A scrim of dust hovers above the alley and drains the light, turning this December afternoon into dusk long before sunset. Peter and I walk to a rotted wood door that leads us into a corridor of mud and clay. Moving slowly, we crouch beneath a slumped brick walk that spans a narrow passageway and walk past bearded old men, foul smelling and ragged, who squat amid caged birds. The birds’ desperate high-pitched songs follow us deeper inside, past the dirt-smeared faces of boys who leer at us, like shadows against the walls. We keep walking toward a blanket behind which rise the shouts of men.

Peter brushes the blanket aside. A courtyard littered with broken bits of metal and coal, firewood, and dried pieces of bread opens before us. Two-story apartment buildings rise above us, slanting drunkenly into shadows. Blood-spattered roosters circle each other, jabbing their heads forward, their multi-hued feathers damp from exertion. Men wrapped in blankets and shrouded in clouds of their own breath squat on their haunches and toss money into the pit.

I listen to them shout as one of the birds leaps, poised for one frozen second, claws extended, before it strikes the air in a sudden fury. It tears down through the floating sheets of dust, eyes wide but without comprehension, drawn by gravity into the chest of the opposing cock, which spews blood. The owner of one of the cocks separates them. He grabs his bird and shoves a wet bandana down its throat, clearing it of blood.

A huge, fist-pumping dude with the build of a tree trunk urges the crowd on. He rages at the sky, appealing to an unseen
deity for more bloodlust among the apostles of this cock fight. He clenches a drooping bouquet of money in his pumping fist and shouts louder, ever louder, and I feel sucked in, some part of me primal and lustful. I search for my own money until I hear something whimper. I turn around but see nothing.

Peter removes the lens cap of his camera.

“Ever been to anything like this before, cowboy?” he asks.

I shake my head. Large, slathering black dogs bark and growl and lunge at us, rising from the cracked ground against the heavy chains that keep them at the edge of a pit. I hear the whimper again and follow the sound to a trash can. Inside, a white puppy cries and scratches at the rusted metal.

Its eyes look as if they have just recently opened. An old man pours himself a cup of green tea and sits by the trash can. Annoyed by the puppy, he jerks it out of the trash can and shakes it in front of one of the chained dogs. The dogs snap at it. The puppy shrieks. The old man tosses it to another dog which tries to bite it, ravaging the air with outrage. The puppy stands motionless, legs shaking. The old man tosses it back in the barrel. A philosopher of bestial sports, he strokes his tobacco-stained beard.

“Keeps the dogs interested,” he says of the puppy. “Makes them want to fight.”

“When do the dogs fight?” I ask.

A shout rises from the onlookers of the cockfight. Blood geyser from the chest of one of the birds.

“After,” the old man says, nodding at the cocks. “Then the dogs.”

The puppy whines, scraping the sides of the trash can.

“What’s going on?” Peter says behind me.

“Dog fight after this.”

He looks into the barrel. “Meat?”

“Bait.”

“Meat.”

I peer into the trash barrel and pick up the puppy. Peter, a photographer, and I have been reporting from Kabul since
November 2001 for Knight Ridder Newspapers. We arrived after twenty-three years of war had left Afghanistan in ruins. We rent a house without power. Ice forms on the walls. We work with an English-speaking Afghan man we call Bro because we can’t pronounce his name.

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. When the Russians left in 1989, civil war followed, culminating in the harsh fundamentalist rule of the Taliban. By the time an international U.S.-led coalition toppled the Taliban after the September 11th terrorist attacks, most roads, airports and utilities had been destroyed. The economy was non-existent. Hospitals were closed. Vacant schools provided havens for refugees.

I’ve tried to ignore the poverty, but in the month I’ve been here I’ve seen more than my share of starving war orphans competing for food in trash piles with goats and sheep.

I pick at flakes of dust clinging to the puppy’s soft fur. It snuggles against my coat, sneezes. I put it back in the barrel but don’t let go of it completely. It scratches at the barrel again and whimpers. The old man looks at me. He holds two crumpled ten-thousand Afghani notes—about two dollars. He says nothing but I read the question in his eyes. I hand him some money. He nods and leaves to place a bet. The cocks strut, slick and pink with sweat-diluted blood. I listen to the noise of the crowd, to the dogs straining against their chains, to the crunch of gravel beneath the old man’s sandals as he walks to place his bet. I grab the puppy by the scruff of its neck and shove it into my pocket.

