ALSO BY KHALED HOSSEINI

The Kite Runner

This book is dedicated to Haris and Farah, both the noor of my eyes, and to the women of Afghanistan.

PART ONE

1.

Ma-ri-am was fi-ve ye-ars old the first ti-me she he-ard the word ha-ra-mi

It hap-pe-ned on a Thurs-day. It must ha-ve, be-ca-use Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red that she had be-en rest-less and pre-oc-cu-pi-ed that day, the way she was only on Thurs-days, the day when Ja lil vi-si- ted her at the kol-ba. To pass the ti-me un-til the mo-ment that she wo-uld see him at last, cros-sing the knee-high grass in the cle-aring and wa-ving, Ma-ri-am had clim-bed a cha-ir and ta-ken down her mot-her's Chi-ne-se tea set. The tea set was the so-le re-lic that Ma-ri-am's mot-her, Na-na, had of her own mot-her, who had di-ed when Na-na was two. Na-na che-ris-hed each blue-and-whi-te por-ce-la-in pi-ece, the gra-ce-ful cur-ve of the pot's spo-ut, the hand-pa-in-ted fine-hes and chrysant-he- mums, the dra-gon on the su-gar bowl, me-ant to ward off evil.

It was this last pi-ece that slip-ped from Ma-ri-am's fin-gers, that fell to the wo-oden flo-or-bo-ards of the kol-ba and shat-te-red.

When Na-na saw the bowl, her fa-ce flus-hed red and her up-per lip shi-ve-red, and her eyes, both the lazy one and the go-od, set-tled on Ma-ri-am in a flat, unb-lin-king way. Na-na lo-oked so mad that Ma-ri-am fe-ared the jinn wo-uld en-ter her mot-her's body aga-in. But the jinn didn't co-me, not that ti-me. Ins-te-ad, Na-na grab-bed Ma-ri-am by the wrists, pul-led her clo-se, and, thro-ugh grit-ted te-eth, sa-id, "You are a clumsy lit-tle ha-ra-mi This is my re-ward for everyt-hing I've en-du-red An he-ir-lo-om-bre-aking, clumsy lit-tle ha-ra-mi."

At the ti-me, Ma-ri-am did not un-ders-tand. She did not know what this word ha-ra-mi-bas-tard -me-ant Nor was she old eno-ugh to ap-pre-ci-ate the inj-us-ti-ce, to see that it is the cre-ators of the ha-ra-mi who are cul-pab-le, not the ha-ra-mi, who-se only sin is be-ing born. Ma-ri-am did sur-mi-se, by the way Na-na sa-id the word, that it was an ugly, lo-ath-so-me thing to be aha-ra-mi, li-ke an
in-sect, li-ke the scur-ry-ing cock-ro-ac-hes Na-na was al-ways cur-sing and swe-eping out of the kol-ba.

La-ter, when she was ol-der, Ma-ri-am did un-ders-tand. It was the way Na-na ut-te-red the word-not so much sa-ying it as spit-ting it at her-that ma-de Ma-ri-am fe-el the full sting of it. She un-ders-to-od then what Na-na me-ant, that aha-ra-mi was an un-wan-ted thing; that she, Ma-ri-am, was an il-le-gi-ti-ma-te per-son who wo-uld ne-ver ha-ve le-gi-ti-ma-te cla-im to the things ot-her pe-op-le had, things such as lo-ve, fa-mily, ho-me, ac-cep-tan-ce.

Jalil ne-ver cal-led Ma-ri-am this na-me. Jalil sa-id she was his lit-tle flo-wer. He was fond of sit-ting her on his lap and tel-ling her sto-ri-es, li-ke the ti-me he told her that He-rat, the city whe-re Ma-ri-am was born, in 1959, had on-ce be-en the crad-le of Per-si-an cul-tu-re, the ho-me of wri-ters, pa-in-ters, and Su-fis.

"You co-uldn't stretch a leg he-re wit-ho-ut po-king a po-et in the ass," he la-ug-hed.

Jalil told her the story of Qu-e-en Ga-uhar Shad, who had ra-ised the fa-mo-us mi-na-rets as her lo-ving ode to He-rat back in the fif-te-enth cen-tury. He desc-ri-bed to her the gre-en whe-at fi-elds of He-rat, the orc-hards, the vi-nes preg-nant with plump gra-pes, the city's crow-ded, va-ul-ted ba-za-ars.

"The-re is a pis-tac-hio tree," Jalil sa-id one day, "and be-ne-ath it, Ma-ri-am jo, is bu-ri-ed no-ne ot-her than the gre-at po-et Jami." He le-aned in and whis-pe-red, "Jami li-ved over fi-ve hund-re-d ye-ars ago. He did. I to-ok you the-re on-ce, to the tree. You we-re lit-tle. You wo-uldn't re-mem-ber."

It was true. Ma-ri-am didn't re-mem-ber. And tho-ugh she wo-uld li-ve the first fif-te-en ye-ars of her li-fe wit-hin wal-king dis-tan-ce of He-rat, Ma-ri-am wo-uld ne-ver see this sto-ri-ed tree. She wo-uld ne-ver see the fa-mo-us mi-na-rets up close, and she wo-uld ne-ver pick fru-it from He-rat's orc-hards or stroll in its fi-elds of whe-at. But whe-ne-ver Jalil tal-ked li-ke this, Ma-ri-am wo-uld lis-ten with enc-hant-ment. She wo-uld qu-iver with pri-de to ha-ve a fat-her who knew such things.


Ma-ri-am wo-uld lis-ten du-ti-ful-ly to this. She ne-ver da-red say to Na-na how much she dis-li-ked her tal-king this way abo-ut Jalil. The truth was that aro-und Jalil, Ma-ri-am did not fe-el at all li-ke aha-ra-mi. For an ho-ur or two every Thurs-day, when Jalil ca-me to see her, all smi-les and gifts and en-de-ar-ments, Ma-ri-am felt de-ser-ving of all the be-a-uty and bo-un-ty that li-fe had to gi-ve. And, for this, Ma-ri-am lo-ved Jalil.
* * *

Even if she had to share him.
Jalil had three wives and nine children, all of whom were strangers to Mariam. He was one of Herat's wealthiest men. He owned a cinema, which Mariam had never seen, but at her insistence Jalil had described it to her, and so she knew that the façade was made of blue-and-tan terracotta tiles, that it had private balcony seats and a trellised ceiling. Double swinging doors opened into a tiled lobby, where posters of Hindi films were enclosed in glass displays. On Tuesdays, Jalil said one day, kids got free ice cream at the con-cessions stand.

Nana smiled demurely when he said this. She waited until he had left the kolba, before snickering and saying, "The children of strangers get ice cream. What do you get, Mariam? Stories of ice cream."

In addition to the cinema, Jalil owned land in Karokh, land in Farah, three carpet stores, a clothing shop, and a black 1956 Buick Roadmaster. He was one of Herat's best-connected men, friend of the mayor and the provincial governor. He had a cook, a driver, and three housekeepers.

Nana had been one of the housekeepers. Until her belly began to swell.
When that happened, Nana said, the collective gasp of Jalil's family sucked the air out of Herat. His in-laws swore blood would flow. The wives demanded that he throw her out. Nana's own father, who was a lowly stone carver in the nearby village of Gul Dam, disowned her. Disgraced, he packed his things and boarded a bus to Bran, never to be seen or heard from again.

"Sometimes," Nana said early one morning, as she was feeding the chickens outside the kolba, "I wish my father had had the stomach to sharpen one of his knives and do the honorable thing. It might have been better for me." She tossed another handful of seeds into the coop, paused, and looked at Mariam.
"Better for you too, maybe. It would have spared you the grief of knowing that you are what you are. But he was a coward, my father. He didn't have the dil, the heart, for it."

Jalil didn't have the dil either, Nana said, to do the ho-no-rab-le thing. To stand up to his family, to his wives and in-laws, and accept responsibility for what he had done. Instead, behind closed doors, a face-saving deal had quickly been struck. The next day, he had made her gather her few things from the servants' quarters, where she'd been living, and sent her off.

"You know what he told his wives by way of defense? That I forced myself on him. That it was my fault. Di-di? You see? This is what it means to be a woman in this world."
Na-na put down the bowl of chic-ken fe-ed. She lif-ten Ma-ri-am's chin with a fin-ger.

"Lo-ok at me, Ma-ri-am."

Re-luc-tantly, Ma-ri-am did.

Na-na sa-id, "Le-arn this now and le-arn it well, my da-ugh-ter: Li-ke a com-pass ne-ed-le that po-ints north, a man's ac-cu-sing fin-ger al-ways finds a wo-man. Al-ways. You re-mem-ber that, Ma-ri-am."

2.

To Jalil and his wi-ves, I was a po-ke-ro-ot. A mug-wort. You too. And you we-ren't even born yet."

"What's a mug-wort?" Ma-ri-am as- ked


Ma-ri-am frow- ned in-ter-nal-ly. Jalil didn't tre-at her as a we-ed. He ne-ver had. But Ma-ri-am tho-ught it wi-se to sup-press this pro-test.

"Unli-ke we-eds, I had to be rep-plan-ted, you see, gi-ven fo-od and wa-ter. On ac-co-unt of you. That was the de-al Jalil ma-de with his fa-mily."

Na-na sa-id she had re- fu-sed to li-ve in He-rat.

"For what? To watch him dri-ve hiskin-c-hi-ni wi-ves aro- und town all day?"

She sa-id she wo-uldn't li-ve in her fat-her's empty ho-use eit-her, in the vil-la-ge of Gul Da-man, which sat on a ste-ep hill two ki-lo-me-ters north of He-rat. She sa-id she wan-ted to li-ve so-mew-he-re re-mo- ved, de-tac-hed, whe-re ne-igh-bors wo-uldn't sta-re at her belly, po-int at her, snic-ker, or, wor-se yet, as-sa-ult her with in-sin-ce-re kind-nes-ses.

"And, be-li-eve me," Na-na sa-id, "it was a re-li-ef to yo-ur fat-her ha-ving me out of sight. It su-ited him just fi-ne."

It was Muh-sin, Jalil's el-dest son by his first wi-fe, Kha-di-ja, who sug-ges-ted the cle-ar-ing. It was on the outs-kirts of Gul Da-man. To get to it, one to-ok a rut- ted, up-hill dirt track that bran-c hed off the ma-in ro-ad bet-we-en He-rat and Gul Da-man. The track was flan-ked on eit-her si-de by knee-high grass and speck-les of whi-te and bright yel-low flo-wers. The track sna- ked up-hill and led to a flat fi-eld whe-re
pop-lars and cot-ton-wo-ods so-ared and wild bus-hes grew in clus-ters. From up the-re, one co-uld ma-ke out the tips of the rus-ted bla-des of Gul Da-man's wind-mill, on the left, and, on the right, all of He-rat spre-ad be-low. The path en-ded per-pen-di-cu-lar to a wi-de, tro-ut-fil-led stre-am, which rol-led down from the Sa-fid-koh mo-un-ta-ins sur-ro-un-ding Gul Da-man. Two hund-red yards upst-re-am, to-ward the mo-un-ta-ins, the-re was a cir-cu-lar gro-ve of we-eping wil-low tre-es. In the cen-ter, in the sha-de of the wil-lows, was the cle-ar-ing.

Jalil went the-re to ha-ve a lo-ok. When he ca-me b ack, Na-na sa-id, he so-un-ded li-ke a war-den brag-ging abo-ut the cle-an walls and shiny flo-ors of his pri-son. "And so, yo-ur fat-her bu-ilt us this rat-ho-le."

* * *

Na-na had al-most mar-ri-ed on-ce, when she was fif-te-en. The su-itor had be-en a boy from Shin-dand, a yo-ung pa-ra-ke-et sel-ler. Ma-ri-am knew the story from Na-na her-self, and, tho-ugh Na-na dis-mis-sed the epi-so-de, Ma-ri-am co-uld tell by the wist-ful light in her eyes that she had be-en happy. Per-haps for the only ti-me in her li-fe, du-ring tho-se days le-ading up to her wed-ding, Na-na had be-en ge-nu-inely happy.

As Na-na told the story, Ma-ri-am sat on her lap and pic-tu-red her mot-her be-ing fit-ted for a wed-ding dress. She ima-gi-ned her on hor-se-back, smi-ling shyly be-hind a ve-iled gre-en gown, her palms pa-in-ted red with hen-na, her ha-ir par-ted with sil-ver dust, the bra-ids held to-get-her by tree sap. She saw mu-si-ci-ans blo-wing the shah-nai flu-te and ban-ging ondo-hol drums, stre-et child-ren ho-oting and gi-ving cha-se.

Then, a we-ek be-fo-re the wed-ding da-te, aj-inn had en-te-red Na-na's body. This re-qu-ired no desc-rip-ti-on to Ma-ri-am. She had wit-nes-sed it eno-ugh ti-mes with her own eyes: Na-na col-lap-sing sud-denl y, her body tigh-te-ning, be-co-ming ri-gid, her eyes rol-ling back, her arms and legs sha-king as if so-met-hing we-re throt-ting her from the in-si-de, the froth at the cor-ners of her mo-uth, whi-te, so-me-ti-mes pink with blo-od. Then the drow-si-ness, the fri-ght-ening di-so-ri-en-ta-ti-on, the in-co-he-rent mumb-ling.

When the news re-ac-hed Shin-dand, the pa-ra-ke-et sel-ler's fa-mily cal-led off the wed-ding.

"They got spo-oked" was how Na-na put it.

The wed-ding dress was stas-hed away. Af-ter that, the-re we-re no mo-re su-itors.

* * *
In the clearing, Jalil and two of his sons, Far-had and Muh-sin, bu-ilt the small*kol-ba* where Ma-ri-am wo-uld li-ve the first fif-te-en ye-ars of her li-fe. They ra-ised it with sun-dri-ed bricks and plas-te-red it with mud and hand-fuls of straw. It had two sle-eping cots, a wo-oden tab-le, two stra-ight-bac-ked cha-irs, a win-dow, and shel-ves na-iled to the walls whe-re Na-na pla-ced clay pots and her be-lo-ved Chi-ne-se tea set. Jalil put in a new cast-iron sto-ve for the win-ter and stac-ked logs of chop-ped wo-od be-hind the*kol-ba* He ad-ded a tan-do-or out-si-de for ma-king bre-ad and a chic-ken co-op with a fen-ce aro-und it. He bro-ught a few she-ep, bu-ilt them a fe-eding tro-ugh. He had Far-had and Muh-sin dig a de-ep ho-le a hund-red yards out-si-de the circ-le of wil-lows and bu-ilt an out-ho-use over it.

Jalil co-uld ha-ve hi-red la-bo-rers to bu-ild the*kol-ba*. Na-na sa-id, but he didn't.
"His idea of pe-nan-ce."

***

LstNa-na'S ac-co-unt of the day that she ga-ve birth to Ma-ri-am, no one ca-me to help. It hap-pe-ned on a damp, over-cast day in the spring of 1959, she sa-id, the twenty-sixth ye-ar of King Za-hir Shah's mostly une-vent-ful forty-ye-ar re-ign. She sa-id that Jalil hadn't bot-he-red to sum-mon a doc-tor, or even a mid-wi-fe, even tho-ugh he knew that*the-j-inn* might en-ter her body and ca-use her to ha-ve one of her fits in the act of de-li-ve-ring. She lay all alo-ne on the*kol-ba's* flo-or, a kni-fe by her si-de, swe-at drenc-hing her body.

"When the pa-in got bad, I'd bi-te on a pil-low and scre-am in-to it un-til I was ho-ar-se. And still no one ca-me to wi-pe my fa-ce or gi-ve me a drink of wa-ter. And you, Ma-ri-am jo, you we-re in no rush. Al-most two days you ma-de me lay on that cold, hard flo-or. I didn't eat or sle-ep, all I did was push and pray that you wo-uld co-me out."

"I'm sorry, Na-na."

"I cut the cord bet-we-en us myself. That's why I had a kni-fe."

"I'm sorry."

Na-na al-ways ga-ve a slow, bur-de ned smi-le he-re, one of lin-ge-ring rec-ri-mi-na-ti-on or re-luc-tant for gi-ve-ness, Ma-ri-am co-uld ne-ver tell It did not oc-cur to yo-un-g Ma-ri-am to pon-der the un-fa-ir-ness of apo-lo-gi-zing for the man-ner of her own birth.

By the ti-me it*did* oc-cur to her, aro-und the ti-me she tur-ned ten, Ma-ri-am no lon-ger be-li-eved this story of her birth. She be-li-eved JaliPs ver-si-on, that tho-ugh he'd be-en away he'd ar-ran-ged for Na-na to be ta-ken to a hos-pi-tal in He-rat whe-re she had be-en ten-ded to by a doc-tor. She had la-in on a cle-an, pro-per bed in a
well-lit room. Jalil shook his head with sadness when Mariam told him about the knife.

Mariam also came to doubt that she had made her mother suffer for two full days.

"They told me it was all over within under an hour," Jalil said. "You were a good daughter, Mariam. Even in birth you were a good daughter."

"He wasn't even there!" Nana spat. "He was in Takht-e-Safar, horse-back riding with his precious friends."

When they informed him that he had a new daughter, Nana said, Jalil had shrugged, kept brushing his horse's mane, and stayed in Takht-e-Safar another two weeks.

"The truth is, he didn't even hold you until you were a month old. And then only to look down on you, comment on your longish face, and hand you back to me."

Mariam came to doubt this part of the story as well. Yes, Jalil admitted, he had been horse-back riding in Takht-e-Safar, but, when they gave him the news, he had not shrugged. He had hopped on the saddle and ridden back to Herat. He had bounced her in his arms, run his thumb over her flaky eyebrows, and hummed a lullaby. Mariam did not picture Jalil saying that her face was long, though it was true that it was long.

Nana said she was the one who'd picked the name Mariam because it had been the name of her mother. Jalil said he chose the name because Mariam, the tuberose, was a lovely flower.

"Your favorite?" Mariam asked.

"Well, one of," he said and smiled.

3.

One of Mariam's earliest memories was the sound of a wheelbarrow's squeaky iron wheels bouncing over rocks. The wheelbarrow came once a month, filled with rice, flour, tea, sugar, cooking oil, soap, toothpaste. It was pushed by two of Mariam's half brothers, usually Muh-sin and Ra-min, sometimes Ra-min and Far-had. Up the dirt track, over rocks and pebbles, around holes and bushes, the boys took turns pushing until they reached the stream. There, the wheelbarrow had to be emptied and the items hand-carried across the water. Then the boys would transfer the wheelbarrow across the stream and
lo-ad it up aga-in. Anot-her two hund-red yards of pus-hing fol-lo-wed, this ti-me thro-ugh tall, den-se grass and aro-und thic-kets of shrubs. Frogs le-aped out of the-ir way. The brot-hers wa-ved mos-qu-ito-es from the-ir swe-aty fa-ces.

"He has ser-vants," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "He co-uld send a ser-vant."

"His idea of pe-nan-ce," Na-na sa-id.

The so-und of the whe-el-bar-row drew Ma-ri-am and Na-na out-si-de. Ma-ri-am wo-uld al-ways re-men-ber Na-na the way she lo-oked on Ra-ti-on Day: a tall, bony, ba-re-fo-ot wo-man le-aning in the do-or-way, her lazy eye nar-ro-wed to a slit, arms cros-sed in a de-fi-ant and moc-king way. Her short-crop-ped, sun-lit ha-ir wo-uld be un-co-ve-red and un-com-bed. She wo-uld we-ar an ill-fit-ing gray shirt but-to-ned to the thro-at. The poc-kets we-re fil-led with wal-nut-si-zed rocks.

The boys sat by the stre-am and wa-ited as Ma-ri-am and Na-na trans-fer-red the ra-ti-ons to the kol-ba They knew bet-ter than to get any clo-ser than thirty yards, even tho-ugh Na-na's aim was po-or and most of the rocks lan-ded well short of the-ir tar-get-s. Na-na yel-led at the boys as she car-ri-ed bags of ri-ce in-si-de, and cal-led them na-mes Ma-ri-am didn't un-ders-ta nd. She cur-sed the-ir mot-hers, ma-de ha-te-ful fa-ces at them. The boys ne-ver re-tur-ned the in-sults.

Ma-ri-am felt sorry for the boys. How ti-red the-ir arms and legs must be, she thoUGHT pit-yingly, pus-hing that he-avy lo-ad. She wis-hed she we-re al-lo-wed to of-fer them wa-ter. But she sa-id not-hing, and if they wa-ved at her she didn't wa-ve back. On-ce, to ple-ase Na-na, Ma-ri-am even yel-led at Muh-sin, told him he had a mo-uth sha-ped li-ke a li-zard's ass-and was con-su-med la-ter with gu-ilt, sha-me, and fe-ar that they wo-uld tell Jalil. Na-na, tho-ugh, la-ug-hed so hard, her rot-ting front to-oth in full disp-lay, that Ma-ri-am tho-ught she wo-uld lap-se in-to one of her fits. She lo-oked at Ma-ri-am when she was do-ne and sa-id, "You're a go-od da-ugh-ter."

When the bar-row was empty, the boys scuf-fled back and pus-hed it away. Ma-ri-am wo-uld wa-it and watch them di-sap-pe-ar in-to the tall grass and flo-we-ring we-eds.

"Are you co-ming?"

"Yes, Na-na."

"They la-ug-h at you. They do. I he-ar them."

"I'm co-ming."

"You don't be-li-eve me?"

"He-re I am."
"You know I lo-ve you, Ma-ri-am jo."

* * *

In the mor-nings, they awo-ke to the dis-tant ble-ating of she-ep and the high-pitc-hed to-ot of a flu-te as Gul Da-man's shep-herds led the-ir flock to gra-ze on the grassy hil-Isi-de. Ma-ri-am and Na-na mil-ked the go-ats, fed the hens, and col-lec-ted eggs. They ma-de bre-ad to-get-her. Na-na sho-wed her how to kne-ad do-ugh, how to kind-le the tan-do-or and slap the flat-te-ned do-ugh on-to its in-ner walls. Na-na taught her to sew too, and to co-ok ri-ce and all the dif-fe-rent top-pings: shal-qam stew with tur-nip, spi-nach sab-zi, ca-ulif-lo-wer with gin-ger.

Na-na ma-de no sec-ret of her dis-li-ke for vi-si-tors-and, in fact, pe-op-le in ge-ne-ral but she ma-de ex-cep-ti-ons for a se-lect few. And so the-re was Gul Da-man's le-ader, the vil-la-ge ar-bab, Ha-bib Khan, a small-he-aded, be-ar-ded man with a lar-ge belly who ca-me by on-ce a month or so, ta-iled by a ser-vant, who car-ri-ed a chic-ken, so-me-ti-mes a pot of kic-hi-ri ri-ce, or a bas-ket of dyed eggs, for Ma-ri-am.

Then the-re was a ro-tund, old wo-man that Na-na cal-led Bi-bi jo, who-se la-te hus-band had be-en a sto-ne car-ver and fri-ends with Na-na's fat-her. Bi-bi jo was in-va-ri-ably ac-com-pa-ni-ed by one of her six bri-des and a grand-cild or two. She lim-ped and huf-fed her way ac-ross the cle-ar-ing and ma-de a gre-at show of rub-bing her hip and lo-ween her-self, with a pa-ined sigh, on-to the cha-ir that Na-na pul-led up for her. Bi-bi jo too al-ways bro-ught Ma-ri-am so-meth-ing, a box of dis-h-le-meh candy, a bas-ket of qu-in-ces. For Na-na, she first bro-ught comp-la-ints abo-ut her fa-iling he-alth, and then gos-sip from He-rat and Gul Da-man, de-li-ve-red at length and with gus-to, as her da-ugh-ter-in-law sat-tis-tis-ning qu-i-etly and du-ti-ful-ly be-hind her.

But Ma-ri-am's fa-vo-ri-te, ot-her than Jalil of co-ur-se, was Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah, the el-derly vil-la-ge Ko-ran tu-tor, its ak-hund He ca-me by on-ce or twi-ce a we-ek from Gul Da-man to te-ach Ma-ri-am the fi-ve daily na-maz pra-yers and tu-tor her in Ko-ran re-ci-ta-ti-on, just as he had taught Na-na when she'd be-en a lit-tle girl It was Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah who had taught Ma-ri-am to re-ad, who had pa-ti-ently lo-oked over her sho-ul-der as her lips wor-ked the words so-und-les-sly, her in-dex fin-ger lin-ge-ring be-ne-ath each word, pres-ing un-til the na-il bed went whi-te, as tho-ugh she co-uld squ-e-eze the me-an-ing out of the sym-bols. It was Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah who had held her hand, gu-ided the pen-cil in it along the ri-se of each a-tuf, the cur-ve of each keh, the three dots of each sheh.

He was a ga-unt, sto-op-ing old man with a to-oth-less smi-le and a whi-te be-ar-d that drop-ped to his na-vel. Usu-al-ly, he ca-me alo-ne to the-kol-ba, tho-ugg so-me-ti-mes with his rus-set-ha-ried son Ham-za, who was a few ye-ar-der than Ma-ri-am.
When he showed up at the kol-ba, Ma-ri-am kissed Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah's hand—which felt like kissing a set of twigs co-ve-red with a thin la-yer of skin—and he kis-sed the top of her brow be-fo-re they sat in-si-de for the day's les-son. Af-ter, the two of them sat out-si-de the kol-ba, ate pi-ne nuts and sip-ped gre-en tea, watc-hed the bul-bul birds dar-ting from tree to tree. So-me-ti-mes they went for walks among the bron-ze fal-len le-aves and al-der bus-hes, along the stre-am and to-ward the mo-un-ta-ins. Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah twir-led the be-ads of his tas-beh ros-ar-y as they strol-led, and, in his qu-ive-ring vo-ice, told Ma-ri-am sto-ri-es of all the things he'd se-en in his yo-uth, li-ke the two-he-aded sna-ke he'd fo-und in Iran, on Is-fa-han's Thirty-three Arch Brid-ge, or the wa-ter-me-lon he had split on-ge out-si-de the Blue Mos-que in Ma-zar, to find the se-eds for-ming the words Al-lah on one half, Ak-bar on the ot-her.

Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah ad-mit-ted to Ma-ri-am that, at ti-mes, he did not un-ders-tand the me-an-ing of the Ko-ran's words. But he sa-id he li-ked the enc-han-ting so-unds the Ara-bic words ma-de as they rol-led o ff his ton-gue. He sa-id they com-for-ted him, eased his he-art.

"They'll com-fort you too, Ma-ri-am jo," he sa-id. "You can sum-mon them in yo-ur ti-me of ne-ed, and they won't fa-il you. God's words will ne-ver bet-ray you, my girl"

Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah lis-te-ned to sto-ri-es as well as he told them. When Ma-ri-am spo-ke, his at-ten-ti-on ne-ver wa-ve-red He nod-ded slowly and smi-led with a lo-ok of gra-ti-tu-de, as if he had be-en gran-ted a co-ve-ted pri-vi-le-ge. It was easy to tell Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah things that Ma-ri-am didn't da-re tell Na-na.

One day, as they we-re wal-king, Ma-ri-am told him that she wis-hed she wo-ul'd be al-lo-wed to go to scho-ol.

"I me-an a re-al scho-ol, ak-hund sa-hib. Li-ke in a clas-sro-om. Li-ke my fat-her's ot-her kids."

Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah stop-ped.

The we-ek be-fo-re, Bi-bi jo had bro-ught news that Jalil's da-ugh-ters Sa-ideh and Na-he-ed we- re go-ing to the Meh-ri Scho-ol for girls in He-rat. Sin-ce then, thoug-hts of clas-sro-oms and te-ac-hers had rat-tled aro-und Ma-ri-am's he-ad, ima-ges of no-te-bo-oks with li-ned pa-ges, co-lumns of num-bers, and pens that ma-de dark, he-avy marks. She pic-tu-red her-self in a clas-sro-om with ot-her girls her age. Ma-ri-am lon-ged to pla-ce a ru-ler on a pa-ge and draw im-por-tant lo-oking li-nes.

"Is that what you want?" Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah sa-id, lo-oking at her with his soft, wa-tery eyes, his hands be-hind his sto-oping back, the sha-dow of his tur-ban fal-ling on a patch of brist-ling but-ter-cups.

'Yes.

"And you want me to ask yo-ur mot-her for per-mis-si-on."
Ma-ri-am smi-led. Ot-her than Jalil, she tho-ught the-re was no one in the world who un-ders-to-od her bet-ter than her old tu-tor.

"Then what can I do? God, in His wis-dom, has gi-ven us each we-ak-nes-ses, and fo-re-most among my many is that I am po-wer-less to re-fu-se you, Ma-ri-am jo," he sa-id, tap-ping her che-ek with one arth-ri-tic fin-ger.

But la-ter, when he bro-ac-hed Na-na, she drop-ped the kni-fe with which she was sli-cing oni-ons. "What for?"

"If the girl wants to le-arn, let her, my de-ar. Let the girl ha-ve an edu-ca-ti-on."

"Le-arn? Le-arn what, Mul-lah sa-hib?" Na-na sa-id sharp-ly. "What is the-re to le-arn?"

She snap-ped her eyes to-ward Ma-ri-am.

Ma-ri-am lo-oked down at her hands.

"What's the sen-se scho-ling a girl li-ke you? It's li-ke shi-ning a spit-to-on. And you'll le-arn not-hing of va-lue in tho-se scho-ols. The-re is only one, only one skill a wo-man li-ke you and me ne-eds in li-fe, and they don't te-ach it in scho-ol. Lo-ok at me."

"You sho-uld not spe-ak li-ke this to her, my child," Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah sa-id.

"Lo-ok at me."

Ma-ri-am did.

"Only one skill And it's this:iaha-muL En-du-re."

"Endu-re what, Na-na?"

"Oh, don't you fret abo-ut that, " Na-na sa-id. "The-re won't be any shor-ta-ge of things."

She went on to say how Mil's wi-ves had cal-led her an ugly, lowly sto-ne car-ver's da-ugh-ter. How they'd ma-de her wash la-undry out-si-de in the cold un-til her fa-ce went numb and her fin-ger-tips bur-ned.

"It's our lot in li-fe, Ma-ri-am. Wo-men li-ke us. We en-du-re. It's all we ha-ve. Do you un-ders-tand? Be-si-des, they'll la-ugh at you in scho-ol. They will. They'll call youha-ra-mi! They'll say the most ter-rib-le things abo-ut you. I won't ha-ve it."

Ma-ri-am nod-ded.
"And no more talk about school. You're all I have. I won't lose you to them. Look at me. No more talk about school."

"Be reasonable, Co-me now. If the girl wants--" Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah be-gan.

"And you, ak-hund sa-hib, with all due res-pect, you sho-uld know bet-ter than to en-co-ura-ge the-se fo-olish ide-as of hers. If you re-al-ly ca-re abo-ut her, then you ma-ke her see that she be-longs he-re at ho-me with her mot-her. The-reis not-hing out the-re for her. Not-hing but re-j-ec-ti-on and he-ar-tac-he. I know, ak-hund sa-hib. I know." 

4.

Ma-ri-am lo-ved ha-ving vi-si-tors at the kol-ba. The vil-la-ge ar-bab and his gifts, Bi-bi jo and her ac-hing hip and end-less gos-si-ping, and, of co-ur-se, Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah. But the-re was no one, no one, that Ma-ri-am lon-ged to see mo-re than Jalil.

The an-xi-ety set in on Tu-es-day nights. Ma-ri-am wo-uld sle-ep po-or-ly, fret-ting that so-me bu-si-ness en-tang-le-ment wo-uld pre-vent Jalil from co-ming on Thurs-day, that she wo-uld ha-ve to wa-it a who-le ot-her we-ek to see him. On Wed-nes-days, she pa-ced out-si-de, aro-und the kol-ba, tos-sed chic-ken fe-ed ab-sent-min-dedly in-to the co-op. She went for aim-less walks, pic-king pe-tals from flo-wers and bat-ting at the mos-quito-es nib-ling on her arms. Fi-nal-ly, on Thurs-days, all she co-uld do was sit aga-inst a wall, eyes glu-ed to the stre-am, and wa-it. If Jalil was run-ning la-te, a ter-rib -le dre-ad fil-led her bit by bit. Her kne-es wo-uld we-aken, and she wo-uld ha-ve to go so-mew-he-re and lie down.

Then Na-na wo-uld call, "And the-re he is, yo-ur fat-her. In all his glory."

Ma-ri-am wo-uld le-ap to her fe-et when she spot-ted him hop-ping sto-nes ac-ross the stre-am, all smi-les and he-arty wa-ves. Ma-ri-am knew that Na-na was watc-hing her, ga-uging her re-ac-ti-on, and it al-ways to-ok ef-fort to stay in the do-or-way, to wa-it, to watch him slowly ma-ke his way to her, to not run to him. She rest-ra-ined her-self, pa-ti-ently watc-hed him walk thro-ugh the tall grass, his su-it jac-ket slung over his sho-ul-der, the bre-eze lif-ting his red neck-tie.

When Jalil en-te-red the cle-ar-ing, he wo-uld throw his jac-ket on the tan-do-or and open his arms. Ma-ri-am wo-uld walk, then fi-nal-ly run, to him, and he wo-uld catch her un-der the arms and toss her up high. Ma-ri-am wo-uld squ-e-al.

Sus-pen-ded in the air, Ma-ri-am wo-uld see Jalil's up-tur-ned fa-ce be-low her, his wi-de, cro-oked smi-le, his wi-dow's pe-ak, his cleft chin-a per-fect poc-ket for the tip
of her pin-kie-his te-eth, the whi-test in a town of rot-ting mo-lars. She li-ked his trim-med mus-tac-he, and she li-ked that no mat-ter the we-at-he he al-ways wo-re a su-it on his vi-sits-dark brown, his fa-vo-ri-te co-lor, with the whi-te tri-ang-le of a hand-kerc-hi-ef in the bre-ast poc-ket-and cuff links too, and a tie, usu-al-ly red, which he left lo-ose-ned Ma-ri-am co-uld see her-self too, ref-lec-ted in the brown of Jalil's eyes: her ha-ir bil-lo-wing, her fa-ce bla-zing with ex-ci-te-ment, the sky be-hind her.

Na-na sa-id that one of the-se days he wo-uld miss, that she, Ma-ri-am, wo-uld slip through his fin-gers, hit the gro-und, and bre-ak a bo-ne. But Ma-ri-am did not be-li-eve that Jalil wo-uld drop her. She be-li-eved that she wo-uld al-ways land sa-fely in-to her fat-her's cle-an, well-ma-ni-cu-red hands.

They sat out-si-de the kol-ba, in the sha-de, and Na-na ser-ved them tea. Jalil and she ack-now-led-ged each ot-her with an une-a sy smi-le and a nod. Jalil ne-ver bro-ught up Na-na's rock thro-wing or her cur-sing.

Des-pi-te her rants aga-inst him when he wasn't aro-und, Na-na was sub-du-ed and man-ner-ly when Jalil vi-si-ted. Her ha-ir was al-ways was-hed. She brus-hed her te-eth, wo-re her besthi-j-ab for him. She sat qu-i-etly on a cha-ir ac-ross from him, hands fol-ded on her lap. She did not lo-ok at him di-rectly and ne-ver used co-ar-se lan-gu-age aro-und him. When she la-ug-hed, she co-ve-red her mo-uth with a fist to hi-de the bad to-oth.

Na-na as-ked abo-ut his bu-si-nes-ses. And his wi-ves too. When she told him that she had he-ar-d, thro-ugh Bi-bi jo, that his yo-un-gest wi-fe, Nar-gis, was ex-pec-ting her third child, Jalil smi-led co-ur-te-o-usly and nod-ded.

"Well. You must be happy," Na-na sa-id. "How many is that for you, now? Ten, is it, mas-hal-lah? Ten?"

Jalil sa-id yes, ten.

"Ele-ven, if you co-unt Ma-ri-am, of co-ur-se."

La-ter, af-ter Jalil went ho-me, Ma-ri-am and Na-na had a small fight abo-ut this. Ma-ri-am sa-id she had tric-ked him.

After tea with Na-na, Ma-ri-am and Jalil al-ways went fis-hing in the stre-am. He sho-ved her how to cast her li-ne, how to re-el in the tro-ut. He ta-ught her the pro-per way to gut a tro-ut, to cle-an it, to lift the me-at off the bo-ne in one mo-ti-on. He drew pic-tu-res for her as they wa-ited for a stri-ke, sho-ved her how to draw an elep-hant in one stro-ke wit-ho-ut ever lif-ting the pen off the pa-per. He ta-ught her rhymes. To-get-her they sang:
Li-li Mi bird-bath, Sit-ting on a dirt path, Min-now sat on the rim and drank, Slip-ped, and in the wa-ter she sank

Jalil bro-ught clip-pings from He-rat's news-pa-per, Li-i-ifaaq-i Is-lam, and re-ad from them to her. He was Ma-ri-am's link, her pro-of that the-re exis-ted a world at lar-ge, be-yond the kol-ba, be-yond Gul Da-man and He-rat too, a world of pre-si-dents with unp-ro-no-un-ce-ab-le na-mes, and tra-ins and mu-se-ums and soc-cer, and roc-kets that or-bi-ted the earth and lan-ded on the mo-on, and, every Thurs-day, Jalil bro-ught a pi-ece of that world with him to the kol-ba.

He was the one who told her in the sum-mer of 1973, when Ma-ri-am was fo-ur-te-en, that King Za-hir Shah, who had ru-led from Ka-bul for forty ye-ars, had be-en overth-rown in a blo-od-less co-up.

"His co-usin Da-o-ud Khan did it whi-le the king was in Italy get-ting me-di-cal tre-at-ment- You re-mem-ber Da-o-ud Khan, right? I told you abo-ut him. He was pri-me mi-nis-ter in Ka-bul when you we-re bom. Any-way, Afg-ha-nis-tan is no lon-ger a mo-narchy, Ma-ri-am. You see, it's a re-pub-lic now, and Da-o-ud Khan is the pre-si-dent. The-re are ru-mors that the so-ci-alists in Ka-bul hel-ped him ta-ke po-wer. Not that he's a so-ci-alist him-self, mind you, but that they hel-ped him. That's the ru-mor any-way."

Ma-ri-am as-ka-d him what a so-ci-alist was and Jalil be-gan to ex-plain, but Ma-ri-am ba-rely he-ar-d him.

"Are you lis-te-ning?"

"I am."

He saw her lo-ok-ing at the bul-ge in his co-at's si-de poc-ket. "Ah. Of co-ur-se. Well. He-re, then. Wit-ho-ut furt-her ado…"

He fis-hed a small box from his poc-ket and ga-ve it to her. He did this from ti-me to ti-me, bring her small pre-sents. A car-ne-li-an bra-ce-let cuff one ti-me, a cho-ker with la-pis la-zu-li be-ads anot-her. That day, Ma-ri-am ope-ned the box and fo-und a le-af-sha-ped pen-dant, tiny co-ins etc-hed with mo-ons and stars han-ging from it.

"Try it on, Ma-ri-am jo."

She did. "What do you think?"

Jalil be-amed "I think you lo-ok li-ke a qu-e-en."
After he left, Na-na saw the pendant around Mariam's neck.
"No-mad jewelry," she said. "I've seen them make it. They melt the coins people throw at them and make jewelry. Let's see him bring you gold next time, your precious father. Let's see him."

When it was time for Jalil to leave, Mariam always stood in the doorway and watched him exit the clearing, deflated at the thought of the week that stood, like an immense, immovable object, between her and his next visit. Mariam always held her breath as she watched him go. She held her breath and, in her head, counted seconds. She pretended that for each second that she didn't breathe, God would grant her another day with Jalil.

At night, Mariam lay in her cot and wondered what his house in Herat was like. She wondered what it would be like to live with him, to see him every day. She pictured herself handing him a towel as he shaved, telling him when he nipped himself. She would brew tea for him. She would sew on his missing buttons. They would take walks in Herat together, in the vaulted bazaar where Jalil said you could find anything you wanted. They would ride in his car, and people would point and say, "There goes Jalil Khan with his daughter." He would show her the famed tree that had a poet buried beneath it.

One day soon, Mariam decided, she would tell Jalil these things. And when he heard, when he saw how much she missed him when he was gone, he would surely take her with him. He would bring her to Herat, to live in his house, just like his other children.

5.

"I know what I want," Mariam said to Jalil.
It was the spring of 1974, the year Mariam turned fifteen. The three of them were sitting outside the kolba, in a patch of shade thrown by the willows, on folding chairs arranged in a triangle.
"For my birthday... I know what I want."

"You do?" said Jalil, smiling en-co-ura-gingly.

Two we eks be-for-e, at Mariam's prod-ding, Jalil had let on that an Ame-ri-can film was pla-ying at his ci-ne-ma. It was a spe-ci-al kind of film, what he'd called a car-to-on. The en-tire film was a se-ri-es of dra-wings, he said, thou-sands of them, so that when they were made into a film and pro-jec-ted on-to a scre-en you had the il-lu-sion that the dra-wings were mo-v ing. Jalil said the film told the story of an old, child-less toy-ma-ker who is lo-nely and des-pe-ra-tely wants a son. So he car-ves a pup-pet, a boy, who ma-gi-cal-ly co-mes to li-fe. Mariam had as- ked him
to tell her mo-re, and Jalil sa-id that the old man and his pup-pet had all sorts of ad-ven-tu-res, that the-re was a pla-ce cal-led Ple-asu-re Is-land, and bad boys who tur ned in-to don-keys. They even got swal-lo-wed by a wha-le at the end, the pup-pet and his fat-her. Ma-ri-am had told Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah all abo-ut this film.

"I want you to ta-ke me to yo-ur ci-ne-ma," Ma-ri-am sa-id now. "I want to see the car-to-on. I want to see the pup-pet boy."

With this, Ma-ri-am sen-sed a shift in the at-mosp-he-re. Her pa-rents stir-red in the-ir se-ats. Ma-ri-am co-uld fe-el them exc-han-ging lo-oks.

"That's not a go-od idea," sa-id Na-na. Her vo-ice was calm, had the cont-rol-led, po-li-te to-ne she used aro-und Jalil, but Ma-ri-am co-uld fe-el her hard, ac-cu-sing gla-re.

Jalil shif-ten on his cha-ir. He co-ug-hed, cle-ared his thro-at.

"You know," he sa-id, "the pic-tu-re qu-al-ity isn't that go-od. Ne-it-her is the so-und.
And the pro-j-ec-tor's be-en mal-func-ti-oning re-cently. May-be yo-ur mot-her is right. May-be you can think of anot-her pre-sent, Ma-ri-am jo."


* * *

But la-ter, at the stre-am, Ma-ri-am sa-id, "Ta-ke me."

"I'll tell you what," Jalil sa-id. "I'll send so-me-one to pick you up and ta-ke you. I'll ma-ke su-re they get you a go-od se-at and all the candy you want."

"Nay. I want you to ta-ke me."

"Ma-ri-am jo-"

"And I want you to in-vi-te my brot-hers and sis-ters too. I want to me-et them. I want us all to go, to-get-her. It's what I want."

Jalil sig-hed. He was lo-oking away, to-ward the mo-un-ta-ins.

Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red him tel-ling her that on the scre-en a hu-man fa-ce lo-oked as big as a ho-use, that when a car cras-hed up the-re you felt the me-tal twis-ting in yo-ur bo-nes. She pic-tu-red her-self sit-ting in the pri-va-t e bal-cony se-ats, lap-ping at ice cre-am, along-si-de her sib-lings and Jalil. "It's what I want," she sa-id.

Jalil lo-oked at her with a for-lorn exp-res-si-on.
"To-mor-row. At no-on. I'll me-et you at this very spot. All right? To-mor-row?"
"Co-me he-re," he sa-id. He hun-ke-red down, pul-led her to him, and held her for a long, long ti-me.

***

At first. Na-na pa-ced aro-und the kol-ba, clen-c-hing and unc-lenc-hing her fists.
"Of all the da-ugh-ters I co-uld ha-ve had, why did God gi-ve me an ung-ra-te-ful one li-ke you? Everyt-hing I en-du-red for you! How da-re you! How da-re you aban-don me li-ke this, you tre-ac-he-ro-us lit-tle ha-ra-mil"
Then she moc-ked.

"What a stu-pid girl you are! You think you mat-ter to him, that you're wan-ted in his ho-use? You think you're a da-ugh-ter to him? That he's go-ing to ta-ke you in? Let me tell you so-met-hing- A man's he-art is a wretc-hed, wretc-hed thing, Ma-ri-am. It isn't li-ke a mot-her's womb. It won't ble-ed, it won't stretch to ma-ke ro-om for you. I'm the only one who lo-ves you. I'm all you ha-ve in this world, Ma-ri-am, and when I'm go-ne you'll ha-ve not-hing. You'll ha-ve not-hing. Youare not-hing!"
Then she tri-ed gu-ilt.

"I'll die if you go. The jinn will co-me, and I'll ha-ve one of my fits. You'll see, I'll swal-low my ton-gue and die. Don't le-ave me, Ma-ri-am jo. Ple-ase stay. I'll die if you go."

Ma-ri-am sa-id not-hing.

"You know I lo-ve you, Ma-ri-am jo."

Ma-ri-am sa-id she was go-ing for a walk.

She fe-ared she might say hurt-ful things if she sta-yed: that she knew the jinn was a lie, that Jalil had told her that what Na-na had was a di-se-ase with a na-me and that pills co-uld ma-ke it bet-ter. She might ha-ve as-ked Na-na why she re-fu-sed to see Jalil's doc-tors, as he had in-sis-ted she do, why she wo-uld'n't ta-ke the pills he'd bo-u-ght for her. If she co-uld ar-ti-cu-la-te it, she might ha-ve sa-id to Na-na that she was ti-red of be-ing an inst-ru-ment, of be-ing li-ed to, la-id cla-im to, used. That she was sick of Na-na twist-ing the truths of the-ir li-fe and ma-king her, Ma-ri-am, anot-her of her gri-evan-ces aga-inst the world.

You're af-ra-id, Na-na, she might ha-ve sa-id. You're af-ra-id that I might find the hap-pi-ness you ne-ver had. And you don 'i want me to be happy. You don't want a go-od li-fe for me. You're the one with the wretc-hed he-art

***

19
The-re was A lo-oko-ut, on the ed-ge of the cle-aring, whe-re Ma-ri-am li-ked to go. She sat the-re now, on dry, warm grass. He-rat was vi-sib-le from he-re, spre-ad be-low her li-ke a child's bo-ard ga-me: the Wo-men's Gar-den to the north of the city, Char-suq Ba-za-ar and the ru-ins of Ale-xan-der the Gre-at's old ci-ta-del to the so-uth. She co-uld ma-ke out the mi-na-rets in the dis-tan-ce, li-ke the dusty fin-gers of gi-ants, and the stre-ets that she ima-gi-ned we-re mil-ling with pe-op-le, carts, mu-les. She saw swal-lows swo-oping and circ-ling over-he-ad. She was en-vi-o-us of the-se birds. They had be-en to He-rat. They had flown over its mos-qu-es, its ba-za-ars. May-be they had lan-ded on the walls of Jalil's ho-me, on the front steps of his ci-ne-ma.

She pic-ked up ten peb-bles and ar-ran-ged them ver-ti-cal-ly, in three co-lumns. This was a ga-me that she pla-yed pri-va-tely from ti-me to ti-me when Na-na wasn't lo-oking. She put fo-ur peb-bles in the fiirst co-lumn, for Kha-di-ja's child-ren, three for Af-so-on's, and three in the third co-lumn for Nar-gis's child-ren. Then she ad-ded a fo-urth co-lumn. A so-li-tary, ele-venth peb-ble.

** * * *

The next mor-ning, Ma-ri-am wo-re a cre-am-co-lo-red dress that fell to her kne-es, cot-ton tro-users, and a gre-en hi-jab over her ha-ir. She ago-ni-zed a bit over the hi-jab, its be-ing gre-en and not matc-hing the dress, but it wo-uld ha-ve to do-moths had eaten ho-les in-to her whi-te one.

She chec-ked the clock. It was an old hand-wo-und clock with black num-bers on a mint gre-en fa-ce, a pre-sent from Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah. It was ni-ne o'clock. She won-de-red whe-re Na-na was. She tho-ught abo-ut go-ing out-si-de and lo-oking for her, but she dre-added the conf-ron-ta-tion, the ag-gri -eved lo-oks. Na-na wo-uld ac-cu-se her of bet-ra-yal. She wo-uld mock her for her mis-ta-ken am-bi-tions.

Ma-ri-am sat down. She tri-ed to ma-ke ti-me pass by dra-wing an elep-hant in one stro-ke, the way Jalil had shown her, over and over. She be-ca-me stiff from all the sit-ting but wo-uldn't lie down for fe-ar that her dress wo-uldn't wrin-kle.

When the hands fi-nal-ly sho-wed ele-ven-thirty, Ma-ri-am poc-ke-ted the ele-ven peb-bles and went out-si-de. On her way to the stre-am, she saw Na-na sit-ting on a cha-ir, in the sha-de, be-ne-ath the do-med ro-of of a we-eping wil-low. Ma-ri-am co-uldn't tell whet-her Na-na saw her or not.

At the stre-am, Ma-ri-am wa-ited by the spot they had ag-re-ed on the day be-fo-re. In the sky, a few gray, ca-ulif-lo-wer-sha-ped clo-uds drif- ted by. Jalil had ta-ught her that gray clo-uds got the-ir co-lor by be-ing so den-se that the-ir top parts ab-sor-bed
the sun-light and cast the-ir own sha-dow along the ba-se.*That's what you see,* Ma-ri-am jo, he had sa-id,*the dark in the-ir un-der-bel-ly.*

So-me ti-me pas-sed.

Ma-ri-am went back to the kol-ba This ti-me, she wal-ked aro-und the west-fa-cing pe-rip-hery of the cle-aring so she wo-uldn't ha-ve to pass by Na-na. She chec-ked the clock. It was al-most one o'clock.

*He's a bu-si-nes-sman,* Ma-ri-am tho-ught. *So-met-hing has co-me up.*

She went back to the stre-am and wa-ited aw-hi-le lon-ger. Black-birds circ-led over-he-ad, dip-ped in-to the grass so-mew-he-re. She wate-hed a ca-ter-pil-lar inc-hing along the fo-ot of an im-ma-tu-re thist-le.

She wa-ited un-til her legs we-re stiff. This ti-me, she did not go back to the kol-ba She rol-led up the legs of her tro-users to the kne-es, cros-sed the stre-am, and, for the first ti-me in her li-fe, he-aded down the hill for He-rat.

* * *

Na-na was ＂wrong abo-ut He-rat too. No one po-in-ted. No one la-ug-hed. Ma-ri-am wal-ked along no-isy, crow-ded, cypress-li-ned bo-ule-vards, amid a ste-ady stre-am of pe-de-stri-ans, bicyc-le ri-ders, and mu-le-drawng a ris, and no one threw a rock at her. No one cal-led her aha-ra-mi. Hardly an-yo-ne even lo-oked at her. She was, unex-pec-tedly, mar-ve-lously, an or-di-nary per-son he-re.

For a whi-le, Ma-ri-am sto-od by an oval-sha-ped po-ol in the cen-ter of a big park whe-re pe-ble paths cris-scros-sed. With won-der, she ran her fin-gers over the be-a-uti-ful marb-le hor-ses that sto-od along the ed-ge of the po-ol and ga-zed down at the wa-ter with opa-que eyes. She spi-ed on a clus-ter of boys who we-re set-ting sa-il to pa-per ships. Ma-ri-am saw flo-wers everyw-he-re, tu-lips, li-li-es, pe-tu-ni-as, the-ir pe-tals awash in sun-light. Pe-op-le wal-ked along the paths, sat on benc-hes and sip-ped tea.

Ma-ri-am co-uld hardly be-li-eve that she was he-re. Her he-art was bat-te-ring with ex-ci-te-ment. She wis-hed Mul-lah Fa-izu l-lah co-uld see her now. How da-ring he wo-uld find her. How bra-ve! She ga-ve her-self over to the new li-fe that awa-ited her in this city, a li-fe with a fat-her, with sis-ters and brot-hers, a li-fe in which she wo-uld lo-ve and be lo-ved back, wit-ho-ut re-ser-va-ti-on or agen-da, wit-ho-ut sha-me.

Sprightly, she wal-ked back to the wi-de tho-ro-ugh-fa-re ne-ar the park. She pas-sed old ven-dors with le-at-hery fa-ces sit-ting un-der the sha-de of pla-ne tre-es, ga-zing
at her im-pas-si-vely be-hind pyra-mids of cher-ri-es and mo-unds of gra-pes. Ba-re-fo-ot boys ga-ve cha-se to cars and bu-ses, wa-ving bags of qu-in-ces. Ma-ri-am sto-od at a stre-et cor-ner and watc-hed the pas-sersby, unab-le to un-ders-tand how they co-uld be so in-dif-fe-rent to the mar-vels aro-und them.

After a whi-le, she wor-ked up the ner-ve to ask the el-derly ow-ner of a hor-se-drawn ga-ri if he knew whe-re Jalil, the ci-ne-ma's ow-ner, li-ved. The old man had plump che-eks and wo-re a ra-in-bow-stri-ped cha-pan. "You're not from He-rat, are you?" he sa-id com-pa-ni-onably. "Ever-yo-ne knows whe-re Jalil Khan li-ves."

"Can you po-int me?"

He ope-ned a fo-il-wrap-ped tof-fee and sa-id, "Are you alo-ne?"

"Yes."

"Climb on. I'll ta-ke you."

"I can't pay you. I don't ha-ve any mo-ney."

He ga-ve her the tof-fee. He sa-id he hadn't had a ri-de in two ho-urs and he was plan-ning on go-ing ho-me any-way. Jalil's ho-use was on the way.

Ma-ri-am clim-bed on-to the ga-ri. They ro-de in si-len-ce, si-de by si-de. On the way the-re, Ma-ri-am saw herb shops, and open-fron-ted cub-byho-les whe-re shop-pers boUGHT oran-ges and pe-ars, bo-oks, shawls, even fal-cons. Child-ren pla-yed marb-les in circ-les drawn in dust. Out-si-de te-aho-uses, on car-pet-co-ve-red wo-oden plat-forms, men drank tea and smo-ked to-bac-co from ho-okahs.

The old man tur-ned on-to a wi-de, co-ni-fer-li-ned stre-et. He bro-ught his hor-se to a stop at the mid-way po-int.

"The-re. Lo-oks li-ke you're in luck, dok-hi-arjo. That's his car."

Ma-ri-am hop-ped down. He smi-led and ro-de on.

* * *

Ma-ri-am had ne-ver be-fo-re to-uc-hed a car. She ran her fin-gers along the ho-od of Jalil's car, which was black, shiny, with glit-te-ring whe-eels in which Ma-ri-am saw a flat-te-ned, wi-de-ned ver-si-on of her-self. The se-ats we-re ma-de of whi-te le-ather. Be-hind the ste-ering whe-el, Ma-ri-am saw ro-und glass pa-nels with ne-ed-les be-hind them.

For a mo-ment, Ma-ri-am he-ard Na-na's vo-ice in her he-ad, moc-king, do-using the de-ep se-ated glow of her ho-pes. With shaky legs, Ma-ri-am ap-pro-ac-hed the front
do-or of the ho-use. She put her hands on the walls. They we-re so tall, so fo-re-bo-ding, Jalil's walls. She had to cra-ne her neck to see whe-re the tops of cypress tre-es prot-ru-ded over them from the ot-her si-de. The tre-etops swa-yed in the bre-eze, and she ima-gi-ned they we-re nod-ding the-ir wel-co-me to her. Ma-ri-am ste-adi-ed her-self aga-inst the wa-ves of dis-may pas-sing thro-ugh her.

A ba-re-fo-ot yo-ung wo-man ope-ned the do-or. She had a tat-too un-der her lo-wer lip.

"I'm he-re to see Jalil Khan. I'm Ma-ri-am. His da-ugh-ter."

A lo-ok of con-fu-si-on cros-sed the girl's fa-ce. Then, a flash of re-cog-ni-ti-on. The-re was a fa-int smi-le on her lips now, and an air of eager-ness abo-ut her, of an-ti-ci-pa-ti-on. "Wa-it he-re," the girl sa-id qu-ickly. She clo-sed the do-or.
A few mi-nu-tes pas-sed. Then a man ope-ned the do-or. He was tall and squ-are-sho-ul-de-red, with sle-epy-lo-oking eyes and a calm fa-ce.

"I'm Jalil Khan's cha-uf-fe-ur," he sa-id, not un-kindly.

"His what?"

"His dri-ver. Jalil Khan is not he-re."

"I see his car," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"He's away on ur-gent bu-si-ness."

"When will he be back?"

"He didn't say."

Ma-ri-am sa-id she wo-uld wa-it-He clo-sed the ga-tes. Ma-ri-am sat, and drew her kne-es to her chest. It was early eve-ni ng al-re-ady, and she was get-ting hungry. She ate the ga-ridri-ver's tof-fee. A whi-le la-ter, the dri-ver ca-me out aga-in.

"You ne-ed to go ho-me now," he sa-id. "It'll be dark in less than an ho-ur."

"I'm used to the dark."

"It'll get cold too. Why don't you let me dri-ve you ho-me? I'll tell him you we-re he-re."

Ma-ri-am only lo-oked at him.
"I'll ta-ke you to a ho-tel, then. You can sle-ep com-for-tably the-re. We'll see what we can do in the mor-ning."

"Let me in the ho-use."
"I've be-en inst-ruc-ted not to. Lo-ok, no one knows when he's co-ming back. It co-uld be days."

Ma-ri-am cros-sed her arms.
The dri-ver sig-hed and lo-oked at her with gent-le rep-ro-ach.
Over the ye-ars, Ma-ri-am wo-uld ha-ve amp-le oc-ca-si-on to think abo-ut how things might ha-ve tur-ned out if she had let the dri-ver ta-ke her back to the kol-ba. But she didn't. She spent the night out-si-de Jalil's ho-use. She watc-hed the sky dar-ken, the sha-dows en-gulf the ne-igh-bo-ring ho-usef-ronts. The tat-to-o-ed girl bro-ught her so-me bre-ad and a pla-te of ri-ce, which Ma-ri-am sa-id she didn't want. The girl left it ne-ar Ma-ri-am. From ti-me to ti-me, Ma-ri-am he-ard fo-ots-teps down the stre-et, do-ors swin-ging open, muf-fled gre-etings. Elect-ric lights ca-me on, and win-dows glo-wed dimly. Dogs bar-ked. When she co-uld no lon-ger re-sist the hun-ger, Ma-ri-am ate the pla-te of ri-ce and the bre-ad. Then she lis-te ned to the cric-kets chir-ping from gar-dens. Over-he-ad, clo-uds slid past a pa-le mo-on.

In the mor-ning, she was sha-ken awa-ke. Ma-ri-am saw that du-ring the night so-me-one had co-ve-red her with a blan-ket.

It was the dri-ver sha-king her sho-ul-der.

"This is eno-ugh. You've ma-de a sce-ne. Bos. It's ti-me to go."

Ma-ri-am sat up and rub-bed her eyes. Her back and neck we-re so-re. "I'm go-ing to wa-it for him."

"Lo-ok at me," he sa-id. "Jalil Khan says that I ne-ed to ta-ke you back now. Right now. Do you un-ders-tand? Jalil Khan says so."

He ope-ned the re-ar pas-sen-ger do-or to the car."Bia Co-me on," he sa-id softly.

"I want to see him," Ma-ri-am sa-id. Her eyes we-re te-ar-ing over.

The dri-ver sig-hed. "Let me ta-ke you ho-me. Co-me on dok-h-ta-ri jo."

Ma-ri-am sto-od up and wal-ked to-ward him. But then, at the last mo-ment, she chan-ged di-rec-ti-on and ran to the front ga-tes. She felt the dri-ver's fin-gers fumb-ling for a grip at her sho-ul-der. She shed him and burst thro-ugh the open ga-tes.
In the hand-ful of se-conds that she was in Jalil's gar-den, Ma-ri-am's eyes re-gis-te-red se-e-ing a gle-aming glass struc-tu-re with plants in-si-de it, gra-pe vi-nes clin-ging to wo-oden trel-li-ses, a fish-pond bu-ilt with gray blocks of sto-ne, fru-it tre-es, and bus-tes of bright-ly co-lo-red flo-wers everyw-he-re. Her ga-ze skim-med over all of the-se things be-fo-re they fo-und a fa-ce, ac-ross the gar-den, in an ups-ta-irs win-dow. The fa-ce was the-re for only an ins-tant, a flash, but long eno-ugh. Long eno-ugh for Ma-ri-am to see the eyes wi-den, the mo-uth open. Then it snap-ped away from vi-ew. A hand ap-pe-ared and fran-ti-cal-ly pul-led at a cord. The cur-ta-ins fell shut.

Then a pa-ir of hands bu-ri-ed in-to her arm-pits and she was lif- ted off the gro-und. Ma-ri-am kic-ked. The peb-bles spil-led from her poc-ket. Ma-ri-am kept kic-king and cry-ing as she was car-ri-ed to the car and lo- we-red on-to the cold le-at-her of the back-se-at.

* * *

The dri-ver tal-ked in a mu-ted, con-so-ling to-ne as he dro-ve. Ma-ri-am did not he-ar him. All du-ring the ri-de, as she bo-un-ced in the back-se-at, she cri-ed. They we-re te-ar-s of gri-ef, of an-ger, of di-sil-lu-si-on-ment. But ma-inly te-ar-s of a de-ep, de-ep sha-me at how fo-olishly she had gi-ven her-self over to Jalil, how she had fret-ted over what dress to we-ar, over the mis-matc-hing hi-j-ab, wal-king all the way he-re, re-fu-sing to le-ave, sle-eping on the stre-et li-ke a stray dog. And

she was as-ha-med of how she had dis-mis-sed her mot-her's stric-ken lo-oks, her puffy eyes. Na-na, who had war-ned her, who had be-en right all along.

Ma-ri-am kept thin-king of his fa-ce in the ups-ta-irs win-dow. He let her sle-ep on the stre-et. On the stre-et Ma-ri-am cri-ed ly-ing down. She didn't sit up, didn't want to be se-en. She ima-gi-ned all of He-rat knew this mor-ning how she'd dis-ga-ced her-self. She wis-hed Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah we-re he-re so she co-uld put her he-ad on his lap and let him com-fort her.

After a whi-le, the ro-ad be-ca-me bum-pi-er and the no-se of the car po-in-ted up. They we-re on the up-hill ro-ad bet-we-en He-rat and Gul Da-man.

What wo-uld she say to Na-na, Ma-ri-am won-de-red. How wo-uld she apo-lo-gi-ze? How co-uld she even fa-ce Na-na now?

The car stop-ped and the dri-ver hel-ped her out. "I'll walk you," he sa-id.

She let him gu-ide her ac-ross the ro-ad and up the track. The-re was ho-ney-suck-le gro-wing along the path, and milk-we-ed too. Be-es we-re buz-zing over twink-ling wildf-lo-wers. The dri-ver to-ok her hand and hel-ped her cross the stre-am. Then he
let go, and he was tal-king abo-ut how He-rat's fa-mo-us one hund-red and twenty
days' winds wo-uld start blo-wing so-on, from mid-mor-ning to dusk, and how the
sand fli-es wo-uld go on a fe-eding frenzy, and then sud-denly he was stan-ding in
front of her, try-ing to co-ver her eyes, pus-hing her back the way they had co-me and
sa-ying, "Go back! No. Don't lo-ok now. Turn aro-und! Go back!"

But he wasn't fast eno-ugh. Ma-ri-am saw. A gust of wind blew and par-ted the
dro-oping branc-hes of the we-eping wil-low li-ke a cur-ta-in, and Ma-ri-am ca-ught a
glimp-se of what was be-ne-ath the tree: the stra-ight-bac-ked cha-ir, over-tur-ned.
The ro-pe drop-ping from a high branch. Na-na dang-ling at the end of it.

6.

I hey bu-ri-ed Na-na in a cor-ner of the ce-me-tery in Gul Da-man. Ma-ri-am sto-od
be-si-de Bi-bi jo, with the wo-men, as Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah re-ci-ted pra-yers at the
gra-ve-si-de and the men lo-we-red Na-na's shro-ued body in-to the
gro-und-After-ward, Jalil wal-ked Ma-ri-am to the
kol-ba, whe-re, in front of the
vil-la-gers who ac-com-pa-ni-ed them, he ma-de a gre-at show of ten-ding to
Ma-ri-am. He col-lec-ted a few of her things, put them in a su-it-ca-se. He sat be-si-de
her cot, whe-re she lay down, and fan-ned her fa-ce. He stro-ked her fo-re-he-ad, and,
with a wo-eb-be-go-ne exp-res-si-on on his fa-ce, as-ked if she ne-eded an-y-t-hing?
"an-y-t-hing?" - he sa-id it li-ke that, twi-ce.

"I want Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"Of co-ur-se. He's out-si-de. I'll get him for you."

It was when Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah's slight, sto-oping fi-gu-re ap-pe-ared in the kol-ba's
do-or-way that Ma-ri-am cri-ed for the first ti-me that day.

"Oh, Ma-ri-am jo."

He sat next to her and cup-ped her fa-ce in his hands. "You go on and cry, Ma-ri-am
jo. Go on. The-re is no sha-me in it. But re-mem-ber, my girl, what the Ko-ran says,
'Bles-sed is He in Who-se hand is the king-dom, and He Who has po-wer over all
things, Who cre-ated de-ath and li-fe that He may try you.' The Ko-ran spe-aks the
truth, my girl.

Be-hind every tri-al and every sor-row that He ma-kes us sho-ul-der, God has a
re-as-on."

But Ma-ri-am co-uld not he-ar com-fort in God's words. Not that day. Not then. All
she co-uld he-ar was Na-na sa-ying, 'I'll die if you go. I'll just die. All she co-uld do
was cry and cry and let her te-ars fall on the spot-ted, pa-per-thi n skin of Mul-lah
Fa-izul-lah's hands.
On the ri-de to his ho-use, Jalil sat in the back-se-at of his car with Ma-ri-am, his arm dra-ped over her sho-ul-der.

"You can stay with me, Ma-ri-am jo," he sa-id. "I've as-ked them al-re-ady to cle-an a ro-om for you. It's ups-ta-irs. You'll li-ke it, I think. You'll ha-ve a vi-ew of the gar-den."

For the first ti-me, Ma-ri-am co-uld he-ar him with Na-na's ears. She co-uld he-ar so cle-ar-ly now the in-sin-ce-ri-ty that had al-ways lur-ked be -ne-ath, the hol-low, fal-se as-su-ran-ces. She co-uld not bring her-self to lo-ok at him.

When the car stop-ped be-fo-re Jalil's ho-use, the dri-ver ope-ned the do-or for them and car-ri-ed Ma-ri-am's su-it-ca-se. Jalil gu-ided her, one palm cup-ped aro-un-d each of her sho-ul-ders, thro-ugh the sa-me ga-t es out-si-de of which, two days be-fö-re, Ma-ri-am had slept on the si-de-walk wa-iting for him. Two days be-fö-re-when Ma-ri-am co-uld think of not-hing in the world she wan-tered mo-re than to walk in this gar-den with Jalil-felt li-ke anot-her li-fe-ti-me. How co-uld her li-fe ha-ve tur-ned up-si-de down so qu-ick-ly, Ma-ri-am as-ked her-self. She kept her ga-ze to the gro-und, on her fe-et, step-ping on the gray sto-ne path. She was awa-re of the pre-sen-ce of pe-op-le in the gar-den, mur-mu-ring, step-ping asi-de, as she and Jalil wal-ked past. She sen-sed the we-ight of eyes on her, lo-oking down from the win-dows ups-ta-irs.

Insi-de the ho-use too, Ma-ri-am kept her he-ad down. She wal-ked on a ma-ro-on car-pet with a re-pe-at-ing blue-and-yel-low oc-ta-go-nal pat-tern, saw out of the cor-ner of her eye the marb-le ba-ses of sta-tu-es, the lo-wer hal-ves of va-ses, the fra-yed ends of richly co-lo-red ta-pest-ri-es han-ging from walls. The sta-irs she and Jalil to-ok we-re wi-de and co-ve-red with asi-mi-lar car-pet, na-iled down at the ba-se of each step. At the top of the sta-irs, Jalil led her to the left, down anot-her long, car-pe-ted hal-lway. He stop-ped by one of the do-ors, ope-ned it, and let her in.

"Yo-ur sis-ters Ni-lo-ufar and Ati-eh play he-re so-met-i-mes," Jalil sa-id, "but mostly we use this as a gu-est ro-om. You'll be com-for-tab-le he-re, I think. It's ni-ce, isn't it?"

The ro-om had a bed with a gre-en-flo-we-red blan-ket knit in a tightly wo-ven, ho-ney-comb de-sign. The cur-ta-ins, pul-led back to re-ve-al the gar-den be-low, matc-hed the blan-ket. Be-si-de the bed was a three-dra-fer chest with a flo-wer va-se on it. The-re we-re shel-ves along the walls, with fra-med pic-tu-res of pe-op-le Ma-ri-am did not re-cog-ni-ze. On one of the shel-ves, Ma-ri-am saw a col-lec-ti-on of iden-ti-cal wo-o-den dolls, ar-ran-ged in a li-ne in or-der of dec-re-as-ing si-ze.
Jalil saw her looking. "Mat-r-yos-h-ka dolls. I got them in Mos-cow. You can play with them, if you want. No one will mind."

Ma-ri-am sat down on the bed.

"Is the-re anyt-hing you want?" Jalil sa-id.

Ma-ri-am lay down. Clo-sed her eyes. Af-ter a whi-le, she he-ard him softly shut the do-or.

* * *

Except for "when she had to use the bath-ro-om down the hall, Ma-ri-am sta-yed in the ro-om. The girl with the tat-too, the one who had ope-ned the ga-tes to her, bro-u-ght her me-als on a tray: lamb ke-bab, sab-zi, aush so-up. Most of it went une-aten. Jalil ca-me by se-ve-ral ti-mes a day, sat on the bed be-si-de her, as-ked her if she was all right.

"You co-uld eat downs-ta-irs with the rest of us," he sa-id, but wit-ho-ut much con-vic-ti-on. He un-ders-to-od a lit-tle too re-adily when Ma-ri-am sa-id she pre-fer-red to eat alo-ne.

From the win-dow, Ma-ri-am watc-hed im-pas-si-vely what she had won-de-red abo-ut and lon-ged to see for most of her li-fe: the co-mings and go-ings of Jalil's da-ily li-fe. Ser-vants rus-hed in and out of the front ga-tes. A gar-de-ner was al-ways trim-ming bus-hes, wa-te-ring plants in the gre-en-ho-use. Cars with long, sle-ek ho-ods pul-led up on the stre-et. From them emer-ged men in su-its, inchapems and ca-ra-cul hats, wo-men inhi-j-abs, chil-d-ren with ne-atly com-bed ha-ir. And as Ma-ri-am watc-hed Jalil sha-ke the-se stran-gers' hands, as she saw him cross his palms on his chest and nod to the-ir wi-ves, she knew that Na-na had spo-ken the truth. She did not be-long he-re.

"But whe-re do I be-long? What am I go-ing to do now? I'm all you ha-ve in this world, Ma-ri-am, and when I'm go-ne you'll ha-ve not-hing. You'll ha-ve not-hing, Youarenot-hing! Li-ke the wind thro-ugh the wil-lows aro-und the kol-ba, gusts of an inexp-res-sib-le black-ness kept pas-sing thro-ugh Ma-ri-am.

