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We Are Now Beginning Our Descent

James Meek

Published by Canongate Books

Extract

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First published in Great Britain in 2008 by
Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street,
Edinburgh EH1 1TE

This paperback edition first published in 2009 by
Canongate Books Ltd

1

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British Library Catalogue-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84767 115 8

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

www.meetatthegate.com

October 2001

1

At four a.m., when it was still dark and an hour before the Fajr prayer, Sarina Najafi got up, washed, dressed, ate a hasty breakfast of lavash and cheese and left her family's apartment on the tenth floor of a modern block on the southern outskirts of the Iranian city of Esfehan. Her father, mother and two brothers were still asleep. They were strictly Friday mosque-goers, and fifteen-year-old Sarina was no more devout than that, at best. But the director of her school was trying to make herself look good in the eyes of the basiji, the vigilantes of the Islamic Revolution, and all this week, Sarina and the six hundred other girl students who attended the Liberation of Khorramshahr High School would be praying five times a day. In Sarina's opinion, which she shared loudly and often with her friends, it was too much. Of course, girls had as much right to pray as boys, as the director said. But how would she ever get her class project finished, and study for her English test, with all this praying, all this getting up so early?

Sarina took the lift to the ground floor. Over her favourite lilac manteau she wore a black chador which left only her face showing, and over that, a satchel with her schoolbooks and the borrowed video camera for her class project. She tugged at the top of her chador where her stubborn fringe kept poking out. Whenever Sarina and her friends were a respectable distance away from the mosque,

off would come the chador. Five times a day! It was a bore. She didn't like the thought that Faraj, her cousin, would see her in the drab garment, with his way of smiling at her in the street.

Outside it was cold. The harsh streetlights lit the bare earth and concrete. This was a new housing development, built to accommodate engineers and technicians who, like Sarina's parents, worked at the nuclear plant. There were no trees or grass yet, but the apartments were big and bright and the families were delighted with them. A kilometre away, Sarina could see the green neon signs hung on the temporary mosque. It had been converted from a sports hall the previous week. Just beyond, behind a high concrete wall and razor wire, was the nuclear plant. The president had visited a few months earlier, and had said some quite silly things, although Asal had whispered to Sarina that she thought he was good-looking and Sarina had hit her friend's arm.

There was little traffic at this time. Over the sound of the few cars and her own footsteps, Sarina heard a strange noise in the distance, a deep, fast thudding, like the lathes in her uncle's furniture workshop. Or like the sound when the president came. Yes, that was it: a helicopter. More than one, perhaps. Sarina walked on. Gradually other girls, dark ghosts in their chadors, began to fill the street. The sound of the helicopters faded and Sarina heard the giggles and murmurs of her fellow students. An amplified 'click' rang out across the district and the muezzin began their calls to prayer.

A new four-lane highway ran right to the gates of the plant, but the quickest way to the mosque lay across a large empty lot and down a much narrower street, between two rows of comfortable villas where the most senior nuclear engineers and their families lived. For the fourth morning in a row, Sarina found herself in a slowly

moving, chattering column of girls dressed in black, sauntering through the pre-dawn darkness in their hundreds, passing under the streetlights like a river.

Sarina saw Asal waiting for her outside her house and greeted her.

'Come on, slowcoach,' said Asal.

'I hate these early starts,' said Sarina. 'Can you see how bad they are for my skin? Did you hear helicopters?'

'Yes!' said Asal, her beautiful eyes widening with fascination. It was the last word Sarina would ever hear her speak.

It all seemed to happen at once. Another sound came from the plant ahead of them, a sort of rattling and scraping, like a ruler dragged along a fence. From the front of the column of girls, they heard the sound of vehicle engines, and screams. Behind them, from the patch of empty ground, was the sound of the helicopters again, now deafeningly loud. Sarina looked back. She saw girls running in panic in different directions and enormous black shapes approaching the ground in clouds of dust. A siren began to moan from the direction of the plant. Sarina turned in time to see a series of blinding white flashes, followed by blasts which made her crouch down and cover her head with her hands. When she next looked, she saw something she could not make sense of. A column of trucks was driving up the street towards her, from the direction of the plant. Soldiers were hanging out of the windows and through holes in the roofs, carrying weapons and screaming in a language she thought she didn't understand but realised, with a shock, was English, although she didn't know all the words. The trucks kept stopping because there were hundreds of shrieking, panic-stricken girls blocking their way.