“What are you doing?” Peter says.

Fleas and ticks and other bugs that look like black needles thrust into its fur have turned the puppy into a pincushion of vermin. My skin crawls at the thought of these little fuckers digging into my skin and I close my windbreaker around my chest to keep the puppy from touching me. Ears flopping, eyes wide, it stares out the car window as Bro drives.
Peter and I decide it’s part Labrador retriever and part everything else and about four weeks old. We name it Maggot. In the evening, I bathe Maggot with shampoo mixed with some gasoline to kill the bugs. Peter slouches against the bathroom door, holding a lit cigarette behind his back.

“Why do you want to break your heart?” he says.

I slather Maggot in suds. The gasoline burns my chapped hands.

“What are you going to do with it when we leave?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“No, you haven’t.”

We mash lamb, rice, beans and carrots for dog food. Maggot won’t eat and won’t drink water. He has diarrhea. His fur stands in dry humps; his eyes are filled with mucus. Peter has all sorts of antibiotics. Green pills, blue pills, white pills. What does this one do? How about that one? We don’t know, but we mash them up and give them to Maggot anyway. Bro offers me Tetracycline tablets which he uses for his chickens when they have diarrhea. We give him those, too.

I keep Maggot in my bedroom. For days, I squeeze water and food down his throat with my fingers, but he grows thinner. I bring him with me during the day and feed him between interviews. He sits on my lap and stares listlessly out the window at the remains of bombed buildings and the lines of beggars sprawled on the sidewalk, wailing for help. I carry him into interviews with Afghan generals who occupy empty government ministries while the country waits for Western governments to decide who should lead it.

Peter watches Maggot when I can’t.

“I took him out ten minutes ago, cowboy. Still not eating,” he’ll say when I get back from an assignment.

I continue force-feeding Maggot. He spits up most of the food. I pat him until he sleeps. At night, Maggot curls so close to a battery-operated space heater that he burns his fur. I pull him
away and he burrows into my sleeping bag. I feel his warmth against my ankles, the steadiness of his breathing inside the bag. He shakes sometimes from whatever bad thoughts dogs have when they dream.

Throughout the night, Maggot awakens me at two-hour intervals to piss. I carry him downstairs and open the door. The frigid air blows against my face. I step out into the front yard, feel his ribs expand and contract against his thin skin. The door slams behind me. I wipe mucus from his eyes. When I was a boy, we owned a cat that came down with distemper. I would clean its eyes every morning and it would look better and because it looked better, I convinced myself it would get better.

Maggot sniffs the ground. Dogs howl and trot down the street, invisible in the fog. The heavy breathing of packs half-crazed with hunger. The air tastes bitter, the sky smooth as slate punched with stars. Moonlight casts jagged shadows through the trees. Military helicopters and planes rumble overhead. Occasional gunshots interrupt the night and then the steady movement of the dogs resumes amid the howls of mating pairs. Maggot squats, keeps his head turned from me, ears pricked.

“Get on with it,” I tell him.

About two weeks after I found him, Maggot awakens me at six o’clock in the morning. Roosters crow amid high-pitched chants rising from mosques. Sunlight begins its ritual melting of the ice on my windowsill. I hear the crunch of wheels against stone, car horns, children playing by the public water well, vendors pushing their carts.

Maggot sits on the floor and stares at me, wagging his tail. He crouches and leaps. It is the first time I have seen him play. His food bowl from the night before is empty for the first time. The water dish stands empty too. Watching me, he arches his head and releases a long, slow belch followed by an immense fart that sends me running from the room, clutching my nose.
January 2002

Days pass. Pashtun warlord Hamid Karzai is now interim president of Afghanistan. The fighting has subsided to occasional confrontations in the south. Reconstruction efforts take center stage.

Maggot grows. At night, we play fetch. Then, in the morning, we drive through the rubble of this ruined capital to speak with more people about reconstruction—day after long day, seven days a week, until it seems I have done nothing with my life other than speak with Afghan officials.

