In the Light of What We Know

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> Our concern with history, so Hilary's thesis ran, is a concern with pre-formed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered.

– W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

In the early hours of one September morning in 2008, there appeared on the doorstep of our home in South Kensington a brown-skinned man, haggard and gaunt, the ridges of his cheekbones set above an unkempt beard. He was in his late forties or early fifties, I thought, and stood at six foot or so, about an inch shorter than me. He wore a Berghaus jacket whose Velcro straps hung about unclasped and whose sleeves stopped short of his wrists, revealing a strip of paler skin above his right hand where he might once have worn a watch. His weathered hiking boots

were fastened with unmatching laces, and from the bulging pockets of his cargo pants the edges of unidentifiable objects peeked out. He wore a small backpack, and a canvas duffel bag rested on one end against the doorway.

The man appeared to be in a state of some agitation, speaking, as he was, not incoherently but with a strident earnestness and evidently without regard for introductions, as if he were resuming a broken conversation. Moments passed without my interruption as I struggled to place something in his aspect that seemed familiar, but what seized me suddenly was a German name I had not heard in nearly two decades.

At the time, the details of those moments did not impress themselves individually upon my consciousness; only later, when I started to put things down on paper, did they give themselves up to the effort of recollection. My professional life has been spent in finance, a business concerned with fine points, such as the small movement in exchange rates on which the fate of millions of dollars or pounds or yen could hang. But I think it is fair to say that whatever professional success I have had – whatever professional success I *had* – owes less to an eye for detail, which is common enough in the financial sector, than it does to a grasp of the broad picture in which wide patterns emerge and altogether new business opportunities become visible. Yet in taking on the task of reporting my conversations with Zafar, of collating and presenting all the material he provided, including volumes of rich and extensive notebooks, and of following up with my own research where necessary, it is the matter of representing details that has most occupied me; the details, to be precise, of his story, which is – to risk putting it in such dramatic terms as Zafar would deprecate – the story of the breaking of nations, war in the twenty-first century, marriage into the English aristocracy and the mathematics of love.

I had not heard the name of the twentieth-century Austrian-American mathematician Kurt Gödel since a July weekend in New York, in the early 1990s, when I was visiting from London for a month of induction at the head offices of an investment bank into which I had recently been recruited. In some part I owe my

recruitment to the firm, of which I later became a partner, to Zafar, who was already a derivatives trader in the bank's Wall Street offices and who had quickly established a reputation as a bright though erratic financial wizard.

Like Zafar, I was a student of mathematics at Oxford, but that, to put it imprecisely, was the beginning and the end of what we had in common. Mine was a privileged background. My father was born into a well-known landed family in Pakistan, where he met and married my mother. From there, the newly-weds went to Princeton, where they had me, making me an American citizen, and where my father obtained his doctorate before moving to Oxford so that he could take up a chair in physics. I am no genius and I know that without the best English schooling, I would not have been able to make as much as I have of the opportunities that came my way.

Zafar, however, arrived at Oxford in 1987 with a peculiar education, largely cobbled together by his own efforts, having been bored, when not bullied, out of one school after another. His family moved to Britain when he was no more than five years old, but then, at the age of twelve, or ten, by the new reckoning, he returned from Britain to rural Bangladesh for an interval of some years.

To him, Oxford must have seemed, as the expression goes, a long way to come. In our first term there, as we lounged in the Junior Common Room beside windows that gave out onto the garden quad, I observed that Zafar's pronunciation of the names of various Continental mathematicians – Lebesgue, Gauss, Cauchy, Legendre, and Euler – was grotesquely inaccurate. Though my first reaction, I am a little ashamed to say, was to find this rather amusing, I soon grasped that Zafar's errors marked his learning as his own, unlike mine, which carried the imprint of excellent schoolmasters. I must confess to a certain envy at the time.

The greatest difference between us, however, the significance of which I did not begin to ascertain until two years after our first meeting, lay in our social classes. As I mentioned, my father was an academic at Oxford, and my mother, after seeing off her only child to university, had returned to practising as a psychotherapist,

throwing herself into the retraining necessary to make up ground lost while raising me. My maternal grandfather had been Pakistan's ambassador to the United States and had moved in that country's elite internationalist circles; his closest friend had been Muhammad Asad, Pakistani ambassador to the UN shortly after 1947, a man who had begun life as Leopold Weiss, an Austro-Hungarian Jew born in what is now Ukraine. On the paternal side, my grandfather was an industrialist whose fortune, based on landholdings and tenancies, he augmented with the profits of shipping enterprises.