Without knowing why, she crouched against the wall and took out the borrowed video camera. She began to

> film. She recorded it all, under the harsh lights. The American soldiers screaming at each other. The stopping and starting of their trucks. The cry: 'Move forward! Move the fucking trucks forward! Any raghead bitch gets in the way, fucking light her up! Move!' The moving of the trucks into the mass of schoolgirls. The screams as their bodies went under the wheels. The shooting. Even when the bullets pierced Sarina's body, the camera continued to record, writing the billions of digits of information that would be found intact in her cold hand, later that morning, among the heaped bodies of the dead.

Adam Kellas halted the free scurry of his pen along the feint of the notebook, read back the last few sentences, crossed out 'raghead' and inserted 'towelhead'. He crossed out 'towelhead' and 'fucking'. *Any bitch gets in the way, light her up*! The extra pejoratives were superfluous. Without it, the sentence was tight, effective craft. Depending on the reader's view, it would provoke anger towards the US troops, or towards him, Kellas, the author. The direction didn't matter; the emotion did. It had the added virtue of distracting attention from the blandness of the petite paragon Sarina, whose only purpose from the off, it might otherwise be clear, was innocence and martyrdom. Six hundred elderly Iranian goatherds slaughtered in their claggy robes wouldn't make such a promising start.

Kellas put the pen down on the rough surface of the desk, locked his hands behind his neck and arched his back as far as it would go. He was surprised at how easy writing the beginning of the novel had turned out to be. He had covered four pages with handwriting in two hours, with not many crossings-out. The acquisition of the desk and chair had helped; he no longer had to write with the notebook resting on his knees, or the floor. Perhaps there'd be time to sand it down and varnish it, if Mohamed could obtain varnish and sandpaper here.

Kellas turned round. Mark was sitting on his mattress,

holding his notebook in the crook of his handless right arm, while his good left hand flipped pages and worked his laptop. The room had whitewashed walls and windows on two sides. There was a recessed cupboard, which Mark and his photographer Sheryl had made their own before Kellas moved in; the three roommates each had a cheap tin trunk with brass clasps, along with their rucksacks. The floor was covered in a red fitted carpet and every square foot not covered by their mattresses had cables, power strips and chargers tangled across it. At night, when the main lights went out, and the generator was still on, the room shone with the red and green dots of batteries charging. It was ten p.m. Lately there'd been a great many aircraft overhead, gouging thunder out of the sky. Tonight the generator was the only sound.

Kellas liked Mark, but there were three reasons he disliked him. In fact, liking him – that was a fourth reason. Kellas wanted to know what had happened to Mark's hand, and he couldn't think of an excuse to ask him whether he'd been born that way or whether it had been accidentally severed, or blown off in an explosion, or the subject of a judicial amputation; so he did not ask. He shouldn't have had to. A man with a missing hand had an implied obligation to explain it to his roommates. That was the first reason. Another was that Kellas had overheard Mark yelling at one of the Northern Alliance functionaries, whose job was to shuffle the drivers around among the reporters, that he was an American reporter, that he didn't work for 'some bullshit European newspaper'. Kellas was cold with Mark for a while after this until Mark found out what was bothering him and told him not to be offended, that he had never considered Britain to be European. What Kellas most begrudged was how hard Mark worked. Their editors were in different time zones. Kellas's were in London and Mark and Sheryl's were in California. Mark had to work twelve hours of his Afghan day, and then he had to work twelve hours of his Californian day, the whole twenty four, no overlap. Kel-

las never saw him sleep. It was not that Kellas was lazy, but if a day passed and he wrote nothing, he wouldn't worry. Mark would. He was always interviewing people and trying to find out what was going on. He didn't spend enough time waiting for things to happen.

