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The Afghan  
Vampires  
Book Club

World Editions

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'The first casualty when war comes is truth.'

US SENATOR HIRAM JOHNSON, 1916

'The deepest sacrifice of those that we ask to go to war is not the possibility that they may die or their colleagues may die, but the sacrifice of their normal unwillingness to kill.'

STANLEY HAUERWAS

# The Captain

February 27, 2025

The captain's room is at the end of the wing, dark but for light seeping from the bathroom. The room, larger than most, has six beds, all empty except the one by the window where he lies. Cold midnight air pushes through the slightly opened window, briefly lifting the thin green curtain and then releasing it.

The squeaking of a nurse's shoes recedes down the hallway and then is gone. All is quiet again. For nearly two months, his ears have been his only link to the outside world. From other rooms he has heard ragged breathing, and midnight crying kept at bay during the day, and shouts as a roadside bomb explodes in a fellow soldier's sleep. He knows this terror. Terror burrowed into the folds of the men's brains so deeply they no longer remember what life was like before. Before the Second Afghan War.

He takes his mind away from all that to the vision of a woman he has loved and lost and swears he will find again.

Medics found him in the mountains, half-buried in snow. At first speechless, unresponsive, almost depleted of life.

He heard shouts. Orders. Jostling him onto the stretcher. Deep thumping of helicopter blades. He shouted and thrashed and begged them to forget about him and save *her*. 'Save *her*!' he had yelled over and over until they drugged him back to sleep.

He ended up here in Germany at the Landsfuhl Hospital near the Ramstein base, where he has remained since, alone in this large, empty room.

But before they will send him home, they want to know what he remembers—what happened that day in that remote corner of Afghanistan. And what happened to all the others who were killed.

He opens his eyes and stares at the ceiling, imagining patterns and shapes in the faint light. They will return in the morning with more questions. Again, he will pretend to be disoriented. And the next day, and the next one, until they are convinced.

Each day, there is a man who stands in the corner. Short, in a civilian suit, always listening, never asking questions. A few days earlier, as he was feigning sleep, the captain heard the man in the suit speak. *If he remembers a single thing, make sure he'll never say a word.*

He closes his eyes, thinks he hears a sound, a rustling of silk, opens his eyes and, as much as the restraints allow, turns back and forth to stare into the darkened room.

He forces his breathing to slow down. He forces his eyes to close.

He knows he is close to convincing them he remembers nothing. That he's just another vet whose memories have been charred by war and scrambled by the meds he was fed to keep him in battle. He believes, he hopes, he prays, they will leave him alone, that they'll think he'll be one more soldier huddling on a street corner or hiding in his bed. One more who will not ask questions and who knows that if there were truth to be found, it was long ago buried in some forgotten place.

He cannot sleep, has barely slept for nights on end. He knows he won't truly sleep until he is far from this hospital and can finally tell what happened that day.

# The Journal of John Murakami Fox

**April 9, London**

It had been Alistair's idea to start the club—almost two years ago. We were already well into the Second Afghan War, the one that came after the Obama withdrawal and the short-lived Russian occupation that followed. I thought the club was folly, really, a desperate act of frustration over this recycled war. But I humoured him.

Alistair Thomason-Thorpe, seventy-one years old, two decades older than I, but determined to live the life of an English gentleman from before he was born, fragrant pipe tobacco, 'old boys,' and all.

Our conversation that night had drifted pleasantly to the theatre season, updates on various acquaintances, and then back again to the latest reports from our current wars.

After discussing one particularly heart-wrenching item from the States, Alistair said, 'I can no longer tell which stories are true and which are pure fiction, my dear John.'

Alistair subscribed to more than twenty papers and magazines, from *The Times* to *Tatler*, *The Times Literary Supplement* to *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, as if he were on a one-man crusade to keep print journalism alive. Even one of the tabloids landed on his doorstep each day.

He had read me a story about a group of vets who formed an armed gang, invaded a casino on a reservation in Wisconsin, threatened to spill a 'swimming pool of blood,' refused to surrender and were gunned down by a SWAT team, along

with many other poor souls gambling their wages away. Thirty-three dead.

