



Spyros Karydakis

human food

translatend by
Konstantine Matsoukas

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Psarlai or Mohammed is a real person and his life as described, is true in every detail. Mario is also a real person, though a bit revamped. The two, however, have never met, hence the story is an invention. When I narrated it to Mohammed and asked his permission to publish it, I asked him if it would be possible for an Afghan refugee to act like the hero of the story. He thought about it and then answered in his quiet tone: "Of the people here whom I know well, only I could do such things".

Mohammed knows well about twenty of his fellow countrymen.

"One in twenty is a very good ratio in favor of the one", I answered him.

Mario wasn't taken in, either by a local or a foreigner. Besides, it would be against the law. The street eventually devoured him and no one ever saw him again.

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To Mohammed,
a friend and a free man

When he looks at his reflection in the store window, he feels good. He has honey-colored eyes. He wishes he had green ones like his father's and his brother's. Not his lost brother, the other one, the younger one. His Greek friends, though, say honey-colored eyes are very nice.

There is wind and rain and it's bitter cold, the symptoms of anguish and death, but he's feeling good: he has just finished a ten-hour shift and he is tired. Tree leaves and rubbish are falling down from the sky. So, then, the sky too has a forest and a city.

This young man is twenty-nine years old and his name is Psarlai, a typical Pashtun name. The Pashtun are the indigenous, ancient race of Afghanistan and usually have two names, a pre-islamic, Afghan one and a muslim one for which is for common use. Psarlai's muslim name is Mohammed. He is tall, strong and handsome. He left his country when he was fourteen. Ever since then, he has been walking for many years, slowly, towards the West. His family, a family of good standing in Kabul, with scientists, a military pilot and a general, was scattered to the four corners, after the defeat of the Russians by the mujaheddin, already before the Taliban wrested control - scattered to Russia, the U.S., Iran, Europe. Psarlai grew up with his sister who had fled to Iran. When he finally came of age, he moved further west, to Turkey. He worked for two years in Istanbul. Then he came to Greece. The name Psarlai in Afghan means 'spring'. In the Pashto language, 'spring' is male. His Greek friends call him Lai.

He finds the lights in the rain appealing. A dark storm arrives and departs. Once it's gone, the cold grows fiercer. All in all, he is well acquainted with cold, as he is with warmth.

He is courteous. He enjoys being praised for speaking Greek well. He took migrant teaching classes last year, to learn better Greek. He left school, and his country, early. He wears nice clothes.

One must live well, he thinks and lights a cigarette in the rain. I must quit cigarettes, he thinks, pleased to be a smoker. Lai is slowly walking and thinking in the dark storm.

With pleasure, he takes in the people under the umbrellas, people hurrying in the colored storm, people in the dark storm. People are generally in a hurry here, rain or shine. He has walked slowly towards this country, for fifteen whole years, but now he is renting a nice apartment where his friends can visit. The cold quickens and passes through your heart like a bullet. But it does pass, in the end, and your heart does not hold onto it. The heart is easily pierced but it doesn't hold onto the bullets, it is too soft. Lai is gay.

At fourteen, he already knew he was gay. A young man loved him and Lai loved him back. The Taliban in his country, and in Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Islamic nations, kill gay men. Even adolescents who are caught in sexual games among themselves, as many adolescents are want to do, without being gay. At fourteen, he was at school. He was already tall and handsome. Kabul had fallen, the mujaheddin had come down from the mountains, many of his family members were already scattered to the four winds. The mujaheddin had taken up the role of police. One of their chiefs in command sat at the balcony of the precinct every morning having his coffee. He watched him on his way to school and it made Lai fearful to be watched; his brother, the pilot, had gone missing. One morning the guard called Lai up. As he went up the stairs, terrified, a girl was coming down sobbing hard. This made an impression and he always remembered it along with his own story. The chief said: "Take off your clothes". He raped him and, then, so did the others. Not long after that, his father sent him over to his sister, already gone over to Iran. He had decided then that he would never cry again.