More than once during term time, Zafar came with me to lunch at my parents' home, a large double-fronted, three-storey Victorian house like many in that part of Oxford, though somewhat more capacious than the homes of most academics. To this day, whenever I return there, I feel an ease and lightness suffuse my being as I tread across the sweeping arc of the driveway, the gravel crunching underfoot, up to the stained glass of the wide front door.

On his first visit, Zafar stood at the threshold, wiping his feet over and over, his eyes darting about the large hall, his mouth slightly open. Evidently, he was, as people often are, astonished by the books, which were everywhere: shelves hanging wherever a wall would allow, books overflowing onto the floors, even leaning accordion-like on the staircase along the wall. In the family room, old issues of science magazines and journals, my father's subscriptions, sat in box files on shelves that scored the walls like lines on a writing pad. More recent issues lay about in small piles on a sideboard and on the floor. Zafar surveyed all this but his eyes settled on the far wall that was covered with my father's collection of old maps, mounted and framed, of the Indian subcontinent under the British Raj, an area that today stretches from Pakistan across India to Bangladesh. Zafar drew up to the maps and it was apparent that his focus had fixed on one in particular, a map of the north-east corner of the subcontinent. Minutes passed as he stood silently gazing at it. Only when the time came to move to the summer room for lunch, and my father rested his hand on Zafar's shoulder, was my friend roused from his intense study.

When we left, Zafar suggested that we walk back to college, rather than take a bus, and I agreed, assuming that he wanted to discuss something. The mathematician Kurt Gödel used to walk, setting off at sunset and returning after midnight, and found that his best ideas came to him in this stretch of time. Albert Einstein, who was deeply fond of Gödel, and who was also at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, used to say in his later years, when he no longer engaged in much research, that he went to the Institute daily only for the privilege of walking home with Kurt.

I thought Zafar wanted to talk but in fact he was silent all the way down the Banbury Road. I sensed that he was searching not so much for a form of words but for clarity of thought. I recalled the map to which my friend was obviously drawn, and though I wanted to ask him what it was that had held his attention, I was reluctant to break the contemplative silence. On reaching Broad Street, as we approached the college gates, he spoke. You must meet my parents, he said, and that is where he left it.

More than a year passed before I did. On the day Zafar finished his final exams, in two years rather than three, when my own were still one year off, he informed me that his parents were to arrive at seven thirty the following morning. He asked me to meet him at the college's north entrance, to help him load his things, after which I was most welcome, he said, to come with them to a cafe in Headington for some breakfast, before the three of them, he and his parents, set off on the journey back to London.

At seven thirty on the Saturday, Oxford was, and I expect it still is on every Saturday morning, perfectly quiet. It was odd that his parents should arrive so early; after all, the trip from London would have taken only an hour or thereabouts. The only explanation I could imagine was that Zafar was ashamed of his parents and did not want others to meet them, and that it was for this reason he had arranged to be collected at such an hour.

I found Zafar and his father already loading bags and boxes into a Datsun Sunny. His father had a beard and was wearing a skullcap. Standing in grey trousers, Hush Puppies, and a green V-neck sweater, he greeted me with a smile, tilting his head in what seemed a rather deferential way. *Asalaam-u-alaikum*, he said, before breaking into Urdu, a language that I know Bangladeshis of a certain age could speak but that is today, in the main, the language of Pakistanis. I supposed that Zafar had mentioned to him that my family was Pakistani originally. When I responded that my Urdu was very poor, Zafar's father looked disappointed, but then he took my hand into both of his and, rather unconfidently, repeated hello a few times.

Zafar's mother, standing by the car in an indigo sari that was pulled over her head, also greeted me with *Asalaam-u-alaikum*, but she bore herself with a self-assurance I did not see in his father. Pointing to the sandstone buildings around us, some of which had stood there for several hundreds of years, she commented on how old everything in Oxford looked. Can't they afford anything new? she asked earnestly. I looked at Zafar, who I am quite sure had heard this, but his eyes avoided mine. I understood then that in the two years he had spent at Oxford, a town less than sixty miles from London, this was the first time they had visited him, and this only as he was leaving the place stealthily one morning.