‘According to this in-depth journalism’—with two fingers he held up one of the local tabloids as if he were holding someone’s used underwear—‘the veterans said they hoped to cleanse themselves of all the barbarism they saw, or committed, in Afghanistan.’ He had taken a thoughtful puff on his pipe and then said, ‘I never did understand this notion of self-cleansing violence, do you, old boy?’ Alastair didn’t wait for an answer. ‘I do love this headline, though: *Vampire Vets Meet Bloody End*.’ He looked up at me and then said, ‘Do any of you actually report anymore or do you simply re-post what you find online?’

‘Why bother searching online?’ I said. ‘We simply run the press releases.’

‘I’m serious,’ he said. ‘We should start a society. A club perhaps.’

‘Of...?’

He took a moment before he said, ‘To collect all these terrible, barbaric, and unbelievable stories.’

As he said this, I glanced at the picture of his son, mounted in an art deco frame and sitting alone in the middle of a dark oak bookshelf.

‘No thanks,’ I said.

‘But why not?’

‘I already do that for my day job. Collect all those stories.’

Two days later I received a handwritten letter. Alistair was perfectly capable of turning on his tablet and sending an email but he relished old-school style.

The letter was headed: ‘The Afghan Vampires Book Club: An Invitation.’



He had sent the same letter to five others: a fellow amateur historian, two journalists, a short story writer of some renown, and his favourite antiquarian book dealer.

We were to gather the most improbable, disturbing, unbelievable, and absurd stories—fiction and non-fiction—that were coming out of the two-and-a-half decades of the start-and-stop Afghan War, as well as the ongoing Syrian-Lebanese-Turkish war, the Venezuelan campaign, and the new counter-insurgency efforts in Indonesia and Argentina, and post them on a website. It was, he conceded, more of a storytellers' club, but he preferred the sound of 'book club', just as he preferred books, especially leather-bound, to any other medium. I think he tossed 'vampire' into the name as a nod to the bloodletting threats of those casino-invading veterans, although perhaps it was merely acknowledging the absurdity of the whole exercise.

He wrote that once a year we would meet at his country home near Oxford, where he would announce the winner. The prize would be a case from his wine cellar, a coveted prize ever since most of the Northern Hemisphere's grape production had gone awry.

'The goal, my dear friends, is to figure out if the story is true or pure invention.

'Only then,' his message continued, 'will the winner take home the wine.'

I had phoned Alistair. I'm certain he would have preferred a letter but I wouldn't have known where to buy a stamp. Again I said no.

The next evening I was having an almost peaceful dinner with Sandra, who, at the time, hadn't yet started her A levels. I shouldn't have been surprised to learn that she already knew

about Alistair's idea since he was her godfather and one of her sources of after-school employment. 'He asked me to register a domain and set up a website for him.' There have been years when she sees more of him than of me. I believe that would be every year since she was born.

My wonderful daughter—she would not use the same adjective for me, I know—heading, she hopes, for medical school after her gap year, that is if I can somehow save enough money working as a serious journalist to help her. This mutual desire is perhaps the one thing Sandra and I have agreed on in many years.

A few days later I had flown off again, to Delhi. But it wasn't long before I received Sandra's note: 'Hi John. [www.Afghan-VampiresBookClub.com](http://www.Afghan-VampiresBookClub.com) Check it out!'

I could not say *no* to my oldest friend. And I would do just about anything to reduce my daughter's animosity toward me. Who knows, she might even start calling me 'Father'.

In the first year of the competition, the winning story was about a French aid worker who fell in love with an Afghan woman from a Taliban family and convinced her to flee the country with him. Anyone who knew anything about Afghanistan knew that couldn't end well. On the way to the airport, they disappeared. Their car was found more than 200 kilometres away with the suitcases still in the boot but no blood and no sign of gunshots or struggle. Months went by before anyone heard anything else of the story. The French government sent investigators, US inspectors poked around, but nothing turned up. Nearly six months later, a package arrived at the French Embassy, addressed to the French ambassador from 'the people of Afghanistan'. Inside was a small box with a note that read: 'After your men look at our beautiful

women, they'll never have eyes for another.'