Kellas asked Mark if he could borrow a couple of AA batteries.

'Borrow?' said Mark.

'I'll get fresh ones back to you by the end of the week.'

'From where? You know the Irish guy? You know the one. The photographer. He came overland from Pakistan, horse and foot. Took him ten days. He's leaving tomorrow because he ran out of AA batteries and nobody'll dip into their stash to help him out.'

'I need a couple.'

'I don't have any. I don't use them. Those are Sheryl's. Ask her.'

'She thinks I've been taking her coffee, but I want her to know I bought my own. The jars look the same.'

'Why don't you tell her?'

'You could tell her when I'm not here.'

'What, are you afraid of losing face?'

'I don't like her.'

'Like her? You don't have to like her.'

Kellas turned his chair round so it was facing into the room. 'You work too hard.'

'So do you. You were out all day, you came back and filed a story, and you've spent the past two hours scribbling in that book.'

Kellas closed the book and put it underneath his laptop.

'What is that, a journal?'

'Yeah.'

Mark laughed and flipped a page in his notebook. He stuck a pencil between his teeth and frowned so that his thick black eyebrows joined together. Kellas could see from the way his

shoulders shook that he was still laughing. Shadows moved across the window and indistinct voices came from outside. The compound was crowded. Kellas was lucky to have even a third of a room.

'What's funny?'

Mark shook his head. His eyes were wrinkling up now.

'What?'

Mark spat out the pencil, which bounced off his laptop screen. '"Dear diary! Sheryl wouldn't talk to me today! She is such a bitch! She'll soon find out that two can play at that game! And, oh my God, in Mazar-i-Sharif, six traitors were hanged in front of the shrine! Gross!"' He looked up. 'You know who else has AA batteries? Your friend Astrid Walsh. Right next door.'

'Are we friends?'

'She came across the mountains with you.'

'Some of the way. We parted company after we came over the Anjoman pass.'

'So ask her.'

'I should,' said Kellas, fidgeting with his pen. 'I went up to the hospital with her last night.'

Mark snorted. He was reading the wires. 'Can you believe it?' he said. 'This war's hardly started and they're already talking about the next one.'

Mark and Sheryl had been to their regular hangout that day, the mujahedin house near the front line. The roof had a view. It was more of a stakeout than a reporting opportunity. Sheryl would come back with photographs of explosions on a particular distant ridge where B-52s dropped bombs by the ton. She would spend most of the night editing and transmitting the pictures to her paper in the US. The Californians had an appetite for looking, over coffee, at the exact monumental broccoli shapes their bombs made in the sky after they were dropped. Once, Sheryl showed Kellas a much enlarged detail of one of her photographs on a laptop screen. He could see the bleached

fangs of the ridge, the smoke and dust from the explosions wasting away into the blue, and perhaps, under Sheryl's tapping fingernail, something else.

'See him?' said Sheryl. 'See the lil' Taliban man?'

Maybe he could. There could have been a black vertical a few pixels high, and a horizontal. The beige point could have been a face. There could have been a Taliban fighter there, standing up from under his rock, deaf, exultant and choking from the bombs, opening his arms out wide and yelling to America that he was not martyred yet. Kellas couldn't be sure. Maybe it was a gap in the rock. Sheryl had lenses the size of buckets but the ridge was far beyond Alliance front lines. It was halfway to Kabul.

Mark was lost in his work. Kellas slid his notebook out and read through the opening again. He'd decided to write it a year earlier, a novel crafted to sell as many copies as possible in the shortest time, to be made into a movie and video game, to make Kellas enough money to spend the rest of his life writing whatever he liked, which might be nothing. He was thirty-seven. Up to that moment he'd written two novels in the time left over from reporting. He'd wanted them to be great literature, but they were neither great nor bad. Nor were they popular. This had been discouraging, rather than devastating. He reassured himself that each book was an end, and not a means to an end. It would have been difficult to believe if he didn't know that others were telling themselves the same thing. The poet Pat M'Gurgan told him in 1981, when they were about to leave school, that as a writer you could settle for being one year's good harvest from the land, or you could be the land. The characterisation appealed to Kellas. It became one of the expressions he considered wise and original when he was young. Later he might have thought it over, but in the interval, its value as wisdom had been replaced by its value as souvenir, and it didn't occur to him to touch it, particularly since M'Gurgan held to it, until one evening when Kellas, who by then lived

in London, called M'Gurgan at his home in Dumfries.