His parents' pronunciation of *Asalaam-u-alaikum* seemed rather affected, although I was able to recognize it as the one adopted by certain pious Muslims, particularly by many of those who have undertaken the pilgrimage, the tour of duty, to the holy city of Mecca. There, amid the throng of thousands of Muslims from across the world, this greeting presumably acquires a special significance as mediator in a Babel of languages, the Nigerian greeting the Malaysian and the Bangladeshi greeting the Uzbek. Perhaps an Arab pronunciation of the phrase proclaims the spirit of brotherhood. Standing there, as he and his father finished loading the last of the boxes, I wondered if it was his parents' religiosity of which Zafar was ashamed, though I understand now, having learned something of Zafar's own religious turn, that this was unlikely. I believe that while he was ashamed of his parents, he was more ashamed of being ashamed.

My own father had encouraged in me a sympathy towards the numinous claims of faith without ever surrendering the authority of science. He is a Muslim, my father; not a zealot but a quiet believer. He has always attended Friday prayers, which to him serve a social function, helping him to retain a link with his roots. While some connections gave in to the attrition of time and distance, others he deliberately let go because, as he explained, he was keen to see his son set his feet in the West. Apart from the Friday ritual, my father does not pray, not even once a day, let alone the five times ordained by Sunni Islam. He has never worn a skullcap, my father, and has never shown a drop of guilt for drinking alcohol. He drinks only on occasion, 'certainly at christenings and bar mitzvahs', he likes to say. 'Oh, look,' he will remark, as he takes a bottle of fifteen-year-old single malt from the cabinet, 'this whisky has certainly come of age. Let us baptize it in the name of the Father and the Son.'

Despite these impieties, which, it is fair to say, stand in the lee of a great Pakistani tradition, going back even to the country's founder, Jinnah, who was known to be rather partial to whisky, my father described himself then and does so now as a follower of the faith. When I once asked him how a physicist could believe in God, his answer was that physics did not explain everything and it did not answer the question, Why these laws and not others? For him, it was not enough to regard the world as being simply as it is. I would have to decide, he told me, whether science was enough for me.

My mother, on the other hand, had only disdain for religion. Islam, she said, oppressed women and encouraged people to accept their abysmal lot in this world in exchange for the promise of some fanciful happily-ever-afterlife. Not for her such opiates.

Zafar's mother interested me more than his father did. As I write this, I remember an intriguing article, which I came across in a journal in my parents' home and which is now easily obtainable on the Internet. The article, written by the primatologist Frans de Waal, concerns his studies of kinship recognition among

chimpanzees. De Waal and his colleague Lisa Parr, the article stated, presented their subject chimpanzees with the task of matching digitized portraits of unfamiliar female chimpanzees with portraits of their offspring. Astonishingly, they found that chimpanzees could match the faces of mothers and sons, thereby establishing kin recognition independent of previous experience with the individuals in question.

Had I been set the same task, I'm quite sure I would have failed to match Zafar to his mother, for I saw no resemblance between them. In his father's aspect, a softness of the eyes, a roundness of face, and a tilting of the head – all of these I recognized in Zafar. But his mother seemed entirely alien to my friend, her eyes sharp and determined, the face long and thin, and the mouth tense.

When we encounter a face we view it as a whole, by a process of integration of the parts, which takes place, as some scientists and physicians understand it, in the optic nerves long before any transmission reaches the brain. The otherwise dizzying abundance of information that hits the retina is distilled in this tract of fibres behind the eye into a sign that our intelligence can absorb. When we see a strip of letters, a billboard slogan, for example, we cannot help but read the word; we do not see each letter separately, but rather, instantly, we grasp the whole word and, moreover, its meaning. As I stood there, on that June morning in Oxford, my friend's mother's face offered no sign of resemblance to Zafar, as if their respective faces were words written in different languages.

My lasting regret is that I made my excuses and did not go with them to Headington for breakfast. At the time, and immediately afterwards, I told myself that I had sensed that in his heart my friend did not want me to. But the truth is that I myself, to my own shame, felt embarrassed for my friend. Sharper still was the disconcerting feeling I had in those few minutes that a distance had opened up between him and me for reasons I did not grasp in their full subtleties. After that day, Zafar did not mention his parents again. If friendship has a cost, then perhaps it is that at its heart there is always a burden of guilt. I don't deny that I've failed to do certain things,

failed, for instance, to provide support in the hour of need, or step in when that's what a friend should do, failed as a friend. But my regrets for the things I did not do pale against the guilt I bear for an act of commission and its consequences.