In all, you only cry once in your lifetime, he was thinking in the dark and colored storm. He had a sandwich in his hand, he was plenty hungry, but couldn't make up his mind to eat it. He had taken a bite. The rain was making the end of it soggy, but everything was fine. He saw the kid.

There are bars in his neighborhood with girls and boys. All races and skin colors, Greeks and migrants. Many of his fellow countrymen are there, too. Selling the one thing of quality they own. His young countrymen don't think of themselves as gay when they go with men for their own pleasure or for

money. Some, who do it for their own pleasure and not for the money, still ask for even five euro, even three, “for a pack of cigarettes”, to justify the contact, making it legitimate. Besides, five euro is the mainstay of a whole day. Each day is a whole lifetime of human food, joyfulness and noise. Noise is the jazz of life.

Lai doesn't care for that business one bit. He believes not quite in love, how could he, anyway, but in pleasure, friendship and freedom. Under the fake clouds, the fake stars, the fake storm, colored and dark, there is a fallout of things from the true nature of the city and the people. The kid was staring at the sandwich.

Lai is a young man empty of spoiled things. What he has been through is not spoiling inside of him, it is alive. That is why he now has a sense of pride as he catches the kid's hungry stare on the sandwich, and, simultaneously, a sense of shame. In the colored and dark storm Lai is feeling shame.

This excessive cold isn't necessarily bad, he decides. The cold is dealt with by dressing properly.

The law in Iran forbids schooling for refugee children, the children of 'fellow muslims' from neighboring, warring countries. They want them forever uneducated and usable. That is why Lai was taught by his sister to sew. When he arrived in Athens, he got work already in the first few days. He soon went to school to learn how to design clothes, on top of sewing. Then, he bought a laptop, enrolled in yet another school and learned how to draw patterns on the screen. Lai is the patient kind who believes in self improvement. "My school", he says.

Although the kid was under the awning, he was still getting rained on. Yet, he appeared to feel safe, and dry. He had a small backpack. He was blue-eyed and blond, with long bushy hair that was now hanging wetly. He was dirty, too. He seemed fairly whole to Lai, among all the diminished things in this place. The boy was looking at the sandwich. Lai offered it to him. He looked at him and took it slowly. Slowly, he lowered the plastic wrapping. Slowly, and then took a bite from where Lai had already bitten into. Lai felt in his mouth the taste of the bacon and started salivating. The kid raised his eyes and told him a stock phrase from his trade:

“I do everything.”

Lai felt disgust for the kid. He smiled at him and walked on. The stars existed behind the heavy clouds, behind so many things that had been lost yet continued to exist in Lai's heart. There is a comic side to winter in the city, the young man thought. But then, comedy can kill you just as surely as a gun.

He always remembered the morning his brother left to go to work. He was a pilot in the military air-force. When Kabul fell, he said: "They need us. Someone has to go up. I have never harmed anyone." He would go every morning to the ruined military airport. After that day, they never saw him

again. The older brother was Lai's hero. Out of his older brothers, he was the one who loved him the most. His father didn't love him all that much, who knows why, but his older brother adored him and looked after him.

The heavy wind was still blowing. Ten feet down the road, Lai stopped and slowly turned. The kid wasn't eating, he was looking at him. He wouldn't be more than fourteen. The kid's stare brought an aspect of comedy and of real winter into Lai's heart. He walked back.

"Why don't you go home, on a night like this?"

"I do everything", the boy said in a rush. "Ten euros only".

"Where are you from?"

"Greek."

"And you've come out into this cold, in that?" Lai gestured at the boy's light jacket, wagging his finger, like his brother used to do to him. "You're too young. You need to go home", he added smilingly.

Smiling, the boy took a bite of the sandwich. "I don't have a home. Five euros."

The rainstorm water was running in the gutter. Lai had a leather jacket on, but his feet, his head, were soaked. There was a physiology of cold in his heart, a comedy of warmth and logic. "Come to my home", he said. The kid followed him devouring the sandwich hungrily but very slowly.