On Ma-ri-am's se-cond full day at Jalil's ho-use, a lit-tle girl ca-me in-to the ro-om. "I ha-ve to get so-met-hing," she sa-id.

Ma-ri-am sat up on the bed and cros-sed her legs, pul-led the blan-ket on her lap. The girl hur-ri-ed ac-ross the ro-om and ope-ned the clo-set do-or. She fete-hed a squ-are-sha-ped gray box.
"You know what this is?" she said. She opened the box. "It's called a gramophone. Gra-mo. Pho-ne. It plays records. You know, mu-sic. A gramophone."

"You're Ni-lo-ufar. You're eight."

The little girl smiled. She had Jalil's smile and his dimpled chin. "How did you know?"

Ma-ri-am shrugged. She didn't say to this girl that she'd once named a pebble after her.

"Do you want to hear a song?"

Ma-ri-am shrugged again.

Ni-lo-ufar plugged in the gramophone. She fished a small record from a pouch beneath the box's lid. She put it on, low-red the ne-ede-le. Mu-sic be-gan to play.

*I will use a flo-wer pe-tal for pa-per, And wri-te you the swe-etest let-ter, You are the sul-tan of my he-art, the sul-tan of my he-art*

"Do you know it?"

"No."

"It's from an Ira-ni-an film. I saw it at my fat-her's ci-ne-ma. Hey, do you want to see so-met-hing?"

Be-fo-re Ma-ri-am could ans-wer, Ni-lo-ufar had put her palms and fo-re-he-ad to the gro-und. She pus-hed with her so-les and then she was stan-ding up-si-de down, on her he-ad, in a three-po-int stan-ce.

"Can you do that?" she said thickly.

"No."

Ni-lo-ufar drop-ped her legs and pul-led her blo-use back down. "I co-uld te-ach you," she sa-id, pus-hing ha-ir from her flus-hed brow. "So how long will you stay he-re?"

"I don't know."

"My mot-her says you're not re-al-ly my sis-ter li-ke you say you are."
"I ne-ver sa-id I was," Ma-ri-am li-ed.

"She says you did. I don't ca-re. What I me-an is, I don't mind if you did say it, or if you are my sis-ter. I don't mind."

Ma-ri-am lay down. "I'm ti-red now."

"My mot-her saysa jinn ma-de yo-ur mot-her hang her-self."

"You can stop that now," Ma-ri-am sa-id, tur-ning to her si-de. "The mu-sic, I me-an."
Bi-bi jo ca-me to see her that day too. It was ra-ining by the ti-me she ca-me. She lo-we-red her lar-ge body on-to the cha-ir be-si-de the bed, gri-ma-cing.

"This ra-in, Ma-ri-am jo, it's mur-der on my hips. Just mur-der, I tell you. I ho-pe…Oh, now, co-me he-re, child. Co-me he-re to Bi-bi jo. Don't cry. The-re, now. You po-or thing. Ask You po-or, po-or thing."

That night, Ma-ri-am co-uldn't sle-ep for a long ti-me. She lay in bed lo-oking at the sky, lis-te-ning to the fo-ots-teps be-low, the vo-ices muf-fled by walls and the she-ets of ra-in pu-nis-hing the win-dow. When she did do-ze off, she was start-led awa-ke by sho-uting. Vo-ices downs-ta-irs, sharp and angry. Ma-ri-am co-uldn't ma-ke out the words. So-me-one slam-med a do-or.

The next mor-ning, Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah ca-me to vi-sit her. When she saw her fri-end at the do-or, his whi-te be-ard and his ami-ab-le, to-oth-less smi-le, Ma-ri-am felt te-ars stin-ging the cor-ners of her eyes aga-in. She swung her fe-et over the si-de of the bed and hur-ri-ed over. She kis-sed his hand as al-ways and he her brow. She pul-led him up a cha-ir-He sho-wed her the Ko-ran he had bro-ught with him and ope-ned it. "I fi-gu-red no sen-se in skip-ping our ro-uti-ne, eh?"

"You know I don't ne-ed les-sons any-mo-re, Mul-lah sa-hib. You ta-ught me every sur-rah and ayat in the Ko-ran ye-ars ago."

He smi-led, and ra-ised his hands in a ges-tu-re of sur-ren-der. "I con-fess, then. I've be-en fo-und out. But I can think of wor-se ex-cu-ses to vi-sit you."

"You don't ne-ed ex-cu-ses. Not you."

"You're kind to say that, Ma-ri-am jo."

He pas-sed her his Ko-ran. As he'd ta-ught her, she kis-sed it three ti-mes-to-uc-hing it to her brow bet-we-en each kiss and ga-ve it back to him.
"How are you, my girl?"

"I ke-ep," Ma-ri-am be-gan. She had to stop, fe-eling li-ke a rock had lod-ged it-self in her thro-at. "I ke-ep thin-king of what she sa-id to me be-fo-re I left. She-

"Nay, nay, nay." Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah put his hand on her knee. "Yo-ur mot-her, may Al-lah for-gi-ve her, was a tro-ub-led and un-hap-py wo-man, Ma-ri-am jo. She did a ter-rib-le thing to her-self. To her-self, to you, and al-so to Al-lah. He will for-gi-ve her, for He is all-for-gi-ving, but Al-lah is sad-de-ned by what she did. He do-es not ap-pro-ve of the ta-king of li-fe, be it anot-her's or one's own, for He says that li-fe is sac-red You see-" He pul-led his cha-ir clo-ser, to-ok Ma-ri-am's hand in both of his own. "You see, I knew yo-ur mot-her be-fo-re you were born, when she was a lit-tle girl, and I tell you that she was un-hap-py then. The se-ed for what she did was plan- ted long ago, I'm af-ra-id. What I me-an to say is that this was not yo-ur fa-ult. It wasn't yo-ur fa-ult, my girl."

"I sho-uldn't ha-ve left her. I sho-uld ha-ve-

"You stop that. The-se tho-ughts are no go-od, Ma-ri-am jo. You he-ar me, child? No go-od. They will dest-roy you. It wasn't yo-ur fa-ult. It wasn't yo-ur fa-ult. No."

Ma-ri-am nod-ded, but as des-pe-ra-tely as she wan- ted to she co-uld not bring her-self to be-li-eve him.

* * *

One ap-ter-no-on, a we-ek la-ter, the-re was a knock on the do-or, and a tall wo-man wal-ked in. She was fa-ir-skin-ned, had red-dish ha-ir and long fin-gers.

"I'm Af-so-on," she sa-id. "Ni-lo-ufar's mot-her. Why don't you wash up, Ma-ri-am, and co-me downs-ta-irs?"

Ma-ri-am sa-id she wo-uld rat-her stay in her ro-om.

"No, na-fah-mi-di, you don't un-ders-tand. You me-dio co-me down. We ha-ve to talk to you. It's im-por-tant."

7.

I hey sat ac-ross from her, Jalil and his wi-ves, at a long, dark brown tab-le. Bet-we-en them, in the cen-ter of the tab-le, was a crystal va-se of fresh ma-ri-golds and a swe-ating pitc-her of wa-ter. The red-ha-ired wo-man who had int-ro-du-ced her-self as Ni-lo-ufar's mot-her, Af-so-on, was sit-ting on Jalil's right. The ot-her two, Kha-di-ja and Nar-gis, we-re on his left. The wi-ves each had on a flimsy black scarf, which they wo-re not on the-ir he-ads but ti-ed lo-osely aro-und the neck li-ke an
af-tert-ho-ught. Ma-ri-am, who co-uld not ima-gi-ne that they wo-uld we-ar black for Na-na, pic-tu-red one of them sug-ges-ting it, or may-be Jalil, just be-fo-re she'd be-en sum-mo-ned.

Afso-on po-ured wa-ter from the pitc-her and put the glass be-fo-re Ma-ri-am on a chec-ke-red cloth co-as-ter. "Only spring and it's warm al-re-ady," she sa-id. She ma-de a fan-ning mo-ti-on with her hand.

"Ha-ve you be-en com-for-tab-le?" Nar-gis, who had a small chin and curly black ha-ir, as-ked. "We ho-pe you've be-en com-for-tab-le. This… or-de-al…must be very hard for you. So dif-fi-cult."

The ot-her two nod-ded. Ma-ri-am to-ok in the-ir pluc-ked eyeb-rows, the thin, to-le-rant smi-les they we-re gi-ving her. The-re was an unp-le-asant hum in Ma-ri-am's he-ad. Her thro-at bur-ned. She drank so-me of the wa-ter.

Thro-ugh the wi-de win-dow be-hind Jalil, Ma-ri-am co-uld see a row of flo-we-ring ap-ple tre-es. On the wall be-si-de the win-dow sto-od a dark wo- oden ca-bi-net. In it was a clock, and a fra-med pho-tog-raph of Jalil and three yo-ung boys hol-ding a fish. The sun ca-ught the spark-le in the fish's sca-les. Jalil and the boys we-re grin-ning.

"Well," Af-so-on be-gan. "I-that is, we ha-ve bro-ught you he-re be-ca-use we ha-ve so-me very go-od news to gi-ve you."

Ma-ri-am lo-oked up.
She ca-ught a qu-ick exc-han-ge of glan-ces bet-we-en the wo-men over Jalil, who slo-uc-hed in his cha-ir lo-oking un-se-e-ing ly at the pitc-her on the tab-le. It was Kha-di-ja, the ol-dest-lo-oking of the thr ee, who tur-ned her ga-ze to Ma-ri-am, and Ma-ri-am had the imp-res-si-on that this duty too had be-en dis-cus-sed, ag-re-ed upon, be-fo-re they had cal-led for her.

"You ha-ve a su-itor," Kha-di-ja sa-id.


Afso-on was nod-ding. "And he do-es spe-ak Far-si, li-ke us, li-ke you. So you won't ha-ve to le-arn Pash-to."
Ma-ri-am's chest was tigh-te-ning. The ro-om was re-el-ing up and down, the gro-und shif-ting be-ne-ath her fe-et.

"He's a sho-em-a-ker," Kha-di-ja was sa-y-ing now. "But not so-me kind of or-di-nary stre-et-si-dem-o-c-hi, no, no. He has his own shop, and he is one of the most so-u-ght-ahe-r sho-em-a-kers in Ka-bul He ma-kes them for dip-lo-mats, mem-bers of the pre-si-den-ti-al fa-mi-ly-that class of pe-op-le. So you see, he will ha-ve no tro-ub-le pro-vi-ding for you."

Ma-ri-am fi-xed her eyes on Jalil, her he-art so-mer-sa-ul-ting in her chest. "Is this true? What she's sa-y-ing, is it true?"

But Jalil wo-uldn't lo-ok at her. He went on che-wing the cor-ner of his lo-wer lip and sta-ring at the pitc-her.

"Now he is a lit-tle ol-der than you," Af-so-on chi-med in. "But he can't be mo-re than…forty. Forty-fi-ve at the most. Wo-uld'n't you say,Nar-gis?"

"Yes. But I've se-en ni-ne-ye-ar-old girls gi-ven to men twenty ye-ars ol-der than yo-ur su-it-or, Ma-ri-am. We all ha-ve. What are you, fif-te-en? That's a go-od, so-lid mar-ry-ing age for a girl." The-re was ent-hu -si-as-tic nod-ding at this. It did not es-ca-pe Ma-ri-am that no men-ti-on was ma-de of her half sis-ters Sa-ideh or Na-he-ed, both her own age, both stu-dents in the Meh-ri Scho-ol in He-rat, both with plans to en-roll in Ka-bul Uni-ver-sity. Fif-te-en, evi-dently, was not a go-od, so-lid mar-ry-ing age for them.

"What's mo-re," Nar-gis went on, "he too has had a gre-at loss in his li-fe. His wi-fe, we he-ar, di-ed du-ring  child-birth ten ye-a rs ago. And then, three ye-ars ago, his son drow-ned in a la-ke."

"It's very sad, yes. He's be-en lo-oking for a bri-de the last few ye-ars but hasn't fo-und an-yo-ne su-itab-le."

"I don't want to," Ma-ri-am sa-id. She lo-oked at Jalil. "I don't want this. Don't ma-ke me." She ha-ted the snif-fling, ple-ading to-ne of her vo-ice but co-uld not help it.

"Now, be re-aso-nab-le, Ma-ri-am," one of the wi-ves sa-id.

Ma-ri-am was no lon-ger ke-eping track of who was sa-y-ing what. She went on sta-ring at Jalil, wa-it-ing for him to spe-ak up, to say that no-ne of this was true.

"You can't spend the rest of yo-ur li-fe he-re."

"Don't you want a fa-mi-ly of yo-ur own?"
"Yes. A ho-me, child-ren of yo-ur own?"

"You ha-ve to mo-ve on."

"True that it wo-uld be pre-fe-rab-ble that you marry a lo-cal, a Ta-j-ik, but Ras-he-ed is he-al-thy, and in-te-res-ted in you. He has a ho-me and a job. That's all that re-al-ly mat-ters, isn't it? And Ka-bul is a be-a-uti-ful and ex-ci-ting city. You may not get anot-her op-por-tu-ni-ty this go-od."

Ma-ri-am tur-ned her at-ten-ti-on to the wi-ves.

"I'll li-ve with Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah," she sa-id. "He'll ta-ke me in. I know he will."

"That's no go-od," Kha-di-ja sa-id. "He's old and so..." She se-arc-hed for the right word, and Ma-ri-am knew then that what she re-al-ly wan-ted to say was He's so clo-se. She un-ders-to-od what they me-ant to do. You may not get anot-her op-por-tu-ni-ty this go-od And ne-it-her wo-uld they. They had be-en dis-gra-ced by her birth, and this was the-ir chan-ce to era-se, on-ce and for all, the last tra-ce of the-ir hus-band's scan-da-lo-us mis-ta-ke. She was be-ing sent away be-ca-use she was the wal-king, bre-at-hing em-bo-di-ment of the-ir sha-me. "He's so old and we-ak," Kha-di-ja even-tu-al-ly sa-id. "And what will you do when he's go-ne? You'd be a bur-den to his fa-mily."

As you are now to us Ma-ri-am al-most saw the uns-po-ken words exit Kha-di-ja's mo-uth, li-ke foggy bre-ath on a cold day. Ma-ri-am pic-tu-red her-self in Ka-bul, a big, stran-ge, crow-ded city that, Jalil had on-ce told her, was so-me six hund-red and fifty ki-lo-me-ters to the east of He-rat. Six hund-red and fifty ki-lo-me-ters. The fart-hest she'd ever be-en from the kol-ba was the two-ki-lo-me-ter walk she'd ma-de to Jalil's ho-use. She pic-tu-red her-self li-ving the-re, in Ka-bul, at the ot-her end of that uni-ma-gi-nab-le dis-tan-ce, li-ving in a stran-ger's ho-use whe-re she wo-uld ha-ve to con-ce-de to his mo-ods and his is-su-ed de-mands. She wo-uld ha-ve to cle-an af-ter this man, Ras-he-ed, co-ok for him, wash his clot-hes. And the-re wo-uld be ot-her cho-res as well-Na-na had told her what hus-bands did to the-ir wi-ves. It was the tho-ught of the-se in-ti-ma-ci-es in par-ti-cu-lar, which she ima-gi -ned as pa-in-ful acts of per-ver-sity, that fil-led her with dre-ad and ma-de her bre-ak out in a swe-at.

She tur-ned to Jalil aga-in. "Tell them. Tell them you won't let them do this."

"Actu-al-ly, yo-ur fat-her has al-re-ady gi-ven Ras-he-ed his ans-wer," Af-so-on sa-id. "Ras-he-ed is he-re, in He-rat; he has co-me all the way from Ka-bul. Thenik-ka will be to-mor-row mor-ning, and then the-re is a bus le-aving for Ka-bul at no-on."

"Tell them!" Ma-ri-am cri-ed
The wo-men grew qu-i-et now. Ma-ri-am sen-sed that they we-re wac-ting him too. Wa-it-ing. A si-len-ce fell over the ro-om. Jalil kept twir-ling his wed-ding band, with a bru-ised, help-less lo-ok on his fa-ce. From in-si-de the ca-bi-net, the clock tie-ked on and on.

"Jalil jo?" one of the wo-men sa-id at last.

Mil's eyes lif-ted slowly, met Ma-ri-am's, lin-ge-red for a mo-ment, then drop-ped. He ope-ned his mo-uth, but all that ca-me forth was a sing-le, pa-ined gro-an.

"Say so-met-hing," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

Then Jalil did, in a thin, thre-ad-ba-re vo-ice. "God-damn it, Ma-ri-am, don't do this to me," he sa-id as tho-ugh he was the one to whom so-met-hing was be-ing do-ne.

And, with that, Ma-ri-am felt the ten-si-on va-nish from the ro-om.

As JaliPs wi-ves be-gan a new-and mo-re sprightly-ro-und of re-as-su-ring, Ma-ri-am lo-oked down at the tab-le. Her eyes tra-ced the sle-ek sha-pe of the tab-le's legs, the si-nu-o-us cur-ves of its cor-ners, the gle-am of its ref-lec-ti-ve, dark brown sur-fa-ce. She no-ti-ced that every ti-me she bre-at-hed out, the sur-fa-ce fog-ged, and she di-sap-pe-ared from her fat-her's tab-le.

Af-so-on es-cor- ted her back to the ro-om ups-ta-irs. When Af-so-on clo-sed the do-or, Ma-ri-am he-ard the rat-tling of a key as it tur-ned in the lock.

8.

In the mor-ning, Ma-ri-am was gi-ven a long-sle-eved, dark gre-en dress to we-ar over whi-te cot-ton tro-users. Af-so-on ga-ve her a gre-en hi-j-ab and a pa-ir of matc-hing san-dals.

She was ta-ken to the ro-om with the long, brown tab-le, ex-cept now the-re was a bowl of su-gar-co-ated al-mond candy in the mid-dle of the tab-le, a Ko-ran, a gre-en ve-il, and a mir-ror. Two men Ma-ri-am had ne-ver se-en be-fo-re wit-nes-ses, she pre-su-med-and a mul-lah she did not re-cog-ni-ze we-re al-re-ady se-ated at the tab-le.

Jalil sho-wed her to a cha-ir. He was we-arin-g a light brown su-it and a red tie. His ha-ir was was-hed. When he pul-led out the cha-ir for her, he tri-ed to smi-le en-co-ura-gingly. Kha-di-ja and Af-so-on sat on Ma-ri-am's si-de of the tab-le this ti-me.
The mullah motioned toward the veil, and Nargis arranged it on Mariam's head before taking a seat. Mariam looked down at her hands.

"You can call him in now," Jalil said to someone.

Mariam smelled him before she saw him. Cigarette smoke and thick, sweet cologne, not faint like Jalil's. The scent of it flooded Mariam's nostrils. Through the veil, from the corner of her eye, Mariam saw a tall man, thick-belied and broad-shouldered, stooping in the doorway. The size of him almost made her gasp, and she had to drop her gaze, her heart hammering away. She sensed him lingering in the doorway. Then his slow, heavy-footed movement across the room. The candy bowl on the table clinked in tune with his steps. With a thick grunt, he dropped on a chair beside her. He breathed noisily.

The mullah welcomed them. He said this would not be a traditional nikka.

"I understand that Rasheda has tickets for the bus to Kabul that leaves shortly. So, in the interest of time, we will bypass some of the traditional steps to speed up the proceedings."

The mullah gave a few blessings, said a few words about the importance of marriage. He asked Jalil if he had any objections to this union, and Jalil shook his head. Then the mullah asked Rasheda if she indeed wished to enter into a marriage contract with Mariam. Rasheda said, "Yes." His harsh, raspy voice reminded Mariam of the sound of dry autumn leaves crushed underfoot.

"And do you, Mariam jan, accept this man as your husband?"

Mariam stayed quiet. Throats were cleared.

"She does," a female voice said from down the table.

"Actually," the mullah said, "she herself has to answer. And she should wait until I ask three times. The point is, he's seeking her, not the other way around."

He asked the question two more times. When Mariam didn't answer, he asked it once more, this time more forcefully. Mariam could feel Jalil beside her shifting on his seat, could sense feet crossing and uncrossing beneath the table. There was more clearing. A small, white hand reached out and flicked a bit of dust off the table.

"Yes," she said shakily.

A mirror was passed beneath the veil. In it, Mariam saw her own face first, the arch-less, unsightly eyebrows, the flat hair, the eyes, mirthless green and set so close together that one might mistake her for being cross-eyed. Her skin was coarser and had a dull, spotty appearance. She thought her brow too wide, the chin too narrow, the lips too thin. The overall impression was of a long face, a triangular face, a bit hound-like. And yet Mariam saw that, oddly enough, the whole of these unmemorable parts made for a face that was not pretty but, somehow, not unpleasant to look at either.

In the mirror, Mariam had her first glimpse of Rashid: the big, square, ruddy face; the hooked nose; the flushed cheeks that gave the impression of sly cheerfulness; the watery, bloodshot eyes; the crowded teeth, the front two pushy to-gether like a gabled roof; the impossibly low hairline, barely two finger widths above the bushy eyebrows; the wall of thick, coarse, salt-and-pepper hair.

Their gazes met briefly in the glass and slid away.

This is the face of my husband, Mariam thought.

They exchanged the thin gold bands that Rashid fished from his coat pocket. His nails were yellow-brown, like the inside of a rotting apple, and some of the tips were curling, lifting. Mariam's hands shook when she tried to slip the band on to his finger, and Rashid had to help her. Her own band was a little tight, but Rashid had no trouble forcing it over her knuckles.

"There," he said.

"It's a pretty ring," one of the wives said. "It's lovely, Mariam."

"All that remains now is the signing of the contract," the mullah said.

Mariam signed her name—theem, the reh, the 3^ and the meem again conscious of all the eyes on her hand. The next time Mariam signed her name to a document, twenty-seven years later, a mullah would again be present.

"You are now husband and wife," the mullah said. "Tab-re-ek. Congratulations."

***
Ras-he-ed wa-ited in the mul-ti-co-lor-red bus. Ma-ri-am co-uld not see him from whe-re she sto-od with Jalil, by the re-ar bum-per, only the smo-ke of his ci-ga-ret-te cur-ling up from the open win-dow. Aro-und them, hands sho-ok and fa-re-wel-ls we-re sa-id. Ko-rans we-re kis-sed, pas-sed un-der. Ba-re-fo-ot boys bo-un-ced bet-we-en tra-ve-lers, the-ir fa-ces in-vi-sib-le be-hind the-ir trays of che-wing gum and ci-ga-ret-tes.

Jalil was busy tel-ling her that Ka-bul was so be-a-uti-ful, the Mog-hul em-pe-ror Ba-bur had as-ked that he be bu-ri-ed the-re. Next, Ma-ri-am knew, he'd go on abo-ut Ka-bul's gar-dens, and its shops, its tre-es, and its air, and, be-fo-re long, she wo-uld be on the bus and he wo-uld walk along-si-de it, wa-ving che-er-ful-ly, uns-cat-hed, spa-red. Ma-ri-am co-uld not bring her-self to al-low it.

"I used to wors-hip you," she sa-id.

Jalil stop-ped in mid-sen-ten-ce. He cros-sed and unc-ros-sed his arms. A yo-ung Hin-di co-up-le, the wi-fe crad-ling a boy, the hus-band drag-gi ng a su-it-ca-se, pas-sed bet-we-en them. Jalil se-em-ed gra-te-ful for the in-ter-rup-ti-on. They ex-cu-sed them-sel-ves, and he smi-led back po-li-tely.

"On Thurs-days, I sat for ho-urs wa-iting for you. I wor-ri-ed myself sick that you wo-uld'n't show up."

"It's a long trip. You sho-uld eat so-met-hing." He sa-id he co-uld buy her so-me bre-ad and go-at che-e-se.

"I tho-ught abo-ut you all the ti-me. I used to pray that you'd li-ve to be a hund-red ye-ars old. I didn't know. I didn't know that you we-re as-ha-med of me."

Jalil lo-oked down, and, li-ke an overg-ro wn child, dug at so-met-hing with the toe of his shoe.

"You we-re as-ha-med of me."

"I'll vi-sit you," he mut-te-red "I'll co-me to Ka-bul and see you. We'll-"

"No. No," she sa-id. "Don't co-me. I won't see you. Don't you co-me. I don't want to he-ar from you. Ever. Ever."

He ga-ve her a wo-un-ded lo-ok.

"It ends he-re for you and me. Say yo-ur go-od-byes."

"Don't le-ave li-ke this," she sa-id in a thin vo-ice.
"You didn't even ha-ve the de-cency to gi-ve me the ti-me to say go-od-bye to Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah."

She tur-ned and wal-ked aro-und to the si-de of the bus. She co-uld he-ar him fol-lo-wing her. When she re-ac-hed the hydra-ulic do-ors, she he-ard him be-hind her.

"Ma-ri-amjo."

She clim-bed the sta-irs, and tho-ugh she co-uld spot Jalil out of the cor-ner of her eye wal-king pa-ra-l-lel to her she did not lo-ok out the win-dow. She ma-de her way down the ais-le to the back, whe-re Ras-he-ed sat with her su-it-ca-se bet-we-en his fe-et. She did not turn to lo-ok when Jalil's palms pres-sed on the glass, when his knuck-les rap-ped and rap-ped on it. When the bus jer-ked for-ward, she did not turn to see him trot-ting along-si-de it. And when the bus pul-led away, she did not lo-ok back to see him re-ce-ding, to see him di-sap-pe-ar in the clo-ud of ex-ha-ust and dust.

Ras-he-ed, who to-ok up the win-dow and mid-dle se-at, put his thick hand on hers.
"The-re now, girl The-re. The-re," he sa-id. He was squ-in-ting out the win-dow as he sa-id this, as tho-ugh so-met-hing mo-re in-te-res-ting had ca-ught his eye.

9.

It was early eve-ning the fol-lo-wing day by the ti-me they ar-ri-ved at Ras-he-ed's ho-use.
"We're in Deh-Ma-zang," he sa-id. They we-re out-si-de, on the si-de-walk. He had her su-it-ca-se in one hand and was un-loc-king the wo-oden front ga-te with the ot-her. "In the so-uth and west part of the city. The zoo is ne-arby, and the uni-ver-sity too."

Ma-ri-am nod-ded. Al-re-ady she had le-ar-ned that, tho-ugh she co-uld un-ders-tan-d him, she had to pay clo-se at-ten-ti-on when he spo-ke. She was unac-cus-to-med to the Ka-bu-li di-alect of his Far-si, and to the un-derl-ying la-yer of Pash-to ac-cen-t, the lan-gu-age of his na-ti-ve Kan-da-har. He, on the ot-her hand, se-emed to ha-ve no tro-ub-le un-ders-tan-ding her He-ra-ti Far-si.

Ma-ri-am qu-ickly sur-ve-yed the nar-row, un-pa-ved ro-ad along which Ras-he-ed's ho-use was si-tu-ated. The ho-uses on this ro-ad we-re crow-ded to-get-her and sha-red com-mon walls, with small, wal-led yards in front buf-fé-ring them from the stre-et. Most of the ho-mes had flat ro-ofs and the na-ti-ve Kan-da-har. He, on the ot-her hand, se-emed to ha-ve no tro-ub-le un-ders-tan-ding her He-ra-ti Far-si.

Ma-ri-am saw small mo-unds of flyblown gar-ba-ge lit-ting the stre-et he-re
and the-re. Ras-he-ed's ho-use had two sto-ri-es. Ma-ri-am co-uld see that it had on-ce be-en blue.

When Ras-he-ed ope-ned the front ga-te, Ma-ri-am fo-und her-self in a small, un-kempt yard whe-re yel-low grass strug-gled up in thin patc-hes. Ma-ri-am saw an out-ho-use on the right, in a si-de yard, and, on the left, a well with a hand pump, a row of dying sap-lings. Ne-ar the well was a to-ols-hed, and a bicyc-le le-an-ing aga-inst the wall.

"Yo-ur fat-her told me you li-ke to fish," Ras-he-ed sa-id as they we-re cros-sing the yard to the ho-use. The-re was no back-yard, Ma-ri-am saw. "The-re are val-leys north of he-re. Ri-vers with lots-of-fish. May-be I'll ta-ke you so-me-day."

He un-loc-ked the front do-or and let her in-to the ho-use.

Ras-he-ed's ho-use was much smal-ler than Jalil's, but, com-pa-red to Ma-ri-am and Na-na's kol-ba, it was a man-si-on. The-re was a hal-lway, a li-ving ro-om downs-ta-irs, and a kit-c-hen in which he sho-wed her pots and pans and a pres-su-re co-oker and a ke-ro-se-ne Lshi-op. The li-ving ro-om had a pis-tac-hio gre-en le-at-her co-uch. It had a rip down its si-de that had be-en clum-sily sewn to-get-her. The walls we-re ba-re. The-re was a tab-le, two ca-ne-se-at cha-irs, two fol-ding cha-irs, and, in the cor-ner, a black, cast-iron sto-ve.

Ma-ri-am sto-od in the mid-dle of the li-ving ro-om, lo-oking aro-und. At the kol-ba, she co-uld to-uch the ce-iling with her fin-ger-tips. She co-uld lie in her cot and tell the ti-me of day by the ang-le of sun-light po-uring thro-ugh the win-dow. She knew how far her do-or wo-uld open be-fo-re its hin-ges cre-aked. She knew every splin-ter and crack in each of the thirty wo-oden flo-or-bo-ards. Now all tho-se fa-mi-li-ar things we-re go-ne. Na-na was de-ad, and she was he-re, in a stran-ge city, se-pa-ra-ted from the li-fe she'd known by val-leys and cha-ins of snow-cap-ped mo-un-ta-ins and en-ti-re de-serts. She was in a stran-ger's ho-use, with all its dif-fe-rent ro-oms and its smell of ci-ga-ret-te smo-ke, with its un-fa-mi-li-ar uten-sils, its he-avy, dark gre-en cur-ta-ins, and a ce-iling she knew she co-uld not re-ach. The spa-ce of it suf-fo-ca-ted Ma-ri-am. Pangs of lon-ging bo-re in-to her, for Na-na, for Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah, for her old li-fe.

Then she was crying.

"What's this crying abo-ut?" Ras-he-ed sa-id crossly. He re-ac-hed in-to the poc-ket of his pants, un-cur-led Ma-ri-am's fin-ger-tips, and pus-hed a hand-kerc-hi-ef in-to her palm. He lit him-self a ci-ga-ret-te and le-an-ed aga-inst the wall. He watc-hed as Ma-ri-am pres-sed the hand-kerc-hi-ef to her eyes.

"Do-ne?"

Ma-ri-am nod-ded.
"Su-re?"

"Yes."

He to-ok her by the el-bow then and led her to the li-ving-ro-om win-dow.
"This win-dow lo-oks north," he sa-id, tap-ping the glass with the cro-oked na-il of his in-dex fin-ger. "That's the As-mai mo-un-ta-in di-rectly in front of us-see?-and, to the left, is the Ali Abad mo-un-ta-in. The uni-ver-sity is at the fo-ot of it. Be-hind us, east, you can't see from he-re, is the Shir Dar-wa-za mo-un-ta-in. Every day, at no-on, they sho-ot a can-non from it. Stop yo-ur crying, now. I me-an it."
Ma-ri-am dab-bed at her eyes.

"That's one thing I can't stand," he sa-id, scow-ling, "the so-und of a wo-man crying. I'm sorry. I ha-ve no pa-ti-en-ce for it."

"I want to go ho-me," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

Ras-he-ed sig-hed ir-ri-tably. A puff of his smoky bre-ath hit Ma-ri-am's fa-ce. "I won't ta-ke that per-so-nal-ly. This ti-me."
Aga-in, he to-ok her by the el-bow, and led her ups-ta-irs.

The-re was a nar-row, dimly lit hal-lway the-re and two bed-ro-oms. The do-or to the big-ger one was aj-ar. Thro-ugh it Ma-ri-am co-uld see that it, li-ke the rest of the ho-use, was spar-sely fur-nis-hed: bed in the cor-ner, with a brown blan-ket and a pil-low, a clo-set, a dres-ser. The walls we-re ba-re ex-cept for a small mir-ror. Ras-he-ed clo-sed the do-or.

"This is my ro-om."

He sa-id she co-uld ta-ke the gu-est ro-om. "I ho-pe you don't mind. I'm ac-cus-to-med to sle-eping alo-ne."

Ma-ri-am didn't tel-l him how re-li-eved she was, at le-ast abo-ut this.
The ro-om that was to be Ma-ri-am's was much smal-ler than the ro-om she'd sta-yed in at Jalil's ho-use. It had a bed, an old, gray-brown dres-ser, a small clo-set. The win-dow lo-ok-ed in-to the yard and, be-yond that, the stre-et be-low. Ras-he-ed put her su-it-ca-se in a cor-ner.

Ma-ri-am sat on the bed.

"You didn't no-ti-ce," he sa-id He was stan-ding in the do-or-way, sto-oping a lit-tle to fit.
"Lo-ok on the win-dow-sill. You know what kind they are? I put them the-re be-fo-re le-aving for He-rat."

Only now Ma-ri-am saw a bas-ket on the sill. Whi-te tu-be-ro-ses spil-led from its si-des.

"You li-ke them? They ple-ase you?"

"Yes."

"You can thank me then."

"Thank you. I'm sorry.Tas-ha-kor -"

"You're sha-king. May-be I sca-re you. Do I sca-re you? Are you frigh-te-ned of me?"

Ma-ri-am was not lo-oking at him, but she co-uld he-ar so-met-hing slyly play-ful in the-se qu-es-ti-ons, li-ke a ne-ed-ling. She qu-ickly sho-ok her he-ad in what she re-cog-ni-zed as her first lie in the-ir mar-ri-age.

"No? That's go-od, then. Go-od for you. Well, this is yo-ur ho-me now. You're go-ing to li-ke it he-re. You'll see. Did I tell you we ha-ve elect-ri-city? Most days and every night?"

He ma-de as if to le-ave. At the do-or, he pa-used, to-ok a long drag, crink-led his eyes aga-inst the smo-ke. Ma-ri-am tho-ught he was go-ing to say so-met-hing. But he didn't. He clo-sed the do-or, left her alo-ne with her su-it-ca-se and her flo-wers.

10.

The first few days, Ma-ri-am hardly left her ro-om. She was awa-ke-ned every dawn for pra-yer by the dis-tant cry of azan, af-ter which she craw-led back in-to bed. She was still in bed when she he-ard Ras-he-ed in the bath-ro-om, was-hing up, when he ca-me in-to her ro-om to check on her be-fo-re he went to his shop. From her win-dow, she watc-hed him in the yard, se-cu-ring his lunch in the re-ar car-ri-er pack of his bicyc-le, then wal-king his bicyc-le ac-ross the yard and in-to the stre-et. She watc-hed him pe-dal away, saw his bro-ad, thick-sho-ul-de-red fi-gu-re di-sap-pe-ar ar-oun-d the turn at the end of the stre-et.

For most of the days, Ma-ri-am sta-ye d in bed, fe-eling ad-rift and for-lorn. So-me-ti-mes she went downs-ta-irs to th e kitc-hen, ran her hands over the sticky, gre-ase-sta-ined co-un-ter, the vinyl, flo-we-red cur-ta-ins that smel-led li-ke bur-ned me-als. She lo-oked thro-ugh the ill-fit-ting dra-wers, at the mis-matc-hed spo-ons and
kni-ves, the co-lan-der and chip-ped, wo-oden spa-tu-las, the-se wo-uld-be inst-ru-ments of her new da-ily li-fe, all of it re-min-ding her of the ha-voc that had struck her li-fe, ma-king her fe-el up-ro-oted, disp-la-ced, li-ke an in-tru-der on so-me-one el-se's li-fe.

At the kol-ba, her ap-pe-ti-te had be-en pre-dic-tab-le. He-re, her sto-mach ra-rely grow-led for fo-od. So-me-ti-mes she to-ok a pla-te of lef-to-ver whi-te ri-ce and a scrap of bre-ad to the li-ving ro-om, by the win-dow. From the-re, she co-uld see the ro-ofs of the one-story ho-uses on the-ir stre-et. She co-uld see in-to the-ir yards too, the wo-men wor-king la-undry li-nes and sho-o-ing the-ir child-ren, chic-kens pec-king at dirt, the sho-vels and spa-des, the cows tet-he-red to tre-es.

She tho-ught lon-gingly of all the sum-mer nights that she and Na-na had slept on the flat ro-of of the kol-ba, lo-oking at the mo-on glo-wing over Gul Da-man, the night so hot the-ir shirts wo-uld cling to the-ir chests li-ke a wet le-af to a win-dow. She mis-sed the win-ter af-ter-no-ons of re-ading in the kol-ba with Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah, the clink of icic-les fal-ling on her ro-of from the tre-es, the crows ca-wing out-si-de from snow-bur-de-ned branc-hes.

Alo-ne in the ho-use, Ma-ri-am pa-ced rest-les-sly, from the kite-hen to the li-ving ro-om, up the steps to her ro-om and down aga-in. She en-ded up back in her ro-om, do-ing her pra-yers or sit-ting on the bed, mis-sing her mot-her, fe-eling na-use-ated and ho-me-sick.

It was with the sun's west-ward crawl that Ma-ri-am's an-xi-ty re-al-ly ratc-he-ted up. Her te-eth rat-tled when she tho-ught of the night, the ti-me when Ras-he-ed might at last de-ci-de to do to her what hus-bands did to the-ir wi-ves. She lay in bed, wrac-ked with ner-ves, as he ate alo-ne downs-ta-irs.

He al-ways stop-ped by her ro-om and po-ked his he-ad in.

"You can't be sle-eping al-re-ady. It's only se-ven. Are you awa-ke? Ans-wer me. Co-me, now."

He pres-sed on un-til, from the dark, Ma-ri-am sa-id, "I'm he-re."

He slid down and sat in her do-or-way. From her bed, she co-uld see his lar-ge-fra-med body, his long legs, the smo-ke swir-ling aro-und his ho-ok-no-sed pro-fi-le, the am-ber tip of his ci-ga-ret-te brigh-te-ning and dim-ming.

He told her abo-ut his day. A pa-ir of lo-a-fers he had cus-tom-ma-de for the de-puty fo-re-ign mi-nis-ter-who, Ras-he-ed sa-id, bo-ught sho-es only from him. An or-der for san-dals from a Po-lish dip-lo-mat and his wi-fe. He told her of the su-pers-ti-ti-ons pe-op-le had abo-ut sho-es: that put-ting them  on a bed in-vi-ted de-ath in-to the fa-mily, that a qu-ar-rel wo-uld fol-low if one put on the left shoe first.
"Unless it was do-ne unin-ten-ti-onal-ly on a Fri-day," he sa-id. "And did you know it's sup-po-sed to be a bad omen to tie sho-es to-get-her and hang them from a na-il?"


He pas-sed on to her things he had he-ard on the stre-ets, li-ke how the Ame-ri-can pre-si-dent Ric-hard Ni-xon had re-sig-ned over a scan-dal.

Ma-ri-am, who had ne-ver he-ard of Ni-xon, or the scan-dal that had for-ced him to re-sign, did not say anyt-hing back. She wa-ited an-xi-o-usly for Ras-he-ed to fi-nish tal-king, to crush his ci-ga-ret-te, and ta-ke his le-ave. Only when she'd he-ard him cross the hal-lway, he-ard his do-or open and clo-se, only then wo-uld the me-tal fist grip-ping her belly let go-Then one night he crus-hed his ci-ga-ret-te and ins-te-ad of sa-ying go-od night le-aned aga-inst the do-or-way.

"Are you ever go-ing to un-pack that thing?" he sa-id, mo-ti-on-ing with his he-ad to-ward her su-it-ca-se. He cros-sed his arms. "I fi-gu-red you might ne-ed so-me ti-me. But this is ab-surd. A we-ek's go-ne and…Well, then, as of to-mor-row mor-ning I ex-pect you to start be-ha-ving li-ke a wi-fe.Fah-mi-di? Is that un-ders-to-od?"

Ma-ri-am's te-eth be-gan to chat-ter.

"I ne-ed an ans-wer."

"Yes."

"Go-od," he sa-id. "What did you think? That this is a ho-tel? That I'm so-me kind of ho-tel-ke-eper? Well, it…Oh. Oh.

La il-lah u ilil-lah. What did I say abo-ut the crying? Ma-ri-am. What did I say to you abo-ut the crying?"

* * *

The next mor-ning, af-ter Ras-he-ed left for work, Ma-ri-am un-pac-ked her clot-hes and put them in the dres-ser. She drew a pa-il of wa-ter from the well and, with a rag, was-hed the win-dows of her ro-om and the win-dows to the li-ving ro-om downs-ta-irs. She swept the flo-ors, be-at the cob-webs flut-te-ring in the cor-ners of the ce-iling. She ope-ned the win-dows to air the ho-use.

She set three cups of len-tils to so-ak in a pot, fo-und a kni-fe and cut so-me car-rots and a pa-ir of po-ta-to-es, left them too to so-ak. She se-arc-hed for flo-ur, fo-und it in the back of one of the ca-bi-nets be-hind a row of dirty spi-ce jars, and ma-de fresh
do-ugh, kne-ad-ing it the way Na-na had shown her, pus-hing the do-ugh with the he-el of her hand, fol-ding the outer ed-ge, tur-ning it, and pus-hing it away aga-in. On-ce she had flo-ured the do-ugh, she wrap-p ed it in a mo-ist cloth, put on ahi-j-ab, and set out for the com-mu-nal tan-do-or.

Ras-he-ed had told her whe-re it was, down the stre-et, a left then a qu-ick right, but all Ma-ri-am had to do was fol-low the flock of wo-men and child-ren who we-re he-aded the sa-me way. The child-ren Ma-ri-am saw, cha-sing af-ter the-ir mot-ers or run-ning ahe-ad of them, wo-re shirts patc-hed and patc-hed aga-in. They wo-re tro-users that lo-oked too big or too small, san-dals with rag-ged straps that flap-p ed back and forth. They rol-led dis-car-ded old bicyc-le ti-res with sticks.

The-ir mot-ers wal-ked in gro-ups of three or fo-ur, so-me in bur-qas, ot-hers not. Ma-ri-am co-uld he-ar the-ir high-pitc-hed chat-ter, the-ir spi-ra -ling la-ughs. As she wal-ked with her he-ad down, she ca-ught bits  of the-ir ban-te r, which se-emingly al-ways had to do with sick child-ren or lazy, ung-ra-te-ful hus-bands.

As if the me-als co-ok them-sel-ves.
Wal-lah o bil-lah, ne-ver a mo-ment's rest!
And he says to me, I swe-ar it, it's true, he ac-tu-al-ly says to-me...

This end-less con-ver-sa-ti-on, the to-ne pla-in-ti-ve but oddl y che-er-ful, flew aro-und and aro-und in a circ-le. On it went, down the stre-et, aro-und the cor-nor, in li-ne at the tan-do-or. Hus-bands who gamb-led. Hus-bands who do-ted on the-ir mot-ers and wo-uldn't spend a ru-pi-ah on them, the wi-ves. Ma-ri-am won-de-red how so many wo-men co-uld suf-fer the sa-me mi-se-rab-le luck, to ha-ve mar-ri-ed, all of them, such dre-ad-ful men. Or was this a wi-fely ga-me that she did not know abo-ut, a da-ily ri-tu-al, li-ke so-aking ri-ce or ma-king do-ugh? Wo-uld they ex-pect her so-on to jo-in in?

In the tan-do-or li-ne, Ma-ri-am ca-ught si-de-ways glan-ces sh ot at her, he-ar-whis-pers. Her hands be-gan to swe-at. She ima-gi-ned they all knew that she'd be-en born aha-ra-mi, a so-ur-ce of sha-me to her fat-her and his fa-mily. They all knew that she'd bet-ra-yed her mot-er and dis-ga-ced her-self.

With a cor-nor of herthi-j-ab, she dab-bed at the mo-is-tu-re aho-ve her up-per lip and tri-ed to gat-her her ner-ves. For a few mi-nu-tes, everyt-hing went well-Then so-me-one tap-p ed her on the sho-ul-der. Ma-ri-am tur-ned aro-und and fo-und a light-skin-ned, plump wo-man we-ar-ing ahi-j-ab, li-ke her. She had short, wiry black ha-ir and a go-od-hu-mo-red, al-most per-fectly ro-und fa-ce. Her lips we-re much ful-ler than Ma-ri-am's, the lo-wer one slightly dro-opy, as tho-ugh drag-ged down by
the big, dark mole just below the line. She had big greenish eyes that shone at Mariam with an inviting gleam.

"You're Rasheed jan's new wife, aren't you?" the woman said, smiling widely.

"The one from Herat. You're so young! Mariam jan, isn't it? My name is Fariaba. I live on your street, five houses to your left, the one with the green door. This is my son-Noor."

The boy at her side had a smooth, happy face and wiry hair like his mother's. There was a patch of black hairs on the lobe of his left ear. His eyes had a mischievous, reckless light in them. He raised his hand. "Sa-la-am, Kha-la Jan."

"Noor is ten. I have an older boy too, Ah-mad."

"He's thir-teen," Noor said.

"Thir-teen going on forty." The woman Fariaba laughed. "My husband's name is Ha-kim," she said. "He's a teacher here in Deh-Ma-zang. You should come by sometime, we'll have a cup -"

And then suddenly, as if emboldened, the other women pushed past Fariaba and swarmed Mariam, forming a circle around her with alarming speed.

"So you're Rasheed jan's young bride -"

"How do you like Kabul?"

"I've been to Herat. I have a cousin there."

"Do you want a boy or a girl first?"

"The mi-na-rets! Oh, what be-a-uty! What a gor-ge-o-us city!"

"Boy is bet-ter, Mariam jan, they carry the family na-me."

"Bah! Boys get mar-ried and run off. Girls stay behind and take care of you when you're old"

"We heard you were coming."

"Have twins. One of each! Then everybody's happy."

Mariam backed away. She was hyperventilating. Her ears buzzed, her pulse flut-tered, her eyes darted from one face to another. She backed away again, but
there was now here to go to she was in the cen-ter of a circ-le. She spot- ted Fa-ri-ba, who was frow-ning, who saw that she was in dis-tress.

"Let her be!" Fa-ri-ba was sa-y-ing. "Mo-ve asi-de, let her be! You're frigh-te-ning her!"

Ma-ri-am clutc-hed the do-ugh clo-se to her chest and pus- hed thro-ugh the crowd aro-und her.

"Whe-re are you go-ing, ham-s-hi-ra?"

She pus- hed un-til so-me-how she was in the cle-ar and then she ran up the stre-et. It wasn't un-til she'd re-ac-hed the in-ter-sec-ti-on that she re-ali-zed she'd run the wrong way. She tur-ned aro-und and ran back in the ot-her di-rec-ti-on, he-ad down, trip-ping on-ce and scra-ping her knee bad-ly, then up aga-in and run-ning, bol-ting past the wo-men.

"What's the mat-ter with you?"

"You're ble-eding, ham-s-hi-ra!"

Ma-ri-am tur-ned one cor-ner, then the ot-her. She fo-und the cor-rect stre-et but sud-denly co-uld not re-mem-ber which was Ras-he-ed's ho-use. She ran up then down the stre-et, pan-ting, ne-ar te-ars now, be-gan try-ing do-ors blindly. So-me we-re loc-ked, ot- hers ope-ned only to re-ve-al un-fa-mi-li-ar yards, bar-king dogs, and start-led chic-kens. She pic-tu-red Ras-he-ed co-ming ho-me to find her still se-arc-hing this way, her knee ble-eding, lost on her own stre-et. Now she did start crying. She pus- hed on do-ors, mut-te-ring pa-nic-ked pra-yers, her fa-ce mo-ist with te-ars, un-til one ope-ned, and she saw, with re-li-ef, the out-ho-use, the well, the to-ols-hed. She slam-med the do-or be-hind her and tur-ned the bolt. Then she was on all fo-urs, next to the wall, retc-hing. When she was do-ne, she craw-led away, sat aga-inst the wall, with her legs spla-yed be-fo-re her. She had ne-ver in her li-fe felt so alo-ne.

* * *

When Ras-he-ed ca-me ho-me that night, he bro-ught with him a brown pa-per bag. Ma-ri-am was di-sap-po-in-ted that he did not no-ti-ce the cle-an win-dows, the swept flo-ors, the mis-sing cob-webs. But he did lo-ok ple-ased that she had al-re-ady set his din-ner pla-te, on a cle-an sof-rah spre-ad on the li-ving-ro-om flo-or.

"I ma-ded a-da-l" Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"Go-od. I'm star-ving."

She po-ured wa-ter for him from thea-fi-awa to wash his hands with. As he dri-ed with a to-wel, she put be-fo-re him a ste-am-ing bowl of da-al and a pla-te of fluf-fy
white rice. This was the first meal she had cooked for him, and Mariam wished she had been in a better state when she made it. She'd still been shaken from the incident at the tandoor as she'd cooked, and all day she had fretted about the dal's consistency, its color, worried that he would think she'd stirred in too much ginger or not enough turmeric.

He dipped his spoon into the gold-colored dal.

Mariam swayed a bit. What if he was disappointed or angry? What if he pushed his plate away in displeasure?

"Careful," she managed to say. "It's hot."

Rasheed pursed his lips and blew, then put the spoon into his mouth.

"It's good," he said. "A little undersalted but good. Maybe better than good, even."

Relieved, Mariam looked on as he ate. A flare of pride caught her off guard. She had done well—maybe better than good, even—and it surprised her, this thrill she felt over his small compliment. The day's earlier unpleasantness receded a bit.

"Tomorrow is Friday," Rasheed said. "What do you say I show you around?"

"Around Kabul?"

"No. Calcutta."

Mariam blinked.

"It's a joke. Of course Kabul. Where else?" He reached into the brown paper bag. "But first, something I have to tell you."

He fished a sky blue burqa from the bag. The yards of pleated cloth spilled over his knees when he lifted it. He rolled up the burqa, looked at Mariam.

"I have customers, Mariam, men, who bring their wives to my shop. The women come uncovered, they talk to me directly, look me in the eye without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show their knees. Sometimes they even put their feet in front of me, the women do, for measurements, and their husbands stand there and watch. They allow it. They think nothing of a stranger touching their wives' bare feet! They think they're being modern men, intellectuals, on account of their education, I suppose. They don't see that they're spoiling their own nang and namoos, their honor and pride."

He shook his head.
"Mostly, they li-ve in the ric-her parts of Ka-bul. I'll ta-ke you the-re. You'll see. But they're he-re too, Ma-ri-am, in this very ne-igh-bor-ho-od, the-se soft men. The-re's a te-ac-her li-ving down the stre-et, Ha-kim is his na-me, and I see his wi-fe Fa-ri-ba all the ti-me wal-king the stre-ets alo-ne with not-hing on her he-ad but a scarf. It em-bar-ras-ses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost con-trol of his wi-fe."

He fi-xed Ma-ri-am with a hard gla-re.

"But I'm a dif-fe-rent bre-ed of man, Ma-ri-am. Whe-re I co-me from, one wrong lo-ok, one imp-ro-per word, and blo-od is spil-led. Whe-re I co-me from, a wo-man's fa-ce is her hus-band's bu-si-ness only. I want you to re-mem-ber that. Do you un-ders-tand?"
Ma-ri-am nod-ded. When he ex-ten-ded the bag to her, she to-ok it.

The ear-li-er ple-asu-re over his ap-pro-val of her co-oking had eva-po-ra-ted. In its ste-ad, a sen-sa-ti-on of shrin-king. This man's will felt to Ma-ri-am as im-po-sing and im-mo-vab-le as the Sa-fid-koh mo-un-ta-ins lo-oming over Gul Da-man.

Ras-he-ed pas-sed the pa-per bag to her. "We ha-ve an un-ders-tan-ding, then. Now, let me ha-ve so-mo more of thatda-al."

11.

Ma-ri-am had ne-ver be-fo-re worn a bur-qa. Ras-he-ed had to help her put it on. The pad-ded he-ad-pi-ece felt tight and he-avy on her skull, and it was stran-ge se-e-ing the world thro-ugh a mesh sce-en. She prac-ti-ced wal-king aro-und her ro-om in it and kept step-ping on the hem and stumb-ling. The loss of pe-rip-he-ral vi-si-on was un-ner-ving, and she did not li-ke the suf-fo-ca-ting way the ple-ated cloth kept pres-sing aga-inst her mo-uth.

"You'll get used to it," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "With ti-me, I bet you'll even li-ke it."
They to-ok a bus to a pla-ce Ras-he-ed cal-led the Shar-e-Nau Park, whe-re child-ren pus-hed each ot-her on swings and slap-ped vol-ley-bal-ls over rag-ged nets ti-ed to tree trunks. They strol-led to-get-her and watc-hed boys fly ki-tes, Ma-ri-am wal-king be-si-de Ras-he-ed, trip-ping now and then on the bur-qa's hem. For lunch, Ras-he-ed to-ok her to eat in a sma ll ke-bab ho-use ne-ar a mos-que he cal-led the Ha-ji Yag-ho-ub. The flo-or was stic-ky and the air smoky. The walls smel-led fa-intly of raw me-at and the mu-sic, which Ras-he-ed desc-ri-bed to her aslo-ga-ri, was lo-ud. The co-oks we-re thin boys who fan-ned sk e-wers with one hand and swat-ted gnats with the ot-her. Ma-ri-am, who had ne-ver be-en in-si-de a res-ta-urant, fo-und it odd at first to sit in a crow-ded ro-om with so many stran-gers, to lift her bur-qa to put mor-sels of fo-od in-to her mo-uth. A hint of the sa-me an-xi-ety as the day at the tan-do-or stir-red in her sto-mach, but Ras-he-ed's pre-sen-ce was of so-me com-fort, and, af-ter a whi-le, she did not mind so much the mu-sic, the smo-ke, even the
pe-op-le. And the bur-qa, she le-ar-ned to her surp-ri-se, was al-so com-for-ting. It was li-ke a one-way win-dow. In-si-de it, she was an ob-ser-ver, buf-fe-red from the scru-ti-ni-zing eyes of stran-gers. She no lon-ger wor-ri-ed that pe-op-le knew, with a sing-le glu-ces, all the sha-me-ful sec-rets of her past.

On the stre-ets, Ras-he-ed na-med va-ri-o-u-s bu-il-dings with aut-ho-ri-ty; this is the Ame-ri-can Em-bas-sy, he sa-id, that the Fo-re-ign Mi-nistry. He po-in-ted to cars, sa-id the-ir na-mes and whe-re they we-re ma-de: So-vi-et Vol-gas, Ame-ri-can Chev-ro-lets, Ger-man Opels.

"Which is yo-ur fa-vo-ri-te?" he as-ked Ma-ri-am he-si-ta-ted, po-in-ted to a Vol-ga, and Ras-he-ed la-ug-hed Ka-bul was far mo-re crow-ded than the lit-tle that Ma-ri-am had se-en of He-rat. The-re we-re fe-fer tre-es and fe-werga-ris pul-led by hor-ses, but mo-re cars, tal-ler bu-il-dings, mo-re traf-fic lights and mo-re pa-ved ro-ads. And every-whe-re Ma-ri-am he-ard the city's pe-cu-li-ar di-alect: "De-ar" wa-sj-on ins-te-ad of jo, "sis-ter" be-ca-ca be-hi-ra in-s-te-ad of ham-s-hi-reh, and so on.

From a stre-et ven-dor, Ras-he-ed bo-ught her ice cre-am. It was the first ti-me she'd eaten ice cre-am and Ma-ri-am had ne-ver ima-gi-ned that such tricks co-uld be pla-yed on a pa-la-te. She de-vo-ured the en-ti-re bowl, the crus-hed pis-tac-hio top-ping, the tiny ri-ce no-od-les at the bot-tom. She mar-ve-led at the be-witc-hing tex-tu-re, the lap-ping swe-et-ness of it.

They wal-ked on to a pla-ce cal-led Koc-heh-Morg-ha, Chic-ken Stre-et. It was a nar-row, crow-ded ba-za-ar in a ne-igh-bor-ho-od that Ras-he-ed sa-id was one of Ka-bul's we-alt-hi-er ones.

"Aro-und he-re is whe-re fo-re-ign dip-lo-mats li-ve, rich bu-si-nes-smen, mem-bers of the ro-yal fa-mily-that sort of pe-op-le. Not li-ke you and me."

"I don't see any chic-kens," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"That's the one thing you can't find on Chic-ken Stre-et." Ras-he-ed la-ug-hed The stre-et was li-ned with shops and lit-tle stalls that sold lambs-kin hats and ra-in-bow-co-lo-recha-pans. Ras-he-ed stop-ped to lo-ok at an eng-ra-ved sil-ver dag-ger in one shop, and, in anot-her, at an old rif-le that the shop-ke-eper as-su-red Ras-he-ed was a re-lic from the first war aga-inst the Bri-tish.

"And I'm Mos-he Da-yan," Ras-he-ed mut-te-red. He half smi-led, and it se-emed to Ma-ri-am that this was a smi-le me-ant only for her. A pri-va-te, mar-ri-ed smi-le.

They strol-led past car-pet shops, han-dic-raft shops, pastry shops, flo-fer shops, and shops that sold su-its for men and dres-ses for wo-men, and, in them, be-hind
la-ce cur-ta-ins, Ma-ri-am saw yo-ung girls se-wing but-tions and iro-ning col-lars. From ti-me to ti-me, Ras-he-ed gre-eted a shop-ke-eper he knew, so-me-ti-mes in Far-si, ot-her ti-mes in Pash-to. As they sho-ok hands and kis-sed on the che-ek, Ma-ri-am sto-od a few fe-et away. Ras-he-ed did not wa-ve her over, did not int-ro-du-ce her.

He as-ked her to wa-it out-si-de an emb-ro-idery shop. "I know the ow-ner," he sa-id. "I'll just go in for a mi-nu-te, say mys-a-la-am."

Ma-ri-am wa-ited out-si-de on the crow-ded si-de-walk. She watc-hed the cars craw-ling up Chic-ken Stre-et, thre-ad-ing thro-ugh the hor-de of haw-kers and pe-dest-ri-ans, hon-king at child-ren and don-keys who wo-uld'n mo-ve. She watc-hed the bo-red-lo-oking merc-hants in-si-de the-ir tiny stalls, smo-king, or spit-ting in-to brass spit-to-ons, the-ir fa-ces emer-ging from the sha-dows now and then to ped-dle tex-ti-les and fur-col-la-red-
po-o-si-in co-ats to pas-sersby.

But it was the wo-men who drew Ma-ri-am's eyes the most.

The wo-men in this part of Ka-bul we-re a dif-fe-rent bre-ed from the wo-men in the po-orer ne-igh-bor-ho-ods-li-ke the one whe-re she and Ras-he-ed li-ved, whe-re so many of the wo-men co-ve-red fully. The-se wo-men we-re-what was the word Ras-he-ed had used?-"mo-dern." Yes, mo-dern Afg-han wo-men mar-ri-ed to mo-dern Afg-han men who did not mind that the-ir wi-ves wal-ked among stran-gers with ma-ke-up on the-ir fa-ces and not-hing on the-ir he-ads. Ma-ri-am watc-hed them can-te-ring unin-hi-bi-ted down the stre-et, so-me-ti-mes with a man, so-me-ti-mes alo-ne, so-me-ti-mes with rosy-che-eked child-ren who wo-re shiny sho-es and watc-hes with le-at-her bands, who wal-ked bicyc-les with high-ri-se hand-le-bars and gold-co-lo-red spo-kes-unli-ke the child-ren in Deh-Ma-zang, who bo-re sand-fly scars on the-ir che-eks and rol-led old bicyc-le ti-ress with sticks.

The-se wo-men we-re all swin-ging hand-bags and rust-ling skirts. Ma-ri-am even spot- ted one smo-king be-hind the whe-el of a car. The-ir na-ils we-re long, po-lis-hed pink or oran-ge, the-ir lips red as tu-lips. They wal-ked in high he-els, and qu-ickly, as if on per-pe-tu-al-ly ur-gent bu-si-ness. They wo-re dark sung-las-ses, and, when they bre-ezed by, Ma-ri-am caught a whiff of the-ir per-fu-me. She ima-gi-ned that they all had uni-ver-sity de-gre-es, that they wor-ked in of-fi-ce bu-il-dings, be-hind desks of the-ir own, whe-re they typed and smo-ked and ma-de im-por-tant te-le-pho-ne calls to im-por-tant pe-op-le. The-se wo-men mysti-fi-ed Ma-ri-am. They ma-de her awa-re of her own low-li-ness, her pla-in lo-oks, her lack of as-pi-ra-ti-ons, her ig-no-ran-ce of so many things.

Then Ras-he-ed was tap-ping her on the sho-ul-der and han-ding her so-met-hing he-re.
It was a dark maroon silk shawl with beaded fringes and edges embroidered with gold thread.

"Do you like it?"

Mariam looked up. Rasheed did a touching thing then. He blinked and averted her gaze.

Mariam thought of Jalil, of the empathetic, jovial way in which he'd pushed his jewelry at her, the overpowering cheerfulness that left no room for response but meek gratitude. Nana had been right about Mil's gifts. They had been half-hearted tokens of penance, insincerity, corrupt gestures meant more for his own appeasement than hers. This shawl, Mariam saw, was a true gift.

"It's beautiful," she said.

That night, Rasheed visited her room again. But instead of smoking in the doorway, he crossed the room and sat beside her where she lay on the bed. The springs creaked as the bed tilted to his side.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then his hand was on her neck, his thick fingers slowly pressing the knobs in the back of it. His thumb slid down, and now it was stroking the hollow above her collarbone, then the flesh beneath it. Mariam began shivering. His hand crept lower still, lower, his fingernails catching in the cotton of her blouse.

"I can't," she croaked, looking at his moonlit profile, his thick shoulders and broad chest, the tufts of gray hair protruding from his open collar.

His hand was on her right breast now, squeezing it hard through the blouse, and she could hear him breathing deeply through the nose.

He slid under the blanket beside her. She could feel his hand working at his belt, at the drawstring of her trousers. Her own hands clenched the sheets in fistfuls. He rolled on top of her, wriggled and shifted, and she let out a whimper. Mariam closed her eyes, gritted her teeth.

The pain was sudden and astonishing. Her eyes sprang open. She sucked air through her teeth and bit on the knuckle of her thumb. She slung her free arm over Rasheed's back and her fingers dug at his shirt.

Rasheed buried his face into her pillow, and Mariam stared, wide-eyed, at the ceiling above his shoulder, shivering, lips pursed, feeling the heat of his...
quick breaths on her shoulder. The air between them smelled of tobacco, of the onions and grilled lamb they had eaten earlier. Now and then, his ear rubbed against her cheek, and she knew from the scratchy feel that he had shaved it.

When it was done, he rolled off her, panting. He dropped his fore-arm over his brow. In the dark, she could see the blue hands of his watch. They lay that way for a while, on the ir backs, not looking at each other.

"There is no shame in this, Mariam," he said, slurring a little. "It's what married people do. It's what the Prophet himself and his wives did. There is no shame."

A few moments later, he pushed back the blanket and left the room, leaving her with the impression of his head on her pillow, leaving her to wait out the pain down below, to look at the frozen stars in the sky and a cloud that draped the face of the moon like a wedding veil.

12.

Jtva-madan came in the fall that year, 1974. For the first time in her life, Mariam saw how the sighting of the new crescent moon could transform an entire city, alter its rhythm and mood. She noticed a drowsy hush overtaking Kabul. Traffic became languid, scant, even quiet. Shops emptied. Restaurants turned off their lights, closed their doors. Mariam saw no smokers on the streets, no cups of tea steaming from window ledges. And at iftar, when the sun dipped in the west and the cannon fired from the Shir Dar-waza mountain, the city broke its fast, and so did Mariam, with bread and dates, tasting for the first time in her fifteen years the sweetness of sharing in a communal experience.

Except for a handful of days, Rasheed didn't observe the fast. The few times he did, he came home in a sour mood. Hunger made him curt, irritable, impatient. One night, Mariam was a few minutes late with dinner, and he started eating bread with radishes. Even after Mariam put the rice and lamb and okra, he wouldn't touch it. He said nothing, and went on chewing the bread, his temples working, the vein on his forehead, full and angry. He went on chewing and staring ahead, and when Mariam spoke to him he looked at her without seeing her face and put another piece of bread into his mouth.

Mariam was relieved when Ramadan ended.

Back at the kolba, on the first of three days of Eid-ul-Fitr celebration that followed Ramadan, Jalil would visit Mariam and Nana. Dressed in suit and tie, he would come bearing Eid presents. One year, he gave Mariam a wool scarf. The three of them would sit for tea and then Jalil would ex-cuse himself
"Off to ce-leb-ra-te Eid with his re-al fa-mily," Na-na wo-uld say as he cros-sed the stre-am and wa-ved-Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah wo-uld co-me too. He wo-uld bring Ma-ri-am cho-co-la-te candy wrap-ped in fo-il, a bas- ket-ful of dyed bo-iled eggs, co-oki-es. Af-ter he was go-ne, Ma-ri-am wo-uld climb one of the wil- lows with her tre-at-s. Perc-hed on a high branch, she wo-uld eat Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah's cho-co-la-tes and drop the fo-il wrap-pers un-til they lay scat-tee-red abo-ut the trunk of the tree li-ke sil-ver blos-soms. When the cho-co-la-te was go-ne, she wo-uld start in on the co-oki-es, and, with a pen-cil, she wo-uld draw fa-ces on the eggs he had bro-ught her now. But the-re was lit-tle ple-asu-re in this for her. Ma-ri-am dre-aded Eid, this ti-me of hos-pi-ta-lity and ce-re-mony, when fa-mi-li-es dres-sed in the-ir best and vi-si-ted each ot-her. She wo-uld ima-gi-ne the air in He-rat crack-ling with mer-ri-ness, and high-spi-ri-ted, bright-eyed pe-op-le sho-we-ring each ot-her with en-de-ar-ments and go-od-will. A for-lorn-ness wo-uld des-cend on her li-ke a shro-ud then and wo-uld lift only when Eid had pas-sed.

This ye-ar, for the first ti-me, Ma-ri-am saw with her eyes the Eid of her child-ho-od ima-gi-nings.

Ras-he-ed and she to-ok to the stre-ets. Ma-ri-am had ne-ver wal-ked amid such li-ve-li-ness. Un-da-un-ted by the chilly we-at-her, fa-mi-li-es had flo-oded the city on the-ir fre-ne-tic ro-unds to vi-sit re-la-ri-ves. On the-ir own stre-et, Ma-ri-am saw Fa-ri-ba and her son No-or, who was dres-sed in a su-it. Fa-ri-ba, we-aring a whi-te scarf, wal-ked be-si-de a small-bo-ned, shy-lo-oking man with eyeg-las-ses. Her ol-der son was the-re too-Ma-ri-am so-me-re-mem-be-red Fa-ri-ba sa-ying his na-me, Ah-mad, at the tan-do-or that first ti-me. He had de-ep-set, bro-oding eyes, and his fa-ce was mo-re tho-ught-ful, mo-re so-l emn, than his yo-un-ger brot-her's, a fa-ce as sug-ges-ti-ve of early ma-t u-rity as his brot-her's wa-s of lin-ge-ring bo-yish-ness. Aro-und Ah-mad's neck was a glit-te-ring al-lah pen-dant.

Fa-ri-ba must ha-ve re-cog-ni-zed her, wal-king in bur-qa be-si-de Ras-he-ed. She wa-ved, and cal-led out,"Eid-mu-ba-rak!"

From in-si-de the bur-qa, Ma-ri-am ga-ve her a ghost of a nod.
"So you know that wo-man, the te-ac-her's wi-fe?" Ras-he-ed sa-id Ma-ri-am sa-id she didn't.

"Best you stay away. She's a nosy gos-si-per, that one. And the hus-band fan-ci-es him-self so-me kind of edu-ca-ted in-tel-lec-tu-al But he's a mo-use. Lo-ok at him. Do-esn't he lo-ok li-ke a mo-use?"

That night they went to Cha-man, and, standing behind Ras-he-ed, Ma-ri-am watched fireworks light up the sky, in flashes of green, pink, and yellow. She missed sitting with Mullah Fa-izul-lah outside the Kol-ba, watching the fireworks explode over Herat in the distance, the sudden bursts of color reflected in her tutor's soft, cataract-riddled eyes. But, mostly, she missed Na-na. Mariam wished her mother were alive to see this. To see her, amid all of it. To see at last that contentment and beauty were not unattainable things. Even for the likes of them.

* * *

They had Eid visitors at the house. They were all men, friends of Ras-he-ed's. When a knock came, Mariam knew to go upstairs to her room and close the door. She stayed there, as the men sipped tea downstairs with Ras-he-ed, smoked, chatted. Ras-he-ed had told Mariam that she was not to come down until the visitors had left.

Mariam didn't mind. In truth, she was even flattered. Ras-he-ed saw sanctity in what they had to gether. Her honor, hernma-mos, was so-mething worth guarding to him. She felt prized by his protective ness. Treasured and signi-ficant.

On the third and last day of Eid, Ras-he-ed went to visit some friends. Mariam, who'd had a queasy stomach all night, boiled some water and made herself a cup of green tea sprinkled with crushed cardamom. In the living room, she took in the aftermath of the previous night's Eid visits: the overturned cups, the half-chewed pumpkin seeds stashed between mattresses, the plates crusted with the outline of last night's meal. Mariam set about cleaning up the mess, marveling at how energetically lazy men could be.

She didn't mean to go into Ras-he-ed's room. But the cleaning took her from the living room to the stairs, and then to the hallway upstairs and to his door, and, the next thing she knew, she was in his room for the first time, sitting on his bed, feeling like a trespasser.

She took in the heavy, green drapes, the pairs of polished shoes lined up neatly along the wall, the closet door, where the gray paint had chipped and showed the wood underneath. She spotted a pack of cigarettes atop the dresser beside his bed. She put one between her lips and stood before the small oval mirror on the wall. She puffed air into the mirror and made ash-tapping motions. She put it back. She could never manage the seamless grace with which Kabuli women smoked. On her, it looked coarse, ridiculous.

Guiltyily, she slid open the top drawer of his dresser.

She-took in-the he-avy, gre-en dra-pes, the pa-irs of po-lis-hed sho-es li-ned up ne-atly al-long the wall, the clo-set do-or, whe-re the gray pa-int had chip-ped and sho-wed the wo-od be-ne-ath. She spot-ted a pack of ci-ga-ret-tes atop the dres-ser be-si-de his bed. She put one bet-we-en her lips and sto-od be-fo-re the small oval mir-ror on the wall. She puf-fed air in-to the mir-ror and ma-de ash-tap-ping mo-ti-ons. She put it back. She co-uld ne-ver ma-na-ge the se-am-less gra-ce with which Ka-bu-li wo-men smo-ked. On her, it lo-oked co-ar-se, ri-di-cu-lo-us.

Gu-il-tily, she slid open the top dra-ker of his dres-ser.
She saw the gun first. It was black, with a wo-oden grip and a short muz-zle. Ma-ri-am ma-de su-re to me-mo-ri-ze which way it was fa-cing be-fo-re she pic-ked it up. She tur-ned it over in her hands. It was much he-avi-er than it lo-ok-ed. The grip felt smo-oth in her hand, and the muz-zle was cold. It was dis-qu-i-eting to her that Ras-he-ed ow-ned so-met-hing who-se so-le pur-po-se was to kill anot-her per-son. But su-rely he kept it for the-ir sa-fety. Her sa-fety.

