

FICTION

THE HAUNTING OF HAJJI HOTAK

BY JAMIL JAN KOCHAI

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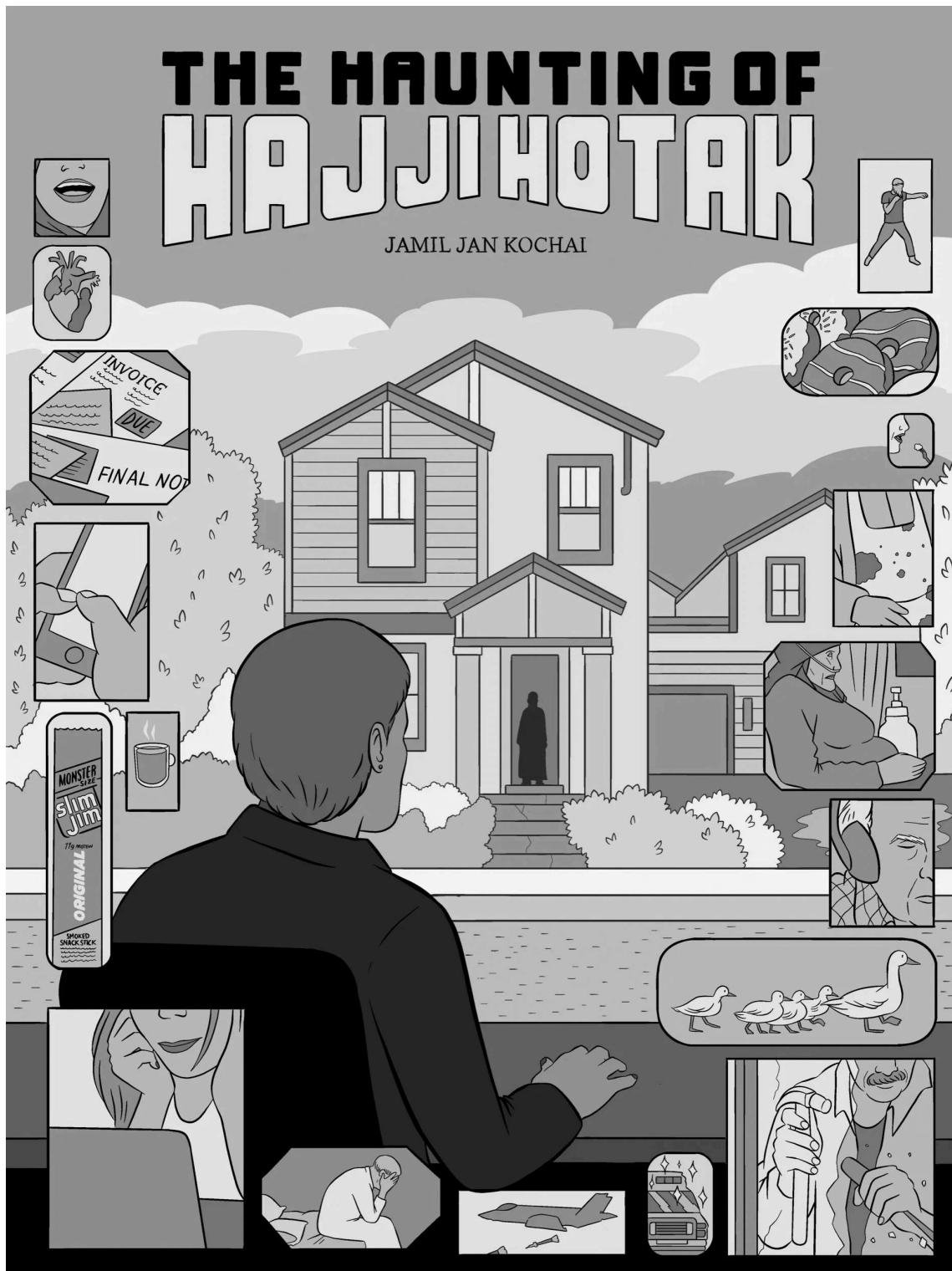


Illustration by Raphaelle Macaron



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**Audio:** Jamil Jan Kochai reads.