Peter and I feel increasingly alone. More and more journos leave as Afghanistan slowly slips off the radar. The Taliban have been defeated and the war seems all but over. The mundane details of international aid projects can’t compete with the faint but persistent rumblings of an impending confrontation between the U.S. and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

One morning while I heat water for instant coffee, Bro runs into the kitchen and grabs me by the arm. The man who organized the cockfights is at the door, he says. He wants Maggot.

“Someone must have seen you take him,” Bro says. “It is too easy to find foreigners in Kabul.”

I tell Bro to take Maggot to my room but he won’t touch him. Instead, he chases him through the house until finally he herds him up the stairs. When I hear my bedroom door close, I walk to the front of the house. A man in a heavy green coat stands behind the front gate. He pulls at his scraggly beard.

“You have my dog,” he says.

“The dog died,” I say.

“I want three hundred dollars.”

“No.”

“One hundred, then.”

“The dog is dead.”

“I want fifty dollars.”

“The dog is dead.”

“I have other dogs you can have.”
“How much?”
“Thirty dollars.”
I give him a twenty dollar bill.
“I will bring you another dog.”
“No. Go please. I don’t want to see you again.”

American journos often drop by to see Maggot. Many of us have been here three months or longer and have grown accustomed to one shower a week, limited power and no central heating. We throw sticks and crouch on the ground to play with Maggot as he barks around our feet. We sit in the dark, oil lamps our only illumination, and share photographs of our families. Smiling husbands and wives with their children, and often a dog, look out at us. Trimmed lawns, flower beds, lawn chairs, mailboxes, clear skies.

Our Afghan translators and drivers share their own photos, faded and torn at the edges. Most of the grinning subjects died fighting in Afghanistan’s civil wars of the 1990s. After a while, we put these frozen images back in our respective wallets and consider one another for a moment, the lives we lived before all of this.

I was in Kansas City, Missouri, on September 11th, fending off my two border collies as they woke me for their morning walk. It was still dark, the sky just beginning to fade at its edges. I heard a car and the thud of the morning newspaper landing on the stoop.

The sound of my feet and the rattle of the dogs’ leashes slapped the still morning. Small, one-storey brick houses shouldered heavy shadows cast by the trees that blocked the sunlight as it slowly tinged the sky wine-colored. Full plastic garbage bags squatted haphazardly beneath street lamps like boulders loosed from their moorings. The lights in the Blue Bird Café were on, and a janitor swept the floor. Joggers ran past with reflector lights around their waists. The dogs squatted and did their business. I scooped it up in a plastic baggy and dropped it among some leaf bags piled along
the street. My dogs sniffed at the bags and I tugged them and we moved on as we always did.

The journos pass Maggot around one final time before they leave. He licks their faces, squirms to be put down, chews their shoes and jumps against their legs, demanding more attention. I now look forward to taking him out mornings, wrestling with him in the yard and putting the day on hold for a few minutes. Bro sometimes joins me now and throws Maggot sticks to fetch.

I tell my colleagues of this routine as if it were unusual. As if no one other than me has ever had a puppy.

“Does he eat kabob?” I’m teased by a Fox Television reporter.

We laugh and talk of home. Like prisoners we ask each other, “When are you getting out?”

I’m often asked what I’ll do with Maggot when I leave.

“The Afghans give us a hard enough time taking rugs out of the country,” a Chicago Tribune reporter says. “They’ll be thrilled with a dog.”

“I’m here for the long haul,” I say, and dismiss the question.

Evenings, Maggot waits for me at the head of the stairs and barks when he hears my footsteps coming into the house. He now has long, gangly legs, wide brown eyes and thick white fur. We go outside. Beyond our house, I hear the shouts of beggars, the bells of scared goats and the calls of mullahs. Maggot listens as I do, dimly aware, despite our proximity to everything around us, that we live separate lives, and therefore live alone.

February 2002

Snow falls. Ice glazes my bedroom window. I burrow deeper into my sleeping bag when I hear Peter yell something from across the hall. Maggot pricks up his ears and runs into his room.
“I’m going to the Caribbean,” Peter shouts after he hangs up his satellite phone.
“What?”
“I’m going back to Miami. Washington’s sending me back home. I just got the call.”

