

Pam Ullman

No Safe Distance

Like a mirror, the ice reflects the sky and everything in between. Pryde treads the weather-beaten faces of young boys, stomps on their narrow chests, leaves scuff marks on the Kalashnikovs that stretch their scrawny arms like well-chewed sticks of gum. Shivering in the colorless light, she takes in their clothes, their wet and wooly smell, the premature crows' feet etched in a month's worth of dirt. When she was their age, she hauled forty-pound bags of feed from the truck to the barn every afternoon after school. She mimicked her father, tossed the bag over her shoulder and folded neatly in half, her face hovering around her knees, eyes on her boots as they crunched the gravel path to the door. The soldier-boys haven't learned this trick; they stand around like baby monkeys, great bunches of black bananas rounding their narrow shoulders. The summer she turned twelve, she shot a coyote that charged her horse at the head of the Cumberland River. She knows how to shoot and shoulder a rifle, but it isn't her job to show these boys what to do. Her job is to listen.

Now that Ismail is dead, Nazeer has taken charge of the group. He is startlingly handsome, golden eyes in a still-smooth brown face, seemingly wise beyond his years. He speaks softly, compelling her to move closer, and she wonders if he does it on purpose, if she reminds him of someone left behind in the village: a sister, a girlfriend, a mother. Standing beside him she smells tobacco and something else she can't decipher, a hint of sweetness, some childhood memory long misplaced, his or hers, she can't be sure. She hangs on his words and studies his hands, still clutching the old rifle; she is charmed by the lovely half-moons of his fingernails. She is old enough to be his mother. He is young enough to be her son.

Over there, he says, nodding eastward toward the snow-covered peaks of the Sia Mountains. *We tracked some movement there last night.* He shifts his weight from side to side, but when he rocks on the sides of his feet, the rifle remains centered; it seems to have a life of its own. *There was a full moon, so I held my men up one kilometer from the base.* Pryde translates word for word, and becomes in that moment, something she is not and never will be: a fourteen-year old Afghan boy. Though inclined to omit the reference to *my men* (likely to draw an insulting chuckle from the American colonel), she leaves it alone. There is a fine line between interpreting and translating; she straddles the line but does

not cross it. Predictably, the American laughs out loud. Three weeks in this god-forsaken place and she knows him better than she knows her own husband.

How far? the colonel inquires.

A day's journey on horseback, replies the boy. *Provided we leave immediately. Provided the snow holds off, and the night holds no surprises.*

Pryde ducks back into her tent and rifles through the contents of her knapsack: a single change of long underwear, six pair of thick woolen socks, a toothbrush, a dozen chocolate bars, a dictionary, a map, and a leather-bound journal—a gift from her husband, all wrong and naïve, its pages even blanker than when she lifted the book from its box six weeks before. Alone in her tent, a cavern of fear in her stomach, there are no words to describe the howling dogs, the braying donkeys, the periodic clicking of the Kalashnikovs, their chambers empty as the boys take aim at one another in the darkness. Last night, as she tumbled into a bumpy sleep, she heard Nazeer speak in perfect English: *If you fail, I'll have you spread eagle on a wagon wheel. If you desert you'll be found. Tracked down and broken into bits.* It is the only English she has ever heard him speak; he has mastered every Wayne-like breath and pause. The words swagger and strut through the night air, and yet she doubts he even knows what they mean. But if she gives him the translation, John Wayne with a Pashtun accent would be far too much to bear. She doesn't know how she might react, and it isn't worth the risk of finding out.