You can imagine what was in the small box.

It was easy to figure out the truth versus fiction question on that one. Not even a crazy Frenchman would try to date an Afghan woman in Afghanistan.

By the second year, as the challenges of making a living as a journalist increased, even for one who has books, prizes, and more than a few scars from his war reporting, I started using the site to find story ideas. It had become an open (if anonymous) website with postings from one and all. The challenge was sifting through the imaginative conspiracy theories, the pedestrian conspiracy theories, the absurd rumours, paranoid fantasies, and stoned jokes concocted late at night in a barracks, in hopes of finding the hint of a real story.

In its first two years, I hadn't even posted a story on the site let alone won the competition, though of course this didn't bother me. It was merely a pastime for an old friend and a small source of income for my daughter.

Both Alistair and Sandra were as persistent as biting insects, intent as they were that I take this year's competition more seriously. The hook for me came from a posting by a US veteran who claimed to have the real story behind the Vod Am massacre, which had been a scoop for me just a few months before.

Cody was his name. I wrote to him. He ignored me. I wrote again and asked if I could meet him. He said 'Maybe', and three days later wrote to me again to say, yes, if I could come to Baltimore.

If an idea is hot, I can get expenses paid by Judith in Brooklyn. Though Judith's business is thriving as one of the more successful agent-editor-management-epub houses, the en-

thusiasm and support of Judith and her staff is conditional on how high I happen to sit on the charts.

My social media lines were static. My world journalist rank had fallen to 482. My credibility index was still high, but my name recognition was spiralling down.

‘Judith. Me.’

‘Jesus, it’s only seven here.’ I heard the rustle of cellophane as she unwrapped a fresh pack of her Marlboro Easy Trippers. I heard her light one and take a short toke. I waited.

‘Ah,’ she finally said, ‘nothing like the first hit of the day. So glad I live in a civilized state.’

‘Listen, I think I’ve found a big story.’

‘Your stories are always gonna be big. I must be time traveling.’

‘Judith, pay attention. Something happened at Vod Am. Something they covered up.’

‘The army always covers its mistakes.’

‘This is different.’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know yet. There’s someone I need to interview.’

‘Where?’ I heard her take her second toke.

‘Baltimore.’

No sound until there was a gush of air as she exhaled. ‘What?’

‘Baltimore.’

‘Why?’

‘I want to eat crabs. And talk to a vet who knows things.’

‘Call me only when you’ve got a book.’

## **April 12, Baltimore**

Cody had a face so scarred it looked as if he'd fought in all the wars Afghanistan had ever been through as well as those yet to come. Remainder of a boot-camp build, now rapidly in decline. Greasy hair, starved look. Blood-shot eyes. He couldn't have been more than twenty-three.

We met at a bar outside of Baltimore; he'd brought along four of his fellow veterans.

Cody tapped a shaky index finger against the soggy tabletop. He leaned forward and said, 'You need to know this,' as if he were about to tell me the greatest secrets of the last quarter century. And then he wrapped a twitchy hand around the bottle of Budweiser. His face was stretched taut, making his eyes bulge, all puffy and alarmed.

The other four were veterans like him, only where Cody's eyes were wild, theirs had that vacant look I'd seen too many times before. Two were watching me, one was watching his own hand clutching a bottle of beer, the last was staring into the distance as if watching a movie replaying in his head.

Finally, Cody spoke. 'No one, I mean no fuckin' body, is saying what happened in the Vod Am Massacre. They don't want you to know...'

I knew all there was to know. Not a single American soldier had survived. Two hundred and eight killed. Thirteen never found. I had been the first journalist to arrive at the scene and the first to file, just lucky that I'd been visiting Bagram at the time. It was my story.

Cody said, 'You tell me this: did they ever announce that shit about their bodies? I mean, how they got killed?'

I said, 'Your standard Taliban ambush, only far bigger. Nastier. They've had years to get quite good at it. Their home-

made bombs have gotten better.’

Cody smiled grimly. His mates nodded, robot-like, but ready for him to deliver the final blow.

‘Well, they don’t know shit.’

