New Fiction from Amy Waldman: ‘A Door in the Earth’

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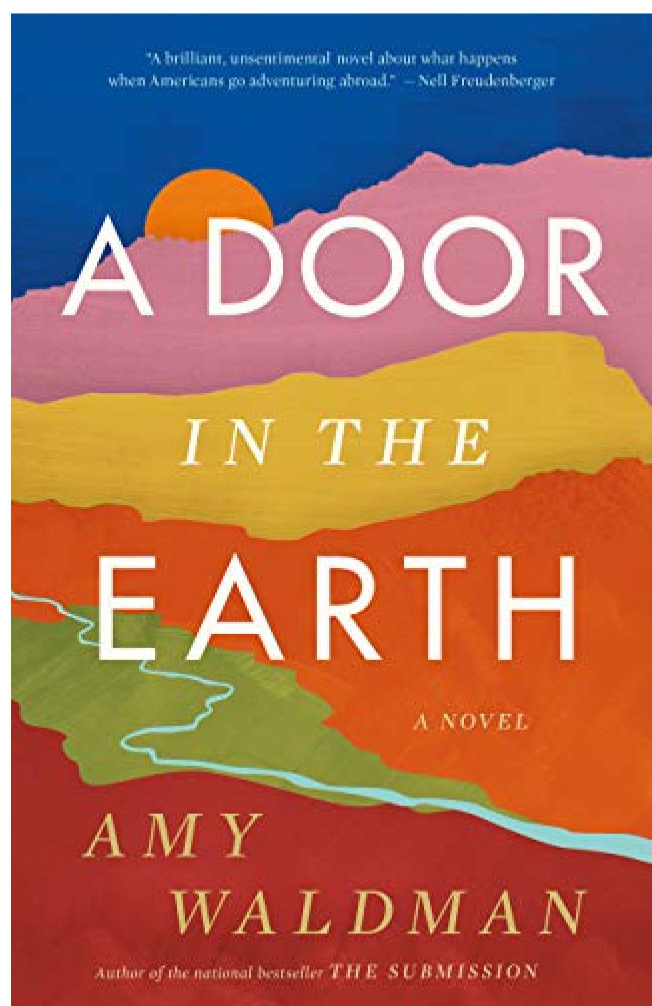
From Chapter Four: The Distant Fire

On her third night, Parveen stayed in the main room with Waheed and Jamshid after dinner while the women and girls went to clean up. The radio was on, tuned to the BBC Persian service, as it was each evening, radio being the sole medium by which news of the outside world regularly came to the village. An Air France flight with two hundred and twenty-eight people aboard had vanished; a South African woman claiming to be one hundred and thirty-four, and thus the world’s oldest person, had died; General Motors had filed for bankruptcy—the family solemnly took it all in . . .

Most of the news they received, however, was about Afghanistan, its politics and its war, reports of which drifted in through the radio like ash from a distant fire. In every other way the war felt remote, as if it were happening in another country. This was a relief to Parveen, for in Kabul it had seemed uncomfortably close, like metal woven through the fabric of the city—a hard, cold presence you kept butting up against in the course of normal life. Her relatives, as they took her to museums and palaces, a Mughal garden, the British cemetery, and the zoo, not to mention internet cafés, kebab joints, and the homes of many distant relatives, often had to pull over for the military convoys that bulled their way through the streets. They pointed out the blast craters left by insurgents’ bombs, and navigated around the barricades and walls meant to guard against them. Western embassies and Afghan government offices had all clawed out so much territory

for their own self-protection that to Parveen, the city read like an aggregation of security fiefdoms. A reprieve her cousins had planned—a picnic in Istalif, a famously beautiful spot north of Kabul—was canceled after a suicide bomber attacked a NATO convoy on the road they would have taken. Such disruptions were not routine, for they could not be predicted, but neither were they surprising. To Kabul's residents, the war was like a giant pothole that you kept swerving around until you fell into it.



Each night she and her relatives gathered in the living room to watch television, where a more disturbing face of the war was playing out. A few weeks before Parveen arrived in Afghanistan, an air strike in the western province of Farah, some five hundred and fifty miles away from Kabul, had killed more civilians, it was said, than any similar incident since 2001. It made the news in America, but Parveen, preoccupied by

preparing for graduation and her journey, had barely noted it at the time. Now she couldn’t escape it. It was believed that a hundred or more people had been killed, and most of them were children, mainly girls. Their bodies had been so badly shredded that not all of the pieces could be recovered, leaving Parveen with a new and chilling understanding of the word *remains*. Then there were the wounded children in their hospital beds, including three sisters she couldn’t forget. They had singed hair and charred skin that had been smeared with yellow ointment. The youngest, just five, clutched a glass of milk.