All the same, it is not guilt alone that brings me to my desk to put pen to paper and reckon with Zafar's story, my role and our friendship. Rather, it is something that no single word can begin to describe but which, I hope, will take form as I carry on. All this is quite fitting really – how it ought to be – when I call to mind the subject of my friend's long-standing obsession. Described as the greatest mathematical discovery of the last century, it is a theorem with the simple message that the farthest reaches of what we can ever know fall short of the limits of what is true, even in mathematics. In a sense, then, I have sat down to venture somewhere undiscovered, without the certainty that it is discoverable.

When he stood before me on the doorstep of our home, my dishevelled friend uttered the name of Gödel clearly and correctly, and I recalled instantly the bright afternoon of a Sunday in New York when I suggested to Zafar that I had caught up with him mathematically. I had assumed that Zafar's grasp of mathematics must have slipped, for after taking a first-class degree at Oxford, he left the study of mathematics entirely, quite to everyone's surprise, to study law at Harvard, while I, on the other hand, after completing my third year and then taking a year off, continued with graduate studies in economics and applied mathematics.

My suggestion to him, as we walked along a tree-lined street in Greenwich Village on that Sunday all those years ago, invited from him what seemed then the cryptic response that mathematics was full of beauty. I felt compelled to ask what he considered the most beautiful mathematics he had come across, and perhaps that is what he had intended, that I ask this question – I cannot tell. Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem was his unhesitating answer, and though I remembered the statement of the theorem well enough, I nevertheless failed to perceive why he regarded it as particularly beautiful. Within any given system, there are claims which are true but which cannot be proven to be true. So states the theorem. So simple. In

its implications, it is a shocking theorem, granted, and some time later, that is to say in the weeks following his sudden reappearance on our doorstep, years after that July day in New York, Zafar would explain to me in simple terms why Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem mattered so much to him and why, if I may be allowed to interpose my own view, the world was foolish to ignore it in an age of dogma.

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that perhaps such beauty, as he perceived, might lie in the theorem's proof rather than in the statement itself. Yet I could not recall the proof of Gödel's disturbing result – I am not sure I ever knew – and I assumed that after his departure from mathematics some years before, Zafar would also have lost all memory of it. I was wrong, of course, for when I prompted him, he began in the manner of an excited child to describe an argument, setting down apparently irrelevant pieces of the puzzle in all its corners. Barely a few such pieces had been laid, before the fragmentary image of a proof reared up towards me. I caught something then of beauty, unfortunately a beauty so nascent that I cannot tell if I had truly seen it or if I had merely been carried away on my friend's euphoria. Presently his animated exposition was interrupted when we ran into a colleague and, so to speak, lost our way.

We had many walks on the streets of New York, a city to which I returned on business nearly every month, and in the streets of London later. Many of those walks abide in the memory, but if any of them stand out from the rest, then a good claim may be made by two others.

The first was near Wall Street, and, while arguably of little consequence insofar as Zafar's story goes, it remains a fond memory for me, despite present circumstances. For the better part of the walk, my friend coached me, helping me to commit to memory a poem by e. e. cummings, 'somewhere i have never travelled gladly beyond', as he discussed its rhythms and cadences and parsed its images into a sequence. His memory held a prodigious store of poetry, and this poem was his answer to my request for something with which I could woo the woman who was to become my wife.

The second was of an altogether different kind, disconcerting, for it revealed a side of Zafar that I had not the slightest knowledge of until then, when I had known him already for close to a decade. It was 1996 and my wife and I were settled into our new home in South Kensington, while Zafar had returned from New York and was living in London. At the end of the working day, our ties slack around our necks, the two of us met for a quick drink at a pub in Notting Hill, though our meeting up was by then less and less frequent. I had a few beers and Zafar, as always, ordered one glass of champagne. His choice might have seemed rather pretentious but for the fact that Zafar could not hold his drink, did not much like alcohol, and, moreover, as he once explained to me, found champagne agreeable because it had all the fun of fizzy lemonade without the latter's unsettling effects on the stomach. At college, as was to be expected, his predilection attracted some mocking, but I like to think that over time his habit was seen as an endearing quirk.