‘I’m afraid I was there. I saw what happened.’ This wasn’t exactly true. By the time I arrived, almost all the bodies had been zipped up and carefully lined up for the helicopters.

He shook his head.

‘I was there, too,’ Cody said.

‘You all were there?’ I asked the rest of the men, but none of them answered.

‘No,’ said Cody. ‘Just me. Cleaning it up. Finding the bodies in the snow. Taggin’ ’em.’

‘So you know that no one survived.’

‘One man did,’ he assured me. ‘A captain. They dug him out of the snow or found him in a cave nearly a week later.’

‘What was his name?’

Cody shrugged. ‘Don’t know.’

Momentarily, I was distracted by the screen on the wall above the bar. A CNN-Huff reporter was doing a stand-up outside a police station, her best urgent journalist expression plastered on her face. The graphic said, *8 VETS INVADE TULSA POLICE STATION*. I turned back. Cody was staring at the screen.

‘Friends of yours?’ I said.

‘Fuck you.’

This was clearly going nowhere. I opened my wallet to settle the tab.

One of the others, a large man with tattoos riding up his arms like a map of rage, laid a massive hand on my forearm.

I closed my wallet and cupped it between my hands.

Cody spoke. I listened. Occasionally, one of his friends spoke. Two hours later, my mouth was still shut and my wallet had opened three times when I bought one more round and then another.

## Later

Alone, I ate steamed crabs at the harbour. I piled the shells on the brown paper that covered the table. I drank more beer. I wiped my hands carefully and took out my phone.

I typed a text to Judith: 'Got it!' But before hitting send, I erased it. The army, as she was keen to remind me, was always trying to cover up its mistakes. And every war produces rumours on top of lies to cover the truth, which is part of the reason Alastair started the Book Club. The problem was, when I asked Cody if anyone could corroborate his story, an expression of great weariness came into his eyes.

'Where's this captain? Is he still alive?'

Cody said, 'Yeah. But he doesn't want no one to find him.'

'Hard to get an interview with a man who doesn't want to be found.'

'He probably doesn't fuckin' trust nobody with what he's been through.'

I nodded.

'Did you see him yourself?'

'No. They found him a week later.'

'Anyone know his name?'

Cody turned to one of his mates, a short, narrow-shouldered man, African-American, who until then hadn't looked me in the eyes.

'I know how to find him,' the second man said. 'He hangin' low.'

'And?'

'Cody gonna write him. Maybe he check you out. Maybe he trust you.'

I nodded again.

'And then?'

The second man said nothing. I turned to Cody.

'And then?'

'Not up to me. Not up to you.'

### **April 15, Baltimore**

Three days later, I was still waiting to hear from Cody's mystery man.

My stroll around Fell's Point trying to find a decent morning cappuccino was disturbed by a sharp bang. Before I realized it, I was down on the sidewalk, my arms flung over my head. It turned out to be a minor traffic accident. I stood up a moment later, brushing off my trousers, embarrassed as hell, kicking my foot against a crack to pretend that was the cause of my mishap and not the imaginary suicide bomb that had just gone off in my head.

Some reptilian part of the brain was reminding me that my home is Islamabad.

But I'm always there, aren't I? Margaret had left me because, she said, even when I wasn't over there I was over there.

### **April 16, Baltimore**

I woke after my fourth night in Baltimore and considered hopping on the train to DC, but couldn't think what I would cover in Washington that wasn't already in the direct feeds from the government. I checked the Web. The US is talking about yet another round of peace talks with the Afghan Tali-



ban. The India Grand Corruption Trial continues to astound even my jaded eyes. Indonesia's seething. The bite-sized Egyptian Coptic Republic is facing a new drought. One-third of Portugal and Spain is now made up of autonomous subsistence agricultural collectives that the EU can't figure out how to tax. Maldives is half underwater.

I searched bars for my vets, enduring several hours of watery beer to no avail. One bartender told me to try again after the benefit cheques arrive.

### **June 12, London**

I'd long since given up on hearing from the mystery man.

I had been home in London for two months, although I suppose 'home' should be in quotations.