After they'd talked for a while, M'Gurgan announced that he had stopped work on poems and his autobiographical novel. He was halfway through writing a new book, the first volume of a fantasy trilogy for teenagers.

'I don't care what you think,' said M'Gurgan aggressively, before Kellas could speak. 'I'm tired of being poor. The only people I know who read the kind of books I've written till now are my wife and other writers like you. I want to make some money. I want to be popular before I die. You're thinking I've sold my soul. Have you seen my soul recently? It's something the kids kick around the lounge when the telly's bad. Its eyes are hanging out.'

Kellas's skin seemed to stretch and contract over his body. His pulse was elevated. 'How do you know it's going to be a trilogy if they haven't published the first one yet?' he said.

'How do I know? One hundred and fifty thousand of Her Majesty's sweet little pounds, that's how I know.'

Kellas's decision came that night. It came: he didn't make it. It arrived while he was staring through his reflection into the spikes and feathers of his incorrectly thriving garden. It came, and his conscience would have to budge up to make room for it. He was beaten. The great words were not in reach and he would rather be popular than obscurely wise. He didn't delude himself that it would be simple to write a best-seller, to write a novel whose first characteristic was that it would appeal to the largest possible audience. Out there in London were hundreds of writers who believed they could easily write commercial novels if they wished, but chose not to. This false notion was the only barrier standing between them and the rolling floodwaters of despair. Kellas knew it would be hard. It could not be thought of as a lowering, or a coarsening. He would need to learn to be content in the new medium, not merely study it. The next day he bought five fat paperback thrillers with their titles and their authors' names on the front in embossed gold lettering two inches high.

In the September of 2001, after Kellas had made his notes and laid out his plot strands diagrammatically on large sheets of cartridge paper, using different coloured pens for each strand, a group of young men hijacked four airliners and flew them into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York, causing thousands of deaths and great destruction. Kellas hadn't talked about his new book at work and when his colleagues at *The Citizen* saw him that day, staring at the TV monitors, chewing his lip, gripping the back of a chair, teeny fireballs popping in his eyes, they were awed at how hard he seemed to be taking it, as if he knew he had a friend trapped on the high floors. He didn't. He was watching a scenario almost identical to the one he had planned, in the secrecy of his study, as the climax for his novel.

He'd known the thriller market was crowded. He'd allowed for the danger that he might have to compete with a book with the same plot as his. But he had not foreseen the extent to which naïve idealists, with no understanding of human nature, no sympathy with the Other and a childlike faith in the use of violence to produce happy outcomes might persuade real people to act out their lousy plots in the real world. Kellas had worked hard to make his terrorist mastermind a one-sided figure of evil, when the character he had been looking for was a frustrated novelist who did not know he was one. It hadn't occurred to Kellas that men might find it easier to sell their thrilling, unlikely narratives to the masses by asking armies of believers to perform them than to vend their imaginations at airport bookstalls in the accepted fashion.

A few days later, the woman he'd been sleeping with for six months, Melissa Monk-Hopton, a columnist on *The Daily Express*, broke up with him, saying the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington had made her reassess her life choices. Those were the words she used. Kellas asked her how many other men and women she supposed had used the actions of a group of suicidal religious fanatics to rationalise their break-

ups that week. She responded in her column next day, proclaiming an end to her 'shameful fraternization with the pusillanimous quislings of the liberal left'. He had desired her on the basest grounds. But even though, while she referred to him as 'my boyfriend', he referred to her out of her hearing as 'a woman I've been seeing', he'd been hurt by the manner of her leaving. It seemed curious to him that he put such a value on knowing women, on understanding women, and boasted to anyone about how much he enjoyed the company of women, yet had never been happy with a woman for more than a few months. He took some days off work and tried to drink but couldn't bring himself to do more than sniff the whisky before he poured it down the drain. He lay on the sofa for hours, cycling his way through the TV channels at two-second intervals, and ordered chicken kormas and calzones from the local takeaways. Salty juices dripped onto his clothes and dried. He studied the faces of the delivery boys, seeking signs of contempt in their eyes, but he saw only fear, or nothing.

