

New Fiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: "Love Engagement"

Noor and his wife Damsa moved to Paris when the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Twenty-two years later, after the collapse of the Taliban, they returned to Kabul and rented a house with a large backyard in District Ten on Taimani Street. Withered red, blue and white roses grew beside a bare concrete wall and geckos perched between the thorns, immobile, alert, leaping at the slightest disturbance into the branches of a poplar. Fallen leaves from the tree curled on the faded tiles of a cracked terrace. One afternoon, while he was watering the roses, Noor met his neighbor, Abdul Ahmadi, and invited him for tea.

Right off, Abdul noticed Damsa in the kitchen without a burqa. She looked him up and down without a hint of self-consciousness. Another woman stood beside her. She wore a burqa and turned away when Abdul glanced at her. Damsa carried tea and a plate of raisins and cashews on a tray and sat with Abdul and Noor and lit a cigarette. Abdul could not believe her behavior and turned to Noor. Noor shrugged.

It is no problem for a woman to smoke and sit with a man in Paris, he said.

Don't apologize for me, Damsa snapped.

I was not apologizing for you.

Yes, you were!

Turning to Abdul, she scolded, You are stuck in the old ways.

Abdul's face reddened with anger but he remained quiet. He closed his eyes as if the darkness would remove Damsa from his sight. When he opened them again, he ignored her and asked

Noor about the other woman. Was she his second wife?

No, Damsa answered and laughed.

I spoke to Noor, Abdul said.

Yes, and now I am speaking to you, Damsa said. She is my friend from long ago. We were in school together.

We are not in France, Abdul said, trying to control his temper.

Yes, but you are in our home, Damsa replied.

Please, Noor said.

No, don't please me, she snapped.

When neither Noor or Abdul spoke, Damsa continued: The woman's name was, Arezo. She was still not used to the idea that the Taliban were gone and she could now show her face to men. Slowly, slowly, Damsa said, she had been encouraging Arezo to relax and trust in the new Afghanistan.

Abdul understood her hesitation. He still had a long beard and wore a salwar kameez. His friends told him to shave but his mind did not switch off and on like a lightbulb. One day, the vice police were measuring his beard, the next day his friends were waiting for barbers to shave theirs off. It was all very sudden and as unbelievable as Damsa's behavior.

Excusing himself, Abdul returned home. He lived alone. During Talib time, when his father arranged for him to marry the daughter of a close friend, Abdul fled to Pakistan. The idea of marriage scared him, especially to a girl he did not even know. He had rarely spoken to any girl and never without an older person present. He had vague memories of playing tag with girl cousins in the back of his house when he was a boy but after he turned ten or eleven his father told him to play only with boys.

Abdul refused to come home until his father relented and promised not to force him into marriage but he did not speak to Abdul again. He moved around him like a detached shadow behaving as if he did not exist.

A tailor who owned a small shop in Shar-e-Naw hired Abdul as his assistant. When he died, Abdul took over. Then al-Qaeda attacked the United States and the Americans came. In the days and months that followed, Abdul would sit behind the counter of his shop beside a sewing machine and stare at the busy sidewalk traffic, incredulous. Young men strode by in blue jeans and button up shirts with bright flower patterns, much of their pale chests exposed. Girls wore jeans, too, and high-heeled shoes, and the wind from cars lifted their saris and they held the billowing cloth with both hands and laughed, their uncovered faces turned toward the clear sky, sunlight playing across their flushed cheeks. Abdul struggled to absorb all the changes that had occurred in such a short time.

One day a year after they had met, Noor called Abdul and told him Damsa had died. She had awakened that morning, stepped into their garden, lit a cigarette and dropped dead of a heart attack. He found her slumped against a wall, a vine reaching above her head. Abdul hurried to his house. When Noor opened the door, Abdul embraced him.

Well, now I can watch American wrestling shows on TV without Damsa telling me it's entertainment for boys, not men, Noor said. I can play panjpar^[1] with my friends and she won't tell me I'm wasting my time.

