

This Hard Easy Life
by Jamaluddin Aram

When the news of General Soleimani's assassination came on the radio, Iqbal was singing to himself something about Kabul being far away. He cleaned the kitchen and his son's and daughter's rooms, picked the freckles of lint from the red Afghan carpet and the couch in the living room. As he organized the bathroom, the thought of returning to Afghanistan took shape nicely in his imagination. He sprayed the small mirror with water and vinegar and wiped it with old newspaper, and he could smell the early morning coolness of a warm day in Kabul. He sang and squeezed up the bottom of the toothpaste tube, and his voice came out beautiful, raw with longing. At that moment, despite his age, despite being in Toronto, his heart felt young and healthy, and he felt happy in anticipation of things coming.

A sheet of paper came in the mailbox over the shoe stand. He took it and looked at the usual picture of the usual grey pigeons. He crumpled the paper in his palm and threw it in the garbage bin in the kitchen. He put the skillet on the stove, opened the fridge, and from a plastic container took pieces of lamb seasoned with lime, crushed garlic, sour yogourt, and red peppers. He sautéed the meat in sunflower oil until it turned gold. He put some water on for tea. Then, from the cabinet, he took a fistful of grains from a big jar, and went out onto the balcony.

It was Friday and it was warm, and Iqbal thought the weather was awfully nice for a day in January in Toronto. He sat in the blue folding camping chair with the plate in his lap and the glass of green tea next to him on the floor. The meat tasted fine and salty. He ate and thought of home as he continued to listen to the local news in Kabul. "Three months after the polls closed, the primary results of the Afghan presidential elections are yet to be announced," said the young reporter. Two grey pigeons came onto the balcony and picked at the grains he had spread on the stone. Then came a third. Iqbal watched them quietly as he drank his tea. The news continued, and the mayor of Kabul explained that the main culprits behind the terrible air pollution were the public bathhouses and brick-making factories. "We burn coal and rubber because it is cheap," said a man with a pronounced lisp. "If Mr. Mayor wants, we will switch to gas, but I'm telling you now, no one will be able to afford to take a bath. This city will stink like a rotten city."

The news ended. The pigeons went away. Iqbal finished his tea and stood up. He leaned forward on the railing and looked at the park below. On the carpet of yellow grass near the narrow stream, there was an empty bench. Next to the bench, there was a bare tree. Small birds sang and moved easily in the branches. Up along the stream, there were more trees and there

were more birds. In the distance, there was a big bridge on which fast, silent cars crossed, and the sun reflected off of their windshields. Behind the bridge, the trees merged into the city that unfolded endlessly with tall buildings standing on the horizon.

For five years, Iqbal had watched these buildings, this city, in the rain, under the sun, in the snow, and had felt no connection. He had arrived a stranger and remained one. He didn't care now. In a matter of days, he would be on a plane, and Kabul would welcome him with open arms. He would sit in his small courtyard and drink tea with the familiar sun over his head and the comforting knowledge that the harsh, beautiful mountains stood all around him in the distance, protecting him without demanding anything in return. Then all the little pleasures of life would return. The tongue in his mouth would find its function again. His neighbours would be happy to see him. Once again he would know the names of things: streets and neighbourhoods and cities and rivers and valleys and mountains. Once again he would be able to bargain when buying groceries or fresh meat. Once again he would be able to go places by himself in a taxi and talk to the driver about life and the prices of food and gas and the air pollution and the elections. Once again he would be able to walk into a restaurant or a teahouse with no hesitation and order whatever his heart desired. Once again he would be able to go and sit by the grave of his wife on the hill and talk to her in the evenings when he felt lonely. Once again he would feel alive and complete.

The day they had gotten on the plane to Toronto, something had died in him. "It feels wrong to leave your mother behind," he had said. "Ata," his son had responded, "Aya would have wanted us to live in a safer place," and fastened his seat belt for him. Thirty-six hours later, after a layover in Istanbul, when they had landed at Pearson International, Iqbal—for the very first time, since the age of ten when he had dropped out of school to work in a timber-cutting yard to pay the debt of his father, who was wasting away in the darkness of the little rooms filled with the hazy smoke of opium—had felt not needed. Until that humid summer morning, he never knew a time when he would stop what he was doing and things would not go terribly wrong. Men would appear at the door asking for his father, then for their money, birds would head into the desert, a family of fourteen would starve, and, with some imagination, you could even say a government would collapse.

In his youth, Iqbal tended to a flock of wild turkeys. During that time, high-ranking government officials had obsessions that bordered on the absurd. They got drunk on home-

brewed green grape liquor as soon as dusk fell, or they smoked hand-picked hashish and watched young boys dance with bells strung around their ankles. In the military, things weren't any different. The officers organized wrestling matches between the soldiers out in the open as they sat on the folding chairs in the cool evening air, watching, laughing, smoking tobacco. Some sent cars to bring women from nearby towns when they felt bored. Some fancied big fighting dogs. Some hung small bamboo cages in the windows of their quarters, and in them small colourful birds sang early in the morning and late in the afternoon. One officer loved wild turkeys. He kept a large flock and put Iqbal in charge. That's how he did his military service, in sandals, with a stick in his hand, running after half-insane birds. After the military, at the age of twenty-two, he became a truck driver's assistant. They transported goods from the Soviet Union's borders in the north to the Soviet-backed government in Kabul. The driver was an old toothless man with a short temper and a terrible mouth. When the armed men stopped the truck on the highway up in the mountains or in the heart of the desert, it was Iqbal who negotiated deals. He was illiterate, but he had mastered the intricacies of negotiations. With a shaved head, in clothes that smelled of dark, unwashed one-room hotels, he used his knowledge of birds, the military, and—from his time in the timber-cutting yard—his understanding of men's vulnerabilities hidden under their obvious machismo and vulgarity.