He starts throwing piles of dirty winter clothing out of his closet to make room in his duffel bag for the Afghan rugs he bought on Chicken Street.
“Take what you want,” he says of his clothes. “I won’t need them.”

Maggot carries off a dirty sock. I kneel by the growing pile and sort through it.
“What about Maggot?”
“Hot shower, man. I’m going to stand in a shower so long I’ll turn into a lobster.”
“What about Maggot?”
“What?”
“What about Maggot?”

Peter pours himself a glass of vodka mixed with mango juice. Maggot sits on my lap, gnawing on the sock he absconded with. The pile of discarded clothes has grown almost knee deep. Peter’s space heater lights up his five duffel bags. Darkness covers the rest of the room. A sliver of moonlight reveals the empty streets outside his window through the hazy mirror of a vodka bottle poised precariously on his laptop.
“We’ll have him shot,” Peter says.
“If we can’t get him out?”
“Better than just turning him loose on the street.”
“He’d starve.”
“We’ll get him out,” Peter says. “Unless. . .”
“What?”
“The guy next door could do it.”
“What?” I say.
“Shoot him. If it comes to that.”
“The commander?”
“One of his men,” Peter says. “We’d have to pay him.”
“I’m not paying anybody to shoot my dog.”
“You’ve given him a good life, cowboy. It’s better than putting him on the street.”
“We’ll get him out.”

Maggot squirms off my lap and onto the floor. He chews on one of Peter’s rugs. Peter nudges him with his foot. Even if I get Maggot out, I’ll have to find him a home. My landlord would never allow me to have three dogs.

Peter pours himself another glass of vodka, oblivious to the increasing complications.

“I’m getting out, cowboy,” he says.

I adjust to living alone by taking walks with Maggot. On an unseasonably warm afternoon that strongly hints of spring, I walk Maggot no more than a block before I hear someone running up behind me, feet slapping noisily in muddy puddles of melting snow. I pick up Maggot and turn around.

“Mister,” a grubby-looking shoe-shine boy shouts.

I know him. He always sits outside the house. Peter paid him one dollar to shine his shoes twice a week. He stops to catch his breath.

More shoe-shine boys spread out across the street and ask cigarette-smoking Northern Alliance soldiers for money. One soldier takes off his scarf and snaps it at a boy. It makes a loud crack and tags him on the cheek. The boy holds a hand against his face, more perplexed than hurt, and the tears flow. I look away. The boy who ran up to me tugs my jacket.

“Where is Mr. Peter?” he asks.

“He flew home yesterday,” I say and point at the sky.

“B-52?”

“No.”

“You are holding a dog. Why?”

“I like him.”
“My mother has no money. Mr. Peter said he would buy me some shoes.”

“That’s between you and Mr. Peter.”

He grabs my left arm and points at his rubber shoes, which are torn at the toe. Maggot growls. The boy steps back. Mud runs off his bare feet. I put Maggot down and he tries to sniff the boy’s shoes. The boy steps back. I give him some candy and wave him away.

“Mister, give me six bills. I need shoes.”

Six Afghani bills come to about three dollars. I can afford that. But with the other children around, I’m not about to give this kid a dime or I’ll be mobbed.

“No,” I say.

I continue walking Maggot. The boy follows. We reach an intersection and I turn toward downtown. The boy follows, shoos away other children who ask me for money.

“Mister, I will be your bodyguard.”

“No.”

“I shine shoes. I’ll brush your boots.”

“No.”

I walk around the piles of mud thrown by two men who stand in a trench, trying to repair electric cables with masking tape.

“Mister, my mother is very sick. I have to work, but my feet hurt.”

I unzip a jacket pocket, where I have a wad of Afghanis, and pat the inside as if I’m looking for money.

“See? I have nothing.”

Dogs skirt a group of soldiers down a rock-strewn side alley and snap at scraps on the road. One dog runs away from the pack with something hanging from its mouth. Children nearby scatter away from it. Maggot strains at his leash and I pull him back.

“You have a father?”

“My father was killed in the bombing.”

“American bombs?”