Two months later, Noor stopped by Abdul's shop with some news: his nephew, the son of his older sister, had become engaged. But it was not a typical engagement. He and the girl had decided to marry on their own. Their parents had not been involved.

My nephew calls it a love engagement, Noor said.

Their fathers do not object? Abdul asked.

No. Now that the Americans are here I think it is OK.

Noor left and a short time later Arezo walked into Abdul's shop and asked if he would mend a pair of sandals. She gave no indication that she recognized him. She still wore a burqa but she had pulled the hood from her face. Her hair fell to her shoulders. She would not look at Abdul directly but he noticed a smile play across her face when he spoke.



That night, as he got ready for bed, Abdul thought about Arezo. He wondered what it would be like walking beside her in public as young men and women now did. Just thinking about it kept him awake. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of them on a sidewalk together, their fingers almost touching. Then he leaned into her face and pressed his mouth against hers. As their lips touched he woke with a jolt.

Night after night Abdul had this dream. He always woke up after he kissed her. Eventually he would fall back to sleep and dream of Arezo again until the dawn call to prayer stirred him awake. Then one night the dreams stopped. He woke up feeling her absence, his head empty of even the slightest impression of her. The next morning, Noor called. His voice broke. He sounded very upset. He asked if he could come over. Yes, of course, Abdul said. When he let him in, he was shocked by his friend's sunken eyes, his unkempt hair and disheveled clothes. His lower lip was cut and swollen.

What's wrong? Abdul asked.

Noor did not answer. Abdul made tea and they sat on the floor of his living room. After a long moment, Noor sighed and began talking. Two days ago, he spoke to his nephew. What is a love engagement? he had asked him. It is the most beautiful thing, his nephew replied. Why do you ask? Noor told him he had fallen in love with Arezo. Sometimes, accompanied by her father, she would stop by his house with food. Damsa would want to know you are taking care of yourself, she would tell him. Noor could not stop staring at her. He wanted to speak to her father about marriage. No, no, his nephew said. That is the old way. You must ask her yourself.

With his help, Noor composed a letter. He told Arezo he did nothing but think of her all day. When he watered the roses, when he walked to the bazaar, when he had tea. *I want you to be my wife*, he wrote. His nephew shook his head.

Be humble. Ask her if she would accept you as her husband.

Noor did as he suggested and signed his name. His nephew delivered the letter. The next day, Noor woke up and found a note from Arezo's father outside his front door.

Noor Mohammad, the letter began, Arezo loved your wife Damsa as a sister and continues to respect you as her husband. You are like a brother to her. She cannot feel anything more for you without betraying Damsa. In the future do not talk to Arezo again. I, as her father, Haji Aziz Sakhi, insist upon this.

Noor walked to his sister's house and beat his nephew, slapping him in the face until the boy's father threw him out. Noor stormed off to Arezo's house and pounded on the door. No one answered. He paced on the sidewalk until nightfall. Then he went home but his frustration was so great he was unable to sleep. This morning, he returned before the sun had fully risen and stood impatiently across the street. As a dry, lazy heat began spreading across the city, he saw Arezo walk

outside with an empty sack and turn toward the downtown bazaar. Noor followed her. When she went down an alley, he called her. She stopped and looked at him. The hood of her burqa was raised and he saw her face, the uncertain smile creasing her mouth. He grabbed her and kissed her. She stiffened in his arms, tried to shake loose from his grip and bit his mouth. He stumbled back and she ran, the burqa inflating like a balloon as if it might lift her into the sky.

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When he finished talking, Noor stared at his tea. After a moment, he looked up at Abdul, stood and let himself out without speaking.

Abdul followed him to the door. As he watched Noor enter his house, Abdul thought of Arezo. He hoped Noor had not scared her from his dreams. He would never hurt her.

^[1] *A card game popular in Afghanistan*