“Why is your new president escalating the war?” her aunt asked. “We hoped he would find a way to end it.”

The politeness of her voice hid her emotions. Pessimism? Resignation? Suppressed rage? As the sole American in her relatives’ house, Parveen felt culpable. She remembered her Berkeley friends savaging the military. How could she argue with them now? She’d expected to find clarity about the war by coming to Afghanistan. Instead, the blur had worsened.

Now, on the radio that Waheed had taken off the shelf and set, like a small pet, to his right, came a discussion of the Farah air strike, in which the U.S. government had at last conceded significant errors. Unable to help herself, Parveen began to speak about it, to describe, as best she could in Dari, the images she had seen on television in Kabul. The girls in the hospital. The men pawing through rubble looking for family members. A mass grave.

The females had rejoined the men and Parveen saw the twins, Adeila and Aakila, staring at her in shock and clutching each other’s hands. She could have been describing them, she realized with horror, when she talked about the sisters. She’d given the twins, perhaps the whole family, a new sense of their fragility, their vulnerability, and she wished she could undo that. Although, unlike the radio reporters, she’d

witnessed nothing other than what she'd seen on television and the internet, the family reacted as if she were the one offering a firsthand account of the air strike, maybe because this was a place with no screens, to where images didn't travel. Or maybe the family was rapt because of the guilt she confessed to—an admission that embarrassed her. It seemed so American, to act as if everything was about her own emotions and be so shocked by the barbarism of war in a country whose past three decades had been consumed by it. And yet she wanted to insist, but didn't for fear of sounding condescending, that it wasn't silly to expect that your government would act decently and to be crushed when it didn't.

The family looked to Waheed, the patriarch, to say something. He turned down the radio and began to speak, occasionally stroking his beard as a much older man might. The village had a great commander, he said, who'd fought with the mujahideen against the Soviets. This man, Amanullah, had gone into the mountains for years, eluding the Russians who were hunting him, surviving on roots, nuts, mulberries. He'd lost a hand in battle and he'd gained great fame. Because of his valor, Waheed added, almost as an aside, the village forgave him his sins.

Parveen knew about the commander, for he'd figured prominently in Crane's book. She also knew his sins. In the late 1990s, he'd lent his courage to the Taliban, becoming a commander for them and terrifying the region for a time. Amanullah had whipped women, beheaded men, and run a private dungeon. And he'd kidnapped Crane during his stay in the village.

Waheed didn't speak of any of this. How painful it must have been for the villagers when their hero joined the Taliban, Parveen thought; too painful to be spoken of. No, Waheed talked only of Commander Amanullah's exploits against the Russians until he reached his point, which was that if Amanullah decided the Americans were an enemy, he'd take up arms to fight them, and many villagers would follow him. Not

that anyone wanted that, he added. They wanted to stay here and farm. For the villagers, too, this war felt like another country. No one here had even gone to fight for the government, although that was mostly because they couldn’t meet the literacy requirement for soldiers.

“But the Americans should be aware,” Waheed said, “that this soil has never been hospitable to foreigners.”

It was all Parveen could do not to roll her eyes. This was the one cliché about Afghanistan that every American seemed to know.

* * *

The next afternoon Waheed came back from the fields and announced, without explanation, that they were going to the clinic that Gideon Crane had built in the village, and where Parveen was planning to volunteer. Parveen wondered if she’d passed some test. From a hook near the door, he lifted a ring with a pair of heavy, ornate keys. Nearby hung a row of emerald-green chadris, what Americans called burqas: the head-to-toe coverings, with netting over the eyes, that the women wore when they left the house. Parveen did not take one—her Kabul relatives had told her that, not being from the village, she should feel no obligation to wear one—yet their mere presence shadowed her into the yard. She chafed at the cloister she’d been living in. The women and girls watched her go.

When she stepped out of the compound she felt free. This was her first clear view of her surroundings, unobscured by walls. The village lay in a long, verdant valley that spilled out from between the feet of the mountains. The valley floor, flat and rich in river silt, had been given over to fields shaped into neat squares or sweeping crescents. Wheat and corn, rye and barley, rice—each claimed its own shade of green. The land had been terraced, and on higher levels there were orchards:

almond, apricot, mulberry, peach, many trees enveloped in clouds of pale pink blossoms. The houses, built from tawny mud bricks, stepped up a low stony ridge, their intricate patterning guarding the privacy of each family. And ringing it all, the mountains.