Be-ne-ath the gun we-re se-ve-ral ma-ga-zi-nes with cur-ling cor-ners. Ma-ri-am ope-ned one. So-met-hing in si-de her drop-ped. Her mo-uth ga-ped of its own will.

On every pa-ge we-re wo-men, be-a-uti-ful wo-men, who wo-re no shirts, no tro-users, no socks or un-der-pants. They wo-re not-hing at all. They lay in beds amid tumb-led she-ets and ga-zed back at Ma-ri-am with half-lid-ded eyes. In most of the pic-tu-res, the-ir legs we-re apart, and Ma-ri-am had a full vi-ew of the dark pla-ce bet-we-en. In so-me, the wo-men we-re prost-ra-ted as if-God for-bid this tho-ught-in su-jda for pra-yer. They lo-ok-ed back over the-ir sho-ul-ders with a lo-ok of bo-red con-tempt.

Ma-ri-am qu-ick-ly put the ma-ga-zi-ne back whe-re she'd fo-und it. She felt drug-ged. Who we-re the-se wo-men? How co-uld they al-low them-sel-ves to be pho-tog-rap-hed this way? Her sto-mach re-vol-ted with dis-tas-te. Was this what he did then, tho-se nights that he did not vi-sit her ro-om? Had she be-en a di-sap-po-int-ment to him in this par-ti-cu-lar re-gard? And what abo-ut all his talk of ho-nor and prop-ri-ety, his di-sap-pro-val of the fe-ma-le cus-to-mers, who, af-ter all, we-re only sho-wing him the-ir fe-et to get fit-ted for sho-es? A wo-man's fa-ce, he'd sa-id, is her hus-band's bu-si-ness only. Su-rely the wo-men on the-se pa-ges had hus-bands, so-me of them must. At the le-ast, they had brot-her-s. If so, why did Ras-he-ed in-sist that she co-ver when he tho-ught not-hing of lo-ok-ing at the pri-va-te are-as of ot-her men's wi-ves and sis-ters?

Ma-ri-am sat on his bed, em-bar-ras-sed and con-fu-sed She cup-ped her fa-ce with her hands and clo-sed her eyes. She bre-at-hed and bre-at-hed un-til she felt cal-mer. Slowly, an exp-la-na-ti-on pr-e-sen-ted it-self He was a man, af-ter all, li-ving alo-ne for ye-ars be-fo-re she had mo-ved in. His ne-eds dif-fe-red from hers. For her, all the-se months la-ter, the-ir co-up-ling was stil l an exer-ci-se in to-le-ra-ting pa-in. His ap-pe-ti-te, on the ot-her hand, was fi-er-ce, so-me-ti-mes bor-de-ring on the vi-olent. The way he pin-ned her down, his hard squ-e-ezes at her bre-asts, how fu-ri-o-usly his hips wor-ked. He was a man. All tho-se ye-ars wit-ho-ut a wo-man. Co-uld she fa-ult him for be-ing the way God had cre-ated him?

Ma-ri-am knew that she co-uld ne-ver talk to him abo-ut this. It was un-men-ti-onab-le. But was it un-for-gi-vab-le? She only had to think of the ot-her man in her li-fe. Jalil, a hus-band of three and fat-her of ni-ne at the ti-me, ha-ving re-la-ti-ons with Na-na out of wed-lock. Which was wor-se, Ras-he-ed's ma-ga-zi-ne
or what Jalil had do-ne? And what en-tit-led her any-way, a vil-la-ger, aha-ra-mi, to pass judg-ment?

Ma-ri-am tri-ed the bot-tom dra-wer of the dres-ser.

It was the-re that she fo-und a pic-tu-re of the boy, Yu-nus. It was black-and-whi-te. He lo-ooked fo-ur, may-be fi-ve. He was we-ar-ing a stri-ped shirt and a bow tie. He was a hand-so-me lit-tle boy, with a slen-der no-se, brown ha-ir, and dark, slightly sun-ken eyes. He lo-oked dis-trac-ted, as tho-ugh so-met-hing had ca-ught his eye just as the ca-me-ra had flas-hed.

Be-ne-ath that, Ma-ri-am fo-und anot-her pho-to, al-so black-and-whi-te, this one slightly mo-re gra-iny. It was of a se-ated wo-man and, be-hind her, a thin-ner, yo-un-ger Ras-he-ed, with black ha-ir. The wo-man was be-a-uti-ful. Not as be-a-uti-ful as the wo-men in the ma-ga-zine, per-haps, but be-a-uti-ful. Cer-ta-inly mo-re be-a-uti-ful than her, Ma-ri-am. She had a de-li-ca-te chin and long, black ha-ir par-ted in the cen-ter. High che-ek-bo-nes and a gent-le fo-re-he-ad. Ma-ri-am pic-tu-red her own fa-ce, her thin lips and long chin, and felt a flic-ker of je-alo-usy. She lo-oked at this pho-to for a long ti-me. The-re was so-met-hing va-gu-ely un-set-tling abo-ut the way Ras-he-ed se-emed to lo-om over the wo-man. His hands on her sho-ul-ders. His sa-vo-ring, tight-lip-ped smi-le and her uns-mi-ling, sul-len fa-ce. The way her body til-ted for-ward subtly, as tho-ugh she we-re trying to wrig-gle free of his hands.

Ma-ri-am put everyt-hing back whe- re she'd fo-und it.

La-ter, as she was do-ing la-undry, she reg-ret-ted that she had sne-aked aro-und in his ro-om. For what? What thing of subs-tan-ce had she le-ar-ned abo-ut him? That he ow-ned a gun, that he was a man with the ne-eds of a man? And she sho-uldn't ha-ve sta-red at the pho-to of him and his wi-fe for as long as she had. Her eyes had re-ad me-an-ing in-to what was ran-dom body pos-tu- re cap-tu-red in a sing-le mo-ment of ti-me.

What Ma-ri-am felt now, as the lo-aded clot-hes-li-nes bo-un-ced he-avily be-fo-re her, was sor-row for Ras-he-ed. He too had had a hard li-fe, a li-fe mar-ked by loss and sad turns of fa-te. Her tho-ughts re-tur-ned to his boy Yu-nus, who had on-ce bu-ilt snow-men in this yard, who-se fe-et had po-un-ded the-se sa-me sta-irs. The la-ke had snatc-hed him from Ras-he-ed, swal-lo-wed him up, just as a wha-le had swal-lo-wed the boy's na-me-sa-ke prop-het in the Ko-ran. It pa-ined Ma-ri-am- it pa-ined her con-si-de-rably to pic-tu-re Ras-he-ed ma-nic-stric-ken and help-less, pa-cing the banks of the la-ke and ple-ad-ing with it to spit his son back on-to dry land.

And she felt for the first ti-me a kins-hip with her hus-band. She told her-self that they wo-uld ma-ke go-od com-pa-ni-ons af-ter all.

13.
On the bus ride home from the doctor, the strangest thing was happening to Mariam. Everywhere she looked, she saw bright colors: on the drab, gray concrete apartments, on the tin-roofed, open-fronted stores, in the muddy water flowing in the gutters. It was as though a rainbow had melted into her eyes.

Rasheed was drumming his gloved fingers and humming a song. Every time the bus bucked over a pothole and jerked forward, his hand shot protectively over her belly.

"What about Zalmai?" he said. "It's a good Pashton name."

"What if it's a girl?" Mariam said.

"I think it's a boy. Yes. A boy."

A murmur was passing through the bus. Some passengers were pointing at something and other passengers were leaning across seats to see.

"Look," said Rasheed, tapping a knuckle on the glass. He was smiling. "There. See?"

On the streets, Mariam saw people stopping in their tracks. At traffic lights, faces emerged from the windows of cars, turned upward toward the falling softness. What was it about a season's first snowfall, Mariam wondered, that was so entrancing? Was it the chance to see something as yet unsoiled, untrod? To catch the fleeting grace of a new season, a lovely beginning, before it was trampled and corrupted?

"If it's a girl," Rasheed said, "and it isn't, but, if it is a girl, then you can choose whatever name you want."

* * *

Ma-hiam awoke the next morning to the sound of sawing and hammering. She wrapped a shawl around her and went out into the snowblown yard. The heavy snowfall of the previous night had stopped. Now only a scattering of light, swirling flakes tickled her cheeks. The air was windless and smelled like burning coal. Kabul was eerily silent, quilted in white, tendrils of smoke snaking here and there.

She found Rasheed in the toolshed, pounding nails into a plank of wood. When he saw her, he removed a nail from the corner of his mouth.

"It was going to be a surprise. He'll need a crib. You weren't supposed to see until it was done."
Ma-ri-am wis-hed he wo-uldn't do that, hitch his ho-pes to its be-ing a boy. As happy as she was abo-ut this preg-nancy, his ex-pec-ta-ti-on we-ig-hed on her. Yes-ter-day, Ras-he-ed had go-ne out and co-me ho-me with a su-ede win-ter co-at for a boy, li-ned in-si-de with soft she-eps-kin, the sle-eves emb-ro-ide-red with fi-ne red and yel-low silk thre-ad.

Ras-he-ed lif-ted a long, nar-row bo-ard. As he be-gan to saw it in half, he sa-id the sta-irs wor-ri-ed him. "So-met-hing will ha-ve to be do-ne abo-ut them la-ter, when he's old eno-ugh to climb." The sto-ve wor-ri-ed him too, he sa-id. The kni-ves and forks wo-uld ha-ve to be sto-wed so-mew-he-re out of re-ach. "You can't be too ca-re-ful Boys are reck-less cre-atu-res."

Ma-ri-am pul-led the shawl aro-und her aga-inst the chill.

* * *

The next mor-ning, Ras-he-ed sa-id he wan- ted to in-vi-te his fri-ends for din-ner to ce-leb-ra-te. All mor-ning, Ma-ri-am cle-aned len-tils and mo-is-te-ned ri-ce. She sli-ced eg-gplants for bo-ra-ni, and co-oked le-eks and gro-und be-ef foraus-hak. She swept the flo-or, be-at the cur-ta-ins, aired the ho-use, des-pi-te the snow that had star-ted up aga-in. She ar-ran-ged mat-tres-ses and cus-hi-ons along the walls of the li-ving ro-om, pla-ced bowls of candy and ro-as-ted al-monds on the tab-le.

She was in her ro-om by early eve-ning be-fo-re the first of the men ar-ri-ved. She lay in bed as the ho-ots and la-ugh-ter and ban-te-ring vo-ices downs-ta-irs be-gan to mush-ro-om. She co-uldn't ke-ep her hands from drif-ting to her belly. She tho-ught of what was gro-wing the-re, and hap-pi-ness rus-hed in li-ke a gust of wind blo-wing a do-or wi-de open. Her eyes wa-te-red.

Ma-ri-am tho-ught of her six-hund-red-and-fifty-ki-lo-me-ter bus trip with Ras-he-ed, from He-rat in the west, ne-ar the bor-der with Iran, to Ka-bul in the east. They had pas-sed small towns and big towns, and knots of lit-tle vil-la-ges that kept sprin-ging up one af-ter anot-her. They had go-ne over mo-un-ta-ins and ac-ross raw-bur-ned de-serts, from one pro-vin-ce to the next. And he-re she was now, over tho-se bo-ul-ders and parc-hed hills, with a ho-me of her own, a hus-band of her own, he-ading to-ward one fi-nal, che-ris-hed pro-vin-ce: Mot-her-ho-od. How de-lec-tab-le it was to think of this baby, her baby, the-ir baby. How glo-ri-o-us it was to know that her lo-ve for it al-re-ady dwar-fed anyt-hing she had ever felt as a hu-man be-ing, to know that the-re was no ne- ed any lon-ger for peb-ble ga-mes.

Downs-ta-irs, so-me-one was tu-ning a har-mo-ni-um. Then the clan-ging of a ham-mer tu-ning a tab-la. So-me-one cle-ared his thro-at. And then the-re was whist-ling and clap-ping and yip-ping and sin-ging.
Ma-ri-am stroked the softness of her belly. *No bigger than a fingernail,* the doctor had said.

*I'm going to be a mother,* she thought. Then she was laughing to herself, and saying it over and over, relishing the words.

When Ma-ri-am thought of this baby, her heart swelled inside of her. It swelled and swelled until all the loss, all the grief, all the loneliness and self-abasement of her life was washed away. This was why God had brought her here, all the way across the country. She knew this now. She remembered a verse from the Koran that Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah had taught her:

*And Allah is the East and the West, therefore where you turn there is Allah's purpose...* She laid down her prayer rug and did *namaz.* When she was done, she cupped her hands before her face and asked God not to let all this good fortune slip away from her.

* * *

It was Ras-heed’S idea to go to the hamam. Ma-ri-am had never been to a bathhouse, but he said there was nothing finer than stepping out and taking that first breath of cold air, to feel the heat rising from the skin.

In the women's *shamam,* shapes moved about in the steam around Ma-ri-am, a glimpse of a hip here, the contour of a shoulder there. The squeals of young girls, the grunts of old women, and the trickling of bath-water echoed between the walls as backs were scrubbed and hair soaped. Ma-ri-am sat in the far corner by herself, working on her heels with a pumice stone, isolated by a wall of steam from the passing shapes.

Then there was blood and she was screaming.

The sound of feet now, slapping against the wet cobblestones. Faces peering at her through the steam. Tongues clucking.

Later that night, in bed, Fa-ri-ba told her husband that when she'd heard the cry and rushed over she'd found Ras-heed's wife shrieking into a corner, hugging her knees, a pool of blood at her feet.

"You could hear the poor girl's teeth rattling, Ha-kim, she was shrieking so hard."

When Ma-ri-am had seen her, Fa-ri-ba said, she had asked in a high, suppliant voice, *It's normal, isn't it? Isn't it? Isn't it normal?*
Anot-her bus ri-de with Ras-he-ed. Sno-wing aga-in. Fal-ling thick this ti-me. It was pi-ling in he-aps on si-de-walks, on ro-ofs, gat-he-ring in pate-hes on the bark of stragglly tre-es. Ma-ri-am watc-hed the merc-hants plo-wing snow from the-ir sto-ref-ronts- A gro-up of boys was cha-sing a black dog. They wa-ved spor-ti-vely at the bus. Ma-ri-am lo-oked over to Ras-he-ed. His eyes we-re clo-sed He wasn't hum-ming. Ma-ri-am rec-li-ned her he-ad an d clo-sed her eyes too. She wan-ted out of her cold socks, out of the damp wo-ol swe-ater that was prickly aga-inst her skin. She wan-ted away from this bus.

At the ho-use, Ras-he-ed co-ve-red her with a qu-ilt when she lay on the co-uch, but the-re was a stiff, per-func-tory air abo-ut this ges-tu-re.

"What kind of ans-wer is that?" he sa-id aga-in. "That's what a mul-lah is sup-po-sed to say. You pay a doc-tor his fee, you want a bet-ter ans-wer than 'God's will.'"

Ma-ri-am cur-led up her kne-es be-ne-ath the qu-ilt and sa-id he ought to get so-me rest.
"God's will," he sim-me-red.

He sat in his ro-om smo-king ci-ga-ret-tes all day.

Ma-ri-am lay on the co-uch, hands tu-c-ked bet-we-en her kne-es, watc-hed the whirl-po-ol of snow twis-ting and spin-ning out-si-de the win-dow. She re-mem-be-red Na-na sa-ying on-ce that each snowf-la-ke was a sigh he-aved by an ag-gri-eved wo-man so-mew-he-re in the worl d. That all the sighs drif-ted up the sky, gat-he-red in-to clo-uds, then bro-ke in-to tiny pi-eces that fell si-lently on the pe-op-le be-low.

As a re-min-der of how wo-men li-ke us suf-fer, she'd sa-id. How qu-i-etly we en-du-re all that falls upon us.

14.

The gri-ef kept surp-ri-sing Ma-ri-am. All it to-ok to un-le-ash it was her thin-king of the un-fi-nis-hed crib in the to-ols-hed or the su-ede co-at in Ras-he-ed's clo-set. The baby ca-me to li-fec then and she co-uld he-ar it, co-uld he-ar its hungry grunts, its gurg-les and jab-be-ring- She felt it snif-fing at her bre-asts. The gri-ef was hed over her, swept her up, tos-sed her up-si-de down. Ma-ri-am was dumb-fo-un-ded that she co-uld miss in such a crip-pling man-ner a be-ing she had ne-ver even se-en.

Then the-re we-re days when the dre-ari-ness didn't se-em qu-ite as un-re-len-ting to Ma-ri-am. Days when the me-re tho-ught of re-su-ming the old pat-ters of her li-fe did not se-em so ex-ha-us-ting, when it did not ta-ke enor-mo- us ef-forts of will to get out of bed, to do her pra-yers, to do the wash, to ma-ke me-als for Ras-he-ed.
Ma-ri-am dre-aded go-ing out-si-de. She was en-vi-o-us, sud-denly, of the ne-igh-bor-ho-od wo-men and the-ir we-alth of child-ren. So-me had se-ven or eight and didn't un-ders-tan-d how for-tu-na-te they we-re, how bles-sed that the-ir child-ren had flo-uris-hed in the-ir wombs, li-ved to sq-irm in the-ir arms and ta-ke the milk from the-ir bre-asts. Child-ren that they had not bled away with so-apy wa-ter and the bo-dily fil-th of stran-gers down so-me bath-ho-use dra-in. Ma-ri-am re-sen-ted them when she over-he-ard them comp-la-in-ing abo-ut mis-be-ha-ving sons and lazy da-ugh-ters.

A vo-ice in-si-de her he-ad tri-ed to so-ot-he her with well-inten-ded but mis-gu-ided con-so-la-ti-on.

You 'll ha-ve ot-her In-s-hal-lah. You 're yo-ung. Su-rely you'll ha-ve many ot-her chan-ces.

But Ma-ri-am's gri-eve wasn't aim-less or uns-pe-ci-fic. Ma-ri-am gri-eved for this baby, this par-ti-cu-lar child, who had ma-de her so happy for a whi-le-So-me days, she be-li-eved that the baby had be-en an un-de-ser-ved bles-sing, that she was be-ing pu-nis-hed for what she had do-ne to Na-na. Wasn't it true that she might as well ha-ve slip-ped that no-ose aro-und her mot-her's neck her-self? Tre-ac-he-ro-us da-ugh-ters did not de-ser-ve to be mot-hers, and this was just pu-nis-h-ment. She had fit-ful dre-ams, of Na'ma'sj-inn sne-a-king in-to her ro-om at night, bur-ro-wing its claws in-to her womb, and ste-aling her baby. In the-se dre-ams, Na-na cack-led with de-light and vin-di-ca-ti-on.

Other days, Ma-ri-am was be-si-eged with an-ger. It was Ras-he-ed's fa-ult for his pre-ma-tu-re ce-leb-ra-ti-on. For his fo-ol-hardy fa-ith that she was car-rying a boy. Na-ming the baby as he had. Ta-king God's will for gran-ted. His fa-ult, for ma-king her go to the bath-ho-use. So-met-hing the-re, the ste-am, the dirty wa-ter, the so-ap, so-met-hing the-re had ca-used this to hap-pen. No. Not Ras-he-ed. She was to bla-me. She be-ca-me fu-ri-o-us with her-self for sle-eping in the wrong po-si-tion, for eat-ing me-als that we-re too spicy, for not eat-ing eno-ugh fru-it, for drin-king too much tea.

It was God's fa-ult, for ta-un-ting her as He Had. For not gran-ting her what He had gran- ted so many ot-ber wo-men. For dang-ling be-fo-re her, tan-ta-li-zing, what He knew wo-uld gi-ve her the gre-at-est hap-pi-ness, then pul-ling it away.

But it did no go-od, all this fa-ult la-y-ing, all the-se ha-ran-gu-es of ac-cu-sa-ti-ons bo-un-cing in her he-ad. It was ko-jr, sa-cri-le-ge, to think the-se tho-ughts. Al-lah was not spi-te-ful. He was not a petty God. Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah's words whis-pe-red in her he-ad:

*Bles-sed is He in Who-se hand is the king-dom, and He Who has po-wer over all things, Who cre-ated de-ath and li-fe that He may try you.*
Ran-sac-ked with gu-ilt, Ma-ri-am wo-uld kne-el and pray for for-gi-ve-ness for the-se tho-ughts.

* * *

Me-anw-hi-le, a chan-ge had co-me over Ras-he-ed ever sin-ce the day at the bath-ho-use. Most nights when he ca-me ho-me, he hardly tal-ked any-mo-re. He ate, smo-ked, went to bed, so-me-ti-mes ca-me back in the mid-dle of the night for a bri-ef and, of la-te, qu-ite ro-ugh ses-si-on of co-up-ling. He was mo-re apt to sulk the-se days, to fa-ult her co-oking, to comp-la-in abo-ut clut-ter aro-und the yard or po-int out even mi-nor unc-le-an-li-ness in the ho-use. Oc-ca-si-on-ly, he to-ok her aro-und town on Fri-days, li-ke he used to, but on the si-de-walks he wal-ked qu-ickly and al-ways a few steps ahe-ad of her, wit-ho-ut spe-a king, un-mind-ful of Ma-ri-am who al-most had to run to ke-ep up with him. He wasn't so re-ady with a la-ugh on the-se out-ings any-mo-re. He didn't buy her swe-ets or gifts, didn't stop and na-me pla-ces to her as he used to. Her qu-es-ti-ons se-emed to ir-ri-ta-te him.

One night, they we-re sit-ting in the li-v ing ro-om lis-te-ning to the ra-dio. Win-ter was pas-sing. The stiff winds that plas-te-red snow on-to the fa-ce and ma-de the eyes wa-ter had cal-med. Sil-very fluffs of snow we-re mel-ting off the branc-hes of tall elms and wo-uld be rep-la-ced in a few we-eks with stubby, pa-le gre-en buds. Ras-he-ed was sha-king his fo-ot ab-sently to the tab-la be-at of a Ha-ma-hang song, his eyes crink-led aga-inst ci-ga-ret-te smo-ke.

"Are you angry with me?" Ma-ri-am as- ked.

Ras-he-ed sa-id not-hing. The song en-ded and the news ca-me on. A wo-man's vo-ice re-por-ted that Pre-si-dent Da-o-ud Khan had sent yet anot-her gro-up of So-vi-et con-sul-tants back to Mos-cow, to the ex pec-ted disp-le-asu-re of the Krem-lin.

"I worry that you are angry with me."

Ras-he-ed sig-hed

"Are you?"

His eyes shif- ted to her. "Why wo-uld I be angry?"

"I don't know, but ever sin-ce the baby-"

"Is that the kind of man you ta-ke me for, af-ter everyt-hing I've do-ne for you?"
"No. Of co-ur-se not."

"Then stop pes-te-ring me!"

"I'm sorry. Be-bakhsh, Ras-he-ed. I'm sorry."

He crus-hed out his ci-ga-ret-te and lit anot-her. He tur-ned up the vo-lu-me on the ra-dio.
"I've be-en thin-king, tho-ugh," Ma-ri-am sa-id, ra-isingher vo-ice so as to be he-ard over the mu-sic.

Ras-he-edsig-hed aga-in, mo-re ir-ri-tably this ti-me, tur-ned down the vo-lu-me on-ce mo-re. He rub-bed hisfo-re-he-ad we-arily. "What now?"
"I've be-en thin-king, that may-be we sho-uld ha-ve a pro-per bu-ri-al For the baby, I me-an. Just us, a few pra-yers, not-hing mo-re."

Ma-ri-am had be-en thin-king abo-ut it for a whi-le. She didn't want to for-get this baby. It didn't se-em right, not to mark this loss in so-me way that was per-ma-nent.

"What for? It's idi-otic."

"It wo-uld ma-ke me fe-el bet-ter, I think."


Now, if you don't mind, I'm trying to lis-ten."

He tur-ned up the vo-lu-me aga-in, le-aned his he-ad back and clo-sed his eyes.
One sunny mor-ning that we-ek, Ma-ri-am pic-ked a spot in the yard and dug a ho-le.
"In the na-me of Al-lah and with Al-lah, and in the na-me of the mes-sen-ger of Al-lah upon whom be the bles-sings and pe-ace of Al-lah," she sa-id un-der her bre-ath as her sho-vel bit in-to the gro-und. She pla-ced the su-ede co-at that Ras-he-ed had bo-ught for the baby in the ho-le and sho-ve-led dirt over it.

"You ma-ke the night to pass in-to the day and You ma-ke the day to pass in-to the night, and You bring forth the li-ving from the de-ad and You bring forth the de-ad from the li-ving, and You gi-ve sus-te-nan-ce to whom You ple-ase wit-ho-ut me-asu-re."
She pat-ted the dirt with the back of the sho-vel. She squ-at-ted by the mo-und, clo-sed her eyes.
April 1978

On April 17, 1978, the year Mariam turned nineteen, a man named Mir Ak-bar Khyber was found murdered. Two days later, there was a large demonstration in Kabul. Everyone in the neighborhood was in the streets talking about it. Through the window, Mariam saw neighbors milling about, chatting excitedly, transistor radios pressed to their ears. She saw Fariba leaning against the wall of her house, talking with a woman who was new to Deh-Mazang. Fariba was smiling, and her palms were pressed against the swell of her pregnant belly. The other woman, whose name escaped Mariam, looked older than Fariba, and her hair had an odd purple tint to it. She was holding a little boy's hand. Mariam knew the boy's name was Tariq, because she had heard this woman on the street call after him by that name.

Mariam and Rashied didn't join the neighbors. They listened in on the radio as some ten thousand people poured into the streets and marched up and down Kabul's government district. Rashied said that Mir Ak-bar Khyber had been a prominent communist, and that his supporters were blaming the murder on President Daoud Khan's government. He didn't look at her when he said this. These days, he never did anymore, and Mariam wasn't ever sure if she was being spoken to.

"What's a communist?" she asked.

Rashied snorted, and raised both eyebrows. "You don't know what a communist is? Such a simple thing.

Everyone knows. It's common knowledge. You don't... Bah. I don't know why I'm surprised." Then he crossed his ankles on the table and mumbled that it was someone who believed in Karl Marx.

"Who's Karl Marx?"

Rashied sighed.

On the radio, a woman's voice was saying that Taraki, the leader of the Khalq branch of the PDPA, the Afghan communist party, was in the streets giving roasting speeches to demonstrators.
"What I me-ant was, what do they want?" Ma-ri-am as-ker. "The-se com-mu-nists, what is it that they be-li-eve?"

Ras-he-ed chort-led and sho-ok his he-ad, but Ma-ri-am tho-ught she saw un-cer-ta-inty in the way he cros-sed his arms, the way his eyes shif-ted. "You know not-hing, do you? You're li-ke a child. Yo-ur bra-in is empty. The-re is no in-for-ma-ti-on in it."

"I ask be-ca-use-"

"Chup-ko. Shut up."

Ma-ri-am did.

It wasn't easy to-le-ra-ting him tal-king this way to her, to be-ar his scorn, his ri-di-cu-le, his in-sults, his wal-king past her li-ke she was not-hing but a ho-use cat. But af-ter fo-ur ye-ars of mar-ri-age, Ma-ri-am saw cle-arly how much a wo-man co-uld to-le-ra-te when she was af-ra-id And Ma-ri-am was af-ra-id She li-ved in fe-ar of his shif-ting mo-ods, his vo-la-ti-les, his in-sis-ten-ce on ste-ering even mun-da-ne exc-han-ges down a conf-ron-ta-ti-onal path that, on oc-ca-si-on, he wo-uld re-sol-ve with punc-hes, slaps, ki cks, and so-me-ti-mes try to ma-ke amends for with pol-lu-ted apo-lo-gi-es and so-me-ti-mes not.

In the fo-ur ye-ars sin-ce the day at the bath-ho-use, the-re had be-en six mo-re cycles of ho-pes ra-ised then das-hed, each loss, each col-lap-se, each trip to the doc-tor mo-re crus-hing for Ma-ri-am than the last. With each di-sap-po-int-ment, Ras-he-ed had grown mo-re re-mo-te and re-sent-ful Now not-hing she did ple-ased him. She cle-aned the ho-use, ma-de su-re he al-ways had a suppl-y of cle-an shirts, co-oked him his fa-vo-ri-te dis-hes. On-ce, di-sast-ro-usly, she even bo-ught ma-ke-up and put it on for him. But when he ca-me ho-me, he to-ok one lo-ok at her and win-ced with such dis-tas-te that she rus-hed to the bath-ro-om and was-hed it all off, te-ars of sha-me mi-xing with so-apy wa-ter, ro-uge, and mas-ca-ra.

Now Ma-ri-am dre-aded the so-und of him co-ming ho-me in the eve-ning. The key rat-ling, the cre-ak of the do-or- the-se we-re so-unds that set her he-art ra-cing. From her bed, she lis-te ned to the click-clack of his he els, to the muf-fl ed shuf fl ing of his fe-et af-ter he'd shed his sho-es. With her ears, she to-ok in-ven-tory of his do-ings: cha-ir legs drag- ged ac-ross the flo-or, the pla-in-ti ve squ-e-ak of the ca-ne se-at when he sat, the clin-king of spo-on aga-inst pla-te, the flut-ter of news-pa-per pa-ges flip-ped, the slur-ping of wa-ter. And as her he-art po-un-ded, her mind won-de-red what ex-cu-se he wo-uld use that night to po-un-ce on her. The-re was al-ways so-met-hing, so-me mi-nor thing that wo-uld in-fu-ri-ate him, be-ca-use no mat-ter what she did to ple-ase him, no mat-ter how tho-ro-ughly she sub-mit-ted to his wants and de-mands, it wasn't eno-ugh. She co-uld not gi-ve him his son back. In this most es-sen-ti-al way, she had fa-iled him-se-ven ti-mes she had fa-iled him-and now she
was not-hing but a bur-den to him. She co-uld see it in the way he lo-oked at her, when he lo-oked at her. She was a bur-den to him.

"What's go-ing to hap-pen?" she as-ked him now.

Ras-he-ed shot her a si-de-long glan-ce. He ma-de a so-und bet-we-en a sigh and a gro-an, drop-ped his legs from the tab-le, and tur-ned off the ra-dio. He to-ok it ups-ta-irs to his ro-om. He clo-sed the do-or.

* * *

On Ap-ril 27, Ma-ri-am's qu-es-ti-on was ans-we-red with crack-ling so-unds and in-ten-se, sud-den ro-ar-s. She ran ba-re-fo-ot down to the li-ving ro-om and fo-und Ras-he-ed al-re-ady by the win-dow, in his un-ders-hirt, his ha-ir dis-he-ve-led, palms pres-sed to the glass. Ma-ri-am ma-de her way to the win-dow next to him. Over-he-ad, she co-uld see mi-li-tary pla-nes zo-oming past, he-ad-ing north and east. The-ir de-afe-ning shri-eks hurt her ears. In the dis-tan-ce, lo-ud bo-oms re-so-na-ted and sud-den plu-mes of smo-ke ro-se to the sky.

"What's go-ing on, Ras-he-ed?" she sa-id. "What is all this?"

"God knows," he mut-te-red. He tri-ed the ra-dio and got only sta-tic.

"What do we do?"

Impa-ti-ently, Ras-he-ed sa-id, "We wa-it."

* * *

La-ter in the day, Ras-he-ed was still try-ing the ra-dio as Ma-ri-am ma-de ri-ce with spi-nach sa-uce in the kitc-hen. Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red a ti-me when she had enj-oyed, even lo-oked for-ward to, co-oking for Ras-he-ed. Now co-oking was an exer-ci-se in he-igh-te-ned an-xi-ety. Thequr-ma% we-re al-ways too salty or too bland for his tas-te. The ri-ce was jud-ged ei-ther too greasy or too dry, the bre-ad dec-la-red too do-ughy or too crys-tal. Ras-he-ed's fa-ult-fin-ding left her stri-cen in the kitc-hen with self-do-ubt.

When she bro-ught him his pla-te, the na-ti-onal ant-hem was pla-ying on the ra-dio.

"I ma-desab-zi," she sa-id.

"Put it down and be qu-i-et."

After the mu-sic fa-ded, a man's vo-ice ca-me on the ra-dio. He an-no-un-ced his na-tional ant-hem was pla-ying on the ra-dio.
the re-bel Fo-ur-th Ar-mo-red Di-vi-si-on had se-ized the air-port and key in-ter-sec-ti-ons in the city. Ka-bul Ra-dio, the mi-nist-ri-es of Com-mu-ni-ca-tion and the In-te-ri-or, and the Fo-re-ign Mi-nistry bu-il-ding had al-so be-en cap-tu-red. Ka-bul was in the hands of the pe-op-le now, he sa-id pro-ud-ly. Re-bel MiGs had at-tac-ked the Pre-si-den-ti-al Pa-la-ce. Tanks had bro-ken in-to the pre-mi-ses, and a fi-er-ce bat-tle was un-der way the-re. Da-o-ud's lo-ya-list for-ces we-re all but de-fe-ated, Ab-dul Qa-der sa-id in a re-as-su-ring to-ne.

Days la-ter, when the com-mu-nists be-gan the sum-mary exe-cu-ti-ons of tho-se con-nec-ted with Da-o-ud Khan's re-gi-me, when ru-mors be-gan flo-ating abo-ut Ka-bul of eyes go-ugged and ge-ni-tals elect-ro-cu-ted in the Pol-e-Chark-hi Pri-son, Ma-ri-am wo-uld he-ar of the sla-ugh-ter that had ta-ken pla-ce at the Pre-si-den-ti-al Pa-la-ce. Da-o-ud Khan had-b-ten kil-led, but not be-fo-re the com-mu-nist re-bels had kil-led so-me twenty mem-bers of his fa-mily, inc-lu-ding wo-men and grandc-hild-ren. The-re wo-uld be ru-mors that he had ta-ken his own li-fe, that he'd be-en gun-ned down in the he-at of bat-tle; ru-mors that he'd be-en sa-ved for last, ma-de to watch the mas-sac-re of his fa-mily, then shot.

Ras-he-ed tur-ned up the vo-lu-me and le-aned in clo-ser.

"A re-vo-lu-ti-onary co-un-cil of the ar-med for-ces has be-en es-tab-lis-hed, and ourwa-tan will now be known as the De-moc-ra-tic Re-pub-lic of Afg-ha-nis-tan," Ab-dul Qa-der sa-id. "The era of aris-toc-racy, ne-po-tism, and ine-qua-lity is over, fel-low ham-wa-i-ans. We ha-ve en-ded de-ca-des of tyr-an ny. Po-wer is now in the hands of the mas-ses and fre-dom-lo-ving pe-op-le. A glo-ri-o-us new era in the his-tory of our co-un-try is afo-ot. A new Afg-ha-nis-tan is born. We as-su-re you that you ha-ve not-hing to fe-ar, fel-low Afg-ha-nis. The new re-gi-me will ma-in-ta-in the ut-most res-pect for prin-cip-les, both Is-la-mic and de-moc-ra-tic. This is a ti-me of re-j-o-icing and ce-leb-ra-ti-on."

Ras-he-ed tur-ned off the ra-dio.

"So is this go-od or bad?" Ma-ri-am as-ked.

"Bad for the rich, by the so-und of it," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "May-be not so bad for us."

Ma-ri-am's tho-ughts drif- ted to Jalil. She won-de-red if the com-mu-nists wo-uld go af-ter him, then. Wo-uld they ja-il him? Ja-il his sons? Ta-ke his bu-si-nes-ses and pro-per-ti-es from him?

"Is this warm?" Ras-he-ed sa-id, eye-ing the ri-ce.

"I just ser-ved it from the pot."

He grun-ted, and told her to hand him a pla-te.
Do

WN the stre-et, as the night lit up in sud-den flas-hes of red and yel-low, an ex-ha-us-ted Fa-ri-ba had prop-ped her-self up on her el-bows. Her ha-ir was mat-ted with swe-at, and drop-lets of mo-is-tu-re te-ete-red on the ed-ge of her up-per lip. At her bed-si-de, the el-derly mid-wi-fe, Wa-jma, watc-hed as Fa-ri-ba's hus-band and sons pas-sed aro-und the in-fant. They we-re mar-ve-ling at the baby's light ha-ir, at her pink che eks and puc-ke-red, ro-se-bud lips, at the slits of jade gre-en eyes mo-v ing be-hind her puffy lids. They smi-led at each ot-her when they he-ard her vo-ice for the first ti-me, a cry that star-ted li-ke the mewl of a cat and exp-lo-ded in-to a he-althy, full-thro-ated yowl. No-or sa-id her eyes we-re li-ke gems-to-nes. Ah-mad, who was the most re-li-gi-o -us mem-ber of the fa-mily, sang the azan in his baby sis-ter's ear and blew in her fa-ce three ti-mes.

"La-ila it is, then?" Ha-kim as-ked, bo-un-cing his da-ugh-ter.


Ras-he-ed ma-de a ball of ri-ce with his fin-gers. He put it in his mo-uth, che-wed on-ce, then twi-ce, be-fo-re gri-ma-cing and spit-ting it out on the sof rah.

"What's the mat-ter?" Ma-ri-am as-ked, ha-ting the apo-lo-ge-tic to-ne of her vo-ice. She co-uld fe-el her pul-se qu-ic-ke-ning, her skin shrin-king.

"What's the mat-ter?" he mew-led, mi-mic-king her. "What's the mat-ter is that you've do-ne it aga-in."

"But I bo-iled it fi-ve mi-nu-tes mo-re than usu-al."

"That's a bold lie."

"I swe-ar-".

He sho-ok the ri-ce ang-rily from his fin-gers and pus-hed the pla-te away, spil-ling sa-uce and ri-ce on the soj rah. Ma-ri-am watc-hed as he stor-med out of the li-ving ro-om, then out of the ho-use, slam-ming the do-or on his way out. Ma-ri-am kne-eled to the gro-und and tri-ed to pick up the gra-ins of ri-ce and put them back on the pla-te, but her hands we-re sha-king badly, and she had to wa-it for them to stop. Dre-ad pres-sed down on her chest. She tri-ed ta-king a few de-ep bre-aths. She ca-ught her pa-le ref-lec-ti-on in the dar-ke-ned li-ving-ro-om win-dow and lo-ok ed away.
Then she heard the front door opening, and Rasheed was back in the living room.

"Get up," he said. "Come here. Get up."

He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it.

"Put these in your mouth." "What?"

"Put. The-se. In yo-ur mo-uth."

"Stop it, Rasheed, I'm-"

His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pressed it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, muttering, but he kept pushing the pebbles in, his upper lip curled in a sneer.

"Now chew," he said.

Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Mariam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes.

"CHEW!" he bellowed. A gust of his smoky breath slammed against her face. Mariam chewed. Something in the back of her mouth cracked.

"Good," Rasheed said. His cheeks were quivering. "Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you've given me in this marriage. Bad food, and nothing else."

Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood, and the fragments of two broken molars.

**Part Two**

**16. Kabul, Spring 1987**

JN ine-yar-old Laila rose from bed, as she did most mornings, hungry for the sight of her friend Tariq. This morning, however, there would be no Tariq sighting.

"How long will you be gone?" she'd asked when Tariq had told her that his parents were taking him south, to the city of Ghazni, to visit his paternal uncle.

"Thirteen days."
"Thir-te-en days?"

"It's not so long. You're ma-king a fa-ce, La-ila."

"I am not."

"You're not go-ing to cry, are you?"

"I am not go-ing to cry! Not over you. Not in a tho-usand ye-ars."

She'd kic-ked at his shin, not his ar-ti-fi-ci-al but his re-al one, and he'd play-ful-ly whac-ked the back of her he-ad.

Thir-te-en days. Al-most two we eks. And, just fi-ve days in, La-ila had le-ar-ned a fun-da-men-tal truth abo-ut ti-me: Li-ke the ac-cor-di-on on which Ta-riq's fat-her so-me-ti-mes pla-yed old Pash-to songs, ti-me stretc-hed and cont-rac-ted de-pen-ding on Ta-riq's ab-sen-cing or pre-sen-cing-Downs-ta-irs, her pa-rents we-re figh-ting. Aga-in. La-ila knew the ro-uti-ne: Mammy, fe-ri-o-ous, in-do-mi-ta-ble, pa-cing and ran-ting; Ba-bi, sit-ting, lo-oking she-epish and da-zed, nod-ding obe-di-ent, wa-iting for the storm to pass. La-ila clo-sed her do-or and chan-ged. But she co-uld still he-ar them. She co-uld still he-ar her Fi-nal-ly, a do-or slam-med. Po-un-ding fo-ots-teps. Mammy's bed cre-aked lo-udly. Ba-bi, it se-emed, wo-uld sur-vi-ve to see anot-her day.

"La-ila!" he cal-led now. "I'm go-ing to be la-te for work!"

"One mi-nu-te!"

La-ila put on her sho-es and qu-ickly brus-hed her sho-ul-de r-length, blond curls in the mir-ror. Mammy al-ways told La-ila that she had in-he-ri-ted her ha-ir co-lor-as well as her thick-las-hed, tur-qu-o-ise gre-en eyes, her dimp-led che-eks, her high che-ek-bo-nes, and the po-ut of her lo-wer lip, which Mammy sha-red-from her gre-at-grand-mot-her, Mammy's grand-mot-her.She was a pa-ri,a stun-ner, Mammy sa-id. Her be-a-uty was the talk of the val-ley. It skip-ped two ge-ne-ra-tions of wo-men in our fa-mily, but it su-re didn't bypass you, La-ila. The val-ley Mammy re-fer-red to was the Pa-njs-hir, the Fa-rsi-spe-aking Ta-j-ik re-gion one hund-red ki-lo-me-ters nor-tal of Ka-bul. Both Mammy and Ba-bi, who we-re first co-usins, had be-en born and ra-ised in Pa-njs-hir; they had mo-ved to Ka-bul back in 1960 as ho-pe-ful, bright-eyed newly-weds when Ba-bi had be-en ad-mit- ted to Ka-bul Uni-ver-sity.

La-ila scramb-led downs-ta-irs, ho-ping Mammy wo-uldn't co-me out of her ro-om for anot-her ro-und. She fo-und Ba-bi kne-eling by the scre-en do-or.
"Did you see this, La-ila?"

The rip in the screen had been the-re for we-eks. La-ila hun-ke-red down be-si-de him. "No. Must be new."

"That's what I told Fa-ri-ba." He lo-ok-ed sha-ken, re-du-ced, as he al-ways did af-ter Mammy was thro-ugh with him. "She says it's be-en let-ting in be-es."

La-ila's he-art went out to him. Ba-bi was a small man, with nar-row sho-ul-ders and slim, de-li-ca-te hands, al-most li-ke a wo-man's. At night, when La-ila wal-ked in-to Ba-bi's ro-om, she al-ways fo-und the down-ward pro-fi-le of his fa-ce bur-ro-wing in-to a bo-ok, his glas-ses perc-hed on the tip of his no-se. So-me-ti-mes he didn't even no-ti-ce that she was the-re. When he did, he mar-ked his pa-ge, smi-led a clo-se-lip-ped, com-pa-ni-onab-le smi- le. Ba-bi knew most of Ru-mi's and Ha-fez's ghazals by he-art. He co-ul-d spe-ak at length abo-ut the strug-gle bet-we-en Bri-ta-in and Rus-sia over Afg-ha-nis- tan. He knew the dif-fe-ren-ce bet-we-en a sta-lac-ti-te and a sta-lag-mi-te, and co-ul-d tell you that the dis-tan-ce bet-we-en the earth and the sun was the sa-me as go-ing from Ka-bul to Ghaz-ni one and a half mil-li-on ti-mes. But if La-ila ne-eded the lid of a candy jar for-ced open, she had to go to Mammy, which felt li-ke a bet-ra-yal. Or-di-nary to-ols be-fud-dled Ba-bi. On his watch, squ-e-aky do-or hin-ges ne-ver got oiled. Ce-ilings went on le-a-king af-ter he plug- ged them. Mold thri-ved de-fi-antly in kitc-hen ca-bi-nets. Mammy sa-id that be-fo-re he left with No-or to jo-in the jihad aga-inst the So-vi-ets, back in 1980, it was Ah-mad who had du-ti-ful-ly and com-pe-tently min-ded the-se things.

"But if you ha-ve a bo-ok that ne-eds ur-gent re-ading," she sa-id, "then Ha-kim is yo-ur man."

Still, La-ila co-ul-d not sha-ke the fe-eling that at one ti-me, be-fo-re Ah-mad and No-or had go-ne to war aga-inst the So-vi-ets Ba-bi had/let them go to war-Mam-my too had tho-ught Ba-bi's bo-oki-sh-ness en-de-aring, that, on-ce upon a ti-me, she too had fo-und his for-get-ful-ness and inep-ti-te char-ming.

"So what is to-day?" he sa-id now, smi-ling coyly. "Day fi-ve? Or is it six?"

"What do I ca-re? I don't ke-ep co-unt," La-ila li-ed, shrug-ging, lo-ving him for re-mem-be-ring. Mammy had no idea that Ta-riq had left.

"Well, his flash-light will be go-ing off be-fo-re you know it," Ba-bi sa-id, re-fer-ring to La-ila and Ta-riq's nightly sig-na-ling ga-me. They had pla-yed it for so long it had be-co-me a bed-ti-me ri-tu-al, li-ke brus-hing te-eth.
Ba-bi ran his fin-ger thro-ugh the rip. "I'll patch this as so-on as I get a chan-ce. We'd bet-ter go." He ra-ised his vo-ice and cal-led over his sho-ul-der, "We're go-ing now, Fa-ri-ba! I'm ta-king La-ila to scho-ol. Don't for-get to pick her up!"

Out-si-de, as she was clim-bing on the car-ri-er pack of Ba-bi's bicyc-le, La-ila spot- ted a car par-ked up the stre-et, ac-ross from the ho-use whe-re the sho-ema-ker, Ras-he-ed, li-ved with his rec-lu-si-ve wi-fe. It was a Benz, an unu-su-al car in this ne-igh-bor-ho-od, blue with a thick whi-te stri-pe bi-sec-ting the ho-od, the ro-of, and the trunk. La-ila co-uld ma-ke out two men sit-ting in-si-de, one be-hind the whe-el, the ot-her in the back.

"Who are they?" she sa-id.

"It's not our bu-si-ness," Ba-bi sa-id. "Climb on, you'll be la-te for class."

La-ila re-mem-be-red anot-her fight, and, that ti-me, Mammy had sto-od over Ba-bi and sa-id in a min-cing way, That's yo-ur bu-si-ness, isn't it, co-usin? To ma-ke not-hing yo-ur bu-si-ness. Even yo-ur own sons go-ing to war. Howl ple-aded with you. Bui you bu-ri-ed yo-ur no-se in tho-se cur-sed bo-o ks and let our sons go li-ke they we-re a pa-ir of ha-ra-mis.

Ba-bi pe-da-led up the stre-et, La-ila on the back, her arms wrap-ped aro-und his belly. As they pas-sed the blue Benz, La-ila ca-ught a fle-eting glimp-se of the man in the back-se-at: thin, whi-te-ha-ired, dres-sed  in a dark brown su-it, with a whi-te hand-kerc-hi-ef tri-ang-le in the bre-ast poc-ket. The only ot-her thing she had ti-me to no-ti- ce was that the car had He-rat li-cen-se pla-tes.

They ro-de the rest of the way in si-len-ce, ex-cept at the turns, whe-re Ba-bi bra-ked ca-uti-o-nally and sa-id, "Hold on, La-ila. Slo-wing down. Slo-wing down. The-re."

* * *

In class that day, La-ila fo-und it hard  to pay at-ten-ti-on, bet-we-en Ta-riq's ab-sen-ce and her pa-rents' fight. So when the te-ac-her cal-led on her to na-me the ca-pi-tals of Ro-ma-nia and Cu-ba, La-ila was ca-ught off gu-ard.

The te-ac-her's na-me was Shan-zai, but, be-hind her back, the stu-dents cal-led her Kha-la Rang-ma-al, Aun-tie Pa-in-ter, re-fer-ring to the mo-ti-on she fa-vo-red when she slap-ped stu-dents-palm, then back of the hand, back and forth, li-ke a pa-in-ter wor-king a brush. Kha-la Rang-ma-al was a sharp-fa-ced yo-ung wo-man with he-avy eyeb-rows. On the first day of scho-ol, she had pro-udly told the class that she was the da-ugh-ter of a po-or pe-asant from Khost. She sto-od stra-ight, and wo-re her jet-black ha-ir pul-led tightly back and ti-ed in a bun so that, when Kha-la Rang-ma-al tur-ned aro-und, La-ila co-uld see the dark brist-les on her neck. Kha-la Rang-ma-al
did not wear make-up or jewelry. She did not cover and forbade the female students from doing it. She said women and men were equal in every way and the reason women should cover if men didn't.

She said that the Soviet Union was the best nation in the world, along with Afghanistan. It was kind to its workers, and its people were all equal. Everyone in the Soviet Union was happy and friendly, unlike America, where crime made people afraid to leave their homes. And everyone in Afghanistan would be happy too, she said, once the anti-revolutionaries, the backward bandits, were defeated.

"That's why our Soviet comrades came here in 1979. To lend their neighbor a hand. To help us defeat the brutes who want our country to be a backward, primitive nation. And you must lend your own hand, children. You must report anyone who might know about these rebels. It's your duty. You must listen, then report. Even if it's your parents, your uncles or aunts. Be-ca-use no-one of them loves you as much as your country does. Your country comes first, remember! I will be proud of you, and so will your country."

On the wall behind Kha-la Rang-ma-al's desk was a map of the Soviet Union, a map of Afghanistan, and a framed photo of the latest communist president, Najibullah, who, Babi said, had once been the head of the dreaded KHAD, the Afghan secret police. There were other photos too, mainly of young Soviet soldiers shaking hands with peasants, planting apple saplings, building homes, always smiling genially.

"Well," Kha-la Rang-ma-al said now, "have I disturbed your daydream, In-qi-la-bi Girl?"

This was her nickname for La ila, Revolutionary Girl, because she'd been born the night of the April co-op of 1978—except Kha-la Rang-ma-al became angry if anyone in her class used the word co-op. What had happened, she insisted, was an in-qi-lab, a revolution, an uprising of the working people against inequality. Jihad was another forbidden word. According to her, there wasn't even a war out there in the provinces, just skirmishes against troublemakers stirred by people she called foreign provocateurs. And certainly no one dared repeat in her presence the rising rumors that, after eight years of fighting, the Soviets were losing this war. Particularly now that the American president, Reagan, had started shipping the Mujahideen Stinger Missiles to down the Soviet helicopters, now that Muslims from all over the world were joining the cause: Egyptians, Pakistanis, even wealthy Saudis, who left their billions behind and came to Afghanistan to fight the jihad.

"Bucharest. Havana," La-ila managed. "And are those countries our friends or not?"

"And are those countries our friends or not?"
"They are, mo-olim sa-hib. They are fri-endly co-unt-ri-es."

Kha-la Rang-ma-al ga-ve a curt nod.

* * *

When scho-ol let out. Mammy aga-in didn't show up li-ke she was sup-po-sed to. La-ila en-ded up wal-king ho-me with two of her clas-sma-tes, Gi-ti and Ha-si-na.

Gi-ti was a tightly wo-und, bony lit-tle girl who wo-re her ha-ir in twin pony-ta-ils held by elas-tic bands. She was al-ways scow-ling, and wal-king with her bo-oks pres-sed to her chest, li-ke a shi-eld. Ha-si-na was twel-ve, three ye-ars ol-der than La-ila and Gi-ti, but had fa-iled third gra-de on-ce and fo-urth gra-de twi-ce. What she lac-ked in smarts Ha-si-na ma-de up for in misc-hi-ef and a mo-uth that, Gi-ti sa-id, ran li-ke a se-wing mac-hi-ne. It was Ha-si-na who had co-me up with the Kha-la Rang-ma-al nick-na-me-To-day, Ha-si-na was dis-pen-sing ad-vi-ce on how to fend off unat-trac-ti-ve su-itors. "Fo-olp-ro-of met-hod, gu-ar-te-ed to work. I gi-ve you my word."

"This is stu-pid. I'm too yo-ung to ha-ve a su-itor!" Gi-ti sa-id.

"You're not too yo-ung."

"Well, no one's co-me to ask for my hand."

"That's be-ca-use you ha-ve a be-ard, my de-ar."

Gi-ti's hand shot up to her chin, and she lo-oked with alarm to La-ila, who smi-led pit-yingly-Gi-ti was the most hu-mor-less per-son La-ila had ever met-and sho-ok her he-ad with re-as-su-ran-ce.

"Anyway, you want to know what to do or not, la-di-es?"

"Go ahe-ad," La-ila sa-id.

"Be-ans. No less than fo-ur cans. On the eve-ning the to-oth-less li-zard co-mes to ask for yo-ur hand. But the ti-ming, la-di-es, the ti-ming is everyt-hing- You ha-ve to sup-press the fi-re-works 'til it's ti-me to ser-ve him his tea."

"I'll re-mem-ber that," La-ila sa-id.

"So will he."

La-ila co-uld ha-ve sa-id then that she didn't ne-ed this ad-vi-ce be-ca-use Ba-bi had no in-ten-ti-on of gi-ving her away any-ti-me so-on. Tho-ugh Ba-bi wor-ked at Si-lo, Ka-bul's gi-gan-tic bre-ad fac-tory, whe-re he la-bo-red amid the he-at and the
hum-ming mac-hi-nery sto-king the mas-si-ve ovens and mill gra-ins all day, he was a uni-ver-sity-edu-ca-ted man. He'd be-en a high scho-ol te-ac-her be-fo-re the com-mu-nists fi-red him-this was shortly af-ter the co-up of 1978, abo-ut a ye-ar and a half be-fo-re the So-vi-ets had in-va-ded. Ba-bi had ma-de it cle-ar to La-ila from ayo-ung age that the most im-por-tant thing in his li-fe, af-ter her sa-fety, was her scho-oling.

I know you're still yo-ung, bull wa-ni-you to un-ders-tand and le-arn this now, he sa-id. Mar-ri-age can wa-it, edu-ca-ti-on can-not You're a very, very bright girl. Truly, you are. You can be anyt-hing you want, La-ila I know this abo-ut you. And I al-so know that when this war is over, Afg-ha-nis-tan is go-ing to ne-ed you as much as its men, may-be even mo-re. Be-ca-use a so-ci-ety has no chan-ce of suc-cess if its wo-men are une-du-ca-ted, La-ila No chan-ce.

But La-ila didn't tell Ha-si-na that Ba-bi had sa-id the-se things, or how glad she was to ha-ve a fat-her li-ke him, or how pro-ud she was of his re-gard for her, or how de-ter-mi-ned she was to pur-sue her edu-ca-ti-on just as he had his. For the last two ye-ars, La-ila had re-ce-ived the awal num-ra cer-ti-fi-ca-te, gi-ven ye-ar-ly to the top-ran-ked stu-dent in each gra-de.

She sa-id not-hing of the-se things to Ha-si-na, tho-ugh, who-se own fat-her was an ill-tem-pe-red ta-xi dri-ver who in two or three ye-ars wo-uld al-most cer-ta-inly gi-ve her away. Ha-si-na had told La-ila, in one of her inf-re-qu-ent se-ri-o-moments, that it had al-re-ady be-en de-ci-ded that she wo-uld marry a first co-usin who was twenty ye-ars ol-der than her and ow-ned an auto shop in La-ho-re. I've se-en him twi-ce, Ha-si-na had sa-id. Both ti-mes he ate with his mo-uth open.

"Be-ans, girls," Ha-si-na sa-id. "You re-mem-ber that. Un-less, of co-ur-se" he-re she she flash-ed an im-pish grin and nud-ged La-ila with an el-bow."It's yo-ur yo-ung hand-so-me, one-leg- ged prin-ce who co-mes knoc-king- Then…"

La-ila slap-ped the el-bow away. She wo-uld ha-ve ta-ken of-fen-se if an-yo-ne el-se had sa-id that abo-ut Ta-riq. But she knew that Ha-si-na wasn't ma-li-ci-o-us. She moc-king was what she did-and her moc-king spa-red no one, le-ast of all her-self.

"You sho-uldn't talk that way abo-ut pe-op-le!" Gi-ti sa-id.

"What pe-op-le is that?"


"I think Mul-lah Gi-ti he-re has a crush on Ta-riq. I knew it! Ha! But he's al-re-ady spo-ken for, don't you know? Isn't he, La-ila?"
"I do not have a crush. On anyone!"

They broke off from Laila, and, still arguing this way, turned in to their street.

Laila walked alone the last three blocks. When she was on her street, she noticed that the blue Benz was still parked there, outside Rashid and Mariam's house. The elderly man in the brown suit was standing by the hood now, leaning on a cane, looking up at the hood.

That was when a voice behind Laila said, "Hey. Yellow Hair. Look here."

Laila turned around and was greeted by the barrel of a gun.

17.

The gun was red, the trigger guard bright green. Behind the gun loomed Kadam's grinning face. Kadam was eleven, like Tarik. He was thick, tall, and had a severe underbite. His father was a butcher in Demzang, and, from time to time, Kadam was known to fling bits of calf intestines at passersby. Sometimes, if Tarik wasn't nearby, Kadam shadowed Laila in the schoolyard at recess, leering, making little whining noises. One time, he'd tapped her on the shoulder and said, "You're so very pretty, Yellow Hair. I want to marry you."

Now he waved the gun. "Don't worry," he said. "This won't show. Not on your hair."

"Don't you do it! I'm warning you."

"What are you going to do?" he said. "Sic your cripple on me? 'Oh, Tarik jan. Oh, won't you come home and save me from the bad-mashl'"

Laila began to backpedal, but Kadam was already pumping the trigger. One after another, thin jets of warm water struck Laila's hair, then her palm when she raised it to shield her face.

Now the other boys came out of their hiding, laughing, cackling.

An insult Laila had heard on the street rose to her lips. She didn't really understand it—couldn't quite picture the logistics of it—but the words packed a fierce potency, and she unleased them now.

"Your mother eats cock!"
"At le-ast she's not a lo-ony li-ke yo-urs," Kha-dim shot back, un-ruf-fled "At le-ast my fat-her's not a sissy! And, by the way, why don't you smell yo-ur hands?"

The ot-her boys to-ok up the chant. "Smell yo-ur hands! Smell yo-ur hands!"
La-il-ala di-d, but she knew even be-fò-re she di-d, what he'd me-ant abo-ut it not sho-wing in her ha-ir. She let out a high-pitc-hed yelp. At this, the boys ho-oted even har-der.
La-il-la tur-ned aro-und and, how-ling, ran ho-me.

* * *

She drew wa-ter from the well, and, in the bath-ro-om, fil-led a ba-sin, to-re off her clot-hes. She so-aped her ha-ir, fran-ti-cal-ly dig-ging fin-gers in-to her scalp, whim-pe-ring with dis-gust. She rin-sed with a bowl and so-aped her ha-ir aga-in. Se-ver-al ti-mes, she tho-ught she might throw up. She kept mew-ling and shi-ve-ring, as she rub-bed and rub-bed the so-apy washc-loth aga-inst her fa-ce and neck un-til they red-de-ned.

This wo-uld ha-ve ne-ver hap-pe-ned if Ta-riq had be-en with her, she tho-ught as she put on a cle-an shirt and fresh tro-users. Kha-dim wo-uldn't ha-ve da-red. Of co-ur-se, it wo-uldn't ha-ve hap-pe-ned if Mammy had showed up li-ke she was sup-po-sed to eit-her. So-me-ti-mes La-il-la won-de-red why Mammy had even bot-he-red ha-ving her. Pe-op-le, she be-li-eved now, sho-uldn't be al-lo-wed to ha-ve new child-ren if they'd al-re-ady gi-ven away all the-i lo-ve to the-i old ones. It wasn't fa-ir. A fit of an-ger cla-imed her. La-il-la went to her ro-om, col-lap-sed on her bed.

When the worst of it had pas-sed, she went ac-ross the hal-lway to Mammy's do-or and knoc-ked. When she was yo-un-ger, La-il-la used to s it for ho-urs out-si-de this do-or. She wo-uldn't ha-ve hap-pe-ned if Mammy had showed up li-ke she was sup-po-sed to eit-her. So-me-ti-mes La-il-la won-de-red why Mammy had even bot-he-red ha-ving her. Pe-op-le, she be-li-eved now, sho-uldn't be al-lo-wed to ha-ve new child-ren if they'd al-re-ady gi-ven away all the-i lo-ve to the-i old ones. It wasn't fa-ir. A fit of an-ger cla-imed her. La-il-la went to her ro-om, col-lap-sed on her bed.

When the worst of it had pas-sed, she went ac-ross the hal-lway to Mammy's do-or and knoc-ked. When she was yo-un-ger, La-il-la used to sit for ho-urs out-si-de this do-or. She wo-uldn't ha-ve hap-pe-ned if Mammy had showed up li-ke she was sup-po-sed to eit-her. So-me-ti-mes La-il-la won-de-red why Mammy had even bot-he-red ha-ving her. Pe-op-le, she be-li-eved now, sho-uldn't be al-lo-wed to ha-ve new child-ren if they'd al-re-ady gi-ven away all the-i lo-ve to the-i old ones. It wasn't fa-ir. A fit of an-ger cla-imed her. La-il-la went to her ro-om, col-lap-sed on her bed.

When the worst of it had pas-sed, she went ac-ross the hal-lway to Mammy's do-or and knoc-ked. When she was yo-un-ger, La-il-la used to sit for ho-urs out-si-de this do-or. She wo-uldn't ha-ve hap-pe-ned if Mammy had showed up li-ke she was sup-po-sed to eit-her. So-me-ti-mes La-il-la won-de-red why Mammy had even bot-he-red ha-ving her. Pe-op-le, she be-li-eved now, sho-uldn't be al-lo-wed to ha-ve new child-ren if they'd al-re-ady gi-ven away all the-i lo-ve to the-i old ones. It wasn't fa-ir. A fit of an-ger cla-imed her. La-il-la went to her ro-om, col-lap-sed on her bed.

* * *

So-me-ti-mes Mammy had go-od days. She sprang out of bed bright-eyed and play-ful. The dro-opy lo-wer lip stretc-hed up-ward in a smi-le. She bat-hed. She put on fresh clot-hes and wo-re mas-ca-ra. She let La-il-la brush her ha-ir, which La-il-la lo-ved do-ing, and pin ear-rings thro-ugh her ear-lo-bes. They went shop-ping to-get-her to Man-da-ii Ba-za-ar. La-il-la got her to play sna-kes and lad-ders, and they ate sha-vings from blocks of dark cho-co-la-te, one of the few things they sha-red a com-mon tas-te for. La-il-la's fa-vo-ri-te part of Mammy's go-od days was when Ba-bi ca-me ho-me, when she and Mammy lo-oked up from the bo-ard and grin-ned at him with brown te-eth. A gust of con-ten-t-ment puf-fed thro-ugh the ro-om then, and
La-ila ca-ught a mo-men-tary glimp-se of the ten-der-ness, the ro-man-ce, that had on-ce bo-und her pa-rents back when this ho-use had be-en crow -ded and no-isy and che-er-ful.

Mammy so-me-ti-mes ba-ked on her go-od days and in-vi-ted ne-igh-bor-ho-od wo-men over for tea and past-ri-es. La-ila got to lick the bowls cle-an, as Mammy set the tab-le with cups and nap-kins and the go-od pla-tes. La-ter, La-ila wo-uld ta-ke her pla-ce at the li-ving-ro-om tab-le and try to bre-ak in-to the con-ver-sa-ti-on, as the wo-men tal-ked bo-is-te-ro-usly and drank tea and comp-li-men-ted Mammy on her ba-king. Tho-ugh the-re was ne-ver much for her to say, La-ila li-ked to sit and lis-ten in be-ca-use at the-se gat-he-rings she was tre-ated to a ra-re ple-asu-re: She got to he-ar Mammy spe-aking af-fe-ci-o-ny-ly abo-ut Ba-bi.

"What a first-ra-te te-ac-her he was," Ma mmy sa-id. "His stu-dents lo-ved him. And not only be-ca-use he wo-uldn't be-at them with ru-lers, li-ke ot-her te-ac-hers did. They res-pec-ted him, you see, be-ca-use he res-pec-ted them. He was mar-ve-lo-us."

Mammy lo-ved to tell the story of how she'd pro-po-sed to him.

"I was six-te-en, he was ni-ne-te-en. Our fa-mi-li-es li-ved next do-or to each ot-her in Pa-njs-hir. Oh, I had the crush on him, ham-s-hi-rasl I used to climb the wall bet-we-en our ho-uses, and we'd play in his fat-her's orc-hard. Ha-kim was al-ways sca-red that we'd get ca-ught and that my fat-her wo-uld gi-ve him a slap-ping. 'Yo-ur fat-her's go-ing to gi-ve me a slap-ping,' he'd al-ways say. He was so ca-uti-o-us, so se-ri-o-us, even then. And then one day I sa-id to him, I sa-id, 'Co-usin, what will it be? Are you go-ing to ask for my hand or are you go-ing to ma-ke me co-mekha-si-e-ga-ri to you?' I sa-id it just li-ke that. You sho-uld ha-ve se-en the fa-ce on him!"

Mammy wo-uld slap her palms to-get-her as the wo-men, and La-ila, la-ug-hed. Lis-te-ning to Mammy tell the-se sto-ri-e-s, La-ila knew that the-re had be-en a ti-me when Mammy al-ways spo-ke this way abo-ut Ba-bi. A ti-me when her pa-rents did not sle-ep in se-pa-ra-te ro-oms. La-ila wis-hed she hadn't mis-SED out on tho-se ti-mes.

Ine-vi-tably, Mammy's pro-po-sal story led to match-ma-king sche-mes. When Afg-ha-nis-tan was free from the So-vi-ets and the boys re-tur-ned ho-me, they wo-uld ne-ed bri-des, and so, one by one, the wo-men pa-ra-ded the ne-igh-bor-ho-od girls who might or might not be su-itab-le for Ah-mad and No-on La-ila al-ways felt exc-lu-ded when the talk tur-ned to her brot-hers, as tho-ugh the wo-men we-re dis-cus-sing a be-lo-ved film that only she hadn't se-en. She'd be-en two ye-ars old when Ah-mad and No-or had left Ka-bul for Pa-njs-hir up north, to jo-in Com-man-der Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud's for-ces and fight the jihad La-ila hardly re-mem-be-red anyt-hing at all abo-ut them. A shiny al-lah pen-dant aro-und Ah-mad's neck. A patch of black ha-irs on one of No-or's ears. And that was it.

"What abo-ut Azi-ta?"
"The rug-maker's daughter?" Mammy said, slapping her cheek with mock outrage.

"She has a thicker mustache than Hakim!"

"The re's Ana-hita. We hear she's top in her class at Zarghoona."

"Have you seen the teeth on that girl? Tombs-to-nes. She's hiding a graveyard behind those lips."

"How about the Wahidi sisters?"

"Those two dwarfs? No, no, no. Oh, no. Not for my sons. Not for my sultans. They deserve better."

As the chat-ter went on, La-ila let her mind drift, and, as always, it found Ta-riq.

* * *

Mammy had pulled the yellowish curtains. In the darkness, the room had a la-ye-red smell about it: sleep, unwashed linen, sweat, dirty socks, per-fume, the previous night's lef-to-verquir-ma. La-ila waited for her eyes to adjust before she crossed the room. Even so, her feet became entangled with items of clot-hing that lit-te-red the flo-or.

La-ila pul-led the cur-ta-ins open. At the fo-of the bed was an old me-tal-lic fol-ding cha-ir. La-ila sat on it and watched the un-mo-ving blan-ke-ted mo-und that was her mot-her.

The walls of Mammy's rooom we-re co-ve-red with pic-tu-res of Ah-mad and No-or. Everyw-he-re La-ila lo-ok-ed, two stran-gers smi-led back. He-re was No-or mo-un-ting a tricycle. He-re was Ah-mad do-ing his Pra-yers, po-sing be-si-de a sun-di-al Ba-bi and he had bu-ilt when he was twel-ve. And the-re they we-re, her brot-thers, sit-ting back to back be-ne-ath the old pe-ar tree in the yard.

Be-ne-ath Mammy's bed, La-ila co-uld see the cor-ner of Ah-mad's shoe box prot-ru-ding. From ti-me to ti-me, Mammy sho-wed her the old, crumpled news-pa-per clip-pings in it, and pamph-leets that Ah-mad had ma-na-ged to col-lect from in-sur-gent gro-ups and re-sis-tan-ce or-ga-ni-zat-ions he-ad-quar-ters in Pa-kis-tan. One phy-to, La-ila re-mem-be-red, sho-wed a man in a long white coat han-ding a lol-li-pop to a leg-less lit-tle boy. The cap-ti-on be-low the phy-to re-ad: Chil-dren are the in-ten-ded vic-tims of So-vi-ets land mi-ne cam-pa-ign. The artic-le went on to say that the So-vi-ets al-so li-ked to hi-de ex-plosives in the yard.
A Thousand Splendid Suns

brightly co-lo-red toys. If a child pic-ked it up, the toy exp-lo-ded, to-re off fin-gers or an en-ti-re hand. The fat-her co-uld not jo-in the jihad then; he'd ha-ve to stay ho-me and ca-re for his child. In anot-her ar-tic-le in Ah-mad's box, a yo-ung Mu-j-ahid was sa-ying that the So-vi-ets had drop-ped gas on his vil-la-ge that bur-ned pe-op-le's skin and blin-ded them. He sa-id he had se-en his mot-her and sis-ter run-ning for the stre-am, co-ug-hing up blo-od.

"Mammy."

The mo-und stir-red slightly. It emit-ted a gro-an.

"Get up, Mammy. It's three o'clock."

Anot-her gro-an. A hand emer-ged, li-ke a sub-ma-ri-ne pe-ris-co-pe bre-a-king sur-fa-ce, and drop-ped. The mo-und mo-ved mo-re dis-cer-nibly this ti-me. Then the rust-le of blan-kets as la-yers of them shif-ten over each ot-her. Slowly, in sta-ges, Mammy ma-te-ri-ali-zed: first the slo-venly ha-ir, then the whi-te, gri-ma-cing fa-ce, eyes pinc-hed shut aga-inst the light, a hand gro-ping for the he-ad-bo-ard, the she-ets sli-ding down as she pul-led her-self up, grun-ting. Mammy ma-de an ef-fort to lo-ok up, flinc-hed aga-inst the light, and her he-ad dro-oped over her chest.

"How was scho-ol?" she mut-te-red.

So it wo-uld be-gin. The ob-li-ga-tory qu-es-ti-ons, the per-func-tory ans-wers. Both pre-ten-ding. Unent-hu-si-as-tic part-ners, the two of them, in this ti-red old dan-ce.

"Scho-ol was fi-ne," La-ila sa-id.

"Did you le-arn anyt-hing?"

"The usu-al."

"Did you eat?"

"I did."

"Go-od."

Mammy ra-ised her he-ad aga-in, to-ward the win-dow. She win-ced and her eye-lids flut-te-red The right si-de of her fa-ce was red, and the ha-ir on that si-de had flat-te-ned.

"I ha-ve a he-adac-he."
"Sho-uld I fetch you so-me as-pi-rin?"

Mammy mas-sa-ged her temp-les. "May-be la-ter. Is yo-ur fat-her ho-me?"

"It's only three."

"Oh. Right. You sa-id that al-re-ady." Mammy yaw-ned. "I was dre-aming just now," she sa-id, her vo-ice only a bit lo-uder than the rust-le of her night-gown aga-inst the she-ets. "Just now, be-fo-re you ca-me in. But I can't re-mem-ber it now. Do-es that hap-pen to you?"

"It hap-pens to every-body, Mammy."

"Stran-gest thing."