You don't know why, exactly, you've been assigned to this particular family, in this particular home, in West Sacramento, California. It's not your job to wonder why. Nonetheless, after a few days, you begin to speculate that the suspect at the heart of your assignment is the father, code-named Hajji, even though you have no reason to believe that he has ever actually completed the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. In fact, Hajji hardly leaves home at all. He spends hours at a time wandering around his house or his yard, searching for things to repair—rotted planks of wood, missing shingles, burned-out bulbs, broken mowers, shattered windows, unhinged doors—until his old injuries act up, and he is forced to lie down wherever he is working, and if he happens to be in the attic or the basement, or in some other secluded area of the house, away from his wife and his mother and his four children, sometimes he will allow himself to quietly mutter verses from the Quran, invocations to Allah, until his ache seems to ebb and he returns to work.

When Hajji has exhausted himself, he often retires to the living room, where he watches murder mysteries or foreign coverage of conflicts in Islamic countries. If his wife, code-named Habibi, is in the kitchen, and if she isn't already chatting with one of her many friends, most of whom you know Hajji despises, he will request a cup of tea and ask about his mother's health, which is never very good, but Hajji's wife doesn't tell him this, because his mother, code-named Bibi, is

sitting just a few feet away, and though she doesn't acknowledge her son's presence, Bibi is always listening.

From early dawn, when she wakes to pray, until late at night, before she falls into a fitful sleep, Bibi nests in a corner of the living room, on the farthest edge of the second couch, and listens to the television at an incredibly low volume, listens to her son and his wife in the kitchen, to her grandchildren on their phones, to the Quran on an old radio that she smuggled out of Afghanistan forty years ago, to the flushing of the toilets in the house, to the wind in the trees that her son planted near her window, to the gentle burbling of her oxygen tank, and to the constant thrumming of the house, and she reports back all that she hears to her only living brother, in Afghanistan. Thanks to Bibi's keen ear for even the most minute details, her calls are thorough and uncompromising. She knows when her grandchildren are constipated. She knows when her son and his wife are secretly fighting. She knows who is peeing too loudly or cheating on exams or missing prayers. Through Bibi's many reports to her brother, you begin to gather snippets of Hajji's history: his former life as a mujahid in Afghanistan; his trek from Logar to Peshawar to Karachi to California; his wedding; the births of each of his children; the children's gradual loss of Pashto; their gradual increase in insolence; the trucking accident that destroyed the nerves in Hajji's neck and shoulder; the court cases that led to nothing; the betrayal he felt when his second-eldest son, code-named Karl, decided to become a Marxist while studying at Berkeley; his depression; his total disillusionment with the American justice system; his anger; his rage; his softly bubbling fury.

Jamil Jan Kochai on Americans' fear of Islam.

In another life, you think, Bibi might have been a spy.

Hajji's eldest son, Mo, gets home from his job at Zafar's butcher shop in the evening. He wears a blood-splattered smock, an Arabic *thobe*, and a heavy beard.

Every night, Mo's mother scolds him for not having washed his smock, which smells like a massacre, and every night Hajji defends his son, who smells, he says, like a man. Mo begs his mother's forgiveness with a laugh and sits beside his father. In English, Mo asks Hajji about the current condition of the *ummah*, which translates roughly to "community," but which actually refers to a supranational collective of Islamic peoples.

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"They hope to destroy our *ummah*," you record Hajji saying, in English, before he gives a recap of all the bombings, massacres, war crimes, protests, shootings, kidnappings, and assassinations that have occurred in the past twenty-four hours. Mo listens quietly, only occasionally asking a question or muttering a vengeful prayer.

The rest of Hajji's children arrive as dinner begins.

Lily, the youngest, sneaks into the kitchen and asks her mother which dishes have been prepared without meat.