When *The Citizen* came to him a few weeks later and asked him to travel to Afghanistan, to relieve a reporter north of Kabul, the editors made the offer in voices brimming with grandeur. They were grave about it, as if they were practising a tone to use for his next of kin, and they were excited. They wanted to be sure he knew he was to be both grateful and solemn. It wasn't the first time they'd asked Kellas to write about a war for the paper, but it was the first time he'd seen his editors so cherishing of each place on the roster. In other wars, fought between dull foreigners, Kellas and his peers would hack out their despatches and fling them homewards, fragmented lumps of narrative that lived and died in a day or two. What Kellas was being offered here was the privilege of slipping with his stories into a greater story, a baton-twirling lit-up marching parade of a story that belonged to a mighty nation of storytellers, mythmakers and newscryers, America, but which other, foreign storytellers might attach themselves

to. The fabulous thing was that it wouldn't matter whether he or anyone else in the great onrushing parade was shouting qualifications, or yelling in a different accent that events were occurring in an altogether other way. America's big loud story would jostle their little stories on together with its own, and his voice would add to the general din, and the general din would give his voice power. He could stay with the parade, or pipe up alone.

Kellas refused to go, and his editors told him they understood, although he didn't give them reasons. They guessed that he was drinking heavily, and the guess became procedure. They gave him the mixture of respect, fear, latitude and contempt that the letters trade gives presumed alcoholics. They knew he was shaken up by events, even if they didn't know that Osama bin Laden had stolen his idea for a book, that his closest friend was confined in an attic room writing about hobgoblins, and that he hadn't expected his lover to leave him. It was true that he didn't like Melissa, but she'd given him to understand that she was fond of him. She responded to his desire with her own, until the day she withheld, and never gave again.

What had changed Kellas's mind about going to Afghanistan, what had made him go back to his editors and persuade them to send him after he'd turned them down, was something he heard in the pub.

'Don't blame you for turning the Afghan gig down, mate,' the reporter said. 'Fucking scare the shit out of me.' He raised and lowered his glass and the lager suds drifted down from the brim. Kellas had nodded slowly, finished his drink and gone to look for the foreign editor. Like many others before him, Kellas found he wasn't brave enough to be thought a coward, and he had flown to the war.

A revised version of his opportunistic thriller had been gestating in him, like a well-loved grudge, ever since he arrived in Jabal os Saraj, until tonight, when it began to unload itself onto the page, with the help of the new furniture. Originally the

house had no furniture, only carpets and mattresses: an Afghan house. Meals were served on a plastic sheet laid out on the floor. None of the Americans, Europeans or East Asians staying there had challenged this arrangement until a Spaniard, already marked out by his preference for comfort and his loathing for the eight o'clock rush to the mountains, who spent the morning lying on his back and wiggling his toes, one hand holding a novel above his face and the other supporting his head, who ambled out of the compound for a couple of hours around lunch and, when he came back, would be seen writing something for his newspaper without reference to notes, his thick heavy fingers striking the laptop keyboard as if it were an old typewriter prone to jam – this Spaniard was seen by all one day to have bought himself a deep armchair and a floor lamp, which threw a suburban orange light slantwise across his long rounded body while he sat there, at rest and serene. All he lacked was a television. (Later, he acquired one.)

