

Lauren Johnson Interviews Amy Waldman, Author of 'A Door in the Earth'

Amy Waldman's novel, A Door in the Earth, follows Parveen, a young Afghan-American woman who returns to her war-torn homeland after discovering a memoir by humanitarian Gideon Crane. Parveen is not the only American influenced by the book; Mother Afghanistan has become a bible for American counterinsurgency operations in the country. If part of that story rings familiar, it is: The book-within-a-book was inspired by Three Cups of Tea, Greg Mortenson's 2006 memoir of building schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was later revealed to be largely fabricated.

I was one of the legions of soldiers who read and fell head over steel-toed boots for Mortenson's story. Like Waldman's protagonist, I ultimately found myself in a remote corner of Afghanistan in 2009. As a military information operations officer, I was charged with "winning hearts and minds"—an instrument of the "kind power" advocated by Gideon Crane. I didn't share Parveen's Afghan heritage, but I see my younger self in her idealism and naivety. I feel the crushing blow when expectations and reality clash.

I relate these parallels to Waldman before our interview, and she begins by asking me questions about my experience—curiosity cultivated through a career in journalism, but also desire to learn, to investigate, to understand. Waldman's first novel, The Submission, explores the aftereffects of 9/11 on American soil, imagining what might happen if a Muslim-American wins a blind competition to design a Ground Zero Memorial. A Door in the Earth is her second novel.

Lauren Johnson: You worked as a reporter for a number of years with the *New York Times* and covered both ground zero in the aftermath of 9/11 as well as the war overseas for a few years. I'd love to hear you talk a little about what led you to pursue journalism to begin with and how your experiences reporting after 9/11 shaped your perspective as a writer.

Amy Waldman: I finished college and didn't quite know what I wanted to do. I was interested in writing, film, but it was all fairly vague. And then I ended up moving to South Africa a year after graduation. First, I was volunteering there in a university—teaching and helping in other ways, and then I began doing some freelance reporting. It was 1992, 1993, so apartheid was ending. It was a very exciting time in the country's history, and so partly I felt like being a reporter gave me a way to go witness all of this, gave me a reason to be going to rallies and protests. I have a strong interest in social justice, so it was a way to write about things I cared about. I sort of felt like I backed into journalism a little bit. But then felt like, *Okay, this is what I want to do.*

I came back from South Africa, worked at the magazine *Washington Monthly*, then went to the *New York Times* and spent five years writing about New York City. And then 9/11. I was in New York for about six weeks afterward covering the aftermath and then was sent overseas . . . I ended up in Afghanistan in November 2001, then went back repeatedly over the next few years. It was, obviously, a much more peaceful time there. There was a lot more freedom of movement. I went to Helmand and places that within a few years it was much more dangerous to go to. So I had, I think, a very personal, visceral sense of what was happening with the war because I had seen this window of optimism and openness, and then watched it closing.

I was actually briefly sent to Iraq after the invasion. And I think that was really informative for me, too—in registering all the ways that diverted resources and attention from

Afghanistan, but also the sense of an occupation was much more palpable there. I think Afghanistan did have this identity much more as the 'good war,' and our reasons for being there were clearer. And yet, it helped me see certain parallels between Iraq and Afghanistan and our presence in both places. Also just watching things start to sour. In Iraq I felt them start to sour very quickly. I was there maybe two months at the most, and within that time I saw the change. Afghanistan, it was much slower – the disillusionment that built, among Afghans, but also my sense is even within the military, and for reporters as well. Even once I left the region I followed really closely what was happening with the war and our presence there and just felt very confused by it. I guess it's the simplest way to put it. You know, more and more this sense that there was—and frankly is—no good solution to this, and that we hadn't thought through where this was going.

I think that's a very long way of saying that all of my post-9/11 experience fed into the first novel I wrote. *The Submission* is much more about America and how 9/11 changed us at home. I'm interested in, even in fiction, moral questions and the choices we have to make both as a society and individuals about how to answer these moral questions. The first novel came out of reporting in America and reporting abroad and the ideas of: What did we want to be as a country in the wake of 9/11? What were our values? What should change? What should stay the same? And then for individuals, how did your personal, political, psychological history weigh into how you answer these questions?