On the way, Lai had already regretted it. One the other hand, what could you do? He let the kid in the house with some pride, about which he was immediately ashamed. He had a nice home with modern furniture, an expensive CD-DVD player, a large TV screen, the sewing machines of his trade. He had a string of white lights on the wall, candles too. He brought the boy a fleecy tracksuit of his. "Take off these wet clothes", he said.

The kid came up to Lai to fulfill his professional duties. He draped the fleece over his head. "That's not what I brought you here for", he said. "I'll cook something to eat".

He'd intended to only have that sandwich because he was very tired. But now he started preparing an Afghan meal. Chicken with butter-rice. Afghan meals cook on a very slow fire, they take ages. Even in the most trying times, Lai had kept up the cooking. For the first time ever, he was feeling impatient for the meal to be done so he could feed the kid.

He, for his part, was sitting quietly. When spoken to, he looked you in the eye, with simplicity. Outside, there was a world of weather and need, but in here the string of white lights coldly illuminated the nature of darkness and color which the two young men were.

Through half-words, Lai learned that: The kid's name was Mario; his parents had been killed in an accident, he could not hold on to the apartment the family had been renting, relatives had taken the few possessions in the home but nobody had wanted him; he lived 'here and there'. Of a great number of other things, the abyss of days and weeks and months of his childhood, the kid never did speak. And Lai never asked.

Lai couldn't eat, although he was hungry. He watched the boy eating slowly. Lai knew about hunger, even though, in actual fact, he had never been truly hungry. Even then, during the terrible siege and the bombing of Kabul, his father and his older brother always scraped up some food. And later, in his slow walk towards the West, in the mountains of Iran during the secretive crossing into Turkey, hunger had latched onto him like an animal only for hours or days, never for weeks and months and years.

Even when after crossing the Evros river with his companions and they'd been kept in prison for four months, somewhere in Northern Greece, even then, he hadn't really gone hungry. The police officer brought them a decent meal every day, even fruit juice. Paid out of his own pocket, or so the young men had inferred, because there was no police budget for such things. Lai had not forgotten this.

There are stories going round among the Afghan refugees. One is about two twenty-year olds in love. They arrived, at long last, outside the gates of the West, on the Turkish coastline of the Aegean. There they got married, so they could enter Europe together. The Traffickers used their knives to put holes in the inflatable boat. Winter, cold and a sea-storm. The girl had a lifebuoy, the boy didn't. When she saw her beloved sink, the girl threw away her buoy, embraced him, and they drowned together. Some others were saved and told the story.

Now, though, Lai could see the kid had been ravenous. He ate with his gaze fixed on his plate. Very, very slowly. He chewed his food thoroughly. There was no pausing in the hand to mouth movements. Without his taut little stomach getting tired, or crying or rejoicing, but only endlessly grinding the human food. The color and the darkness of human food are not found primarily in enjoyment, but, rather, in hunger. Lai was looking awestruck at the kid eat. For some reason, the sight enchanted him. He couldn't tell why. Outside, color was alternating with blackness in the storm, and the night was marching slowly from West to East. Every now and then, the kid raised his eyes up to Lai without really looking at him. Scared his plate might be taken away, or not filled up again, Lai reasoned. Lai refilled it three times. His taut little stomach didn't bulge one bit. Then, the boy said simply:

"Thanks".

They looked at some TV. Every so often, Lai brought dried nuts, juice, some sweets from last week, and the kid ground everything down, very slowly and inexorably. Finally, Lai brought bedcovers out to the couch and said:

"Now you sleep here".

"Thanks".

In the morning he shook the kid awake who jumped up and got dressed in no time, as was, evidently, his work habit. "Goodbye", he said to him at the door. "Take care of yourself. Find some relatives to go to".

"Thanks", said the boy.