Up to that moment the foreign journalists living in the house had expressed their defiance of local conditions either by bitching about the Afghans' commercial practices, or by flaunting their gear, their shining multi-tools in hand-stitched pouches, their lightweight trousers of spacesuit fabric or their high-bandwidth antennae, which folded out like altarpieces. The Spaniard's defiance was of a different kind. The sight of him sitting there in his armchair, when till then there had been nothing but red and blue carpet and cushions, affected Kellas. The lack of vertical furnishings hadn't bothered him before. After the journey in the lizard-coloured transport plane from Dushanbe to Faizabad, after the trip here through the mountains with Astrid in Russian cars, the house had delighted him with its plain brightness and its peace. Four walls and a roof, a generator, soft pallets to lie on at night, three meals a day if you wanted them and steel drums in the washrooms which were filled with water and heated by wood furnaces each morning and evening. Kellas didn't bitch about the Afghans.

Two hundred bucks a day for a car, a driver and an interpreter was easy to pay. He was glad to be spending *The Citizen*'s money. Every fresh hundred dollar bill rubbed between his thumb and index finger and given to Mohamed – who would glance at it, smile, fold it in half, put it in his pocket and offset it against the thousands of dollars he owed to local small businessmen, each of whom owned an automatic weapon – was a bill less in the pouch Kellas wore around his waist. When he'd left London the pouch contained twelve thousand dollars. It felt as if a paperback was stuffed down the front of his jeans. When he squatted down over the outhouse hole in the morning and lowered his trousers he imagined the money belt breaking and him having to retrieve it from the Marscape of ordure down there, where mice scampered over hills of turds.

What moved Kellas when he saw the Spaniard in his armchair was an imaginative step bolder and more honest than any of the other foreigners in the house had taken. The Spaniard had dared to face the possibility of living among the Afghans for ever. He wouldn't, and knew it. But he had allowed the possibility. Living among the Afghans, that is, not as an Afghan; not growing a beard and buying a shalwar kameez and becoming a Muslim. The Spaniard had allowed the possibility to enter him that he might live among the Afghans not as a colonist, a soldier or an aid worker, but as the man he actually was, a tired, well-read, funny, sexually indulgent, godless, twice-married, wine-loving, seventy-thousand-euro-a-year writer from the rich side of the Mediterranean. By making himself comfortable and ignoring (except for lunchtimes) the war that pattered on just over the horizon, the Spaniard had travelled further into this foreign land than any other *farang* in the guesthouse.

Kellas sent Mohamed to get a desk and two chairs. Mohamed found them in the bazaar. They wobbled, on mixed metal and wooden legs. In this country even the furniture had prostheses. Like all the foreigners in the compound, Kellas was

acting, but this time, inspired by the Spaniard, he had decided to change his role. In the clothes they wore, the things they carried and their actions, the journalists were explicitly transient. The Brits played soldier-explorers; the Americans doubled up as missionaries and prospectors. The French were buccaneering scientists, the kind who would kill to get the sarcophagus or bacilli back home before a rival; the Germans cast themselves as students on their study year abroad; the Japanese, astronauts landing on a foreign planet. Some of the British way was partaken of by Kellas, although for him it tended to be less exploratory or military than that of someone sent, with a handsome travelling allowance, to visit a poor relative he had never met and whose address he didn't know. All these roles had in common dealing with life in the hard countries, like Afghanistan or the Congo, but their salient characteristic was the way they helped separate the reporters from their bourgeois contemporaries who stayed safely at home. Such was the Spaniard's genius, and selflessness. There would have been nothing easier for him than to go home and impress his middle-class friends and any number of girls with stories of how he'd survived mines and mortars and Taliban roadblocks. He could ride through the dust clouds in a pakul hat with his teeth clenched and his eyes on the far distance, behind aviator glasses. It would impress nobody in Spain to hear that, in Afghanistan, he'd made himself a comfortable sitting room. For that reason the sitting room was the greater achievement. To take souvenirs of Afghanistan back to the bourgeois European world was trivial. To transport fragments of the bourgeois European world, however briefly, to Afghanistan, was a magnificent gesture. The Spaniard had made a sitting room; Kellas would make an office. He had the desk and the chair. He pinned a map to the wall above the desk. He had the computer. The final prop required was the phone, and although Jabal had neither landlines nor mobile coverage, he had one of them on his desk, too, a satellite phone, a square black object the size

and weight of a toasted sandwich maker. It came with a small, square antenna that had to be outdoors, pointed at a satellite over the Indian Ocean, in order to work. Kellas had run the antenna out from the phone on a length of brown cable that stretched from his desk, through a small window and onto the second chair outside. The antenna stood on the seat of the chair, face to the southern stars.