“Does it matter?”
I look at his feet.
“Mr. Peter was going to buy shoes for me.”
“I’m not Mr. Peter.”

We pass small shops squeezed together with lopsided signs: Hamid Store, Hamtyon Workshop, Noorine Photo Studio, Nani Ovid Pharmacy, Fahim’s Shoe Shop. The boy watches me. I have my hands full, taking care of a dog. I don’t need this boy. I look around and see other kids hustling passersby on the sidewalk. None of them notice me. Let’s get this done, I think.

“I’ll pay six bills for your shoes. No more,” I say. “Now walk away from me so the other boys don’t know what I’m doing. I’ll meet you in the shop.”

He runs into Fahim’s Shoe Shop. I continue walking about a block. Then I turn around and retrace my steps. Maggot draws looks from the crowded sidewalk. When I am in front of the shoe shop, I pick Maggot up and duck inside.

A bare bulb hangs suspended from the ceiling by exposed wires and offers feeble light. I wait for my eyes to adjust to the dark. Stacks of shoe boxes shiver slightly as a truck rumbles past. The shopkeeper stands behind the counter and rubs his hands together against the cold.

“How are you, mister?” he says. “Is that a dog?”

I put Maggot down and keep him close to me. The boy tells the shopkeeper I am buying him shoes. The shopkeeper looks at me and smiles. He collects several boxes of shoes under both arms and places them on the counter. He offers me a piece of chocolate and a cup of tea. He shaking my hand and smiles again. I feel something behind me and turn around. Boys on the street crowd the doorway and block the light. I lose sight of the shopkeeper who yells at the boys. They run away and gray light filters through.

The kid ignores the commotion. He tries on a pair of black shoes, square at the toe with thick heels and silver buckles. Too big. He kicks them off and slips on shoes made in a similar style but without the buckles. Too big. The shopkeeper offers him
another box. Brown loafers. He holds them up to the bulb. He 
rolls them to one side, then the other, shining them in the pale 
light. He grins at me, puts the shoes on and walks in a circle. He 
slips them off carefully and wraps the shoes in the tissue paper 
from the box. He closes the box. He folds the box under his arm. 
He looks at me and nods.

I count out six bills and put the money on the counter. The 
shopkeeper looks at the money for a long moment. Maggot 
whimpers, impatient.

“I am sorry,” he says, then speaks to the boy in Dari.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

“He needs one-hundred twenty Afghani,” the boy says.

I do a quick calculation.

“That’s sixty bucks, man,” I tell the boy. “You said six bills.”

“Mister, please . . .”

Sixty bucks. The shopkeeper has doubtlessly seen Western 
journalists, diplomats and soldiers dispensing money without a 
thought. He assumes I am no different. I feel the money inside my 
pocket. I have it. God dammit. The boy and the shopkeeper know 
I have it. I count money out on the counter. Darkness closes in. I 
know without turning around that street kids have converged on 
the door again.

“Buro,” the shopkeeper tells them. “Go.”

I stop counting. I can’t buy the shoes. Those kids will be all 
over me if I do.

“No,” I say. “No.”

The boy looks away. He has given up. I wonder how he knows 
when to push and when to quit. In a life of reduced expectations, 
it may not be that difficult for him to judge his moments. He 
returns the shoes to the shopkeeper and watches him put the box 
back on a shelf.

“I’m sorry,” I say to the shopkeeper.

He shrugs. We shake hands and the boy grabs the money I left 
on the counter and runs out of the store.
“Sai koo!” the shopkeeper shouts, coming around the counter. “Hey!”

I spin around but can’t catch him. I see the other boys chase after him. Maggot barks until I give a sharp tug on his leash. The shopkeeper stands in the door, hands on his hips. He shakes his head.

“I am sorry, mister,” he says. “Crazy boy. Six bills, that’s impossible for shoes.”

“Of course,” I say. “I know.”

The next morning, Bro gives me shit about the boy. “You let him rob you,” he says.

“I know.”

“Stick with dogs.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You understand dogs.”

“I don’t regret I took Maggot, if that’s what you mean.”

“We have too much hunger in Afghanistan to feed dogs.”

“I can do this much.”

“For a dog.”

“Yes. A child—it’s complicated, Bro. It would be too much.”


