

Kabul is Mars

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There is life. And there is life in Kabul. Where it might as well be Mars...

He wakes with the call to prayer, the kind of sudden waking that is filled with equal parts fear, surprise, and confusion, to find himself beneath a tree in Shar-e-Nau Park, laying on his right side in the fetal position, wearing a faded pair of blue jeans and a plain white t-shirt. Barefoot. The ground, gravely dirt littered with stiff tufts of green grass shooting up through its cracked surface like drowning victims gasping up through the water for air. "What the fuck?" he asks to the birds staring down at him from above, chirping and singing as if not noticing him. The early morning dew has moistened the world around and beneath him, leaving him with a slight chill that will soon evaporate beneath the rising summer sun. He looks towards the sky while sitting up, protecting his eyes with an open hand though the light of day has barely made an appearance. The park is still empty, save for a few junkies making their way towards the house of holies and the divinity pusher living there. He stands, brushing off the dirt and chill, and begins trying to think back on how he got there. But his mind is a blank. He walks out of the park and onto Cinema Park Street, already alive with the start of another day, and feels his way between the taxis and through the rapidly building frenzy. "Shit, *post*-conflict. Right," he thinks to himself as he watches a band of street kids gathered at the corner, two of them punching each other over a piece of gum. "Mister, Mister, please, one dollar, one dollar Mister, please."

He turns to find a dirt-stained phantom on his heels, her wrinkled hand extending from beneath the powdery blue shroud. He reaches into his pocket, digging deep for a 10 Afghani note, and pulls out a 5 Afghani coin instead. He hands it to her, and in disbelief listens as she tells him how he's rich and should be ashamed for giving her only 5 Afs. After staring at her for a moment, he apologizes, puts the coin back in his pocket, and keeps walking. He hears her burqa muffled voice muttering curses and insults at his back as he walks away.

The sun is now well risen and the breeze blows a fine, brown, far-away dust into his eyes, drought-stricken land-flakes, smelling of dung and the unlucky, unyielding fields they have left behind. He can almost hear the cries of the farmers, "One good crop or else to the poppies!" "The poppies," he thinks to himself, "Tariak. I was smoking tariak last night." This much he now remembers from the events before waking this morning, but nothing more. He looks across the street and sees the band of street kids again. They've stopped fighting, the smaller of them sulking empty-handed on the curb, chewing on exhaust fumes and embarrassment. He arrives home and finds the street gate ajar, creaking slightly with the wind. He closes it behind him, calling out to make sure he's alone, "Someone here?!" No response, but for the rustle of leaves. Entering the house he proceeds straight to the bathroom where he runs a hot bath, undresses, and slips into the steaming water with a long, drawn-out groan. Beginning to unwind, feeling his muscles relax and smooth themselves out of their tension-filled knots, his mobile rings, bringing him out of his empty-minded drift. Pulling the phone out of his pants pocket he answers, "Baley." "Hey! What the hell happened to you last night? You just got

up from the table and walked away. I called you for like an hour but you never answered. I was going to come by your house but I was too pissed off with you.” Her voice is agitated, angry actually, but with a sprinkle of worry on every word. “Hey. Um, I don’t know. Did I? Really?” His head begins to throb. “Where the fuck did you go?” she demands, without any sprinkles of worry this time. “I don’t know. But I woke up this morning on the ground under a tree in Shar-e-Nau Park.” “You what?!” she yells, disbelievingly and with more than a hint of reproach. “Look, if you don’t want to tell me then don’t tell me, but don’t fucking lie to me!” she screams, and hangs up. He notices the seventeen missed calls from the night before and that it is now 8am, before dropping the mobile on the ground and settling back into his liquid escape.

Freshened up, smelling clean, and feeling like himself again, he heads towards her house in Taimani, trying to call her on the way. She doesn’t pick up. “Man, she’s really pissed off. This is going to hurt,” he winces, thinking of the altercation he knew was waiting for him once he did find her. He knocks on her gate door and rings the bell. The chowkidar answers, she’s not home. Hungry, he walks back over to Madinah Bazaar near his own house and the chapli kabob shop he frequents. He asks for an order and a half, with egg. The three large patties of minced meat mixed with onions, tomatoes, and mild peppers topped with two eggs sunny-side arrive with a full naan, one halved lemon, a hot green pepper, and a bowl of watered-down yoghurt-cilantro chutney. He devours it, while watching a Pashtun martial arts gangster film complete with onomatopoeic punching and kicking sounds. Walking out into the now steamy, late-morning pollution, he tries calling again. “What?”

