ANTHROPOLOGY
of all-night clerks

Midnight's **refugees**

That person ringing up your candy bar at the convenience store might well have a bizarre and dramatic personal history to share. Just ask.

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'he little corner grocery store is not what it used to be. When my reat-grandparents arrived from Lebanon and set up shop in rince Rupert at the beginning of this century, they were part of n immigrant tradition. Now, the family business has given way ɔ the convenience store. Even today, it is often those from the arger refugee diaspora, fleeing war and revolution, who sit beind the cashier. But they are not the owners; they are minimum-vage earners stuck in the waystation en route to the North Amer-:an dream.

"Kafka," says Amir, an Iranian clerk in his mid-30s who slings lurpees at a 7-11 on Vancouver's west side. Like others inter-iewed for this article, he prefers that his last name not appear in print. "My situation is out of Kafka," he tells me as the rain pours lown outside and a parade of dirty-blond, scraggly haired men in ›aseball caps emerge from the evening darkness to purchase heir Marlboros. "Just after the revolution, I got into trouble with he *pasdaran* (religious police)."

Amir was a civil servant then, he explains, and when he com-›lained too loudly about nepotism within the ranks of the "reli-giously-correct, politically-connected" government employees, ıe received a death threat. Overnight, he was forced to leave everything behind — his home, his job, his family — and escape ıcross the Turkish border with a fake Italian passport. From Turkey, he made his way to Germany, where he lived until 1989, studying to be a draftsman. Faced with mounting racism and dwindling employment, Amir decided to come to Canada.

Amir's story is interrupted by a Chinese-speaking man wanting Pokémon cards for his children. I strike up a conversation with Mahmoud, Amir's Eritrean colleague, who's doing an inventory of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Mahmoud explains that he fled Keren, a town in central Eritrea, in 1975, when the civil war that had started in 1961 moved from rural guerrilla to urban warfare. "Ethiopia was supported by the Russians. The rebels by the Arab states. We were caught in the middle."

So Mahmoud fled to neighbouring Sudan, where he studied to be an accountant. When the political and economic situation in the Sudan began to deteriorate in the late '80s, Mahmoud decided to come to Canada, and soon was an employee of 7-11. "It's been 10 years now," says Mahmoud, with a sleepy kind of bewilderment. He still dreams of one day starting his own accounting business.

There is silence for a minute, the drone of the refrigerators, groaning with cans of Pepsi, the only sound. It is 11 o'clock and time for a shift change. Mahmoud and the Filipina working at the post office will get a ride home with Derej, the tall Ethiopian "gas man," who arrived last year from Addis Ababa and still looks culture-shocked. Amir will hand over the store to Jaggi, a man from a remote Indian Himalayan village on the Tibetan border. When Jaggi arrives Amir takes me outside for a minute, to have a smoke and tell me more of his story.

"I feel trapped here," he confides. "I cannot escape."

He has been waiting ten years, he explains, to have his refugee status confirmed. Until that time, he says, his life is in "limbo."

"I've had lots of good job offers, but when they ask me what my status is, they say 'sorry but we can't hire you.'" Amir's visa is up for renewal every year and he lives in fear of being deported at any moment. The reason for the delay in his status confirmation? Suspicions of a bogus story, perhaps, or vague underworld connections?

"No," says Amir, "It's my heart."

Amir tells me that because of his heart condition, he did not pass the initial medical exam/screening process for refugees. "They're worried that I might be an unnecessary burden to the medical system here," he grimaces. "But this whole situation is just making my heart condition worse!" He shows me a bottle of Fluvox , a prescription anti-depressant, that he keeps in his pocket.

"Look," he tells me, his frustration with his situation evident, "I have a Gold Card, a cell phone, and excellent credit rating! I can't go anywhere! I can't move! I'm stuck here!" He lifts his hands, shrugs. "What can I do?"

PETER BATTISTONI/Vancouver Sun

"We do get some nice customers," Azam offers, as the guy in the toque comes back again to fill up a paper cup with ice for the bottle of vodka he has stashed outside.