I assume I’ll need papers to get Maggot out of Afghanistan and into Pakistan and Germany. Bro suggests we drive to the Ministry of Agriculture. They have health certificates for farm animals. Why not for dogs?

At the ministry, we’re led to an empty room where a man sits alone but for his desk and chair. I tell him I need veterinary papers for my dog. He doesn’t blink, behaves as if this is a perfectly normal request. Has Maggot been vaccinated for rabies and distemper? he asks. I hand him twenty dollars and tell him Maggot has had all of his shots. I just need the documentation. He signs a piece of paper and hands it to me.
Next we drive to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “What do you need?” an aid to the foreign minister asks.

“Papers authorizing me to take a dog out of the country.”

The aid to the foreign minister tugs his coat around his thin chest. He runs a hand over the papers from the Ministry of Agriculture. “Mag … got,” he says, fingering the papers. He covers his mouth and looks away. Eventually, he stops laughing.

“Where do you want to take this … Maggot?”

“The U.S.”

“He lives in America,” Bro says.

The aid shakes his head. “When the Taliban came into Kabul, I was a shopkeeper,” he says. “I lost much money because women were not allowed to shop. My neighbors had a wedding party and were arrested for playing music and spent eight nights in jail. Now the Taliban are gone, but I have not been paid for six months.” He asks my name and begins typing a letter on a manual typewriter.

“Something should get out of this damn country,” he says.

March 2002

I check my email as I do every morning. My Washington editor tells me I’m to be transitioned out in two weeks. Afghanistan is slipping off the news radar, he writes. The Taliban are gone, and the war is all but over. The mundane details of reconstruction can’t compete with the escalating rhetoric between the U.S. and Iraq.

I lie in my sleeping bag, staring at the ceiling with Maggot curled in the crook of my arm. “Leaving,” I say out loud.

Maggot sits up and looks at me, but I’m lost in my own thoughts.

After I walked my dogs on the morning of September 11th, I ate cereal and walked to work. A homeless man stopped me. He held a radio bound with duct tape against his ear.
“Hey, d’ya hear about the planes that crashed in New York?” he said.

I assumed he was crazy.

I stopped at a gas station for coffee. No one was behind the counter. I leaned over it and looked around the cash register toward the back room. Two men sat huddled around a small television. I saw Special Report flash across the screen.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I want some coffee.”

The men ignored me. At that moment, unlike me, they understood how everything had changed.

Maggot paws my face and pulls me back to Kabul. Time for his morning piss. I let him out and wait by the door until he runs back inside. I feed him. While he eats, I throw my winter clothes on the floor to see how much room I can make for rugs and other souvenirs. Another reporter who moved in about a week after Peter left sees the stack of clothes and knows without asking that I’m out of here. He falls to his knees and grabs long underwear and heavy socks. “When do you go?”

“Couple weeks.”

“Can I have these?” he asks, holding a pair of gloves. He pushes aside Maggot, who waddles away with a pair of underwear, tail pointed triumphantly in the air.

“Yeah.”

“I did something I shouldn’t have yesterday,” he says, examining a shirt.

“What?”

“Can I try this shirt on?”

“Keep it. If it doesn’t fit, give it away.”

“I was doing this story on refugees in Kabul. I gave the leader of this one group of refugees a hundred dollars. I shouldn’t have, but you should have seen how they were living.”

I don’t say anything. Good for him. Cry me a goddamn self-indulgent river, pal. May you win the Mother Theresa award. I’m saving a dog. We do what we can and the rest ... I don’t know.
“What are you doing with Maggot?”
“Taking him.”
“Good luck.”
“Thanks.”
“I ain’t leaving,” he says.

He has been in Afghanistan two weeks, his second time through after a three-week break. On his first two-month tour, he followed the Northern Alliance into Kabul. He survived dust storms and floods. He saw men shot and ripped to shreds by mines. He likes to pose for photographs with AK-47 rifles procured for him by his driver, a former Northern Alliance soldier, and have his translator snap pictures.

“When this place falls apart, I don’t want to be caught standing here with just a butter knife in my hand,” he shouted one afternoon when other reporters were at the house for their routine dose of Maggot.