she answers. “Can we meet for a coffee?” Silence. “Please?” “Okay, where?” “How about the Intercon?” “The Intercon for coffee?” “C’mon, it’ll be fun, and you know I love it there.” “Fine, but I need to finish running some errands, so let’s meet there around 2pm.” The Intercontinental Hotel is Kabul’s first 5-star hotel opened in 1967, though now it perhaps hovers more within the upper 3 to mid 4-star range. One can still find old postcards in shops on Flower Street in Shar-e-Nau from the hotel’s heyday when foreign guests would lounge around the pool in their swim trunks and bikinis. It held the honor of “Best 5-Star Hotel in Asia” in 1970, served as Officers’ Quarters during the Soviet Occupation, and was the only functioning hotel in Kabul at the time of the U.S. invasion. Although having undergone renovations adding up to the millions of dollars in the last few years, it has luckily maintained its ability to send you drifting through a time warp; walking into the Intercon is like walking back in time, to the glamorous kitsch of the early ‘70s.

He waits for her in the Talk of the Town Café inside the hotel, drinking a sweet, black coffee, smoking cigarettes, and staring out the window at the treetops below. He’s alone, except for a couple of shady-looking characters sitting at a table across the room. They’re dressed sharp, one in traditional Afghan attire, a black pehran-tuhmban with white hand-sewn embroidery on the chest, a black vest, and pristine white, long-toed, slip-on loafers, and the other in a shiny black two-piece suit with sparkles that flash at different angles like multi-colored Christmas lights, a thin, yellow, old-wave tie straight from the ‘80s, and equally pristine and pointy yellow slip-ons. “How do they keep their shoes so clean?” he thinks to himself, noticing

them notice him noticing them. They're speaking in whispers, regularly looking around to see if anyone's close enough to overhear them. There's a black briefcase on their table, and the traditionally dressed one keeps tapping his right pointer finger on it as he speaks in hushed tones to the suited one, as if explaining something to him, as if carefully and deliberately giving him directions about what to do with the briefcase once they part ways. After being caught several times watching them and attempting to eavesdrop, he stares blankly again out the window, dragging deeply on his cigarette, trying to look distracted. Luckily, she arrives just moments later, breaking the discomfort that hung heavily in the smoky air. The two men watch her as she enters, but with a sort of devouring lust in their eyes rather than the malicious suspicion they had reserved for him. When she sits down at his table, they make eye contact with him again but this time, the look they have is one of respect, the kind of "Shahbash" or "Well done" look of respect men have here for other men who seem to have successfully aligned themselves with attractive foreign women. They each confirm the look with a slight, smiling nod and go back to their secret planning. "At least," he says to himself," they think I'm Afghan."

"Can I have a black coffee please?" she orders from the server behind the counter, before even looking him in the eye. The sun is coming in through the window, lighting up her face the color of turmeric. Her eyes seem watery and slightly red, like she's been crying. But he then notices her sniffing and realizes that his fleeting, self-indulgent notion that she had been crying because of him is just allergies. With her tangled hair she looks beautifully unkempt as she lights up a Seven Stars, exhaling

her first drag directly into his face with a mischievous smile that softens the hardness in her gaze. "Are you okay?" she asks, the worry sprinkles back in her voice. "Yeah, I'm fine I guess. But look, I'm not lying to you. I really did wake up in the park. Barefoot no less." The coffee arrives, "Tashakur. Jesus man. I mean shit, what the hell happened?" "I don't remember. I mean, the last thing I remember is you telling me about some incompetent colleague of yours who keeps coming to you with questions he should know the answers to." She looks at him, slightly shocked, her mouth half open. "What? That was maybe the first thing we talked about last night after we sat down for dinner. A dinner that had lasted at least an hour before you just got up and walked away. I assumed you had seen someone you knew outside and were going to go say hello or something. But then you didn't come back," she says, lighting up another cigarette with the butt of the last. "An hour? You mean we had a conversation and ate food and otherwise interacted normally for an hour *after* the last thing I remember?" "Well, I don't know if I'd say 'normally.' You seemed a bit spaced-out, like you couldn't focus. But I just assumed it was the tariak we had smoked together earlier. You smoked a lot more than I did." He glances back over at the two conspirators across the room, but then has to make a double take. They aren't the same two guys. They're dressed the same, with the same black briefcase on the table, speaking in the same hushed whispers, but their faces are not the men who suspected and respected him less than a half hour ago. "Hey, did you notice those two guys across the room when you walked in?" he whispers to her, leaning in close. "No, why?" she says in a normal tone. "Because they're not the same guys that were there earlier." "Um, maybe because those guys left