I really loved Afghanistan as a country. I always loved going there. I loved the people that I met and people that I worked with. I was good friends with a lot of our interpreters there. I felt anguish about what I saw happening. [*A Door in the Earth*] is, in a way, another chapter of what I had started with the first novel: who we are at home. Afghanistan was where I wanted to try to understand who and what we are

abroad.

I also felt like 9/11 created this whole new set of tropes and ideas and conditions about who we imagined ourselves to be. *Three Cups of Tea* I think was so popular because it fit into that idea of who we think we are. I was interested in idealism, even going back to when I went to South Africa as a young person. I kind of love that impulse in Americans, to want to go and help abroad. But I also think as I've gotten older I question it more and see it as much more complicated, and I don't have as clear a sense of how to think about it. Fiction for me is a good place to work out things that I don't know the answers to, or don't exactly know how to think about. So that all fed into this novel. That was a very long answer.

Lauren Johnson: I appreciate long answers because these are challenging things to think about, and I don't think there is an easy answer a lot of times. I heard that for *The Submission* the idea kind of lodged itself in your brain, and you had initially shelved it while you were working as a journalist. Then it wouldn't stop gnawing at you so you decided to listen to it, and you stopped working for the *Times* and wrote the novel. Was the seed for *A Door in the Earth* similar to that? Was it an obsession, for lack of better words?

Amy Waldman: Yeah, it actually was. I had not read *Three Cups of Tea*, and then Jon Krakauer published *Three Cups of Deceit* and 60 Minutes did its report, and I became completely obsessed with the entire thing. So I read *Three Cups of Tea* at that point. I wasn't even that interested in [Greg Mortenson] as a person or what his motivations were, I was more interested in why did so many people buy into this myth? What did that say about us? I felt like it got at something pretty deep, both in who we are as Americans, but also in the War on Terror, the war in Afghanistan. I couldn't easily articulate what that was, but I felt like it really went to the heart of something there. And then I also was really interested in what would it feel like to believe in this cause or this person and

then find out that in all kinds of ways, it wasn't what you thought it had been.

I spent a lot of time online reading reactions from people after *Three Cups of Tea* was exposed. I was interested in the people who were really angry at Krakauer for exposing him—this idea that we need heroes, and it's wrong to tear them down, even if they're false heroes. But then I would find, say, a 14 year old girl who would be like, '*I'm crushed, because I really believed in this and raised money for this.*' What would that feel like to be that young and having this experience? I was trying to make sense of why was it so popular, why did the military latch on to it, and then what would it feel like to find out that basically you've hitched your idealism—which is a genuine feeling—to something that's false. I kept meeting people who said, '*Oh, I went into education because of that book,*' or '*My brother went to help in Pakistan because of that book.*' So, if something's not true but it's motivating people to help, that's really interesting as well. So anyway, it just seemed very messy and interesting. I usually feel like when I become obsessed with something, that's fertile territory for a novel.

Lauren Johnson: And why did you choose 2009 as a time frame in particular?

Amy Waldman: Initially, I think I didn't have the novel set in any particular year. When I'm writing fiction I'm always torn, especially the kind of fiction I do—at least everything I've done so far—which is so obviously spun off reality in some way. I'm always torn about how specific do I want to get? In *The Submission*, I don't say it's 9/11. I left it vague in terms of what the attack in question was. I never use the term 9/11 or September 11 anywhere in the book, because I felt like it just takes you out of a fictional world into one that immediately you're thinking about all your associations and experiences with 9/11.

In this case, the more I thought about it and started looking at different points in the war, I just felt like it actually does matter to be specific. That year was so interesting to me, for all the reasons I weave into the novel: everything from Obama becoming president and rethinking the whole Afghanistan strategy, to the number of casualties of American soldiers rising, to growing public disenchantment at home. . . It really just felt like that was a pivotal year in the war. And so it seems a good pivot point to set the story when all of this is going on.