“What’s he talking about?” a woman whispered to me.

“He’s talking Alamo, baby,” I said. “He’s talking Pearl Harbor, Bay of Pigs, Gulf of Tonkin, the Gulf War, you feel me? He’s talking ain’t going down for nobody, dig it?”

“You’re both crazy,” she said.

I toss him a pair of waterproof pants. So what if he’s mental toast? That’s no reason to let him get wet.

In the days leading up to my departure, Steve, an American reporter with the Berlin bureau of USA Today, tells me that German people love dogs. They take them to restaurants, theaters, supermarkets, just name it, he says. I should fly back to the States through Berlin. No one there would give me a hard time about Maggot. Steve offers to travel with me. He needs to return soon for his wife’s fiftieth birthday.

I’ve found another journalist to employ Bro, so Steve and I hire Wahob, an acquaintance of several translators we know, to drive us to the Pakistan border for two hundred dollars. It will take us at least eight hours on the one bomb-cratered road running east
from Kabul. We will spend the night in Jalalabad, a former Taliban stronghold. Four journalists were killed in November outside Jalalabad near Sarob Village shortly after the war started. We don’t want to be out after dark.

From the border, we will catch a bus to Islamabad. Then we will fly to Berlin.

On an overcast morning, Steve and I load the car with our bags. I put Maggot in a wicker basket I bought at the bazaar. Wahob maneuvers through traffic into downtown Kabul and toward distant snow-covered mountains. I tap my coat pocket to make sure I have the papers from the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It starts raining. Bicycle riders wrapped in blankets hug the sides of the road, holding umbrellas over their heads. Cars douse them with water. Dissolute-looking mules haul carts of wood and charcoal, their ears flattened against the rain. Traffic bogs down from an accident. We skirt the pandemonium of the bazaar, where vendors’ stalls sag under the weight of water collected in tarps.

I take a final look around. A misshapen pillar stands upright in the middle of the street, looking like a gnawed bone. A lone doorway rises from the rubble of a former office building. A boy stands in traffic with his hand out.

Wahob follows the road as it dips into a valley beside the Kabul River, now swollen and muddy from winter rains. Kabul sinks behind us with each twist and turn that carries us further east, until I can only see one building downtown. Then it too disappears.

Two hours later, armed men in the ruins of several huts stop us at a checkpoint in Sarob Village. They ask Wahob to follow them inside a stone hut. They don’t wear uniforms. Blankets wrapped around their shoulders collect the rain that shines their rifles.

Steve and I wait for Wahob.

“So, I interview this banker,” Steve says, talking more quickly than usual. “He owns the only private bank in Afghanistan. And I
tell him I work in Berlin, and he asks about the Euro and I give him one, a five Euro note. “Keep it; it’s my gift to you,” I said. Then he tells me, he says, “Oh, I have to get you a gift.” I can’t take a present from a source, but I don’t want to offend the guy, so he gives me this package. Now, what am I going to do? You don’t accept gifts from a source.”

I tell him it’s not a big deal. I’m more interested in the graffiti on a nearby boulder. I’ve not seen graffiti in the time I’ve been here, and wonder what it says. Soon villagers surround our car, peer inside at us. They put their fingers to their mouths, indicating they want money for food. Rainwater runs off their hands. Maggot, asleep on my lap, puzzles them. I smell wet clothes, the sweat of unwashed bodies.

“So, if I come back here—and I’m sure I will on another assignment—I’ll give him something,” Steve says, his voice pitched a little higher. “I’ll get his gift valued and give him something of comparable worth.”

“What did he give you?”

“I haven’t looked yet.”

A bearded man with a rifle walks up to the car, followed by Wahob. He looks inside, letting the muzzle of the gun rest on the open passenger window.

“Just smile,” Steve whispers.

The man reaches in and shakes my hand. He waves Wahob forward and opens the door for him.

“He wanted to see if my ownership papers for the car were good,” Wahob says.

He shifts into gear and we roll forward, sinking into deep, muddy holes that threaten to swamp the car.

“What does that say?” I ask, pointing at the graffiti.

“Don’t collaborate with the Western enemy.”