Lily has recently, and secretly, become a vegetarian. Two weeks earlier, she came home weeping to her mother after having witnessed the vehicular maiming of a duck that was crossing the street with a line of her ducklings. Lily had cradled the duck in her death throes, surrounded by her little ducklings—which, Lily swore,

were crying out for their mother. Together, Habibi and Lily wept for the little orphaned ducklings. Later that day, Lily informed her mother that she could not bring herself to eat the chicken korma she had prepared, and Habibi decided not to scold her (a decision she would come to regret). At first, it was only chicken, but then Lily confessed to her mother that she could no longer stomach beef or lamb, the rest of the culinary trinity of Hajji's household. Habibi made an effort to explain to her daughter that vegetarianism was a slippery slope toward feminism, Marxism, Communism, atheism, hedonism, and, eventually, cannibalism. "Animals are animals," her mother explained, deftly, "and humans are humans, and when you begin mixing up the two you will find yourself kissing chickens and eating children."

Lily swore that it was a matter not of ethics but of physical repulsion, and that with time, *Inshallah*, she would be able to eat all her favorite dishes again. Habibi relented, and for a few days the secret remained solely between mother and daughter, until Mary, Hajji's elder daughter, turned toward her sister one afternoon, in the room they had shared since Lily's infancy, and asked her how much weight she had lost.

"None," she said, too quickly, laughing. "I'm as chunky as ever."

But she *had* lost weight. Two pounds.

"Then why do you look so pale and self-righteous?" Mary asked, continuing her interrogation. Sharp, uncompromising, and with an excellent eye for weakness—a trait that, you assume, she inherited from her grandmother—Mary has many talents (deception, introspection, manipulation, a high pain threshold, and embroidery) that are wasted in Hajji's household, where the girls are allowed to go only to school or to the mosque and then must come straight home.

It's really a tragedy, you think. She could have been a fine spy.

In the end, Lily confessed her sin to Mary, who immediately mocked her. "Idiot," she said. "You're short enough as it is. How do you expect to get taller without protein?"

"I'll eat beans."

"Beans? How many beans? This room isn't ventilated enough for you to be eating beans all day."

"Please," Lily said. "Don't tell."

Mary laughed and promised to snitch as soon as she could, which was a lie, of course, because Mary wasn't the sort.

During dinner, Lily is always careful to serve herself a heaping portion of chicken or kebab or kofta, but while she eats her rice and fried vegetables, Mary, an avowed carnivore, nonchalantly clears away Lily's meat. Hajji, fortunately, never notices. He eats with perfect focus. In total silence. And with his fingers.

Habibi, on the other hand, hardly eats. She is all questions and stories. She wants to know about Mo's butchering, Mary's studying, Lily's friends, and even Marvin's gaming. In response, the children tease her, which, at times, upsets Hajji, but Habibi always takes it in stride. She is—in your professional estimation—the beating heart of the household. Not only does she take on most of the chores; she also actively organizes the entire social life of the family—dinners and parties and showers and gatherings and even the occasional communal prayer. Seemingly at war with the hundred silences that fill her small house, she is almost always on the brink of shouting in Pashto or Farsi or English or sometimes Urdu. She chats so much on the phone, outside in the yard, inside in the kitchen, with her gloomy husband, her spiteful mother-in-law, her eclectic children, and her many, many friends, that you end up spending half your time at the office skimming through hours and hours of Habibi's gossip, translated from your audio recordings by an officially sanctioned team of Afghan American interpreters, who are only ever

provided with fragments of her statements, in the hope that they won't figure out whom, exactly, they are interpreting. Habibi's relentless chatter, however, is not completely useless. Every night, before bed, she calls her family in Afghanistan, some of whom still live in a small village in Logar Province, which, according to your research, is currently under the control of the Taliban.

The word comes up sometimes amid Habibi's barrage of Pashto and Farsi. Her "baleh"s and "bachem"s and "cheeka"s and "keer"s.

"Taliban," she will whisper into her phone, as if she knows you are listening.