After an hour, we set off on the Portobello Road towards the crossroads where we were to part, I to catch a cab home and he to join Emily. I later learned that the troubles with Emily were already in full throe by this time, and I marvel now to think that as we sat in the pub and talked he had disclosed nothing of those difficulties.

We were walking along the road when a voice boomed: Oi, mate. Zafar and I turned to see two men leaning against a railing, looking at us. Both had closely shaven heads and wore jeans, and both had a certain bar-bell muscularity. The first man, the one who had apparently spoken, was several inches taller than the other and wore only a white T-shirt despite the time of year, while the second wore an open leather jacket, ineffectively obscuring some of the excess weight around his torso. The tall man in the white T-shirt, so obviously the alpha male of the pair, fixed his attention on my friend. A quizzical expression spread across the man's face.

Do you speak English? he asked Zafar.

Zafar looked at him, turned his head towards the shorter man, and then turned back to the alpha male, before replying in the haughtiest Englishman's accent, affected to perfection: Terribly sorry. Not a word. Good day.

Zafar touched my elbow and we both turned and walked on. After a few steps, I asked him under my breath, What the hell was that about? When Zafar replied, he told me that from where I had been standing, I could not have seen what he saw.

Which was? I asked.

The shoulder of the man in the T-shirt, he said.

What? That the sleeves had been rolled up to the shoulder?

Revealing the tattoo of a swastika and beneath it the characters C18, he added.

I knew what a swastika meant but I had no idea about C18.

C18, explained Zafar, stands for Combat 18. The 1 corresponds to the first letter of the alphabet and the 8 to the eighth.

So what? I asked.

AH are the initials of Adolf Hitler and Combat 18 is a notoriously violent neo-Nazi group.

Oh, I said limply.

After three blocks, Zafar turned sharply into a mews leading us away from Portobello Road, saying that he wanted to take a detour. This seemed odd to me, given that he was already running a little late for supper with Emily.

Halfway down the empty mews, I heard the sound of footsteps on the cobblestones, and I turned to see the two skinheads now following. Zafar told me not to say a word and pulled to a stop. The men came up to us.

You being funny? said the man in the white T-shirt to Zafar. Bit of a smart aleck, eh? You dirty little Paki.

Are you a racist? Zafar asked the man.

Bit lippy, aren't we?

Zafar didn't reply but turned to me and said, Do you see this gentleman's shoulder? I looked at the man's shoulder, as did this man, the alpha male. He looked at his own shoulder.

And then suddenly the man was on the ground. He was choking and coughing and clutching at his throat, the most hellish, rasping sound coming from his mouth.

The man in the leather jacket stood stunned. Zafar told him to listen.

I punched your friend in the throat, said Zafar. You can pick a fight with me or you can call for help and save your friend.

The man did not move.

Do you have a phone? he asked him.

The man nodded.

Zafar then touched my elbow and we carried on down the mews, at our backs the dreadful gasps of the man on the ground and his friend's gabbling into the phone. I was stunned.

Back on Portobello Road, I asked him if he thought they'd go to the police.

In court, it would be the word of two suits, two meek South Asians, against the word of bullyboy skinheads, one with a swastika and Combat 18 tattoos. What would they say? That we picked a fight?

We parted ways then. Only later, as images of that evening came back to me, certain questions presented themselves. Had Zafar sought to avoid the two men or had he in fact picked a fight? Had he turned into the quiet mews in order to evade the skinheads or to confront them?

That evening in 1996, I saw an aspect of Zafar that was new to me. But I didn't know what to make of it. What had happened seemed almost ridiculous, but it was real. If anyone had told me about it, I would have disbelieved him.*

As I write this, I see that Zafar's return on that September morning in 2008 was welcome not only because it stirred the embers of our early friendship, which had never ceased to glow, but also because it afforded me a chance to shift the focus of my own thoughts. Habits of mind are not easily broken from within. His arrival coincided with a time of reflection in my life, precipitated in some measure by the turmoil in the financial markets and the looming prospect of being called before a congressional or parliamentary committee, all of which had left me, as a junior partner in the firm, with feelings of helplessness. Such feelings are, I am sure, foreign to many men and women in my business, who, like matadors, acquire enormous self-belief from subduing the great beast, the bull or bear, that is the market. Yet in 2008, my dreams were not for greater wealth but for the recovery of a sense of control in my personal life.