In minutes, we’re driving outside the village. We open our windows and the stuffy air inside the car clears and I breathe easier.
We stop for the night in Jalalabad and take a room at a run-down hotel. We have a bed, a mattress on the floor, and a gas lamp. A generator grumbles outside, but the lights in our room don’t work.

No cars or people on the street. Air curtained with drizzle has a sullen heaviness to it that inspires me to do nothing more than slump against a wall and stroke Maggot. Mud huts across from the hotel sink into the expanding shadows, except for one dilapidated shop, where a tailor sews by candlelight. Beyond the huts, the outlines of mountains form monstrous ink blots against the sky.

We call it a night. I’d like to bathe, but the one bathroom is in a rancid-smelling room, the floor wet and slimy. The odor of mildew rises out of corners. I look forward to a shower, drinking tap water again, using a toilet that’s more than a hole in the floor, having power at the flip of a switch.

“And real toilet paper,” Steve says.
“And real coffee,” I say.
“And something to eat other than kabob.”
I close my eyes. The lamp spits and sputters, slowly burning itself out.

“Hey,” I say, rousing myself. “What did the banker give you?”
“A rug. I checked while you were in the bathroom. You want to see?”
“No.”
Maggot curls at my feet. I close my eyes and listen to the steady drizzle outside. The rug and whatever else I want can wait.

In the morning we begin the two-hour drive to Torkahm, a border town where we will catch our bus to Islamabad. Without warning, Wahob stops the car halfway there and shuts off the ignition. He insists the fee we had agreed to pay him was six hundred dollars, but we all know it was really two hundred dollars. He dangles the car keys outside his window. I take out my wallet and he starts the car.

“We cannot let you take the dog,” a soldier tells us at the border.
“Wait a minute!” I shout at him.
“We’ve got all the documents,” Steve says.
“A note from the foreign ministry.”
I reach into my pockets for Maggot’s papers.
“I’m only joking,” the soldier says and laughs. “What do I care about a dog?”

After a five-hour journey through the Khyber Pass and mud hut villages, the bus drops us off in downtown Islamabad. We take a taxi to the Marriott Hotel where Steve rents a room. I cannot stay there with Maggot. The driver takes me to a run-down guest house next to a large garbage dump. The owner has no problem with Maggot. Some nights the odor of mildew overwhelms my room and I sleep in the hall, holding Maggot in my lap. I eat with Steve at the Marriott and wrap food for Maggot in my napkin.

I spend the next two days haggling with merchants until I find one who will build a cage for Maggot. I give him specific measurements, but he follows his own ideas and constructs a heavy, waist-high wood box that resembles a chicken cage.

To my surprise, the airline flying us to Berlin accepts Maggot without question, despite his non-traditional pet carrier. We leave at midnight. Maggot stares at me from the luggage conveyor belt as it rolls him out to the plane.

Steve was right about Germans. Customs agents don’t ask about Maggot, despite his howls of indignation at being cooped up for so many hours. Steve leaves for his apartment while Maggot and I catch a taxi to the Hotel Palace where I have made an internet reservation. The hotel manager coos over Maggot without commenting on his outrageous cage. He gives me a key to a second-floor room. I play with the light switches and thermostat, thrilled to have power again. I run my hand over the pink sheets, the soft red quilt. Suddenly I feel exhausted. I pick up Maggot and crawl into bed and crash for the next twelve hours with the dog sprawled across my chest.
When I wake, I find that Steve has left a message for me. His English neighbors, Duncan and Jackie, want Maggot. I had asked Steve if he could find Maggot a home, but a part of me hoped he wouldn’t.

“Hello, Maggot,” Duncan says the next day outside my hotel. Maggot sniffs his shoes.

“I appreciate your taking him,” I say.

“No, thank you for giving him to us. We’re going to change his name, of course. To Harvey, I think.”

“Harvey,” I say.

I hand Duncan the leash. Maggot sits on the sidewalk and stares at me, eyes wide, ears alert. Then he cocks his head, stops wagging his tail. I turn away, leaving Maggot and Afghanistan and everything else I’ve known for the past four months. Duncan says something, but I don’t hear him clearly. I dread returning to my room alone, but I can’t stand out here any longer or I’ll lose it.