Some nights, with the war a gentle thunder in the distance, she manages to dream. Up to her elbows in Joy, in the sink at the kitchen window, she scrubs a pot while her husband yanks carrots from the garden. She feels his eyes on her and looks up from her pot, raises the window just a little. He holds up a carrot, and says something, smiling. *Purple!* she thinks it is. His voice is the urgent voice of the colonel. *What did he say? Ask him how far. Ask him if he can take us there.* She wakes up alone in her tent, the cold ground a needle in her spine. *Purple?* she says out loud, a question mark in her heart. She tries to picture every purple thing she has seen in her life and is surprised to recall so few: a pot of chrysanthemums, her grandmother's nubby old cardigan, an eggplant at the local farmer's market. *Chrysanthemums, cardigan, eggplant,* she murmurs, running her tongue over her sticky morning-teeth, each word brand new, their images only hers to imagine. She ponders and remembers and wonders in Pashtu, the language of the Afghan soldiers. She combs her fingers through her breath, raking up the warmth, piling it up like leaves in her small tent.

Pryde reaches for her nerves, her toothbrush, and her gloves, and stumbles back into the morning. Her back is sore, the soles of her feet throb hot and cold; she can no longer tell the difference. A gentle snow falls all around her. She heads away from the camp toward a snow-covered boulder in the near distance. Behind it, she squats; her cheeks melt the ice like a flame. She stands and pulls

herself together, catches her bulky glove in the zipper's jagged teeth. She takes a travel-sized bottle of SCOPE from her pocket (admittedly, a stupid indulgence), jogs the ice with the tap of her finger, and tosses her head back to the sky. She lets her mind wander just a little, to Paris (though she's never been to Paris), to a small hôtel in St. Germain-des-Près, an eighteenth-century abbey with vaulted arches and a garden bursting with asters and zinnias. She washes her hair in a tiny porcelain sink the very pink of a baby's cheek. She bends at the waist and spits into the snow. Mint green. She marvels at the color. Everything here is gray and white.

On her way back to the camp, she meets the colonel. His eyes skim her face before settling on her boots. *How are your feet? Do you need fresh socks or bandages?* His sole concern is her feet; without them, he cannot do his job.

I'm fine, she says, though the blister on the ball of one foot is on the brink of a stunning rupture. Like a puddle, its center nudges the edges into a lopsided circle. If she is lucky, the second half-mile will numb the sting. For the rest of the journey, her feet will move, but she will not feel them. She will push the pain to some idle corner of her brain, and bury it there with words: *Lookout, fire, ridge-line, surprise, dead*. As deliberately as possible, she meets the colonel's eyes, as gray as the sky behind him. *I'm fine*, she says again, too tired to care if he believes her, not sure if she believes it herself.

The colonel looks up at the mountains, his nostrils twitching like a housecat sniffing at the autumn's first frost. The hairs in his nose are crusted with ice. He stuffs his gloves under an armpit and takes a cigarette from the inside chest pocket of his Army-issue parka. Pryde watches as he rolls it between his palms, flattening the swell of his fear. The cigarette is as thin as the haricot vert her mother served with the Thanksgiving turkey, green beans smothered in a pungent mushroom sauce. She remembers how the afternoon sun lit up her place at the table, how the meat fell silently from her father's carving knife, a tap dance of shadows on the white linen tablecloth. She squeezes her eyes and sandwiches the scene between last night's horror, and what might happen today.

Above the colonel's shoulder, the sun rises with a scream. It echoes off the mountain and hammers at the center of her chest, white hot. It is quiet enough to hear the colonel breathing beside her; she is aware of their opposite rhythms, see-sawing back and forth like the bow of a violin. She holds her breath, tries to time her exhale with his, seeks comfort in the sameness. It doesn't work. They have little in common, her breathing comes shallow and fast. She is twenty years younger, her boots are too tight, she will never grow accustomed to the altitude.