"I sho-uld tell you that whi-le you we-re dre-aming, a boy shot piss out of a wa-ter gun on my ha-ir."

"Shot what? What was that? I'm sony."

"Piss. Uri-ne."

"That's…that's ter-rib-le. God I'm sorry. Po-or you. I'll ha-ve a talk with him first thing in the mor-ning. Or may-be with his mot-her. Yes, that wo-uld be bet-ter, I think."

"I ha-ven't told you who it was."

"Oh. Well, who was it?"

"Ne-ver-mind."

"You're angry."

"You we-re sup-po-sed to pick me up."

"I was," Mammy cro-aked. La-ila co-uld not tell whet-her this was a qu-es-ti-on. Mammy be-gan pic-king at her ha-ir. This was one of li-fe's gre-at myste-ri-es to La-ila, that Mammy's pic-king had not ma-de her bald as an egg. "What abo-ut…What's his na-me, yo-ur fri-end, Ta-riq? Yes, what abo-ut him?"

"He's be-en go-ne for a we-ek."

"Oh." Mammy sig-hed thro-ugh her no-se. "Did you wash?"
"Yes."

"So you're cle-an, then." Mammy tur-ned her ti-red ga-ze to the win-dow. "You're cle-an, and everyt-hing is fi-ne."

La-ila sto-od up. "I ha-ve ho-me-work now."

"Of co-ur-se you do. Shut the cur-ta-ins be-fo-re you go, my lo-ve," Mammy sa-id, her vo-ice fa-ding. She was al-re-ady sin-king be-ne-ath the she-ets.

As La-ila re-ac-hed for the cur-ta-ins, she saw a car pass by on the stre-et ta-iled by a clo-ud of dust. It was the blue Benz with the He-rat li-cen-se pla-te fi-nal-ly le-av-ing. She fol-lo-owed it with her eyes un-til it va-nis-hed aro-und a turn, its back win-dow twink-ling in the sun.

"I won't for-get to-mor-row," Mammy was sa-ying be-hind her. "I pro-mi-se."

"You sa-id that yes-ter-day."

"You don't know, La-ila."

"Know what?" La-ila whe-eled aro-und to fa-ce her mot-her. "What don't I know?" Mammy's hand flo-ated up to her chest, tap-ped the-re. "In he-re. What's in-he-re." Then it fell flac-cid. "You just don't know."

18.

A we-ek pas-sed, but the-re was still no sign of Ta-riq. Then anot-her we-ek ca-me and went.

To fill the ti-me, La-ila fi-xed the scre-en do-or that Ba-bi still hadn't got aro-und to. She to-ok down Ba-bi's bo-oks, dus-ted and alp-ha-be-ti-zed them. She went to Chic-ken Stre-et with Ha-si-na, Gi-ti, and Gi-ti's mot-her, Ni-la, who was a se-amst-ress and so-me-ti-me se-wing part-ner of Mammy's. In that we-ek, La-ila ca-me to be-li-eve that of all the hards-hips a per-son had to fa-ce no-ne was mo-re pu-nis-hing than the simp-le act of wa-iting.

Anot-her we-ek pas-sed.

La-ila fo-und her-self ca-ugh in a net of ter-rib-le tho-ughts.

He wo-uld ne-ver co-me back. His pa-rents had mo-ved away for go-od; the trip to Ghaz-ni had be-en a ru-se. An adult sche-me to spa-re the two of them an up-set-ting fa-re-well.
A land mi-nehad got-ten to him aga-in. The way it did in 1981, when he was fi-ve, the last ti-me his pa-rents to-ok him so-uth to Ghaz-ni. That was shortly af-ter La-ilas third birth-day. He'd be-en lucky that ti-me, lo-sing only a leg; lucky that he'd sur-vi-ved at all.

Her he-ad rang and rang with the-se tho-ughts.

Then one night La-ilas saw a tiny flas-hing light from down the stre-et. A so-und, so-met-hing be-tween a squ-e-ak and a gasp, es-ca-ped her lips. She qu-ickly fis-hed her own flash-light from un-der the bed, but it wo-uldn't work. La-ilas ban-ge-d it aga-in-st her palm, cur-sed the de-ad bat-te-ri-es. But it didn't mat-ter. He was back. La-ilas sat on the ed-ge of her bed, giddy with re-li-ef, and watc-hed that be-a-uti-ful, yel-low eye win-king on and off.

**

On her way to Ta-riqs ho-use the next day, La-ilas saw Kha-dims and a gro-up of his fri-ends ac-ross the stre-et. Kha-dim was squ-at-ting, dra-wing so-met-hing in the dirt with a stick. When he saw her, he drop-ped the stick and wig-gled his fin-gers. He sa-id so-met-hing and the-re was a ro-und of chuck-les. La-ilas drop-ped her he-ad and hur-ri-ed past.

"What did you do?" she exc-la-imed when Ta-riq ope-ned the do-or. Only then did she re-mem-ber that his unc-le was a bar-ber.

Ta-riq ran his hand over his newly sha-ved scalp and smi-led, sho-wing whi-te, sligh-tly une-ven te-eth.

"Li-ke it?"

"You lo-ok li-ke you're en-lis-ting in the army."

"You want to fe-el?" He lo-we-red his he-ad.

The tiny brist-les scratc-hed La-ilas palm ple-asantly. Ta-riq wasn't li-ke so-me of the ot-her boys, who-se ha-ir con-ce-aled co-ne-sha-ped skulls and un-sightly lumps. Ta-riqs he-ad was per-fectly cur-ved and lump-free.

When he lo-oked up, La-ilas saw that his che-eks and brow had sun-bur-ned

"What to-ok you so long?" she sa-id

"My unc-le was sick. Co-me on. Co-me in-si-de."
He led her down the hall-way to the fa-mily ro-om. La-ila lo-ved everyt-hing abo-ut this ho-use. The shabby old rug in the fa-mily ro-om, the patch-work qu-ilt on the co-uch, the or-di-nary clut-ter of Ta-riq's li-fe: his mot-her's bolts of fab-ric, her se-wing ne-ed-les em-bed-ded in spo-ols, the old ma-ga-zines, the ac-cor-di-on ca-se in the cor-ner wa-iting to be crac-ked open.

"Who is it?"

It was his mot-her cal-ling from the kite-hen.

"La-ila," he ans-we-red

He pul-led her a cha-ir. The fa-mily ro-om was brightly lit and had do-ub-le win-dows that ope-ned in-to the yard. On the sill we-re empty jars in which Ta-riq's mot-her pick-led eg-gplant and ma-de car-rot mar-ma-la-de.

"You me-an ouraro-os, our da-ug-h-ter-in-law," his fat-her an-no-un-ced, en-te-ting the ro-om. He was a car-pen-ter, a le-an, whi-te-ha-ired man in his early six-ti-es. He had gaps bet-we-en his front te-eth, and the squ-inty eyes of so-me-one who had spent most of his li-fe out-do-ors. He ope-ned his arms and La-ila went in-to them, gre-eted by his ple-asant and fa-mi-li-ar smell of saw-dust. They kis-sed on the che-ek three ti-mes.

"You ke-ep cal-ling her that and she'll stop co-ming he-re," Ta-riq's mot-her sa-id, pas-sing by them. She was car-rying a tray with a lar-ge bowl, a ser-ving spo-on, and fo-ur smal-ler bowls on it. She set the tray on the tab-le. "Don't mind the old man." She cup-ped La-ila's fa-ce. "It's go-od to see you, my de-ar. Co-me, sit down. I bro-ught back so-me wa-ter-so-aked fru-it with me."

The tab-le was bulky and ma-de of a light, un-fi-nis-hed wo-od-Ta-riq's fat-her had bu-ilt it, as well as the cha-irs. It was co-ve-red with a moss gre-en vinyl tab-lee-th with lit-tle ma-gen-gea cres-cents and stars on it. Most of the li-ving-ro-om wall was ta-ken up with pic-tu-res of Ta-riq at va-ri-o-us ages. In so-me of the very early ones, he had two legs.

"I he-ard yo-ur brot-her was sick," La-ila sa-id to Ta-riq's fat-her, dip-ping a spo-on in-to her bowl of so-aked ra-isins, pis-tac-hi-os, and ap-ri-cots.

He was ligh-ting a ci-ga-ret-te. "Yes, but he's fi-ne now, shokr e Kho-da, thanks to God."

"He-art at-tack. His se-cond," Ta-riq's mot-her sa-id, gi-ving her hus-band an ad-mo-nis-hing lo-ok.
Ta-riq's fat-her blew smo-ke and win-ked at La-il-a. It struck her aga-in that Ta-riq's pa-rents co-uld easily pass for his grand-pa-rents. His mot-her hadn't had him un-til she'd be-en well in-to her for-ti-es.

"How is yo-ur fat-her, my de-ar?" Ta-riq's mot-her sa-id, lo-oking on over her bowl-As long as La-il-a had known her, Ta-riq's mot-her had worn a wig. It was tur-ning a dull purp-le with age. It was pul-led low on her brow to-day, and La-il-a co-uld see the gray ha-irs of her si-de-burns. So-me days, it ro-de high on her fo-re-he-ad. But, to La-il-a, Ta-riq's mot-her ne-ver lo-oked pi-ti-ab-le in it. What La-il-a saw was the calm, self-assu-red fa-ce be-ne-ath the wig, the cle-ver eyes, the ple-asant, un-hur-ri-ed man-ners.

"He's fi-ne," La-il-a sa-id. "Still at Si-lo, of co-ur-se. He's fi-ne."

"And yo-ur mot-her?"

"Go-od days. Bad ones too. The sa-me-"

"Yes," Ta-riq's mot-her sa-id tho-ught-ful-ly, lo-we-ring her spo-on in-to the bowl. "How hard it must be, how ter-ribly hard, for a mot-her to be away from her sons."

"You're sta-ying for lunch?" Ta-riq sa-id-

"You ha-ve to," sa-id his mot-her. "I'm ma-kin-g- s-hor-wa"

"I don't want to be amo-za-hem. "

"Im-po-sing?" Ta-riq's mot-her sa-id. "We le-ave for a co-up-le of we-eks and you turn po-li-te on us?"

"All right, I'll stay," La-il-a sa-id, blus-hing and smi-ling.

"It's set-tled, then."

The truth was, La-il-a lo-ved eating me-als at Ta-riq's ho-use as much as she dis-li-ked eating them at hers. At Ta-riq's, the-re was no eating alo-ne; they al-ways ate as a fa-amily. La-il-a li-ked the vi-olet plas-tic drin-king glas-ses they used and the qu-ar-ter le-mon that al-ways flo-ated in the wa-ter pitc-her. She li-ked how they star- ted each me-al with a bowl of fresh yo-gurt, how they squ-e-ezed so-ur oran-ges on everyt-hing, even the-ir yo-gurt, and how they ma-de small, harm-less jokes at each ot-her's ex-pen-se.

Over me-als, con-ver-sa-ti-on al-ways flo-wed. Tho-ugh Ta-riq and his pa-rents we-re eth-nic Pash-tuns, they spo-ke Far-si when La-il-a was aro-und for her be-ne-fit,
even tho-ugh La-ila mo-re or less un-ders-to-od the-ir na-ti-ve Pash-to, ha-ving le-ar-ned it in scho-ol. Ba-bi sa-id that the-re we-re ten-si-ons bet-we-en the-ir pe-op-le-the Ta-j-iks, who we-re a mi-no-rity, and Ta-riq's pe-op-le, the Pash-tuns, who we-re the lar-gest eth-nic gro-up in Afg-ha-nis-tan. Ta-j-iks ha-ve al-ways felt sligh-ted. Ba-bi had sa-id. Pas-hi-un kings ru-led this co-un-try for al-most two hund-red and 'fi-ty ye-ars, La-ila, and Ta-j-iks for all of ni-ne months, back in 1929.

And you, La-ila had as-ked, do you fe-el sligh-ted, Ba-bi?

Ba-bi had wi-ped his eyeg-las ses cle-an with the hem of his shirt. To me, it's non-sen-se -and very dan-ge-ro-us non-sen-se at that-all this talk of I'm Ta-j-ik and you're Pas-hi-un and he's Ha-za-ra and she's Uz-bek. We're all Afg-hans, and that's all that sho-uld mat-ter. But when one gro-up ru-les over the ot-hers for so long…The-ref's con-tempt. Ri-valry. The-re is. The-re al-ways has be-en.

May-be so. But La-ila ne-ver felt it in Ta-riq's ho-use, whe-re the-se mat-ters ne-ver even ca-me up. Her ti-me with Ta-riq's fa-mily al-ways felt na-tu-ral to La-ila, ef-fort-less, un-comp-li-ca-te d by dif-fe-ren-ces in tri-be or lan-gu-age, or by the per-so-nal spi-tes and grud-ges that in-fec-ted the air at her own ho-me.

"How abo-ut a ga-me of cards?" Ta-riq sa-id.

"Yes, go ups-ta-irs," his mot-her sa-id, swi-ping di-sap-pro-vingly at her hus-band's clo-ud of smo-ke. "I'll get the shor-wa go-ing."

They lay on the-ir sto-machs in the mid-dle of Ta-riq's ro-om and to-ok turns de-aling for pa-nj-par. Pe-da-ling air with his fo-ot, Ta-riq told her abo-ut his trip. The pe-ach sap-ling he had hel-ped his un-cle plant. A gar-den sna-ke he had cap-tu-red. This ro-om was whe-re La-ila and Ta-riq did the-ir ho-me-work, whe-re they bu-ilt pla-ying-card to-wers and drew ri-di-cu-lo-ous port-ra-its of each ot-her. If it was ra-ining, they le-aned on the win-dow-sill, drin-king warm, fizzy or-an-ge Fan-ta, and watc-hed the swol-len ra-in drop-lets trick-le down the glass.

"All right, he-re's one," La-ila sa-id, shuf-fling. "What go-es aro-und the world but stays in a cor-nar?"


La-ila re-mem-be-red the first ti-me he'd shown her his stump. She'd be-en six. With one fin-ger, she had po-ked the ta-ut.
shiny skin just below his left knee. Her finger had found little hard lumps there, and Ta-riq had told her they were spurs of bone that sometimes grew after an am-pu-ta-tion. She'd asked him if his stump hurt, and he said it got sore at the end of the day, when it swelled and didn't fit the prost-he-sis like it was sup-po-sed to, like a fin-ger in a thim-ble. And so-me-ti-mes it gets rub-bed Es-pe-ci-al-ly when it's hot. Then I get ras-hes and blis-ters, but my mot-her has cre-a-m that help. It's not so bad.

La-il-a had burst in-to te-ars.

What are you crying for? He'd strap-ped his leg back on. You as-ker to see it, you gir-ya-nok, you crybaby! If I'd known you we-re go-ing to bawl, I wo-uldn't ha-ve shown you.

"A stamp," he sa-id.

"What?"

"The rid-dle. The ans-ver is a stamp. We sho-ul'd go to the zoo af-ter lunch." "You knew that one. Did you?" "Ab-so-lu-tely not."

"You're a che-at."

"And you're en-vi-o-us." "Of what?"

"My mas-cu-li-ne smarts."


"I let you win." He la-ug-hed. They both knew that wasn't true.

"And who fa-iled math? Who do you co-me to for help with yo-ur math ho-me-work even tho-ugh you're a gra-de ahe-ad?"

"I'd be two gra-des ahe-ad if math didn't bo-re me."

"I sup-po-se ge-o-grap hy bo-res you too."

"How did you know? Now, shut up. So are we go-ing to the zoo or not?"

La-il-a smi-led. "We're go-ing."

"Go-od."

"I mis-sed you."
The-re was a pa-use. Then Ta-riq tur-ned to her with a half-grin-ning, half-gri-ma-cing lo-ok of dis-tas-te. "What's themat-ter with you?"

How many ti-mes had she, Ha-si-na, and Gi-ti sa-id tho-se sa-me three words to each ot-her, La-il-a won-de-red, sa-id it wit-ho-ut he-si-ta-ti-on, af-ter only two or three days of not se-e-ing each ot-her? /mis-sed you, Ha-si-na Oh, I mis-sed you too. In Ta-riq's gri-ma-ce, La-il-a le-ar-ned that boys dif-fe-red from girls in this re-gard. They didn't ma-ke a show of fri-ends-hip. They felt no ur-ge, no ne-ed, for this sort of talk. La-il-a ima-gi-ned it had be-en this way for her brot-hers too. Boys, La-il-a ca-me to see, tre-ated fri-ends-hip the way they tre-ated the sun: its exis-ten-ce un-dis-pu-ted; its ra-di-an-ce best enj-oyed, not be-held di-rectly.

"I was trying to an-noy you," she sa-id.

He ga-ve her a si-de-long glan-ce. "It wor-ked."

But she tho-ught his gri-ma-ce sof-te-ned. And she tho-ught that may-be the sun-burn on his che-eks de-epe-ned mo-men-ta-rily.

* * *

La-il-a didn't me-an to tell him. She'd, in fact, de-ci-ded that tel-ling him wo-uld be a very bad idea. So-me-one wo-uld get hurt, be-ca-use Ta-riq wo-uld'n't be ab-le to let it pass. But when they we-re on the stre-et la-ter, he-ad-ing down to the bus stop, she saw Kha-dim aga-in, le-an-ing aga-inst a wall He was sur-ro-un-ded by his fri-ends, thumbs ho-oked in his belt lo-ops. He grin-ned at her de-fi-antly. And so she told Ta-riq. The story spil-led out of her mo-uth be-fo-re she co-uld stop it. "He did what?"

She told him aga-in.

He po-in-ted to Kha-dim. "Him? He's the one? You're su-re?"

"I'm su-re." Ta-riq clen-ched his te-eth and mut-te-red so-met-hing to him-self in Pash-to that La-il-a didn't catch. "You wa-it he-re," he sa-id, in Far-si now.

"No, Ta-riq-

He was al-re-ady cros-sing the stre-et. Kha-dim was the first to see him. His grin fa-ded, and he pus-hed him-self off the wall. He un-ho-oked his thumbs from the belt lo-ops and ma-de him-self mo-re
up-right, ta-king on a self-cons-ci-o-us air of me-na-ce. The ot-hers fol-lo-wed his ga-ze.

La-ila wis-hed she hadn't sa-id anyt-hing. What if they ban-ded to-get-her? How many of them we-re the-re-ten? ele-ven? twel-ve? What if they hurt him?

Then Ta-riq stop-ped a few fe-et from Kha-dim and his band. The-re was a mo-ment of con-si-de-ra-ti-on, La-ila tho-ught, may-be a chan-ge of he-art, and, when he bent down, she ima-gi-ned he wo-uld pre-tend his sho-ela-ce had co-me un-do-ne and walk back to her. Then his hands went to work, and she un-ders-to-od.

The ot-hers un-ders-to-od too when Ta-riq stra-igh- te ned up, stan-ding on one leg. When he be-gan hop-ping to-ward Kha-dim, then char-ging him, his unst-rap-ped leg ra-ised high over his sho-ul-der li-ke a sword.

The boys step-ped asi-de in a hurry. They ga-ve him a cle-ar path to Kha-dim. Then it was all dust and fists and kicks and yelps.

Kha-dim ne-ver bot-he-red La-ila aga-in.

* * *

That night, as most nights, La-ila set the din-ner tab-le for two only. Mammy sa-id she wasn't hungry. On tho-se nights that she was, she ma-de a po-int of ta-king a pla-te to her ro-om be-fo-re Ba-bi even ca-me ho-me. She was usu-al-ly as-le-ep or lying awa-ke in bed by the ti-me La-ila and Ba-bi sat down to eat.

Ba-bi ca-me out of the bath- ro-om, his ha-ir-pep-pe-red whi-te with flo-ur when he'd co-me ho-me was-hed cle-an now and com-bed back.

"What are we ha-ving, La-ila?"

"Lef-to-veraush so-up."
"So-unds go-od," he sa-id, fol-ding the to-w el with which he'd dri-ed his ha-ir. "So what are we wor-king on to-night? Ad-ding frac-ti- ons?"

"Actu-al-ly, con-ver- ting frac-ti- ons to mi-xed num-bers."

"Ah. Right."

Every night af-ter din-ner, Ba-bi hel-ped La-ila with her ho-me-work and ga-ve her so-me of his own. This was only to ke-ep La-ila a step or two ahe-ad of her class, not be-ca-use he di-sap-pro-ved of the work as-sig-ned by the scho-ol-the pro-pa-gan-da te-ac-hing not-withs-tan-ding. In fact, Ba-bi tho-ught that the one thing the com-mu-nists had do-ne right-or at le-ast in-ten-ded to-iro-ni-cal-ly, was in the fi-eld of edu-ca-ti-on, the vo-ca-ti-on from which they had fi-red him. Mo-re spe-ci-fi-cal-ly,
the edu-ca-ti-on of wo-men. The go-vern-ment had spon-so-red li-te-racy clas-ses for all wo-men. Al-most two-thirds of the stu-dents at Ka-bul Uni-ver-sity we-re wo-men now, Ba-bi sa-id, wo-men who we-re stud-ying law, me-di-ci-ne, en-gi-ne-e-ring.

Wo-men ha-ve al-ways had it hard in this co-un-try, La-ila, but they're pro-bably mo-re free now, un-der the com-mu-nists, and ha-ve mo-re rights than they've ever had be-fo-re,Ba-bi sa-id, al-ways lo-we-ring his vo-ice, awa-re of how in-to-le-rant Mammy was of even re-mo-tely po-si-ti-ve talk of the com-mu-nists. But it's true, Ba-bi sa-id, it's a-go-od ti-me to be a wo-man in Afg-ha-nis-tan. And you can ta-ke ad-van-ta-ge of that, La-ila Of co-ur-se, wo-men's fre-edom - he-re, he sho-ok his he-ad ru-eful-ly-is al-so one of the re-as-ons pe-op-le out the-re to-ok up arms in the first pla-ce.

By "out the-re," he didn't me-an Ka-bul, which had al-ways be-en re-la-ti-vely li-be-ral and prog-res-si-ve. He-re in Ka-bul, wo-men ta-ught at the uni-ver-sity, ran scho-ols, held off-fi-ce in the go-vern-ment- No, Ba-bi me-ant the tri-bal are-as, es-pe-ci-al-ly the Pash-tun re-gi-ons in the so-uth or in the east ne-ar the Pa-kis-ta-ni bor-der, whe-re wo-men we-re ra-rely se-en on the stre-ets and only then in bur-qa and ac-com-pa-ni-ed by men. He me-ant tho-se re-gi-ons whe-re men who li-ved by an-ci-ent tri-bal laws had re-bel-led aga-inst the com-mu-nists and the-ir dec-re-es to li-be-ra-te wo-men, to a-bo-lish for-ced mar-ri-age, to ra-ise the mi-ni-mum mar-ri-age age to six-te-en for girls. The-re, men saw it as an in-sult to the-ir cen-tu-ri-es-old tra-di-ti-on, Ba-bi said, to be told by the go-vern-ment-and a god-less one at that-that the-ir da-ugh-ters had to le-ave ho-me, at-tend scho-ol, and work along-si-de men.

God for-bid that sho-ul-d hap-pen!Ba-bi li-ked to say sar-cas-ti-cal-ly. Then he wo-uld sigh, and say, La-ila, my lo-ve, the only en-my an Afg-han can-not de-fe-at is him-self.

Ba-bi to-ok his se-at at the tab-le, dip-ped bre-ad in-to his bowl of aush.

La-ila de-ci-ded that she wo-uld tell him abo-ut what Ta-riq had do-ne to Kha-dim, over the me-al, be-fo-re they star-ted in on frac-ti-ons. But she ne-ver got the chan-ce. Be-cause, right then, the-re was a knock at the do-or, and on the ot-her si-de of the do-or, a stran-ger with news.

19.

I ne-ed to spe-ak to yo-ur pa-rents, dok-hi-arj-an" he sa-id when La-ila ope-ned the do-or. He was a stocky man, with a sharp, we-at-her-ro-ug-he-ned fa-ce. He wo-re a po-ta-to-co-lo-red co-at, and a brown wo-ol pa-kol on his he-ad

"Can I tell them who's he-re?"

Then Ba-bi's hand was on La-ila's sho-ul-der, and he gently pul-led her from the do-or.
"Why don't you go up-stairs, La-ila. Go on."

As she mo-ved to-ward the steps, La-ila he-ard the vi-si-tor say to Ba-bi that he had news from Pa-njs-hir. Mammy was in the ro-om now too. She had one hand clam-ped over her mo-uth, and her eyes we-re skip-ping from Ba-bi to the man in the pa-rents. La-ila pe-eked from the top of the sta-irs. She watc-hed the stran-ger sit down with her pa-rents. He le-aned to-ward them. Sa-id a few mu-ten-der words. Then Ba-bi's fa-ce was whi-te, and get-ting whi-ter, and he was lo-oking at his hands, and Mammy was scre-aming, scre-aming, and te-aring at her ha-ir.

* * *

The next mor-ning, the day of the-fa-i-iha, a flock of ne-igh-bor-ho-od wo-men des-cen-ded on the ho-use and to-ok char-ge of pre-pa-ra-ti-ons for the khatm din-ner that wo-uld ta-ke place af-ter the fu-ne-ral Mammy sat on the co-uch the who-le mor-ning, her fin-gers wor-king a hand-kerc-hi-ef, her fa-ce blo-ated. She was ten-ded to by a pa-ir of sniff-ling wo-men who to-ok turns pat-ting Mammy's hand gin-gerly, li-ke she was the ra-rest and most fra-gi -le doll in the world. Mammy did not se-em awa-re of the-ir pre-sen-ce.

La-ila kne-eled be-fo-re her mot-her and to-ok her hands. "Mammy."

Mammy's eyes drif-ten down. She blin-ked.
"We'll ta-ke ca-re of her, La-ila jan," one of the wo-men sa-id with an air of self-impor-tan-ce. La-ila had be-en to fu-ne-ral be-fo-re whe-re she had se-en wo-men li-ke this, wo-men who re-lis-hed all things that had to do with de-ath, of-fi-ci-al con-so-lers who let no one tres-pass on the-ir self-appo-in-ted du-ti-es.

"It's un-der cont-rol. You go on now, girl, and do so-met-hing el-se. Le-ave yo-ur mot-her be."

Sho-o-ed away, La-ila felt use-less. She bo-un-ced from one ro-om to the next. She put-te-red aro-und the kitc-hen for a whi-le. An un-cra-te-ris-ti-cal-ly sub-du-ed Ha-si-na and her mot-her ca-me. So did Gi-ti and her mot-her. When Gi-ti saw La-ila, she hur-ri-ed over, threw her bony arms aro-und her, and ga-ve La-ila a very long, and sur-pri-sing-ly strong, emb-ra-ce. When she pul-led back, te-ars had po-oled in her eyes. "I am so sorry, La-ila," she sa-id. La-ila than-ked her. The three girls sat out-si-de in the yard un-til one of the wo-men as-sig-ned them the task of was-hing glas-ses and stac-king pla-tes on the tab-le.

Ba-bi too kept wal-king in and out of the ho-use aim-les-sly, lo-oking, it se-emed, for so-met-hing to do.

"Ke-ep him away from me." That was the only ti-me Mammy sa-id anyt-hing all mor-ning.
Ba-bi en-ded up sit-ting alo-ne on a fol-ding cha-ir in the hal-lway, lo-oking de-so-la-te and small Then one of the wo-men told him he was in the way the-re. He apo-lo-gi-zed and di-sap-pe-ared in-to his study.

* * *

That ap-ter-no-on, the men went to a hall in Kar-teh-Seh that Ba-bi had ren-ted for the fa-ti-ha. The wo-men ca-me to the ho-use. La-ila to-ok her spot be-si-de Mammy, next to the li-ving-ro-om ent-ran-ce whe-re it was cus-to-mary for the fa-mily of the de-ce-ased to sit. Mo-ur-ners re-mo-ved the-ir sho-es at the do-or, nod-ded at ac-qu-a-in-tan-ces as they cros-sed the ro-om, and sat on fol-ding cha-irs ar-ran-ged along the walls. La-ila saw Wa-jma, the el-der ly mid-wi-fe who had de-li-ve-red her. She saw Ta-riq's mot-her too, we-ar-ing a black scarf over the wig. She ga-ve La-ila a nod and a slow, sad, clo-se-lip-ped smi-le.

From a cas-set-te pla-yer, a man's na-sal vo-ice chan-tered ver-ses from the Ko-ran. In bet-we-en, the wo-men sig-hed and shif-ted and sniff-led. The-re we-re mu-tered co-ughs, mur-murs, and, pe-ri-o-di-cal-ly, so-mo-ne let out a the-at-ri-cal, sor-row-drenc-hed sob.

Ras-he-ed's wi-fe, Ma-ri-am, ca-me in. She was we-ar-ing a black hij-ab. Strands of her ha-ir stra-yed from it on-to her brow. She to-ok a se-at along the wall ac-ross from La-ila.

Next to La-ila, Mammy kept roc-king back and forth. La-ila drew Mammy's hand in-to her lap and crad-led it with both of hers, but Mammy did not se-em to no-ti-ce.

"Do you want so-me wa-ter, Mammy?" La-ila sa-id in her ear. "Are you thirsty?"

But Mammy sa-id not-hing. She did not-hin g but sway back and forth and sta-re at the rug with a re-mo-te, spi-rit-less lo-ok.

Now and then, sit-ting next to Mammy, se-e-ing the dro-oping, wo-ebe-go-ne lo-oks a-und the ro-om, the mag-ni-tu-de of the di-sas-ter that had struck her fa-mily wo-uld re-gis-ter with La-ila. The pos-si-bi-li-ti-es de-ni-ed. The ho-pes das-hed.

But the fe-ling didn't last. It was hard to fe-el, re-al-ly fe-el, Mammy's loss. Hard to sum-mon sor-row, to gri-eve the de-aths of pe-op-le La-ila had ne-ver re-al-ly tho-ught of as ali-ve in the first pla-ce. Ah-mad and No-or had al-ways be-en li-ke lo-re to her. Li-ke cha-rac-ters in a fab-le. Kings in a his-tory bo-ok.

It was Ta-riq who was re-al, flesh and blo-od. Ta-riq, who ta-ught her cus-swords in Pash-to, who li-ked sal-ted clo-ver le-aves, who frow-ned and ma-de a low, mo-an-ing so-und when he che-wed, who had a light pink birth-mark just be-ne-ath his left col-lar-bo-ne sha-ped li-ke an up-si-de-down man-do-lin.
So she sat be-si-de Mammy and du-ti-ful-ly mo-ur-ned Ah-mad and No-or, but, in La-ila's he-art, her true brot-her was ali-ve and well.

20.

The ail-ments that wo-uld ho-und Mammy for the rest of her days be-gan. Chest pa-ins and he-ad-ac-hes, jo-int ac-hes and night swe-ats, pa-ra-ly-ning pa-ins in her ears, lumps no one el-se co-uld fe-el. Ba-bi to-ok her to a doc-tor, who to-ok blo-od and uri-ne, shot X-rays of Mammy's body, but fo-und no physi-cal il-ness.

Mammy lay in bed most days. She wo-re black. She pic-ked at her ha-ir and gna-wed on the mo-le be-low her lip. When Mammy was awa-ke, La-ila fo-und her stag-ge-ring thro-ugh the ho-use. She al-ways en-ded up in La-ilas ro-om, as tho-ugh she wo-uld run in-to the boys so-oner or la-ter if she just kept wal-king in-to the ro-om whe-re they had on-ce slept and far-ted and fo-ught with pil-lows. But all she ran in-to was the-ir ab-sen-ce. And La-ila. Which, La-ila be-li-eved, had be-co-me one and the sa-me to Mammy.

The only task Mammy ne-ver neg-lee-ted was her fi-ve da-ily na-maz pra-yers. She en-ded each na-maz with her he-ad hung low, hands held be-fo-re her fa-ce, palms up, mut-te-ring a pra-yer for God to bring vic-tory to the Mu-j-ahi-de-en. La-ila had to sho-ul-der mo-re and mo-re of the cho-res. If she didn't tend to the ho-use, she was apt to find clot-hes, sho-es, open ri-ce bags, cans of be-ans, and dirty dis-hes strewn abo-ut everyw-he-re. La-ila was-hed Mammy's dres-ses and chan-ged her she-ets. She co-axed her out of bed for baths and me-a ls. She was the one who iro-ned Ba-bi's shirts and fol-ded his pants. Inc-re-asingly, she was the co-ok.

So-me-ti-mes, af-ter she was do-ne with he r cho-res, La-ila craw-led in-to bed next to Mammy. She wrap-ped her arms aro-und her, la-ced her fin-gers with her mot-her's, bu-ri-ed her fa-ce in her ha-ir. Mammy wo-uld stir, mur-mur so-met-hing. Ine-vi-tably, she wo-uld start in on a story abo-ut the boys.

One day, as they we-re lying this way, Mammy sa-id, "Ahmad was go-ing to be a le-ader. He had the cha-ris-ma for it-Pe-op-le three ti-mes his age lis-te ned to him with res-pect, La-ila. It was so-met-hing to see. And No-on Oh, my No-or. He was al-ways ma-king skete-hes of bu-il-dings and brid-ges. He was go-ing to be an arc-hi-tect, you know. He was go-ing to trans-form Ka-bul with his de-signs. And now they're both sha-he-ed, my boys, both martyr's."

La-ila lay the-re and lis-te ned, wis-hing Mammy wo-uld no-ti-ce that she, La-ila, hadn't be-co-mes ha-he-ed, that she was ali-ve, he-re, in bed with her, that she had ho-pes and a fu-tu-re. But La-ila knew that her fu-tu-re was no match for her brot-hers' past. They had overs-ha-do wed her in li-fe. They wo-uld ob-li-te-ra-te her in de-ath. Mammy was now the cu-ra-tor of the-ir li-ves' mu-se-um and she, La-ila, a
me-re vi-si-tor. A re-cep-tac-le for the-ir myths. Thepar-c-h-ment on which Mammy me-ant to ink the-ir le-gends.

"The mes-sen-ger who ca-me with the news, he sa-id that when they bro-ught the boys back to camp, Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud per-so-nal-ly over-saw the bu-ri-al. He sa-id a pra-yer for them at the gra-ve-si-te. That's the kind of bra-ve yo-ung men yo-ur brot-hers we-re, La-ila, that Com-man-der Mas-so-ud him-self, the Li-on of Pa-njs-hir, God bless him, wo-uld over-see the-ir bu-ri-al."

Mammy rol-led on-to her back. La-ila shif-ted, res-ted her he-ad on Mammy's chest. "So-me days," Mammy sa-id in a ho-ar-se vo-ice, "I lis-ten to that clock tic-king in the hal-l-way. Then I think of all the ticks, all the mi-nu-tes, all the ho-urs and days and we-eks and months and ye-ars wa-it-ing for me. All of it wit-ho-ut them. And I can't bre-at-he then, li-ke so-me-one's step-ping on my he-art, La-ila. I get so we-ak. So we-ak I just want to col-lap-se so-mew-he-re."

"I wish the-re was so-met-hing I co-uld do," La-ila sa-id, me-aning it. But it ca-me out so-un-ding bro-ad, per-func-tory, li-ke the to-ken con-so-l a-ti-on of a kind stran-ger.

"You're a go-od da-ugh-ter," Mammy sa-id, af-ter a de-ep sigh. "And I ha-ven't be-en much of a mot-her to you."

"Don't say that."

"Oh, it's true. I know it and I'm sorry for it, my lo-ve."

"Mammy?"

"Mm."

La-ila sat up, lo-oking down at Mammy. The-re we-re gray strands in Mammy's ha-ir now. And it start-led La-ila how much we-ight Mammy, who'd al-ways be-en plump, had lost. Her che-eks had a sal-low, drawn lo-ok. The blo-useshe was we-ar-ing dro-oped over her sho-ul-ders, and the-re was a ga-ping spa-ce bet-we-en her neck and the col-lar. Mo-re than on-ce La-ila had se-en the wed-ding bandsli-de off Mammy's fin-ger.

"I've be-en me-aning to ask you so-met-hing."

"What is it?"

"You wo-uldn't..." La-ila be-gan.
She'd tal-ked abo-ut it to Ha-si-na. At Ha-si-na's sug-ges-ti-on, the two of them had emp-ti-ed the bot-tle of as-pi-rin in the gut-ter, hid-den the kitc-hen kni-ves and the sharp ke-bab ske-wers be-ne-ath the rug un-der the co-uch. Ha-si-na had fo-und a ro-pe in the yard. When Ba-bi co-uldn't find his ra-zors, La-il-a had to tell him of her fe-ars. He drop-ped on the ed-ge of the co-uch, hands bet-we-en his kne-es. La-il-a wa-ited for so-me kind of re-as-su-ran-ce from him. But all she got was a be-wil-de-red, hol-low-eyed lo-ok.

"You wo-uldn't…Mam-my I worry that-

"I tho-ught abo-ut it the night we got the news," Mammy sa-id. "I won't lie to you, I've tho-ught abo-ut it sin-ce too. But, no. Don't worry, La-il-a. I want to see my sons' dre-am co-me true. I want to see the day the So-vi-ets go ho-me dis-ga-cred, the day the Mu-j-ahi-de-en co-me to Ka-bul in vic-tory. I want to be the-re when it hap-pens, when Afg-ha-ni-s-tan is free, so the boys see it too. They'll see it thro-ugh my eyes."

Mammy was so-on as-le-ep, le-aving La-il-a with du-eling emo-ti-ons: re-as-su-red that Mammy me-ant to li-ve on, stung that she wo-uld ne-ver le-ave her mark on Mammy's he-art the way her brot-hers had, be-ca-use Mammy's he-art was li-ke a pal-lid be-ach whe-re La-il-a's fo-otp-rints wo-uld fo-re-ver wash be-ne-ath the wa-ves of sor-row that swel-led and cras-hed, swel-led and cras-hed.

21.

The dri-ver pul-led his ta-xi over to let pass anot-her long con-voy of So-vi-et je-eps and ar-mo-red ve-hic-les. Ta-riq le-aned ac-ro ss the front se-at, over the dri-ver, and yel-led,"Pa-j-al-mia! Pa-j-al-m-ta!"

A je-ep hon-ked and Ta-riq whist-led back, be-am-ing and wa-ving che-er-ful-ly. "Lo-vely guns!" he yel-led "Fa-bu-lo-us je-eps! Fa-bu-lo-us army! Too bad you're lo-sing to a bunch of pe-asants fi-ring slings-hots!"

The con-voy pas-sed. The dri-ver mer-ged back on-to the ro-ad

"How much fart-her?" La-il-a as-ked

"An ho-ur at the most," the dri-ver sa-id. "Bar-ring any mo-re con-voys or check-po-ints."

They we-re ta-king a day trip, La-il-a, Ba-bi, and Ta-riq. Ha-si-na had wan-ted to co-me too, had beg-ged her fat-her, but he wo-uldn't al-low it. The trip was Ba-bi's idea. Tho-ugh he co-uldn't hard-ly af-ford it on his sa-lary, he'd hi-red a dri-ver for the day. He wo-uldn't disc-lo-se anyt-hing to La-il-a abo-ut the ir des-ti-na-ti-on ex-cept to say that, with it, he was cont-ri-bu-ting to her edu-ca-ti-on.

They had be-en on the ro-ad sin-ce fi-ve in the mor-ning. Thro-ugh La-il-a's win-dow, the lands-ca-pe shif-ted from snow-cap-ped pe-aks to de-serts to can-yons and
sun-scorched outcroppings of rocks. Along the way, they passed mud ho-uses with thatched roofs and fi-elds dot-ted with bund-les of whe-at. Pite-hed out in the dusty fi-elds, he-re and the-re, La-ila re-cog-ni-zed the black tents of Ko-oc-hi no-mads. And, fre-qu-ently, the car-cas-ses of bur-ned-out So-vi-et tanks and wrec-ked he-li-cop-ters. This, she tho-ught, was Ah-mad and No-or's Afg-ha-nis-tan. This, he-re in the pro-vin-ces, was whe-re the war was be-ing fo-ught, af-ter all. Not in Ka-bul. Ka-bul was lar-gely at pe-ace. Back in Ka-bul, if not for the oc-ca-si-onal bursts of gun-fi-re, if not for the So-vi-et sol-di-ers smo-king on the si-de-walks and the So-vi-et je-eps al-ways bum-ping thro-ugh the stre-ets, war might as well ha-ve be-en a ru-mor.

It was la-te mor-ning, af-ter they'd pas-sed two mo-re check-po-ints, when they en-te-red a val-ley. Ba-bi had La-ila le-an ac-ross the se-at and po-in-ted to a se-ri-es of an-ci-ent-lo-oking walls of sun-dri-ed red in the dis-tan-ce.

"That's cal-led Shahr-e-Zo-hak. The Red City. It used to be a fort-ress. It was bu-ilt so-me ni-ne hund-red ye-ars ago to de-fend the val-ley from in-va-ders. Geng-his Khan's grand-son at-tac-ked it in the thir-teen cen-tury, but he was kil-led. It was Geng-his Khan him-self who then dest-ro-yed it."

"And that, my yo-ung fri-ends, is the story of our co-un-try, one in-va-der af-ter anot-her," the dri-ver sa-id, flic-ki ng ci-ga-ret-te ash out the win-dow. "Ma-ce-do-ni-ans. Sas-sa-ni-ans. Arabs. Mon-gols. Now the So-vi-ets. But we're li-ke tho-se walls up the-re. Bat-te-re d, and not-h-ing pretty to lo-ok at, but still stan-ding. Isn't that the truth, ba-dar?"

"Inde-ed it is," sa-id Ba-bi.

* * *

Half an ho-ur la-ter, the dri-ver pul-led over.

"Co-me on, you two," Ba-bi sa-id. "Co-me out-si-de and ha-ve a lo-ok." They got out of the ta-xi. Ba-bi po-in-ted "The-re they are. Lo-ok."

Ta-riq gas-ped. La-ila did too. And she knew then that she co-uld li-ve to be a hund-red and she wo-uld ne-ver aga-in see a thing as mag-ni-fi-cent.

The two Bud-dhas we-re enor-mo-us, so-ar-ing much hig-her than she had ima-gi-ned from all the pho-tos she'd se-en of them. Chi-se-led in-to a sun-ble-ac-hed rock cliff, they pe-ered down at them, as they had ne-arly two thou-sand ye-ars be-fo-re, La-ila ima-gi-ned, at ca-ra-vans cross-sing the val-ley on the Silk Ro-ad. On ei-ther si-de of them, along the over-han-ging nic-he, the cliff was poc-ked with myri-ad ca-ves.

"I fe-el so small," Ta-riq sa-id.
"You want to climb up?" Ba-bi sa-id.
"Up the sta-tu-es?" La-il-a as-ked. "We can do that?"

Ba-bi smi-led and held out his hand. "Co-me on."

* * *

The climb was hard for Ta-riq, who had to hold on to both La-il-a and Ba-bi as they inc-hed up a win-ding, nar-row, dim-ly lit sta-ir-ca-se. They saw sha-dowy ca-ves along the way, and tun-nels ho-ney-com-bing the cliff every which way.
"Ca-re-ful whe-re you step," Ba-bi sa-id His vo-ice ma-de a lo-ud ec-ho. "The gro-und is tre-ac-he-ro-us."

In so-me parts, the sta-ir-ca-se was open to the Bud-dha's ca-vity.

"Don't lo-ok down, child-ren. Ke-ep lo-oking stra-ight ahe-ad."

As they clim-bed, Ba-bi told them that Ba-mi-yan had on-ce be-en a thri-ving Bud-dhist cen-ter un-til it had fal-len un-der Is-la-mic Arab ru-le in the ninth cen-tury. The sands-to-ne clif-fs we-re ho-me to Bud-dhist monks who car-ved ca-ves in them to use as li-ving qu-ar-ters and as sanc-tu-ary for we-ary tra-ve-ling pilg-rims. The monks, Ba-bi sa-id, pa-in-ted be-a-uti-ful fres-co-es along the walls and ro-ofs of the-ir ca-ves.

"At one po-int," he sa-id, "the-re we-re fi-ve tho-usand monks li-ving as her-mits in the-se ca-ves."

Ta-riq was badly out of bre-ath when they re-ac-hed the top. Ba-bi was pan-ting too. But his eyes sho-ne with ex-ci-te-ment.

"We're stan-ding atop its he-ad," he sa-id, wi-ping his brow with a hand-kerc-hi-ef "The-re's a nic-he over he-re whe-re we can lo-ok out."

They inc-hed over to the craggy over-hang and, stan-ding si-de by si-de, with Ba-bi in the mid-dle, ga-zed down on the val-ley.

"Lo-ok at this!" sa-id La-il-a.

Ba-bi smi-led.
The Ba-mi-yan Val-ley be-low was car-pe-ted by lush far-ming fi-el-ds. Ba-bi sa-id they we-re gre-en win-ter whe-at and al-fal-fa, po-ta-to-es too. The fi-el-ds we-re bor-de-red by pop-lars and cris-scros-sed by stre-ams and ir-ri-ga-ti-on ditc-hes, on the banks of which tiny fe-ma-le fi-gu-res squ-at-ted and was-hed clot-hes. Ba-bi po-in-ted to ri-ce pad-di-es and bar-ley fi-el-ds dra- ping the slo-pes. It was autumn,
and La-ila co-uld ma-ke out pe-op-le in bright tu-nics on the ro-ofs of mud brick
dwel-lings la-ying out the har-vest to dry. The ma-in ro-ad go-ing thro-ugh the town
was pop-lar-li-ned too. The-re we-re small shops and te-aho-uses and stre-et-si-de
bar-bers on eit-her si-de of it. Be-yond the vil-la-ge, be-yond the ri-ver and the
stre-ams, La-ila saw fo-ot-hil-ls, ba-re and dusty brown, and, be-yond tho-se, as
be-yond everyt-hing el-se in Afg-ha-nis-tan, the snow-cap-ped Hin-du Kush.

The sky abo-ve all of this was an im-ma-cu-la-te, spot-less blue.
"It's so qu-i-et," La-ila bre-at-hed. She co-uld see tiny she-ep and hor-ses but
co-uldn't he-ar the-ir ble-ating and whin-nying.

The pe-ace of it. I wan- ted you to ex-pe-ri-en-ce it. But I al-so wan-ted you to see
yo-ur co-un-try's he-ri-ta-ge, child-ren, to le-arn of its rich past. You see, so-me things
I can te-ach you. So-me you le-arn from bo-oks. But the-re are things that, well, you
just ha-ve to see and fe-el."

"Lo-ok," sa-id Ta-riq.

They watc-hed a hawk, gli-ding in circ-les abo-ve the vil-la-ge.

"Did you ever bring Mammy up he-re?" La-ila as-ked

"Oh, many ti-mes. Be-fo-re the boys we-re born. Af-ter too. Yo-ur mot-her, she used
to be ad-ven-tu-ro-us then, and…soali-ve. She was just abo-ut the li-ve-li-est,
hap-pi-est per-son I'd ever met." He smi-led at the me-mory. "She had this la-ugh. I
swe-ar it's why I mar-ri-ed her, La-ila, for that la-ugh. It bul-ldo-zed you. You sto-od
no chan-ce aga-inst it."

A wa-ve of af-fec-ti-on over-ca-me La-ila. From then on, she wo-uld al-ways
re-mem-ber Ba-bi this way: re-mi-nis-cing abo-ut Mammy, with his el-bows on the
rock, hands cup-ping his chin, his ha-ir ruf-fled by the wind, eyes crink-led aga-inst
the sun.

"I'm go-ing to lo-ok at so-me of tho-se ca-ves," Ta-riq sa-id.

"Be ca-re-ful," sa-id Ba-bi.

"I will, Ka-ka-j-an," Ta-riq's vo-ice ec-ho-ed back.

La-ila watc-hed a trio of men far be-low, tal-king ne-ar a cow tet-he-red to a fen-ce.
Aro-und them, the tre-es had star-ted to turn, och-re and oran-ge, scar-let red.
"I miss the boys too, you know," Ba-bi sa-id. His eyes had wel-led up a tad. His chin was tremb-ling. "I may not… With yo-ur mot-her, both her joy and sad-ness are ext-re-me. She can't hi-de eit-her. She ne-ve-er co-uld. Me, I sup-po-se I'm dif-fe-rent. I tend to…But it bro-ke me too, the boys dying. I miss them too. Not a day pas-ses that I…It's very hard, La-ila. So very hard." He squ-e-ezed the in-ner cor-ners of his eyes with his thumb and fo-re-fin-ger. When he tri-ed to talk, his vo-ice bro-ke. He pul-led his lips over his te-eth and wa-ited. He to-ok a long, de-ep bre-ath, lo-oked at her. "But I'm glad I ha-ve you. Every day, I thank God for you. Every sing-le day. So-mo-ti-mes, when yo-ur mot-her's ha-ving one of her re-al-ly dark days, I fe-el li-ke you're all I ha-ve, La-ila."

La-ila drew clo-ser to him and res-ted her che-ek up aga-inst his chest. He se-emed slight-ly start-led-unli-ke Mammy, he ra-rely exp-res-sed his af-fec-ti-on physi-cal-ly. He plan-ted a brisk kiss on the top of her he-ad and hug-ged her back awk-wardly. They sto-od this way for a whi-le, lo-oking down on the Ba-mi-yan Val-ley.

"As much as I lo-ve this land, so-me days I think abo-ut le-aving it," Ba-bi sa-id.

"Whe-re-to?"

"Anypла-ce whe-re it's easy to for-get. Pa-kis-tan first, I sup-po-se. For a ye-ar, may-be two. Wa-it for our pa-per-work to get pro-ces-sed."

"And then?"

"And then, well, it is a big world. May-be Ame-ri-ca. So-mew-he-re ne-ar the sea. Li-ke Ca-li-for-nia."

Ba-bi sa-id the Ame-ri-cans we-re a ge-ne-ro-us pe-op-le. They wo-uld help them with mo-ney and fo-od for a whi-le, un-til they co-uld get on the-ir fe-et.

"I wo-uld find work, and, in a few ye-ars, when we had eno-ugh sa-ved up, we'd open a lit-tle Afg-han res-ta-urant-Not-hing fancy, mind you, just a mo-des-t lit-tle pla-ce, a few tab-les, so-me rugs. May-be hang so-me pic-tu-res of Ka-bul. We'd gi-ve the Ame-ri-cans a tas-te of Afg-han fo-od. And with yo-ur mot-her's co-oking, they'd li-ne up and down the stre-et.

"And you, you wo-uld con-ti-nue go-ing to scho-ol, of co-ur-se. You know how I fe-el abo-ut that. That wo-uld be our ab-so-lu-te top pri-ority, to get you a go-od edu-ca-ti-on, high scho-ol then col-le-ge. But in yo-ur free ti-me, if you wan-ted to, you co-uld help out, ta-ke or-ders, fill wa-ter pitc-hers, that sort of thing."

Ba-bi sa-id they wo-uld hold birth-day par-ti-es at the res-ta-urant, en-ga-ge-men-t ce-re-mo-ni-es, New Ye-ar's get-to-get-her-s. It wo-uld turn in-to a gat-he-ring pla-ce for ot-her Afg-hans who, li-ke them, had fled the war. And, la-te at night, af-ter
ever-yo-ne had left and the pla-ce was cle-aned up, they wo-uld sit for tea amid the empty tab-les, the three of them, ti-red but thank-ful for the-ir go-od for-tu-ne.

When Ba-bi was do-ne spe-ak-ing, he grew qu-i-et. They both did. They knew that Mammy wasn't go-ing anyw-he-re. Le-av-ing Afg-ha-nis-tan had be-en unt-hin-kab-le to her whi-le Ah-mad and No-or we-re still ali-ve. Now that they we-resha-he-ed, pac-king up and run-ning was an even wor-se af-front, a bet-rah-yal, a di-sa-vo-wal of the sac-ri-fi-ce her sons had ma-de.

* * *

La-ila co-uld he-ar her sa-ying. Do-es the-ir dying me-an not-hing to you, co-usin? The only so-la-ce I find is in kno-wing that I walk the sa-me gro-und that so-aked up the-ir blo-od. No. Ne-ver.

And Ba-bi wo-uld ne-ver le-ave wit-ho-ut her, La-ila knew, even tho-ugh Mammy was no mo-re a wi-fe to him now than she was a mot-her to La-ila. For Mammy, he wo-uld brush asi-de this dayd-re-am of his the way he flic-ked specks of flo-ur from his co-at when he got ho-me from work. And so they wo-uld stay. They wo-uld stay un-til the war en-ded And they wo-uld stay for wha-te-ver ca-me af-ter war.

La-ila re-mem-be-red Mammy tel-ling Ba-bi on-ce that she had mar-ri-ed a man who had no con-vic-ti-ons. Mammy didn't un-der-sta nd. She didn't un-der-sta nd that if she lo-oked in-to a mir-ror, she wo-uld find the one un-fa-iling con-vic-ti-on of his li-fe lo-oking right back at her.

* * *
The-re was so-met-hing she hadn't told Ba-bi up the-re atop the Bud-dha: that, in one im-por-tant way, she was glad they co-uldn't go. She wo-uld miss Gi-ti and her pinch-fa-ced ear-nest-ness, yes, and Ha-si-na too, with her wic-ked la-ugh and reck-less clow-ning aro-und But, mostly, La-ila re-mem-be-red all too well the ines-ca-pab-le drud-gery of tho-se fo-ur we-eks wit-ho-ut Ta-riq when he had go-ne to Ghaz-ni. She re-mem-be-red all too well how ti-me had drag-ged wit-ho-ut him, how she had shuf-fled abo-ut fe-eling way-la-id, out of ba-lan-ce. How co-uld she ever co-pe with his per-ma-nent ab-sen-ce?

May-be it was sen-se-less to want to be ne-ar a per-son so badly he-re in a co-untry whe-re bul-lets had shred-ded her own brot-thers to pi-eces. But all La-ila had to do was pic-tu-re Ta-riq go-ing at Kha-dim with  his leg and then not-hing in the world se-emed mo-re sen-sib-le to her.

* * *


"They sig-ned a tre-aty!" he sa-id. "In Ge-ne-va. It's of-fi-ci-al! They're le-aving. Wit-hin ni-ne months, the-re won't be any mo-re So-vi-ets in Afg-ha-nis-tan!"

Mammy was sit-ting up in bed. She shrug-ged.

"But the com-mu-nist re-gi-me is sta-ying," she sa-id. "Na-j-ibul-lah is the So-vi-ets' pup-pet pre-si-dent. He's not go-ing anyw-he-re. No, the war will go on. This is not the end"

"Na-j-ibul-lah won't last," sa-id Ba-bi.

"They're le-aving, Mammy! They're ac-tu-al-ly le-aving!"

"You two ce-leb-ra-te if you want to. But I won't rest un-till the Mu-j-ahi-de-en hold a vic-tory pa-ra-de right he-re in Ka-bul"

And, with that, she lay down aga-in and pul-led up the blan-ket.

22.

Janu-ary1989

One cold, over-cast day in Janu-ary 1989, three months be-fo-re La-ila tur-ned ele-ven, she, her pa-rents, and Ha-si-na went to watch one of the last So-vi-et con-voys exit the city. Spec-ta-tors had gat-he-red on both si-des of the tho-ro-ugh fa-re out-si-de the Mi-li-tary Club ne-ar Wa-zir Ak-bar Khan. They sto-od in muddy snow and wate-hed the li-ne of tanks, ar-mo-red trucks, and je-eps as light
snow flew across the glare of the passing head-lights. The-re we-re heck-les and je-ers. Afg-han sol-di-ers kept pe-op-le o ff the stre-et. Every now and then, they had to fi-re a war-ning shot.

Mammy ho-is-ted a pho-to of Ah-mad and No-or high over her he-ad. It was the one of them sit-ting back-to-back un-der the pe-ar tree. The-re we-re ot-hers li-ke her, wo-men with pic-tu-res of the-ir irsha-he-ed hus-bands, sons, brot-hers held high. So-me-one tap-ped La-ila and Ha-si-na on the sho-ul-der. It was Ta-riq.

"Whe-re did you get that thing?" Ha-si-na exc-la-imed.

"I tho-ught I'd co-me dres-sed for the oc-ca-si-on." Ta-riq sa-id. He was we-aring an enor-mo-us Rus-si-an fur hat, comp-le-te with earf-laps, which he had pul-led down.

"How do I lo-ok?"

"Ri-di-cu-lo-us," La-ila la-ug-hed.

"That's the idea."

"Yo-ur pa-rents ca-me he-re with you dres-sed li-ke this?"
"They're ho-me, ac-tu-al-ly," he sa-id.

The pre-vi-o-us fall, Ta-riq's unc-le in Ghaz-ni had di-ed of a he-art at-tack, and, a few we-eks la-ter, Ta-riq's fat-her had suf-fe-red a he-art at-tack of his own, le-aving him fra-il and ti-red, pro-ne to an-xi-ty and bo-uts of dep-res-si-on that over-to-uk him for we-eks at a ti-me. La-ila was glad to see Ta-riq li-ke this, li-ke his old self aga-in. For we-eks af-ter his fat-her's il-ness, La-ila had watc-hed him mo-ping aro-und, he-avy-fa-ced and sul-len.

The three of them sto-le away whi-le Mammy and Ba-bi sto-od watc-hing the So-vi-ets. From a stre-et ven-dor, Ta-riq boUGHT them each a pla-te of bo-iled be-ans top-ped with thick ci-lant-ro chut-ney. They ate be-ne-ath the aw-ning of a clo-sed rug shop, then Ha-si-na went to find her fa-mily.

On the bus ri-de ho-me, Ta-riq and La-ila sat be-hind her pa-rents. Mammy was by the win-dow, sta-ring out, clutc-hing the pic-tu-re aga-inst her chest. Be-si-de her, Ba-bi was im-pas-si-vely lis-te-ning to a man who was ar-gu-ing that the So-vi-ets might be le-aving but that they wo-uld send we-apons to Na-jibul-la in Ka-bul.

"He's the-ir pup-pet. They'll ke-ep the war go-ing thro-ugh him, you can bet on that." So-me-one in the next ais-le vo-iced his ag-re-ement.
Mammy was mut-te-ring to her-self, long-win-ded pra-yers that rol-led on and on un-til she had no bre-ath left and had to eke out the last few words in a tiny, high-pitc-hed squ-e-ak.

* * *

They "went to Ci-ne-ma Park la-ter that day, La-ila and Ta-riq, and had to set-tle for a So-vi-et film that was dub-bed, to unin-ten-ti-onal-ly co-mic ef-fect, in Far-si. The-re was a merc-hant ship, and a first ma-te in lo-ve with the cap-ta-in's da-ugh-ter. Her na-me was Al-yo-na. Then ca-me a fi-er-ce storm, light-ning, ra-in, the he-aving sea tos-sing the ship. One of the fran-tic sa-ilors yel-led so-met-hing. An ab-surdly calm Afg-pan vo-ice trans-la-ted: "My de-ar sir, wo-uld you kindly pass the ro-pe?"

At this, Ta-riq burst out cack-ling. And, so-on, they both we-re in the grips of a ho-pe-less at-tack of la-ugh-ter. Just when one be-ca-me fa-ti-gu-ed, the ot-her wo-uld snort, and off they wo-uld go on anot-her ro-und. A man sit-ting two rows up tur-ned aro-und and shus-hed them.

The-re was a wed-ding sce-ne ne-ar the end. The cap-ta-in had re-len-ted and let Al-yo-na marry the first ma-te. The newly-weds we-re smi-ling at each ot-her. Ever-yo-ne was drin-king vod-ka.

"I'm ne-ver get-ting mar-ri-ed," Ta-riq whis-pe-red.

"Me ne-it-her," sa-id La-ila, but not be-for-e a mo-men-t of ner-vo-us he-si-ta-tion. She wor-ri-ed that her vo-ice had bet-ra-yed her di-sap-po-int-ment at what he had sa-id. Her he-art gal-lo-ping, she ad-ded, mo-re for-ce-ful-ly this ti-me, "Ne-ver."

"Wed-dings are stu-pid." "All the fuss."

"All the mo-ney spent." "For what?"

"For clot-hes you'll ne-ver we-ar aga-in."

"Ha!"

"If I everdo get mar-ri-ed," Ta-riq sa-id, "they'll ha-ve to ma-ke ro-om for three on the wed-ding sta-ge. Me, the bri-de, and the guy hol-ding the gun to my he-ad."

The man in the front row ga-ve them anot-her ad-mo-nis-hing lo-ok. On the scre-en, Al-yo-na and her new hus-band loc-ked lips.

Watc-hing the kiss, La-ila felt stran-gely cons-pi-cu-o-us all at on-ce. She be-ca-me in-ten-sely awa-re of her he-art thum-ping, of the blo-od thud-ding in her ears, of the sha-pe of Ta-riq be-si-de her, tigh-te-ning up, be-co-ming still. The kiss drag-ged on.
It se-emed of ut-most ur-gency to La-ila, sud-denly, that she not stir or ma-ke a no-ise. She sen-sed that Ta-riq was ob-ser-ving her-one eye on the kiss, the ot-her on her-as she was ob-ser-ving him. Was he lis-te-ning to the air who-os-hing in and out of her no-se, she won-de-red, wa-iting for a sub-t-le fal-te-ring, a re-ve-al-ing ir-re-gu-la-rity, that wo-uld bet-ray her tho-ughts?

And what wo-uld it be li-ke to kiss hi m, to fe-el the fuzzy ha-ir abo-ve his lip tick-ling her own lips?

Then Ta-riq shif-ted un-com-for-tably in his se-at. In a stra-ined vo-ice, he sa-id, "Did you know that if you fling snot in Si-be-ria, it's a gre-en icic-le be-fo-re it hits the gro-und?"

They both la-ug-hed, but bri-efly, ner-vo-usly, this ti-me. And when the film en-ded and they step-ped out-si-de, La-ila was re-li-eved to see that the sky had dim-med, that she wo-uld'n't ha-ve to me-et Ta-riq's eyes in the bright day-light.

23.

April1992

Three ye-ars pas-sed.

In that ti-me, Ta-riq's fat-her had a se-ri-es of stro-kes. They left him with a clumsy left hand and a slight slur to his spe-ech. When he was agi-ta-ted, which hap-pe-ned fre-qu-ently, the slur-ring got wor-se.

Ta-riq outg-rew his leg aga-in and was is-su-ed a new leg by the Red Cross, tho-ugh he had to wa-it six months for it.

As Ha-si-na had fe-ared, her fa-mil-y to-ok her to La-ho-re, whe-re she was ma-de to marry the co-usin who ow-ned the auto shop. The mor-ning that they to-ok her, La-il and Gi-ti went to Ha-si-na's ho-use to say go-od-by. Ha-si-na told them that the co-usin, her hus-band-to-be, had al-re-ady star-ted the pro-cess to mo-ve them to Ger-ma-ny, whe-re his bro-t hers li-ved. Wit-hin the ye-ar, she tho-ught, they wo-uld be in Frank-furt. They cri-ed then in a three-way emb-ra-ce. Gi-ti was in-con-so-lab-le. The last ti-me La-ila ever saw Ha-si-na, she was be-ing hel-ped by her fat-her in-to the crow-ded back-se-at of a ta-xi.

The So-vi-et Uni-on crumb-led with as-to-nis-hing swift-ness. Every few we eks, it se-emed to La-il, Ba-bi was co-ming ho-me with news of the la-test re-pub-lic to dec-la-re in-de-pen-dence. Lit-hu-ania. Es-to-nia. Uk-ra-ine. The So-vi-et flag was lo-we-red over the Krem-lin. The Re-pub-lic of Rus-sia was born.

In Ka-bul, Na-j-ibul-lah chan-ged tac-tics and tri-ed to port-ray him-self as a de-vo-ut Mus-lim. "Too lit-tle and far too la-te," sa-id Ba-bi. "You can't be the chi-ef of KHAD one day and the next day pray in a mos-que with pe-op-le who-se re-la-ti-ves you tor-tu-red and kil-led" Fe-el-ing the no-ose tigh-te-ning aro-und Ka-bul,
Na-j-ibul-lah tri-ed to re-ach a set-tle-ment with the Mu-j-ahi-de-en but the Mu-j-ahi-de-en bal-ked.

From her bed, Mammy sa-id, "Go-od for them." She kept her vi-gils for the Mu-j-ahi-de-en and wa-it-ed for her pa-ra-de. Wa-it-ed for her sons' ene-mi-es to fall.

* * *

Na-j-ibul-lah sur-ren-de-red at last and was gi-ven sanc-tu-ary in the UN com-po-und ne-ar Da-ru-la-man Pa-la-ce, so-uth of the city.

The jihad was over. The va-ri-o-us com-mu-nist re-gi-mes that had held po-wer sin-ce the night La-ila was born we-re all de-fe-ated. Mammy's he-ro-es, Ah-mad's and No-or's brot-hers-in-war, had won. And now, af-ter mo-re than a de-ca-de of sac-ri-fi-cing everyt-hing, of le-aving be-hind the ir fa-mi-li-es to li-ve in mo-un-ta-ins and fight for Afg-ha-nis-tan's so-ve-re-ignty, the Mu-j-ahi-de-en we-re co-ning to Ka-bul, in flesh, blo-od, and bat-tle-we-ary bo-ne.

Mammy knew all of the-ir na-mes.


And, of co-ur-se, the-re was Mammy's he-ro, Rab-ba-ni's ally, the bro-oding, cha-ris-ma-tic Ta-j-ik com-man-der Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud, the Li-on of Pa-njs-hir. Mammy had na-iled up a pos-ter of him in her ro-om. Mas-so-ud's hand-so-me, tho-ught-ful fa-ce, eyeb-row coc-ked and tra-de-mar-k pa-kotil-ted, wo-ul-d be-co-me ubi-qu-ito-us in Ka-bul. His so-ul-ful black eyes wo-ul-d ga-ze back from bil-lbo-ar-ds, walls, sto-ref-ront win-dows, from lit-tle flags mo-un-ted on the an-ten-nas of ta-xi-cabs.

For Mammy, this was the day she had lon-ged for. This bro-ught to fru-iti-on all tho-se ye-ars of wa-iting.

At last, she co-uld end her vi-gils, and her sons co-uld rest in pe-ace.

* * *
The day after Najibullah surrendered, Mammy rose from bed a new woman. For the first time in the five years since Ahmad and Noor had become shahed, she didn't wear black. She put on a co-balt blue linen dress with white polka dots. She washed the windows, swept the floor, aired the house, took a long bath. Her voice was shrill with merriment.

"A party is in order," she declared—She sent Laila to invite neighbors. "Tell them we're having a big lunch tomorrow!"

In the kitchen, Mammy stood looking around, hands on her hips, and said, with friendly reproach, "What have you done to my kitchen, Laila? Boy. Everything is in a different place."

She began moving pots and pans around, theatrically, as though she were laying claim to them anew, restaking her territory, now that she was back. Laila stayed out of her way. It was best. Mammy could be as incompressible in her fits of euphoria as in her attacks of rage. With unsettling energy, Mammy set about cooking: aush soup with kidney beans and dried dill, ko-fia, steaming hot ma-niu drenched with fresh yogurt and topped with mint.

"You're plucking your eyebrows," Mammy said, as she was opening a large burlap sack of rice by the kitchen counter.

"Only a little."

Mammy poured rice from the sack into a large black pot of water. She rolled up her sleeves and began stirring.

"How is Tariq?"

"His father's been ill," Laila said "How old is he now anyway?"

"I don't know. Sixties, I guess."

"I meant Tariq."

"Oh. Sixteen."

"He's a nice boy. Don't you think?"

Laila shrugged.

"Not really a boy any more, though, is he? Sixteen. Almost a man. Don't you think?"

107
"What are you getting at, Mammy?"

"Nothing," Mammy said, smiling innocently. "Nothing. It's just that you...Ah, nothing. I'd better not say any-way."

"I see you want to," La-ila said, irritated by this circuitous, playful accusation.

"Well." Mammy folded her hands on the rim of the pot. La-ila spotted an unnatural, almost rehearsed, quality to the way she said "Well" and to this folding of hands. She feared a speech was coming.

"It was one thing when you were little kids running around. No harm in that. It was charming- But now. Now. I no-ti-ce you're we-aring a bra, La-ila."

La-ila was caught off guard.

"And you could have told me, by the way, abo-ut the bra. I didn't know. I'm di-sap-po-in-ted you didn't tell me." Sen-sing her ad-va-nta-ge, Mammy pressed on.

"Anyway, this isn't abo-ut me or the bra. It's abo-ut you and Ta-riq. He's a boy, you see, and, as such, what do-es he ca-re abo-ut re-pu-ta-ti-on? But you? The re-pu-ta-ti-on of a girl, es-pe-ci-al-ly one as pretty as you, is a de-li-ca-te thing, La-ila. Li-ke a mynah bird in yo-ur hands. Slac-ken yo-ur grip and away it fli-es."

"And what abo-ut all yo-ur wall clim-bing, the sne-aking aro-und with Ba-bi in the orc-hards?" La-ila said, ple-as-ed with her qu-ick re-co-very.

"We we-re co-usins. And we mar-ri-ed. Has this boy as-ked for yo-ur hand?"

"He's a fri-end. Arqfiq. It's not li-ke that bet-we-en us," La-ila said, so-un-ding de-fen-si-ve, and not very con-vin-cing. "He's li-ke a brot-her to me," she ad-ded, mis-gu-idedly. And she knew, even be-fo-re a clo-ud pas-sed over Mammy's fa-ce and her fe-atu-res dar-ke-ned, that she'd ma-de a mis-ta-ke.

"That he is not," Mammy said flatly. "You will not li-ken that one-leg-ged car-pen-ter's boy to yo-ur brot-hers. The-re is no one li-ke yo-ur brot-hers."

"I didn't say he...That's not how I me-ant it."

Mammy sig-hed thro-ugh the no-se and clen-ched her te-eth.
"Anyway," she re-su-med, but wit-ho-ut the coy light-he-aded-ness of a few mo-ments ago, "what I'm trying to say is that if you're not ca-re-ful, pe-op-le will talk."

La-il-a ope-ned her mo-uth to say so-met-hing. It wasn't that Mammy didn't ha-ve a po-int. La-il-a knew that the days of in-no-cent, un-hin-de-red fro-lic-king in the stre-ets with Ta-riq had pas-sed. For so-me ti-me now, La-il-a had be-gun to sen-se a new stran-ge-ness when the two of them we-re out in pub-lic. An awa-re-ness of be-ing lo-oked at, scru-ti-ni-zed, whis-pe-red abo-ut, that La-il-a had ne-ver felt be-fo-re. Andwo-uldn't ha-ve felt even now but for one fun-da-men-tal fact: She had fal-len for Ta-riq. Ho-ple-sly and des-pe-ra-ty, when he was ne-ar, she co-uld'n't help but be con-su-med with the most scan-da-lo-us tho-ughts, of his le-an, ba-re body en-tang-led with hers. Lying in bed at night, she pic-tu-red him kis-sing her belly, won-de-red at the soft-ness of his lips, at the fe-el of his hands on her neck, her chest, her back, and lo-wer still. When she tho-ught of him this way, she was over-ta-ken with gu-ilt, but al-so with a pe-cu-li-ar, wa rm sen-sa-ti-on that spre-ad up-ward from her belly un-til it felt as if her fa-ce we-re glo-wing pink.