To a large degree, my introspection grew with the increasing distance between me and my wife, a woman for whom I no longer felt any passion and for whom, at bottom, I struggled to find respect. When I met her, she had come to finance after a year of teaching in a school in a Kenyan township near Kisumu, by Lake Victoria. She spoke then of the children, whom she obviously loved. She told me of eight-year-old Oneka, who would valiantly thrust up his hand to answer a question put to the class, and when my wife acknowledged him with a nod, little Oneka would say, *I don't know*. She spoke of the children by name, she sent them cards, and she would tell me how much she wanted to go back and spend more time there, that she was going to squirrel away her earnings in finance for the freedom to do so soon. As our love blossomed, she became certain that when the day came, she would persuade me to go with her. But fifteen years later, with her idealism faded, she approached finance with the vigour of the convert. The last time our conversation had alighted on the topic of her days in Africa, of her dreams then, I caught in her eye the look of embarrassment. If that embarrassment had been for her failure to return to those children, I would have comforted her tenderly: Don't they say that when mortals make plans, the gods laugh? I saw instead that her embarrassment was for having ever felt so idealistic; it was scorn for her own naivety.

Cold, unfeeling statistics tell us that marriages are now about as likely as not to end in divorce. Many of our friends were separating or had already divorced, but my wife and I had long regarded ourselves as shielded against whatever foul wind was driving apart so many couples around us. We even comforted ourselves with invented true stories of how those failed marriages had been doomed from the start, that this divorced couple had not had sufficiently similar interests, or that another had been doomed by a rivalry we believed we could detect from the very beginning.

The seat of our faith in the endurance of our life together, it is plainly visible to me now, was the store we set in the similarity of our cultural backgrounds. My wife and I were both the children of Pakistanis, immigrants, Muslims, and we had faith that

our union was of things greater than ourselves, that it would survive, even flourish, because of a history of generations that intertwined in us. We could never imagine that the strength of our faith might merely have been conjured from longing.

Weeks of such rumination had fed a growing fear of what the future held, when Zafar's reappearance came as a relief and diversion, though later it would come to mean much more than that. Seeing him again restored in me a sense of continuity with something older than my marriage, older than my work – a period of limitless possibility. There was the revival of things forgotten over years of pounding the professional treadmill while watching life ebb away from the home. Seeing him was enough to set off in me an electrical firestorm of associations that had lain dormant for years, and I felt a renewed sense of the timeless beauty I had known during my studies. Mathematics, as Zafar had said many moons ago in New York, cannot contain its own beauty.

It had seemed extraordinary to me in those days that my brilliant friend had ever chosen to give up a career in mathematics to study law, and when I once asked him why he had switched gears so sharply, he replied merely that it could be an interesting thing to do. Kurt Gödel had edged towards madness over the course of his life, near the end relying on his forbearing wife to taste his food first, for fear that it might be poisoned, so that when she herself was taken gravely ill and was unable to perform this function, Gödel starved to death. I think that Zafar had some premonition of the madness that might await him in mathematics, though this danger, I see now, never actually left his side. This, then, is how I understand him now: a human being fleeing ghosts while chasing shadows. This also accounts for the twists and turns in his working life, changes of direction that I came to observe largely from afar, as in time our friendship lost its moorings, in the way perhaps of many college friendships.

Through a web of friends and acquaintances, I maintained some notion of Zafar's path, but even before he disappeared there seemed curiously little known about him. Sometime in 2001, Zafar vanished from sight altogether, thereafter to become, from

time to time, the subject of rumours, some apparently preposterous, that he had converted to Roman Catholicism and married an English aristocrat, that he had been spotted in Damascus, Tunis, or Islamabad, and that he had killed a man, fathered a child, and, absurdly it seemed, spied for British intelligence.

That day in 2008, when Zafar resurfaced on my doorstep, he stood there, for one hovering moment of stillness, waiting to be let in, and I perceived the spark of recognition in his eye. The house had not changed much since he had last set foot in it nearly a decade before. He asked me if I had fixed the leg of the ottoman in the study. I laughed. One corner of the ottoman was still propped up by books.

Do you have the leg?

It's still there under the desk, I replied.

I'll mend it – but not today. I have to sleep.

An hour after I left him in the guest room, I went back to collect his clothes and found a small pile beside the duffel bag. Zafar was murmuring in his sleep. For a minute, I tried to decipher his words but I couldn't.