How she came to this place is a mystery; there is little in her past to explain it. Shooting the coyote was a fluke; she put it behind her, she has never been brave, she has never had the urge to do brave things. To the contrary, really. The

spring she turned thirteen, a thick miasma of doubt crept into her life like a cataract, and what had once been very clear turned blurry: her hopes, her plans, her impractical dreams. She had wanted to travel the world, to live among strange tribes like Margaret Mead and her adolescent Manu girls. At night, when she should have been asleep, she took a flashlight to bed, and lost herself in a slippery pile of magazines—*National Geographic*s and *Smithsonians* mostly—bewitched by photographs of lush-leafed jungles and big-breasted women who stretched their lips over what looked to her like ping-pong paddles. She dreamed of paddling down the Amazon in a hollowed-out tree trunk, painted faces peeking out at her from the bush, a camera around her neck like Bourke-White, a notebook in her lap like Mead, savoring the danger, communicating in a curious language, earning the trust of strangers. She hoped to discover some lost tribe of supra-pygmyies who would adopt her as one of their own; she would love them the way that Camilla Wedgwood is said to have loved the tribes of New Guinea. PBS would commission Sir Richard Attenborough to make a documentary of her extraordinary life. Jane Goodall, Dian Fosse, Pryde MacAllister.

But then something happened. Overnight, she grew irrationally timid. Ordinary things seemed inordinately threatening and intimidating. Example: She defected from the Girl Scouts to avoid a camping trip to Lake Shantituck because she feared that the lake might break the dam and flood the camp. Though she'd trailed her mother through the Army-Navy store, helping her assemble the endless punch-list of required equipment—the metal plates and utensils, the sleeping bag, the giant flashlight—she knew that she would never use them. She felt no connection to them. Their strangeness jangled her nerves.

In her room that same night, Pryde shut the door and sat cross-legged on her bed. She spread her flowered flannel sleeping bag out in front of her and dumped her camping gear on top. She fingered the lip of a battered tin cup until a marshmallow floated on a cloud of hot chocolate, and when she closed her eyes, wisps of steam tickled her nose and warmed her face as she and the other girls gathered silently around a campfire. In the middle of the night, she flicked on the flashlight and cut a path through the woods to the latrine. And when the boogey-man jumped out from behind a rock, she blinded him with the light, then crept back to her tent and slept, triumphant.

She opened her eyes, stashed her gear in a cardboard box, and pushed it to the back of her closet, behind a pair of go-go boots that she hadn't worn since the second grade. She rolled up her sleeping bag, flattened it down, and slid it under the bed where it would soon gather dust as thick as cotton balls. On the morning of the trip to Camp Shantituck, she faked an earache so convincingly that she actually ran a fever; the mercury hovered near the danger mark while she conjured up floods, deer ticks, the call of an owl, poison oak, snakes and

spiders crawling around in her sleeping bag. By the next week, Saturday morning cartoons frightened her, and cobwebs blanketed her orange Schwinn Varsity three-speed. She even quit the softball team after Jody Maxwell (accidentally) banged a line drive straight into her chest beside third base.

Pryde kept her distance and surrendered her dreams. She catalogued her *National Geographics* for future reference. Someday she might teach social studies in the local high school.

If her parents noticed the change in their eldest, they did not seem particularly disturbed. Pryde (strong-willed and opinionated, bordering on impertinent) grew quiet and polite, respectful of her elders and shy around her peers, rarely leaving the farm except for school. She spent a great deal of time in the barn, palming apples to her father's horses, hanging out with the trainers on the track, a bandana at her throat, a stopwatch tickling her palm like a moth. Like Jemma Parker, who woke up one day in the seventh grade, awfully and perfectly blind, Pryde adjusted. She accepted the change without question, and, like Jemma's sudden blindness, its cause seemed destined to remain a mystery. She forgot about Margaret Mead and the Samoans. In the afternoons when she finished her chores, she lay on the grass behind the barn, elbows cradling her head, and swallowed huge cumulous clouds, letting them puff up inside her. With very little practice, she learned to float. She moved sideways through life, buffeted by winds she had no urge to control.