In the evening it wasn't raining, but it was very cold. On his return from work, he found the boy on his doorstep. He felt irritated and, at the same time, something like the swelling of triumph. "You can't come in. I have work to do", he said abruptly. The other didn't speak, didn't move, nor did he look at him. He was looking at the door. "What's the deal? You think you found some fool to put you up and feed you?" he said a little loudly. The kid was staring at the door without expression. "Fine; come in, but it's just for today because it's cold. We'll make vegetable soup". In the black cold, fake things were falling down from a real city. Lai watched the adolescent boy eat the soup.

The third morning, he didn't put the boy out when he left for work. A week later, he gave him keys. But the kid never went out by himself. He stayed inside all day long. He bought him clothes. He cooked him meals. He watched him like an imbecile, eating slowly and endlessly. "He probably needs a lot of food because he's gone hungry and now he's growing", Lai thought and the thought pleased him, although it also seemed terribly stupid, somehow. Without being asked, the boy tidied everything in the house that he thought needed tidying. He was very thorough.

Lai has friends who visit his place, Afghans and Greeks. The Greeks are former or current lovers. In his country and in neighboring muslim countries, love affairs between unmarried young men, though heavily punishable, are a very old tradition, extremely wide spread. None of these couples think of themselves a gay. But no one, whether they have secretly dallied with the same sex or not, are well disposed towards actual gay men. Because there is always the terror of public lynching and a death sentence. So, Lai takes care that the two groups don't meet one another.

After the initial surprise, both the Greeks and the Afghans sat watching the thin waif. Angelic, with his blond mop and his big blue eyes. Still pale from malnutrition. To the Greeks, Lai explained where and how they met. To the Afghans he just said: "I found him in the street". They made the predictable jokes: "Does he keep your bed warm for you, Psarlai?" the Afghans would say. "So, Mario, does Lai send you out to the bars, to make ends meet?" the Greeks would say. Lai would smile. But at some point he did say to both groups:

"Leave the kid be".

They made out the dark and colored storm in his quiet tone. They quit their jokes. There are real things that fall down and fake things that rise up.

The Pashtun have been warriors for thousands of years, descendants of the warriors that gave Alexander the Great a hard time. They also gave a hard time to the Persians, Mongolians, Indians, Arabs, Russians, British and, now again, to the Europeans and Americans. They read the Koran in their Indo-European language, Pashto. In Arabic, they only know the invocation of God's name, the Muslims' most sacred prayer, the one with which the suras begin. Lai knows it as well and those few words are all

that interests him about God. As for the rest, he, too possesses a copy of the Koran, like everyone else.

Lai's mother, now dead, hailed from the Kalash people of northern Afghanistan, who were forcefully converted to Islam at the beginning of the 20th century. Lai enjoys telling his Greek friends about his mother's lineage. Two thousand, three hundred and thirty seven years after the exchange of vows with Roxanne, a young man "from over there" smiles quietly to his Greek friend and says "one of you":

"My mom was from there. From the Kalash. The Kalash are from you. From Alexander".

Lai knows that Alexander the Great was a very handsome youth and that he had a boyfriend. He knows that the Greeks marched for years to arrive at his country, to fight, to kill and be killed, to intermarry with his ancestors, to live there and pass into his blood. He, himself, took the reverse path, also for years and years. A very heavy winter and a long and freezing road are outside, though Psarlai in Pashto means "spring". In Afghanistan, spring is a boy. Lai is impressed with the local school: they take all children, Greek and foreign alike. Mario stopped going to school a year and a half ago, when his relatives put him out into the street. Lai wonders whether to send the kid to school.

"You out of your mind!" the Afghans told him. "As if giving him food and shelter wasn't enough!"

There was one whom they knew to have been a warrior with the Taliban. He said: "Get rid of him. There's no shortage of our own children going hungry here, with no one to look after them. Take in one of those, if you will." The rest agreed that there was sense in this, whichever way you looked at it.

His Greek friends were more practical. "It's very decent of you, but you risk going to jail, you know", they told him. "You are sheltering a minor, being yourself a foreigner, a muslim, and gay on top of it. Everyone's bound to think you're screwing him. How will you present him to the school's administration? You are not even supposed to have him in your house. It's against the law".

