew they wouldn't care that he was born in San Diego. He would be Chinese to them because they would need him to be.

I'm sorry, he said finally, unable to think of anything better to say.

Afghans are not Arabs, Wasi said.

I'm sorry, Mark said again. Do you want to call the police?

No. I spoke to the police in the hospital. They said it would be difficult, too difficult to catch them without a witness because I did not see their faces.

I'm sorry.

I want to go home.

They began walking. It was hard for Mark to believe that such horrible people played Frisbee. Nothing was what it seemed. Poor Wasi. Mark felt bad for him while at the same time he could not escape a sense of relief that so far he had been spared.

When they reached his house, Mark stuck his arm out to shake Wasi's hand and then stopped.

Sorry, he said. I always forget.

In Afghanistan, if we want something to happen, we say, Inshallah. It means, If God wills. Inshallah, these strange times will pass.

He covered his heart with his right hand, bowed, and said goodbye.

Mark watched him leave. Tomorrow, he would probably see Wasi again taking his daily walk. He would wave and say, Good morning, but he would keep his distance and not ask to join

him. He did not want to catch Wasi's bad luck. There would be no harm in saying hello, however, no harm in being pleasant.