Now he found himself on the periphery of life. He did things that didn't mean much. A couple of times a day he squeezed up the bottom of a tube of toothpaste, tidied up his son's and daughter's rooms, washed the dishes, did the laundry, arranged the balcony, and fed the birds. His son wished he wouldn't touch the toothpaste tube. His daughter said that she would appreciate if he stayed out of her room. And every so often a written warning came in the mailbox from the building's management, asking him to refrain from feeding the pigeons.

Still, he fed the pigeons, squeezed up the toothpaste tube, walked to that Value Village across from that LCBO, and came back a little glazed, the deadness inside him a little more manageable. Whenever his son and daughter pleaded with him to stop, he made the case to let him return to Afghanistan. They had finally reached an agreement: he would return home and receive a monthly allowance under the condition that he ate less red meat, ate more vegetables and fruit, stayed away from alcohol (home-brewed and imported), and spent six months in Kabul and the rest of the year in Toronto to keep his pension and health care benefits. The night that happened, he had phoned his friends, who, like him, had found this easy life in Canada difficult

and had gone back to Kabul. They had laughed joyously on the other end of the line and said that when he arrived there would be green tea with cardamom, and candies from the Haji Hassan sweet shop, and they would drink tea and listen to Shah Ewaz songs like in the old days. They asked when, and he said that his daughter was looking up air tickets and his son was going to take him to their family doctor to get him his pills. “Come, you won’t need the medications,” one of his friends had shouted. “The water, the air, the dust of this land are medicine.” He couldn’t have agreed more. His health had deteriorated since arriving in Toronto. It was here that he had learned he had high blood pressure, and then one night during the second summer, he had developed gout on his left foot. Since then every summer the gout had attacked, and his big toe puffed up. The skin became thin and purple and shiny and his lips became dark with pain.

In the evening, his daughter came from work. She could smell the aroma of spiced red meat in the living room. Did he eat meat again against the doctor’s advice? she asked. No, he responded. Did he go to the Value Village? No, he responded. Did he feed the pigeons? No, he responded.

“Good,” she said and shook her head and gave him the printout of his ticket. He would have a six-hour layover at Atatürk International Airport. She would prepare him vegetable sandwiches and bags of sliced fresh fruit because he wouldn’t be able to buy himself food in Istanbul.

Later his son came home covered in sawdust. “Ata, the superintendent said that the neighbour below us complained again about pigeons today.”

Iqbal didn’t say anything. He watched his daughter write on pieces of white paper with a black Sharpie.

“What is that?” his son asked.

“I booked Dad’s ticket,” his daughter answered. “I’m writing these signs to help him with directions in case he gets lost.”

“Did you hear the news?” his son said while taking his steel-toed boots off.

“What news?”

“The Americans killed Qasem Soleimani,” his son said, and Iqbal remembered the news on the radio.

“Who’s Qasem Soleimani?” his daughter asked without stopping writing the signs.

“He was an Iranian military general.”

“And what does he have to do with Dad’s flight?”

“His assassination means that things will get bad in Afghanistan,” his son said. “Maybe we should wait.” He put Al Jazeera English on the TV.

It was then, when his daughter stopped writing, that Iqbal saw the slain general’s face for the first time. On the screen, there were pictures of Soleimani, and a scorched vehicle still in flames on a road at night, and videos of American officials, and then Iranian leaders. He sensed the unease. The news saddened him unimaginably.

“Let’s let him go,” his daughter whispered in the hallway. “Have you seen how happy he has been in the past couple of days?”

“*O Khowar*,” his son said to his sister, “with Soleimani dead, the Iranians are going to attack American interests anywhere they can get to. Afghanistan will sink in deep shit.”

“It has always been in deep shit. How much deeper can it sink?”

“We have to wait and see. And please tell him to stop feeding the pigeons. He doesn’t listen to me. The next time they are not going to send a warning, they are going to terminate our lease.”

Iqbal listened intently and wished his daughter would say something, but she didn’t. When they went to their rooms, he got the radio on his phone. Unlike the English channel on TV, the Afghan radio hardly mentioned Soleimani’s assassination; it was squeezed between a report on the Afghan elections and a story about a group of Saudi humanitarian workers who had landed in the west of the country carrying not aid packages but expensive cages, in them expensive birds of prey.

That night Iqbal had trouble falling asleep. He lay awake in bed and listened to the sound of the deadness inside him grow steadily. His old heart began to hurt in a new way.