and two different guys came in and sat at their table?" she replies, quieter this time but riddled with annoyance. "No!" he whispers loudly, "I mean they're dressed exactly the same, with the same briefcase on the table, and the same way of talking to each other, but they're different guys!" "How much of that shit did you smoke last night?" she asks, clearly not believing him. "Why should she?" he thinks, he can hardly believe it himself. "Sorry, maybe you're right. I guess I'm just still a bit rattled by the lost hours I seem to have had last night. Anyway, look, I'm really sorry about walking out on you. I didn't mean to do it. I mean it wasn't planned or anything." A silence passes through the room on the back of the devil. "You think we can go back to your house, get into bed, and just watch a DVD or something? I feel exhausted." Softening, she replies, "Sure, let's go. Whatever the fuck happened to you last night, you *do* look like you need some rest." They get up to leave, and before exiting the café he glances back at the two men. They are the same men as when he first came to the cafe. "Fuck. How much of that shit *did* I smoke?" he thinks as they both look up at him and, making eye contact, give him that same slight, smiling nod, "Well done."

"Where are we going?" he asks, as the taxi heads towards Karte Seh. "To my house like you asked if we could." "But your house is in Taimani." "Are you completely losing it? I haven't lived in Taimani for months, since I got the job at the University." "But I just went by your house in Taimani this morning and the chowkidar said you weren't home." "He must've just meant that I didn't live there anymore. You recognized him didn't you? He's the same chowkidar as when I *was* living there." "Yeah, of course, I did." "You're really

starting to freak me out a little bit, you know that?" His head begins to hurt again, his temples throbbing to the beat of his heart. "I really need to lay down," he says, closing his eyes and squeezing his head with both hands. "We'll be there in a minute," she says with honest concern as she takes one of his hands in hers. He opens his eyes when the taxi comes to a stop, and upon seeing the house after he gets out, he stares at it, confused. "But this is my old house. This is where I used to live." "Really?" she asks surprised. "You've been here a hundred times, you've spent nights over here, and you've never told me you used to live in this house." "Something's really wrong," he worries as they enter the house. "Go on. Take your clothes off, pick a movie, and get into bed. I'll make some tea and be there in a minute." "Right, the bedroom," he says under his breath, realizing he doesn't know where that is. Upstairs would be a good guess he figures, and after opening the third of four doors, finds the bedroom with unmade bed and clothes strewn across the floor. Around the TV and DVD Player he also finds films scattered about, some outside their jackets as if viewed and then carelessly tossed aside. He picks a film that is still in its wrapper, unopened, so as of yet unseen. According to the box, a science-fiction film called Encounter about a multinational space expedition team that comes across a strange, sort of planetary entity on Mars. He pops it into the player, undresses, and gets under the covers, feeling a chill even in the warmth of the room. "Okay, we've got a real treat here. I made a quick masala tea, with decaffeinated black tea because I don't think you need caffeine right now, and I found some Lu Candi biscuits." "Yeah! Candi biscuits!" "Yep, I thought you'd like that. How's your head?" "Better. The film's cued up and ready to go too." She picks up the box he had

placed leaning up against the player on the shelf beneath the TV like they do in video or music stores so the clientele can see “What’s Playing,” a custom they had come to adopt when watching films. “Right, I remember when you bought this. Clearly not my choice as could be determined by the fact that it was still in its wrapper.” “I know, but humor me huh? I don’t feel well.” Watching the film, they agree that it’s actually pretty good, while appreciating the comically inaccurate, and simply unnecessary, transliteration of the English audio into English subtitles that one can only get with a Chinese bootleg film. Spoken line – “Where do you think you’re going Matthew?” Transliterated English into English subtitled line – “What go now Ling Mat Soo?” In the film, one of the characters, the captain of the expedition, begins to have problems identifying reality from imagination as they approach Mars, and thinking that things such as where his quarters are, who the people are in his crew, and where it is that they’re heading are other than that what they appear to be. Crunching nervously on another Candi biscuit, he immediately notices the similarity between the captain’s and his own discombobulated experiences since the previous night and throughout the day. The film ends with the captain having been “absorbed” by Mars’ natural elements after he leads the team across the harsh, dry, red terrain of the planet. He goes into a cave to check out a strange noise the team heard, and after several minutes, the captain calls out to his team in an almost otherworldly voice, “Go back to the ship and wait for me there.” The team is of course indecisive about whether to leave their captain out there alone, but when venturing a protest saying they’d wait for him, he yells, “I’m ordering you to go back to the ship!!” in a voice that now seems not otherworldly, but rather all-worldly. The