Back in the 7-11, Amir catches one of the ubiquitous baseball-capped customers stealing a Ding-Dong and a pack of cigarettes. "Get out of the store!" he yells, with carefully controlled rage. The thief retreats outside, muttering obscenities.

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A few miles away, at the Robson Street 7-11 in the West End, Azam, a 35-year-old single mother, calmly confronts a teenaged hooligan twice her size.

The huge gorilla of a guy, dressed in a toque, mack jacket and high-top sneakers, appears stoned out of his mind. He has picked up a yellow plastic THIS FLOOR IS WET sign and begun to hit his friends with it. The other customers look nervous. Azam is quietly assertive.

"Please stop that," she tells the guy, and he does. As she returns to her nightly "sandwich check," discarding ham and cheese that has passed its due date, Azam tells her story. "I ran away from my husband."

The guy in the toque is performing an impromptu rap song for the benefit of the video surveillance cameras.

Azam tells me that when she arrived here in 1994, she was nin months pregnant. "I went straight from the airport to the hospi tal," she says.

Azam is an ethnic Azeri from northern Iran. She says that sh met her husband when they were both medical students in Bakı the capital of Azerbaijan, recently independent from the forme Soviet Union. They got married at the Iranian embassy ther and everything was fine, she says, until they returned to Irar Azam was denied a medical internship, she claims, because whe she told hospital administrators in Tehran of her desire to wor in rural Azeri villages, she was accused of being a separatist.

At that point, Azam's in-laws insisted that the young coupl live with them in their small Tehran apartment. Soon Azam, wh was used to the independence of her life in Azerbaijan, a rel tively liberal and secular state compared to the theocratic Ira found herself in an unbearable situation.

"My husband took advantage of the power he had as a man i Iranian society. He became very controlling and abusive." Wh she left to live with her mother, she discovered that she was pre nant. She went to the passport office to try and secure a visa to back to Azerbaijan, but was told that she needed her husband permission to do so.

To further complicate matters, Azam and her husband had n officially registered their union in Iran, so if she were to stay Iran and have her baby, she would be denied a hospital birth b cause officially she would be considered a single mother.

Faced with this catch-22, Azam went to her ancestral village the north and obtained a new passport. "I pretended I had lo mine," she recounts, as dread-locked Japanese students pass by search of chewing gum, "and applied for a new one spelling n last name with a p instead of a b."

A man with a crew-cut and two gold earrings inquires abo Neo-Citran. Azam continues: "I took a bus to Turkey." On there, she sold all the gold jewelry she had received as weddi gifts, and paid an agent $8,000 US to take her to Canada. She a rived after a two-month journey through Italy, Venezuela a Mexico.

Now Azam is a landed immigrant and her four-month-o daughter attends pre-school in the West End. Azam hopes to b come a nurse here and eventually to work as a doctor. In t meantime, she will continue to work the nightshift.

"We do get some nice customers," Azam offers, as the guy the toque comes back again to fill up a paper cup with ice, f the bottle of vodka he has stashed outside. The glare of the flu rescent lighting begins to feel especially harsh. It is almost 2 the morning.

A man in jeans and Birkenstocks who looks a bit like a fade movie star smiles at me and says "Hi, I'm from Aleppo." Aleppo a town in Syria. The man has been here all night. He comes eve day around sunset. "He's a little bit crazy," Azam whispers.

He asks me my name and where I am from, and then asks t same question three more times. "Lot's of good silver in Al po" I say to him, feeling like a displaced tourist.

"No, gold," he replies sharply, "not silver." His eyes look inte gent, but something about him is off. He stands very close to and then wanders over to the magazine racks, full of gay erot and sports journals.

"He's all right" says Azam. "But sometimes he starts yelling customers, telling them, "Get out, this is my store."

The Syrian's ears prick up and he turns around. "That's rig he announces, "this is my store. I'm the king of 7-11!"

He starts to laugh, and then we join in, and soon the wh store is giggling. And for a moment, the sound of our laugh drowns out even the drone of the refrigerators and the glar the fluorescent lights.

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