As Parveen was getting her first view of the valley, the villagers were getting their first view of her. When she was just steps from the compound, a passel of boys and a few men gathered around, as if they'd been waiting these past days for her to emerge. Her hair was covered but not her face, and it was her face they stared at, their gazes pinning her in place. Her seconds of freedom vanished.

"Have you never seen a woman's face?" Waheed shouted. "Don't you have mothers?"

His assertiveness on her behalf surprised her, although she sensed that some of his irritation was directed at her for putting him in this situation. The boys didn't move until Waheed took a step toward them and clinked the large keys. Then they scattered, continuing to spy on Parveen from behind walls and around corners. Once she and Waheed reached the bazaar, the boys didn't bother to hide. They stood a few feet away and gawked.

The bazaar was a simple place: two rows of facing stalls, about fifteen all told, propped up by stripped tree limbs, with corrugated tin roofs overhead. The main path was mucky from the buckets of water merchants tossed on it to keep down the dust. Waheed gave one-word self-evident descriptions for each stall they passed: butcher (a skinned sheep hung on a hook, its bare pink flesh flecked with black flies), baker (loaves were stacked for those too poor to buy ovens), and tinsmith, a maker of pots and pans. There was a shop with a desultory hodgepodge of stale biscuits, cigarettes, expired medicines, and pirated DVDs (although no one in the village had a DVD player) of *2 Fast 2 Furious* and Bollywood films,

merchandise that had probably been bought and sold a hundred times between Kabul and here, where it had washed up, as an ocean deposits plastic far from its source, to gather dust.

“Some of those things have been here since I was a child,” Waheed joked.

The shopkeeper laughed a little too hard. People greeted Waheed deferentially, as if he were someone important, and Parveen wondered if this was because she was with him. He bantered with them but did not introduce her.

The blacksmith worked outdoors, next to his forge, which was made from mud. The coals within it glowed orange, and a large kettle sat atop it. The blacksmith was an inquisitive graybeard with sweat trickling down his face, but it was the man next to him who caught Parveen’s attention. He was as big in the belly as he was in the shoulders and had a hennaed beard, a gray turban wrapped expertly around his head, and in place of one hand a metal hook. With his intact hand he was popping pistachios into his mouth, then loudly biting them with a sound like knuckles being cracked. The shells he ejected with a buffoonish *pfft.* This was Commander Amanullah.

She looked in vain for signs of the terror he had inflicted on so many or of his famed courage. What she saw was a grizzled aging man, hardly in fighting shape. Waheed’s suggestion that he could lead an army against the Americans seemed comical, a pantomime of threat. But when someone changes slowly before your eyes, Parveen thought, the change can be hard to see.

“You are the American doctor,” the commander said after Waheed had introduced Parveen.

She was not a doctor, she clarified.

“Then who are you? We need a doctor here.”

“The clinic doesn’t have one?”

“The lady doctor comes once a week. We’ve instructed our wives to get sick or give birth only on Wednesday, but they don’t always listen.”

The small crowd of men who had gathered laughed; Parveen didn’t find it funny. She was about to tell the commander so but Waheed had disappeared, so she held her tongue and instead asked, “Didn’t Gideon Crane hire a full-time doctor?”

“I don’t know what Dr. Gideon has done.” Like Issa, the villagers called Crane Dr. Gideon, she noticed.

Parveen said that she would report the situation with the doctor to Crane’s foundation.

“You work for Dr. Gideon?”

“I’ve come to be helpful to him,” she said, uncomfortable with this elision but uncertain what to say instead.

The commander asked if Parveen spoke English. The question struck her as hilarious until she remembered that of course they had no way to know what language, other than Dari, she spoke. Yes, she said and smiled.

“Let’s hear some,” the commander said in Dari.

She stuttered, “H-hello, how are you?” and was surprised to hear how strange English sounded to her.

“Yes, she speaks English,” he confirmed in Dari to his minions, who laughed because the commander himself didn’t speak the language and had no idea what Parveen had said. He asked her if she’d learned Dari in school.

No, she told him. Her family was from Afghanistan, from Kabul, where she’d been born. Her parents had left in 1988.