team returns to the ship outside the cave, and are attacked suddenly by a severe electrical storm of some sort, coinciding with a sandstorm, monsoon-style rain, and a violent marsquake. They have to take off and leave orbit or perish, and so after failing to communicate with him one last time through the radios, they leave their captain behind. The final scene has the captain standing at the mouth of the cave, watching the ship disappear, and then walk towards the horizon until the sand, rain, and electrical storms envelop him completely. The credits come up, and feeling a certain camaraderie with the captain, like he understands him, he thinks out loud, “That’s weird.” “What is?” she asks. “Oh, nothing, just the way the film ended. Can you pass me another Candi?”

The next day, he wakes, washes his face, grabs the film cover from the shelf, quietly ejects the film, clips it into its cover, slips the box into the pocket of his leather jacket, and leaves the house while she’s still sleeping, deciding to walk for a while before catching a taxi back to the other side of town. He makes it out to where the new madrassah has been built, called the fabrikae mullah, or mullah factory, by many locals, his distant thoughts already spinning and cooking beneath the heat of the sun like a slow mental rotisserie. Passing the madrassah on the opposite side of the street, he notices a group of believers sitting together beneath a tree in the garden, all dressed in long, white tunics, white pantaloons, and matching skullcaps. Suddenly he sees them stand, pass through the madrassah gate, and gather at the street curb, staring at him. They have tambourines in their hands and begin shaking them, chanting, “Allah-lujah! Allah-lujah!” as their tunics blow in the breeze of passing cars. Their trance leads them into the street,

weaving with closed eyes between cars and buses and bicyclists, and directly towards him. Now, within two arms' lengths away, they open their eyes fixing them on him once again as they advance, the sounds of their tambourines and chanting drowning out all others. Frozen, staring at them as they inch closer, he breaks his gaze and rushes over to a passerby, grabbing his arm and pointing at the dervishes with a death wish who crossed the busy street and are now practically on top of them. "Do you see that?!" he yells. The passerby jerks his arm out of his grasp, looking at him angrily, and yells back, "See what you idiot?!" He looks back to the street and finds nothing but the buzzing and honking traffic, the believers back on the other side of the street under the tree where he had first seen them. The man walks away, cursing him loudly, calling him crazy, and damning him to death. He begins to shiver, and still not comprehending what just happened, hails a cab, gets in the back seat rather than the usual front, and blurts out "Madinah Bazaar" before the cabbie grinds the car into first gear and drives off ...*Trapped in a room where the walls are covered with mirrors, different sizes and shapes of mirrors. I try to avoid looking into them, keeping my eyes diverted towards the ground as I negotiate myself through the room, looking for the exit. Finding a door, I open it and once through I lift my head as if coming up for air, finding myself face to face with me. The mirror me clenches its fists, stares directly into my eyes, and screams "Who are you?!"... The question brings him around in the backseat of the taxi. He looks out the window and sees that he's descending into a small, shallow valley surrounded by dry fields with the occasional walled-off green patch. A range of low-lying mountains ring the valley, covered with rock and glistening raw marble. "Where are*