No. Mammy had a po-int. Mo-re than she knew, in fact. La-il-a sus-pec-ted that so-me, if not most, of the ne-igh-bors we-re a co-up-le. The ot-her day, for ins-tan-ce, she and Ta-riq we-re wal-king up the stre-et to-get-her when they'd pas-sed Ras-he-ed, the sho-ema-ker, with his bur-qa-clad wi-fe, Ma-ri-am, in tow. As he'd pas-sed by them, Ras-he-ed had play-ful-ly sa-id, "If it isn't La-il-ili and Ma-jno-on," re-fer-ring to the star-cros-sed lo-vers of Ne-za-mi's po-pu-lar twelfth-cen-tury ro-man-tic po-em a Far-si ver-si-on of Ro-meo and Juli-et, Ba-bi sa-id, tho-ugh he ad-ded that Ne-za-mi had writ-ten his ta-le of ill-fa-ted lo-vers fo-ur cen-tu-ri-es be-fo-re Sha-kes-pe-are.

Mammy had a po-int. What rank-led La-il-a was that Mammy hadn't ear-ned the right to ma-ke it. It wo-uld ha-ve been an un-fa-i r. La-il-a felt li-ke she was no bet-ter than the-se pots and pans, so-met-hing that co-uld go neg-lec-ted, then la-id cla-im to, at will, whe-ne-ver the mo-od struck.

But this was a big day, an im-por-tant day, for all of them. It wo-uld be petty to spo-il it over this. In the spi-rit of things, La-il-a let it pass. "I get yo-ur po-int," she sa-id.

"Go-od!" Mammy sa-id. "That's re-sol-ved, then. Now, whe-re is Ha-ki-m? Whe-re, oh whe-re, is that swe-et lit-tle hus-band of mi-ne?"

* * *
It was a daz-zling, clo-ud-less day, per-fect for a party. The men sat on ric-kety
fol-ding cha-irs in the yard. They drank tea and smo-ked and tal-ked in lo-ud
ban-te-ring vo-ices abo-ut the Mu-j-ahi-de-en's plan. From Ba-bi, La-ila had le-ar-ned
the out-li-ne of it: Afg-ha-nis-tan was now cal-led the Is-la-mic State of
Afg-ha-nis-tan. An Is-la-mic Jihad Co-un-cil, for-med in Pes-ha-war by se-ve-ral of
the Mu-j-ahi-de-en fac-ti-ons, wo-uld over-see things for two months, led by
Sibg-ha-tul-lah Mo-j-adi-di. This wo-uld be fol-lo-wed then by a le-aders-hip
co-un-cil led by Rab-ba-ni, who wo-uld ta-ke over for fo-ur months. Du-ring tho-se
six months, alo-ya-j-ir-ga wo-uld be held, a grand co-un-cil of le-aders and el-ders,
who wo-uld form an in-te-rim go-ver-n-ment to hold po-wer for two ye-ars, le-ad-ing
up to de-moc-ra-tic elec-ti-ons.

One of the men was fan-ning ske-wers of lamb siz-zling over a ma-kes-hift grill
Ba-bi and Ta-riq's fat-her we-re pla-ying a ga-me of chess in the sha-de of the old
pe-ar tree. The-ir fa-ces we-re scrunc-hed up in con-cent-ra-ti-on. Ta-riq was sit-ting
at the bo-ard too, in turns watc-hing the match, then lis-te-ning in on the po-li-ti-cal
chat at the adj-acent tab-le.

The wo-men gat-he-red in the li-ving ro-om, the hal-lway, and the kitc-hen. They
chat-ted as they ho-is-ted the-ir ba-bi-es and ex-pertly dod-ge-d, with mi-nu-te shifts of
the-ir hips, the child-ren te-aring af-ter each ot-her aro-und the ho-use. An Us-tad
Sa-ra-ha-sha-zal bla-red from a cas-set-te pla-yr.

La-ila was in the kitc-hen, ma-king ca-ra-fes of dogh with Gi-ti. Gi-ti was no lon-ger
as shy, or as se-ri-o-us, as be-fo-re. For se-ve-ral months now, the per-pe-tu-al
se-ve-re scowl had cle-ared from her brow. She la-ug-hed openly the-se days, mo-re
fre-qu-ently, and-it struck La-ila-a bit flir-ta-ti-o-nal-y. She had do-ne away with the
drab pony-ta-ils, let her ha-ir grow, and stre-aked it with red high-ights. La-ila
le-ar-ned even-tu-al-ly that the im-pe-tus for this trans-for-ma-ti-on was an
eigh-te-en-ye-ar-old boy who-se at-ten-tion Gi-ti had ca-ught. His na-me was Sa-bir,
and he was a go-al-ke-eper on Gi-ti's ol-der brot-her's soc-cer te-am.

"Oh, he has the most hand-so-me smi-le, and this thick, thick black ha-ir!" Gi-ti had
told La-ila. No one knew abo-ut the-ir at-trac-tion, of co-ur-se. Gi-ti had sec-ret-ly
met him twi-ce for tea, fif-te-en mi-nu-tes each ti-me, at a small te-aho-use on the
ot-her si-de of town, in Ta-ima-ni.

"He's go-ing to ask for my hand, La-ila! May-be as early as this sum-mer. Can you
be-li-eve it? I swe-ar I can't stop thin-king abo-ut him."

"What abo-ut scho-ol?" La-ila had as-ked. Gi-ti had til-ted her he-ad and gi-ven her
We both know bet-ter lo-ok.
By the ti-me we're twenty, Ha-si-na used to say, Gi-ti and I, we'll ha-ve pus-hed out fo-ur, fi-ve kids each Bui you, La-ila, you 'll ma-ke m two dum-mi-es pro-ud. You 're go-ing to be so-me-body. I know one day I'll pick up a news-pa-per and find yo-ur pic-tu-re on the fron-t-pa-ge.

Gi-ti was be-si-de La-ila now, chop-ping cu-cum-bers, with a dre-amy, far-off lo-ok on her fa-ce.

Mammy was ne-arby, in her bril-li-ant sum-mer dress, pe-eling bo-iled eggs with Wa-jma, the mid-wi-fe, and Ta-riq's mot-her.

"I'm go-ing to pre-sent Com-man-der Mas-so-ud with a pic-tu-re of Ah-mad and No-or," Mammy was sa-ying to Wa-jma as Wa-jma nod-ded and tri-ed to lo-ok in-te-res-ted and sin-ce-re.

"He per-so-nal-ly over-saw the bu-ri-al. He sa-id a pra-yer at the-ir gra-ve. It'll be a to-ken of thanks for his de-cency." Mammy crac-ked anot-her bo-iled egg. "I he-ar he's a ref-lec-ti-ve, ho-no-rab-le man. I think he wo-uld ap-pre-ci-ate it."

All aro-und them, wo-men bol-ted in and out of the kitc-he n, car-ri-ed out bowls of qur-ma, plat-ters of ma-si-awa, lo-aves of bre-ad, and ar-ran-ged it all on the sof-rah spre-ad on the li-ving-ro-om flo-or.

Every on-ce in a whi-le, Ta-riq sa-un-te-red in. He pic-ked at this, nib-bled on that. "No men al-lo-wed," sa-id Gi-ti.

"Out, out, out," cri-ed Wa-jma.

Ta-riq smi-led at the wo-men's go-od-hu-mo-red sho-o-ing. He se-emed to ta-ke ple-asu-re in not be-ing wel-co-me he-re, in in-fec-ting this fe-ma-le at-mosp-he-re with his half-grin-ning, mas-cu-li-ne ir-re-ve-ren-ce. La-ila did her best not to lo-ok at him, not to gi-ve the-se wo-men any mo-re gos-sip fod-der than they al-re-ady ha-d So she kept her eyes down and sa-id not-hing to him, but she re-mem-be-red a dre-am she'd had a few nights be-fo-re, of his fa-ce and hers, to-get-her in a mir-ror, be-ne-ath a soft, gre-en ve-il. And gra-ins of ri-ce, drop-ping from his ha-ir, bo-un-cing off the glass with alink.

Ta-riq re-ac-hed to samp-le a mor-sel of ve-al co-oked with po-ta-to-es.

"Ho bac-ha!" Gi-ti slap-ped the back of his hand. Ta-riq sto-le it any-way and la-ug-hed. He sto-od al-most a fo-ot tal-ler than La-ila now. He sha-ved. His fa-ce was le-aner, mo-re an-gu-lar. His sho-ul-ders had bro-ad e-ned. Ta-riq li-ke-d to we-ar ple-ated tro-users, black shiny lo-afers, and short-sle-eve shirts that sho-wed off his newly
mus-cu-lar arms-comp-li-ments of an old, rusty set of bar-bel-ls that he lif-ted da-ily in his yard. His fa-ce had la-tely ad-op-ted an exp-res-si-on of play-ful con-ten-ti-o-us-ness. He had ta-ken to a self-cons-ci-o-us coc-king of his he-ad when he spo-ke, slightly to the si-de, and to arc-hing one eyeb-row when he la-ug-hed. He let his ha-ir grow and had fal-len in-to the ha-bit of tos-sing the floppy locks of-ten and un-ne-ces-sa-ri-ly. The cor-rupt half grin was a new thing too.

The last ti-me Ta-riq was sho-o-ed out of the kite-hen, his mot-her ca-ught La-il-a ste-al-ing a glan-ce at him. La-il-a's he-art jum-ped, and her eyes flu-t-te-red gu-il-tily. She qu-ickly oc-cu-pi-ed her-self with tos-sing the chop-ped cu-cum-ber in-to the pitc-her of sal-ted, wa-te-red-down yo-gurt. But she co-uld sen-se Ta-riq's mot-her watc-hing, her kno-wing, ap-pro-ving half smi-le.

The men fil-led the-ir pla-tes and glas-ses and to-ok the-ir me-als to the yard. On-ce they had ta-ken the-ir sha-re, the wo-men and child-ren set-tled on the flo-or aro-und the sof-rah and ate.

It was af-terfat sof-rah was cle-ared and the pla-tes we-re stac-ked in the kite-hen, when the frenzy of tea ma-king and re-mem-be-ring who to-ok gre-en and who black star-ted, that Ta-riq mo-ti-oned with his he-ad and slip-ped out the do-or.

La-il-a wa-ited fi-ve mi-nu-tes, then fol-lo-wed.

She fo-und him three ho-uses down the stre-et, le-an-ing aga-inst the wall at the ent-ran-ce of a nar-row-mo-ut-hed al-ley bet-we-en two adj-acent ho-uses. He was hum-ming an old Pash-to song, by Us-tad Awal Mir:

Da ze ma zi-ba wa-i-an, da ze ma da-da wa-i-an. This is our be-a-uti-ful land, this is our be-lo-ved land.

And he was smo-king, anot-her new ha-bit, which he'd pic-ked up from the guys La-il-a spot-ted him han-ging aro-und with the-se days. La-il-a co-uld'n't stand them, the-se new fri-ends of Ta-riq's. They all dres-sed the sa-me way, ple-ated tro-users, and tight shirts that ac-cen-tu-ated the-ir arms and chest. They all wo-re too much co-log-ne, and they all smo-ked. They strut-ted aro-und the ne-igh-bor-ho-od in gro-ups, joking, la-ug-hing lo-udly, so-me-ti-mes even cal-ling af-ter girls, with iden-ti-cal stu-pid, self-sa-tis-fi-ed grin on the-ir fa-ces. One of Ta-riq's fri-ends, on the ba-sis of the most pas-sing of re-semb-lan-ces to Sylves-ter Stal-lo-ne, in-sis-ted he be cal-led Ram-bo.

"Yo-ur mot-her wo-uld kill you if she knew abo-ut yo-ur smo-king," La-il-a sa-id, lo-oking one way, then the ot-her, be-fo-re slip-ping in-to the al-ley.

"But she do-esn't," he sa-id. He mo-ved asi-de to ma-ke ro-om.

"That co-uld chan-ge."
"Who is going to tell? You?"

La-ila tapped her foot. "Tell your secret to the wind, but don't blame it for telling the trees."

Ta-riq smiled, the one eyebrow arched. "Who said that?"

"Kha-lil Gib-ran."

"You're a show-off."

"Gi-ve me a ci-gar-te."

He shook his head no and crossed his arms. This was a new entry in his re-per-to-ire of po-ses: back to the wall, arms crossed, ci-gar-te dang-ling from the cor-ner of his mo-uth, his go-od leg ca-su-al-ly bent.

"Why not?"

"Bad for you," he said.

"And it's not bad for you?"

"I do it for the girls."

"What girls?"

He smirked. "They think it's sexy."

"It's not."

"No?"

"I as-su-re you."

"Not sexy?"

"You lo-okki-la, li-ke a half-wit."

"That hurts," he said

"What girls any-way?"

"You're je-alo-us."

"I'm in-dif-fe-rently cu-ri-o-us."
"You can't be both." He took another drag and squinted through the smoke. "I'll bet they're tal-king abo-ut us now."


"And what are they sa-ying?"

"That we're ca-no-e-ing down the Ri-ver of Sin," he sa-id. "Eating a sli-ce of Im-pi-ety Ca-ke."
"Ri-ding the Ricks-haw of Wic-ked-ness?" La-ila chi-med in.

"Ma-king Sac-ri-le-ge Qur-ma."

They both la-ug-hed. Then Ta-riq re-mar-ked that her ha-ir was get-ting lon-ger. "It's ni-ce," he sa-id La-ila ho-ped she wasn't blus-hing. "You chan ged the su-bj-ect."
"From what?"

"The empty-he-aded girls who think you're sexy."

"You know."

"Know what?"

"That I only ha-ve eyes for you."

La-ila swo-oned in-si-de. She tri-ed to re-ad his fa-ce but was met by a lo-ok that was in-de-cip-he-rab-le: the che-er-ful, cre-ti-no-us grin at odds with the nar-row, half-des-pe-ra-te lo-ok in his eyes. A cle-ver lo-ok, cal-cu-la -ted to fall pre-ci-sely at the mid-po-int bet-we-en moc-kery and sin-ce-rity.

Ta-riq crus-hed his ci-ga-ret-te with the he-el of his go-od fo-ot. "So what do you think abo-ut all this?"

"The party?"

"Who's the half-wit now? I me-ant the Mu-j-ahi-de-en, La-ila. The-ir co-ming to Ka-bul."
Oh.

She star-ted to tell him so-met-hing Ba-bi had sa-id, abo-ut the tro-ub-le-so-me mar-ri-age of guns and ego, when she he-ard a com-mo-ti-on co-ming from the ho-use. Lo-ud vo-ices. Scre-aming.

La-il-la to-ok off run-ning. Ta-riq hob-bled be-hind her.

The-re was a me-lee in the yard. In the mid-dle of it we-re two snar-ling men, rol-ling on the gro-und, a kni-fe bet-we-en them. La-il-la re-cog-ni-zed one of them as a man from the tab-le who had be-en dis-cus-sing po-li-tics ear-li-er. The ot-her was the man who had be-en fan-ning the ke-bab ske-wers. Se-ve-ral men we-re try-ing to pull them apart. Ba-bi wasn't among them. He sto-od by the wall, at a sa-fe dis-tan-ce from the fight, with Ta-riq's fat-her, who was cry-ing.

From the ex-ci-ted vo-ices aro-und her, La-il-la ca-ught snip-pets that she put to-get-her: The fel-low at the po-li-tics ta b-le, a Pash-tun, had cal-led Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud a tra-itor for "ma-king a de-al" with the So-vi-ets in the 1980s. The ke-bab man, a Ta-j-ik, had ta-ken of-fen-se and de-man-ded a ret-rac-ti-on. The Pash-tun had re-fu-sed. The Ta-j-ik had sa-id that if not for Mas-so-ud, the ot-her man's sis-ter wo-uld still be "gi-ving it" to So-vi-et sol-di-ers. They had co-me to blows. One of them had then bran-dis-hed a kni-fe; the-re was di-sag-re-ment as to who.

With hor-ror, La-il-la saw that Ta-riq had thrown him-self in-to the scuf-fle. She al-so saw that so-me of the pe-ace ma-kers we-re now thro-wing punc-hes of the-ir own. She tho-ught she spot-ten a se-cond kni-fe.

La-ter that eve-ning, La-il-la tho-ught of how the me-lee had top-pled over, with men fal-ling on top of one anot-her, amid yelps and cri-es and sho-uts and flying punc-hes, and, in the mid-dle of it, a gri-ma-cing Ta-riq, his ha-ir dis-he-ve-dled, his leg co-me un-do-ne, try-ing to crawl out.

* * *

It was diz-zying how qu-ick-ly everyt-hing un-ra-ve-led.

The le-ad-ers hip co-un-cil was for-med pre-ma-tu-rely. It elec-ted Rab-ba-ni pre-si-dent. The ot-her fac-ti-ons cri-ed na-po-ti-sm. Mas-so-ud cal-led for pe-ace and pa-ti-en-ce.

Hek-mat-yar, who had be-en exc-lu-ded, was in-cen-sed. The Ha-za-ras, with the-ir long his-tory of be-ing op-pres-sed and neg-lec-ted, se-et-hed.

The Mu-j-ahi-de-en, ar-med to the te-eth but now lac-king a com-mon enemy, had fo-und the enemy in each ot-her.

Ka-bul's day of rec-ko-ning had co-me at last.
And when the roc-kets be-gan to ra-in down on Ka-bul, pe-op-le ran for co-ver. Mammy did too, li-te-ral-ly. She chan-ged in-to black aga-in, went to her ro-om, shut the cur-ta-ins, and pul-led the blan-ket over her he-ad.

24.

It's the whist-ling," La-ila sa-id to Ta-riq, "the damn whist-ling, I ha-te mo-re than anyt-hing" Ta-riq nod-ded kno-wingly.

It wasn't so much the whist-ling it-self, La-ila tho-ught la -ter, but the se-conds bet-we-en the start of it and im-pact. The bri-ef and in-ter-mi-nab-le ti-me of fe-ling sus-pen-ded. The not kno-wing. The wa-iting. Li-ke a de-fen -dant abo-ut to he-ar the ver-dict.

Often it hap-pe-ned at din-ner, when she and Ba-bi we-re at the tab-le. When it star-ted, the-ir he-ads snap-ped up. They lis-te-ned to the whist-ling, forks in mi-da-ir, unc-he-wed fo-od in the-ir mo-uths. La-ila saw the ref-lec-ti-on of the-ir half-lit fa-ces in the pitch-black win-dow, the-ir sha-dows un-mo-ving on the wall. The whist-ling. Then the blast, blis-sful-ly el-sew-he-re, fol-lo-wed by an ex-pul-si-on of bre-ath and the know-led-ge that they had be-en spa-red for now whi-le so-mew-he-re el-se, amid cri-es and cho-king clo-uds of smo-ke, the-re was a scramb-ling, a ba-re-han-ded frenzy of dig-ging, of pul-ling from the deb-ris, what re-ma-ined of a sis-ter, a brot-her, a grandc-hild.

But the flip si-de of be-ing spa-red was the agony of won-de-ring who hadn't. Af-ter every roc-ket blast, La-ila ra-ced to the stre-et, stam-me-ring a pra-yer, cer-ta-in that, this ti-me, su-rely this ti-me, it was Ta-riq they wo-uld find bu-ri-ed be-ne-ath the rub-ble and smo-ke.

At night, La-ila lay in bed and watc-hed the sud-den whi-te flas-hes ref-lec-ted in her win-dow. She lis-te-ned to the rat-ling of auto-ma-tic gun-fi-re and co-un- ted the roc-kets whi-ning over-he-ad as the ho-use sho-ok and fla-kes of plas-ter ra-ined down on her from the ce-ling. So-me nights, when the light of roc-ket fi-re was so bright a per-son co-uld re-ad a bo-ok by it, sle-ep ne-ver ca-me. And, if it did, La-ila's dre-ams we-re suf-fu-sed with fi-re and de-tac-hed limbs and the mo-aning of the wo-un-ded.

Mor-ning bro-u-ght no re-li-ef. The mu-ez-zin's call forna-maz rang out, and the Mu-j-ahi-de-en set down the-ir guns, fa-ced west, and pra-yed. Then the rugs we-re fol-ded, the guns lo-aded, and the mo-un-ta-ins fi-red on Ka-bul, and Ka-bul fi-red
back at the mo-un-ta-ins, as La-ila and the rest of the city watc-hed as help-less as old San-ti-ago watc-hing the sharks ta-ke bi-tes out of his pri-ze fish.

* * *

Everyw-he-re La-ila "went, she saw Mas-so-ud's men. She saw them ro-am the stre-ets and every few hund-red yards stop cars for qu-es-ti-on-ing. They sat and smo-ked atop tanks, dres-sed in the-ir fa-ti-gu-es and ubi-quito-us-pa-kols. They pe-eked at pas-sersby from be-hind stac-ked sand-bags at in-ter-sec-ti-ons.

Not that La-ila went out much any-mo-re. And, when she did, she was al-ways ac-com-pa-ni-ed by Ta-riq, who se-emed to re-lish this chi-val-ric duty.

"I bo-ught a gun," he sa-id one day. They we-re sit-ting out-si-de, on the gro-und be-ne-ath the pe-ar tree in La-ila's yard. He sho-wed her. He sa-id it was a se-mi-a-uto-ma-tic, a Be-ret-ta. To La-ila, it me-rely lo-oked black and de-adly.

"I don't li-ke it," she sa-id. "Guns sca-re me."

Ta-riq tur-ned the ma-ga-zi-ne over in his hand

"They fo-und three bo-di-es in a ho-use in Kar-teh-Seh last we-ek," he sa-id. "Did you he-ar? Sis-ters. All three ra-ped The-ir thro-ats slas-hed. So-me-one had bit-ten the rings off the-ir fin-gers. You co-uld tell, they had te-eth marks-"

"I don't want to he-ar this."

"I don't me-an to up-set you," Ta-riq sa-id "But I just…Ife-el be t-ter car-rying this."

He was her li-fe-li-ne to the stre-ets now. He he-ard the word of mo-uth and pas-sed it on to her. Ta-riq was the one who told her, for ins-tan-ce, that mi-li-ti-amen sta-ti-oned in the mo-un-ta-ins shar-pe-ned the-ir marks-mans-hip-and set-tled wa-gers over sa-id marks-mans-hip-by sho-ting ci-vi-li-ans down be-low, men, wo-men, child-ren, cho-sen at ran-dom. He told her that they fi-red roc-kets at cars but, for so-me re-ason, left ta-xis alo-ne-which exp-la-ined to La-ila the re-cent rash of pe-op-le spra-ying the-ir cars yel-low.

Ta-riq exp-la-ined to her the tre-ac-he-ro-us, shif-ting bo-un-da-ri-es wit-hin Ka-bul. La-ila le-ar-ned from him, for ins-tan-ce, that this ro-ad, up to the se-ond aca-cia tree on the left, be-lon-ged to one war-lord; that the next fo-ur blocks, en-ding with the ba-kery shop next to the de-mo-lis-hed phar-macy, was anot-her war-lord's sec-tor; and that if she cros-sed that stre-et and wal-ked half a mi-le west, she wo-uld find her-self in the ter-ri-tory of yet anot-her war-lord and, the-re-fo-re, fa-ir ga-me for sni-per fi-re. And this was what Mammy's he-ro-es we-re cal-led now. War-lords.
La-ila he-ard them cal-led mu-j-ahi-de-en, but, when they did, they ma-de a fa-ce-a sne-ering, dis-tas-te-ful fa-ce-the word re-eking of de-ep aver-si-on and de-ep scorn. Li-ke an in-sult.

Ta-riq snap-ped the ma-ga-zi-ne back in-to his hand-gun. "Do you ha-ve it in you?" La-il-a sa-id. "To what?"

"To use this thing. To kill with it."

Ta-riq tuc-ked the gun in-to the wa-ist of his de-nims. Then he sa-id a thing both lo-vely and ter-rib-le. "For you," he sa-id. "I'd kill with it for you, La-il-a."

He slid clo-ser to her and the-ir hands brus-hed, on-ce, then aga-in. When Ta-riq's fin-gers ten-ta-ti-vely be-gan to slip in-to hers, La-il-a let them. And when sud-denly he le-aned over and pres-sed his lips to hers, she let him aga-in.

At that mo-ment, all of Mammy's talk of re-pu-ta-ti-ons and mynah birds so-un-ded im-ma-ti-real to La-il-a. Ab-surd, even. In the midst of all this kil-ling and lo-oting, all this ug-li-ness, it was a harm-less thing to sit he-re be-ne-ath a tree and kiss Ta-riq. A small thing. An easily for-gi-vab-le in-dul-g en-ce. So she let him kiss her, and when he pul-led back she le-aned in and kiss ed him, he-art po-un-ding in her thro-at, her fa-ce ting-ling, a fi-re bur-ning in the pit of her belly.

* * *


Ba-bi tri-ed aga-in to con-vin-ce Mammy to le-ave Ka-bul.

"They'll work it out," Mammy sa-id. "This figh-ting is tem-po-rary. They'll sit down and fi-gue-re so-met-hing out."

"Fa-ri-ba, all the-se pe-op-le know is war," sa-id Ba-bi. "They le-ar-ned to walk with a milk bot-tle in one hand and a gun in the ot-her."
"Whozrtyou to say?" Mammy shot back. "Did you fight jihad? Did you aban-don every-t-ing you had and risk yo-ur li-fe? If not for the Mu-j-ahi-de-en, we'd still be the So-vi-ets' ser-vants, re-mem-ber. And now you'd ha-ve us bet-ray them!"
"We aren't the ones do-ing the bet-ra-ying, Fa-ri-ba."
"You go, then. Ta-ke yo-ur da-ugh-ter and run away. Send me a post-card. But pe-ace is co-ming, and I, for one, am go-ing to wa-it for it."

The stre-ets be-ca-me so un-sa-fe that Ba-bi did an unt-hin-kab-le thing: He had La-ila drop out of scho-ol.

He to-ok over the te-ac-hing du-ti-es him-self. La-ila went in-to his study every day af-ter sun-down, and, as Hek-mat-yar la-unc-hed his roc-kets at Mas-so-ud from the so-ut-hern outs-kirts of the city, Ba-bi and she dis-cus-sed the he-zals of Ha-fez and the works of the be-lo ved Afg-han po-et Us-tad Kha-li-lul-lah Kha-li-li. Ba-bi taught her to de-ri-ve the qua-adr-a-tic equ-at-i-on, sho-wed her how to fac-tor poly-no-mi-als and plot pa-ra-met-ric cur-ves. When he was te-ac-hing, Ba-bi was trans-for-med. In his ele-ment, amid his bo-oks, he lo-oked tal-ler to La-ila. His vo-ice se-emed to ri-se from a cal-mer, de-eper pla-ce, and he didn't blink ne-arly as much. La-ila pic-tu-red him as he must ha-ve be-en on-ce, era-sing his black-bo-ar d with gra-ce-ful swi-pes, lo-oking over a stu-dent's sho-ul-der, fat-herly and at-ten-ti-ve.

But it wasn't easy to pay at-ten-ti-on. La-ila kept get-ting dist-rac-ted.
"What is the area of a pyra-mid?" Ba-bi wo-uld ask, and all La-ila co-uld think of was the ful-lness of Ta-riq's lips, the he-at of his bre-ath on her mo-uth, her own ref-lec-ti-on in his ha-zel eyes. She'd kis-sed him twi-ce mo-re sin-ce the ti-me be-ne-ath the tree, lon-ger, mo-re pas-si-on-at-e, and, she tho-ught, less clum-sily. Both ti-mes, she'd met him sec-retly in the dim al-ley whe-re he'd smo-ked a ci-ga-ret-te the day of Mammy's lunch party. The se-cond ti-me, she'd let him to-uch her bre-ast.

"La-ila?"
"Yes, Ba-bi."
"Pyra-mid. Area. Whe-re are you?"
"Sorry, Ba-bi. I was, uh…Let's see. Pyra-mid. Pyra-mid. One-third the area of the ba-se ti-mes the he-ight."

Ba-bi nod-ded un-cer-ta-in, his ga-ze lin-ge-ring on her, and La-ila tho-ught of Ta-riq's hands, squ-e-e-zing her bre-ast, sli-ding down the small of her back, as the two of them kis-sed and kis-sed.

* * *

One daY that sa-me month of June, Gi-ti was wal-king ho-me from scho-ol with two clas-sma-tes. Only three blocks from Gi-ti's ho-use, a stray roc-ket struck the girls. La-ter that ter-rib-le day, La-ila le-ar-ned that Ni-la, Gi-ti's mo-ther, had run up and down the stre-et whe-re Gi-ti was kil-led, col-lec-ti-ng pi-eces of her da-ugh-ter's flesh
in an apron, screaming hysterically. Giti's decomposing right foot, still in its nylon sock and purple sneaker, would be found on a rooftop two weeks later.

At Giti's fa-i-iha, the day after the killings, Laila sat stunned in a roomful of weeping women. This was the first time that someone whom Laila had known, been close to, loved, had died. She couldn't get around the unhomely reality that Giti wasn't alive any more. Giti, with whom Laila had exchanged secret notes in class, whose fingernails she had polished, whose chin hair she had plucked with tweezers. Giti, who was going to marry Sabir the goalkeeper. Giti was dead. Dead. Blown to pieces. At last, Laila began to weep for her friend. And all the tears that she hadn't been able to shed at her brother's funeral came pouring down.

25.

Laila could hardly move, as though cement had solidified in every one of her joints. There was a conversation going on, and Laila knew that she was at one end of it, but she felt removed from it, as though she were merely eavesdropping. As Tarig talked, Laila pictured her life as a rotted rope, snapping, unraveling, the fibers detaching, falling away.

It was a hot, muggy afternoon that August of 1992, and they were in the living room of Laila's house. Mammy had had a stomachache all day, and, minutes before, despite the rockets that Hekmatyar was launching from the south, Babi had taken her to see a doctor. And here was Tarig now, seated beside Laila on the couch, looking at the ground, hands between his knees. Saying that he was leaving.


Laila was struck blind.

"Where? Where will you go?"

"Pakistan first. Peshawar. Then I don't know. Maybe Hindustan. Iran."

"How long?"

"I don't know."

"I mean, how long have you known?"

"A few days. I was going to tell you, Laila, I swear, but I couldn't bring myself to. I knew how upset you'd be."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"It's my father. His heart can't take it any more, all this fighting and killing."

Laila buried her face in her hands, a bubble of dread filling her chest.
She sho-ul-d ha-ve se-en this co-ming, she tho-ught. Al-most ever-yo-ne she knew had pac-ked the-ir things and left. The ne-igh-bor-ho-od had be-en all but dra-ined of fa-mi-li-ar fa-ces, and now, only fo-ur months af-ter figh-ting had bro-ken out bet-we-en the Mu-j-ahi-de-en fac-ti-ons, La-ila hardly re-cog-ni-zed any-body on the stre-ets any-mo-re. Ha-si-na's fa-mily had fled in May, off to Teh-ran. Wa-jma and her ne-i gh-bor-ho-od had go-nee to Is-la-ma bad that sa-me month. Gi-ti's pa-rents and her sib-ling left in June, shortly af-ter Gi-ti was kil-led. La-ila didn't know whe-re they had go-ne-she he-ard a ru-mor that they had he-aded for Mas-had, in Iran. Af-ter pe-op-le left, the-ir ho-mes sat unoc-cu-pi-ed for a few days, then eit-her mi-li-ti-amen to-ok them or stran-ger-s mo-ved in.

Eve-ryo-ne was le-aving. And now Ta-riq too.
"And my mot-her is not a yo-ung wo-man any-mo-re," he was sa-ying. "They're so af-ra-id all the ti-me. La-ila, lo-ok at me."
"You sho-ul-d ha-ve told me."
"Ple-ase lo-ok at me."
A gro-an ca-me out of La-ila. Then a wa-il. And then she was crying, and when he went to wi-pe her che-ek with the pad of his thumb she swi-ped his hand away. It was sel-fish and ir-ra-ti-onal, but she was fu-ri-o-us with him for aban-do-ning her, Ta-riq, who was li-ke an ex-ten-si-on of her, who-se sha-dow sprung be-si-de hers in every me-mory. How co-uld he le-ave her? She slap-ped him. Then she slap-ped him aga-in and pul-led at his ha-ir, and he had to ta-ke her by the wrists, and he was sa-ying so-met-hing she co-uldn't ma-ke out, he was sa-ying it softly, re-aso-nably, and, so-me-how, they en-ded up brow to brow, no-se to no-se, and she co-ul-d fe-el the he-at of his bre-ath on her lips aga-in.

And when, sud-den-ly, he le-ane-d in, she did too.

* * * 

In the co-ming days and we-eks, La-ila wo-uld scramb-le fran-ti-cal-ly to com-mit it all to me-mory, what hap-pe-ned next-Li-ke an art lo-ver run-ning out of a bur-ning mu-se-um, she wo-uld grab wha-te-ver she co-ul-d a lo-ok, a whis-per, a mo-an-to sal-va-ge from pe-ris-hing, to pre-ser-ve. But ti-me is the most un-for-gi-ving of fi-res, and she co-uldn't, in the end, sa-ve it all Still, she had the-se: that first, tre-men-do-us pang of pa-in down be-low. The slant of s un-light on the rug. Her he-el gra-zing the cold hard-ness of his leg, lying be-si-de them, has-tily unst-rap-ped. Her hands cup-ping his el-bows. The up-si-de-down, man-do-lin-sha-peed birth-mark be-ne-ath his col-lar-bo-ne, glo-wing red. His fa-ce ho-ve-ring over hers. His black curls dang-ling, tick-ling her lips, her chin. The ter-ror th at they wo-uld be dis-co-ve-red. The dis-be-li-ef at the-ir own bold-ness, the-ir co-ura-ge. The stran-ge and in-desc-ri-bab-le ple-asu-re, in ter-la-ced with the pa-in. And the lo-ok, the myri-ad oflo-oks, on Ta-riq; of ap-pre-hen-si-on, ten-der-ness, apo-logy, em-bar-ras-sment, but mostly, mostly, of hun-ger.
The-re was frenzy af-ter. Shirts hur-ri-edly but-to-ned, belts buck-led, ha-ir fin-ger-com-bed. They sat, then, they sat be-si-de each ot-her, smel-ling of each ot-her, fa-ces flus-hed pink, both of them stum-ned, both of them spe-ech-less be-fo-re the enor-mity of what had just hap-pe-ned. What they had do-ne.

La-ila saw three drops of blo-od on the rug, her blo-od, and pic-tu-red her pa-rents sit-ting on this co-uch la-ter, ob-li-vi-o-us to the sin that she had com-mit-ted. And now the sha-me set in, and the gu-ilt, and, ups-ta-irs, the clock tic-ked on, im-pos-sibly lo-ud to La-ilas ears. Li-ke a jud-ge's ga-vel po-un-ding aga-in and aga-in, con-dem-ning her.

Then Ta-riq sa-id, "Co-me with me."

For a mo-ment, La-ilas al-most be-li-eved that it co-uld be do-ne. She, Ta-riq, and his pa-rents, set-ting out to-get-her-Pac-king the-ir bags, clim-bing abo-ard a bus, le-aving be-hind all this vi-olen-ce, go-ing to find bles-sings, or tro-ub-le, and whic-he-ver ca-me they wo-uld fa-ce it to-get-her. The ble-ak iso-la-ti-on awa-iting her, the mur-de-ro us lo-ne-li-ness, it didn't ha-ve to be.

She co-uld go. They co-uld be to-get-her. They wo-uld ha-ve mo-re af-ter-no-ons li-ke this.

"I want to marry you, La-ila."

For the first ti-me sin-ce they we-re on the flo-or, she ra-ised her eyes to me-et his. She se-arc-hed his fa-ce. The-re was no play-ful-ness this ti-me. His lo-ok was one of con-vic-ti-on, of gu-ile-less yet ironc-lad ear-nest-ness.

"Ta-riq-"

"Let me marry you, La-ila. To-day. We co-uld get mar-ri-ed to-day."

He be-gan to say mo-re, abo-ut go-ing to a mos-que, fin-ding a mul-lah, a pa-ir of wit-nes-ses, a qu-icknik-ka. …

But La-ilas was thin-king of Mammy, as obs-ti-na-te and un-comp-ro-mi-sing as the Mu-jahi-de-en, the air aro-und her cho-ked with ran-cor and des-pa-ir, and she was thin-king of Ba-bi, who had long sur-ren-de-red, who ma-de such a sad, pat-he-tic op-po-nent to Mammy.

So-me-ti-mes I fe-el li-ke you 're all I ha-ve, La-ila.
The-se we-re the cir-cums-tan-ces of her li-fe, the ines-ca-pab-le truths of it.
"I'll ask Ka-ka Ha-kim for yo-ur hand He'll gi-ve us his bles-sing, La-ila, I know it."
He was right. Ba-bi wo-uld. But it wo-uld shat-ter him.
Ta-riq was still spe-aking, his vo-ice hus-hed, then high, be-se-ec-hing, then re-aso-ning; his fa-ce ho-pe-ful, then stric-ken.
"I can't," La-ilas sa-id.
"Don't say that. I lo-ve you."
"I'm sorry-
"I lo-ve you."
How long had she wa-ited to he-ar tho-se words from him? How many ti-mes had she dre-ammed them ut-te-red? The-re
they were, spoken at last, and the irony crushed her.
"It's my father I can't leave," Laila said "I'm all he has left. His he-art wouldn't ta-ke it e-ith-er."

Tariq knew this. He knew she could not wi-pe away the ob-li-ga-ri-ons of her li-fe an-y mo-re than he could his, but it went on, his ple-adings and her re-but-tals, his pro-po-sals and her apo-lo-gi-es, his te-ars and hers.

In the end, Laila had to make him le-ave.

At the do-or, she made him pro-mi-se to go wit-ho-ut go-od-byes. She clo-sed the do-or on him. Laila le-aned her back aga-inst it, sha-king aga-inst his po-un-ding fists, one arm grip-ping her belly and a hand ac-ross her mo-uth, as he spo-ke thro-ugh the do-or and pro-mi-sed that he wo-uld co-me back, that he wo-uld co-me back for her.

She sto-od the-re un-til he ti-red, un-til he ga-ve up, and then she lis-te ned to his un-even fo-ots-teps un-til they fa-ded, un-til all was qu-i-et, sa-ve for the gun-fi-re crac-king in the hills and her own he-art thud-ding in her belly, her eyes, her bo-nes.

26.

It was, by far, the hot-test day of the ye-ar. The mo-un-ta-ins trap-ped the bo-ne-scorc-hing he-at, stif-led the city li-ke smo-ke. Po-wer had be-en out for days. All over Ka-bul, elect-ric fans sat id-le, al-most moc-kingly so.

Laila was lying still on the li-ving-ro-om co-uch, swe-ating thro-ugh her blo-use. Every ex-ha-led bre-ath bur-ned the tip of her no-se. She was awa-re of her pa-rents tal-king in Mammy's ro-om. Two nights ago, and aga-in last night, she had awa-ke-ned and tho-ught she he-ar-d the-ir vo-ices downs-ta-irs. They we-re tal-king every day now, ever sin-ce the bul-let, ever sin-ce the new ho-le in the ga-te.

Out-si-de, the far-off bo-om of ar-til-lery, then, mo-re clo-sely, the stam-me-ring of a long string of gun-fi-re, fol-lo-wed by anot-her.

Insi-de Laila too a bat-tle was be-ing wa-ged: gu-ilt on one si-de, part-ne-red with sha-me, and, on the ot-her, the con-vic-ti-on that what she and Tariq had do-ne was not sin-ful; that it had be-en na-tu-ral, go-od, be-a-uti-ful, even ine-vi-ta-bi-le, spur-red by the know-led-ge that they might ne-ver see each ot-her aga-in.

Laila ro-led to her si-de on the co-uch now and tri-ed to re-mem-ber so-met-hing: At one po-int, when they we-re on the flo-or, Tariq had lo-we-red his fo-re-he-ad on hers. Then he had pan-ted so-met-hing, eit-her Am I hur-ting you? or Is this hur-ting you?

Laila co-uld'n't de-ci-de which he had sa-id.

Am I hur-ting you?
Is this hur-ting you?

Only two we eks sin-ce he had left, and it was al-re-ady hap-pe-ning- Ti-me, blun-ting the ed-ges of tho-se sharp me-mo-ri-es. Laila bo-re down men-tal-ly. What had he sa-id? It se-emed vi-tal, sud-denly, that she know.

Laila clo-sed hereyes. Con-cen-ta-ta-ten.
With the passing of time, she would slowly tire of this exercise. She would find it increasingly exhausting to conjure up, to dust off, to reanimate once again what was long dead. There would come a day, in fact, years later, when Laila would no longer bewail his loss. Or not as relentlessly; not nearly. There would come a day when the details of his face would begin to slip from memory's grip, when overhearing a mother on the street call after her child by Tariq's name would no longer cut her adrift. She would not miss him as she did now, when the ache of his absence was her unrelenting companion like the phantom pain of an amputee. Except every once in a long while, when Laila was a grown woman, ironing a shirt or pushing her children on a swing set, some trivial, maybe the warmth of a carpet beneath her feet on a hot day or the curve of a stranger's forehead, would set off a memory of that afternoon together. And it would all come rushing back. The spontaneity of it. Their astonishment. Their clumsiness. The pain of the entangled bodies.

It would flood her, steal her breath.

But then it would pass. The moment would pass. Leave her deflated, feeling not-hing but a vague restlessness.

She decided that he had said

Ami hurting you? Yes. That was it. Laila was happy that she'd remembered

Then Baba was in the hallway, calling her name from the top of the stairs, asking her to come up quickly.

"She's agreed!" he said, his voice tremulous with suppressed excitement-

"We're leaving, Laila. All three of us. We're leaving Kabul."

***

In Mammy's room, the three of them sat on the bed. Outside, rockets were zipping across the sky as Hekmatyar's and Masoud's forces fought and fought. Laila knew that somewhere in the city someone had just died, and that a pall of black smoke was hovering over some building that had collapsed in a puffing mass of dust. The-re would be bodies to be disposed of, to be cleaned up quickly. Others not. Then Kabul's dogs, who had developed a taste for human meat, would feast.

All the same, Laila had an urge to run through those streets. She could barely contain her own happiness. It took effort to sit, to not shriek with joy. Baba said they would go to Peshawar first, to apply for visas. Pakistan, where Tarig was! Tarig was only gone seventeen days, Laila calculated excitedly. If only Mammy had made up her mind seventeen days earlier, they could have left together. She would have been with Tarig right now! But that didn't matter now. They were going to Peshawar- she, Mammy, and Baba-and they would find Tarig
and his parents the-re. Su-rely they wo-uld. They wo-uld pro-cess the-ir pa-per-work to-get-her. Then, who knew? Who knew? Euro-pe?

Ame-ri-ca? May-be, as Ba-bi was al-ways sa-ying, so-mew-he-re ne-ar the sea… Mammy was half lying, half sit-ting aga-inst the he-ad-bo-ard. Her eyes we-re puffy. She was pic-king at her ha-ir.

Three days be-fo-re, La-ila had go-ne out-si-de for a bre-ath of air. She'd sto-od by the front ga-tes, le-an-ing aga-inst them, when she'd he-ard a lo-ud crack and so-met-hing had zip-ped by her right ear, sen-ding tiny splin-ters of wo-od flying be-fo-re her eyes. Af-ter Gi-ti's de-ath, and the tho-usands of ro-unds fi-red and myri-ad roc-kets that had fal-len on Ka-bul, it was the sight of that sing-le ro-und ho-le in the ga-te, less than three fin-gers away from whe-re La-ila's he-ad had be-en, that sho-ok Mammy awa-ke. Ma-de her see that one war had cost her two child-ren al-re-ady; this la-test co-uld cost her her re-ma-ining one.

From the walls of the ro-om, Ah-mad and No-or smi-led down. La-ila watc-hed Mammy's eyes bo-un-cing now, gu-il-tily, from one pho-to to the ot-her. As if lo-oking for the-ir con-sent. The-ir bles-sing. As if as-king for for-gi-ve-ness.

"The-re's not-hing left for us he-re," Ba-bi sa-id. "Our sons are go-ne, but we still ha-ve La-ila. We still ha-ve each ot-her, Fa-ri-ba. We can ma-ke a new li-fe."

Ba-bi re-ac-hed ac-ross the bed. When he le-aned to ta-ke her hands, Mammy let him. On her fa-ce, a lo-ok of con-ces-si-on. Of re-sig-na-ti-on. They held each ot-her's hands, lightly, and then they we-re swa-ying qu-i-etly in an emb-ra-ce. Mammy bu-ri-ed her fa-ce in his neck. She grab-bed a hand-ful of his shirt.

For ho-urs that night, the ex-ci-te-ment r ob-bed La-ila of sle-ep. She lay in bed and watc-hed the ho-ri-zon light up in ga-rish sha-des of oran-ge and yel-low. At so-me po-int, tho-ugh, des-pi-te the ex-hi-la-ra-ti-on in-si-de and the crack of artil-lery fi-re out-si-de, she fell as-le-ep.

And dre-amed

They are on a rib-bon of be-ach, sit-ting on aqu-ilt. It's a chill-y, over-cast day, but it's warm next to Ta-riq un-der the blan-ket dra-ped over the-ir sho-ul-ders. She can see cars par-ked be-hind a low fen-ce of chip-ped whi-te pa-int be-ni-th the cur-ved rid-ges of one du-ne to anot-her. They're watc-hing sa-il-bo-ats bob in the dis-tan-ce. Aro-und them, se-agul-ls squ-awk and shi-ver in the wind. The wind whips up anot-her spray of sand off the shal-low, wind-wardslo-pes. The-re is a no-ise then li-ke a chant, and she tells him so-met-hing Ba-bi had ta-ught her ye-ars be-fo-re abo-ut the fric-ti-on of gra- in aga-inst fra-ses of sand from it. She cat-c-hes a flic-ker of the band on his fin-ger. It's iden-ti-cal to hers -gold with a sort of ma-ze pat-tern et-c-hed all the way aro-und.

He rubs at her eyeb-row, wi-pes gra-ins of sand from it. She cat-c-hes a flic-ker of the band on his fin-ger. It's iden-ti-cal to hers -gold with a sort of ma-ze pat-tern et-c-hed all the way aro-und.

It's true, she tells him. It's the fric-ti-on, of gra-ins of sand from it. Lis-ten. Hed-o-es. He frowns. They wa-it. They he-ar it aga-in. A gro-aning so-und, when the wind is soft, when it blows hard, a mew-ling, high-pitc-hed cho-rus.
* * * Bab-i sa-id they **should** ta-ke only what was ab-so-lu-tely ne-ces-sary. They wo-ul-d sell the rest.

"That sho-ul-d hold us in Pes-ha-war un-til I find work."

For the next two days, they gat-he-red items to be sold. They put them in big pi-les.

In her ro-om, La-il-a set asi-de old blo-uses, old sho-es, bo-oks, toys. Lo-oking un-der her bed, she fo-und a tiny yel-low glass cow Ha-si-na had pas-sed to her du-ring re-cess in fifth gra-de. A mi-ni-atu-re-so-cer-ball key cha-in, a gift from Gi-ti. A lit-tle wo-oden zeb-ra on whe-els. A ce-ra-mic ast-ro-na-ut she and Ta-riq had fo-und one day in a gut-ter. She'd be-en six and he eight. They'd had a mi-nor row, La-il-a re-mem-be-red, over which one of them had fo-und it.

Mammy too gat-he-red her things. The-re was a re-luc-tan-ce in her mo-ve-ments, and her eyes had a let-har-gic, fa-ra-way lo-ok in them. She did away with her go-od pla-tes, her nap-kins, all her jewelry-sa-ve for her wed-ding band-and most of her old clot-hes.

"You're not sel-ling this, are you?" La-il-a sa-id, lift-ing Mammy's wed-ding dress. It cas-ca-ded open on-to her lap. She to-u c-hed the la-ce and rib-bon along the neck-li-ne, the hand-sewn se-ed pe-arls on the sle-eves.

Mammy shrug-ged and to-ok it from her. She tos-sed it brus-qu-ely on a pi-le of clot-hes. Li-ke rip-ping off a Band-Aid in one stro-ke, La-il-a tho-ught.

It was Ba-bi who had the most pa-in-ful task.

La-il-a fo-und him stan-ding in his study, a ru-eful exp-res-si-on on his fa-ce as he sur-ve-yed his shel-ves. He was we-aring a se-cond-hand T-shirt w ith a pic-tu-re of San Fran-cis-co's red brid-ge on it. Thick fog ro-se from the whi-te-cap-ped wa-ters and en-gul-fed the brid-ge's to-wers.

"You know the old bit," he sa-id. "You're on a de-ser-ted is-land. You can ha-ve fi-ve bo-oks. Which do you cho-ose? I ne-ver tho-ught I'd ac-tu-al-ly ha-ve to."

"We'll ha-ve to start you a new col-lec-ti-on, Ba-bi." "Mm." He smi-led sadly. "I can't be-li-eve I'm le-aving Ka-bul. I went to scho-ol he-re, got my first job he-re, be-ca-me a fat-her in this town. It's stran-ge to think that I'll be sle-eping be-ne-ath anot-her city's ski-es so-on."

"It's stran-ge for me too."

"All day, this po-em abo-ut Ka-bul has be-en bo-un-cing aro-und in my he-ad. Sa-ib-e-Tab-ri-zi wro-te it back in the se-ven-te-enth cen-tury, I think. I used to know the who-le po-em, but all I can re-mem-ber now is two li-nes:"

"One co-uld not co-unt the mo-ons that shim-mer on her ro-ofs, Or the tho-usand splen-did suns that hi-de be-hind her -walls."

La-il-a lo-oked up, saw he was we-eping. She put an arm aro-und his wa-ist. "Oh, Ba-bi. We'll co-me back. When this war is over. We'll co-me back to Ka-bul, in-s-hal-lah. You'll see."

* * *
On the third mor-ning, La-ila be-gan mo-v ing the pi-les of things to the yard and de-po-si-ting them by the front do-or. They wo-uld fetch a ta-xi then and ta-ke it all to a pawns-hop.

La-ila kept shuf-fling bet-we-en the ho- use and the yard, back and forth, car-rying stacks of clot-hes and dis-hes and box af-ter box of Ba-bi's bo-oks. She sho-uld ha-ve be-en ex-ha-us-ted by no-on, when the mo- und of be-lon-gings by the front do-or had grown wa-ist high. But, with each trip, she knew that she was that much clo-ser to se-e-ing Ta-riq aga-in, and, with each trip, her legs be-ca-me mo-re sprightly, her arms mo-re ti-re-less.

"We're go-ing to ne-ed a big ta-xi."

La-ila lo-oked up. It was Mammy cal-ling down from her bed-ro-om ups-ta-irs. She was le-an-ing out the win-dow, res-ting her el-bows on the sill. The sun, bright and warm, ca-ught in her gra-ying ha-ir, sho-ne on her drawn, thin fa-ce. Mammy was we-aring the sa-me co-balt blue dress she had worn the day of the lunch party fo-ur months ear-li-er, a yo-uth-ful dress me-ant for a yo-ung wo-man, but, for a mo-ment, Mammy lo-oked to La-ila li-ke an old wo-man. An old wo-man with stringy arms and sun-ken temp-les and slow eyes rim-med by dar-ke-ned circ-les of we-ari-ness, an al-to-get-ter dif-fe-rent cre-atu-re from the plump, ro-und fa-ced wo-man be-am ing ra-di-antly from tho-se gra-iny wed-ding pho-tos.

"Two big ta-xis," La-ila sa-id.

She co-uld see Ba-bi too, in the li-ving ro-om stac-king bo-xes of bo-oks atop each ot-her.

"Co-me up when you're do-ne with tho-se," Mammy sa-id. "We'll sit down for lunch. Bo-iled eggs and lef-to-ver be-ans."

"My fa-vo-ri-te," La-ila sa-id.

She tho-ught sud-denly of her dre-am. She and Ta-riq on a qu-ilt. The oce-an. The wind. The du-nes.

What had it so-un-ded li-ke, she won-de-red now, the sin-ging sands?

La-ila stop-ped. She saw a gray li-zard crawl out of a crack in the gro-und. Its he-ad shot si-de to si-de. It blin-ked. Dar-ted un-der a rock.

La-ila pic-tu-red the be-ach aga-in. Ex-cept now the sin-ging was all aro-und. And gro-wing. Lo-uder and lo-uder by the mo-ment, hig-her and hig-her. It flo-oded her ears. Drow-ned every-tin-gel el-se out. The gulls we-re fe-at-he-red mi-mes now, ope-ning and clo-sing the-ir be-aks no-ise-les-sly, and the wa-ves we-re cras-hing with fo-am and spray but no ro-ar. The sands sang on. Scre-am ing now. A so-und li-ke…a tink-ling?


La-ila drop-ped the bo-oks at her fe-et. She lo-ok ed up to the sky. Shi-el-ded her eyes with one hand.

Be-hind her, a flash of whi-te.

The gro-und lurc-hed be-ne-ath her fe-et.
So-somet-hing hot and po-wo-er-ful slam-med in-to her from be-hind. It knoc-ked her out of her san-dals. Lif-ted her up. And now she was flying, twis-ting and ro-ta-ting in the air, se-e-ing sky, then earth, then sky, then earth. A big bur-ning chunk of wo-od whip-ped by. So did a tho-usand shards of glass, and it se-emed to La-ila that she co-uld see each in-di-vi-du-al one flying all aro-und her, flip-ping slowly end over end, the sun-light cate-hing in each. Tiny, be-a-uti-ful ra-in-bows.

Then La-ila struck the wall. Cras-hed to the gro-und. On her fa-ce and arms, a sho-wer of dirt and peb-bles and glass. The last thing she was awa-re of was se-e-ing so-met-hing thud to the gro-und ne-ar by. A blo-ody chunk of so-met-hing. On it, the tip of a red brid-ge po-king thro-ugh thick fog.

* * *

La-ila fa-des back to the dark.

* * *

Anot-her fa-ce. This ti-me a man's. His fe-atu-res se-em bro-ad and dro-opy. His lips mo-ve but ma-ke no so-und. All La-ila he-ars is rin-ning.
The man wa-ves his hand at her. Frowns. His lips mo-ve aga-in.

It hurts. It hurts to bre-at-he. It hurts everyw-he-re.
A glass of wa-ter. A pink pill.
Back to the dark-ness.

* * *

The wo-man aga-in. Long fa-ce, nar-row-set eyes. She says so-met-hing. La-ila can't he-ar anyt-hing but the rin-ning. But she can see the words, li-ke thick black syrup, spil-ling out of the wo-man's mo-uth.
Her chest hurts. Her arms and legs hurt.
All aro-und, sha-pes mo-ving.
Wer-e is Ta-riq?
Why isn't he he-re?
Dark-ness. A flock of stars.

Ba-bi and she, per-c Hed so-mew-he-re high up. He is po-in-ting to a fi-eld of bar-ley. A ge-ne-ra-tor co-mes to li-fe.
The long-fa-ced wo-man is stan-ding over her lo-ok-ing down.
It hurts to bre-at-he.
So-mew-he-re, an ac-cor-di-on pla-ying.
Mer-ci-ful-ly, the pink pill aga-in. Then a de-ep hush. A de-ep hush falls over ever-y-t-hing.

PART THREE

27.

Ma-dam
Do you know who I am?"
The girl's eyes flut-te-red
"Do you know what has hap-pe-ned?"
The girl's mo-uth qu-ive-red. She clo-sed her eyes. Swal-lo-wed. Her hand gra-zed her left che-ek. She mo-ut-hed so-met-hing.
Ma-ri-am le-aned in clo-ser.
"This ear," the girl bre-at-hed. "I can't he-ar."

* * *

For the first "we-ek, the girl did lit-tle but sle-ep, with help from the pink pills Ras-he-ed pa-id for at the hos-pi-tal. She mur-mu-red in her sle-ep. So-me-ti-mes she spo-ke gib-be-rish, cri-ed out, cal-led out na-mes Ma-ri-am did not re-cog-ni-ze. She wept in her sle-ep, grew agi-ta-ted, kic-ked the blan-kets off, and then Ma-ri-am had to hold her down. So-me-ti-mes she re-tc-hed and retc-hed, threw up everyt-hing Ma-ri-am fed her.

When she wasn't agi-ta-ted, the girl was a sul-len pa-ir of eyes sta-ring from un-der the blan-ket, bre-at-hing out short lit-tle ans-wers to Ma-ri-am and Ras-he-ed's qu-es-tions. So-days she was child-li-ke, whip-ped her he-ad si-de to si-de, when Ma-ri-am, then Ras-he-ed, tri-ed to fe-ed her. She went ri-gid when Ma-ri-am ca-me at her with a spo-on. But she ti-red easily and sub-mit-ted even-tu-al-ly to the-ir per-sis-tent bad-ge-ring. Long bo-uts of we-eping fol-lo-wed sur-ren-der.

Ras-he-ed had Ma-ri-am rub an-ti-bi-otic oint-ment on the cuts on the girl's fa-ce and neck, and on the su-tu-red gas-hes on her sho-ul-der, ac-ross her fo-re-ar-ms and lo-wer legs. Ma-ri-am dres-sed them with ban-da-ges, which she was-hed and recyc-led. She held the girl's ha-ir back, out of her fa-ce, when she had to retch.
"How long is she sta-y-ing?" she as-ked Ras-he-ed.
"Until she's bet-ter. Lo-ok at her. She's in no sha-pe to go. Po-or thing."

* * *

It was Ras-he-ed who fo-und the girl, who dug her out from be-ne-ath the rub-ble.
"Lucky I was ho-me," he sa-id to the girl. He was sit-ting on a fol-ding cha-ir be-si-de Ma-ri-am's bed, whe-re the girl lay. "Lucky for you, I me-an. I dug you out with my own hands. The-re was a scrap of me-tal this big-" He-re, he spre-ad his thumb and in-dex fin-ger apart to show her, at le-ast do-ub-ling, in Ma-ri-am's
es-ti-ma-tion, the ac-tu-al si-ze of it. "This big. Stic-king right out of yo-ur sho-ul-der. It was re-al-ly em-bed-ded in the-re. I tho-ught I'd ha-ve to use a pa-ir of pli-ers.

But you're all right. In no ti-me, you'll benau soc-ha. Go-od as new."

It was Ras-he-ed who sal-va-ged a hand-ful of Ha-kim's bo-oks. "Most of them we-re re-as ashamed. The rest we-re lo-o-ted, I'm af-ra-id."

He hel-ped Ma-ri-am watch over the girl that first we-ek. One day, he ca-me ho-me from work with a new blan-ket and pil-low. Anot-her day, a bot-tle of pills. "Vi-ta-mins," he sa-id.

It was Ras-he-ed who ga-ve La-ila the news that her fri-end Ta-riq's ho-use was oc-cu-pi-ed now.

"A gift," he sa-id. "From one of Say-yaf s com-man-ders to three of his men. A gift. Ha!"

The three men we-re ac-tu-al-ly boys with sun-tan-ned, yo-uth-ful fa-ces. Ma-ri-am wo-uld see them when she pas-sed by, al-ways dres-sed in the-ir fa-ti-gu-es, squa-at-ting by the front do-or of Ta-riq's ho-use, pla-ying cards and smo-king, the-ir Ka-lash-ni-kovs le-an-ing aga-inst the wall. The brawny one, the one with the self-sa-tis-fi-ed, scorn-ful de-me-anor, was the le-ader. The yo-un-gest was al-so the qu-i-etest, the one who se-em-ed re-luc-tant to who-le-he-ar-tedly emb-ra-ce his fri-ends' air of im-pu-ni-ty. He had ta-ken to smi-ling and tip-ping his he-ad sa-la-am when Ma-ri-am pas-sed by. When he did, so-me of his sur-fa-ce smug-ness drop-ped away, and Ma-ri-am ca-ught a glint of hu-mi-lity as yet un-cor-rup-ted.

Then one mor-ning roc-kets slam-med in-to the ho-use. They we-re ru-mo-red la-ter to ha-ve be-en fi-red by the Ha-za-ras of Wah-dat. For so-me ti-me, ne-igh-bors kept fin-ding bits and pi-eces of the boys.

"They had it co-ming," sa-id Ras-he-ed.

* * *

The girl was ext-ra-or-di-na-rily lucky, Ma-ri-am tho-ught, to es-ca-pe with re-la-ti-ve mi-nor inj-uri-es, con-si-de-ring the roc-ket had tur-ned her ho-use in-to smo-king rub-ble. And so, slow-l-y, the girl got bet-er. She be-gan to eat mo-re, be-gan to brush her own ha-ir. She to-ok baths on her own. She be-gan ta-king her me-als downs-ta-irs, with Ma-ri-am and Ras-he-ed.


And so-me-ti-mes reg-rets.

"I sho-uldn't even be he-re," she sa-id one day.

Ma-ri-am was chan-ging the she-ets. The girl wate-hed from the flo-or, her bru-ised kne-es drawn up aga-inst her chest.

"My fat-her wan-ted to ta-ke out the bo-xes. The bo-oks. He sa-id they we-re too he-avy for me. But I wo-uldn't let him. I was so eager. I sho-uldn ha-ve be-en the one in si-de the ho-use when it hap-pe-ned."

130
Ma-ri-am snap-ped the cle-an she-et and let it set-tle on the bed She lo-oked at the
girl, at her blond curls, her slen-der neck and gre-en eyes, her high che-ek-bo-nes and
plump lips. Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red se-e-ing her on the stre-ets when she was lit-tle,
tot-te-ring af-ter her mot-her on the way to the tan-do-or, ri-ding on the sho-ul-ders of
her brot-her, the yo-un-ger one, with the patch of ha-ir on his ear. Sho-oting marb-les
with the car-pen-ter's boy. 

The girl was lo-oking back as if wa-iting for Ma-ri-am to pass on so-me mor-sel of
wis-dom, to say so-met-hing en-co-ura-gi ng. But what wis-dom did Ma-ri-am ha-ve
to of-fer? What en-co-ura-ge-ment? Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red the day they'd bu-ri-ed
Na-na and how lit-tle com-fort she had fo-und when Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah had qu-oted
the Ko-ran for her. *Bles-sed is He in Who-se hand is the king-dom, and He Who has
po-wer over all things, Who cre-ated de-ath and li-fe that He may try you. Or when
he'd sa-id of her own gu-ilt, The-se tho-ughts are no go-od, Ma-ri-am jo. They will
dest-roy you. It wasn't yo-ur fa-ult It wasn't yo-ur fa-ult.

What co-uld she say to this girl that wo-uld ease her bur-den?

As it tur-ned out, Ma-ri-am didn't ha-ve to say anyt-hing. Be-ca-use the girl's fa-ce
twis-ted, and she was on all fo-urs then sa-ying she was go-ing to be sick.

***

Then one day, abo-ut a month af-ter the blast that kil-led the girl's pa-rents, a man
called knoc-king. Ma-ri-am ope-ned the do-or. He sta-ted his bu-si-ness.

"The-re is a man he-re to see you," Ma-ri-am sa-id.
The girl ra-is ed her he-ad from the pil-low.
"He says his na-me is Ab-dul Sha-rif."
"I don't know any Ab-dul Sha-rif."
"Well, he's he-re as-king for you. You ne-ed to co-me down and talk to him."

28.

La-ila

JLa-ila sat ac-ross from Ab-dul Sha-rif, who was a thin, small-he-aded man with a
bul-bo-us no-se poc-ked with the sa-me cra-te-red scars that pit-ted his che-eks. His
ha-ir, short and brown, sto-od on his scalp li-ke ne-ed-les in a pin-cus-hi-on.
"You'll ha-ve to for-gi-ve me, ham-s-hi-ra," he sa-id, adj-us-ting his lo-ose col-lar
and dab-bing at his brow with a hand-ker-c-hi-ef "I still ha-ven't qu-ite re-co-ve-red, I
fe-ar. Fi-ve mo-re days of the-se, what are they cal-led…sul-fa pills."
La-ila po-si-ti-oned her-self in her se-at so that her right ear, the go-od one, was
clo-set to him. "We-re you a fri-end of my pa-rents?"
"No, no," Ab-dul Sha-rif sa-id qu-ickly. "For-gi-ve me." He ra-ised a fin-ger, to-ok a long sip of the wa-ter that Ma-ri-am had pla-ced in front of him.

"I sho-uld be-gin at the be-gin-ning, I sup-po-se." He da-b-bed at his lips, aga-in at his brow. "I am a bu-si-nes-sman. I own clot-hing sto-res, mostly men's clot-hing. Cha-pans, hats, ium-ban%, su-its, ti-es-you na-me it. Two sto-res he-re in Ka-bul, in Ta-ima-ni and Shar-e-Nau, tho-ugh I just sold tho-se. And two in Pa-kis-tan, in Pes-ha-war. That's whe-re my wa-re-ho-use is as well. So I tra-vel a lot, back and forth. Which, the-se days"-he sho-ok his he-ad and chuck-led ti-redly-"let's just say that it's an ad-ven-tu-re.

"I was in Pes-ha-war re-cent-ly, on bu-si-ness, ta-king or-ders, go-ing over in-ven-tory, that sort of thing. Al-so to vi-sit my fa-mily. We ha-ve three da-ugh-ters, al-ham-du-lel-lah. I mo-ved them and my wi-fe to Pes-ha-war af-ter the Mu-j-ahi-de-en be-gan go-ing at each ot-her's thro-ats. I won't ha-ve the-ir na-mes ad-ded to thes-ha-he-edlist. Nor mi-ne, to be ho-nest. I'll be jo-in-ing them the-re very so-on, in-s-hal-lah.

"Any-way, I was sup-po-sed to be back in Ka-bul the Wed-nes-day be-fo-re last. But, as luck wo-uld ha-ve it, I ca-me down with an il-lness. I won't bot-her you with it, ham-s-hi-ra, suf-fi-ce it to say that when I went to do my pri-va-te bu-si-ness, the simp-ler of the two, it felt li-ke pas-sing chunks of bro-ken glass. I wo-uld'n't wish it on Hek-mat-yar him-self. My wi-fe, Na-dia ja-n, Al-lah bless her, she beg-ged me to see a doc-tor. But I tho-ught I'd be-at it with as-pi-rin and a lot of wa-ter. Na-dia jan in-sis-ted and I sa-id no, back and forth we went. You know the sa-ying'stub-born ass ne-eds a stub-born dri-ver. This ti-me, I'm af-ra-id, the ass won. That wo-uld be me."

He drank the rest of this wa-ter and ex-ten-ded the glass to Ma-ri-am. "If it's not too much zah-mat."

Ma-ri-am to-ok the glass and went to fill it.

"Ne-ed-less to say, I sho-uld ha-ve lis-te-ned to her. She's al-ways be-en the mo-re sen-sib-le one, God gi-ve her a long li-fe. I wo-uld'n't wish it on Hek-mat-yar him-self. My wi-fe, Na-dia jan, Al-lah bless her, she beg-ged me to see a doc-tor. But I tho-ught I'd be-at it with as-pi-rin and a lot of wa-ter. Na-dia jan in-sis-ted and I sa-id no, back and forth we went. You know the sa-ying'stub-born ass ne-eds a stub-born dri-ver. This ti-me, I'm af-ra-id, the ass won. That wo-uld be me."

He drank the rest of this wa-ter and ex-ten-ded the glass to Ma-ri-am. "If it's not too much zah-mat."

La-ila watc-hed him swal-low his pill She was awa-re that her bre-at-hing had qu-ic-ke-ned Her legs felt he-avy, as tho-ugh we-ights had be-en tet-he-red to them. She told her-self that he wasn't do-ne, that he hadn't told her anyt-hing as yet. But he wo-uld go on in a se-cond, and she re-sis-ted an ur-ge to get up and le-ave, le-ave be-fo-re he told her things she didn't want to he-ar.

Ab-dul Sha-rif set his glass on the tab-le.

"That's whe-re I met yo-ur fri-end, Mo-ham-mad Ta-riq Wa-li-zai."
La-ila's he-art sped up. Ta-riq in a hos-pi-tal? A spe-ci-al unit? For re-al-ly sick pe-op-le?

She swal-lo-wed dry spit. Shif-tered on her cha-ir. She had to ste-el her-self. If she didn't, she fe-ared she wo-uld co-me un-hin-ged. She di-ver- ted her tho- ughts from hos-pi-tals and spe-ci-al units and tho- ught ins-te-ad the fac-t that she hadn't he- ard Ta-riq cal-led by his full na-me sin-ce the two of them had en-rol-led in a Far-si win-ter co-ur-se ye-ar-s back. The te-ac-her wo-uld call roll af-fer the bell and say his na-me li-ke that-Mo-ham-mad Ta-riq Wa-li-zai. It had struck her as co-mi-cal-ly of-fi-ci-o-us then, he-a ring his full na-me ut-te-red.

"What hap-pe-ned to him I he- ard from one of the nur-ses," Ab-dul Sha-rif re-su-med, tap-ping his chest with a fist as if to ease the pas-sa-ge of the pill. "With all the ti-me I've spent in Pes-ha-war, I've be-co-me pretty pro-fi-ci-ent in Ur-du. Any-way, what I gat-he-red was that yo-ur fri-end was in a lorry full of re-fu-ge-es, twenty-three of them, all he-aded for Pes-ha-war. Ne-ar the bor-der, they we-re ca-ught in cross fi-re. A roc-ket hit the lorry. Pro-bably a stray, but you ne-ver know with the-se pe-op-le, you ne-ver know. The-re we-re only six sur-vi-vors, all of them ad-mit-ted to the sa-me unit. Three di-ed wit-hin twenty-fo-ur ho-urs. Two of them li-ved-sis-ters, as I un-ders-to-od it and had be-en disc-har-ged.

Yo-ur fri-end Mr. Wa-li-zai was the last. He'd be-en the-re for al-most three we-eks by the ti-me I ar-ri-ved."

So he was ali-ve. But how badly had they hurt him? La- ila won-de-red fran-ti-cal-ly. How badly? Badly eno- ugh to be put in a spe-ci-al unit, evi-dently. La- ila was awa-re that she had star-ted swe-at-ing, that her fa-ce felt hot. She tri-ed to think of so-met-hing el-se, so-met-hing ple-asant, li-ke the trip to Ba-mi-yan to see the Bud-dhas with Ta-riq and Ba-bi. But ins-te-ad an ima-ge of Ta-riq's pa-rents pre-sen-ted it-self: Ta-riq's mot-her trap-p ed in the lorry, up-si-de down, scre-am-ing for Ta-riq thro- ugh the smo-ke, her arms and chest on fi-re, the wig mel-ting in-to her scalp…

La-ila had to ta-ke a se-ri-es of ra-pid bre-aths. "He was in the bed next to mi-ne. The-re we-re no walls, only a cur-ta-in be-tween us. So I could see him pretty well."

Ab-dul Sha-rif fo-und a sud-den ne-ed to toy with his wed-ding band. He spo-ke mo-re slowly now.

"Yo-ur fri-end, he was badly-very badly-inj-ured, you un-ders-tan. He had rub-ber tu-bes co-ming out of him every-whe-re. Af-ter," He cle-ared his thro-at. "At first, I tho- ught he'd lost both legs in the at-tack, but a nur-se sa-id no, only the right, the left one was on ac-co-unt of an old inj-ury. The-re we-re in-ter-nal inj uri-es too. They'd ope-ra-ted three ti-mes al-re-ady. To-ok out sec-ti-ons of in-testi-nes, I don't re-mem-ber what el-se. And he was bur-ned. Qu-ite badly. That's all I'll say abo-ut that. I'm su-re you ha- ve yo-ur fa-ir sha-re of night-ma-res, ham-s-hi-ra. No sen-se in me ad-ding to them."