Lauren Johnson: And it's definitely rooted in reality. You mentioned a lot of things that took place that year, including the airstrike in Farah that led to massive civilian casualties, and the attack in Kunduz in November where the British reporter was kidnapped. I appreciated all those little reminders. And I think someone who maybe didn't have an obsession with that region in 2009-2010 would still pick up on those elements, that it feels very grounded.

Amy Waldman: Yes, but I think, equally though, someone who didn't know anything—in a way it wouldn't matter. It's almost like I'm speaking to you as a reader in one way and another reader in another way. I'm putting all those things in; to me, it's exciting that you would get them and register them and their significance. But equally, I know there's a lot of readers who will not have paid any attention to any of those things. I kind of like tucking in reality into fiction. I like that people who get it will get it. But I also feel like, if you don't, that's fine, too. It doesn't matter if you never read the news about Afghanistan, I want it to affect you emotionally. Maybe there's a way putting it in fiction will do that, even if you turn off the news.

Lauren Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. It grounds it but also has those emotional reverberations, and I think particularly the way that you approach it from a new perspective. That's one of the things that I really appreciate about the book as a whole

is all the different perspectives. You're not looking at this from the traditional whitewashed American lens that most people are used to viewing war through. You weave in all these different points of view against the backdrop of war that captures a fuller spectrum. There's Parveen—and I would love to hear more about your choice to make her your protagonist—and then all the colorful characters she interacts with along the way.

Amy Waldman: Originally there was going to be, I think, five different sections, and each would have a different central character. Aziz, the [military] interpreter, and Trotter [the American military commander] were going to have one section, and [Parveen] was going to have another section. But when I started working on it, it just didn't work. And so I ended up kind of folding everything into her story. And it really to me became about her story, but braided together with all these other people. I wanted someone young, because I feel like that is a point when you are more open to influences, and partly it's a novel about her wrestling with all these adult figures and mentors and influences, and kind of coming to terms with them.

The idea of a young American going abroad is a very familiar story and has been done in fiction. I decided to make her Afghan-American, partly because I wanted her to have some understanding of the culture and speak the language. I feel like every American in some way has a place that they are connected to—it can be very immediate, it can be very distant—and they're sort of these ghost places for us where you imagine a strong connection. And then what happens when that's tested and you have to come face to face with real people? Also, I'm always very interested in people who are kind of caught in between. With her and Aziz, I felt like they were both in that situation. The question of allegiances: even if that's clear in your own mind, how do other people perceive you?

Lauren Johnson: You cover a really impressive spectrum. With Parveen herself, with the family she's staying with, Waheed's family, who are mostly just trying to exist and live their lives in this remote Afghan village, and then Colonel Trotter and these American soldiers who are also inspired by Gideon Crane's book and the "kind power" notion. And I'm glad you mentioned Aziz, I think he was my favorite character.

Amy Waldman: Oh, that makes me happy!

Lauren Johnson: I think interpreters don't get a lot of attention for the precarious position that they're in, straddling these different worlds and competing agendas. I really appreciated that perspective. But again, it's how you weave everyone all together. Parveen observes at one point that her "sympathies kept tilting back and forth, never finding a perfect place to rest." I have to say, that's how I felt throughout the book, not really comfortable aligning myself 100% with any character. And I think that's in large part because of all these different perspectives that you invite us to consider. Would you say that one of your messages is that there *is* no comfortable place to rest in war?

Amy Waldman: Yes. Although I'd maybe say there's no comfortable place to rest in life!

Lauren Johnson: That's a fair edit!

Amy Waldman: But yes, I think that's true. When I was younger I was very certain about a lot of things, and I think I've become less and less so, which is often frustrating. There are things—and I could go on at great length—where I have a very strong sense of what's right and what's wrong, including in war. I mean, there's a lot happening right now in Afghanistan that I think is egregiously wrong. But that feeling you have is exactly what I wanted. That certainly in that situation there's nobody's saintly or perfect, whether that's because they're trying to survive or that's human nature. There

shouldn't be a comfortable place to rest. Certainly in war.