When I came back from Baltimore, Alistair had listened patiently to my story about Cody and his friends, interrupting only to ask questions about how I could stand the anaemic beer in the States, how I could eat such large portions of food, how I could stomach having religion constantly shoved into my face, etc., etc. I knew it was a screen for all his anger about the US so I ignored his tiresome barbs.

He was intrigued by my first-hand account of the type of veterans we'd been reading about.

'A sorry lot they are,' he finally had said.

We both knew his cavalier answer was but a flimsy shield against his own demons.

### **Later**

I received an email from a name I didn't recognize. The subject line: *Cody sent me.*

I immediately tried to reach Cody to see if this was the per-

son he'd told me about. But Cody was nowhere to be found. Veterans Affairs was, as usual, no help. Eventually I found him. Or, rather, found out about him. A short note in *The Baltimore Sun*. Nasty way to go.

### **June 19, Charleston, South Carolina**

Only 8 a.m. but already Charleston is steaming. I walk along the sea wall as instructed by the mystery man. The once-gorgeous houses facing the harbour had withstood the Civil War and a couple of centuries of hurricanes, but The Storms have made them look like a row of crack houses. I reflexively check the sky: The Storms had come even earlier last year, months before the normal hurricanes.

A solitary woman walks in my direction, a soldier's posture. I slow down, meet her eyes, but she simply says hello and sweeps past.

Two runners overtake me, one moving effortlessly, the older one panting so hard I rehearse CPR manoeuvres in my head.

A battered Kawasaki 750cc motorcycle pulls up, both bike and driver dusty as if it's been an all-night drive.

The driver doesn't even flip up the visor as he tosses me a helmet. I scrape out some cobwebs, slip it on, and awkwardly climb up behind him.

Off we go. It's taken all of ten seconds.

Like the rest of the planet feeding steadily on revelations, leaks, arrests, and extraditions, my driver seemed to have acquired a paranoid need for security.

We don't drive far before he parks on one of the colonial residential streets edging downtown Charleston. We get off. We pull off our helmets and he says, 'I'm Tanner. The captain.'

‘Is that your first or last name?’

‘Take your pick,’ he says.

Only then does he reach for my outstretched hand. Doesn’t try to crush me, which I like.

He is taller than I by a head, but then again, I’m only 5’8”. His neck and face look tense and for a moment his eyes dance around as if watching for spies. Then he chuckles, as if recognizing he’s cast himself into a thriller. I like that too.

He can’t be much more than thirty. His hair has an old-fashioned Brad Pitt shagginess which flops over his ears and forehead, so he must have been out of the army for at least a few months. His cheekbones are prominent and his muddy brown eyes reveal a sense of certainty. Not brashness, just certainty.

‘Hey,’ he says, ‘it’s been a bit of a drive. I need a piss, a coffee, and a good long walk.’

I feel comfortable with him. I’m eager to hear what he has to tell.

After he grabs a take-away coffee and we head back outside, I ask if I can record him. He stops walking. He stares around as if noticing for the first time where he is.

He juts his chin out in a gesture of agreement.

We walk together in tight patterns criss-crossing the historic quarter. He has a slight limp. He talks, I listen, not fully believing all that he tells me. But his voice is calm and sincere. He doesn’t sound crazy.

At lunchtime we find a restaurant where we eat pulled pork and drink some decent local brew which, I expect, even Alistair would approve of.

‘You up for more?’ I ask. Tanner continues to quietly recite his story in the now-empty restaurant and then back out on the streets.

The sun is low on the horizon when his story finally reaches the massacre in Vod Am.

It's dark when he says he has to go.

'There are still lots of details I need to ask you,' I say.

He shrugs. That's all I get for now.

'If I'm going to pitch an article, I need to be able to reach you.'

He says, 'I don't want an article... This is a book. You're a writer. You take my story and write a book. This will sell. Heads will roll.'

'Ghost it?'

'I don't want my name on it. Reasons should be obvious.'

'I don't even know your real name.'

He smiled. 'Tanner Jackson will do fine. You can be the author. I just want half the proceeds. I'll make certain you know how to get them to me.'

'I'm not sure,' I say.

He gives me a look that tells me he knows I'm in.