Ta-riq was leg-less now. He was a tor-so with two stubs. Leg-less. La- ila tho- ught she might col-lap-se. With de-li-be-ra-te, des-pe-ra-te ef-fort, she sent the tend- rils of her mind out of this ro-om, out the win-dow, away from this man, over the stre-et.
out-side, over the city now, and its flat-top-ped ho-uses and ba-za-ars, its ma-ze of nar-row stre-ets tur-ned to sand cast-les.

"He was drug-ged up most of the ti-me. For the pa-in, you un-ders-tand. But he had mo-ments when the drugs we-re we-ar-ing off when he was cle-ar. In pa-in but cle-ar of mind I wo-ul-d talk to him from my bed. I told him who I was, whe-re I was from. He was glad, I think, that the-re was ah-am-wa-i-an next to him.

"I did most of the tal-king. It was hard for him to. His vo-ice was ho-ar-se, and I think it hurt him to mo-ve his lips. So I told him abo-ut my da-ugh-ers, and abo-ut our ho-use in Pes-ha-war and the ve-ran-da my brot-her-in-law and I are bu-il-ding out in the back. I told him I had sold the sto-res in Ka-bul and that I was go-ing back to fi-nish up the pa-per-work. It wasn't much. But it oc-cu-pi-ed him. At le-ast, I li-ke to think it did.

"So-me-ti-mes he tal-ked too. Half the ti-me, I co-uldn't ma-ke out what he was sa-ying, but I ca-ught eno-ugh. He desc-ri-bed whe-re he'd li-ved.

He tal-ked abo-ut his un-cle in Ghaz-ni. And his mot-her's co-ook-ing and his fat-her's car-pentry, him pla-ying the ac-cor-di-on.

"But, mostly, he tal-ked abo-ut you, ham-s-hi-ra. He sa-id you we-re-how did he put it-his ear-li-est me-mory. I think that's right, yes. I co-ul-d tell he ca-red a gre-at de-al abo-ut you.Ba-lay, that much was pla-in to see. But he sa-id he was glad you we-ren't the-re. He sa-id he didn't want you se-e-ing him li-ke that."

La-il-a's fe-et felt he-avy aga-in, anc-ho-red to the flo-or, as if all her blo-od had sud-denly po-oled down the-re. But her mind was far away, free and fle-et, hurt-ling li-ke a spe-eding mis-si-le be-yond Ka-bul, over craggy brown hills and over de-serts rag-ged with clumps of sa-ge, past can-yons of jag-ged red rock and over snow-cap-ped mo-un-ta-ins…

"When I told him I was go-ing back to Ka-bul, he as-ked me to find you. To tell you that he was thin-king of you. That he mis-sed you. I pro-mi-sed him I'd ta-ken qu-ite a li-king to him, you see. He was a de-cent sort of boy, I co-ul-d tell."

Abdul Sha-ref wi-ped his brow with the hand-kerc-hi-ef.

"I wo-ke up one night," he went on, his in-te-rest in the wed-ding band re-ne-wed, "I think it was night any-way, it's hard to tell in tho-se pla-ces. The-re aren't any win-dows. Sun-ri-se, sun-down, you just don't know. But I wo-ke up, and the-re was so-me sort of com-mo-ti-on aro-und the bed next to mi-ne. You ha-ve to un-ders-tand that I was full of drugs myself, al-ways slip-ping in and out, to the po-int whe-re it was hard to tell what was re-al and what you'd dre-amed up. All I re-mem-ber is, doc-tors hud-dled aro-und the bed, cal-ling for this and that, alarms ble-eping, syrin-ges all over the gro-und.

"In the mor-ning, the bed was empty. I as-ked a nur-se. She sa-id he fo-ught va-li-ant-ly."

La-il-a was dimly awa-re that she was nod-ding. She'd known. Of co-ur-se she'd known. She'd known the mo-ment she had sat ac-ross from this man why he was he-re, what news he was brin-ging.

"At first, you see, at first I didn't think you even exis-ted," he was sa-ying now. "I tho-ught it was the morp-hi-ne tal-king. May-be I evenho-ped-you didn't exist; I've
always dreaded bearing bad news. But I promised him. And, like I said, I’d become rather fond of him. So I came by here a few days ago. I asked around for you, talked to some neighbors. They pointed to this house. They also told me what had happened to your parents. When I heard about that, well, I turned around and left. I wasn’t going to tell you. I decided it would be too much for you. For any body."

Abdul Sharif reached across the table and put a hand on her knee-cap. "But I came back. Because, in the end, I think he would have wanted you to know. I believe that. I’m so sorry. I wish…"

Laila wasn’t listening anymore. She was remembering the day the man from Panjshir had come to deliver the news of Ahmad’s and Nor’s deaths. She remembered Babi, white-faced, slumping on the couch, and Mammy, her hand flying to her mouth when she heard. Laila had watched Mammy come undone that day and it scared her, but she hadn’t felt any true sorrow. She hadn’t understood the awfulness of her mother’s loss. Now another stranger bringing news of another death. Now she was the one sitting on the chair. Was this her penalty, then, her punishment for being aloof to her own mother’s suffering?

Laila remembered how Mammy had dropped to the ground, how she’d screamed, torn at her hair. But Laila couldn’t even manage that. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t move a muscle.

She sat on the chair instead, hands limp in her lap, eyes staring at nothing, and let her mind fly on. She let it fly on until it found the place, the good and safe place, where the barley fields were green, where the water ran clear and the cottonwood seeds danced by the thousands in the air; where Babi was reading a book beneath an acacia and Tarik was napping with his hands laced across his chest, and where she could dip her feet in the stream and dream good dreams beneath the watchful gaze of gods of ancient, sun-bleached rock.

Ma’am

I’m so sorry," Rashied said to the girl, taking his bowl of masi-awa and meat-balls from Mariam without looking at her. "I know you were very close…friends. The two of you. Since you were kids. It’s a terrible thing, what’s happened. Too many young Afghan men are dying this way."

He motioned impatiently with his hand, still looking at the girl, and Mariam passed him a napkin.

For years, Mariam had looked on as he ate, the muscles of his temples churning, one hand making compact little rice balls, the back of the other wiping grease, swiping stray grains, from the corners of his mouth. For years, he had eaten without looking up, without speaking, his silence condemning, as though some judgment were being passed, then broken only by an accusatory
grunt, a di-sap-pro-ving cluck of his ton-gue, a one-word com-mand for mo-re bre-ad, mo-re wa-ter.

Now he ate with a spo-on. Used a nap-kin. Sa-id lot/an when as-king for wa-ter. And tal-ked. Spi-ri-tedly and in-ces-santly.

"If you ask me, the Ame-ri-cans ar-med the wrong man in Hek-mat-yar. All the guns the CIA han-ded him in the eigh-ti-es to fight the So-vi-ets. The So-vi-ets are go-ne, but he still has the guns, and now he's tur-ning them on in-no-cent pe-op-le li-ke yo-ur pa-rents. And he calls this jihad. What a far-ce! What do-es jihad ha-ve to do with kil-ling wo-men and child-ren? Bet-ter the CIA had ar-med Com-man-der Mas-so-ud."

Ma-ri-am's eye-brows shot up of the-ir own will. Com-man-der Mas-so-ud? In her he-ad, she co-uld he-ar Ras-he-ed's rants aga-inst Mas-so-ud, how he was a tra-itor and a com-mu-nist- But, then, Mas-so-ud was a Ta-j-ik, of co-ur-se. Li-ke La-ila.

"Now, the-re is a re-aso-nab-le fel-low. An ho-no-rab-le Afg-han. A man ge-nu-inely in-te-res-ted in a pe-ace-ful re-so-lu-ti-on."

Ras-he-ed shrug-ged and sig-hed.

"Not that they gi-ve a damn in Ame-ri-ca, mind you. What do they ca-re that Pash-tuns and Ha-za-ru and Ta-j-iiks and Uz-beks are kil-ling each ot-her? How many Ame-ri-cans can even tell one from the ot-her? Don't ex-pect help from them, I say. Now that the So-vi-ets ha-ve col-lap-se d, we're no use to them. We ser-ved our pur-po-se. To them, Afg-ha-nis-tan is ake-na-rab, a shit ho-le. Ex-cu-se my lan-gu-age, but it's true. What do you think, La-ila jan?"

The girl mumb-led so-met-hing unin-tel-li-gib-le and pus-hed a me-at-ball aro-und in her bowl.

Ras-he-ed nod-ded tho-ught-ful-ly, as tho-ugh she'd sa-id the most cle-ver thing he'd ever he ard. Ma-ri-am had to lo-ok away.

"You know, yo-ur fat-her, God gi-ve him pe-ace, yo-ur fat-her and I used to ha-ve dis-cus-si-ons li-ke this. Th is was be-fo-re you we-re born, of co-ur-se. On and on we'd go abo-ut po-li-tics. Abo-ut bo-oks too. Didn't we, Ma-ri-am? You re-mem-ber."

Ma-ri-am bu-si-ed her-self ta-king a sip of wa-ter.

"Anyway, I ho-pe I am not bo-ring you with all this talk of po-li-tics."

La-ter, Ma-ri-am was in the kitc-hen, so-aking dis-hes in so-apy wa-ter, a tightly wo-und knot in her bel-ly-It wasn't so much what he sa-id, the bla-tant li-es, the con-ri-ved em-pathy, or even the fact that he had not ra-ised a hand to her, Ma-ri-am, sin-ce he had dug the girl out from un-der tho-se bricks.

It was the sta ged de-li-very. Li-ke a per-for-man-ce. An at-tempt on his part, both sly and pat-he-tic, to imp-ress. To charm.

And sud-denly Ma-ri-am knew that her sus-pi-ci-ons we-re right. She un-ders-to-od with a dre-ad that was li-ke a blin-ding whack to the si-de of her he-ad that what she was wit-nes-sing was not-hing less than a co-urts-hip.
When shed at last wor-ked up the ner-ve, Ma-ri-am went to his ro-om.
Ras-he-ed lit a ci-ga-ret-te, and sa-id, "Why not?"
Ma-ri-am knew right then that she was de-fe-ate-d. She'd half ex-pec-ted, half ho-ped, that he wo-uld deny everyt-hing, fe-ign surp-ri-se, may-be even out-ra-ge, at what she was impl-ying. She might ha-ve had the up-per hand then. She might ha-ve suc-ce-eded in sha-ming him. But it sto-le her grit, his calm ack-now-ledg-ment, his mat-ter-of-fact to ne-
"Sit down," he sa-id. He was lying on his bed, back to the wall, his thick, long legs spla-yed on the mat-tress. "Sit down be-fo-re you fa-int and cut yo-ur he-ad open."
Ma-ri-am felt her-self drop on-to the fol-ding cha-ir be-si-de his bed.
"Hand me that asht-ray, wo-uld you?" he sa-id.
Obe-di-ently, she did.
Ras-he-ed had to be sixty or mo-re now-tho-ugh Ma-ri-am, and in fact Ras-he-ed him-self did not know his exact age. His ha-ir had go-ne whi-te, but it was as thick and co-ar-se as ever. The-re was a sag now to his eye-lids and the skin of his neck, which was wrin-k-led and le-at-her-y. His che-eks hung a bit mo-re than they used to. In the mor-nings, he sto-oped just a tad. But he still had the sto-ut sho-ul-ders, the thick tor-so, the strong hands, the swol-len belly that en-te-red the ro-om be-fo-re any ot her part of him did.
On the who-le, Ma-ri-am tho-ught that he had we-at-he-red the ye-ars con-si-de-rably bet-ter than she.
He in-ha-led smo-ke and let it out slowly. "She can't just stay he-re, if that's what you're sug-ges-ting. I can't go on fe-eding her and clot-hing her and gi-ving her a pla-ce to sle-ep. I'm not the Red Cross, Ma-ri-am."
"But this?"
"I...I don't want this," Ma-ri-am sa-id, numb with con-tempt and help-less-ness.
"It's not yo-ur de-ci-si-on. It's hers and mi-ne."
"I'm too old."
"She's too yo-ung, you're too old. This is non-sen-se."
"I am too old. Too old for you to do this to me," Ma-ri-am sa-id, bal-ling up fist-fuls of her dress sot-tight ly her hands sho-Ok."For you, af-ter all the-se ye-ars, to ma-ke me anam-bagh"
"Don't be sode-ra-ma-tic. It's a com-mon thing and you know it. I ha-ve fri-ends who-ha-ve two, three, fo-ur wi-ves. Yo-ur own fat-her had three. Be-si-des, what I'm do-ing now most men I know wo-uld ha-ve do-ne long ago. You know it's true."

"I won't al-low it."

At this, Ras-he-ed smi-led sadly.
"The-re is anot-her op-ti-on," he sa-id, scratc-hing the so-le of one fo-ot with the cal-lo-used he-el of the ot-her. "She can le-ave. I won't stand in her way. But I sus-pect she won't get far. No fo-od, no wa-ter, not a ru-pi-ah in her poc-kets, bul-lets and roc-kets flying everyw-he-re. How many days do you sup-po-se she'll last be-fo-re she's ab-duc-ted, ra-ped, or tos-sed in-to so-me ro-ad-si-de ditch with her thro-at slit? Or all three?"

He co-ug-hed and adj-us-ted the pil-low be-hind his back.
"The ro-ads out the-re are un-for-gi-ving, Ma-ri-am, be-li-eve me. Blo-od-ho-unds and ban-dits at every turn. I wo-uldn't li-ke her chan-ces, not at all. But let's say that by so-me mi-rac-le she gets to Pes-ha-war. What then? Do you ha-ve any idea what tho-se camps are li-ke?"

He ga-zed at her from be-hind a co-lumn of smo-ke.

"Of co-ur-se," he ma-de a play-ful, twir-ling mo-ti-on with hi s hand, "she co-uld ke-ep warm in one of tho-se Pes-ha-war brot-hels. Bu-si-ness is bo-oming the-re, I he-ar. A be-a-uty li-ke her ought to bring in a small for-tu-ne, don't you think?"

He set the asht-ray on the nights-tand and swung his legs over the si-de of the bed.

"Lo-ok," hesa-id, so-un-ding mo-re con-ci-li-atory now, asa vic-tor co-uld af-ford to. "I knew you wo-uld'n ta-ke this well. I don't re-al-ly bla-me you. But this is for the best. You'll see. Think of it this way, Ma-ri-am. I'm gi-ving you help aro-und the ho-use and her a sanc-tu-ary. A ho-me and a hus-band. The-se days, ti-mes be-ing what they are, a wo-man ne-eds a hus-band. Ha-ven't you no-ti-ced all the wi-dows sle-eping on the stre-ets? They wo-uld kill for this chan-ce. In fact, this is. … Well, I'd say this is down-right cha-ri-tab-le of me."

He smi-led.
"The way I see it, I de-ser-ve an ame-dal."

* * *

La-ter, in the dark, Ma-ri-am told the girl.
For a long ti-me, the girl sa-id not-hing.
"He wants an ans-wer by this mor-ning," Ma-ri-am sa-id.
"He can ha-ve it now," the girl sa-id. "My ans-wer is yes."
La-ila

The next day, La-ila stayed in bed. She was under the blanket in the morning when Ras-he-ed poked his head in and said he was going to the barber. She was still in bed when he came home late in the afternoon, when he showed her his new haircut, his new used suit, blue with cream pinstripes, and the wedding band he'd bought her.

"She doesn't care. Believe me. She won't even notice."

La-ila pulled away to the far end of the bed. She could hear Mariam downstairs, the hissing of her iron.

"She never wore it anyway," Ras-he-ed said.

"I don't want it," La-ila said, weakly. "Not like this. You have to take it back."

"Take it back?" An impatient look flashed across his face and was gone. He smiled. "I had to add some cash too—quite a lot, in fact. This is a better ring, twenty-two-karat gold. Feel how heavy? Go on, feel it. No?" He closed the box.

"How about flowers? That would be nice. You like flowers? Do you have a favorite? Daisies? Tulips? Lilacs? No flowers? Good! I don't see the point myself. I just thought…Now, I know a tailor here in Deh-Ma-zang. I was thinking we could take you there tomorrow, get you fitted for a proper dress."

La-ila shook her head.

Ras-he-ed raised his eyebrows.

"I'd just as soon—" La-ila began.

He put a hand on her neck. La-ila couldn't help wincing and recoiling. His touch felt like wearing a prickly old wet wool sweater with no undershirt.

"Yes?"

"I'd just as soon we get it done."

Ras-he-ed's mouth opened, then spread in a yellow, toothy grin. "Eager," he said.

* * *

Before Abdul Sha-rif's visit, La-ila had decided to leave for Pakistan. Even after Abdul Sha-rif came bearing his news, La-ila thought now, she might have left. Gone somewhere far from here. Detached from this city where every street corner was a trap, where every alley hid a ghost that sprang at her like a jack-in-the-box. She might have taken the risk.

But, suddenly, leaving was no longer an option. Not with this daily retching.

This new fulness in her breasts.

---

Be-fore Ab-dul Sha-rif's vi-sit, La-ila had de-ci-ded to le-ave for Pa-kis-tan. Even af-ter Ab-dul Sha-rif ca-me be-ar-ing his news, La-ila tho-ught now, she might ha-ve left. Go-ne so-mew-he-re far from he-re. De-tac-hed her-self from this city whe-re every stre-et cor-ner was a trap, whe-re every al-ley hid a ghost that sprang at her li-ke a jack-in-the-box. She might ha-ve ta-ken the risk.

But, sud-denly, le-aving was no lon-ger an op-ti-on.

Not with this da-ily re-tch-ing.

This new ful-ness in her bre-asts.
And the awa-re-ness, so-me-how, amid all of this tur-mo-il, that she had mis-sed a
cycle.
La-ila pic-tu-red her-self in a re-fu-gee camp, a stark fi-eld with thou-sands of
she-ets of plas-tic strung to ma-kes-hift po-les flap-ping in the cold, stin-ging wind.
Be-ne-ath one of the-se ma-kes-hift tents, she saw her baby, Ta-riq's baby, its
temp-les was- ted, its jaws slack, its skin mot-tled, blu-ish gray. She pic-tu-red its tiny
body was-hed by stran-gers, wrap-ped in a tawny shro-ud, lo-we-red in-to a ho-le dug
How co-uld she run now?
La-il a to-ok grim in-ven-tory of the pe-op-le in her li-fe. Ah-mad and No-or, de-ad.
Ha-si-na, go-ne. Gi-ti, de-ad. Mammy, de-ad. Ba-bi, de-ad. Now Ta-riq…
But, mi-ra-cu-lo-usly, so-met-hing of her for-mer li-fe re-ma-ined, her last link to the
per-son that she had be-en be-fo-re she had be-co-me so ut-ter-ly alo-ne. A part of
Ta-riq still ali-ve in-si-de her, spro-uting tiny arms, gro-wing trans-lu-cent hands.

How co-uld she je-opar-di-ze the only thing she had left of him, of her old li-fe?
She ma-de her de-ci-si-on qu-ick-ly. Six we-eks had pas-sed sin-ce her ti-me with
Ta-riq. Any lon-ger and Ras-he-ed wo-uld grow sus-pi-ci-o-us.
She knew that what she was do-ing was dis-ho-no- rab-le. Dis-ho-no-rab-le,
di-sin-ge-nu-o-us, and sha-me-ful. And spec-ta-cu-larly un-fa-ir to Ma-ri-am. But
even tho-ugh the baby in-si-de her was no bi-g-ger than a mul-ber-ry, La-il a al-re-ady
saw the sac-ri-fi-ces a mot-her had to ma-ke. Vir-tue was only the first.
She put a hand on her belly. Clo-sed her eyes.

* * *
La-il a wo-uld re-mem-ber the mu-ted ce-re-mony in bits and frag-ments. The
cre-am-co-lo-red stri-pes of Ras-he-ed's su-it. The sharp smell of his ha-ir spray. The
small sha-ving nick just abo-ve his Adam's ap-ple. The ro-ugh pads of his
to-bac-co-sta-ined fin-gers when he slid the ring on her. The pen. Its not wor-king.
The se-arch for a new pen. The con-t-ract. The sig-ning, his su-re-han-ded, hers
qu-ave-ring. The pra-yers. No-ti-cing, in the mir-ror, that Ras-he-ed had trim-med his
eye-brows.
And, so-mew-he-re in the ro-om, Ma-ri-am watc-hing. The air cho-king with her
di-sap-pro-val.
La-il a co-uld not bring her-self to me-et the ol-der wo-man's ga-ze.

* * *
Lying be-ne-ath his cold she-ets that night, she wate-hed him pull the cur-ta-ins shut.
She was sha-king even be-fo-re his fin-gers wor-ked her shirt but-tons, tug-ged at the
drawst-ring of her tro-users. He was agi-ta-ted. His fin-gers fumb-led end-less-sly with
his own shirt, with un-do-ing his belt. La-il a had a full vi-ew of his sag-ging bre-asts,
his prot-ru- ding belly but-ton, the small blue ve-in in the cen-ter of it, the tufts of thick
white hair on his chest, his shoulders, and upper arms. She felt his eyes crawling all over her.

"God help me, I think I love you," he said—through chattering teeth, she asked him to turn out the lights.

Later, when she was sure that he was asleep, Laila quietly reached beneath the mattress for the knife she had hidden earlier. With it, she punctured the pad of her index finger. Then she lifted the blanket and let her finger bleed on the sheets where they had lain together.

31.

Ma-dam

In the daytime, the girl was no more than a creaking bedspring, a patter of footsteps overhead. She was water splashing in the bathroom, or a teaspoon clinking against glass in the bedroom upstairs. Occasionally, there were sightings: a blur of billowing dress in the periphery of Ma-dam's vision, scurrying up the steps, arms folded across the chest, sandals slapping the heels.

But it was inevitable that they would run into each other. Ma-dam passed the girl on the stairs, in the narrow hallway, in the kitchen, or by the door as she was coming in from the yard. When they met like this, an awkward tension rushed into the space between them. The girl gathered her skirt and breathed out a word or two of apology, and, as she hurried past, Ma-dam would chance a side-long glance and catch a blush. Sometimes she could smell Rashid on her.

She could smell his sweat on the girl's skin, his tobacco, his appetite. Sex, mercifully, was a closed chapter in her own life. It had been for a long time, and now even the thought of those laborious sessions of lying beneath Rashid made Ma-dam queasy in the gut.

At night, however, this mutually orchestrated dance of avoidance between her and the girl was not possible. Rashid said they were a family. He insisted they were, and families had to eat together, he said.

"What is this?" he said, his fingers working the meat off a bone—the spoon-and-fork charade was abandoned a week after he married the girl. "Have I married a pair of statues? Go on, Ma-dam, gap be-zan, say something to her. Where are your manners?"

Sucking marrow from a bone, he said to the girl, "But you mustn't blame her. She is quiet. A blessing, really, because, wallah, if a person hasn't got much to say she might as well be stingy with words. We are city people, you and I, but she isde-ha-ti. A village girl. Not even a village girl. No. She grew up in akol-ba made of mud out-side the vil-la-ge. Her fat-her put her there. Have you told her, Mariam, have you told her that you are hah-ra-mil? Well, she is. But she is not wit-ho-ut qu-al-i-ti-es, all things con-si-de-red. You will see for yourself, La ila jan. She is sturdy, for one thing, a good worker, and without pretensions. I'll say it this way: If she were a car, she would be a Vol-ga."
Ma-ri-am was a thirty-three-ye-ar-old wo-man now, but that word, ha-ra-mi, still had sting. He-ar-ing it still ma-de her fe-el li-ke she was a pest, a cock-ro-ach. She re-mem-be-red Na-na pul-ling her wrists. You are a clumsy Uti-le ha-ra-mi. This is my re-ward for everyt-hing I've en-du-red. An he-ir-lo-om-bre-aking clumsy Uti-le ha-ra-mi.

"You," Ras-he-ed sa-id to the girl, "you, on the ot-her hand, wo-uld be a Benz. A brand-new, first-class, shiny Benz. Wah wah. But. But." He ra-ised one gre-asy in-dex fin-ger. "One must ta-ke cer-ta-in…ca-res…wi th a Benz. As a mat-ter of res-pect for its be-a-uty and crafts-mans-hip, you see. Oh, you must be thin-king that I am crazy, di-wa-na, with all this talk of auto-mo-bi-les. I am not sa-ying you are cars. I am me-rely ma-king a po-int."

For what ca-me next, Ras-he-ed put down the ball of ri-ce he'd ma-de back on the pla-te. His hands dang-led id-ly over his me-al, as he lo-ok-ed down with a so-ber, tho-ught-ful exp-res-si-on.

"One mustn't spe-ak ill of the de-ad much less the, sha-he-ed. And I in-tend no dis-res-pect when I say this, I want you to know, but I ha-ve cer-ta-in…re-ser-va-tions…abo-ut the way yo-ur pa-rents-Allah, for-gi-ve them and grant them a pla-ce in pa-ra-di-se. And I in-tend no dis-res-pect when I say this, I want you to know, but I ha-ve cer-ta-in…re-ser-va-tions…abo-ut the way yo-ur pa-rents-Allah, for-gi-ve them and grant them a pla-ce in pa-ra-di-se. And I in-tend no dis-res-pect when I say this, I want you to know, but I ha-ve cer-ta-in…re-ser-va-tions…abo-ut the way yo-ur pa-rents-Allah, for-gi-ve them and grant them a pla-ce in pa-ra-di-se.

The cold, ha-te-ful lo-ok the girl flas-hed Ras-he-ed at this did not es-ca-pe Ma-ri-am, but he was lo-ok-ing down and did not no-ti-ce. "No mat-ter. The po-int is, I am yo-ur hus-band now, and it falls on me to gu-ard not only yo-ur ho-nor but tours, yes, our nang and na mo-os. That is the hus-band's bur-den. You let me worry abo-ut that. Ple-as-ee. As for you, you are the qu-e-en, thema-li-ka, and this ho-use is yo-ur pa-la-ce. Anyt-hing you ne-ed do-ne you ask Ma-ri-am and she will do it for you. Won't you, Ma-ri-am? And if you fancy so-met-hing, I will get it-for-you. You see, that is the sort of hus-band I am.

"All I ask in re-turn, well, it is a simp-ple thing. I ask that you avo-id le-aving this ho-use wit-ho-ut my com-pany. That's all. Simp-ple, no? If I am away and you ne-ed so-met-hing ur-gently, I me-an ab-so-lu-tely ne-ed it and it can-not wa-it for me, then you can send Ma-ri-am and she will go out and get it for you. You've no ti-ced a disc-re-pancy, su-rely. Well, one do-es not dri-ve a Vol-ga and a Benz in the sa-me man-ner. That would be fo-olish, wo-uldn't it? Oh, I al-so ask that when we are out to-get-her, that you we-ar a bur-qa. For yo-ur own pro-tec-ti-on, na-tu-ral-ly. It is best. So many lewd men in this town now. Such vi-le in ten-ri-ons, so eager to dis-ho-nor even a mar-ri-ed wo-man. So. That's all."

He co-ug-hed.

"I sho-uld say that Ma-ri-am will be my eyes and ears when I am away." He-re, he shot Ma-ri-am a fle-e-ting lo-ok that was as hard as a ste-el to-ed kick to the temp-le. "Not that I am mist-rus-ting. Qu-ite the con-try. Frankly, you stri-ke me as far wi-ser than yo-ur ye-ars. But you are still a yo-ung wo-man, La-il-la jan, adokh tar ej-awan, and yo-ung wo-men can ma-ke un-for-tu-na-te cho-ices. They can be pro-ne to misc-hi-ef. Any-way, Ma-ri-am will be ac-co-un-tab-le. And if the-re is a sli-pup…"
On and on he went. Ma-ri-am sat watch-ing the girl out of the cor-ner of her eye as Ras-he-ed's de-mands and judg-ments ra-i ned down on them li-ke the roc-kets on Ka-bul.

* * *

One day, Ma-ri-am was in the li-ving ro-om fol-ding so-me shirts of Ras-he-ed's that she had pluc-ked from the clot hes-li-ne in the yard. She didn't know how long the girl had be-en stan-ding the-re, but, when she pic-ked up a shirt and tur-ned aro-und, she fo-und her stan-ding by the do-or-way, hands cup-ped aro-und a glas-sful of tea.
"I didn't me-an to start-le you," the girl sa-id. "I'm sorry."
Ma-ri-am only lo-oked at her.

The sun fell on the girl's fa-ce, on her lar-ge gre-en eyes and her smo-oth brow, on her high che-ek-bo-nes and the ap-pe-al-ing, thick eyeb-rows, which we-re not-hing li-ke Ma-ri-am's own, thin and fe-atu-re- less. Her yel-low ha-ir, un-com-bed this mor ning, was mid-dle-par- ted.
Ma-ri-am co-uld see in the stiff way the girl clutc-hed the cup, the tigh-te ned sho-ul-ders, that she was ner-vo-us. She ima-gi-ned her sit-ting on the bed wor-king up the ner-ve.

"Not re-al-ly."
The girl cup-ped a hand be-hind her ear. "I'm sorry?"
Ma-ri-am ra-ised her vo-ice. "I sa-id no. I didn't know yo-ur mot-her."
"Oh."
"Is the-re so-met-hing you want?"
"Ma-ri-am jan, I want to…Abo-ut the things he sa-id the ot-her night-"
"I ha-ve be-en me-aning to talk to you abo-ut it." Ma-ri-am bro-ke in.
"Yes, ple-a-se," the girl sa-id ear-nestly, al-most eagerl y. She to-ok a step for-ward. She lo-oked re-li-eved.
Out-si-de, an ori-ole was warb-ling. So-me-one was pul-ling a cart; Ma-ri-am co-uld he-ar the cre-a-king of its hin-ges, the bo-un-cing and rat-tling of its iron whe els. The-re was the so-und of gun-fi-re not so far away, a sing-le shot fol-lo-wed by three mo-re, then not-hing.

"I won't be yo-ur ser-vant," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "I won't."
The girl flinc hed "No. Of co-ur-se not!"
"You may be the pa-la-cema-li-ka and me ade-ha-ti, but I won't ta-ke or-ders from you. You can comp-la-in to him and he can slit my thro-at, but I won't do it. Do you he-ar me? I won't be yo-ur ser-vant."
"No! I don't ex-pect-"
"And if you think you can use yo-ur lo-oks to get rid of me, you're wrong. I was he-re first. I won't be thrown out. I won't ha-ve you cast me out."
"It's not what I want," the girl sa-id we-akly.
"And I see yo-ur wo-unds are he-aled up now. So you can start do-ing yo-ur sha-re of the work in this ho-use-"
The girl was nod-ding qu-ickly. So-me of her tea spi-led, but she didn't no-ti-ce. "Yes, that's the ot-her re-a-son I ca-me down, to thank you for ta-king ca-re of me."
"Well, I wo-uld'n't ha-ve," Ma-ri-am snap-ped. "I wo-uld'n't ha-ve fed you and was-hed you and nur-sed you if I'd known you we-re go-ing to turn aro-und and ste-al my hus-band."
"Ste-al-"

"I will still co-ok and wash the dis-hes. You will do the la-undry and the swe-eping. The rest we will al-ter-na-te da-ily. And one mo-re thing. I ha-ve no use for yo-ur com-pa-ny. I don't want it. What I want is to be alo-ne. You will le-ave me be, and I will re-turn the fa-var. That's how we will get on. Tho-se are the ru-les."
When she was do-ne spe-aking, her he-art was ham-me-ring and her mo-uth felt parc-hed. Ma-ri-am had ne-ver be-fo-re spo-ken in this man-ner, had ne-ver sta-ted her will so for-ce-ful-ly. It ought to ha-ve felt ex-fi-la-ting, but the girl's eyes had te-ared up and her fa-ce was dro-oping, and what sa-tis-fac-ti-on Ma-ri-am fo-und from this out-burst felt me-ager, so-me-how il-li-cit.
She ex-ten-ded the shirts to-ward the girl.
"Put them in the al-ma-ri, not the clo-set. He li-kes the whi-tes in the top dra-wer, the rest in the mid-dle, with the socks."
The girl set the cup on the flo-or and put her hands out for the shirts, palms up. "I'm sorry abo-ut all of this," she cro-aked.
"You sho-uld be," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "You sho-uld be sorry."

32.

La-ila

JLa-ila re-mem-be-red a gat-he-ring on-ce, ye-ar-s be-fo-re at the ho-use, on one of Mammy's go-od days. The wo-men had be-en sit-ting in the gar-den, eating from a plat-ter of fresh mul-ber-ri-es that Wa-jma had pic-ked from the tree in her yard. The plump mul-ber-ri-es had be-en whi-te and pink, and so-me the sa-me dark purp-le as the bursts of tiny ve-ins on Wa-jma's no-se.
"He drow-ned, didn't he?" Ni-la, Gi-ti's mot-her, sa-id. "At Gharg-ka La-ke, wasn't it?"
"But did you know, did you know that Ras-he-ed..." Wa-jma ra-ised a fin-ger, ma-de a show of nod-ding and che-wing and ma-king them wa-it for her to swal-low.
"Did you know that he used to drinksha-rab back then, that he was crying drunk that day? It's true. Crying drunk, is what I he-ard. And that was mid-mor-ning. By no-on,
he had passed out on a lounge chair. You could have fired the noon cannon next to his ear and he wouldn't have blinked.

La-ila remembered how Wa-jma had covered her mouth, burped; how her tongue had gone exploring between her remaining teeth.

"You can imagine the rest. The boy went into the water unnoticed. They spotted him a while later, floating face-down. People rushed to help, half trying to wake up the boy, the other half the father. Someone bent over the boy, did the...the mouth-to-mouth thing you're supposed to do. It was pointless. They could all see that. The boy was gone."

La-ila remembered Wa-jma raising a finger and her voice quivering with piety. "This is why the Holy Koran forbids sharab. Because it always falls on the sober to pay for the sins of the drunk. So it does."

It was this story that was circulating in La-ila's head after she gave Ras-he-ed the news about the baby. He had immediately hopped on his bicycle, ridden to a mosque, and prayed for a boy.

That night, all during the meal, La-ila watched Ma-ri-am push a cube of meat around her plate. La-ila was there when Ras-he-ed sprung the news on Ma-ri-am in a high, dramatic voice-La-ila had never before witnessed such cheerful cruelty. Ma-ri-am's lashes flutted when she heard. A flush spread across her face. She sat sulking, looking desolate.

After, Ras-he-ed went upstairs to listen to his radio, and La-ila helped Ma-ri-am clean the sojrah.

"I can't imagine what you are now," Ma-ri-am said, picking grains of rice and bread crumbs, "if you were a Benz before."

La-ila tried a more heady tactic. "A train? Maybe a big jumbo jet."

Ma-ri-am straightened up. "I hope you don't think this excuses you from chores."

La-ila opened her mouth, thought better of it. She reminded herself that Ma-ri-am was the only innocent party in this arrangement. Ma-ri-am and the baby-Later, in bed, La-ila burst into tears.

What was the matter? Ras-he-ed wanted to know, lifting her chin. Was she ill? Was it the baby, was something wrong with the baby? No?

Was Ma-ri-am misrepresenting her?

"That's it, isn't it?"

"No."

"Wal-lah o bil-lah, I'll go down and teach her a lesson. Who does she think she is, thatha-ra-mi, treating you?"

"No!"

He was getting up already, and she had to grab him by the forearm, pull him back down. "Don't! No! She's been de-cent to me. I ne-ed a mi-nu-te, that's all. I'll be fi-ne."
He sat be-si-de her, stro-king her neck, mur-mu-ring. His hand slowly crept down to her back, then up aga-in. He le-aned in, flas-hed his crow-ded te-eth.
"Let's see, then," he pur-red, "if I can't help you fe-el bet-ter."

* * *

First, the tre-es-tho-se that hadn't be-en cut down for fi-re-wo-od-shed the-ir spotty yel-low-and-cop-per le-aves. Then ca-me the winds, cold and raw, rip-ping thro-ugh the city. They to-re off the last of the clin-ging le-aves, and left the tre-es lo-oking ghostly aga-inst the mu-ted brown of the hills. The se-as-on's first snow-fall was light, the fla-kes no so-on-er fal-len than mel-ted. Then the ro-ads fro-ze, and snow gat-he-red in he-aps on the ro-of-top,s, pi-led half-way up frost-ca-ked win-dows. With snow ca-me the ki-tes, on-ce the ru-lers of Ka-bul's win-ter ski-es, now ti-mid tres-pas-sers in ter-i-try cla-imed by stre-a-king roc-kets and figh-ter jets.

Ras-he-ed kept brin-ging ho-me news of the war, and La-ila was baf-fled by the al-le-gi-an-ces that Ras-he-ed tri-ed to exp-la-in to her. Say-yaf was figh-ting the Ha-za-ros, he sa-id. The Ha-za-ros we-re figh-ting Mas-so-ud.

"And he's figh-ting Hek-mat-yar, of co-ur-se, who has the sup-port of the Pa-kis-ta-nis. Mor-tal ene-mi-es, tho-se two, Mas-so-ud and Hek-mat-yar. Say-yaf, he's si-ding with Mas-so-ud. And Hek-mat-yar sup-ports the Ha-za-ros for now."

As for the unp-re-dic-tab-le Uz-bek com-man-der Dos-tum, Ras-he-ed sa-id no one knew whe-re he wo-uld stand. Dos-tum had fo-ught the So-vi-ets in the 1980s along-si-de the Mu-j-ahi-de-en but had de-fec-ted and jo-ined Na-j-ibul-lah's com-mu-nist pup-pet re-gi-me af-ter the So-vi-ets had left. He had even ear-ned a me-dal, pre-sen-ted by Na-j-i bul-lah him-self, be-fo-re de-fec-ting on-ce again and re-tur-ning to the Mu-j-ahi-de-en's si-de. For the ti-me be-ing, Ras-he-ed sa-id, Dos-tum was sup-por-ting Mas-so-ud.


"But don't worry," he sa-id. "You're sa-fe with me, my flo-wer, mygul. An-yo-ne tri-es to harm you, I'll rip out the-ir li-ver and ma-ke them eat it."

That win-ter, every-whe-re La-ila tur-ned, walls bloc-ked her way. She tho-ught lon-gingly of the wi-de-open ski-es of her child-ho-od, of her days of go-ing tobu-z-kas-hi to-ur-na-ments with Ba-bi and shop-ping at Man-da-ii with Mammy, of her days of run-ning free in the stre-ets and los-ting free in the stre-ets and gos-si-ping abo-ut boys with Gi-ti and Ha-si-na. Her days of sit-ting with Ta-riq in a bed of clo-ver on the banks of a stre-am so-mew-he-re, tra-ding rid-dles and candy, watc-hing the sun go down.

But thin-king of Ta-riq was tre-ac-he-ro-u s be-ca-use, be-fo-re she co-uld stop, she saw him lying on a bed, far from ho-me, tu-bes pi-er-cing his bur-ned body. Li-ke the bi-le that kept bur-ning her thro-at the-se days, a de-ep, pa-raly-zing gri-e f wo-uld
co-me ri-sing up La-ila's chest. Her legs wo-uld turn to wa-ter. She wo-uld ha-ve to hold on to so-met-hing.

La-ila pas-sed that win-ter of 1992 swe-eping the ho-use, scrub-bing the pump-kin-co-lo-red walls of the bed-ro-om she sha-red with Ras-he-ed, was-hing clot-hes out-si-de in a big cop-per la-go-on. So-me-ti-mes she saw her-self as if ho-ve-ring abo-ve her own body, saw her-self squ-at-ting over the rim of the o-go-on, sle-eves rol-led up to the el-bows, pink hands wrin-ging so-apy wa-ter from one of Ras-he-ed's un-ders-hirts. She felt lost then, cas-ting abo-ut, li-ke a shipw-reck sur-vi-vor, no sho-re in sight, only mi-les and mi-les of wa-ter.

When it was too cold to go out-si-de, La-ila amb-led aro-und the ho-use. She wal-ked, drag-ging a fin-ger-na-il along the wall, down the hal-lway, then back, down the steps, then up, her fa-ce un-was-hed, ha-ir un-com-bed. She wal-ked un-til she ran in-to Ma-ri-am, who shot her a che-er-less gl an-ce and went back to sli-cing the stem off a bell pep-per and trim-ming strips of fat from me-at. A hurt-ful si-len-ce wo-uld fill the ro-om, and La-ila co-uld al-most see the word-less hos-ti-lity ra-di-ating from Ma-ri-am li-ke wa-ves of he-at ri-sing from asp-halt. She wo-uld ret-re-at back to her ro-om, sit on the bed, and watch the snow fal-ling.

* * *

Ras-he-ed to-ok her to his shoe shop one day.

When they we-re out to-get-her, he wal-ked along-si-de her, one hand grip-ping her by the el-bow. For La-ila, be-ing out in the stre-ets had be-co-me an exer-ci-se in avo-iding inj-ury. Her eyes we-re still ad j-us-ting to the li-mi-ted, grid-li-ke vi-si-bi-lity of the bur-qa, her fe-et stil l stumb-ling over the hem. She wal-ked in per-pe-tu-al fe-ar of trip-ping and fal-ling, of bre-aking an ank-le step-ping in-to a pot-ho-le. Still, she fo-und so-me com-fort in the anony-mity that the bur-qa pro-vi-ded. She wo-uldn't be re-cog-ni-zed this way if she ran in-to an old ac-qu-a-in-tan-ce of hers. She wo-uldn't ha-ve to watch the surp-ri-se in the-ir eyes, or the pity or the glee, at how far she had fal-len, at how her loft y as-pi-ra-ti-ons had be-en das-hed.

Ras-he-ed's shop was big-ger and mo-re brightly lit than La-ila had ima-gi-ned. He had her sit be-hind his crow-ded work-bench, the top of which was lit-te-red with old so-les and scraps of lef-to-ver le-a t-her. He sho-wed her his ham-mers, de-mon-st-ra-ted how the sand-pa-per whe-el wor-ked, his vo-ice rin-ging high and pro-ud-He felt her belly, not thro-ugh the shirt but un-der it, his fin-ger-tips cold and ro-ugh li-ke bark on her dis-ten-ded skin. La-ila re-mem-be-red Ta-riq's hands, soft but strong, the tor-tu-o-us, full ve-ins on the backs of them, which she had al-ways fo-und soap-pe-alingly mas-cu-li-ne.

"Swel-ling so qu-ickly," Ras-he-ed sa-id."It's go-ing to be a big boy. My son will beapa-h-la-wan! Li-ke his fat-her."

La-ila pul-led down her shirt. It fil-led her with fe-ar when he spo-ke li-kethis.

"Howare things with Ma-ri-am?"
She sa-id they we-re fi-ne.
"Go-od. Go-od."
She didn't tell him that they'd had the-ir first true fight.
It had hap-pe-ned a few days ear-li-er. La-ila had go-ne to the kite-hen and fo-und Ma-ri-am yan-king dra-wers and slam-ming them shut. She was lo-oking, Ma-ri-am sa-id, for the long wo-oden spo-on she used to stir ri-ce.
"Whe-re did you put it?" she sa-id, whe-eling aro-und to fa-ce La-ila.

"Me?" La-ila sa-id "I didn't ta-ke it. I hardly co-me in he-re."
"I've no-ti-ced."
"Is that an ac-cu-sa-ti-on? It's how you wan-tered it, re-mem-ber. You sa-id you wo-uld ma-ke the me-als. But if you want to switch-"
"So you're sa-ying it grew lit-tle legs and wal-ked out, Te-ep, te-ep, te-ep, te-ep. Is that what hap-pe-ned, de-geh?"
"I'm sa-ying..." La-ila sa-id, trying to ma-in ta-in cont-rol.Usu-al-ly, she co-uld will her-self to ab-sorb Ma-ri-am's de-ri-si-on and fin-ger-po-in-ting. But her ank-les had swol-len, her he-ad hurt, and the he-art-burn was vi-ci-o-us that day. "I am sa-ying that may-be you've misp-la-ced it."
"Misp-la-ced it?" Ma-ri-am pul-led a dra-wer. The spa-tu-las and kni-ves in-si-de it clan-ked. "How long ha-ve you be-en he-re, a few months? I've li-ved in this ho-use for ni-ne-te-en ye-ars, dok-hi-arjo. I ha-ve kept that spo-on in this dra-wer sin-ce you we-re shit-ting yo-ur di-apers."
"Still," La-ila sa-id, on the brink now, te-eth clenc-hed, "it's pos-sib-le you put it so-mew-he-re and for-got."
"And it's pos-sib-le you hid it so-mew-he-re, to ag-gra-va-te me."
"You're a sad, mi-se-rab-le wo-man," La-ila sa-id.
Ma-ri-am flinc-hed, then re-co-ve-red, pur-sed her lips. "And you're a who-re. A who-re and adozd. A thi-eving who-re, that's what you are!"

Then the-re was shoo-ing- Pots ra-ised tho-ugh not hur-led. They'd cal-led each ot-her na-mes, na-mes that ma-de La-ila blush now. They hadn't spo-ken sin-ce. La-ila was still shoc-ked at how easi-ly she'd co-me un-hin-ged, but, the truth was, part of her had li-ked it, had li-ked how it felt to sce-ram at Ma-ri-am, to cur-se at her, to ha-ve a tar-get at which to fo-cus all her sim-me-ring an-ger, her gri-ef.
La-ila won-de-red, with so-met-hing li -like in-sight, if it wasn't the sa-me for Ma-ri-am.

After, she had run ups-ta-irs and thrown her-self on Ras-he-ed's bed. Downs-ta-irs, Ma-ri-am was still yel-ling, "Dirt on yo-ur he-ad! Dirt on yo-ur he-ad!" La-ila had la-in on the bed, gro-aning in-to the pil-low, mis-sing her pa-rents sud-denly and with an over-po-we-ring in-ten-sity she hadn't felt sin-ce tho-se ter-rib-le days just af-ter the at-tack. She lay the-re, clutc-hing hand-fuls of the beds-he-et, un-til, sud-denly, her bre-ath ca-ught. She sat up, hands sho-o-ting down to her belly.
The baby had just kic-ked for the first ti-me.
33.

Ma-dam

Jbarly one mor-ning the next spring, of 1993, Ma-ri-am sto-od by the li-ving-ro-om win-dow and watc-hed Ras-he-ed es-cort the girl out of the ho-use. The girl was tot-te-ring for-ward, bent at the wa-ist, one arm dra-ped pro-tec-ti-ve ac-ross the ta-ut drum of her belly, the sha-pe of which was vi-sib-le thro-ugh her bur-qa. Ras-he-ed, an-xi-o-us and overly at-ten-ti-ve, was hol-ding her el-bow, di-rec-ting her ac-ross the yard li-ke a traf-fic po-li-ce-man. He ma-de aWa-it he-re ges-tu-re, rus-hed to the front ga-te, then mo-ti-oned for the girl to co-me for-ward, one fo-ot prop-ping the ga-te open. When she re-ac-hed him, he to-ok her by the hand, hel-ped her thro-ugh the ga-te. Ma-ri-am co-uld al-most he-ar him say,"Watch yo-ur step, now, my flo-wer, my gul."

They ca-me back early the next eve-ning.

Ma-ri-am saw Ras-he-ed en-ter the yard first. He let the ga-te go pre-ma-tu-ly, and it al-most hit the girl on the fa-ce. He cros-sed the yard in a few, qu-ick steps. Ma-ri-am de-tec-ted a sha-dow on his fa-ce, a dark-ness un-derl-ying the cop-pery light of dusk. In the ho-use, he to-ok off his co-at, threw it on the co-uch. Brus-hing past Ma-ri-am, he sa-id in a brus-que vo-ice, "I'm hungry. Get sup-per re-ady."

The front do-or to the ho-use ope-ned. Fr om the hal-lway, Ma-ri-am saw the girl, a swad-dled bund-le in the ho-ok of her left ar-m. She had one fo-ot out-si-de, the ot-her in-si-de, aga-inst the do-or, to pre-vent it from sprin-ging shut. She was sto-oped over and was grun-ting, trying to re-ach for the pa-per bag of be-lon-gings that she had put down in or-der to open the do-or. Herfa-ce was gri-ma-cing with ef-fort. She lo-oked up and saw Ma-ri-am.

Ma-ri-am tur-ned aro-und and went to the kitc-hen to warm Ras-he-ed's sme-al.

* * *

"Irs li-ke so-me-one is ram-ming a screwd-ri-ver in-to my ear," Ras-he-ed sa-id, rub-bing his eyes.He was stan-ding in Ma-ri-am's do-or, puf-fy-eyed, we-ar-ing only aiunm-ban ti-ed with a floppy knot.His whi-te ha-ir was stragglily, po-in-ting every which way. "This crying. I can't stand it."

Downs-ta-irs, the girl was wal-king the baby ac-ross the flo-or, trying to sing to her. "I ha-ven't had ade-cent night's sle-ep in twomonths," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "And the ro-om smells li-ke a se-wer. The-re's shit cloths lying all over the pla-ce. I step-ped on onejus-the ot-her night."

Ma-ri-am smir-ked in-wardly with per-ver-se ple-asu-re.

"Ta-ke her out-si-de!" Ras-he-ed yel-led over his sho-ul-der. "Can't you ta-ke her out-si-de?"

The sin-ging was sus-pen-ded bri-efly."She'll catch pne-umo-nia!"

"It's sum-mer-ti-me!"

"What?
Ras-he-ed clenc-hed his te-eth and ra-ised his vo-ice. "I sa-id, It's warm out!"
"I'm not ta-king her out-si-de!"
The sin-ging re-su-med
"So-me-ti-mes, I swe-ar, so-me-ti-mes I want to put that thing in a box and let her
flo-at down Ka-bul Ri-ver. Li-ke baby Mo-ses."
Ma-ri-am ne-ver he-ard him call his da-ugh-ter by the na-me the girl had gi-ven her,
Azi-za, the Che-ris-hed One. It was al-ways the baby, or, when he was re-al-ly
exas-pe-ra-ted, thai thing.
So-me nights, Ma-ri-am over-he-ard them ar-gu-ing. She tip-to-ed to the-ir do-or,
lis-te-ned to him comp-la-in abo-ut the baby-al-ways the baby-the in-sis-tent crying,
the smells, the toys that ma-de him trip, the way the baby had hi-j-ac-ked La-ila's
at-ten-ti-ons from him with cons-tant de-mands to be fed, bur-ped, chan-ged, wal-ked,
held. The girl, in turn, scol-ded him for smo-king in the ro-om, for not let-ting the
baby sle-ep with them.
The-re we-re ot-her ar-gu-ments wa-ged in vo-ices pitc-hed low.
"The doc-tor sa-id six we-eks."
"Not yet, Ras-he-ed. No. Let go. Co-me on. Don't do that."
"It's be-en two months."
"Sshi. The-re. You wo-ke up the baby." Then mo-re sharply, "Khosh sho-di? Happy
now?"
Ma-ri-am wo-uld sne-ak back to her ro-om.
"Can't you help?" Ras-he-ed sa-id now. "The-re must be so-met-hing you can do."
"What do I know abo-ut ba-bi-es?" Ma-ri-am sa-id.
"Ras-he-ed! Can you bring the bot-tle? It's sit-ting on theal-ma-ri. She won't fe-ed. I
want to try the bot-tle aga-in."
The baby's scre-ec-hing ro-se and fell li-ke a cle-aver on me-at.
Ras-he-ed clo-sed his eyes. "That thing is a war-lord. Hek-mat-yar. I'm tel-ling you,
La-ila's gi-ven birth to Gul-bud-din Hek-mat-yar."
* * *
Ma-ri-am watc-hed as the girl's days be-ca-me con-su-med with cycles of fe-eding,
roc-king, bo-un-cing, wal-king. Even when the baby nap-ped, the-re we-re so-iled
di-apers to scrub and le-ave to so-ak in a pa-il of the di-sin-fec-tant that the girl had
in-sis-ted Ras-he-ed buy for her. The-re we-re fin-ger-na-ils to trim with sand-pa-per,
co-ve-ral-ls and pa-j-amas to wash and ha-ng to dry. The-se clot-hes, li-ke ot-her
things abo-ut the baby, be-ca-me a po-int of con-ten-ti-on.
"What's the mat-ter with them?" Ras-he-ed sa-id
"They're boys' clot-hes. For abac-ha"
"You think she knows the dif-fe-ren-ce? I pa-id go-od mo-ney for tho-se clot-hes.
And anot-her thing, I don't ca-re for that to-ne. Con-si-der that a war-ning."
Every we-ek, wit-ho-ut fa-il, the girl he-at-ed a black me-tal bra-zi-er over a fla-me, tos-sed a pinch of wild rue se-e-ds in it, and waf-ted thees-pan-di smo-ke in her baby's di-rec-ti-on to ward off evil.

Ma-ri-am fo-und it ex-ha-us-ting to watch the girl's lol-lo-ping ent-hu-si-as-m-and had to ad-mit, if only pri-va-tely, to a deg-ree of ad-mi-ra-ti-on. She mar-ve-led at how the girl's eyes sho-ne with wors-hip, even in the mor-nings when her fa-ce dro-oped and her comp-le-xi-on was waxy from a night's worth of wal-king the baby. The girl had fits of la-ugh-ter when the baby pas-sed gas. The ti-ni-est chan-ges in the baby enc-han-ter her, and everyt-hing it did was dec-la-red spec-ta-cu-lar.

"Lo-ok! She's re-ac-hing for the rat-tle. How cle-ver she is."

"I'll call the news-pa-pers," sa-id Ras-he-ed.

Every night, the-re we-re de-mon-st-ra-ti-ons. When the girl in-sis-ted he wit-ness so-met-hing, Ras-he-ed tip-ped his chin up-ward and cast an im-pa-ti-ent, si-de-long glan-ce down the blue-ve-ined ho-ok of his no-se.

"Watch. Watch how she la-ughs when I snap my fin-gers. The-re. See? Did you see?"

Ras-he-ed wo-uld grunt, and go back to his pla-te. Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red how the girl's me-re pre-sen-ce used to overw-helm hi m. Everyt-hing she sa-id used to ple-ase him, int-ri-gue him, ma-ke him lo-ok up from his pla-te and nod with ap-pro-val.

The stran-ge thing was, the girl's fall from gra-ce ought to ha-ve ple-ased Ma-ri-am, bro-ught her a sen-se of vin-di-ca-ti-on. But it didn't. It didn't. To her own sur-pri-se, Ma-ri-am fo-und her-self pit-ying the girl.

It was al-so over din-ner that the girl let lo-ose a ste-ady stre-am of wor-ri-es. Top-ping the list was pne-umo-nia, which was sus-pec-ted with every mi-nor co-ugh. Then the-re was dysen-tery, the spec-ter of which was ra-ised with every lo-ose sto-ol. Every rash was ei-ther chic-ken pox or me-as-les.

"You sho-uld not get so at-tac-hed," Ras-he-ed sa-id one night.

"What do you me-an?"

"I was lis-te-ning to the ra-dio the ot-her night. Vo-ice of Ame-ri-ca. I he-ard an in-te-res-ting sta-tis-tic. They sa-id that in Afg-ha-nis-tan one out of fo-ur child-ren will die be-fo-re the age of fi-ve. That's what they sa-id. Now, they-What? What? Whe-re are you go-ing? Co-me back he-re. Get back he-re this ins-tant!"

He ga-ve Ma-ri-am a be-wil-de-red lo-ok. "What's the mat-ter with her?"

That night, Ma-ri-am was ly-ing in bed when the bic-ke-ring star-ted aga-in. It was a hot, dry sum-mer night, typi-cal of the month of Sa-ra-tan in Ka-bul. Ma-ri-am had ope-ned her win-dow, then shut it when no bre-eze ca-me through to tem-per the he-at, only mos-qu-ito-es. She co-uld fe-el the he-at ri-sing from the gro-und out-si-de, thro-ugh the whe-at brown, splin-te-red planks of the out-ho-use in the yard, up thro-ugh the walls and in-to her ro-om.

Usu-al-ly, the bic-ke-ring ran its co-ur-se af-ter a few mi-nu-tes, but half an ho-ur pas-sed and not only was it still go-ing on, it was es-ca-la-ted now. The girl's vo-ice, un-der-ne-ath his, was ten-ta-ti-ve and shrill. So-on the baby was wa-il-ing.
Then Ma-ri-am he-ard the-ir do-or open vi-o-lently. In the mor-ning, she wo-uld find the do-ork-nob's cir-cu-lar imp-res-si-on in the hal-lway wall. She was sit-ting up in bed when her own do-or slam-med open and Ras-he-ed ca-me thro-ugh.

He was we-ar-ing whi-te un-der-pants and a matc-hing un-ders-hirt, sta-ined yel-low in the un-de-rarms with swe-at. On his fe-et he wo-re flip-flops. He held a belt in his hand, the brown le-at-her one he'd bo-ught for hisnik-ka with the girl, and was wrap-ping the per-fo-ra-ted end aro-und his fist.

"It's yo-ur do-ing, I know it is," he snar-led, ad-van-cing on her.

Ma-ri-am slid out of her bed and be-gan back-pe-da-ling. Her arms ins-tinc-ti-vely cros-sed over her chest, whe-re he of-ten struck her first.

"What are you tal-king abo-ut?" she stam-me-red.
"Her den-ying me. You're te-ac-hing her to."

Over the ye-ars, Ma-ri-am had le-ar ned to har-den her-self aga-inst his scorn and rep-ro-ach, his ri-di-cu-ling and rep-ri-man-ding. But this fe-ar she had no cont-rol over. All the-se ye-ars and still she shi-ve-red with fright when he was li-ke this, sne-er-ing, tigh-te-ning the belt aro-und his fist, the cre-aking of the le-at-her, the glint in his blo-ods-hot eyes. It was the fe-ar of the go-at, re-lease in the ti-ger's ca-ge, when the ti-ger first lo-oks up from its paws, be-gins to growl-Now the girl was in the ro-om, her eyes wi-de, her fa-ce con-tor-ted

"I sho-uld ha-ve known that you'd cor-rupt her," Ras-he-ed spat at Ma-ri-am. He swung the belt, tes-ting it aga-inst his own thigh. The buck-le jing-led lo-udly.

"Go back to the ro-om."
Ma-ri-am back-pe-da-led aga-in.
"No! Don't do this!"
Now!

Ras-he-ed ra-ised the belt aga-in and this ti-me ca-me at Ma-ri-am.

Then an as-to-nis-hing thing hap-pe-ned: The girl lun-ged at him. She grab-bed his arm with both hands and tri-ed to drag him down, but she co-uld do no mo-re than dang-le from it. She did suc-ce-ed in slo-wing Ras-he-ed's prog-ress to-ward Ma-ri-am.

"Let go!" Ras-he-ed cri-ed.
"You win. You win. Don't do this. Ple-ase, Ras-he-ed, no be-ating! Ple-ase don't do this."

They strug-gled li-ke this, the girl han-ging on, ple-ading, Ras-he-ed try-ing to sha-ke her off, ke-eping his eyes on Ma-ri-am, who was too stun-ned to do anyt-hing.

In the end, Ma-ri-am knew that the-re wo-uld be no be-ating, not that night. He'd ma-de his po-int. He sta-ied that way a few mo-ments lon-ger, arm ra-ised, chest he-aving, a fi-ne she-en of swe-at fil-ming his brow. Slowly, Ras-he-ed lo-we-red his arm. The girl's fe-et to-uc-hed gro-und and still she wo-uldn't let go, as if she didn't trust him. He had to yank his arm free of her grip.
"I'm on to you," he said, slinging the belt over his shoulder. "I'm on to you both. I won't be made anaht maq, a fool, in my own house."

He threw Mariam one last, murderous stare, and gave the girl a shove in the back on the way out.

When she heard the door close, Mariam climbed back into bed, buried her head beneath the pillow, and waited for the shaking to stop.

* * *

Three times that night, Mariam was awakened from sleep. The first time, it was the rumble of rockets in the west, coming from the direction of Karteh-Char. The second time, it was the baby crying downstairs, the girl's shushing, the clatter of spoon against milk bottle. Finally, it was thirst that pulled her out of bed.

Downstairs, the living room was dark, save for a bar of moonlight spilling through the window. Mariam could hear the buzzing of a fly somewhere, could make out the outline of the cast-iron stove in the corner, its pipe jutting up, then making a sharp angle just below the ceiling.

On her way to the kitchen, Mariam nearly tripped over something. There was a shape at her feet. When her eyes adjusted, she made out the girl and her baby lying on the floor on top of a quilt.

The girl was sleeping on her side, snoring. The baby was awake. Mariam lit the kerosene lamp on the table and knuckled down. In the light, she had her first close-up look at the baby, the tuft of dark hair, the thick-lashed hazel eyes, the pink cheeks, and lips the color of ripe pomegranate.

Mariam had the impression that the baby, too, was examining her. She was lying on her back, her head tilted sideways, looking at Mariam intently with a mixture of amusement, confusion, and suspicion. Mariam wondered if her face might frighten her, but then the baby squealed happily and Mariam knew that a favorable judgment had been passed on her behalf.

"Shh," Mariam whispered, "You'll wake up your mother, half deaf as she is."

The baby's hand balled into a fist. It rose, fell, found a spas tic path to her mouth. Around a mouthful of her own hand, the baby gave Mariam a grin, little bubbles of spit shining on her lips.

"Look at you. What a sorry sight you are, dressed like a damn boy. And all bundled up in this heat. No wonder you're still awake."

Ma-ri-am pul-led the blan-ken off the baby, was hor-ri-fi-ed to find a sec-ond one be-ne-ath the pil-low, and pul-led that one off too. The baby gig-gled with re-li-ef. She flap-ped her arms li-ke a bird.

"Be-t-ter, nay T"

As Ma-ri-am was pul-ling back, the baby grab-bed her pin-kie. The tiny fin-gers cur-led them-selfes tightly aro-und it. They felt warm and soft, mo-ist with dro-ol.

"Gu-muh," the baby said.
"All right, Ms; let go."
The baby hung on, kic-ked her legs aga-in.

Ma-ri-am pul-led her fin-ger free. The baby smi-led and ma-de a se-ri-es of gurg-ling so-unds. The knuck-les went back to the mo-uth.
"What are you so happy abo-ut? Huh? What are you smi-ling at? You're not so cle-ver as yo-ur mot-her says. You ha-ve a bru-te for a fat-her and a fo-ol for a mot-her. You wo-uldn't smi-le so much if you knew. No you wo-uldn't. Go to sle-ep, now. Go on."
Ma-ri-am ro-se to her fe-et and wal-ked a few steps be-fo-re the baby star- ted ma-king the theeh, eh, eh so-unds that Ma-ri-am knew sig-na-led the on-set of a he-arty cry. She ret-ra-ced her steps.
"What is it? What do you want from-me?"
The baby grin-ned to-oth-les-sly.
Ma-ri-am sig-hed. She sat down and let her fin-ger be grab-bed, lo-ok-ed on as the baby squ-e-ak-ed, as she fle-x-ed her plump legs at the hips and kic-ked air. Ma-ri-am sat the-re, wate-hing, un-til the baby stop-ped mo-ving and be-gan sno-ring softly.
Out-si-de, moc-king-birds we-re sin-ging blit-hely, and, on-ce in a whi- le, when the songs-ters to-ok flight, Ma-ri-am co-uld see the-ir wings catc-hing the phosp-ho-res-cent blue of mo-on-light be-am-ing thro- ugh the clo-uds. And tho-ugh her thro-at was parc-hed with thirst and her fe-et bur-ned with pins and ne-ed-les, it was a long ti-me be-fo-re Ma-ri-am gently fre-ed her fin-ger from the baby's grip and got up.

La-ila
Of all earthly ple-asu-res, La-ila's fa-vo-ri-te was lying next to Azi-za, her baby's fa-ce so clo-se that she co-uld watch her big pu-pils di-la-te and shrink. La-ila lo-ved run-ning her fin-ger over Azi-za's ple-as-ing, soft skin, over the dimp-led knuck-les, the folds of fat at her el-bows. So-me-ti-mes she lay Azi-za down on her chest and whis-pe-red in-to the soft crown of her he-ad things abo-ut Ta-riq, the fat-her who wo-uld al-ways be a stran-ger to Azi-za, who-se fa-ce Azi-za wo-uld ne-ver know. La-ila told her of his ap-ti-tu-de for sol-vi ng rid-dles, his tric-ker y and misc-hi-ef, his easy la-ugh.
"He had the pret-ti-est las-hes, thick li-ke yo-urs. A go-od chin, a fi-ne no-se, and a ro-und fo-re-he-ad. Oh, yo-ur fat-her was hand-so-me, Azi-za. He was per-fect. Per-fect, li-ke you are."

But she was ca-re-ful ne-ver to men-ti-on him by na-me.
So-me-ti-mes she ca-ught Ras-he-ed lo-oking at Azi-za in the most pe-cu-li-ar way. The ot-her night, sit-ting on the bed-ro-om flo-or, whe-re he was sha-ving a corn from his fo-ot, he sa-id qu-ite ca-su-al-ly, "So what was it li-ke bet-we-en you two?"
La-ila had gi-ven him a puz-zled lo-ok, as tho-ugh she didn't un-ders-tan-d.
"La-ili and Ma-jno-on. You and the-yak-knga, the crip-ple. What was it you had, he and you?"

"He was my fri-end," she sa-id, ca-re-ful that her vo-ice not shift too much in key. She bu-si-ed her-self ma-king a bot-tle. "You know that."
"I don't know what I know." Ras-he-ed de-po-si-ted the sha-vings on the win-dow-sill and drop-ped on-to the bed. The springs pro-tes-ted with a lo-ud cre-ak.
He spla-yed his legs, pic-ked at his crotch. "And as… fri-ends, did the two of you ever do anyt-hing out of or-der?"
"Out of or-der?"
Ras-he-ed smi-led light-he-ar-tedly, but La-ila co-uld fe-el his ga-ze, cold and watch-ful. "Let me see, now. Well, did he ever gi-ve you a kiss? May-be put his hand whe-ere it didn't be-long?"
La-ila win-ced with, she ho-ped, an in-d ig-nant air. She co-uld fe-el her he-rt drum-ming in her thro-at. "He was li-ke abrot-her to me."
"So he was a fri-end or a brot-her?"
"Both. He^
"Which was it?"
"He was li-ke both."

"But brot-hers and sis-ters are cre-atu-res of cu-ri-osity. Yes. So-me-ti-mes a brot-her lets his sis-ter see his pec-ker, and asis-ter will-
"You sic-ken me," La-ila sa-id.
"So the-re was not-hing."
"I don't want to talk abo-ut this any-mo-re."
Ras-he-ed til-ted his he-ad, pur-sed his lips, nod-ded. "Pe-op-le gos-si-ped, you know. I re-mem-ber. They sa-id all sorts of things abo-ut you two. But you're sa-ying the-re was not-hing."
She wil-led her-self to gla-re at him.
He held her eyes for an exc-ru-ci-atingly long ti-me in an unb-lin-king way that ma-de her knuck-les go pa-le aro-und the milk bot-tle, and it to-ok all that La-ila co-uld mus-ter to not fal-ter.
She shud-de-red at what he wo-uld do if he fo-und out that she had been ste-aling from him. Every we-ek, sin-ce Azi-za's birth, she pri-ed his wa-llet open when he was as-le-ep or in the out-ho-use and to-ok a sing-le bill. So-me we-eks, if the wa-llet was light, she to-ok only a fi-ve-afgha-ni bill, or not-hing at all, for fe-ar that he wo-uld no-ti-ce. When the wa-llet was plump, she hel-ped her-self to a ten or a twenty, on-ce even ris-king two twen-ti-es. She hid the mo-ney in a po-uch she'd sewn in the li-ning of her chec-ke-red win-ter co-at.

She won-de-red what he wo-uld do if he knew that she was plan-ning to run away next spring. Next sum-mer at the la-test. La-ila ho-ped to ha-ve a tho-usand afg-ha-nis or mo-re sto-wed away, half of which wo-uld go to the bus fa-re from Ka-bul to Pes-ha-war. She wo-uld pawn her wed-ding ri-ng when the ti-me drew clo-se, as well
as the other jewelry that Ras-he-ed had gi-ven her the ye-ar be-fo-re when she was still thema-li-ka of his pa-la-ce.

"Anyway," he sa-id at last, fin-gers drum-ming his belly, "I can't be bla-med. I am a hus-band. The-se are the things a hus-band won-ders. But he's lucky he di-ed the way he did. Be-ca-use if he was he-re now, if I got my hands on him..." He suc-ked thro-ugh his te-eth and sho-ok his he-ad.

"What hap-pe-ned to not spe-aking ill of the de-ad?"

"I gu-ess so-me pe-op-le can't be de-ad eno-ugh," he sa-id.

* * *

Two days la-ter, La-ila wo-ke up in the mor-ning and fo-und a stack of baby clot-hes, ne-atly fol-ded, out-si-de her bed-ro-om do-or. The-re was a twirl dress with lit-tle pink fis-hes sewn aro-und the bo-di-ce, a blue flo-ral wo-ol dress with matc-hing socks and mit-tens, yel-low pa-j-amas with car-rot-co-lo-red pol-ka dots, and gre-en cot-ton pants with a dot-ted ruf-fle on the cuff.

"The-re is a ru-mor," Ras-he-ed sa-id over din-ner that night, smac-king his lips, ta-king no no-ti-ce of Azi-za or the pa-j-amas La-ila had put on her, "that Dos-tum is go-ing to chan-ge si-des and jo-in Hek-mat-yar. Mas-so-ud will ha-ve his hands full then, figh-ting tho-se two. And we mustn't for-get the Ha-za-ras." He to-ok a pinch of the pick-led eg-gplant Ma-ri-am had ma-de that sum-mer. "Let's ho-pe it's just that, a ru-mor. Be-ca-use if that hap-pens, this war," he wa-ved one gre-as-y hand, "will se-em li-ke a Fri-day pic-nic at Pagh-man." La-ter, he mo-un-ted her and re-li-eved him-self with word-less has-te, fully dres-sed sa-ve for his tum-ban, not re-mo-ved but pul-led dow-n to the ank-les. When the fran-tic roc-king was over, he rol-led off her and was as-le-ep in mi-nu-tes.

La-ila slip-ped out of the bed-ro-om and fo-und Ma-ri-am in the kitc-hen squ-at-ting, cle-aning a pa-ir of tro-ut. A pot of ri-c e was al-re-ady so-aking be-si-de her. The kitc-hen smel-led li-ke cu-min and smo-ke, brow-nened oni-ons and fish.

La-ila sat in a co-mer and dra-ped her kne-es with the hem of her dress.

"Thank you," she sa-aid.

Ma-ri-am to-ok no no-ti-ce of her. She fi-nis-hed cut-ting up the first tro-ut and pic-ked up the se-cond. With a ser-ra-ted kni-fe, she clip-ped the fins, then tur-ned the fish over, its un-der-bel-ly fa-cing her, and sli-ced it ex-per-tly from the ta-il to the gills. La-ila watc-hed her put her thumb in-to its mo-uth, just over the lo-wer jaw, push it in, and, in one down-ward stro-ke, re-mo-ve the gills and the ent-ra-ils.

"The clot-hes are lo-vel-y." 

"I had no use for them," Ma-ri-am mut-te-red. She drop-ped the fish on a news-pa-per smud-ged with slimy, gray ju-ice and sli-ced off its he-ad. "It was eit-her yo-ur da-ugh-ter or the moths."

"Whe-re did you le-arn to cle-an fish li-ke that?"

"When I was a lit-tle girl, I li-ved by a stre-am. I used to catch my own fish."

"I've ne-ver fis-hed"
"Not much to do. It's mostly waiting."

La-ila watched her cut the gutted trot-ut in to thirds. "Did you sew the clot-hes yo-ur-self?"

Ma-ri-am nod-ded.

"When?"