I took his laundry to the cleaners, where I noted the sizes of his pants and shirt (I wish now that I had checked the pockets but I didn't). Then, before heading to the office to put in a few perfunctory hours, I stopped off at Gap intending to buy some new clothes for him, like the ones he was wearing, cargo pants and flannel shirts. I'd got as far as the checkout before realizing I'd absent-mindedly picked up a pair of khaki trousers and a blue cotton shirt. A banker's taste in clothes is about the only thing predictable in banking.

That first day he slept late into the afternoon and then took a long bath. Sitting at the kitchen table, clean-shaven and dressed in a bathrobe, he ate a ham and mushroom omelette I had prepared, washing it down with coffee and orange juice.

He ate slowly, even carefully. He still looked older than his years, though now younger than he had appeared standing on our doorstep. Lines radiated from his eyes and his jowls hung from his jaw like the worn-out saddlebags on an old horse, and I wondered what, in the matter of a decade, had come to pass in the life of the man I once knew that he should look so used up. When he finished eating, he brought together the knife and the fork, pushed the plate forward, and began his story. ?

* The following year, I read in the press of the arrest and conviction of a number of members of Combat 18, although two of its ringleaders absconded to the United States, where, curiously, they claimed political asylum.

The above excerpt is the first chapter of Zia Haider Rahman's forthcoming novel, In the Light of What We Know, *to be published 22 April by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in the USA and 22 May by Picador in the UK.*

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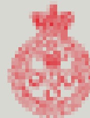

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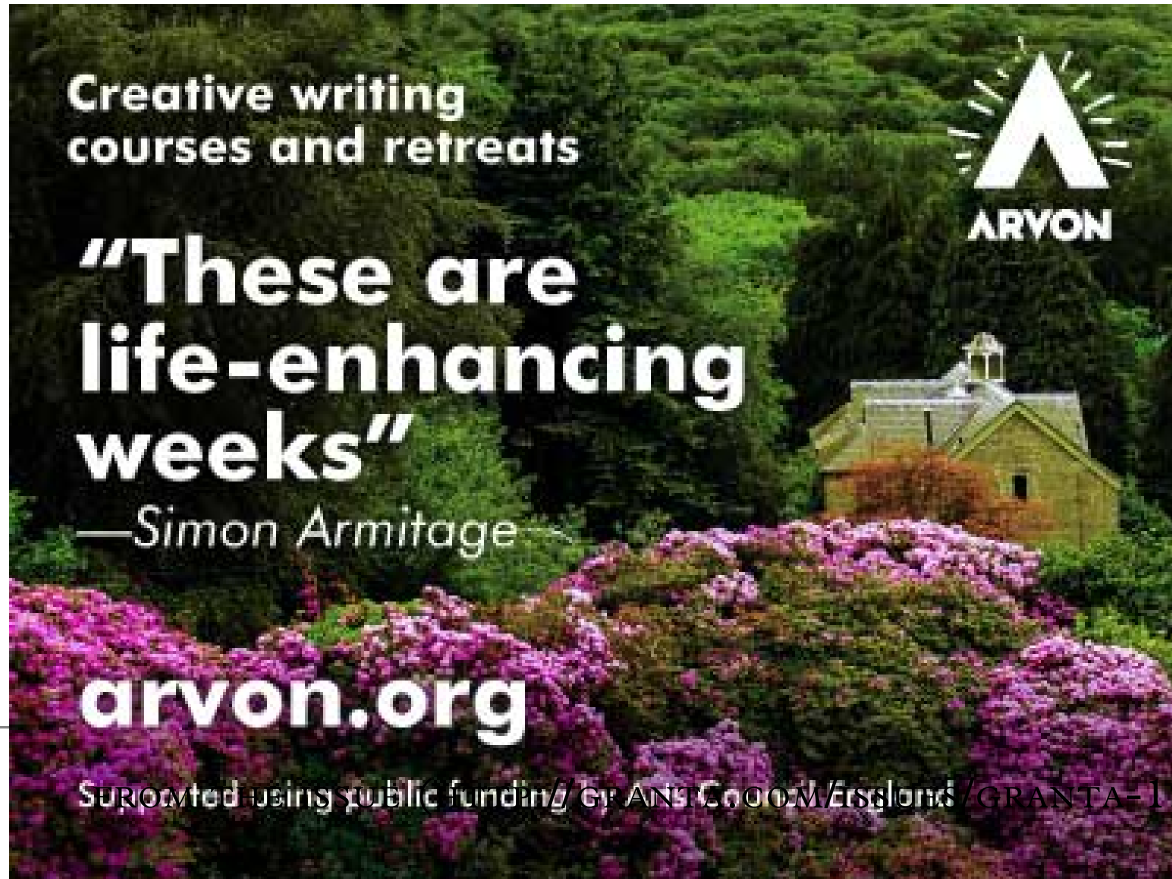