Lauren Johnson: I grew up in the era of chick flicks where in 90 minutes someone falls in love and lives happily ever after; it's just this clean-cut story line. As I've gotten older I realized that's not the case, basically ever. And that's part of coming of age. To me, a lot of Parveen's experience read like a coming of age story also.

Amy Waldman: Yes.

Lauren Johnson: She's confronted with the fact that life isn't black and white, that there are shades of gray everywhere, and it's uncomfortable. Your decisions have ripple effects, and even if you're making them with good intentions, you can't count on them having positive outcomes.

Amy Waldman: The more I worked on this novel, that idea became something I thought about more and more. Just what do our actions do? In the name of whatever cause you believe in, how do you affect other people? That's the beauty of being alive—how interconnected we all are—but also it's very hard to live without having repercussions in the lives of others, whether you want to or not. And the gap between our ideas of ourselves in the world and our realities in the world interests me too. How do you ever stand far enough outside yourself to even see how you affect others?

Lauren Johnson: Having not been back to the country in so long, you render the landscape so strikingly. And you also invite readers into this very intimate setting of an Afghan home, which is mostly closed off to us here in the West. I would love to hear more about how you were able to capture the spaces and characters authentically.

Amy Waldman: The landscape there made such an impression on me. Some of that just stayed with me, and then I certainly drew on the reporting I had done when I was there. There's little lines and things people said to me when I was a

reporter that I probably wove into the book or gave me the seed for an idea. So I had that base for having spent time there, but it was very difficult not being able to—or, I should say, deciding not to—go back and research. Instagram I love for the visual reminders it provides, and there's so many photographers doing great work there. I read a lot of books, including *Afghan Post* [by Wrath-Bearing Tree co-editor Adrian Bonenberger]. There are quite a few documentaries that I watched, and I also did a lot of research on maternal mortality. I read [military blogs] for more logistical detail. Anthropology—there's not so much that's super recent just because of conditions, but there's enough to be really helpful. There's a lot out there. But it's not the same as going back.

Lauren Johnson: I'm glad you mentioned maternal mortality. Could you talk about why you chose to focus on that as one of the central issues? [Crane, the humanitarian, witnesses an Afghan woman's death in childbirth, and in response decides to build a clinic for women in her village]

Amy Waldman: Yes. So once I came up with the idea that, in a way, it's a book about a book—the influence of this memoir—I was trying to think, who is this person who wrote it? What was he doing in this village? I don't remember exactly what the spark was for that, but as soon as I thought about it, it totally made sense. I mean, maternal mortality is a huge issue in Afghanistan, and it also was a way to get at one of the complicated things about this war, which is the whole issue of women. Are we there to save them or protect them? Is that a true reason or a pretext? And also the contradictions embedded in that—for example the way we've mostly allowed women to be left out of the peace process.

And so I wanted to see how those contradictions in America's relationship to women in Afghanistan would play out in the story I'd invented. What is PR and what is a legitimate desire to help? What is our obligation? I felt like it was a way for

[Parveen] to connect with women in the village as well. And then all the complexities around—and again this came out of my reporting, some of it at least—who can treat women, medically, and how does that work? So, it just seemed like the issue to build the novel around.

Lauren Johnson: And one of the other ways that Parveen ends up connecting with the women in the village is in reading them Crane's book, which is such an interesting layer. She quickly realizes that events and descriptions in the book don't line up with the reality of the people who were living it. Aside from that, the moments in those scenes where we get to see the women interacting away from the men and their daily routines was a really powerful image. They take their burqas off and they're teasing each other, and harping on their husbands, talking about sex; just women being women. I think that's an important element, too, that gets lost in the politicized discussions of war: just people being people and the connective power of that.