Just the sound of it makes your heart race.

After dinner, Marvin and the girls rush off to their rooms while Mo, his parents, and Bibi drink tea in the living room. Inevitably, the conversation turns to Mo's prospects for marriage. Habibi has a niece in Kabul, a midwife and a beauty, who speaks English, Pashto, Farsi, and Urdu. "She is almost too good for you," Habibi says, laughing. Hajji has a niece in Logar, only sixteen, wholesome, holy. She has memorized half the Quran, and her father is a respected mullah in the village. What Mo's parents don't know is that Mo is already in love with a girl at Sac State. They are constantly messaging, conversing, and Snapchatting. Mo writes her secret love poems on his laptop. Horrendous verses that he is rightfully embarrassed by. Sometimes, when he thinks he's alone, he recites his poems quietly.

His love, you hope, will save him.

At night, Hajji and his wife are the first to go to bed. The next morning, they will wake up at dawn—Hajji because of his pain, and Habibi because of Hajji's pain. Both Marvin and Mo pretend to fall asleep, but when Mo thinks Marvin has passed out he sneaks downstairs with his laptop, and, as soon as he does, Marvin climbs out of his own bed, performs *wudhu*, and begins to make up all the prayers

he missed throughout the day. Though Marvin has earned a 3.8 G.P.A. in his first semester at U.C. Davis, though he works part time and donates money to Afghanistan, his parents often scold him for not praying, not reading the Quran, and Marvin never utters a word in self-defense. And yet here he is, in the middle of the night, praying in secrecy, away from the approving eyes of his mother and father and brother and grandmother, reciting verse after verse from the Quran, in a voice so soft and melodic that it almost brings tears to your eyes.

Downstairs, Mo descends into forums. Swaddled in his father's woollen shawl—the very same shawl that Hajji used to wear in the days of his long-ago jihad—Mo watches clips of American bombs falling on Iraqi cities, Afghans bearing witness to ISAF executions, Muslim boys being burned alive in Gujarat. He watches these clips for hours, his head bobbing, his eyes bleary, until his beloved, mercifully, notices that he is online and commands him to go to sleep. Upstairs, Mary is reading Mo's messages. She has hacked into his Facebook account and watches his conversation play out in real time. She is a ghost on his profile, always careful to read only what he has already read and to leave everything else untouched. Such potential, you think, such a pity. Lily, in the bed next to Mary, is sketching pictures of ducks and ducklings and ponds and ducks crying into ponds and ponds expanding into oceans and ducks in flight and ducks walking and ducks dying, and she takes pictures of these charcoal portraits and posts them to a private Instagram account, which Mary can also, secretly, access. In the room adjacent to the girls, Hajji and his wife have a quiet argument about his wife's brothers. You recognize their names and suspect it has something to do with the fact that they were employed as interpreters for the U.S. military in Afghanistan. Hajji, you know, considers these men to be traitors. Eventually, Habibi turns away from her husband, mutters something under her breath, and cries herself softly to sleep. Hajji does nothing to comfort her. He sits up in bed, wheezing with pain or regret, and stares out the window at the dark street, where Mo is now shadowboxing beneath a street light. Tucked away in her corner of the house, Bibi

sits up at the same moment, in the same manner, and stares out her window at the same street light. She, too, watches Mo strike at invisible enemies.

When the family finally sleeps, you listen to them dream.

In the course of the next few weeks, you search for clues, signs, evidence of evil intentions. But to no avail. Life merely goes on.

Hajji repairs a window he broke while attempting to repaint his mother's room.

Cold floods the house.

Bibi moves into the boys' room, and the boys sleep in the living room. No longer able to sneak away from each other, they carry out long conversations before falling asleep. They discuss their family's finances, their suspicion that their father is hiding bills from them. They plan to confront him but never go through with it.