“So they left with the Russians. Were they Communists, your parents?”

“No! That’s just when their visa came through. They were trying to escape the Soviets. No one knew they would with-draw—”

“The little bird has quite a sharp beak,” he said, amused by Parveen’s outrage.

They’d left everything behind, she went on. They’d started over in America with nothing. Her father, for several years, had driven an ice-cream truck. That this was humiliating for Ashraf didn’t register on the villagers’ faces. An ice-cream truck was as mythical here as a unicorn. Truck drivers earned good money.

“The suffering of those who left can’t compare with that of those who stayed,” Amanullah said, and Parveen fell silent. “I’ve lost two sons to war. And this.” He waved his hook.

“I’m sorry about your sons,” she said, unsure whether to offer condolences for his hand.

“It’s a blessing to lose sons fighting for God,” he said.

“Of course.” She rebuked herself. She should have known that was how he would see it.

There was an awkward silence. The blacksmith picked up his hammer and began to bang on his anvil. Commander Amanullah looked away, as if to say he was done with Parveen.

She could see the clinic from the bazaar. She couldn’t *not* see it, since it was two stories high and painted a white so bright that it looked primed for sunburn. It was completely out of scale and character to the rest of the village. If she hadn’t known better, Parveen would have figured the building for a wedding hall planted by some entrepreneurial provincial. It looked like the photo in Crane’s TED Talk, but it was much grander than the photo in the book, which she had recently perused.

She mentioned this to Waheed, who laughed; the clinic looked smaller in the book because it *had* been smaller. Originally the structure had been just one story with a few rooms, he said. But after the book was published and donations poured in, that clinic was torn down and a new one built at three or four times the original size.

From what Issa had told him, there were three warehouses in Dubai full of unused equipment, Waheed said. “The donations kept coming; the clinic had to keep growing.” He sounded almost sad, but his eyes were creased with amusement, as if he understood his own illogic. Supplies were brought in, sometimes by helicopters, he continued. A high wall, also white, surrounded the clinic. Both wall and clinic were repainted at least twice a year, because of the dust, Waheed said, then added: “It can never be defeated.”

“Dr. Gideon wants the clinic to look sanitary,” Parveen said, feeling obliged to explain for him.

With one of the large keys Waheed unlocked the metal door that led into the clinic’s courtyard. Among the children who had tailed Parveen and him, only Waheed’s were permitted inside. The rest were harried off. The courtyard was large and dusty, unadorned except for a single shade tree that stood slightly off-center. In the late-afternoon light, its shadow stretched diagonally across the empty space.

“So the doctor comes once a week? Isn’t the clinic open any other time?”

Waheed was using the other large key to unlock the building door. “If there’s no doctor, it stays locked,” he said. “The equipment here is more valuable than all the fields in this village. And what good’s a clinic without a doctor?”

His question struck Parveen as unintentionally profound, more profound than anything in Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic,* which they’d read in Professor Banerjee’s class. Parveen had

been taken with the idea of the “medical gaze,” which was how Foucault described the way doctors, even as they were elevated to sages, reduced patients to bodies alone. She’d been curious to see how that would play out here, in the developing world. That there might not be a doctor to bestow a medical gaze had never occurred to her.

The clinic facility itself was good, staggeringly so, Parveen thought. The interior walls were a soothing white and there was a reception desk and several rows of sturdy metal chairs screwed to the floor in a waiting area. The chemical smells—ammonia, bleach, paint—were acute, almost painful. She hadn’t smelled chemicals anywhere else in the village except for the diesel that fed Waheed’s generator. There were skylights and—this seemed almost miraculous—a light switch, which Parveen flipped. Nothing happened.

The fuel was saved for when the doctor came, Waheed explained. They couldn’t run the generator all the time. After sparking a lantern, he walked Parveen from room to room, beginning upstairs with the ten-bed maternity ward and the adjacent nursery, which held three empty incubators. Downstairs he slung the beam of the lantern into windowless rooms labeled, in both English and Dari, examination, labor, delivery, surgery, and recovery. The equipment looked state-of-the-art. That this pristinely kept temple to health—to modernity—should be in this village, of all places, moved Parveen. If, approaching the clinic, she’d questioned the abandon with which Crane flouted the village context, now she celebrated his refusal to let the village’s history or isolation limit its possibilities. The clinic’s seeming excess proclaimed these humble villagers to be worthy of the same medical care that Americans were, a message almost as meaningful as the treatment itself.