we?!" he asks, startled, "Where are you taking me?!" "Agha Saib, we're in Alghouey, I'm taking you home," the taxi driver replies, a bit confused by his question. "Why are you calling me Agha Saib?!" The driver pulls up to a patch of rocky, brown earth where a bombed out and weather-beaten house rests, as if emerging out of the ground itself. He recognizes it immediately; the house belonged to his grandfather, and is where his father was born. He hadn't visited the place in almost a year. "But I don't live here. And besides, it's completely destroyed." The taxi driver looks at him even more puzzled, and then turns his head towards the house. He follows his stare, and a liquid cold runs down his spine like water. The house is not destroyed at all, but rather rises in good form above a perimeter wall that also wasn't there just a moment before. There are clothes hanging on a line to dry on a second-floor terrace, and the sounds of family life can be heard coming from within the compound. "How much?" he asks the driver, dazed but drawn to follow this to its end. "The same as always Agha Saib," but when he shoots him an agitated look the driver continues, "200 Afghanis." He pays him, and enters through the front metal gate of the earthen wall. Standing in the walled courtyard, he hears a voice call out from within the house, "It's about time you've come home. Did you bring the naan?" "Yes," a young boy mumbles having just entered the compound's gate behind him, carrying with him at least 20 long, warm naans. The house is abuzz with activity, and he walks through it all like a half-solid ghost, barely feeling the ground beneath his feet, not being noticed by anyone. "How far back have I gone?" he asks himself, feeling as if he was seeing a life he would have known if the world had spun differently, a time before his ancestors were robbed of their

dreams and pulled like roots from warm beds in the middle of the night by an invading army. He hears children laughing behind him and as he turns to see them, everything swirls into darkness.

He finds himself again still sitting in the back of the taxi, which is stopped at a corner in Madinah Bazaar. “How long have I been sleeping?” he asks the driver. “Sleeping? You weren’t sleeping. You were just sitting there in silence, looking out the window. I tried to talk with you but you were ignoring me,” he said. “I mean how long have I been in your taxi?!” he asks, panicking. “”Maybe thirty minutes!” the driver snaps back. He pays him, gets out of the car, and although confused beyond measure and beginning to freak himself out, feels his bones align with stars unseen in the near-white light of the now midday sun as he rattles clumsily down the street towards home. “If I wasn’t sleeping, then what the fuck *was* I doing?” he says to himself. His mobile rings as he walks through the door. Answering it, he finds her on the other end, her voice still sleepy and gentle. “Hey, are you okay? Where did you go? I got worried when I woke up and you weren’t in bed next to me.” “I think I might really be losing it,” he replies, plopping down into the office chair in his atelier, the desk in front of it littered with books, receipts, and tobacco. He lights a cigarette, letting out that first puff of smoke in a long, exaggerated sigh. He proceeds to tell her about the two hallucination-like experiences he had since waking that morning, trying to be as detailed as possible, especially about the taxi driver telling him he wasn’t sleeping on the way. When he finishes, there’s silence on the other end of the line. “Are you there?” he asks, thinking she may have hung up somewhere between the

beginning and middle of his monologue. “Yeah baby, I’m here, and I just can’t believe what you’ve told me. But I do believe you, and know you’re telling me the truth. I’m really worried about you. You’ve been losing weight for weeks, almost chain-smoking cigarettes, and I keep catching you just sitting somewhere and staring into space or at a wall like you see an entire universe in it. Maybe you should ease up on the hash, and cut out the tariak completely. Are you at home now?” “Yeah.” “Stay there, I’m coming over.” Less than hour later, she walks in with a special bag of tricks; detoxification teas to flush him out, frankincense for a calm mind, and rose oil for relaxation, also used for increasing sexual potency though judging from the regimen she appears to have planned and is ready to execute, it’s clear that he’s the only one thinking about sex right now. “Here, put a couple dabs of the oil under your nostrils,” she says, handing him the bottle while she sets off to light a stick of incense and put the kettle on. He applies the oil and lays down on a tushak, closing his eyes to take in the rosy aroma. The feeling of alignment with unseen stars returns and it’s as though his entire body is covered in a celestial dust. His body starts to grow heavy, pressing down towards the floor as if gravity had decided to focus a more generous share of its attention just on him. A moment of light flashes and the next thing he knows, *he’s standing in the middle of a dry, barren landscape surrounded by mountains. Just at his feet, a crack in the earth, wide and dark, runs from where he stands towards the mountains on the horizon and past his line of sight. He hears a voice not quite his own in his head asking, “How deep do borders run that are drawn in the sand by imperialist hands? Fertilized with the innocent blood of our children. Death without sin may send them straight to heaven but do you*

remember when our fathers were happy? Do you?!” “No,” he mumbles beneath his breath, watching a distant caravan cross the barren landscape alongside tanks and the tyranny of someone else’s ideas. He suddenly remembers something from Shaw, as if the line was delicately but urgently placed in the forefront of his memories, and without thinking he verbalizes the thought, “If I survive this I will become immortal.”