"What kind of a stupid law is that? You mean it's better for him to be starving in the streets and getting fucked in the ass for five euro?" Lai said.

But he knew they were right. He started being a little afraid. Some folks were giving him looks when he was out with the blond kid, though he himself, like many Pashtun, looks Mediterranean or Balkan. He wished he was blond and green-eyed like his younger brother and his father. You snip off whatever you have no space for in your soul, if need be, but the shadow remains of the empty space, and the cold. A moment came when he wished to send the boy away.

He sits next to him on the couch at night while they watch television. The pale blue of childhood in him has turned early to darkness and color. Sometimes he has nightmares in the night and cries out. Childhood nightmares are real. Lai then springs awake, wakes the kid up. He takes him to his bed and the boy nestles in his arms. He goes back to sleep straight away, lulled.

That's what his big brother also used to do during the bombings, when he got scared. Lai has been slowly walking since he was fourteen years old in the fake and the real storm.

That morning he meets outside the apartment building the man who takes care of the utilities. He is a mild mannered, fifty-year old, always in a suit. Lai likes men in suits, especially mature ones, though not the utility man. The utility man is a snitch. He knows Lai is gay - he's seen some of his Greek friends.

"Young man", the utility guy says mildly. He mentions some things about the building's maintenance. Then: "There is a minor living with you - no, no, I'm not asking any questions, you have been impeccable in every way. But, if he is in any trouble with the law, best he isn't here come Monday. I'm calling the police over on Monday, to check him out, just so you know." Courteously, sweetly, he changes the subject, he points to the weather forecast in a multicolored newspaper, which 'll take a turn for the worse, and then: "Look here, more pederast arrests." He looks him in the eye. "You know how much they're bound to get? Five years minimum". And he walks off.

Indeed, the weather gets worse still. Black storms and colored ones. The day after next, Lai takes the day off from work. He wakes up Mario at dawn, brings a pair of scissors and shears his bushy hair down to the scalp. He dresses him in clothing that's slightly worn, a woolen cap down to the ears. The kid asks nothing. It's raining solidly in the street. He tells him a couple of things. "You don't speak Greek. If they ask you, you don't understand a word."

There is a long queue in front of the desk, but eventually they are standing before the clerk. He is swamped. He glances at Mario whose hand Lai is holding. "What's this?"

"This is my son", says Lai.

"So, bring me your dogs and your dead, next, why don't you! And what do you want?"

"I'd like you to issue him with a temporary stay permit, please. So I can put an application on his behalf as a political refugee." Afghans, on the pretext that they are political, rather than economic, refugees, aren't issued regular stay permits. "Here is my own temporary permit".

"It's his papers I need, not yours".

"He's only a young kid. He left the country secretly. His mother is dead. He has no papers. Here are mine, my passport and everything else".

The clerk stares at the boy suspiciously. Since eight o'clock he's had dozens of fights with desperate people. Every single day he gets underage kids with no papers. He has children of his own whom he loves. He scrawls, muttering angrily.

"Name?"

"He is Mohammed, son of Psarlai and such-and-such." He shaves a couple of years off the boy's age.

On the way home the boy says nothing. This is a relief to Lai. Because he doesn't really feel like saying anything himself. The day after that, though, is

a Saturday. He feels freedom like hunger latched onto his body. "The hell with everything!" he thinks, and picks up the phone. He calls his Greek and Afghan friends. "I'm throwing a party", he says, "I have a surprise". To Mario he says: "Come on, let's make Kabuli Pulao. It's what we always cook in Afghanistan on special occasions".

In the evening, when the two groups first come in contact, there is a frozen stiffness that is dark but also colorful. Especially on the part of the Afghans, as soon as they see a couple of the Greeks who you can tell are gay from a mile away. There are two girls too, in the greek group, one with her boyfriend. They don't mind being with all those men, they are comfortable with their gay friends. The food is delicious.