When they sleep, both of the boys snore, Marvin whistling and Mo sort of growling, and the girls, whose bedroom is closest to the living room, complain to each other all night. The timing of the boys' snoring is uncanny. There is a certain rhythm to it. When Mo murmurs, Marvin bursts, and, when Marvin quiets, Mo roars. The girls refer to it as "the symphony." Eventually, though, the girls fall asleep and you become the sole listener.

Mo notices blood in his stool but doesn't go to a doctor.

Mary earns a 4.3 G.P.A. for the semester, and Hajji buys doughnuts for the whole family. They all sit in the living room, eating doughnuts and drinking tea, and Bibi jokes that now they won't have to sell Mary for a pair of goats. The whole family laughs as though in a scene in a sitcom.

While Habibi's husband is out buying supplies from a hardware store, she receives a call from her parents, in Kabul, and discovers that her mother is seriously ill. She tells no one and leaves to visit her brothers across town. Soon afterward, Hajji returns home to find her missing. He goes from room to room, calling her name. For the first time in weeks, Bibi speaks to her son, informing him that his mother-in-law is sick.

Tech workers from the Bay Area have moved into the neighborhood. Property taxes are rising. Bills stack up. Hajji needs help but won't tell his sons, because he doesn't want them to take on more work. He borrows money and credit. He buries the bills at night like corpses.

Habibi receives another call from her parents. There will be an operation. It's the heart, of all things. Habibi tells only Hajji, but Bibi, of course, finds out.

In a moment of weakness, Lily eats a Slim Jim that she shoplifted from a gas station near her school. At home, she vomits the processed meat for several minutes. Though everyone assures Hajji that Lily will be fine, Hajji insists on taking her to the emergency room. "As long as we have Medi-Cal, why take the risk?" he argues. An hour later, Hajji and Lily return home from the hospital, and Hajji informs his wife that Lily has become a vegetarian. He asks her to keep it a secret. "For now," Hajji says, "she doesn't want anyone else to know." Habibi promises not to tell a soul.

One afternoon, while her father sleeps and her mother cooks, Mary shuffles through Hajji's mail and discovers past-due bills, three or four from the same creditor. She picks a few of the most urgent (electricity and Internet) and rushes upstairs. On Poshmark.com, she sells her own lightly used sweaters and jeans and

T-shirts, which she has embroidered with characters from popular animes—Sailor Moon and Totoro and Naruto—and, in the course of a week, pays her father's bills online.

Habibi tells Marvin about his grandmother's upcoming surgery. "Do you think she will forgive me for abandoning her in that city?" she asks him. Marvin pretends to pause his video game, even though he is playing online, in real time. He sets his controller aside and listens to his mother's fears without responding. He is killed over and over again.

The stack of bills lightens, but Hajji hardly notices.

When her husband is out, Habibi calls Karl in Berkeley. They chat about his stomach, his rent, his studies, his protests, and his prayers until Habibi begs him, once again, to renounce Communism and come home. Karl argues that his father, more than anyone else, should be sympathetic to his cause. Habibi begins to weep and Karl mutters an excuse and hangs up. You wonder which of your colleagues is surveilling Karl.

While Hajji watches Al Jazeera—video footage of a young Afghan farmer being executed by an Australian soldier plays on the screen—Mary curls up next to him and picks at the flakes of dried skin in his beard as she did when she was four years old. According to Habibi, this was her special ritual before sleep. Now Mary has a bottle of olive oil in hand, a tiny dollop of which she pours into her palm and runs through her father's beard. The execution is played again. After being mauled by a dog, the farmer, Dad Mohammad, lies on his back in the middle of a field. His knees are drawn up to his chest, and he is clutching red prayer beads. A soldier stands over him with a rifle. "You want me to drop this cunt?" he asks. There is the sound of a shot, and the footage cuts to black. When Mary is gone and the news segment is finished, Hajji sits alone in the living room with the TV turned off. He runs his fingers through the moistened strands of his beard and seems surprised by its softness.