Until her senior year in high school, when her father's sizeable contribution to the Committee-to-Elect-the-President was rewarded with an ambassadorship. The family (excepting Pryde, who had no intention of going anywhere) pinned its hopes on London, Paris, Rome, or Sydney—and waited for official word. Kabul was not even on their radar. Getting the news was like being told to pack for Mars. The most diligent of the four children, Pryde was dispatched to the University library, and told to bring home whatever “educational material” she could find. At the dinner table, she picked at her brussel sprouts and read aloud from her notes. Her reports had the distinctly cautionary flavor of a State Department Travel Alert: *The country faces daunting challenges. American citizens must be vigilant for child abduction, banditry, land mines, and armed rivalry among political and tribal groups. Basic services are rudimentary or do not exist. These factors may contribute to crime and lawlessness.* One night, when her mother had had enough of such pessimistic talk, she said simply: *Pryde, dear, this isn't Camp Shantituck.*

And reluctantly, Pryde surrendered.

They arrived at the end of March. The ground was still frozen, and snow draped the mountains from Kabul to the Khyber Pass; a bitter wind blew south from Kazakhstan. The narrow windows on their crumbling brick residence were

crisscrossed with steel bars, and for one long year, they lived as hostages to their own foolishness, cowering in the basement whenever the city came under fire. Bombs exploded in the street and cracked the concrete foundation of the house, tickling the soles of their feet the way that a subway train shudders deep inside a sidewalk. And still, they flattened their hands against their ears and strained for the all-clear, then buried their fears until the next time.

They lived in practical isolation. At first, a moon-faced Pashtun girl with a long, elegant neck and the lipid brown eyes of a giraffe was the family's only regular visitor. Her name was Spogmay. In the afternoons, Spogmay prepared their dinner in the enormous kitchen that faced onto a courtyard full of armed men. The girl smelled of basil and chutney; her golden skin shimmered like olive oil beneath the gauzy veil of her *tsbaaderi*. She had a habit of talking to herself, of whispering the names of the items that she removed from her straw basket and set upon the knife-scarred butcher-block counter. Her voice had the seductive timber of an alto clarinet. Her words were like a reed, bitten more than spoken. She barely moved her lips.

Near the end of that summer, Spogmay brought her eldest brother to the house. Ismail—sienna-skinned and green-eyed—was as mischievous as Spogmay was tractable. While Spogmay kept her eyes on the floor, tiptoeing round the kitchen on her bare feet, Ishmail was dangerous, vaulting onto the counter, snatching apples and pears from the silver bowl that Pryde's mother had dragged halfway across the globe. Watching him chomp on an apple one day (baring chunky white teeth, licking his lips, even relishing the seeds) she was reminded of Pooh Bear—the pony she'd lost in a stable fire the December that there hadn't been a Christmas. Ismail was a flirt. He liked to sit on the counter and braid her hair; she would back into the space between his legs and close her eyes and when his fingers glanced her skin, gathering hair at the nape of her neck, she felt a stirring between her own legs. He flirted in silence, and in Pashtu, and she fell in lust, and then in love, as much with the language as with him. For a while, Ismail made Pryde forget who she was. And then he was gone (a dream-like kiss in the shadows of the courtyard), and she was left with only Spogmay and the strangely beautiful language that kept him close.

Like a magnet, Pryde gravitated toward the enigmatic Pashtun girl, the stone floor cold beneath her own bare feet; daily, her hips jutted forward to greet her. At first, she merely listened; soon enough she let the strange new words roll off her tongue. Her first nouns were eggplant, chutney, and mutton; her first verbs were *sauté*, *toss*, and *cube*. At night, she memorized recipes like flash cards of multiplication tables. While she slept, silvery skeins of grammar threaded their way through her subconscious, connecting words to form full sentences: *Sauté the eggplant in a half-inch of olive oil. Toss in a tablespoon of chutney. Cube the mutton and shred the onions. Stir.* Eventually, she dreamed in Pashtu, and

thought of herself as more Pashtun than Kentuckian, and when the rest of the family fled Kabul for home, she enrolled in a highly regarded linguistics program at a venerable university on the Thames. Two years later, she graduated with honors, the only student of Pashtu in the school's ancient history.