Kabuli Pulao is made with veal or chicken, rice, carrots sliced in sticks, raisins, almonds, walnuts. It requires a lot of preparation. Lai serves it in the traditional manner: in large platters with the rice on each one, with small craters in it, filled with the meat and all the rest. Everyone has to eat out of the platters. Human food is meant to be shared.

Lai keeps filling the glasses with good wine. Because he is happy. Everyone likes good wine, the muslims as much as everyone else on the face of the earth. Jokes start in both groups and people strike up conversations with each other; besides, most of those present are quite young. Youth is sweet and it likes life to be sweet. When the spirits get high, Lai shows them the documents.

"I got papers for Mario", he explains. "I said he is my son and gave him my own muslim name: Mohammed".

Laughter, applause. The former Taliban stands up. "Have you no shame?" he cries out to Lai in Afghan. "The name of the Prophet to an infidel dog!" Some Afghans tell him to be quiet, others turn thoughtful, the Greeks ask for translation and one Afghan explains omitting the word 'dog'. In the middle of it all, Tamim gets up, around thirty five, who has the respect of all his countrymen. He has also been to war. Lai, too, respects him and he also likes him as a man, and flirts with him a little.

"We want to live well", Tamim says in Greek. "We have been through much. It is good to live well. But, Psarlai, we mustn't not forget who we are".

Lai feels peaceful. He gets up, picks the Koran from the small bookshelf. "Come", he says to Mario. They shut themselves up in the kitchen. "Repeat after me". Then, he has the kid write the phrase at the margin of the page, the way it sounds to him. They come back in. Everyone is silent, not eating, not moving.

"Read it out loud!" he orders the boy. He reads in a resonant, adolescent voice that occasionally breaks into high pitch:

"Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim".

"What is that?" asks one of the girls.

"The invocation with which begin one hundred and thirteen out of the one hundred and fourteen suras of the holy Koran", whispers the member of the

greek group who knows, and then he loudly recites: *"In the name of the compassionate and merciful God"*.

Lai hugs the boy and kisses him three times. "Now you are a muslim and you are my son and your name is Mohammed", he quietly tells him. Then, he loudly announces to the room. "Enough of this. Let no one speak of it again. Whoever doesn't like it may leave. Now, I want us to dance". And he turns up the volume on the CD-player. He leads the boy by the hand to the centre of the room. The others rise at once with whoops, overturning a couple of chairs. Only the former warrior remains in his seat, ashen and immobile. Tamim pulls at his sleeve.

"Let's dance, the two of us", he tells him. "There is much to forget and much to remember".

There is a knock on the door and it's the utilities man. "Is the music too loud? My son got a temporary stay permit and we're celebrating", Lai tells him. He looks at the boy waiting stock still in the circle of dancers, staring at Lai and Lai alone.

The man steps backwards towards the elevator. "Congratulations. You didn't tell me he was your son. Be here on Monday with the young man, for the police check. Enjoy yourselves".

On Monday everything might go to rack and ruin but now Lai feels fine. He goes back to the centre of the circle and everyone dances and toasts the boy over and over again. The two groups leave at some point, exchanging kisses and telephone numbers and promises. Lai steps out to the balcony, leaving the door open to get rid of the thick cigarette smoke. There is a cold wind blowing. In the dark and colored city everything is swirling with startling cracking noises as if the order of man's dimensions has been dislodged, and the ratio of sounds as well. Lai lights a cigarette. He is drunk and a little sad. He stays standing like this for some time without stirring. Lai is standing still at last in the heart of the real city.

From the balcony door appears the artlessly shorn head of the boy.

"You'll catch a cold. Come inside, dad".

Lai lets the cigarette drop from his hand. He watches it fall on the ledge. The air sucks at it and pulls it into the void. He watches it disappear flickering in the heart of the fake city, real fire in the real darkness.

"I'm quitting", he thinks. "It's bad for the boy".

He lets the packet drop over the railing and follows Mohammed back into the room.



a n a l p h a b e t