Mark's satphone rang. It was still morning in America. It was the early call from his editors. Kellas was expecting a call of the same sort from London. It was overdue. He tapped one of the buttons on his phone. No bars.

Mark hung up. 'Not getting a signal?' he said.

'No,' said Kellas.

'I don't know if it's related,' said Mark, 'but you know that kid, the little one who guards the gate some nights? He was looking so happy and comfortable in a chair when I came in. It looked like one of yours.'

An emotion dragged at Kellas's insides. The hormones shot first and asked questions later. They fizzed, and notified the brain to step aside while they went about their work. Kellas, under anger's direction, got up and went out into the corridor in his socks. Past the door of the room Astrid shared with the NPR woman and the elderly fellow from Sweden. Had it been open and light and had she been there, cross-legged and the curve of her body over the laptop, eyes looking up through her blonde fringe, anger would have yielded. But not. Through to the broad lobby, past the humps of asleep Koreans, to the door. Boots! Forbidden in the house. Among that park of muddened suede and dust, stiff laces with space fabric, were Kellas's tanky Scottish boots. He had to find two among a hundred still boots before his anger stood down. It was not standing down, however. It was recruiting. Kellas found his boots. He was in too much of a hurry to loosen the laces and push his feet all the way in so he walked out into the darkness with his toes hooked under the tongue of the boots and his heels squashing down

the backs. It made his stride jerky and galumphing, like a stop-motion animated monster from a 1960s B-movie. The cold night settled round him and the line of trees along the compound wall spread a dim net of twigs across the sky. Kellas came to the corner of the building and saw that the chair had been taken from underneath his window and the antenna left on the ground, facing the wrong way. The same thing had happened the night before. He had been angry then, but now it was more wonderful and intoxicating, a gush of rage that made him refreshed, clean and free. He was astonished to find so much of something in him that he hardly knew he even had a little of. He stalked over to the gate of the compound. The guard stood up quickly from the chair. He was a boy of fifteen or sixteen, a head shorter than Kellas, in a frayed shalwar kameez with an old v-necked woollen jumper on top. He wore plastic slippers on his bare feet. His Kalashnikov hung diagonally across his chest, held there by a filthy canvas sling over his shoulder. The varnish was almost worn off the stock, like a piece of driftwood, and each raised edge of pressed gunmetal was worn silver with age. It was probably the family gun, the only thing worth money he and his kin owned apart from sheep and daughters. The boy's broad face told Kellas how angry Kellas looked. The boy's head was uncovered and his hair was short and almost fair and he narrowed his eyes and pinched his mouth. He trembled a little and looked red and defiant. Kellas saw that this was how the boy's face would front up to a beating or a humiliation from an elder and that now he, Kellas, was the elder. The anger still poured through him, undammed, with the terrible quality of a flood, concealing or simplifying all boundaries. Kellas was both the flood and the body being carried along by it. Kellas grabbed the chair with his left hand and lifted it.

'I told you!' he yelled. 'That's my fucking chair!' The night seemed to record the words in a deep, adamantine groove, and play them back to Kellas many times. The part of him being

carried away by the flood couldn't speak. The flood surged again and Kellas shouted the same words to the boy, who didn't move, and didn't utter a word. He didn't know English. Kellas's words were a mad roar. With his left hand, Kellas shoved the boy in the chest. His palm came into contact with the teenager's hard warm little body for an instant before the boy teetered back a step. He recovered, compressed his mouth more tightly and stared into Kellas's eyes. Kellas turned and stomped to the house with the chair. The rage had ebbed and he felt calm. The shame came on behind. He placed the antenna back on the chair.