Amy Waldman: I definitely wanted to have that. I would say the war was the thing that propelled the novel into existence, and yet I didn't want it only to be about that. And I did feel strongly that all the reasons I really loved Afghanistan, I wanted to try to get some of that across. And, you know, people everywhere are just funny and saucy and smart. Someone once said to me that it's much easier to focus on the differences with people in other cultures than it is the similarities. That was probably in the context of being a reporter, but I think it's true in fiction too, that it's very easy to exoticize everything that's different or extreme in another culture. But the truer portrait is capturing at least some of ways that people are quite similar anywhere: their friendships, their relationships, their desires—all of that.

Lauren Johnson: Were any of the moments that occur in the book echoes of experiences you had in Afghanistan?

Amy Waldman: Good question. Funny, at this point it's so hard to even sort everything out. There are things that were not experiences, but were taken from the news. [One incident, removed to avoid spoilers] is based on this tiny, one paragraph news item that I found years ago . . . that's always really haunted me. Frankly, the Konduz incident—the translator who died was someone I was really close to and had worked with, so that never went away for me. I had very strong feelings about it and wanted it not forgotten. And then there would just be little things. Like when Waheed says to Parveen, “You know, I wish my wives could do what you do.” When I was in a Pashtun area reporting, this man said that to me: “I wish my wife could do what you do.” I just never expected to hear that there.

There are little things that in one way or another either are my experience or things I read. [I read a paper] about the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, the psychology of an occupation, and that fed into my thinking: this idea of, is an old man just an old man or is he dangerous? What does it mean to be an occupying power? As the fear increases, how do you start to interact with the population? I feel like that's a central tension of our presence there: Supposedly trying to help and win hearts and minds, and yet we're also terrified and have no idea who to trust. How do those things coexist with each other?

Lauren Johnson: I actually wrote down a line where Parveen wonders: “What did it mean to offer help to people you don't trust?”

Amy Waldman: Exactly.

Lauren Johnson: That was certainly something on my mind when I was there, and I'm sure many of my compatriots as well. That really complicated mixture of the inherent power that comes with being an American military member, but also the vulnerability that comes with it, and just the pervasive lack

of knowledge and understanding, and then the rules that are being dictated by people who aren't actually on the ground—and you captured that web in really kind of an appropriately discombobulating way.

Amy Waldman: That's interesting, that idea that you are not making the rules. And also that, in this novel, and it seemed to me there, like the rules were always changing.

Lauren Johnson: Yeah, absolutely.

Amy Waldman: I think for most Americans and Afghans that's incredibly confusing. Because there's no consistent relationship. And even as a soldier, you're still a human being, and you're told one day to perceive the people in this place a certain way, and the next day you're told to perceive them in a different way. How are you supposed to reconcile that internally as well as externally in your actions and your reactions?

Lauren Johnson: Right. And how are you supposed to inspire trust in an interaction when you're going in with body armor and two weapons and ballistic sunglasses and fourteen ton vehicles? So many paradoxes inherent in war.

Amy Waldman: Yes, paradox is the word.

Lauren Johnson: The fact that this war has now been going on for 18 years, I think it's fitting that this is not a book that wraps up neatly at the end. Parveen has this great line that it is "a war shaggy with loose ends." Which does not satisfy my idealistic American desire for happy ending, but it's also very appropriate. Was that a conscious decision?

Amy Waldman: Yes. It was hard for me to imagine a happy ending, to be honest. I think this is a very slow moving, epic tragedy and it's gotten so much worse—for Afghans, in particular, in the past few years. I just felt like the most honest ending was one that was unresolved . . . It's more

just, we have to think about these things. We can't just be congratulating ourselves all the time on being the saviors of the world. Not that we really are any more. In some ways I feel like I'm writing about history more than the present.

[I also want to] touch on the role anger, for lack of a better word, played in the writing of *A Door in the Earth*. So many things about the war that were treated as normal—the lies or withholding of information; the false rhetoric about success or victory in the war; the sending of soldiers on missions or to outposts that made no sense or seemed destined to fail; the loss of life on both sides, of both soldiers and civilians, and the lack of questioning whether those deaths, or lifelong injuries, were a cost worth paying—seemed wrong to me, and the novel was a way to work through that. I think one problem with the civilian-military divide is that civilians don't think they have the right to ask these kinds of questions, because we're not serving, when for me that's the reason we're obligated to ask them.