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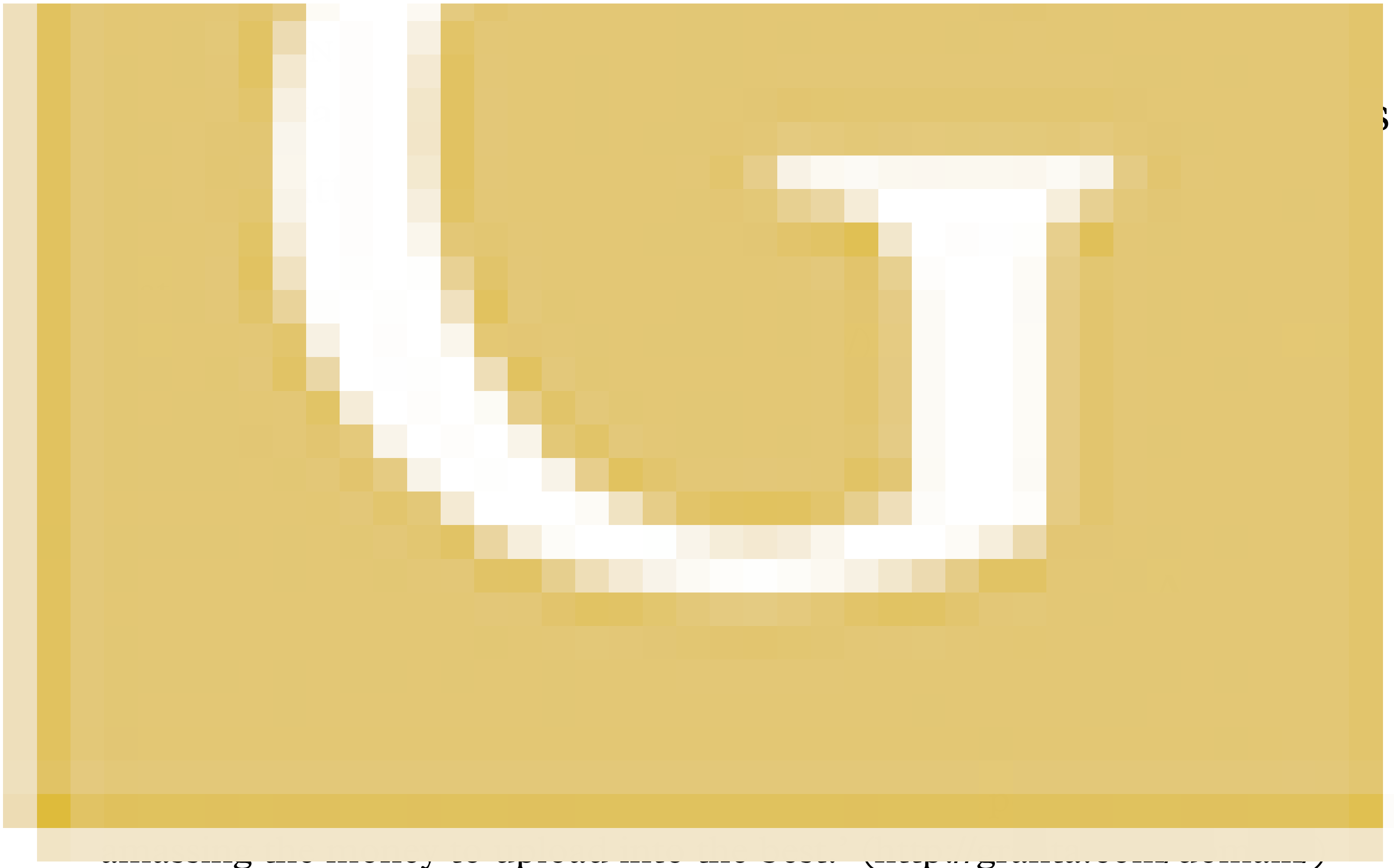

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