A sound came from the darkness overhead, as if the sky had turned to stone, and a slab was being dragged across it. Sometimes the engines of an American aircraft would hush or roar out suddenly. Kellas looked south. In the far distance he caught a faint flash. He heard the sentry boy murmuring behind him. He wondered if it was a prayer, or a curse. Kellas had fallen back on the striking and the screaming. Language was the obstacle, of course, but since the break with Melissa, Kellas had come to distrust words and his skill in their use even when he shared the language. Even in their moments of greatest apparent unity he and Melissa, and his ex-wife Fiona, and Katerina in Prague, had remained impermeably single.

Shoving the sentry boy was the closest he'd come to feeling the warmth of another human body since he'd put his hand on Melissa's bare shoulder to wake her up on the morning she left him. No, this wasn't true. For some reason he'd found himself holding Astrid's hand in the bus to the hospital the night before. They'd talked. They'd looked into each other's eyes. It was too bad that he no longer put faith in talking, or seeing. There'd been a time when Kellas thought the meeting of eyes, with its infinite regression of looking, him looking at her looking at him looking at her, and so on for ever, was the purest form of intimacy, when souls come close to meeting, like two birds flying down to drink from the same deep, narrow pool.

Now he wondered if the meeting of eyes, even lovers' eyes, was nothing but a more refined form of blindness.

From many miles away, the slightest of thuds came from the direction of the flash. Strange that it should carry so far; a trick of the atmosphere. The sound of America prodding the surface of the night side of the world.

He intended to keep away from Astrid. He'd given up on an old hope that two people might form a whole. He remembered thinking once that two people could experience together a communion with the world that the solitary soul achieves easily. He could imagine. He had done that. The first time he'd fallen in love, as a boy, it had been with a girl he never spoke to. He achieved what he couldn't have if they'd been together: he shared the ecstasy of solitude. For that reason, and because it was the first time, it acted on him like a toxin, like not-fatal cancer. He recovered, but he was changed. Damaged, perhaps. Where love was concerned, it was impossible to distinguish between damage and mere change.

On the way to his room he passed Astrid walking in the other direction carrying an open laptop. She had on her too-big anorak. They smiled at each other.

'Hey,' said Astrid. Through her fringe her grey eyes looked at him with curiosity and doubt. She passed him and stopped and said over her shoulder: 'Did you get your chair back?'

Kellas turned round. 'The shouting wasn't cool,' he said.

'Yeah,' said Astrid. 'Young boys with guns. That's as proud as it gets.'

In Virginia she was a hunter.

'He wasn't going to use it on me.'

'That's what makes you a bully.'

'Was I being a bully?'

'Yeah. When unarmed men shove armed boys around because they know they can. What does it sound like to you?'

'I didn't see you at the bomb village today,' said Kellas.

'I got up early. I was out there and back by ten. The guy,

Jalaluddin. He was so bereft. Fuck.'

Kellas had forgotten the name of the husband, although he had written it down. He did remember the man's bereftness when the reporters left him sitting on the ruins of his house.

'I gave him money,' said Astrid, looking past Kellas into space. 'Kinda wish I hadn't. Like I was trying to buy something. A hundred bucks.'

'It wasn't your bomb.'

'Oh, it was my bomb,' said Astrid absently. 'They're all my bombs.' She looked at him. 'Did you give him something?'

'Yeah. Same amount.'

'Here,' said Astrid. She closed the laptop, tucked it under her arm and put her free hand into one of her anorak pockets. She took out a couple of Duracells and held them out to him. 'Mark said you needed some.'

Kellas thanked her and lifted the batteries from her hand. His fingertips touched her palm. He felt the trace of damp in the lines that crossed it and the warmth that the heat of the computer had left there.

'Thanks. I don't know when I can give these back,' he said. Astrid was opening her laptop again. The cuffs of the anorak rustled against it.

'But you will, right?' she said.

'As soon as I can.'

'Don't forget!' she said over her shoulder. She was smiling when she said it. Kellas called after her to see if she wanted to take a walk later, but she didn't answer.