On the night before Habibi's mother's surgery, one of Habibi's brothers visits for the first time in months. Mary is the only one who doesn't acknowledge him. In their shared room, Lily attempts to persuade her sister to forgive their uncle for his many insults, attacks, jokes, attacks disguised as jokes, and threats. But Mary refuses. "Mom will understand," Mary says, but you're not so sure. That night, Habibi and her brother sleep on a red *toshak* in the living room and quietly pray for their sick mother. In the morning, the news is good, and you cannot help sighing with relief.

Six months into your assignment, you begin to doubt your purpose. Hajji is falling apart. His doctor has advised him to undergo spinal surgery that may leave him paralyzed. In another era, in a different body, perhaps Hajji could have been dangerous. But here, now, debilitated by pain and trauma, the old man is no threat at all.

You should update your superiors. You should advise them to abort the operation. But you won't. Not now. Not when Mary is about to apply to colleges, not when Mo is planning to propose, not when Marvin is making new friends on campus, not when Habibi's parents are applying for a visa to the States, not when Hajji is deciding whether or not he will go through with the surgery, not when Bibi is losing touch with her brother, not when Lily is on the brink of an artistic breakthrough. There's too much left to learn.

But then, on a cold summer night, when the rest of the family has driven down to an aunt's house in Fremont, Hajji heads up to the attic to fix a pipe. You watch him prepare his tools and climb his ladder and enter his soaking attic, and, in a fine mist of leaking water, Hajji fidgets with the pipe until he mutters "Shit" in Pashto. He crawls back through the water, but on his way down he slips off the highest rung of the ladder and falls onto the hard tile beneath him. Though the fall must have been only ten feet or so, Hajji has landed awkwardly and broken his leg. He lies on the floor, on his back, staring up at the attic from which he fell. You

know for a fact that Hajji has broken this leg once before, during the Soviet occupation, when a Kalashnikov round pierced his fibula and forced him off the battlefield for six months, during the heaviest period of fighting in Logar, and that this injury probably saved his life, and that his living—while his brother died, while his sister died, while his cousins and friends and neighbors all died—has haunted him his whole life.

A minute passes. Two. You know that Hajji always forgets his cell phone in the kitchen and that the kitchen is approximately twenty yards away from the spot where he lies on the floor, unmoving, and that he will have no other choice but to drag himself there and call for help. And yet he doesn't move. You listen for his breath and hear him rasping. Water drips from the trapdoor to the attic, and Hajji lifts his hands and washes his face and his arms and his hair as if he were performing his ablutions. It's at this point that both you and Hajji notice the small puddle of blood forming under his head.

Hajji pleads to God, and you hear him, and you answer.

The ambulance arrives shortly afterward.

The next day, as soon as he returns home from the hospital, Hajji purchases a phone recorder on Amazon and, when it arrives, has Marvin hook it up to the landline. No one questions him. No one argues. He listens to hours and hours of recordings in his bedroom, alone or with Habibi, and during awkward moments of silence, pauses in conversations, he stops and rewinds and listens again. "Do you hear it?" he whispers to Habibi in Pashto. "The breathing?"

She waits and listens again and nods her head.

You know this is impossible. You know there is no way for them to hear you, and yet, when you are listening to a conversation, and there is a pause, a silence, you find yourself holding your breath.

Hajji becomes relentless.

He searches for you on the phone, in the streets, in unmarked white vans, in the faces of policemen, detectives in street clothes, military personnel, and his own neighbors. He searches for you at the hospital, at the bank, on his computer, his sons' laptops, in Webcams, phone cameras, and on the television. He searches for you in the curtains and in the drawers of the kitchen and in the trees in his back yard, in the electrical sockets, the locks of the door handles, and in the filaments of the light bulbs. And, even as his family protests, Hajji searches for you in shattered glass, in broken tile, in the strips of his wallpaper, the splinters of his doors, his tattered flesh, his warped nerves, and in his own beating heart, where, through it all, the voice whispering that he is loved is yours. ♦

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Jamil Jan Kochai, the author of the novel "[99 Nights in Logar](#)," published "[The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories](#)" in 2022.

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