He comes back, feeling his body being shaken. “Hey,” she says, “welcome back. Jesus. I was calling out your name and shaking you for almost five minutes. Your eyes were that creepy kind of half-open like they are when you sleep, but you weren’t asleep, you were gone man. Where were you?” “I don’t know,” he answers honestly. “It was like a sort of desert landscape surrounded by mountains. I was alone except for a caravan way off in the distance crossing the terrain side by side with tanks. There was a tank for every camel. They moved in almost perfect time with each other.” “Here, sit up, take this,” and she hands him a cup of tea. It smells of fennel and tastes like sawdust mixed with grass. He shoots her a disapproving cringe, and she says, “I know, it tastes like shit, but it’ll help clean out your system.” He finishes the cup while she sits next to him, caressing the back of his left hand as she holds it. He tries to think back to when was the last time she was so loving and affectionate but he can’t. He never has been into the lovey-dovey type, which she wasn’t, but even the occasional expressions of affection had long ago disappeared. “You feel warm,” she says, feeling his forehead in a mothering sort of way. “It’s just the tea,” he says, “I feel fine, really. I just wish I knew what was causing all these hallucinations. But you know, I keep thinking about what the taxi driver said, about me not

being asleep. And I realize that they do feel like more than hallucinations, they feel completely real.” She begins to open her mouth to say something, but he already knows what it is and cuts her off. “I know, I know, hallucinations and delusions are supposed to seem real, but this is different. It feels as if I’m actually traveling through space-time continuums and ending up in either different moments in historical time, or completely alternate dimensions.” “Well this might seem a bit ridiculous after what you just said, but maybe we should try and get out of town,” she says, “maybe go to Dubai and then head out over to Oman for some camping and hiking like we’ve talked about doing. Just to be in the fresh, clean, air. And next weekend is a full moon so we could do some night hikes without torches.” “That does sound ridiculous, and like a really good idea,” he says smiling, “but you sure you can get away? You sure you want to?” “Definitely,” she smiles back. “Ok cool, I’ll book us the flights to Dubai tomorrow.” “Try to get some sleep now, and let’s see how you feel later,” she tells him. But she didn’t need to say anything, as his eyelids were already getting heavy and he felt sleep pull itself over him like a thick, dark blanket.

People fill the streets carrying hand painted signs that read “The END of Kali Yuga IS HERE now!,” “The World Will NOT WAIT for You!,” “The WORLD will be REBORN!, and other such sayings. I don’t know what year it is, but it’s decades if not centuries in the future. The sky is filled with what seems like a perpetually dim, faded sun, cars are buzzing around between high-rise buildings, digitized advertisements hang in midair selling everything from anti-ageing creams to weekend getaways on the moon, and armed, robotic policeman patrol the trash and graffiti filled streets. As I slowly push and

squeeze my way through the mass, a ring-riddled hand grips my arm. Attached to that hand is a small woman dressed in a sort of hodge-podge outfit pulled together from the traditional dress and jewelry of at least three cultures. She's barefoot, her silver-grey hair loose and long to her waist. "18 February! 18 February! You were there at the beginning! The day the Kali Yuga cycle began! You sat among the gods in an amethyst throne! Safety of God! Peace of God! You fall asleep feeling protected by a name. But how is that possible? Who are you?!"

He comes to in a sweat, shivering though the room must be 27 degrees. "Fuck! Again with the 'Who are you?' shit. What the hell is going on?" He realizes she's left, so he's alone in the house. He goes into the atelier and sits at the desk, gets online, and looks up Kali Yuga, only to find it's the last of the four stages that the world goes through as part of the cycle of yugas described in the Indian scriptures, the one where human civilization degenerates spiritually and the universe dies at the end, only to be reborn in Satya Yuga, the first cycle. It is associated with the apocalypse demon Kali, and is supposed to last 432,000 years. But it started in 3102 BCE, at midnight, on 18 February. "What the hell? Jesus. 18 February, my birthday." Lighting a cigarette, he leans back in his chair and thinks about something the woman said in his dream, "You were there at the beginning. The day the Kali Yuga cycle began." "I was there to witness the beginning of the end, to unfold the start of the age of death, disenchantment, disillusion, and destruction?" he thinks. Brushing off the absurd thought, he laughs, "It was just a fucking dream." He smokes in silence for a minute, "But with all the weird shit that's been happening, somehow, it feels true. It's real in the same way the hallucinations have been real. It's like all of my past incarnations, are dimension-skipping and