Ma-ri-am rinsed sec-tons of-fish in a bowl of wa-ter. "When I was preg-nant the first ti-me. Or may-be the se-cond ti-me. Eigh-te-en, ni-ne-te-en ye-ars ago. Long ti-me, any-how. Li-ke I sa-id, I ne-ver had any use for them."

"You're a re-al-ly go-od kha-yai. May-be you can te-ach me."

Ma-ri-am placed the rinsed chunks of trot-ut in to a cle-an bowl. Drops of wa-ter drip-ping from her fin-ger-tips, she ra-ised her he-ad and lo-oked at La-ila, lo-oked at heras if for the first ti-me.

"The ot-her night, when he…No-body's ever sto-od up for me be-fo-re," she sa-id.

La-ila exa-mi ned Ma-ri-am's dro-oping che-eks, the eye-lids that sag-ged in ti-red folds, the de-ep li-nes that fra-med her mo-uth-she saw the-se things as tho-ugh she too we-re lo-oking at so-me-one for the first ti-me. And, for the first ti-me, it was not an ad-ver-sary's fa-ce La-ila saw but a fa-ce of gri-evan-ces un-spo-ken, bur-dens go-ne un-p-ro-tes-ted, a des-tiny sub-mit-ted to and en-du-red. If she sta-yed, wo-uld this be her own fa-ce, La-ila won-de-red, twenty ye-ars from now?

"I co-uldn't let him," La-ila sa-id "I wasn't ra-ised in a ho-use-hold whe-re pe-op-le did things li-ke that."

"This is yo-ur ho-use-hold now. You ought to get used to it."

"Not to/to I won't."

"He'll turn on you too, you know," Ma-ri-am sa-id, wi- ping her hands dry with a rag.

"So-on eno-ugh. And you ga-ve him a da-ugh-ter. So, you see, yo-ur sin is even less for-gi-vab-le than mi-ne."

La-ila ro-se to her fe-et. "I know it's chilly out-si-de, but what do you say we sin-ners ha-ve us a cup of cha-i in the yard?"

Ma-ri-am lo-oked surp-ri-sed "I can't. I still ha-ve to cut and wash the be-ans."

"I'll help you do it in the mor-ning."

"And I ha-ve to cle-an up he-re."

"We'll do it to-get-her. If I'm not mis-ta-ken, the-re's so-mehal-wa left over. Aw-ful-ly go-od with cha-i."

Ma-ri-am put the rag on the co-un-ter. La-ila sen-sed an-xi-ety in the way she tug-ged at her sle-eves, adj-us-ted her hi-j-ab, pus-he-d back a curl of ha-ir.

"The Chi-ne-se say it's bet-ter to be dep-ri-ved of fo-od for three days than tea for one."

Ma-ri-am ga-ve a half smi-le. "It's a go-od sa-y-ing."

"It is."

"But I can't stay long."

"One cup."
They sat on folding chairs outside and ate halwa with their fingers from a common bowl. They had a second cup, and when Laila asked her if she wanted a third, Mariam said she did. As gunfire cracked in the hills, they watched the clouds slide over the moon and the last of the season's fireflies charting bright yellow arcs in the dark. And when Aziza woke up crying and Rasheed yelled for Laila to come up and shut her up, a look passed between Laila and Mariam. An unguarded, knowing look. And in this fleeting, wordless exchange with Mariam, Laila knew that they were not enemies any longer.

35.

Ma'am

From that night on, Mariam and Laila did their chores together. They sat in the kitchen and rolled dough, chopped green onions, minced garlic, offered bits of cucumber to Aziza, who banged spoons nearby and played with carrots. In the yard, Aziza lay in a wicker bassinet, dressed in layers of clothing, a winter muffler wrapped snugly around her neck. Mariam and Laila kept a watchful eye on her as they did the wash, Mariam's knuckles bumping Laila's as they scrubbed shirts and trousers and diapers.

Mariam slowly grew accustomed to this tentative but pleasant companionship. She was eager for the three cups of chai she and Laila would share in the yard, a nightly ritual now. In the mornings, Mariam found herself looking forward to the sound of Laila's cracked slippers slapping the steps as she came down for breakfast and to the tinkling of Aziza's shrill laugh, to the sight of her eight little teeth, the milky scent of her skin. If Laila and Aziza slept in, Mariam became anxious waiting. She washed dishes that didn't need washing. She rearranged cushions in the living room. She dusted clean windowsills. She kept herself occupied until Laila entered the kitchen, Aziza hoisted on her hip.

When Aziza first spotted Mariam in the morning, her eyes always sprang open, and she began mewing and squirming in her mother's grip. She thrust her arms toward Mariam, demanding to be held, her tiny hands opening and closing urgently, on her face a look of both adoration and quivering anxiety.

"What a scene you're making," Laila would say, releasing her to crawl toward Mariam. "What a scene! Calm down. Khal Ma'am isn't going anywhere. There she is, your aunt. See? Go on, now."

As soon as she was in Mariam's arms, Aziza's thumb shot into her mouth and she buried her face in Mariam's neck. Mariam bounced her stiffly, a half bewildered, half grateful smile on her lips. Mariam had never been wanted like this. Love had never been declared to her so guilelessly, so unreservedly.

Aziza made Mariam want to weep.

"What a scene you're making," Laila would say, releasing her to crawl toward Mariam. "What a scene! Calm down. Khal Ma'am isn't going anywhere. There she is, your aunt. See? Go on, now."

As soon as she was in Mariam's arms, Aziza's thumb shot into her mouth and she buried her face in Mariam's neck. Mariam bounced her stiffly, a half bewildered, half grateful smile on her lips. Mariam had never been wanted like this. Love had never been declared to her so guilelessly, so unreservedly.

Aziza made Mariam want to weep.
"Why ha-ve you pin-ned yo-ur lit-tle he-art to an old, ugly hag li-ke me?" Ma-ri-am wo-uld mur-mur in-to Azi-za's ha-ir. "Huh? I am no-body, don't you see? Ade-hatl! What ha-ve I got to gi-ve you?"

But Azi-za only mut-te-red con-ten-tedly and dug her fa-ce in de-eper. And when she did that, Ma-ri-am swo-oned. Her eyes wa-te-red. Her he-art to-ok flight. And she mar-ve-led at how, af-ter all the-se ye-ars of rat-tling lo-ose, she had fo-und in this lit-tle cre-atu-re the first true con-nec-ti-on in her li-fe of fal-se, fa-iled con-nec-ti-ons.

* * *

Early the fol-lo-wing ye-ah, in Janu-ary 1994, Dos-tumdid switch si-des. He jo-ined Gul-bud-din Hek-mat-yar, and to-ok up po-si-ti-on ne-ar Ba-la His-sar, the old ci-ta-del walls that lo-omed over the city from the Koh-e-Shir-da-wa-za mo-un-ta-ins. To-get-her, they fi-red on Mas-so-ud and Rab-ba-ni for-ces at the Mi-nistry of De-fen-se and the Pre-si-den-tial Pa-la-ce. From eit-her si-de of the Ka-bul Ri-ver, they re-le-ased ar-tillery at each ot-her. The stre-ets be-ca-me lit-te-red with bo-di-es, glass, and crump-led chunks of me-tal. The-re was lo-oting, mur-der, and, ince-re-asingly, ra-pe, which was used to in-ti-ma-te cre-atu-res, re-ward mi-li-ty. Ma-ri-am he-ard of wo-men who we-re kil-ling them-sel-ves out of fe-ar of be-ing ra-pe-d, and of men who, in the na-me of ho-nor, wo-uld kil-ling the-ir wi-ves or da-ugh-ters if they'd be-en ra-ped by the mi-li-ty.

Azi-za shri-eked at the thum-ping of mor-tars. To dist-ract her, Ma-ri-am ar-ran-ged gra-ins of ri-ce on the flo-or, in the sha-pe of a ho-use or a ro-os-ter or a star, and let Azi-za scat-ter them. She drew elep-hants for Azi-za the way Jali l had shown her, in one stro-ke, wit-ho-ut lift-ting the tip of the pen.

Ras-he-ed sa-id ci-vi-li-ans we-re get-ting kil-led da-ily, by the do-zens. Hos-pi-ta-ls and sto-tes hol-ding me-di-cal sup-pli-es we-re get-ting shel-led. Ve-hic-les car-rying emer-gency fo-cil sup-pli-es we-re be-ing bar-red from en-te-ring the city, he sa-id, ra-ided, shot at. Ma-ri-am won-de-red if the-re was figh-ting li-ke this in He-rat too, and, if so, how Mul-lah Fa-izul-rah was co-ping, if he was still ali-ve, and Bi-bi-jo too, with all her sons, bri-des, and grand-cild-ren. And, of co-ur-se, Jalil. Was he hi-ding out, Ma-ri-am won-de-red, as she was? Or had he ta-ken his wi-ves and child-ren and fled the co-untry? She ho-ped Jalil was so-mew-thing he-re sa-fe, that he'd ma-na-ged to get away from all of this kil-ling.

For a we-ek, the figh-ting for-ces Ras-he-ed ed to stay ho-me. He loc-ked the do-or to the yard, set bo-oby traps, loc-ked the front do-or too and bar-ri-ca-de-d it with the co-u-ch. He pa-ced the ho-use, smo-king, pe-ering out the win-dow, clean-ing his gun, lo-ading and lo-ading it aga-in. Twi-ce, he fi-red his we-apon in-to the stre-ets cla-im-ing he'd se-en so-me-one trying to climb the wall.

"They're for-cing yo-ung boys to jo-in," he sa-id. "The-Mu-j-ahi-de-en-en-eh. In pla-in day-light, at gun-po-int. They drag boys right off the stre-ets. And when sol-di-ers from a ri-val mi-li-ty cap-tu-re the-se boys, they tor-tu-re them. I he-ard they elect-ro-cu-te them-it's what I he-ard-that they crush the-ir balls with pli-ers. They
ma-ke the boys le-ad them to the-ir ho-mes. Then they bre-ak in, kill the-ir fat-hers, ra-pe the-ir sis-ters and mot-hers."

He wa-ved his gun over his he-ad. "Let's see them try to bre-ak in-to my ho-use. I'll crush the-ir balls! I'll blow the-ir he-ads off! Do you know how lucky you two are to ha-ve a man who's not af-ra-id of Sha-itan him-self?"

He lo-oked down at the gro-und, no-ti-ced Azi-za at his fe-et. "Get off my he-els!" he snap-ped, ma-king a sho-o-ing mo-ti-on with his gun. "Stop fol-lo-wing me! And you can stop twir-ling yo-ur wrists li-ke that. I'm not pic-king you up. Go on! Go on be-fo-re you get step-ped on."

Azi-za flinc-hed. She craw-led back to Ma-ri-am, lo-oking bru-ised and con-fu-sed. In Ma-ri-am's lap, she suc-ked her thumb ch e-er-les-sly and watc-hed Ras-he-ed in a sul-len, pen-si-ve way. Oc-ca-si-on-al-ly, she lo-oked up, Ma-ri-am ima-gi-ned, with a lo-ok of wan-ting to be re-as-su-red.

But when it ca-me to fat-hers, Ma-ri-am had no as-su-ran-ces to gi-ve.

** * * **

Ma-e-i-am was re-li-eved when the figh-ting sub-si-ded aga-in, mostly be-ca-use they no lon-ger had to be co-oped up with Ras-he-ed, with his so-ur tem-per in-fec-ting the ho-use-hold. And he'd frigh-te-ned her badly wa-ving that lo-aded gun ne-ar Azi-za.

One day that win-ter, La-ila as- ked to bra-id Ma-ri-am's ha-ir. Ma-ri-am sat still and watc-hed La-ila's slim fin-gers in the mir-ror tight-ten her pla-its, La-ila's fa-ce scrunc-hed in con-cent-ra-ti-on. Azi-za was cur-led up as-le-ep on the flo-or. Tue-ked un-der her arm was a doll Ma-ri-am had hand-stic-hed for her. Ma-ri-am had stu-f-fed it with be-ans, ma-de it a dress with tea-dyed fab-ric and a neck-la-ce with tiny empty thre-ad spo-ols thro-ugh which she'd thre-aded a string.

Then Azi-za pas-sed gas in her sle-ep. La-il-a be-gan to la-ugh, and Ma-ri-am jo-ing in. They la-ug-hed li-ke this, at each ot-her's ref-lec-ti-on in the mir-ror, the-ir eyes te-ar-ing, and the mo-ment was so na-tu-ral, so ef-fort-less, that sud-denly Ma-ri-am star- ted tel-ling her abo-ut Jalil, and Na-na, and the jinn. La-il-a sto-od with her hands id-le on Ma-ri-am's sho-ul-ders, eyes lo-c ked on Ma-ri-am's fa-ce in the mir-ror. Out the words ca-me, li-ke blo-od gus-hing from an ar-tery. Ma-ri-am told her abo-ut Bi-bi jo, Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah, the hu-mi-li-ating trek to Jalil's ho-use, Na-na's su-ici-de. She told abo-ut Jalil's wi-ves, and the hur-ri-ed nik-ka with Ras-he-ed, the trip to Ka-bul, her preg-nan-ci-es, the end-less cycles of ho-pe and di-sap-po-int-ment, Ras-he-ed's tur-ning on her.

After, La-il-a sat at the fo-ot of Ma-ri-am's cha-ir. Ab-sently, she re-mo-ved a scrap of lint en-tang-led in Azi-za's ha-ir. A si-len-ce en-su-ed.

"I ha-ve so-met-hing to tell you too," La-il-a sa-id.

** * * **
Ma-e-i-am did not sleep that night. She sat in bed, watched the snow falling soundlessly.

Seasons had come and gone; presidents in Kabul had been inaugurated and murdered; an empire had been defeated; old wars had ended and new ones had broken out. But Ma-ri-am had hardly noticed, hardly cared. She had passed these years in a distant corner of her mind. A dry, barren field, out beyond wish and lament, beyond dream and disillusionment. There, the future did not matter. And the past held only this wisdom: that love was a damaging mistake, and its accomplice, hope, a treacherous illusion. And whenever those twin poisonous flowers began to sprout in the parched land of that field, Ma-ri-am uprooted them. She uprooted them and dined them before they took hold.

But somehow, over these last months, La-ila and Azi-za-li-like her-self, as it turned out—had become extensions of her, and now, without them, the life Ma-ri-am had tolerated for so long suddenly seemed intolerable.

We're leaving this spring, Azi-za and I. Come with us, Ma-ri-am.

The years had not been kind to Ma-ri-am. But perhaps, she thought, there were kinder years awaiting still. A new life, a life in which she would find the blessings that Na-na had said like her would never see. Two new flowers had unexpectedly sprouted in her life, and, as Ma-ri-am watched the snow coming down, she pictured-red Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah twirling his ias-beh be-ads, leaning in and whispering to her in his soft, tremulous voice, But it is God Who has plan-ten them, Ma-ri-am jo. And it is His will that you tend to them. It is His will, my girl.

36.

La-ila

As day-light ste-adily bleac-hed dark-ness from the sky that spring mor-ning of 1994, La-ila be-ca-me cer-ta-in that Ras-he-ed knew. That, any mo-ment now, he wo-ul'd drag her out of bed and ask whet-her she’d re-al-ly ta-ken him for such a khar, such a don-key, that he wo-uldn't find out. But azan rang out, and then the mor-ning sun was fal-ling flat on the ro-of-tops and the ro-os-ters were cro-wing and not-hing out of the or-di-nary hap-pe-ned. She could hear him now in the bath-ro-om, the tap-ping of his ra-zor aga-inst the ed-ge of the ba-sin. Then downs-ta-irs, mo-ving abo-ut, he-ating tea. The keys jing-led. Now he was cros-sing the yard, wal-king his bicyc-le.

La-ila pe-ered thro-ugh a crack in the li-ving-ro-om cur-ta-ins. She Watered him pe-dal away, a big man on a small bicyc-le, the mor-ning sun gla-ring off the hand-le-bars.

"La-ila?"

Ma-ri-am was in the do-or-way. La-ila co-uld tell that she hadn't slept eit-her. She won-de-red if Ma-ri-am too had be-en se-ized all night by bo-uts of eup-ho-ria and at-tacks of mo-uth-drying an-xi-ety.
"We'll le-ave in half an ho-ur," La-ila sa-id.

* * *

In the back-se-at of the ta-xi, they did not spe-ak. Azi-za sat on Ma-ri-am's lap, clutc-hing her doll, lo-oking with wi-de-eyed puz-ze-ment at the city spe-eding by.
"Ona!"she cri-ed, po-in-ting to a gro-up of lit-tle girls skip-ping ro-pe. "Ma-yam!Ona"
Everyw-he-re she lo-oked, La-ila saw Ras-he-ed. She spot-ted him co-ming out of bar-bers-hops with win-dows the co-lor of co-al dust, from tiny bo-oths that sold part-rid-ges, from bat-te-red, open-fron-ted sto-res pac-ked with old ti-res pi-led from flo-or to ce-ling.
She sank lo-wer in her se-at.
Be-si-de her, Ma-ri-am was mut-te-ring a pra-yer. La-ila wis-hed she co-uld see her fa-ce, but Ma-ri-am was in bur-qa-they both we-re-and all she co-uld see was the glit-ter of her eyes thro-ugh the grid.
This was La-ila's first ti-me out of the ho-use in we eks, dis-co-un-ting the short trip to the pawns-hop the day be-fo-re-where she had pus-hed her wed-ding ring ac-ross a glass co-un-ter, whe-re she'd wal-ked out thril-led by the fi-na-lity of it, kno-wing the-re was no go-ing back.
All aro-und her now, La-ila saw the con-se-qu-en-ces of the re-cent figh-ting who-se so-unds she'd he-ard from the ho-use. Ho-mes that lay in ro-of-less ru-ins of brick and jag-ged sto-ne, go-uged bu-il-dings with fal-len be-ams po-king thro-ugh the ho-les, the char-red, mang-led husks of cars, up-en-ded, so-me-ti-mes stac-ked on top of each ot-her, walls poc-ked by ho-les of every con-ce-ivab-le ca-li-ber, shat-te-red glass everyw-he-re. She saw a fu-ne-ral pro-ces-si-on marc-hing to -ward a mos-que, a black-clad old wo-man at the re-ar te-aring at her ha-ir. They pas-sed a ce-me-ter-y lit-te-red with rock-pi-led gra-ves and rag-ged sha-he-ed flags flut-te-ring in the bre-eze.
La-ila re-ac-hed ac-ross the su-it-ca-se, wrap-ped her fin-gers aro-und the soft-ness of her da-ugh-ter's arm.

* * *

At the La-ho-re Ga-te bus sta-ti-on, ne-ar Pol Mah-mo-od Khan in East Ka-bul, a row of bu-ses sat id-ling along the curb-si-de. Men in tur-bans we-re busy he-aving bund-les and cra-tes on-to bus tops, se-cu-ring su-it-ca-ses down with ro-pes. In-si-de the sta-ti-on, men sto-od in a long li-ne at the tic-ket bo-oth. Bur-qa-clad wo-men sto-od in gro-ups and chat-ted, the-ir be-lon-gings pi-led at the-ir fe-et. Ba-bi-es we-re bo-un-ced, child-ren scol-ded for stra-ying too far.
Mu-j-ahi-de-en mi-li-ti-amen pat-rol-led the sta-ti-on and the curb-si-de, bar-king curt or-ders he-re and the-re. They wo-re bo-ots, pa-kols, dusty gre-en fa-ti-gu-es. They all car-ri-ed Ka-lash-ni-kovs.
La-ila felt wa-te-hed. She lo-oked no one in the fa-ce, but she felt as tho-ugh every per-son in this pla-ce knew, that they we-re lo-oking on with di-sap-pro-val at what she and Ma-ri-am we-re do-ing.

"Do you see any-body?" La-ila as- ked. Ma-ri-am shif- ted Azi-za in her arms. "I'm lo-oking."

This, La-ila had known, wo-uld be the first risky part, fin- ding a man su-itab-le to po-se with them as a fa-mily mem-ber. The fre-edoms and op-por-tu-ni-ti-es that wo-men had enj-oyed be-tween 1978 and 1992 we-re a thing of the past now- La-ila co-uld still re-mem-ber Ba-bi sa-y-ing of tho-se ye-ars of com-mu-nist ru-le, It's a go-od ti-me to be a wo-man in Afg-ha-ni-s-tan, La-ila Sin-ce the Mu-j-ahi-de-en ta-ke-over in Ap-ril 1992, Afg-ha-ni-s-tan's na-me had be-en chan- ged to the Is-la-mic Sta-te of Afg-ha-ni-s-tan. The Sup-re-me Co-urt un-der Rab-ba-ni was fil-led now with hard-li-ner mul-lahs who did away with the com-mu-nist-era dec-re-es that em-po-we-red wo-men and ins-te-ad pas-sed ru-lings ba-sed on Sha-ri'a, strict Is-la-mic laws that or-de-red wo-men to co-ver, for- ba-de the-ir tra-vel wit-ho-ut a ma-le re-la-ti-ve, pu-nis-hed adul-tery with sto- ning. Even if the ac-tu-al en-for-ce-ment of the-se laws was spo-ra-dic at best. But they'd en-for-ce them on us mo-re, La-ila had sa-id to Ma-ri-am, if they we-ren't so busy kil-ling each ot-her. And us.

The se-cond risky part of this trip wo-uld co-me when they ac-tu-al-ly ar-ri-ved in Pa-kis-tan. Al-re-ady bur-de-ned with ne-arly two mil-li-on Afg-han re-fu-ge-es, Pa-kis-tan had clo-sed its bor-ders to Afg-hans in Janu-ary of that ye-ar. La-ila had he- ard that only tho-se with vi-sas wo-uld be ad-mit-ted. But the bor-der was po-ro-us-always had be-en-and La-ila knew that tho-usands of Afg-hans we-re still cros-sing in-to Pa-kis-tan eit-her with bri-bes or by pro-ving hu-ma-ni-ta-ri-an gro-unds- and the-re we-re al-ways smug-glers who co-uld be hi-red. We'll find a way when we get the-re, she'd told Ma-ri-am.

"How abo-ut him?" Ma-ri-am sa-id, mo-ti-oning with her chin.

"He do-esn't lo-ok trust-worth-y."

"And him?"

"Too old. And he's tra-ve-ling with two ot-her men."

Even-tu-al-ly, La-ila fo-und him sit-ting out-si-de on a park bench, with a ve-iled wo-man at his si-de and a lit-tle boy in a skul-lcap, ro-ughly Azi-za's age, bo-un-cing on his kne-es. He was-tall and slen-der, be-ar-ded, we-ar-ing an open-col-la-red shirt and a mo-des-t gray co-at with mis-sing but-tons.

"Wa-it he-re," she sa-id to Ma-ri-am. Wal-king away, she aga-in he-ard Ma-ri-am mu-te-ting a pra-yer.

When La-ila ap-pro-ac-hed the yo-un-g man, he lo-oked up, shi-el-ded the sun from his eyes with a hand.

"For-gi-ve me, brot-her, but are you go-ing to Pes-ha-war?"

"Yes," he sa-id, squ-in- ting.

"I won-der if you can help us. Can you do us a fa-vor?"

163
He passed the boy to his wife. He and La-ila stepped away.
"What is it, ham-s-hi-ra?"
She was encouraged to see that he had soft eyes, a kind face.
She told him the story that she and Ma-ri-am had agreed on. She was abi-wa, she said, a widow. She and her mother and daugh-ter had no one left in Ka-bul. They were going to Pes-ha-war to stay with her uncle.

"You want to come with my family," the young man said.
"I know it's zah-mat for you. But you lo-ok li-ke a de-cent brot-her, and I-"
"Don't worry, ham-s-hi-ra I un-ders-tand. It's no tro-ub-le. Let me go and buy yo-ur tic-kets."
"Thank you, brot-her. This issa-wab, a go-od de-ed. God will re-mem-ber."

She fished the en-ve-lo-pe from her poc-ket be-ne-ath the bur-qa and pas-sed it to him. In it was ele-ven hund-red afg-ha-nis, or abo-ut half of the mo-ney she'd stas-hed over the past ye-ar plus the sa-le of the ring. He slip-ped the en-ve-lo-pe in his tro-user poc-ket.
"Wa-it he-re."
She watc-hed him en-ter the sta-tion. He re-tur-ned half an ho-ur la-ter.
"It's best I hold on to yo-ur tic-kets," he sa-id. The bus le-aves in one ho-ur, at ele-ven. We'll all bo-ard to-get-her. My na-me is Wa-kil. If they ask-and they sho-uldn't-I'll tell them you're my co-usin."
La-ila ga-ve him the-ir na-mes, and he sa-id he wo-uld re-mem-ber.
"Stay clo-se," he sa-id.

They sat on the bench adj-acent to Wa-kil and his fa-mily's. It was a sunny, warm mor-ning, the sky stre-ak-ed only by a few wispy clo-uds ho-ve-ring in the dis-tan-ce over the hills. Ma-ri-am be-gan fe-eding Azi-za a few of the crac-kers she'd re-mem-be-red to bring in the-ir rush to pack. She of-fe-red one to La-ila.
"I'll throw up," La-ila la-ug-hed. "I'm too ex-ci-ted."
"Me too."
"Thank you, Ma-ri-am."
"For what?"
"For this. For co-ming with us," La-ila sa-id. "I don't think I co-uld do this alo-ne."
"You won't ha-ve to."
"We're going to be all right, aren't we, Ma-ri-am, whe-re we're going?"
Ma-ri-am's hand slid ac-ross the bench and clo-sed over hers. "The Ko-ran says Al-lah is the East and the West, the-re-fo-re whe-ver you turn the-re is Al-lah's pur-po-se."
"Bov!" Azi-za cri-ed, po-in-ting to a bus. "Ma-yam, bov"

"I see it, Azi-za jo," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "That's right, bov. So-on we're all going to ri-de on abov. Oh, the things you're go-ing to see."
La-ila smi-led. She watc-hed a car-pen-ter in his shop ac-ross the stre-et sa-wing wo-od, sen-ding chips flying. She watc-hed the cars bol-ting past, the-ir win-dows
coated with soot and grime. She watched the buses growing idly at the curb, with peacocks, lions, rising suns, and glittery swords painted on their sides.

In the warmth of the morning sun, La-ila felt giddy and bold. She had another of those little sparks of euphoria, and when a stray dog with yellow eyes limped by, La-ila leaned forward and pet its back.

A few minutes before eleven, a man with a bullhorn called for all passengers to Peshawar to begin boarding. The bus doors opened with a violent hydraulic hiss. A parade of travelers rushed toward it, scampering past each other to squeeze through.

Wakil motioned toward La-ila as he picked up his son.

"We're going," La-ila said.

Wakil led the way. As they approached the bus, La-ila saw faces appear in the windows, noses and palms pressed to the glass. All around them, farewells were yelled.

A young militiaman was checking tickets at the bus door.

"Boo!" Azxxz cried.

Wakil handed tickets to the soldier, who tore them in half and handed them back. Wakil let his wife board first. La-ila saw a look pass between Wakil and the militiaman. Wakil, perched on the first step of the bus, leaned down and said something in his ear. The militiaman nodded.

La-ila's heart plummeted.

"You two, with the child, step aside," the soldier said through numb lips. "We have tickets. Didn't my cousin hand them to you?"

He made a Shh motion with his finger and spoke in a low voice to another guard. The second guard, a rotund fellow with a scar down his right cheek, nodded.

"Follow me," this one said to La-ila.

"We have to board this bus," La-ila cried, aware that her voice was shaking. "We have tickets. Why are you doing this?"

"You're not going to get on this bus. You might as well accept that. You will follow me. Unless you want your little girl to see you dragged."

As they were led to a truck, La-ila spotted Wakil's boy at the rear of the bus. The boy saw her too and waved happily.

** * **

At the police station at Torabaz Khan Intersection, they were made to sit apart, on opposite ends of a long, crowded corridor, between a desk,
behind which a man smoked one cigarette after another and clacked occasionally on the typewriter. Three hours passed this way. Azi-za tottered from La-ila to Ma-ri-am, then back. She played with a paper clip that the man at the desk gave her. She finished the crackers. Eventually, she fell asleep in Ma-ri-am's lap.

At around three o'clock, La-ila was taken to an interview room. Ma-ri-am was made to wait with Azi-za in the corridor.

The man sitting on the other side of the desk in the interview room was in his thirties and wore civilian clothes: black suit, tie, black loafers. He had a neatly trimmed beard, short hair, and eyebrows that met. He stared at La-ila, bouncing a pencil by the eraser end on the desk.

"We know," he began, clearing his throat and politely covering his mouth with a fist, "that you have already told one lie to-day, kam-shi-ra. The young man at the station was not your cousin. He told us as much himself. The question is whether you will tell more lies to-day. Personally, I advise you against it."

"We were going to stay with my uncle," La-ila said. "That's the truth."

The policeman nodded. "The ham-shi-ra in the corridor, she's your mother?"

"Yes."

"She has a Herati accent. You don't."

"She was raised in Herat, I was born here in Kabul."

"Of course. And you are widowed? You said you were. My condolences. And this uncle, this ka-ka, where does he live?"

"In Peshawar."

"Yes, you said that." He licked the point of his pencil and poised it over a blank sheet of paper. "But where in Peshawar? Which neighborhood, please? Street name, sector number."

La-ila tried to push back the bubble of panic that was coming up her chest. She gave him the name of the only street she knew in Peshawar—she'd heard it mentioned once, at the party Mammy had thrown when the Mujahideen had first come to Kabul—"Jamrud Road."

"Oh, yes. Same street as the Pearl Continental Hotel. He might have told you."

"Except the hotel is on Khyber Road."

La-ila coiled her arm around Azi-za crying in the corridor. "My daughter's frightened. May I get her, brother?"

"I prefer 'Officer.' And you'll be with her shortly. Do you have a telephone number for this uncle?"

"I do. I did. I..." Even with the burqa between them, La-ila was not buffeted from his penetrating eyes. "I'm so upset, I seem to have forgotten it."

He sighed through his nose. He asked for the uncle's name, his wife's name. How many children did he have? What were their names? Where did he work? How old was he? His questions left La-ila flustered.
He put down his pen-cil, la-ced his fin-gers to-get-her, and le-aned for-ward the way pa-rents do when they want to con-vey so-met-hing to a tod-dler. "You do re-ali-ze, ham-s-hi-ra, that it is a cri-me for a wo-man to run away. We see a lot of it. Wo-men tra-ve-ling alo-ne, cla-im-ing the-ir hus-bands ha-ve di-ed. So-me-ti-mes they're tel-ling the truth, most ti-mes not. You can be imp-ri-so-ned for run-ning away, I as-su-me you un-ders-tand that, nay?"

"Let us go, Of-fi-cer..." She re-ad the na-me on his la-pel tag. "Offi-cer Rah-man. Ho-nor the me-an-ing of yo-ur na-me and show com-pas-si-on. What do-es it mat-ter to you to let a me-re two wo-men go? What's the harm in re-le-asing us? We are not cri-mi-nals."

"I can't."

"I beg you, ple-ase."

"It's a mat-ter of qa-no-on, hams-hi-ra, a mat-ter of law," Rah-man sa-id, inj-ec-ting his vo-ice with a gra-ve, self-impor-tant to-ne. "It is my res-pon-si-bi-lity, you see, to ma-in-ta-in or-der."

In spi-te of her dist-ra-ught sta-te, La-il-a al-most la-ug-hed. She was stun-ned that he'd used that word in the fa-ce of all that the Mu-j-ahi-de-en fac-ti-ons had do-ne-the mur-ders, the lo-otings, the ra-pes, the tor-tu-res, the exe-cu-tions, the bom-bings, the tens of tho-usands of roc-kets they had fi-red at each ot-her, he-ed-less of all the in-no-cent pe-op-le who wo-uld die in the cross fi-re. Or-der. But she bit her ton-gue.

"If you send us back," she sa-id ins-te-ad, slowly, "the-re is no sa-ying what he will do to us."

She co-uld see the ef-fort it to-ok him to ke-ep his eyes from shif-ting. "What a man do-es in his ho-me is his bu-si-ness."

"What abo-ut the law, then, Of-fi-cer Rah-man?" Te-ars of ra-ge stung her eyes. "Will you be the-re to ma-in-ta-in or-der?"

"As a mat-ter of po-licy, we do not in-ter-fe-re with pri-va-te fa-mily mat-ters, ham-s-hi-ra."

"Of co-ur-se you don't. When it be-ne-fi ts the man. And isn't this a 'pri-va-te fa-mily mat-ter,' as you say? Isn't it?"

He pus-hed back from his desk and sto-od up, stra-igh-te-ned his jac-ket. "I be-li-eve this in-ter-vi-ew is fi-nis-hed. I must say, ham-s-hi-ra, that you ha-ve ma-de a very po-or ca-se for yo-ur-self. Very po-or in-de-ed. Now, if you wo-uld wa-it out-si-de I will ha-ve a few words with yo-ur...who-ever she is."

La-il-a be-gan to pro-test, then to yell, and he had to sum-mon the help of two mo-re men to ha-ve her drag-ged out of his of-fi-ce.

Ma-ri-am's in-ter-vi-ew las-ted only a few mi-nu-tes. When she ca-me out, she lo-ok-ed sha-ken.

"He as-ked so many qu-es-ti-ons," she sa-id. "I'm sorry, La-il-a jo. I am not smart li-ke you. He as-ked so many qu-es-ti-ons, I didn't know the ans-wers. I'm sorry."

"It's not yo-ur fa-ult, Ma-ri-am," La-il-a sa-id we-akly. "It's mi-ne. It's all my fa-ult. Everyt-hing is my fa-ult."

* * *
It was past six o'clock when the police car pulled up in front of the house. La-ila and Ma-ri-am were made to wait in the back seat, guarded by a Mujahid soldier in the passenger seat. The driver was the one who got out of the car, who knocked on the door, who spoke to Ras-he-ed. It was he who motioned for them to come.

"Welcome home," the man in the front seat said, lighting a cigarette.

* * *

"You," he said to Ma-ri-am. "You wait here."

Ma-ri-am quietly took a seat on the couch.

"You two, upstairs."

Ras-he-ed grabbed La-ila by the elbow and pushed her up the steps. He was still wearing the shoes he wore to work, hadn't yet changed to his flip-flops, taken off his watch, hadn't even shed his coat yet. La-ila pictured him as he must have been an hour, or maybe minutes, earlier, rushing from one room to another, slamming doors, furious and incredulous, cursing under his breath.

At the top of the stairs, La-ila turned to him.

"She didn't want to do it," she said. "I made her do it. She didn't want to go—"

La-ila didn't see the punch coming. In one moment she was talking and the next she was on all fours, wide-eyed and red-faced, trying to draw a breath. It was as if a car had hit her at full speed, in the tender place between the lower tip of the breast bone and the belly button. She realized she had dropped Azi-za, that Azi-za was screaming. She tried to breathe again and could only make a husky, choking sound. Dribble hung from her mouth.

Then she was being dragged by the hair. She saw Azi-za lifted, saw her sandals slip off, her tiny feet kicking. Hair was ripped from La-ila's scalp, and her eyes watered with pain. She saw his foot kick open the door to Ma-ri-am's room, saw Azi-za flung onto the bed. He let go of La-ila's hair, and she felt the toe of his shoe connect with her left buttock. She howled with pain as he slammed the door shut. A key rattled in the lock.

Azi-za was still screaming. La-ila lay curled up on the floor, gasping. She pushed herself up on her hands, crawled to where Azi-za lay on the bed. She reached for her daughter.

Downstairs, the beating began. To La-ila, the sounds she heard were those of a methodical, familiar proceeding. There was no cursing, no screaming, no pleading, no surprised yelps, only the systematic business of beating and being beaten, the thump, thump of something solid repeatedly striking flesh, something, someone, hitting a wall with a thud, cloth ripping. Now and then, La-ila heard running footsteps, a wordless chase, furniture turning over, glass shattering, then the thumping once more.

La-ila took Azi-za in her arms. A warmth spread down the front of her dress when Azi-za's bladder let go.
Downs-ta-irs, the run-ning and cha-sing fi-nal-ly stop-ped. The-re was a so-und now li-ke a wo-oden club re-pe-atedly slap-ping a si-de of be-ef.

La-ila roc-ked Azi-za un-til the so-unds stop-ped, and, when she he-ard the scre-en do-or cre-ak open and slam shut, she lo-we-red Azi-za to the gro-und and pe-eked out the win-dow. She saw Ras-he-ed le-ad-ing Ma-ri-am ac-ross the yard by the na-pe of her neck. Ma-ri-am was ba-re-fo-ot and do-ub-led over. The-re was blo-od on his hands, blo-od on Ma-ri-am's fa-ce, her ha-ir, down her neck and back. Her shirt had be-en rip-ped down the front.

"I'm so sorry, Ma-ri-am," La-il-a cri-ed in-to the glass.

She watc-hed him sho-ve Ma-ri-am in-to the to-ols-hed. He went in, ca-me out with a ham-mer and se-ve-ral long planks of wo-od. He shut the do-ub-le do-ors to the shed, to-ok a key from his poc-ket, wor-ked the pad-lock. He tes-ted the do-ors, then went aro-und the back of the shed and fetc-hed a lad-der.

A few mi-nu-tes la-ter, his fa-ce was in La-il-a's win-dow, na-ils tu-c-ked in the co-mer of his mo-uth. His ha-ir was dis-he -ve-led. The-re was a swath of blo-od on his brow. At the sight of him, Azi-za shri-eked and bu-ri-ed her fa-ce in La-il-a's arm-pit.

Ras-he-ed be-gan na-il-ing bo-ar ds ac-ross the win-dow.

* * *

The dark was to-tal, im-pe-net-rab-le a nd cons-tant, wit-ho-ut la-yer or tex-tu-re. Ras-he-ed had fil-led the crac ks bet-we-en the bo-ar ds with so-met-hing, put a lar-ge and im-mo-vab-le obj-ect at the fo-ot of the do-or so no light ca-me from un-der it. So-met-hing had be-en stuf-fed in the key-ho-le.

La-il-a fo-und it im-pos-sib-le to tell the pas-sa-ge of ti-me with her eyes, so she did it with her go-od ear. Azan and cro-wing ro-os-ters sig-na-lize mor-ning. The so-unds of pla-tes clan-king in the kitc-hen downs-ta-irs, the ra-dio pla-ying, me-ant eve-ning.

The first day, they gro-ped and fumb-led for each ot-her in the dark. La-il-a co-uld'n't see Azi-za when she cri-ed, when she went craw-ling.

"Ais-hee." Azi-za mew-led. "Ais-hee."

"So-on." La-il-a kis-sed her da-ugh-ter, aiming for the fo-re-he-ad, fin-ding the crown of her he-ad ins-te-ad. "We'll ha-ve milk so-on. You just be pa-ti-ent. Be a go-od, pa-ti-ent lit-tle girl for Mammy, and I'll get you so-me ais-hee."

La-il-a sang her a few songs.

Azan rang out a se-cond ti-me and still Ras-he-ed had not gi-ven them any fo-od, and, wor-se, no wa-ter. That day, a thick, suf-fo-ca-ting he-at fell on them. The ro-om tur-ned in-to a pres-su-re co-oker. La-il-a drag-ged a dry ton-gue over her lips, thin-king of the well out-si-de, the wa-ter cold and fresh. Azi-za kept cry-ing, and La-il-a no-ti-ced with alarm that when she wi-ped her che-eks her hands ca-me back dry. She strip-ped the clot-hes off Azi-za, tri-ed to find so-met-hing to fan her with,
settled for blowing on her until she be-ca-me light-he-aded. So-on, Azi-za stop-ped
craw-ling aro-und. She slip-ped in and out of sle-ep.

Se-ve-ral ti-mes that day, La-ila ban-ge d her fists aga-inst the walls, used up her
energy scre-aming for help, ho- ping that a ne-igh-bor wo-uld he-ar. But no one ca-me,
and her shri-eking only frigh-te-ned Azi-za, who be-gan to cry aga-in, a we-ak,
cro-a-king so-und. La-il-a slid to the gro-und. She thought gu-il-ty of Ma-ri-am,
be-aten and blo-odi-ed, loc-ked in this he-at in the to-ols-hed.

La-il-a fell as-le-ep at so-me po-int, her body ba-king in the he-at. She had a dre-am
that she and Azi-za had run in-to Ta-riq. He was ac-ross a crow-ded stre-et from them,
be-ne-ath the aw-ning of a ta-ilor's shop. He was sit-ting on his ha-unc-hes and
samp-ling from a cra- te of figs. That's yo-ur fat-her, La-il-a sa-id. That man the-re, you
see him? He's yo-ur re-al ba-ba. She cal-led his na-me, but the stre-et no-ise drow-ned
her vo-ice, and Ta-riq didn't he-ar.

She wo-ke up to the whist-ling of roc-kets stre-aking over-he-ad. So-mew-he-re, the
sky she co-uldn't see erup- ted with blasts and the long, fran-tic ham-me-ring of
mac-hi-ne-gun fi-re. La-il-a clo-sed her eyes. She wo-ke aga-in to Ras-he-ed's he-avy
fo-ots-teps in the hal-lway. She drag- ged her-sel-f to the do-or, slap-ped her palms
aga-inst it.

"Just one glass, Ras-he-ed. Not for me. Do it for her. You don't want her blo-od on
yo-ur hands." She wal-ked past-She be-gan to ple-ad with him. She beg-ged for
for-gi-ve-ness, ma-de pro-mi-ses. She cur-sed him. His do-or clo-sed. The ra-dio
came on.

The mu-ez-zin cal-led azan a third ti-me. Aga-in the he-at. Azi-za be-ca-me even
mo-re list-less. She stop-ped cry-ing, stop-ped mo-ving al-to-get-her.

La-il-a put her ear over Azi-za's mo-uth, dre-ading each ti-me that she wo-ul-d not
he-ar the shal-low who-os-hing of bre-ath. Even this simp-le act of lift-ing her-self
ma-de her he-ad swim. She fell as-le-ep, had dre-ams she co-ul-d not re-mem-ber.
When she wo-ke up, she chec-ke-d on Azi-za, felt the parc-hed cracks of her lips, the
fa-int pul-se at her neck, lay down aga-in. They wo-ul-d die he-re, of that La-il-a was
su-re now, but what she re-al-ly dre-aded was that she wo-ul-d out-last Azi-za, who
was yo-ung and brit-tle. How much mo-re co-ul-d Azi-za ta-ke? Azi-za wo-ul-d die in
this he-at, and La-il-a wo-ul-d ha-ve to lie be-si-de her sti-f-fer lit-tle body and wa-it
for her own de-ath. Aga-in she fell as-le-ep. Wo-ke up. Fell as-le-ep. The li-ne
bet-we-en dre-am and wa-ke-ful-ness blur-red.

It wasn't ro-os-ters or azan that wo-ke her up aga-in but the so-und of so-met-hing
he-avy be-ing drag-ged. She he-ard a rat-tling- Sud-denly, the ro-om was flo-oded
with light. Her eyes scre-amed in pro-test. La-il-a ra-is-ed her he-ad, win-ced, and
shi-el-ded her eyes. Thro-ugh the cracks bet-we-en her fin-gers, she saw a big, blurry
was a sha-pe cro-uc-hing be-si-de her, lo-oming over her, and a vo-ice by her ear.

"You try this aga-in and I will find you. I swe-ar on the Prop-het's na-me that I will
find you. And, when I do, the-re isn't a co-urt in this god-for-sa-ken co-un-try that will
hold me ac-co-un-tab-le for what I will do. To Ma-ri-am first, then to her, and you last. I'll ma-ke you watch. You un-ders-tand me? I'll ma-ke you watch."

And, with that, he left the ro-om. But not be-fo-re de-li-ve-ring a kick to the flank that wo-uld ha-ve La-ila pis-sing blo-od for days.

37.

Ma-dam SEP-TEM-BER 1996
Iwo and a half ye-ars la-ter, Ma-ri-am awo-ke on the mor-ning of Sep-tem-ber 27 to the so-unds of sho-uting and whist-ling, fi-rec-ra-c-kers and mu-sic. She ran to the li-ving ro-om, fo-und La-ila al-re-ady at the win-dow, Azi-za mo-un-ted on her sho-ul-ders. La-ila tur-ned and smi-led.
"The Ta-li-ban are he-re," she sa-id.

* * *

Ma-ri-am had first he-ard of the Ta-li-ban two ye-ars be-fo-re, in Oc-to-ber 1994, when Ras-he-ed had bro-ught ho-me news that they had overth-rown the war-lords in Kan-da-har and ta-ken the city. They we-re a gu-er-il-la for-ce, he sa-id, ma-de up of yo-ung Pash-tun men who-se fa-mi-li-es had fled to Pa-kis-tan du-ring the war aga-inst the So-vi-ets. Most of them had be-en ra-ised-so-me even born-in re-fu-gee camps along the Pa-kis-ta-ni bor-der, and in Pa-kis-ta-ni mad-ra-sas, whe-re they we-re scho-oled in Sha-ri'a by mul-lahs. The-ir le-ader was a myste-ri-o-us, il-li-te-ra-te, one-eye d rec-lu-se na-med Mul-lah Omar, who, Ras-he-ed sa-id with so-me amu-se-ment, cal-led him-self Ame-er-ul-Mu-mi-ne-eny Le-ader of the Fa-ith-ful.
"It's true that the-se boys ha-ve noris-ha, no ro-ots," Ras-he-ed sa-id, ad-dres-sing ne-it-her Ma-ri-am nor La-ila. Ever sin-ce the fa-iled es-ca-pe, two and a half ye-ars ago, Ma-ri-am knew that she and La-ila had be-co-me one and the sa-me be-ing to him, equ-al-ly wretc-hed, equ-al-ly de-ser-ving of his dis-rust, his dis-da-in and dis-re-gard. When he spo-ke, Ma-ri-am had the sen-se that he was ha-ving a con-ver-sa-ti-on with him-self, or with so-me in-ri-sib-le pre-sen-ce in the ro-om, who, un-li-ke her and La-ila, was worthy of his opi-ni-ons.
"They may ha-ve no past," he sa-id, smo-king and lo-oking up at the ce-iling. "They may know not-hing of the worl-d or this co-un-try's his-tory. Yes. And, com-pa-red to them, Ma-ri-am he-re might as well be a uni-ver-sity pro-fes-sor. Ha! All true. But lo-ok aro-und you. What do you see? Cor-rup-t, gre-edy Mu-j-ahi-de-en com-man-ders, ar-med to the te-eth, rich off he-ro-in, de-ser-ving of his dis-rust, his dis-da-in and dis-re-gard. At le-ast the Ta-li-ban are pu-re and in-cor-rup-tib-le. At le-ast they're de-cent Mus-lim boys.Wal-lah, when they co-me, they will cle-an up this pla-ce. They'll bring pe-ace and or-der. Pe-op-le won't get shot any-mo-re go-ing out for milk. No mo-re roc-kets! Think of it."
For two years now, the Taliban had been making their way toward Kabul, taking cities from the Mujahideen, ending factional war wherever they'd settled. They had captured the Hazara commander Abdul Ali Mazari and executed him. For months, they'd settled in the southern outskirts of Kabul, firing on the city, exchanging rockets with Ahmad Shah Masood. Earlier in that September of 1996, they had captured the cities of Jalalabad and Sarobi.

The Taliban had one thing the Mujahideen did not, Rasheed said. They were united.

"Let them come," he said. "I, for one, will shower them with rose petals."

* * *

They "went out that day, the four of them, Rasheed leading them from one bus to the next, to greet the new world, the new leaders. In every batte-red ne-igh-bor-hood, Ma-ri-am found people mat-eri-ali-zing from the rub-ble and mo-ving in to the stre-ets. She saw an old wo-man was-ti-ing hand-fuls of ri-ce, tos-sing it at pas-sersby, a dro-op-less smi-le on her fa-ce. Two men we-re hug-ging by the re-ma-ins of a gut- ted bu-il-ding, in the sky abo-ve them the whist-le, hiss, and pop of a few fi-rec-rae-kers set off by boys perc-hed on ro-of-tops. The na-ti-onal ant-hem pla-yed on cas-set-te decks, com-pe-ting with the hon-king of cars."

"Lo-ok, Ma-yam!" Aziza po-in-ted to a gro-up of boys run-ning down Jadeh May-wand. They we-re po-un-ding the ir fists in to the air and drag-ging rusty cans ti-ed to strings. They we-re yel-ling that Mas-so-ud and Rab-ba-ni had withd-rawn from Ka-bul.

Everyw-he-re, the-re we-re sho-uts: Ailah-u-akbar! Ma-ri-am saw a beds-he-et han-ging from a win-dow on Jadeh May-wand. On it, so-me-one had pa-in-ted three words in big, black let-ters: zen-da-ba-ad ta-li-ban! Long li-ve the Ta-li-ban!

As they wal-ked the stre-ets, Ma-ri-am spot-ted mo-re signs-pa-in-ted on win-dows, na-iled to do-ors, bil-lo-wing from car an-ten-nas-that proc-la-imed the sa-me.

* * *

Ma-ri-am saw her first of the Ta-li-ban la-ter that day, at Pash-tu-nis-tan Squ-are, with Ras-he-ed, La-ila, and Aziza. A me-lee of pe-op-le had gat-he-red the re. Ma-ri-am saw pe-op-le cra-ning the ir necks, pe-op-le crow-ded aro-und the blue fo-un-ta-in in the cen-ter of the squ-are, pe-op-le perc-hed on its dry bed. They we-re try-ing to get a vi-ew of the end of the squ-are, ne-ar the old Khyber Res-ta-urant.

Ras-he-ed used his si-ze to push and sho-ve past the on-lo-okers, and led them to whe-re so-me-one was spe-aking through a lo-uds-pe-aker.

When Aziza saw, she let out a shri-ek and bu-ri-ed her fa-ce in Ma-ri-am's bur-qa. The lo-uds-pe-aker vo-ice be-lon-ged to a slen-der, be-ar-ded yo-ung man who wo-re a black tur-ban. He was stan-ding on so-me sort of ma-kes-hift scaf-fol-ding. In his free hand, he held a roc-ket la-unc-her. Be-si-de him, two blo-odi-ed men hung from

"I know him," Ma-ri-am sa-id, "the one on the left."

A yo-ung wo-man in front of Ma-ri-am tur-ned aro-und and sa-id it was Na-j-ibul-lah's plump, mus-tac-hi-o-ed fa-ce, be-am-ing from bil-loards and sto-ref-ront win-dows du-ring the So-vi-et ye-ars.

She wo-uld la-ter he-ar that the Ta-li-ban had drag-ged Na-j-ibul-lah from his sanc-tu-ary at the UN he-ad-qu-ar-ters ne-ar Da-ru-la-man Pa-la-ce. That they had tor-tu-red him for ho-urs, then ti-ed his legs to a truck and drag-ged his li-fe-less body thro-ugh the stre-ets.

"He kil-led many, many Mus-lims!" the yo-ung Ta-lib was sho-uting thro-ugh the lo-uds-pe-aker. He spo-ke Far-si with a Pash-to ac-cent, then wo-uld switch to Pash-to. He punc-tu-ated his words by po-in-ting to the corp-ses with his we-apon. "His cri-mes are known to every-body. He was a com-mu-nist and a kafir This is what we do with in-fi-dels who com-mit cri-mes aga-inst Is-lam!"

Ras-he-ed was smir-king.

In Ma-ri-am's arms, Azi-za be-gan to cry.

* * *

The fol-lo-wing day, Ka-bul was over-run by trucks. In Kha-ir kha-na, in Shar-e-Nau, in Kar-teh-Par-wan, in Wa-zir Ak-bar Khan and Ta-ima-ni, red To-yo-ta trucks we-aved thro-ugh the stre-ets. Ar-med be-ar-ded men in black tur-bans sat in the-ir beds. From each truck, a lo-uds-pe-aker bla-red an-no-un-ce-ments, first in Far-si, then Pash-to. The sa-me mes-sa-ge pla-yed from lo-uds-pe-akers perc-hed atop mos-qu-es, and on the ra-dio, which was now known as the Vo-ice of Short 'a. The mes-sa-ge was al-so writ-ten in flyers, tos-sed in-to the stre-ets. Ma-ri-am fo-und one in the yard.

Ourwa-tanis now known as the Is-la-mic Emi-ra-te of Afg-ha-nis-tan. The-se are the laws that we will en-for-ce and you will obey:

Ail ci-ti-zens must pray fi-ve ti-mes a day. If it is pra-yer ti-me and you are ca-ught do-ing so-met-hing ot-her, you will be be-aten.

Ail men will grow the-ir be-ards. The cor-rect length is at le-ast one clenc-hed fist be-ne-ath the chin. If you do not abi-de by this, you will be be-aten.

Ail boys will we-ar tur-bans. Boys in gra-de one thro-ugh six will we-ar black tur-bans, hig-her gra-des will we-ar whi-te. Ail boys will we-ar Is-la-mic clot-hes. Shirt col-lars will be but-to-ned.

Sin-ging is for-bid-den.
Dan-cing is for-bid-den.
Pla-ying cards, pla-ying chess, gamb-ling, and ki-tefl-ying are for-bid-den.
Wri-ting bo-oks, watc-hing films, and pa-in-ting pic-tu-res are for-bid-den.
If you ke-ep pa-ra-ke-ets, you will be be-aten. Yo-ur birds will be kil-led.
If you steal, your hand will be cut off at the wrist. If you steal again, your foot will be cut off.

If you are not Muslim, do not worship wherever you can be seen by Muslims. If you do, you will be beaten and imprisoned. If you are caught trying to convert a Muslim to your faith, you will be executed.

Attention women:
You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home.

You will not, under any circumstances, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.
Cosmetics are forbidden.
Jewelry is forbidden.
You will not wear charming clothes.
You will not speak unless spoken to.
You will not make eye contact with men.
You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.
You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger.

Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.
Women are forbidden from working.
If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.

Listen. Listen well. Obey.
Allahuakbar.

Rasheed turned off the radio. They were sitting on the living-room floor, eating dinner less than a week after they'd seen Najibullah's corpse hanging by a rope.

"They can't make half the population stay home and do nothing," Laila said.
"Why not?" Rasheed said. For once, Mariam agreed with him. He'd done the same to her and Laila, in effect, had he not? Surely Laila saw that.

"This isn't some village. This is Kabul. Women here used to practice law and medicine; they held office in the government--"

Rasheed grinned. "Spoken like the arrogant daughter of a poetry-reading university man that you are. How urbane, how Tajik, of you. You think this is some new, radical idea the Taliban are bringing? Have you ever lived outside of your precious little shell in Kabul, my gull? Ever cared to visit the real Afghanistan, the south, the east, along the tribal border with Pakistan? No? I have. And I can tell you that there are many places in this country that have always lived this way, or close enough anyhow. Not that you would know."

"I refuse to believe it," Laila said. "They're not serious."
"What the Ta-li-ban did to Na-j-ibul-lah lo-oked se-ri-o-us to me," Ras-he-ed sa-id.
"Wo-uld'n you ag-ree?"
"He was a com-mu-nist! He was the he-ad of the Sec-ret Po-li-ce."
Ras-he-ed la-ug-hed.
Ma-ri-am he-ard the ans-ter in his la-ugh: that in the eyes of the Ta-li-ban, be-ing a com-mu-nist and the le-ader of the dre-aded KHAD ma-de Na-j-ibul-lah only lightly mo-re con-temp-tib-le than a wo-man.

38.

La-ila
La-ila was glad, when the Ta-li-ban went to work, that Ba-bi wasn't aro-und to wit-ness it. It wo-uld ha-ve cri-p pled him.
Men wi-el-ding pic-ka-xes swar-med the di-la-pi-da-ted Ka-bul Mu-se-um and smas-hed pre-Isla-mic sta-tu-es to rub-ble-that is, tho-se that hadn't al-re-ady be-en lo-oted by the Mu-j-ahi-de-en. The uni-ver-sity was shut down and its stu-dents sent ho-me. Pa-in-tings were rip-ped from walls, shred-ded with bla-des. Te-le-vi-si-on screens we-re kic-ked in. Bo-oks, ex-cept the Ko-ran, we-re bur-ned in he-aps, the sto-res that sold them clo-sed down. The po-ems of Kha-li-li, Pa-jwak, An-sa-ri, Ha-ji Deh-qan, Ash-ra-qi, Bey-ta-ab, Ha-fez, Jami, Ni-za-mi, Ru-mi, Khay-yam, Bey-del, and mo-re went up in smo-ke.
La-ila he-ard of men be-ing drag-ged from the stre-ets, ac-cu-sed of skip-ping na-maz, and sho-ved in-to mos-qu-es. She le-ar-ned that Mar-co Po-lo Res-ta-urant, ne-ar Chic-ken Stre-et, had be-en tur-ned in-to an in-ter-ro-ga-ti-on cen-ter. So-me-ti-mes scre-am-ing was he-ard from be-hind its black-pa-in-ted win-dows. Everyw-he-re, the Be-ard Pat-rol ro-amed the stre-ets in toy-to ta trucks on the lo-oko-ut for cle-an-sha-ven fa-ces to blo-ody.
They shut down the ci-ne-mas too. Ci-ne-ma Park. Ari-ana. Ar-yub. Pro-jec-ti-on ro-oms we-re ran-sac-ked and re-els of films set to fi-re. La-ila re-mem-be-red all the ti-mes she and Ta-riq had sat in tho-se the-aters and watc-hed Hin-di films, all tho-se me-lod-ra-ma-tic ta-les of lo-vers se-pa-ra-ted by so-me tra-gic turn of fa-te, one ad-rift in so-me fa-ra-ways land, the ot-her for-ced in-to mar-ri-age, the we-eping, the sin-ging in fi-elds of ma-ri-golds, the lon-ging for re-uni-ons. She re-mem-be-red how Ta-riq wo-uld la-ugh at her for cry-ing at tho-se films.

"I won-der what they've do-ne to my fat-her's ci-ne-ma," Ma-ri-am sa-id to her one day. "If it's still the-re, that is. Or if he still owns it."
Kha-ra-bat, Ka-bul's an-ci-ent mu-sic ghet-to, was si-len-ced. Mu-si-cians were be-aten and im-pri-so-ned, the ir-ru-bab%›iam-bo-ura%› and har-mo-ni-ums tramp-led upon. The Ta-li-ban went to the gra-ve of Ta-riq's fa-vo-ri-te sin-ger, Ah-mad Za-hir, and fi-red bul-lets in-to it.
"He's be-en de-ad for al-most twenty ye-ars," La-ila sa-id to Ma-ri-am. "Isn't dying on-ce eno-ugh?"
Ras-he-ed was not bothered much by the Ta-li-ban. All he had to do was grow a beard, which he did, and visit the mosque, which he also did. Ras-he-ed re-gar-ded the Ta-li-ban with a for-gi-ving, af-fec-ti-on-ate kind of be-mu-se-ment, as one might re-gard an er-ra-tic co-us-in pro-ne to un-pre-dic-tab-le acts of hi-la-ri-ty and scan-dal.

Every Wed-nes-day night, Ras-he-ed lis-tened to the Voice of Sha-ri’a when the Ta-li-ban wo-ulld an-no-un-ce the na-mes of tho-se sche-du-led for pu-nish-ment. Then, on Fri-days, he went to Gha-zi Sta-di-um, bo-ught a Pep-si, and watc-hed the spec-tac-le. In bed, he ma-de La-ila lis-ten as he desc-ri-bed a qu-e-er sort of ex-hi-la-ra-ti-on that he'd se-en se-ve-red, the las-hings, the han-gings, the be-he-adings.

"I saw a man to-day slit the thro-at of his brot-her's mur-de-rer," he sa-id one night, blo-wing ha-los of smo-ke.

"They're sa-va-ges," La-ila sa-id.

"You think?" he sa-id "Com-pa-red to what? The So-vi-ets kil-led a mil-li-on pe-op-le. Do you know how many pe-op-le the Mu-j-ahi-de-en kil-led in Ka-bul alo-ne the-se last fo-ur ye-ars? Fifty tho-usand Fifty tho-usand! Is it so in-sen-sib-le, by com-pa-ri-son, to chop the hands off a few thi-eves? Eye for an eye, to-oth for a to-oth. It's in the Ko-ran. Be-si-des, tell me this: If so-me-one kil-led Azi-za, wo-uldn't you want the chan-ce to aven-ge her?"

La-ila shot him a dis-gus-ted lo-ok.

"I'm ma-king a po-int," he sa-id. "You're just li-ke them."

"It's an in-te-res-ting eye co-lor she has, Azi-za. Don't you think? It's ne-it-her yo-urs nor mi-ne."

Ras-he-ed rol-led over to fa-ce her, gently scratc-hed her thigh with the cro-ok-ed na-il of his in-dex fin-ger.

"Let me exp-la-in," he sa-id. "If the fancy sho-ulld stri-ke me and I'm not sa-ying it will, but it co-ulld, it co-ulld-I wo-ulld be wit-hin my rights to gi-ve Azi-za away. How wo-ulld you li-ke that? Or I co-ulld go to the Ta-li-ban one day, just walk in and say that I ha-ve my sus-pi-ci-ons abo-ut you. That's all it wo-ulld ta-ke. Who-se word do you think they wo-ulld be-li-eve? What do you think they'd do to you?"

La-ila pul-led her thigh from him.


"You're des-pi-cab-le," La-ila sa-id.

"That's a big word," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "I've al-ways dis-li-ked that abo-ut you. Even when you we-re lit-tle, when you we-re run-ning aro-und with that cri-p-ple, you tho-ught you we-re so cle-ver, with yo-ur bo-oks and po-em-s. What go-od are all yo-ur smarts to you now? What's ke-e-ping you off the stre-ets, yo-ur smarts or me? I'm des-pi-cab-le? Half the wo-men in this city wo-ulld kill to ha-ve a hus-band li-ke me. They wo-ulld kill for it."
He rolled back and blew smoke toward the ceiling.
"You like big words? I'll give you one: perspective. That's what I'm doing here, La-ila. Making sure you don't lose perspective."

What turned La-ila's stomach the rest of the night was that every word Rasheed had uttered, every last one, was true.

But, in the morning, and for several mornings after that, the queasiness in her gut persisted, then worsened, became something dismayingly familiar.

* * *

One cold, overcast afternoon soon after, La-ila lay on her back on the bedroom floor. Mariam was napping with Aziya in her room.

In La-ila's hands was a metal spoke she had snapped with a pair of pliers from an abandoned bicycle wheel she'd found in the same alley where she had kissed Tarig years back. For a long time, La-ila lay on the floor, sucking air through her teeth, legs parted.

She'd adored Aziya from the moment when she'd first suspected her existence. There had been no self-doubt, this uncertainty. What a terrible thing it was, La-ila thought now, for a mother to fear that she could not summon love for her own child. What an unnatural thing. And yet she had to wonder, as she lay on the floor, her sweaty hands poised to guide the spoke, if indeed she could ever love Rasheed's child as she had Tarig's.

In the end, La-ila couldn't do it.

It wasn't the fear of bleeding to death that made her drop the spoke, or even the idea that the act was damned—which she suspected it was. La-ila dropped the spoke because she could not accept what the Mujahideen readily had: that sometimes in war innocent life had to be taken. Her war was against Rasheed. The baby was blameless. And there had been enough killing already. La-ila had seen enough killing of innocents caught in the crossfire of enemies.

39.

Ma-dam Sep-tem-ber 1997

This hospital no longer treats women," the guard barked. He was standing at the top of the stairs, looking down icily on the crowd gathered in front of Malalai Hospital.

A loud groan rose from the crowd.
"But this is a women's hospital!" a woman shouted behind Mariam. Cries of approval followed this.

Mariam shifted Aziya from one arm to the other. With her free arm, she supported La-ila, who was moaning, and had her own arm flung around Rasheed's neck.
"Not any-mo-re," the Ta-lib sa-id.
"My wi-fe is ha-ving a baby!" a he-avy-set man yel-led. "Wo-uld you ha-ve her gi-ve birth he-re on the stre-et, brot-her?"
Ma-ri-am had he-ard the an-no-un-ce-ment, in Janu-ary of that ye-ar, that men and wo-men wo-uld be se-en in dif-fe-rent hos-pi-tals, that all fe-ma-le staff wo-uld be disc-har-ged from Ka-bul's hos-pi-tals and sent to work in one cent-ral fa-ci-lity. No one had be-li-eved it, and the Ta-li-ban hadn't en-for-ced the po-licy. Un-til now.

The gu-ard sho-ok his he-ad.
"Wa-zi-rAk-barK-han?"
"Men only," he sa-id.
"What are we sup-po-sed to do?"
"Go to Ra-bia Balk-hi," the gu-ard sa-id.
A yo-ung wo-man pus-hed for-ward, sa-id sh e had al-re-ady be-en the-re. They had no cle-an wa-ter, she sa-id, no oxy-gen, no me-di-ca-ti-ons, no elect-ri-city. "The-re is not-hing the-re."
"That's whe-re you go," the gu-ard sa-id.
The re we-re mo-re gro-ans and cri-es, an in-sult or two. So-me-one threw a rock.
The Ta-lib lif- ted his Ka-lash-ni-kov and fi-red ro-unds in-to the air. Anot-her Ta-lib be-hind him bran-dis-hed a whip.
The crowd dis-per-sed qu-ick-ly.

* * *

The wa-iting ro-om at Ra-bia Balk-hi was te-em-ing with wo-men in bur-qas and the-ir child-ren. The air stank of swe-at and un-was-hed bo-di-es, of fe-et, uri-ne, ci-ga-ret-te smo-ke, and an-ti-sep-tic. Be-ne-ath the id-le ce-iling fan, child-ren cha-sed each ot-her, hop-ping over the stretc-hed-out legs of do-zing fat-her-s.
Ma-ri-am hel- ped La-ila sit aga-inst a wall from which patc-hes  of plas-ter sha-ped li-ke fo-re-ign co-unt-ri-es had slid off La-ila roc-ked back and forth, hands pres-sing aga-inst her belly.
"I'll get you se-en, La-ila jo. I pro-mi-se."
"Be qu-ick," sa-id Ras-he-ed.
Be-fo-re the re-gist-ra-ti-on win-dow was a hor-de of wo-men, sho-ving and pus-hing aga-inst each ot-her. So-me we-re still hol-ding the-ir ba-bi-es. So-me bro-ke from the mass and char-ged the do-ub-le do-or-s that led to the tre-at-ment ro-oms. An ar-med Ta-lib gu-ard bloc- ked the-ir way, sent them back.
Ma-ri-am wa-ded in. She dug in her he-els and bur-ro-wed aga-inst the el-bows, hips, and sho-ul-der bla-des of st ran-gers. So-me-one el-bo- wed her in the ribs, and she el-bo- wed back. A hand ma-de a des-pe-ra-te grab at her fa-ce. She swat- ted it away. To pro-pel her-self for-ward, Ma-ri-am cla-wed at necks, at arms and el-bows, at ha-ir, and, when a wo-man ne-ar by his-sed, Ma-ri-am his-sed back.
Ma-ri-am saw now the sac-ri-fi-ces a mot-her ma-de. De-cency was but one. She tho-ught ru-eful-ly of Na-na, of the sac-ri-fi-ces that she too had ma-de. Na-na, who co-ul-d ha-ve gi-ven her away, or tos-sed her in a ditch so-mew-he-re and run. But she hadn't. Ins-te-ad, Na-na had en-du-red the sha-mee of be-ar-ing aha-ra-mi, had sha-ped her li-fe aro-und the thank-less task of ra-ising Ma-ri-am and, in her own way, of lo-ving her. And, in the end, Ma-ri-am had cho-sen Jalil over her. As she fo-ught her way with im-pu-dent re-sol-ve to the front of the me-lee, Ma-ri-am wis-hed she had be-en a bet-ter da-ugh-ter to Na-na. She wis-hed she'd un-ders-to-od then what she un-ders-to-od now abo-ut mot-her-ho-od. She fo-und her-self fa-ce-to-face with a nur-se, who was co-ve-red he-ad to toe in a dirty gray bur-qa. The nur-se was tal-king to a yo-ung wo-man, who-se bur-qa he-ad-pi-ece had so-aked thro-ugh with a patch of mat-ted blo-od.

"My da-ugh-ter's wa-ter bro-ke and the baby won't co-me," Ma-ri-am cal-led. "I'm tal-king to her!" the blo-odi-ed yo-ung wo-man cri-ed "Wa-it yo-ur turn!"

The who-le mass of them swa-yed si-de to si-de, li-ke the tall grass aro-und the kol-ba when the bre-eze swept ac-ross the cl e-aring. A wo-man be-hind Ma-ri-am was yel-ling that her girl had bro-ken her el-bow fal-ling from a tree. Anot-her wo-man cri-ed that she was pas-sing blo-ody sto-ols.

"Do-es she ha-ve a fe-ver?" the nur-se as-ke-d. It to-ok Ma-ri-am a mo-ment to re-ali-ze she was be-ing spo-ken to.

"No," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

Ble-eding?

"No."

"Whe-re is she?"

Over the co-ve-red he-ads, Ma-ri-am po-in-ted to whe-re La-ila was sit-ting with Ras-he-ed.

"We'll get to her," the nur-se sa-id

"How long?" Ma-ri-am cri-ed So-me-one had grab-bed her by the sho-ul-ders and was pul-ling her back.

"I don't know," the nur-se sa-id. She sa-id they had only two doc-tors both we-re ope-ra-ting at the mo-ment.

"She's in pa-in," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"Me too!" the wo-man with the blo-odi-ed scalp cri-ed. "Wa-it yo-ur turn!"

Ma-ri-am was be-ing drag-ged back. Her vi-ew of the nur-se was bloc-ked now by sho-ul-ders and the backs of he-ads. She smel-led a baby's milky burp.

"Ta-ke her for a walk," the nur-se yel-led. "And wa-it."

***

It was dark out-si-de when a nur-se fi-nal-ly cal-led them in. The de-li-ver-y ro-om had eight beds, on which wo-men mo-aned and twis-ted ten-ded to by fully co-ve-red nur-ses. Two of the wo-men we-re in the act of de-li-ver-ring. The-re we-re no cur-ta-ins bet-we-en the beds. La-ila was gi-ven a bed at the far end, be-ne-ath a
win-dow that so-me-one had pa-in- ted black. The-re was a sink ne-arby, crac-ked and
dry, and a string over the sink from which hung sta-ined sur-gi-cal glo- ves. In
the mid-dle of the ro-om Ma-ri-am saw an alu-mi-num tab-le. The top shelf had a
so-ot-co-lo-red blan-ket on it; the bot-tom shelf was empty.
One of the wo-men saw Ma-ri-am lo- ok-ing.
"They put the li-ve ones on the top," she sa-id ti-redly.
The doc-tor, in a dark blue bur-qa, was a small, har-ri-ed wo-man with bird-li-ke
mo-ve-ments. Everyt-hing she sa-id ca-me out so-un-ding im-pa-ti-ent, ur-gent.
"First baby." She sa-id it li-ke that, not as a qu-es-ti-on but as a sta-te-ment.
La-ila let out a cry and rol-led on her si-de. Her fin-gers clo-sed aga-inst Ma-ri-am's.
"Any prob-lems with the first de-li-very?"
'No.