After university, she took a job as a translator for a thriving London outfit that hosted conferences and seminars for a wide variety of international audiences. Astronomers and medical examiners, economists and psychologists, archeologists, meteorologists, astrologists, and cartographers. Week after week, she translated *white dwarfs* and *poison puts*, *bradycardia* and *rigor mortis* into Pashtu for the handful of Afghan conferees; one or ten, it made no difference to her. She made maps, charted stars, and measured earthquakes, all from a safe distance. She craved certainty and quietude, safe harbors and calculable odds. On an ordinary Tuesday in October, she married a mathematician named Tom. Each night, she dreamed of Ismail. Neither happy nor unhappy, she merely was, and that was enough. She floated through life on a lovely bank of English clouds.

And so she could not have predicted how completely her life would change. One warm summer night, as she was sitting in her office, locusts buzzing, lost in a textbook on Jungian psychology, Pryde looked up to see a stranger beside her desk. He was tall and dark, and vaguely familiar, dressed in neatly pressed khaki slacks and a brown, collarless shirt buttoned up to the neck. A ragged scar, rough as a rocky riverbed, reached from his hairline to the corner of his mouth in a perfect half-moon. In the light from the hallway, he looked like a ghost. She reached up to touch her own face. The curve of her cheek was smooth beneath her fingers, more lake than river. Her breath scraped her throat like a razor.

I did not mean to startle you. I knocked, but you did not hear me.

I am a very heavy reader; she replied in the same language (more flirtatiously than she'd intended), and smiled, surprising herself, since she did not normally warm to strangers. In her head, she'd translated his Pashtu into English, and then back again to Pashtu. She spoke formally, the words strangely stilted and uncertain, like matchsticks standing on end. She looked at him hard. *Ismail*, she whispered.

Six weeks later, she returned to Afghanistan.

She had not been back since the Soviet occupation. Circling the airfield in a military transport (sharp air whistling through an ancient bullet hole above her head), she looked down upon the snowy mountains and wide plains, and was reminded of the winter Alleghenies, starkly cold and beautiful. South of Kabul, in a muddy field rutted with snow and ice, the plane bucked and lunged its way to a near disaster. And yet deplaning, turning her collar up to the cold, she felt oddly calm, as if she'd just drunk a warm glass of milk in front of the fire at home with the cat asleep on her feet.

Ismail was waiting for her, though she barely recognized him this time, the long scar on his face was thick and red, it spilled down his cheek like a blistering stream of lava. Beside him stood the American colonel, short, squat, and clean-shaven. Boots the color of mud. Black leather gloves that made his hands look like King Kong's. When they shook hands behind the battered jeep, she fought the urge to scream. Fay Wray in a Taliban stronghold. A far cry from Margaret Mead playing house on Samoa.

They'd headed north, past mere suggestions of houses, slippery shells of packed mud stapled with branches and sticks. Now and then, a glimpse of a child, a goat, a few sheep. The nicest building she saw was a mosque: windows, a roof, a patch of snow-covered grass. The drive to the camp was endless, and after a while she slept, oblivious to the ruts in the road, the burned-out tanks, the decimated villages, the occasional shepherd, a single Black Hawk hovering overhead. When at last they made camp, it was dark, and she crawled into her tent and slept some more. Once, she awoke to the touch of Ismail's fingers in her hair, and twined her fingers through his before drifting back to sleep.

In the middle of the night, she awakened to the rat-tat-tat of gunshots punctuated by the simultaneous cries of the soldier-boys, and the sharp commands of the American colonel, their voices like the dissonant chords of a minor key; music without melody, language without words. She lay very still and listened hard with her fists hooked under her chin, her warm breath snaking through the cold air in the tent, her body pressing down on the commotion outside. Between the thunderous beats of her heart and the clanging din of the confusion outside, she made out the muffled crunch of boots in the snow, the flap of a blanket in the wind, the sorrowful whinny of a horse, abandoned. She put words to the sounds but could not divine their meaning.