converging on me here, now, today, in my waking and dreaming life. But I'm not even religious. I'm an atheist for fuck's sake. How the hell could I be connected to all of this?" he thinks half aloud. He goes into the kitchen, makes coffee, and walks back into the atelier, looking out the window. He realizes that he slept through the remaining afternoon, the sun having already begun to set. His mobile rings, and when he takes it to answer he realizes there are several missed calls. "Hallo?" "Hey, you just getting up? I tried calling you a couple times." "Yeah, sort of." "Good, you must've needed it. You crashed hard so I headed out to run some errands. Any more space-time travel?" "I was in the future. Cars were flying." "Really? Damn. What else?" "The sun looked like it was dying. People were filling the streets saying that the end of world was coming. Hey, you know what Kali Yuga is?" "Sure, the fourth cycle of the universe in Indian cosmology, the death and destruction one, after which the world is born again. Through that cycle, humans basically become complete assholes, lying to each other all the time, killing each other for no reason, fucking each other over, and fucking each other like life is just one global orgy, completely doomed. The universe's reincarnation cycle basically." I smile, thinking, "Of course she knows." There's a long pause. "What?" she asks. "Nothing. I love you." Another pause. "I love you too. Hey, I'm going to the hammam for a couple hours and then I'll swing by your place." "Okay, sounds good, I think I'm going to take a stroll through the neighborhood."

Walking through the streets as evening falls, he starts to think, despite his disbelief in god, how it's possible that he's linking in with some sort of weird psycho-spiritual power that maybe

he inherited from an old relative. These *are* the streets of his ancestors after all, dedicated Sufis and spiritual saints. Legend even has it that the founder of his family, the patriarch from whom they all sprang, had control over the djinns. Suddenly, faces and places, distant and unrecognizable, appear in his mind, like snapshots from an antique camera. One after another, the old, sepia-toned memories float through his head, their edges crumbling when he tries to focus on one too hard. But they don't feel like his memories. Rather he feels like they belong to the old man who passes by him wearing his crisply ironed, brown, 3-piece suit and gray karakul hat. Watching him walk by he thinks of the man's glory days when he was surely young and handsome and wonders what the man's life might have been like in another place, another time. They belong to the well-dressed woman with salon hair on the other side of the pot-holed street, stepping lightly through a patch of mud trying to keep it off her bright green shoes, as she makes her way through the crowd on the sidewalk with a will of purpose that makes her seem 7-feet tall. He begins to think of his parents, and how those memories belong to his mother and his father who carry them deep within their hearts, not their minds, because they're memories of feeling and not of thought. And as he starts feeling this history, the one that doesn't belong to him, settle like a fine dust on his skin he begins to think about the space-times he has visited and about his history not only here but in the past, present, and future of the entire world. He begins to think of her, and the uncertain strength he can hear in her voice when she speaks. Of the way it's as if she wears her confusion like a second skin, thin and soft, over her own and of the shape-shift in mood she often undergoes, sometimes right

before his eyes. He thinks of the sincerity that burns in her eyes and the scent of wildflowers that fills the air when she touches him. It begins to occur to him, as the last rays of an amber sun filter through what seems like a timeless haze, that this *is* his history; that these thoughts and feelings are the memories of his future and that they belong only to him. Suddenly, as he wanders through the street in a half-daze, it's as if the air in front of him opens up like a mouth and swallows him whole. In the next instant, *he's standing at the mouth of a cave. There are violent sand and electrical storms, and a thick sheet of windy rain falls as he watches a small spaceship take off and disappear into the wet, brown sky. He turns and walks toward the horizon, drenched in sand and rain while the electrical storm cracks blue-white all around. The thick, moist sand begins to get into his clothes, his mouth, his nose, his eyes, his ears. It begins to feel as though it's passing through his skin and into his blood, filling his veins with mud. The electrical storm gets closer, practically cocooning him within it. He hears a voice, distant at first but getting closer and louder as he walks. It's a woman's voice, but not until it's so close it's as if it's inside his head, is he able to make out what she's saying, "And you will be there at the end!"*

She walks inside, calling out to him as she moves through the house searching. "Hey! Are you here?!" Entering the bedroom, she sees the film cover on the floor near his bed and thinks, "I figured he must've taken it." She walks over to pick it up and, looking at the cover, cries out, "What the fuck?! Oh my god!" She finds him there, standing at the mouth of the cave, in the

middle of a raging storm, watching a small spaceship take off
in the distance.