Lauren Johnson: These two novels, it seems, very organically fed into each other. Do you think you'll stay in that zone, about the aftereffects of 9/11? Or is that still to be determined?

Amy Waldman: I think it's to be determined. I mean, sometimes I think there must be a trilogy. It seems like these things always come in threes, but I don't know what the third one would be. And I definitely don't want to force it. Both these books really just came out of, as we talked about, kind of obsessions. And so, I feel like if I don't have another obsession, I will not write another novel along those lines. I might write another novel, but it would be totally different. And yet, I clearly am consumed by post-9/11 America and the War on Terror. And since it never seems to end, I guess eventually there may be another novel. But I would rather it all ended and then I could write about something else.

Lauren Johnson: Do you ever see yourself going back to journalism?

Amy Waldman: I don't think I would go back to the kind of journalism I was doing. I could see doing more essay writing. I keep thinking about how to write about what's going on now . . . The Afghan deaths, both soldiers and civilians, and the numbers—how extreme that has become. And also the number of airstrikes the US is now carrying out there, and how little information there is about that—I think that's what's really disturbing, that it almost becoming this secret war where we just have very little sense of what's going on and who's doing what. But I don't want to write a novel about that. It would be more an essay or op-ed. So that's a long way of saying I don't know.

Lauren Johnson: Well you can be sure that I will be reading everything you ever write from now on.

New Fiction from Amy Waldman: 'A Door in the Earth'

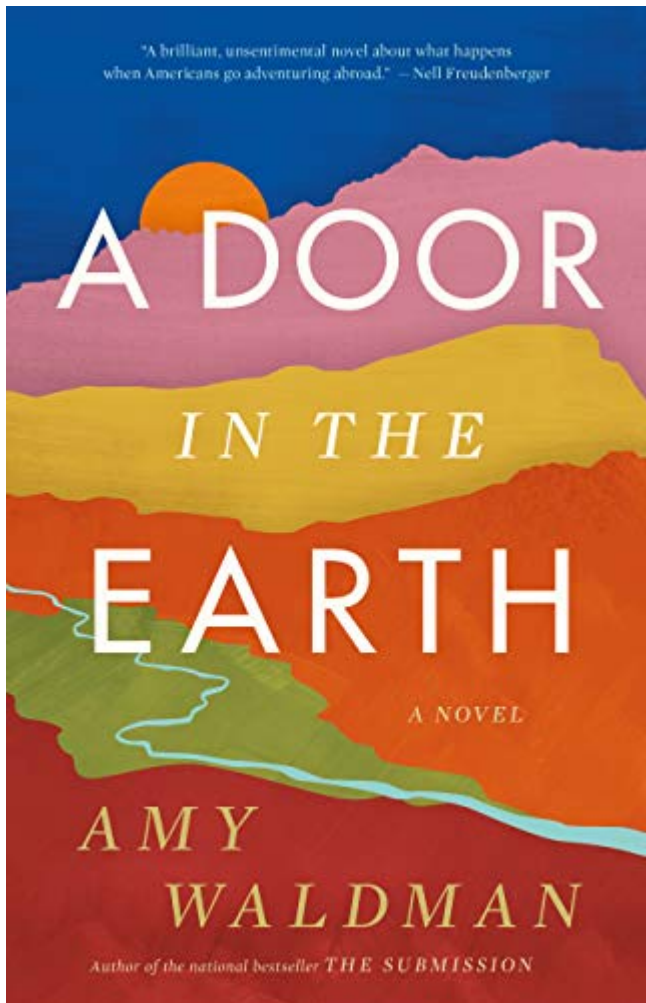
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From Chapter Four: The Distant Fire

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.

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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 withdraw—"

"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.