In a strange reversal of roles, it was Nazeer who made the translation. Minutes or hours later (the time eaten up by darkness and fear), she felt him beside her in the tent, his arms around her, his smooth cheek in the curve of her neck, warm, like water on ice. Without a word, he answered her unasked questions. *A single sniper. Ismail is dead.* She tensed and he held her tighter, his thin arms surprisingly strong around her waist. *Sssb, sssb* like the wind. He pushed a lock of hair off her neck and bent closer. *He was feeding his horse in the moonlight. A stupid man. A brave man. I will miss him.* His lips kissed the lobe of her ear, and she broke away, and rolled over and found his eyes, a glimmer of gold in the darkness. *The sniper is dead. Now go to sleep.* His breath smelled like mulberries. Once, during the night, she awoke to find him beside her, and then slipped back to sleep, like a child tucked safely in her bed.

In the morning, the colonel had asked about her feet and Nazeer had pointed to the mountains as if nothing had changed, even as a boy in a moth-eaten prayer

shawl led Ismail's mare away from the camp. Now, as the sun continues its motionless climb above the mountains, the blister presses on the ball of her left foot, and Pryde wants to believe that she imagined the gunshots, that Nazeer's breath on her ear was nothing more than the tease of the wind through the canvas folds of her tent. But then he catches her eye, and she knows that Ismail is dead. Killed only yards from where she slept.

The colonel hands her a pistol, a question mark in his eyes. Without a word, she shoves it into the waistband of her pants, the act, she suspects he concludes, of a competent shooter. Satisfied, he walks away, leaving her alone with her grief.

Theirs is a reconnaissance mission; if all goes well, no shots will be fired. The enemy is believed to be hiding in the caves of the Sia Mountains. Only months ago, Nazeer and the other boys were holed up in the same caves. Recently, they defected to the American side. They are brave and determined, but unused to the cold. Some wear open-toed shoes, and tattered Russian Army pants topped with shawls like the one worn by the boy with Ismail's horse. A mile or two into their trek, Pryde rummages through her knapsack for her socks and offers them to Nazeer and the others. Shyly, they accept her gift; they seem surprised by their perfect fit. The colonel scowls and scoffs at her stupidity. *You're crazy*, he tells her. *You are bound to regret this*. Within minutes, of course, the boys' socks are wet and soggy. Each step leaves a colorful trail of wool in the snow, tiny specks of blue, red and green. Pryde follows the trail, one hand on her pistol, imagining the scene in Mary Poppins where Bert's chalk paintings run on the sidewalk in the rain. She thinks of Ismail, and her husband and his carrots, and begins to suspect that she may never see Paris.

Two hours later, they reach the base of the mountains and make camp for tea and bread. Nazeer and another boy build a fire behind a man-sized rock. In an effort to hide their position, they wave at the smoke, gathering it up in dirty fists, the way that Pryde swallowed clouds in another life. A single cup is passed around and refilled as needed; the cup is cracked and chipped and beautiful. A hunk of brown bread is shared silently among them. No one speaks. There is nothing to say. She knows they are thinking the same thing. She gets up to stretch her legs and finds the hint of a path up the rocky mountain. She means to climb until it hurts, a safe distance, until she feels the stab of each breath in her chest. And then, in the mouth of a cave, she glimpses the snow lion, and she is back on the Cumberland River.

The pistol's hammer is deafening. It rings in her ears and confounds her sense of place and identity. When the colonel drops the teacup, the boys can only stare in disbelief; it is a clean break. From her place on the ridge, Pryde feels their eyes burning into her back. She returns the pistol to her waistband, and turns for a moment toward the camp. But then the blister bursts against the sole of her boot, and she bites down on her tongue, and keeps climbing.

Pam Ullman is a lawyer who lives and writes in Shillington, Pennsylvania. Her short fiction and essays have been published in a variety of journals, magazines, and anthologies. She won First Prize in the 2000 Random House *Bold Type* Short Story Contest for a story that was later anthologized in *Love is Ageless: Stories About Alzheimer's Disease*. Pam dedicates "No Safe Distance" to the men and women fighting the war against terror, and to those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001.