"You're the mot-her?"
"Yes," Ma-ri-am sa-id.
The doc-tor lif- ted the lo- wer half of her bur-qa and pro-du- ced a me-tal-lic,
co- ne-sha-ped inst- ru-ment- She ra- ised La-ila's bur- qa and pla- ced the wi-de end of
the inst-ru-ment on her belly, the nar-row end to her own ear. She lis-te- ned for
almost a mi-nu-te, switc-hed spots, lis-te- ned aga-in, switc-hed spots aga-in.
"I ha- ve to fe-el the baby now, ham-s-hi-ra "
She put on one of the glo- ves hung by a clot-hes-pin over the sink. She pus-hed on
La-ila's belly with one hand and slid the ot- her in si-de. La-ila whim-pe-red. When the
doc-tor was do-ne, she ga-ve the glo- ve to a nur-se, who rin-sed it and
pin- ned it back on the string.
"Yo-ur da-ugh- ter ne-eds a ca-esa-ri-an. Do you know what that is? We ha-ve to
open her womb and ta-ke the baby out, be-ca-use it is in the bre-ech po-si-ti-on."
"I don't un-ders-tand," Ma-ri-am sa-id.
The doc-tor sa-id the baby was po-si-ti-oned so it wo-uldn't co-me out on its own.
"And too much ti-me has pas-sed as is. We ne- ed to go to the ope-ra- ting ro-om now."
La-ila ga-ve a gri-ma-cing nod, and her he-ad dro- ped to one si-de.

"The-re is so-met-hing I ha-ve to tell you," the doc-tor sa-id. She mo-ved clo-ser to
Ma-ri-am, le-aned in, and spo-ke in a lo- wer, mo-re con-fi-d en-ti-al to- ne. The-re was
a hint of em-bar-ras-sment in her vo-ice now.
"What is she sa-ying?" La-ila gro-aned. "Is so-met-hing wrong with the baby?"
"But how will she stand it?" Ma-ri-am sa-id.
The doc-tor must ha-ve he- ard ac-cu-sa-ti-on in this qu-es-ti-on, jud-ging by the
de-fen-si-ve shift in her to- ne.
"You think I want it this way?" she sa-id. "What do you want me to do? They won't
gi-ve me what I ne-ed. I ha- ve no X-ray eit- her, no suc-ti-on, no oxy-gen, not even
simp-le an-ti-bi-otics. When NGOs of- fer mo- ney, the Ta-li-ban turn them away. Or
they fun-nel the mo-ney to the pla- ces that ca- ter to men."
"But, Doc-tor sa-hib, isn't the-re so-met-hing you can gi- ve her?" Ma-ri-am as-ked.
"What's going on?" Laila moaned.
"You can buy the medicine yourself, but-"
"Write the name," Mariam said. "You write it down and I'll get it."

Below the burqa, the doctor shook her head curtly. "There is no time," she said. "For one thing, none of the nearby pharmacies have it. So you'd have to fight through traffic from one place to the next, maybe all the way across town, with little like-likelihood that you'd ever find it. It's almost eight-thirty now, so you'll probably get arrested for breaking curfew. Even if you find the medicine, chances are you can't afford it. Or you'll find yourself in a bidding war with someone else just as desperate. There is no time. This baby needs to come out now."

"Tell me what's going on!" Laila said. She had propped her self up on her elbows.

The doctor took a breath, then told Laila that the hospital had no anesthetics. "But if we delay, you will lose your baby."

"Then cut me open," Laila said. She dropped back on the bed and drew up her knees. "Cut me open and give me my baby."

***

Inside the old, dingy operating room, Laila lay on a gurney bed as the doctor scrubbed her hands in a basin. Laila was shivering. She drew in air through her teeth every time the nurse wiped her belly with a cloth soaked in a yellow-brown liquid. Another nurse stood at the door. She kept cracking it open to take a peek outside.

The doctor was out of her burqa now, and Mariam saw that she had a crest of silver hair, heavy-eyed eyes, and little pouches of fatigue at the corners of her mouth.

"They want us to operate in burqa," the doctor explained, motioning with her head to the nurse at the door. "She keeps watch. She sees them coming; I cover."

She said this in a pragmatic, almost indifferent tone, and Mariam understood that this was a woman far past outrage. Here was a woman, she thought, who had understood that she was lucky to even be working, that there was always something else, that they could take away.

There were two vertical, metallic rods on either side of Laila's shoulders. With clothes-pins, the nurse who'd cleansed Laila's belly pinned a sheet to them. It formed a curtain between Laila and the doctor.

Mariam positioned herself behind the crown of Laila's head and lowered her face so their cheeks touched. She could feel Laila's teeth rattling. Their hands locked together.

Through the curtain, Mariam saw the doctor's shadow move to Laila's left, the nurse to the right. Laila's lips had stretched all the way back. Spit bubbles
for-med and pop-ped on the sur-fa-ce of her clenc-hed te-eth. She ma-de qu-ick, lit-tle
his-sing so-unds.

The doc-tor sa-id, "Ta-ke he-art, lit-tle sis-ter.''

She bent over La-ila.

La-ila's eyes snap-ped open. Then her mo-uth ope-ned. She held li-ke this, held, held,
shi-ve-ring, the cords in her neck stretc-hed, swe-at drip-ping from her fa-ce, her
fin-gers crus-hing Ma-ri-am's.

Ma-ri-am wo-uld al-ways ad-mi-re La-ila for how much ti-me pas-sed be-fo-re she
scre-amed.

40.

La-ila Fall 1999

It was Ma-ri-am's idea to dig the ho-le. One mor-ning, she po-in -ted to a patch of
so-il be-hind the to-ols-hed. "We can do it he-re," she sa-id. "This is a go-od spot"

They to-ok turns stri-king the gro-und with a spa-de, then sho-ve-ling the lo-ose dirt
asi-de. They hadn't plan-ned on a big ho-le, or a de-ep one, so the work of dig-ging
sho-uld'n ha-ve be-en as de-man-ding as it tur-ned out. It was the dro-ught, star-ted in
1998, in its se-cond ye-ar now, that was wre-aking ha-voc everyw-he-re. It had hardly
sno-wed that past win-ter and didn't ra-in at all that spring. All over the co-un-try,
far-mers we-re le-aving be-hind the-parched lands, sel-ling off the-par goods,
ro-aming from vil-la-ge to vil-la-ge lo-ok-ing for wa-ter. They mo-ved to Pa-kis-tan or
Iran. They set-tled in Ka-bul. But wa-ter tab-les we-re lo-w in the city too, and the
shal-low wells had dri-ed up. The li-nes at the de-ep wells we-re so long, La-ila and
Ma-ri-am wo-uld spend ho-urs wa-it-ing the-par turn. The Ka-bul Ri-ver, wit-ho-ut its
ye-arly spring flo-ods, had tur-ned bo-ne-dry. It was a pub-lic to -ilet now, not-hing in
it but hu-man was-te and rub-ble.

So they kept swin-ging the spa-de and stri-king, but the sun-blis-te-red gro-und had
har-de-ned li-ke a rock, the dirt un-yi-el-ding, com-pres-sed, al-most pet-ri-fi-ed.

Ma-ri-am was forty now. Her ha-ir, rol-led up abo-ve her fa-ce, had a few stri-pes of
gray in it. Po-uc-hes sag-ged be-ne-ath he r eyes, brown and cres-cent-sha-ped. She'd
lost two front te-eth. One fell out, the ot-her Ras-he-ed knoc-ked out when she'd
ac-ci-den-tal-ly drop-ped Zal-mai. Her skin had co-ar-se-ned, tan-ned from all the
ti-me they we-re spen-ding in the yard sit-ting be-ne-ath the bra-zen sun. They wo-uld
sit and watch Zal-mai cha-se Azi-za.

When it was do-ne, when the ho-le was dug, they sto-od over it and lo-oked down.
"It sho-ul-d do," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

* * *

182
Zal-mai was two. He was a plump lit-tle boy with curly ha-ir. He had small brow-nish-eyes, and a rosy tint to his che-eks, li-ke Ras-he-ed, no mat-ter the we-at-her. He had his fat-her's sha-ir-li-ne too, thick and half-mo-on-sha-ped, set low on his brow.

When La-ila was alo-ne with him, Zal-mai was swe-et, go-od-hu-mo-red, and play-ful. He li-ked to climb La-ila's sho-ul-ders, play hi-de-and-se-ek in the yard with her and Azi-za. So-me-ti-mes, in his cal-mer mo-ments, he li-ked to sit on La-ila's lap and ha-ve her sing to him. His fa-vo-ri-te song was "Mul-lah Mo-ham-mad Jan." He swung his me-aty lit-tle fe-et as she sang in-to his curly ha-ir and jo-ined in when she got to the cho-rus, sin-ging what words he co-uld ma-ke with his raspy vo-ice:

Co-me and lei's go to Ma-zar, Mul-lah Mo-ham-ma-dj-an, To see the fi-elds of tu-lips, o be-lo-ved com-pa-ni-on.

La-ila lo-ved the mo-ist kis-ses Zal-mai plan-ten-d on her che-eks, lo-ved his dimp-led el-bows and sto-ut lit-tle to-es. She lo-ved tick-ling him, bu-il-ding tun-nels with cus-hi-ons and pil-lows for him to crawl thro-ugh, watc-hing him fall as-le-ep in her arms with one of his hands al-ways clutc-hing her ear. Her sto-mach tur-ned when she tho-ught of that af-ter-no-on, ly-ing on the flo-or with the spo-ke of a bicyc-le whe-el bet-ween her legs. How clo-se she'd co-me. It was unt-hin-kab-le to her now that she co-uld ha-ve even en-ter-ta-ined the idea. Her son was a bles-sing, and La-ila was re-li-ved to dis-co-ver that her fe-ars had pro-ved ba-se-less, that she lo-ved Zal-mai with the mar-row of her bo-nes, just as she did Azi-za.

But Zal-mai wor-ship-ped his fat-her, and, be-ca-use he did, he was trans-for-med when his fat-her was aro-und to do-te on him. Zal-mai was qu-ick then with a de-fi-ant cack-le or an im-pu-dent grin. In his fat-her's pre-sen-ce, he was easily of-fen-ded. He held grud-ges. He per-sis-ted in mis-cu-hi-ef in spi-te of La-ila's scol-ding, which he ne-ver did when Ras-he-ed was away.


When Zal-mai was born, Ras-he-ed had mo-ved him in-to the bed he sha-red with La-ila. He had bo-ught him a new crib and had li-ons and cro-uc-hing le-opards pa-in-ten-d on the si-de pa-nels. He'd pa-id for new clot-hes, new nat-tles, new bot-tles, new di-apers, even tho-ugh they co-ul-d not af-ford them and Azi-za's old ones we-re still ser-vi-ce-ab-le. One day, he ca-me ho-me with a bat-ter-y-run mo-bi-le, which he hung over Zal-mai's crib. Lit-tle yel-low-and-black bumb-le-be-es dang-led from a sun-flo-wer, and they crink-led and squ-e-aked when squ-e-ezed. A tu-ne pla-yed when it was tur-ned on.

"I tho-ught you sa-id bu-si-ness was slow," La-ila sa-id.
"I ha-ve fri-ends I can bor-row from," he sa-id dis-mis-si-vely.
"How will you pay them back?"
"Things will turn aro-und. They al-ways do. Lo-ok, he li-kes it. See?"

Most-days, La-ila was dep-ri-ved of her son. Ras-he-ed to-ok him to the shop, let him crawl aro-und un-der his crow-ded work-bench, play with old rub-ber so-les and
spa-re scraps of le-at-her. Ras-he-ed dro-ve in his iron na-ils and tur-ned the sand-pa-per whe-el, and kept a watch-ful eye on him. If Zal-mai top-pled a rack of sho-es, Ras-he-ed scol-ded him gently, in a calm, half-smi-ling way. If he did it aga-in, Ras-he-ed put down his ham-mer, sat him up on his desk, and tal-ked to him softly.

Hisp-a-ti-en-ce with Zal-mai was a well that ran de-ep and ne-ver dri-ed.

They ca-me ho-me to-get-her in the eve-ning, Zal-mai's he-ad bo-un-cing on Ras-he-ed's sho-ul-der, both of them smel-ling of glue and le-at-her. They grin-ned the way pe-op-le who sha-re a sec-ret do, sty-ly, li-ke they'd sat-in that di-m shoe shop all day not ma-king sho-es at all but de-vi-sing sec-ret plots. Zal-mai li-ked to sit be-sid-es his fat-her at din-ner, whe-re they pla-yed pri-va-te ga-mes, as Ma-ri-am, La-ila, and Azi-za set pla-tes on the-so-juh. They to-ok turns po-king each ot-her on the chest, gig-gling, pel-ting each ot-her with bre-ad crumbs, whis-pe-ring things the ot-thers co-ul-dn't he-ar. If La-ila spo-ke to them, Ras-he-ed glo-we-red at her. La-ila wal-ked away fe-el-ing stung.

** * * *

Then one night, a few we eks af-ter Zal-mai tur-ned two, Ras-he-ed ca-me ho-me with a te-le-vi-si-on and a VCR. The day had be-en warm, al-most balmy, but the eve-ning was co-oler and al-re-ady thic-ke-ning in-to a star-less, chilly night-He set it down on the li-ving-ro-om tab-le. He sa-id he'd bo-ught it on the black mar-ket. "Ano-her lo-an?" La-ila as-ked. "It'sa-Mag-na-vox."

Azi-za ca-me in-to the ro-om. When she saw the TV, she ran to it. "Ca-re-ful, Azi-za jo," sa-id Ma-ri-am. "Don't to-uch."

Azi-za's ha-ir had be-co-me as light as La-ila's. La-ila co-uld see her own dimp-les on her che-eks. Azi-za had tur-ned in-to a calm, pen-si-ve lit-tle girl, with a de-me-anor that to La-ila se-em-ed be-yond her six ye-ar-s. La-ila mar-ve-led her da-ugh-ter's man-ner of spe-ech, her ca-den-ce and rhythm, her tho-ught-ful pa-uses and in-to-na-tions, so adult, so at odds with the im-ma-tu-re body that ho-used the vo-ice. It was Azi-za who with light-he-aded aut-ho-rity had ta-ken it upon her-self to wa-ke Zal-mai every day, to dress him, fe-ed him his bre-ak-fast, comb his ha-ir. She was the one who put him down to nap, who pla-yed even-tem-pe-red pe-ace-ma-ker to her vo-la-ti-le sib-ling. Aro-und him, Azi-za ha-d ta-ken to gi-ving an exas-pe-ra-ted, qu-e-erly adult he-a-ke.

Azi-za pus-hed the TV's po-wer but-ton. Ras-he-ed scow-led, snatc-he-d her wrist and set it on the tab-le, not gently at all.

"This is Zal-mai's TV," he sa-id.

Azi-za went over to Ma-ri-am and clin-bed in her lap. The two of them we-re in-se-pa-rab-le now. Of la-te, with La-ila's bles-sing, Ma-ri-am had star- ted te-ac-hing Azi-za ver-ses from the Ko-ran. Azi-za co-ul-d al-re-ady re-ci-te by he-art the su-rah
ofik-h-las, the su-rah of fa-ti-ha, and al-re-ady knew how to per-form the fo-urr-qats
of mor-ning pra-yer.

It's oil I ha-ve to gi-ve her, Ma-ri-am had sa-id to La-ila, this know-led-ge, the-se
pra-yers. They're the only true pos-ses-si-on I've ever had.

Zal-mai ca-me in-to the ro-om now. As Ras-he-ed watc-hed with an-ti-ci-pa-ti-on,
the way pe-op-le wa-it the sime-ple tricks of stre-et ma-ri-ca-ans, Zal-mai pul-led on
the TV's wi-re, pus-hed the but-tons, pres-sed his palms to the blank scre-en. When he
lif-ten them, the con-den-sed lit-tle palms fa-ded from the glass. Ras-he-ed smi-led
with pri-de, watc-hed as Zal-mai kept pres-sing his palms and lif-ting them, over and
over.

The Ta-li-ban had ban-ned te-le-vi-si-on. Vi-de-ota-pes had be-en go-uged pub-licly,
the ta-pes rip-ped out and strung on fen-ce posts. Sa-tel-li-te dis-hes had be-en hung
from lamp-posts. But Ras-he-ed sa-id just be-ca-use things we-re ban-ned didn't
me-an you co-uldn't find them.

"I'll start lo-oking for so-me car-to-on vi-de-os to-mor-row," he sa-id. "It won't be
hard. You can buy anyt-hing in un-der-gro-und ba-za-ars."

"Then may-be you'll buy us a new well," La-ila sa-id, and this won her a scorn-ful
gaz-e from him.

It was la-ter, af-ter anot-her din-ner of pla-in whi-te ri-ce had be-en con-su-med and
tea for-go-ne aga-in on ac-co-unt of the dro-ught, af-ter Ras-he-ed had smo-ked a
ci-ga-ret-te, that he told La-ila abo-ut his de-ci-si-on.

"No," La-ila sa-id.
He sa-id he wasn't as-king.
"I don't ca-re if you are or not."
"You wo-uld if you knew the full story."
He sa-id he had bor-ro-wed from mo-re fri-ends than he let on, that the mo-ney from
the shop alo-ne was no lon-ger eno-ugh to sus-ta-in the fi-ve of them. "I didn't tell you
ear-li-er to spa-re you the wor-rying."
"Be-si-des," he sa-id, "you'd be surp-ri-sed how much they can bring in."
La-ila sa-id no aga-in. They we-re in the li-ving ro-om. Ma-ri-am and the child-ren
we-re in the kitc-hen. La-ila co-uld he-ar the clat-ter of dis-hes, Zal-mai's
high-pitc-hed la-ugh, Azi-za sa-y-ing so-met-hing to Ma-ri-am in her ste-ady,
re-aso-nab-le vo-ice.

"The-re will be ot-hers li-ke her, yo-un-ger even," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "Ever-yo-ne in
Ka-bul is do-ing the sa-me."

La-ila told him she didn't ca-re what ot-her pe-op-le did with the-ir child-ren.
"I'll ke-ep a clo-se eye on her," Ras-he-ed sa-id, less pa-ti-ently now. "It's a sa-fe
cor-ner. The-re's a mos-que ac-ross the stre-et."
"I won't let you turn my da-ugh-ter in-to a stre-et beg-gar!" La-ila snap-ped.
The slap ma-de a lo-ud smac-king so-und, the palm of his thick-fin-ge-red hand
con-nec-ting squ-arely with the me-at of La-ila's che-ek. It ma-de her he-ad whip
aro-und. It si-len-ced the no-ises from the kitc-hen. For a mo-ment, the ho-use was
perfectly quiet. Then a flurry of hurried footsteps in the hallway before Mariam and the children were in the living room, their eyes shifting from her to Rasheed and back.

Then Laila punched him.

It was the first time she'd struck anybody, disconnecting the playful punches she and Taqir used to trade. But those had been open-fisted, more pats than punches, self-conscious frien-dly, com-for-table expres-sions of anxieties that were both perplexing and thrilling. They would aim for the muscle that Taqir, in a profes-sional voice, called the deltoid.

Laila watched the arch of her closed fist, slicing through the air, felt the crinkle of Rasheed's stubbly, coarse skin under her knuckles. It made a sound like dropping a rice bag to the floor. She hit him hard. The impact actually made him stagger two steps backward.

From the other side of the room, a gasp, a yelp, and a scream. Laila didn't know who had made which noise. At the moment, she was too astounded to notice or care, waiting for her mind to catch up with what her hand had done. When it did, she believed she might have grinned when, to her astonishment, Rasheed calmly walked out of the room.

Suddenly, it seemed to Laila that the collective hardships of their lives, Aziiza's, Mariam's—simply dropped away, vaporized like Zalmai's palms from the TV screen. It seemed worth while, if absurdly so, to have endured all they'd endured for this one crowning moment, for this act of defiance that would end the suffering of all indigni-ties.

Laila did not notice that Rasheed was back in the room. Until his hand was around her throat. Until she was lifted off her feet and slammed against the wall.

Up close, his sneering face seemed impossibly large. Laila noticed how puffier it was getting with age, how many more broken vessels charted tiny paths on his nose. Rasheed didn't say anything. And, really, what could be said, what needed saying, when you'd shoved the barrel of your gun into your wife's mouth?

* * *

It was the raids, the reason they were in the yard digging. So-metime monthly raids, so-metime weekly. Of late, almost daily. Mostly, the Taliban confiscated stuff, gave a kick to someone's rear, whacked the back of a head or two. But so-metime the raids were public beatings, lashings of soles and palms.

"Gently," Mariam said now, her knees over the edge. They lowered the TV into the hole by each clutching one end of the plastic sheet it was wrapped

"That should do it," Mariam said.
They patted the dirt when they were done, filling the hole up again. They tossed some of it around so it wouldn't look conspicuous.

"The-re," Ma-ri-am said, wiping her hands on her dress.

When it was safer, they'd agreed, when the Ta-li-ban cut down on their raids, in a month or two or six, or maybe longer, they would dig the TV up.

* * *

In La-ila'S dre-am, she and Ma-ri-am are out behind the to-ols-hed dig-ging aga-in. But, this time, it's Azi-za they're lo-we-ring in-to the gro-und. Azi-za's bre-ath fogs the she-et of plas-tic in which they ha-ve wrap-ped her. La-ila se-es her pa-nic-ked eyes, the whi-te-ness of her palms as they slap and push aga-inst the she-et. Azi-za ple-ads. La-ila can't he-ar her scre-ams. Only for a whi-le, she calls down, it's only for a whi-le. It's the ra-ids, don't you know, my lo-ve? When the ra-ids are over, Mammy and Kha-la Ma-ri-am will dig you out. I pro-mi-se, my lo-ve. Then we can play. We can play all you want. She fills the sho-vel. La-ila wo-ke up, out of bre-ath, with a tas-te of so-il in her mo-uth, when the first gra-nu-lar lumps of dirt hit the plas-tic.

41.

Ma-dam

In the sum-mer of 2000, the dro-ught re-ac-hed its third and worst ye-ar.

In Hel-mand, Za-bol, Kan-da-har, vil-la-ges tur-ned in-to herds of no-ma-dic com-mu-ni-ty-es, al-ways mo-ving, se-arc-hing for wa-ter and gre-en pas-tu-res for the-ir li-ves-tock. When they fo-und ne-it-her, when the-ir go-ats and she-ep and cows di-ed off, they ca-me to Ka-bul They to-ok to the Ka-reh-Ari-ana hil-Isi-de, li-ving in ma-kes-hift slums, pac-ked in huts, fif-te-en or twenty at a ti-me.

That was also the sum-mer of Ti-ta-nic, the sum-mer that Ma-ri-am and Azi-za we-re a tang-le of limbs, rol-ling and gig-gling, Azi-za in-sis-tingshe get to be Jack.

"Qu-i-et, Azi-za jo." "Jack! Say my na-me, Kha-la Ma-ri-am. Say it. Jack!" "Yo-ur fat-her will be angry if you wa-ke him." "Jack! And you're Ro-se." "Jack! Say my na-me, Kha-la Ma-ri-am. Say it. Jack!" "Yo-ur fat-her will be angry if you wa-ke him."

"Jack! And you're Ro-se." It wo-uld end with Ma-ri-am on her back, sur-ren-de-ring,  ag-re-e-ing aga-in to be Ro-se. "Fi-ne, you be Jack," she re-len-ted "You die yo-ung, and I get to li-ve to a ri-pe old age."

"Yes, but I die a he-ro," sa-id Azi-za, "whi-le you, Ro-se, you spend yo-ur en-ti-re, mi-se-rab-le li-fe lon-ging for me." Then, strad-dling Ma-ri-am's chest, she'd an-no-un-ce, "Now we must kiss!" Ma-ri-am whip-ped her he-ad si-de to si-de, and Azi-za, de-ligh-ted with her own scan-da-lo-us be-ha-vi-or, cack-led thro-ugh puc-ke-red lips.

So-me-ti-mes Zal-mai wo-uld sa-un-ter in and watch this ga-me. What didhe get to be, he as-ked
"You can be the ice-berg," said Azi-za.

That summer, Titanic fever gripped Kabul. People smuggled pirated copies of the film from Pakistan sometimes in their underwear. After curfew, everyone locked the doors, turned out the lights, turned down the volume, and wept for Jack and Rose and the passengers of the doomed ship. If there was electrical power, Mariam, Lila, and the children watched it too. A dozen times or more, they unearthed the TV from behind the tools hdr, late at night, with the lights out and quilts pinned over the windows.

At the Kabul River, vendors moved into the parceled riverbed. Soon, from the river's sun-baked hollows, it was possible to buy Titanic carpets, and Titanic cloth, from bolts arranged in wheelbarrows. There was Titanic deodorant, Titanic toothpaste, Titanic perfume, even Titanic burqas. A particularly persistent beggar began calling himself "Titanic Beggar."

"Titanic City" was born.

It's the song, they said.

No, the sea. The luxury. The ship.

It's the sex, they whispered Leo, said Azi-za sheepishly. It's all about Leo.

"Everybody wants Jack," Lila said to Mariam. "That's what it is. Everybody wants Jack to rescue them from disaster. But there is no Jack. Jack is dead."

***

Then, late that summer, a fabric merchant fell asleep and forgot to put out his cigarettes. He survived the fire, but his store did not. The fire took the adjacent fabric store as well, a second-hand clothing store, a small furniture shop, a bakery.

They told Rasheed later that if the winds had blown east instead of west, his shop, which was at the corner of the block, might have been spared.

***

They sold every-t-thing.

First to go were Mariam's things, then Lila's. Azi-za's baby clothes, the few toys Lila had fought Rasheed to buy her. Azi-za watched the proceedings with a docile look. Rasheed's watch too was sold, his old transistor radio, his pair of neckties, his shoes, and his wedding ring. The couch, the table, the rug, and the chairs went too. Zalmay threw a wicked tantrum when Rasheed sold the TV.
After the fire, Rasheed was home almost every day. He slapped Aziiza. He kicked Mariam. He threw things. He found fault with Laila, the way she smelled, the way she dressed, the way she combed her hair, her yellow teeth.

"What's happened to you?" he said. "I married apart, and now I'm saddled with a hag. You're turning into Mariam."

He got fired from the kebab house near Haji Yagoob Square because he and a customer got into a scuffle. The customer complained that Rasheed had rudely tossed the bread on his table. Harsh words had passed. Rasheed had called the customer a monkey-faced Uzbek. A gun had been brandished. A skewer pointed in return. In Rasheed's version, he held the skewer. Mariam had her doubts.

Fired from the restaurant in Ta-ima-ni because customers complained about the long waits, Rasheed said the cook was slow and lazy.

"You were probably out back napping," said Laila.

"Don't provoke him, Laila jo," Mariam said.

"I'm warning you, woman," he said.

"Either that or smoking."

"I swear to God."

"You can't help being what you are."

And then he was on Laila, pummeling her chest, her head, her belly with fists, tearing at her hair, throwing her to the wall. Aziiza was shrieking, pulling at his shirt; Zalmai was screaming too, trying to get him off his mother. Rasheed shoved the children aside, pushed Laila to the ground, and began kicking her. Mariam threw herself on Laila. He went on kicking, kicking Mariam now, spit flying from his mouth, his eyes glittering with murderous intent, kicking until he couldn't anymore.

"I swear you're going to make me kill you, Laila," he said, panting. Then he stormed out of the house.

***

When the money ran out, hunger began to cast a pall over their lives. It was stunning to Mariam how quickly alleviating hunger became the crux of their existence.
Rice, boiled plain and white, with no meat or sauce, was a rare treat now. They skipped meals with increasing and alarming regularity. Sometimes Rashid brought home sardines in a can and brittle, dried bread that tasted like sawdust. Sometimes a stolen bag of apples, at the risk of getting his hand sawed off. In grocery stores, he carefully pocketed canned ravioli, which they split five ways, Zalmai getting the lion's share. They ate raw turnips sprinkled with salt. Limp leaves of lettuce and blackened bananas for dinner.

Death from starvation suddenly became a distinct possibility. Some chose not to wait for it. Mariam heard of a neighborhood widow who had ground some dried bread, laced it with rat poison, and fed it to all seven of her children. She had saved the biggest portion for herself.

Aziza's ribs began to push through the skin, and the fat from her cheeks vanished. Her calves thinned, and her complexion turned the color of weak tea. When Mariam picked her up, she could feel her hip bone poking through the taut skin. Zalmai lay around the house, eyes dulled and half closed, or in his father's lap limp as a rag. He cried himself to sleep, when he could must the energy, but his sleep was fitful and sporadic. White dots leaped before Mariam's eyes whenever she got up. Her head spun, and her ears rang all the time. She remembered something Mullah Faizullah used to say about hunger when Ramadan started: Even the snake-bi-i-i-en man finds sleep, but not the hungry.

"My children are going to die," Laila said. "Right before my eyes."

"They are not," Mariam said. "I won't let them. It's going to be all right, Laila. I know what to do."

***

One blistering-hot day, Mariam put on her burqa, and she and Rashid walked to the Intercontinental Hotel. Bus fare was an unaffordable luxury now, and Mariam was exhausted by the time they reached the top of the steep hill. Climbing the slope, she was struck by bouts of dizziness, and twice she had to stop, wait for it to pass.

At the hotel entrance, Rashid greeted and hugged one of the doormen, who was dressed in a burgundy suit and visor cap. There was some friendly-looking talk between them. Rashid spoke with his hand on the doorman's elbow. He motioned toward Mariam at one point, and they both looked her way briefly. Mariam thought there was something vaguely familiar about the doorman. When the doorman went inside, Mariam and Rashid waited. From this vantage point, Mariam and Rashid had a view of the Poly-technic Ins-ti-tu-te, and, beyond that, the old Kha-ir kha-na district and the road to Mazari. To the south, she could
see the bre-ad fac-tory, Si-lo, long aban-do-ned, its pa-le yel-low fa9ade poc-ked with yaw-ning ho-les from all the shel-ling it had en-du-red. Fart-her so-uth, she co-uld ma-ke out the hol-low ru-ins of Da-ru-la-man Pa-la-ce, whe-re, many ye-ars back, Ras-he-ed had ta-ken her for a pic-nic. The me-mory of that day was a re-lic from a past that no lon-ger se-emed li-ke her own.

Ma-ri-am con-cent-ra-ted on the-se things, the-se land-marks. She fe-ared she might lo-se her ner-ve if she let her mind wan-der.

Every few mi-nu-tes, je-eps and ta-xis dro-ve up to the ho-tel ent-ran-ce. Do-or-men rus-hed to gre-et the pas-sen-gers, who we-re all men, ar-med, be-ar-ded, we-ar-ing tur-bans, all of them step-ping out with the sa-me self-assu-red, ca-su-al air of me-na-ce. Ma-ri-am he-ard bits of the-ir chat-ter as they va-nis-hed thro-ugh the ho-tel's do-ors. She he-ard Pash-to and Far-si, but Ur-du and Ara-bic too.

"Me-et our-re-al mas-ters," Ras-he-ed sa-id in a low-pitc-hed vo-ice. "Pa-kis-ta-ni and Arab Is-la-mists. The Ta-li-ban are pup-pets. The-se are the big pla-yers and Afg-ha-nis-tan is the-ir playg-ro-und."

Ras-he-ed sa-id he'd he-ard ru-mors that the Ta-li-ban we-re al-lo-wing the-se pe-op-le to set up sec-ret camps all over the co-untry, whe-re yo-ung men we-re be-ing tra-ined to be-co-me su-ci-de bom-bers and jiha-di figh-ters.

"What's ta-king him so long?" Ma-ri-am sa-id.

Ras-he-ed spat, and kic-ked dirt on the spit. An ho-ur la-ter, they we-re in-si-de, Ma-ri-am and Ras-he-ed, fol-lo-wing the do-or-man. The-ir he-els clic-ked on the ti-led flo-or as they we-re led ac-ross the ple-asantly co-ol lobby. Ma-ri-am saw two men sit-ting on le-at-her cha-irs, rif-les and a cof-fee tab-le bet-we-en them, sip-ping black tea and eating from a pla-te of syrup-co-ated jela-bi, rings sprink-led with pow-de-red su-gar. She tho-ught of Azi-za, who lo-ved jela-bi, and to-re her ga-ze away.

The do-or-man led them out-si-de to a bal-cony. From his poc-ket, he pro-du-ced a small black cord-less pho-ne and a scrap of pa-per with a num-ber scrib-bled on it. He told Ras-he-ed it was his su-per-vi-sor's sa-tel-li-te pho-ne.

"I got you fi-ve mi-nu-tes," he sa-id. "No mo-re."
"Tas-ha-kor," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "I won't for-get this."

The do-or-man nod-ded and wal-ked away. Ras-he-ed di-aled. He ga-ve Ma-ri-am the pho-ne.
As Ma-ri-am lis-te-ned to the scratchy rin-ning, her mind wan-de-red. It wan-de-red
to the last ti-me she'd se-en Jalil, thir-te-en ye-ars ear-li-er, back in the spring of 1987.
He'd sto-od on the stre-et out-si-de her ho-use, le-aning on a ca-ne, be-si-de the blue
Benz with the He-rat li-cen-se pla-tes and the whi-te stri-pe bi-sec-ting the ro-of, the
ho-od, and trunk. He'd sto-od the-re for ho-urs, wa-iting for her, now and then cal-ling
her na-me, just as she had on-ce cal-led his na-me out-si-de his ho-use. Ma-ri-am had
par-tered the cur-ta-in on-ce, just a bit, and ca-ught a glimp-se of him. Only a glimp-se, but
long eno-ugh to see that hi-s ha-ir had tur-ned fluffy whi-ite, and that he'd star- ted
to sto-op. He wo-re glas-ses, a red tie, as al-ways, and the usu-al whi-te
hand-kerc-hi-ef tri-ang-le in his bre-ast poc- ket. Most stri-king, he was thin-ner, much
thin-ner, than she re-mem-be-red, the co-at of his dark brown su-it dro-op-ing over his
sho-ul-ders, the tro-users po-oling at his ank-les.

Jalil had se-en her too, if only for a mo-ment. The-ir eyes had met bri-e-fly thro-ugh a
part in the cur-ta-ins, as they had met many ye-ars ear-li-er thro-ugh a part in anot-her
pa-ir of cur-ta-ins. But then Ma-ri-am had qu-ickly clo-sed the cur-ta-ins. She had sat
on the bed, wa-ited for him to le-ave.

She tho-ught now of the let-ter Jalil had fi-nal-ly left at her do-or. She had kept it for
days, be-ne-ath her pil-low, pic-king it up now and then, tur-ning it over in her hands.
In the end, she had shred-ded it uno-pe-ned.

And now he-re she was, af-ter all the-se ye-ars, cal-ling him.
Ma-ri-am reg-ret-ted her fo-olish, yo-uth-ful pri-de now. She wis-hed now that she
had let him in. What wo-uld ha-ve be-en the harm to let him in, sit with him, let him
say what he'd co-me to say? He was her fat-her. He'd not be-en a go-od fat-her, it was
true, but how or-di-nary his fa-ults se-emed now, how for-gi-vab-le, when com-pa-red
to Ras-he-ed's ma-li-ce, or to the bru-ta-lity and vi-olen-ce th at she had se-en men
in-flict on one anot-her.

She wis-hed she hadn't dest-ro-yed his let-ter.
A man's de-ep vo-ice spo-ke in her ear and in-for-med her that she'd re-ac-hed the
ma-yor's of-fi-ce in He-rat.

Ma-ri-am cle-ared her thro-at. "Sa-la-am, brot-her, I am lo-oking for so-mee-one who
li-ves in He-rat. Or he did, many ye-ars ago. His na-me is Jalil Khan. He li-ved in
Shar-e-Nau and ow-ned the ci-ne-ma. Do you ha-ve any in-for-ma-ti-on as to his
whe-re-abo-uts?"
The ir-ri-ta-ti-on was audib-le in the man's vo-ice. "This is why you call the ma-yor's
of-fi-ce?"
Ma-ri-am sa-id she didn't know who el-se to call. "For-gi-ve me, brot-her. I know
you ha-ve im-por-tant things to tend to, but it is li-fe and de-ath, a qu-es-ti-on of li-fe
and de-ath I am cal-ling abo-ut."
"I don't know him. The cinema's been closed for many years."
"Maybe there's someone there who might know him, someone—"
"There is no one."

Mariam closed her eyes. "Please, brother. There are children involved. Small children."

A long sigh.

"Maybe someone there—"

"There's a groundskeeper here. I think he's lived here all of his life."

"Yes, ask him, please."

"Call back tomorrow."

Mariam said she couldn't. "I have this phone for five minutes only. I don't—"

There was a click at the other end, and Mariam thought he had hung up. But she could hear footsteps, and voices, a distant car horn, and some mechanical humming punctuated by clicks, maybe an electric fan. She switched the phone to her other ear, closed her eyes.

She pictured Jalil smiling, reaching into his pocket.

Ah. Of course. Well here then. Without Juriher ado…

A leaf-shaped pendant, tiny coins etched with moons and stars hanging from it.

Try it on, Mariam jo.

What do you think?

I think you look like a queen.

A few minutes passed. Then footsteps, a cracking sound, and a click. "He does know him."

"He does?"

"It's what he says."

"Where is he?" Mariam said. "Does this man know where Jalil Khan is?"
The-re was a pa-use. "He says he di-ed ye-ar ago, back in 1987."
Ma-ri-am's sto-mach fell. She'd con-si-d er the pos-si-bi-lity, of co-ur-se. jalil 
wo-ul-ld ha-ve be-en in his mid-to la-te se-ven-ti-es by now, but…

1987.

He was di-ving then. He had dri-ven all the way from He-rat to say go-od-bye.
She mo-ved to the ed-ge of the bal-cony. From up he-re, she co-uld see the ho-tel's 
on-ce-fa-mo-us swim-ming po-ol, empty and grub-ry now, scar-red by bul-let ho-les 
and de-ca-ying ti-les. And the-re was the bat-te-red ten-nis co-urt, the rag-ged net 
ly-ing limply in the mid-dle of it li-ke de-ad skin shed by a sna-ke.

"I ha-ve to go now," the vo-ice at the ot-her end sa-id

"I'm sorry to ha-ve bot-he-red you," Ma-ri-am sa-id, we-eping so-und-les-sly in-to 
the pho-ne. She saw Jalil wa-ving to her, skip-ping from sto-ne to sto-ne as he 
cros-sed the stre-am, his poc-kets swol-len with gifts. All the ti-mes she had held her 
bre-ath for him, for God to grant her mo-re ti-me with him. "Thank you," Ma-ri-am 
be-gan to say, but the man at the ot-her end had al-re-ady hung up.

Ras-he-ed was lo-oking at her. Ma-ri-am sho-ok her he-ad.
"Use-less," he sa-id, snatc-hing the pho-ne from her. "Li-ke da-ugh-ter, li-ke 
fat-her."
On the-ir way out of the lobby, Ras-he-ed wal-ked briskly to the cof-fee tab-le, 
which was now aban-do-ned, and poc-ke-ted the last ring of jela-bi. He to-ok it ho-me 
and ga-ve it to Zal-mai.

42.

La-ila

In a pa-per bag, Azi-za pac-ked the-se things: her flo-wo-red shirt and her lo-ne pa-ir 
of socks, her mis-matc-hed wo-ol glo-ves, an old, pump-kin-co-lo-red blan-ket dot-ted 
with stars and co-mets, a splin-te-red plas-tic cup, a ba-na-na, her set of di-ce-It was a 
co-ol mor-ning in Ap-ril 2001, shortly be-fo-re La-ila's twenty-third birth-day. The 
sky was a trans-lu-cent gray, and gusts of a clam-my, cold wind kept rat-ting the 
scre-en do-or.
This was a few days af-ter La-ila he-ard that Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud had go-ne to 
Fran-ce and spo-ken to the Euro-pe-an Par-li-ament. Mas-so-ud was now in his 
na-ti-ve North, and le-ading the Nort-hern Al-li-an-ce, the so-le op-po-si-ti-on gro-up 
still figh-ting the Ta-li-ban. In Euro-pe, Mas-so-ud had war-ned the West abo-ut 
fer-ro-rist camps in Afg-ha-nis-tan, and ple-aded with the U.S. to help him fight the 
Ta-li-ban.
"If Pre-si-dent Bush do-esn't help us," he had sa-id, "the-se ter-ro-rists will da-ma-ge the U.S. and Euro-pe very so-on."

A month be-fo-re that, La-ila had le-ar-ned that the Ta-li-ban had plan- ted TNT in the cre-vi-ces of the gi-ant Bud-dhas in Ba-mi-yan and blown them apart, cal-ling them obj-ects of ido-latry and sin. The-re was an outcry aro-und the world, from the U.S. to Chi-na. Go-vern-ments, his-to-ri-ans, and arc-ha-e-olo-gists from all over the glo-be had writ-ten let- ters, ple-aded with the Ta-li-ban not to de-mo-lish the two gre-at est his-to-ri-cal ar-ty-facts in Afg-ha-nis-tan. But the Ta-li-ban had go-ne ahe-ad and de-to-na-ted the-ir exp-lo- si- ves in-si-de the two-tho-usand-ye-ar-old Bud-dhas. They had chan-ted Al-lah-u-akbar with each blast, che-ered each ti-me the sta-tu-es lost an arm or a leg in a crumb-ling clo-ud of dust. La-ila re-mem-be-red stan-ding atop the big-ger of the two Bud-dhas with Ba-bi and Ta-riq, back in 1987, a bre-eze blo-wing in the-ir sun-lit fa-ces, watc-hing a hawk gli-ding in circ-les over the spraw-ling val-ley be-low. But when she he-ard the news of the sta-tu-es' de-mi-se, La-ila was numb to it. It hardly se-emed to mat-ter. How co-uld she ca-re abo-ut sta-tu-es when her own li-fe was crumb-ling dust?

Until Ras-he-ed told her it was ti-me to go, La-ila sat on the flo-or in a co-mer of the li-ving ro-om, not spe-aking and sto-ne-fa-ced, her ha-ir han-ging aro-und her fa-ce in stragg-ly curls. No mat-ter how much she bre-at-hed in and out, it se-emed to La-ila that she co-uldn't fill her lungs with eno-ugh air.

* * *

On the way to Kar-teh-Seh, Zal-mai bo-un- ced in Ras-he-ed's arms, and Azi-za held Ma-ri- am's hand as she wal-ked qu-ickly be-si-de her. The wind blew the dirty scarf ti-ed un-der Azi-za's chin and rip-pled the hem of her dress. Azi-za was mo-re grim now, as tho-ugh she'd be-gun to sen-se, with  each step, that she was be-ing du-ped. La-ila had not fo-und the strength to tell Azi-za the truth. She had told her that she was go-ing to a scho-ol, a spe-ci-al scho-ol whe-re the child-ren ate and slept and didn't co-me ho-me af-ter class. Now Azi-za kept pel- ting La-ila with the same qu-es-tion she had be-en as-king for days. Did the stu-dents sle-ep in dif-fe-re nt ro-oms or all in one gre-at big ro-om? Wo-ul-d she ma-ke fri-ends? Was she, La-ila, su-re that the te-ac-hers wo-ul'd be ni-ce?

And, mo-re than on-ce, How long do I ha-ve to stay?

They stop-ped two blocks from the squ-at, bar-racks-style bu-il-ding.

"Zal-mai and I will wa-it he-re," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "Oh, be-fö-re I for-get…"

He fis- hed a stick of gum from his poc-ket, a par-ting gift, and held it out to Azi-za with a stiff, mag-na-ni-mo us air. Azi-za to-ok it and mu- te-red a thank-you. La-ila mar-ve-led at Azi-za's gra-ce, Azi-za's vast ca-pa-city for for-gi-ve-ness, and her eyes
filled. Her heart squeezed, and she was faint with sorrow at the thought that this affternoon Azi-za would not nap beside her, that she would not feel the flimsy weight of Azi-za's arm on her chest, the curve of Azi-za's head pressing into her ribs, Azi-za's breath warming her neck, Azi-za's heels poking her belly.

When Azi-za was led away, Zal-mai began wailing, crying, Zi-za! Zi-za! He squirmed and kicked in his father's arms, called for his sister, until his attention was diverted by an organ-grinder's monkey across the street.

They walked the last two blocks alone, Ma-ri-am, La-ila, and Azi-za. As they approached the building, La-ila could see its splintered facade, the sagging roof, the planks of wood nailed across frames with missing windows, the top of a swing set over a decaying wall.

They stopped by the door, and La-ila repeated to Azi-za what she had told her earlier.

"And if they ask about your father, what do you say?"
"The Mu-jahi-de-en killed him," Azi-za said, her mouth set with wariness.
"That's good. Azi-za, do you understand?"
"Because this is a special school," Azi-za said. Now that they were here, and the building was a reality, she looked shaken. Her lower lip was quivering and her eyes threatened to well up, and La-ila saw how hard she was struggling to be brave. "If we tell the truth," Azi-za said in a thin, breathless voice, "they won't take me. It's a special school. I want to go home."

"I'll visit all the time," La-ila managed to say. "I promise."
"Me too," said Ma-ri-am. "We'll come to see you, Azi-za, and we'll play together, just like always. It's only for a while, until your father finds work."

"They have food here," La-ila said shakily. She was glad for the burqa, glad that Azi-za couldn't see how she was falling apart inside it. "Here, you won't go hungry. They have rice and bread and water, and maybe even fruit."

"But-you won't be here. And Kha-la Ma-ri-am won't be with me."

"I'll come and see you," La-ila said. "All the time. Look at me, Azi-za. I'll come and see you. I'm your mother. If it kills me, I'll come and see you."

* * *
The orp-ha-na-ge di-rec-tor was a sto-oping, nar-row-ches-ted man with a ple-asantly li-ned fa-ce. He was bal-ding, had a shaggy be-ard, eyes li-ke pe-as. His na-me was Za-man. He wo-re a skul-lcap. The left lens of his eyeg-las-ses was chip-ped.

As he led them to his of-fi-ce, he as-ked La-ila and Ma-ri-am the-ir na-mes, as-ked for Azi-za's na-me too, her age. They pas-sed thro-ugh po-or-ly lit hal-lways whe-re ba-re-fo-ot child-ren step-ped asi-de and watc-hed They had dis-he-ve-led ha-ir or sha-ved scalps. They wo-re swe-aters with fra-yed sle-eves, rag-ged je-ans who-se kne-es had worn down to strings, co-ats patch-ed with duct ta-pe. La-ila smel-led so-ap and tal-cum, am-mo-nia and uri-ne, and ri-sing ap-pre-hen-si-on in Azi-za, who had be-gun whim-pe-ring.

La-ila had a glimp-se of the yard: we-edy lot, ric-kety swing set, old ti-res, a def-la-ted bas-ket-ball. The ro-oms they pas-sed we-re ba-re, the win-dows co-ve-red with she-ets of plas-tic. A boy dar-ted from one of the ro-oms and grab-bed La-ila's el-bow, and tri-ed to climb up in-to her arms. An at-ten-dant, who was cle-aning up what lo-ok-ed li-ke a pud-dle of uri-ne, put down his mop and pri-ed the boy off.

Za-man se-emed gently prop-ri-etary with the orp-hans. He pat-ted the he-ads of so-me, as he pas-sed by, sa-ia a cor-di-al word or two to them, to-us-led the-ir ha-ir, wit-ho-ut con-des-cen-si-on. The child-ren wel-co-med his to-uch. They all lo-ok-ed at him, La-ila tho-ught, in ho-pe of ap-pro-val.

He sho-wed them in-to his of-fi-ce, a ro-om with only three fol-ding cha-irs, and a di-sor-derly desk with pi-les of pa-per scat-te-red atop it.

"You're from He-rat," Za-man sa-id to Ma-ri-am. "I can tell from yo-ur ac-cent."

He le-aned back in his cha-ir and la-ced his hands over his belly, and sa-id he had a brot-her-in-law who used to li-ve the-re. Even in the-se or-di-nary ges-tu-res, La-ila no-ted a la-bo-ri-o-us qu-ality to his mo-ve-ments. And tho-ugh he was smi-ling fa-ntly, La-ila sen-sed so-met-hing tro-ub-led and wo-un-ded be-ne-ath, di-sap-po-int-ment and de-fe-at glos-sed over with a ve-ne-er of go-od hu-mor.

"He was a glas-sma-ker," Za-man sa-id. "He ma-de the-se be-a-uti-ful, jade gre-en swans. You held them up to sun-light and they glit-te-red in-si-de, li-ke the glass was fil-led with tiny jewels. Ha-ve you be-en back?"

Ma-ri-am sa-id she hadn't.

"I'm from Kan-da-har myself. Ha-ve you ever be-en to Kan-da-har, ham-s-hi-ra1? No? It's lo-vely. What gar-dens! And the gra-pes! Oh, the gra-pes. They be-witch the pa-la-te."

A few child-ren had gat-he-red by the do-or and we-re pe-cking in. Za-man gently sho-o-ed them away, in Pash-to.
"Of co-ur-se I lo-ve He-rat too. City of ar-tists and wri-ters, Su-fis and mys-tics. You
know the old joke, that you can't stretch a leg in He-rat wit-ho-ut po-king a po-et in
the re-ar."

Next to La-il-a, Azi-za snor-ted.
Za-man fe-ig-ned a gasp. "Ah, the-re. I've ma-de you la-ugh, lit-tleham-s-hi-ra.
That's usu-al-ly the hard part. I was wor-ri-ed, the-re, for a whi-le. I tho-ught I'd ha-ve
to cluck li-ke a chic-ken or bray li-ke a don-key. But, the-re you are. And so lo-vely
you are."

He cal-led in an at-ten-dant to lo-ok af-ter Azi-za for a few mo-ments. Azi-za
le-aped on-to Ma-ri-am's lap and clung to her.

"We're just go-ing to talk, my lo-ve,"La-il-a sa-id. "I'll be right he-re. All right? Right
he-re."

"Why don't we go out-si-de for a mi-nu-te, Azi-za jo?" Ma-ri-am sa-id. "Yo-ur
mot-her ne-eds to talk to Ka-ka Za-man he-re.Jus-t for a mi-nu-te. Now, co-me on."

When they we-re alo-ne, Za-man as-ked for Azi-za's da-te of birth, his-tory of
il-lnes-ses, al-ler-gi-es. He as-ked abo-ut Azi-za's fat-her, and La-il-a had the stran-ge
ex-pe-ri-en-ce of tel-ling a lie that was re-al-ly the truth. Za-man lis-te ned, his
exp-res-si-on ex-ve-aling ne-it-her be-li ef nor skep-ti-ci sm. He ran the orp-ha-na-ge
on the ho-nor system, he sa-id. If aham-s-hi-ra sa-id her hus-band was de-ad and she
couldn't ca-re for her child-ren, he didn't qu-es-ti-on it.

La-il-a be-gan to cry.
Za-man put down his pen.

"I'm as-ha-med," La-il-a cro-aked, her palm pres-sed to her mo-uth.

"Lo-ok at me,ham-s-hi-ra"

"What kind of mot-her aban-dons her own child?"

"Lo-ok at me."

La-il-a ra-ised her ga-ze.
"It isn't yo-ur fa-ult. Do you he-ar me? Not you. It's tho-sesa-va-ges, tho-sewah-s-his,
who are to bla-me. They bring sha-me on me as a Pash-tun. They've dis-ga-ced the
na-me of my pe-op-le. And you're not alo-ne,ham-s-hi-ra We get mot-ers li-ke you
all the ti-me-all the ti-me-mot-ers who co-me he-re who can't fe-ed the-ir child-ren
be-ca-use the Ta-li-ban won't let them go out and ma-ke a li-ving. So you don't bla-me

La-ila wi-ped her eyes with the cloth of her bur-qa.

"As for this pla-ce," Za-man sig-hed, mo-ti-oning with his hand, "you can see that it's in di-re sta-te. We're al-ways un-der-fun-ded, al-ways scramb-ling, imp-ro-vi-sing. We get lit-tle or no sup-port from the Ta-li-ban. But we ma-na-ge. Li-ke you, we do what we ha-ve to do. Al-lah is go-od and kind, and Al-lah pro-vi-des, and, as long He pro-vi-des, I will see to it that Azi-za is fed and clot-hed. That much I pro-mi-se you."

La-ila nod-ded.

"All right?"

He was smi-ling com-pa-ni-onably. "But don't cry, ham-s-hi-ra Don't let her see you cry."

La-ila wi-ped her eyes aga-in. "God bless you," she sa-id thickly. "God bless you, brot-her."

***

But "when the ti-me for go-od-byes ca-me, the sce-ne erup-ted pre-ci-sely as La-ila had dre-aded.

Azi-za pa-nic-ked.

All the way ho-me, le-aning on Ma-ri-am, La-ila he-ard Azi-za's shrill cri-es. In her he-ad, she saw Za-man's thick, cal-lo-used hands clo-se aro-und Azi-za's arms; she saw them pull, gently at first, then har-der, then with for-ce to pry Azi-za lo-o-se from her. She saw Azi-za kic-king in Za-man's arms as he hur-ri-edly tur-ned the cor-ner, he-ard Azi-za scre-aming as tho-ugh she we-re abo-ut to va-nish from the fa-ce of the earth. And La-ila saw her-self run-ning down the hal-lway, he-ad down, a howl ri-sing up her thro-at.

"I smell her," she told Ma-ri-am at ho-me. Her eyes swam un-se-e-ingly past Ma-ri-am's sho-ul-der, past the yard, the walls, to the mo-un-ta-ins, brown as smo-ker's spit. "I smell her sle-ep smell. Do you? Do you smell it?"

"Oh, La-ila jo," sa-id Ma-ri-am. "Don't. What go-od is this? What go-od?"

***

At first, Ras-he-ed hu-mo-red La-ila, and ac-com-pa-ni-ed them-her, Ma-ri-am, and Zal-mai-to the orp-ha-na-ge, tho-ugh he ma-de su-re, as they wal-ked, that she had an eye-ful of his gri-evo-us lo-oks, an ear-ful of his rants over what a hards-hip she was
put-ting him thro-ugh, how badly his legs and back and fe-et ac-hed wal-king to and from the orp-ha-na-ge. He ma-de su-re she knew how aw-ful-ly put out he was.

"I'm not a yo-ung man any-mo-re," he sa-id. "Not that you ca-re. You'd run me to the gro-und, if you had yo-ur way. But you don't, La-ila. You don't ha-ve yo-ur way."

They par-ted ways two blocks from the orp-ha-na-ge, and he ne-ver spa-red them mo-re than fif-te-en mi-nu-tes. "A mi-nu-te la-te," he sa-id, "and I start wal-king. I me-an it."

La-ila had to pes-ter him, ple-ad with him, in or-der to spin out the al.lot-ted mi-nu-tes with Azi-za a bit lon-ger. For her-self, and for Ma-ri-am, who was dis-con-so-la-te over Azi-za's ab-sen-ce, tho-ugh, as al-ways, Ma-ri-am cho-se to crad-le her own suf-fe-ring pri-va-ty and qu-i-et-ly. And for Zal-mai too, who as-ked for his sis-ter every day, and threw tant-rums that so-me-ti-mes dis-sol-ved in-to in-con-so-la-b-le fits of crying.

So-me-ti-mes, on the way to the orp-ha-na-ge, Ras-he-ed stop-ped and comp-la-ined that his leg was so-re. Then he tur-ned aro-und and star-ted wal-king ho-me in long, ste-ady stri-des, wit-ho-ut so much as a limp. Or he cluc-ked his ton-gue and sa-id, "It's my lungs, La-ila. I'm short of bre-ath. May-be to-mor-row I'll fe-el bet-ter, or the day af-ter. We'll see." He ne-ver bot-he-red to fe-ign a sing-le raspy bre-ath. Of-ten, as he tur-ned back and marc-hed ho-me, he lit a ci-ga-ret-te. La-ila wo-uld ha-ve to ta-il him ho-me, help-less, tremb-ling with re-sent-ment and im-po-tent ra-ge.

Then one day he told La-ila he wo-uldn't ta-ke her any-mo-re. "I'm too ti-red from wal-king the stre-ets all day," he sa-id, "lo-ok-ing for work."

"Then I'll go by myself," La-ila sa-id. "You can't stop me, Ras-he-ed. Do you he-ar me? You can hit me all you want, but I'll ke-ep go-ing the-re."

"Do as you wish. But you won't get past the Ta-li-ban. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I'm co-ming with you," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

La-ila wo-uldn't al-low it. "You ha-ve to stay ho-me with Zal-mai. If we get stop-ped... I don't want him to see."

And so La-ila's li-fe sud-denly re-vol-ved aro-und fin-ding ways to see Azi-za. Half the ti-me, she ne-ver ma-de it to the orp-ha-na-ge. Cros-sing the stre-et, she was spot- ted by the Ta-li-ban and rid-dled with qu-es-tions—What is yo-ur na-me? Whe-re are you go-ing? Why are you alo-ne? Whe-re is yo-ur ma-h-roj? -be-fo-re she was sent ho-me. If she was lucky, she was gi-ven a ton-gue-las-hing or a sing-le kick to the re-ar, a sho-ve in the back. Ot-her ti-mes, she met with as-sort-ments of wo-oden clubs, fresh tree branc- hes, short whips, slaps, of-ten fists.
One day, a yo-ung Ta-lib be-at La-ila with a ra-dio an-ten-na. When he was do-ne, he ga-ve a fi-nal whack to the back of her neck and sa-id, "I see you aga-in, I'll be-at you un-til yo-ur mot-her's milk le-aks out of yo-ur bo-nes."

That ti-me, La-ila went ho-me. She lay on her sto-mach, feel-ing li-ke a stu-pid, pi-ti-ab-le ani-mal, and his-sed as Ma-ri-am ar-ran-ged damp cloths ac-ross her blo-odi-ed back and thighs. But, usu-al-ly, La-ila re-fu-sed to ca-ve in. She ma-de as if she we-re go-ing ho-me, then to-ok a dif-fe-rent ro-ute down si-de stre-ets. So-me-ti-mes she was ca-ught, qu-es-tioned, scol-ded-two, three, even fo-ur ti-mes in a sing-le day. Then the whips ca-me down and the an-ten-nas sli-ced thro-ugh the air, and she trud-ged ho-me, blo-odi-ed, wit-ho-ut so much as a glimp-se of Azi-za. So-on La-ila to-ok to we-ar-ing ext-ra la-yers, even in the he-at, two, three swe-aters be-ne-ath the bur-qa, for pad-ding aga-inst the be-atings.

But for La-ila, the re-ward, if she ma-de it past the Ta-li-ban, was worth it. She co-uld spend as much ti-me as she li-ked then-ho-urs, even-with Azi-za. They sat in the co-urt-yard, ne-ar the swing set, among ot-her child-ren and vi-si-ting mot-hers, and tal-kept abo-ut what Azi-za had le-ar-ned that we-ek.

"But we ha-ve to pull the cur-ta-ins," Azi-za sa-id, "so the Ta-li-ban don't see us." Ka-ka Za-man ma-de it a po-int to te-ach them so-met-hing every day, re-ad-ing and wri-ting most days, so-me-ti-mes ge-og-ra-phy, a bit of his-to-ry or sci-en-ce, so-met-hing abo-ut a plant, ani-mals.

"They're frac-tu-res along the earth's crust," sa-id Azi-za. 'They're cal-led fa-ults.'

It was a warm af-ter-no-on, a Fri-day, in June of 2001. They we-re sit-ting in the orp-ha-na-ge's back lot, the fo-ur of them, La-ila, Zal-mai, Ma-ri-am, and Azi-za.
Ras-he-ed had re-len-ted this ti-me-as he inf-re-qu-ently did-and ac-com-pa-ni-ed the fo-ur of them. He was wa-iting down the stre-et, by the bus stop.

Ba-re-fo-ot kids scam-pe-red abo-ut aro-und them. A flat soc-cer ball was kic-ked aro-und, cha-sed af-ter list-les-sly.
"And, on ei-t-hor si-de of the fa-ults, the-re are the-se she-ets of rock that ma-ke up the earth's crust," Azi-za was sa-y-ing.

So-me-one had pul-led the ha-ir back from Azi-za's fa-ce, bra-id ed it, and pin-ned it ne-atly on top of her he-ad. La-ila beg-rud-ged who-ever had got-ten to sit be-hind her da-ugh-ter, to flip sec-ti-ons of her ha-ir one over the ot-her, had as-ked her to sit still.
Azi-za was de-mon-st-ra-ting by ope-ni ng her hands, palms up, and rub-bing them aga-inst each ot-her. Zal-mai wate-hed this with in-ten-se in-te-rest.

"Kec-to-nic pla-tes, they're cal-led?"

"Tec-to-nic,"La-ila sa-id. It hurt to talk. Her jaw was still so-re, her back and neck ac-hed. Her lip was swol-len, and her ton-gue kept po-king the empty poc-ket of the lo-wer in-ci-sor Ras-he-ed had knoc-ked lo-ose two days be-fo-re. Be-fo-re Mammy and Ba-bi had di-ed and her li-fe tur-ned up-si-de down, La-ila ne-ver wo-uld ha-ve be-li-eyed that a hu-man body co-uld withs-ta nd this much be-ating, this vi-ci-o-usly, this re-gu-lar-ly, and ke-ep func-ti-on-ing.

"Right. And when they sli-de past each ot-her, they catch and slip-see, Mam-my?-and it re-le-as es energy, which tra-vels to the earth's sur-fa-ce and ma-kes it sha-ke."

"You're get-ting so smart," Ma-ri-am sa-id "So much smar-ter than yo-ur dumb kha-la"
Azi-za's fa-ce glo-wed, bro-ade-ned. "You're not dumb, Kha-la Ma-ri-am. And Ka-ka Za-man says that, so-mo-ti-mes, the shif-ting of rocks is de-ep, de-ep be-low, and it's po-wer-ful and scary down the-re, but all we fe-el on the sur-fa-ce is a slight tre-mor. Only a slight tre-mor."

The vi-sit be-fo-re this one, it was oxy-gen atoms in the at-mosp-he-re scat-te-ring the blue light from the sun. If the earth had no at-mosp-he-re, Azi-za had sa-id a lit-tle bre-ath-les-sly, the sky wo-uld'n t be blue at all but a pitch-black sea and the sun a big bright star in the dark

"Is Azi-za co-ming ho-me with us this ti-me?" Zal-mai sa-id.
"So-on, my lo-ve," La-ila sa-id. "So-on."
La-ila wa-te-hed him wan-der away, wal-king li-ke his fat-her, sto-op-ing for-ward, to-es tur-ned in. He wal-ked to the swing set, pus-hed an empty se-at, en-ded up sit-ting on the conc-re-te, rip-ping we-eds from a crack.

Wa-ter eva-po-ra-tes from the le-aves-Mam-my, did you know?-the way it do-es from la-undry han-ging from a li-ne. And that dri-ves the flow of wa-ter up the tree. From the gro-und and thro-ugh the ro-ots, then all the way up the tree trunk, thro-ugh the branc-hes and in-to the le-aves. It's cal-led tran-spi-ra-tion.

Mo-re than on-ce, La-ila had won-de-red what the Ta-li-ban wo-uld do abo-ut Ka-ka Za-man's clan-des-ti-ne les-sons if they fo-und out.

Du-ring vi-sits, Azi-za didn't al-low for much si-len-ce. She fil-led all the spa-ces with ef-fu-si-ve spe-ech, de-li-ve-red in a high, rin-ging vo-ice. She was tan-gen-ti-al with her to-pics, and her hands ges-ti-cu-la-ted wildly, flying up with a ner-vo-us-ness that wasn't li-ke her at all. She had a new la-ugh, Azi-za did. Not so much a la-ugh, re-al-ly, as ner-vo-us punc-tu-ati-on, me-ant, La-ila sus-pec-ted, to re-as-su-re.

And the-re we-re ot-her chan-ges. La-ila wo-uld no-ti-ce the dirt un-der Azi-za's fin-ger-na-ils, and Azi-za wo-uld no-ti-ce her no-ti-cing and bury her hands un-der her thighs. Whe-ne-ver a kid cri-ed in the-ir vi-ci-nity, snot oozing from his no-se, or if a kid wal-ked by ba-re-as sed, ha-ir clum-ped with dirt, Azi-za's eye-lids flut-te-red and she was qu-ick to exp-la-in it away. She was li-ke a hos-tess em-bar-ras-sed in front of her gu-es-ts by the squ-alor of her ho-me, the un-ti-di-ness of her child-ren.

Qu-es-ti-ons of how she was co-ping we-re met with va-gue but che-er-ful rep-li-es. Do-ing Jim, Kha-la I'm fi-ne.

Do kids pick on you?

They dont Mammy. Ever-vo-ne is ni-ce.

Are you eating? Sle-eping all right?

Eating. Sle-eping too. Yes. We had lamb last night May-be it was last we-ek.

When Azi-za spo-ke li-ke this, La-ila saw mo-re than a lit-tle of Ma-ri-am in her. Azi-za stam-me-red now. Ma-ri-am no-ti-ced it first. It was subt-le but per-cep-ti-b-le, and mo-re pro-no-un-ced with words that be-gan with /. La-ila as-ke-d Za-man abo-ut it. He frow-ned and sa-id, "I tho-ught she'd al-ways do-ne that."

They left the orp-ha-na-ge with Azi-za that Fri-day af-ter-no-on for a short outing and met Ras-he-ed, who was wa-it-ing for them by the bus stop. When Zal-mai
spot-ted his fat-her, he ut-te-red an ex-ci-ted squ-e-ak and im-pa-ti-ent ly wrig-gled
from La-il a's arms. Azi-za's gre-et ing to Ras-he-ed was ri-gid but not hos-ti-le.

Ras-he-ed sa-id they sho-uld hurry, he had only two ho-urs be-fo-re re-port
back to work. This was his first we-ek as a do-or-man for the In-ter-con-ti-nen-tal.
From no-on to eight, six days a we-ek, Ras-he-ed ope-ned car do-or-s, car-ri-ed
lug-ga-ge, mop-ped up the oc-ca-si-on al spill. So-me-ti-mes, at day's end, the co-ok at
the buf-fet-style res-ta-urant let Ras-he-ed bring ho-me a few lef-to-vers as long as he
was disc-re-et abo-ut it-cold me-at-bal-ls slos-hing in oil; fri-ed chic-ken wings, the
crust go-ne hard and dry; stuf-fed pas-ta shells tur-ned chewy; stiff, gra-vel-ly ri-ce.
Ras-he-ed had pro-mi-sed La-ila that on-ce he had so-me mo-ney sa-ved up, Azi-za
co-uld mo-ve back ho-me.

Ras-he-ed was we-ar-ing his uni-form, a bur-gundy red pol-yes-ter su-it, whi-te shirt,
clip-on tie, vi-sor cap pres-sing down on his whi-te ha-ir. In this uni-form, Ras-he-ed
was trans-for-med. He lo-oked vul-ne-rab -le, pi-ti-ably be-wil-de-red, al-most
harm-less. Li-ke so-me-one who had ac-cep-ted wit-ho-ut  a sigh of pro-test the
in-dis-ple of the day. So-me-one both pat-he-tic and ad-mi-rab-le
in his do-ci-lity.

They ro-de the bus to Ti-ta-nic City. They wal-ked in-to the ri-ver-bed, flan-ked on
eit-her si-de by ma-kes-hift stalls clin-ging to the dry banks. Ne-ar the brid-ge, as they
we-re des-ten-ding the steps, a ba-re-fo-ot man dang-led de-ad from a cra-ne, his ears
cut off, his neck bent at the end of a ro-pe. In the ri-ver, they mel-ted in-to the hor-de
of shop-pers mil-ling abo-ut, the mo-ney chan-gers and bo-red-lo-oking NGO
wor-kers, the ci-ga-ret-te ven-dors, the co-ve-red wo-men who thrust fa-ke
an-ti-bi-otic presc-rip-ti-ons at pe-op-le  and beg-ged for mo-ney to fill them.
Whip-to-ting,nas-war-chew'mg Ta-lib-s pat-rol-led Ti-ta-nic City on the lo-oko-ut for
the in-disc-re-et la-ugh, the un-ve-iled fa-ce.

From a toy ki-osk, bet-we-en apo-o-si-e-en co-at ven-dor and a fa-ke-flo-wer stand,
Zal-mai pic-ked out a rub-ber bas- ket-ball with yel-low and blue swirls.

"Pick so-met-hing," Ras-he-ed sa-id to Azi-za.

Azi-za hed-ged, stif-fe-ned with em-bar-ras-sm ent.

"Hurry. I ha-ve to be at work in an ho-ur."

Azi-za cho-se a gum-ball mac-hi-ne-the sa-me co-in co-uld be in-ser-ted to get candy,
then ret-ri-ved from the flap-do-or co-in re-turn be-low.
Ras-he-ed's eyeb-row-s shot up when the sel ler qu-oted him the pri-ce. A ro-und of
hag-gled en-su-ed, at the end of which Ras-he-ed sa-id to Azi-za con-ten-ti-ously, as
if itwe-re she who'd hag-gled him, "Gi-ve it back. I can't af-ford both."
On the way back, Azi-za's high-spirited façade waned the closer they got to the orphanage. The hands stop-ped flying up. Her face tur-ned he-avy. It hap-pe-ned every ti-me. It was La-ila's turn now, with Ma-ri-am pitc-hing in, to ta-ke up the chat-te-ring, to la-ugh ner-vo-usly, to fill the me-lanc-holy qu-i-et with bre-ath-less, aim-less ban-ter-La-ter, af-ter Ras-he-ed had drop-ped them off and ta-ken a bus to work, La-ila watc-hed Azi-za wa-ve go-od-bye and scuff along the wall in the orp-ha-na-ge back lot. She tho-ught of Azi-za's stut-ter, and of what Azi-za had sa-id ear-li-er abo-ut frac-tu-res and po-wer-ful col-li-si-ons de-ep down and how so-me-ti-mes all we see on the sur-fa-ce is a slight tre-mor.

* * *


"Hush," Ma-ri-am sa-id "Who are you yel-ling at?"


La-ila fol-lo-wed his fin-ger. The-re was a man at the front do-or of the ho-use, le-aning aga-inst it. His he-ad tur-ned when he saw them ap-pro-ac-hing. He un-cros-sed his arms. Lim-ped a few steps to-war-d them.

La-ila stop-ped.

A cho-king no-is ca-me up her thro-at. Her kne-es we-ake-ned. La-ila sud-denly wan-ten-d, ne-eded, to gro-pe for Ma-ri-am's arm, her sho-ul-der, her wrist, so-met-hing, an-yt-hing, to le-an on. But she didn't. She didn't da-re. She didn't da-re mo-ve a mus-cle. She didn't da-re bre-at-he, or blink even, for fe-ar that he was not-hing but a mi-ra-ge shim-me-ring in the dis-tan-ce, a brit-tle il-lu-si-on that wo-uld va-nish at the sligh-test pro-vo-ca-ti-on. La-ila sto-od per-fectly still and lo-oked at Ta-riq un-ti-i her chest scre-a-med for air and her eyes bur-ned to blink. And, so-me-how, mi-ra-cu-lo-usly, af-ter she to-ok a bre-ath, clo-sed and ope-ned her eyes, he was still stan-ding the-re. Ta-riq was still stan-ding the-re.

La-ila al-lo-wed her-self to ta-ke a step to-war-d him. Then anot-her. And anot-her. And then she was run-ning.

43.

Ma-dam

Upsta-irs, in Ma-ri-am's ro-om, Zal-mai was wo-und up. He bo-un-ced his new rub-ber bas-ket-ball aro-und for a whi-le, on the flo-or, aga-inst the walls. Ma-ri-am as-ked him not to, but he knew that she had no aut-ho-rit-y to exert over him and so he
went on boun-cing his ball, his eyes hol-ding hers de-fi-antly. For a while, they pus-hed his toy car, an am-bu-lan-ce with bold red let-ter-ring on the si-des, sen-ding it back and forth bet-we-en them ac-ross the ro-om.

Ear-li-er, when they had met Ta-riq at the do-or, Zal-mai had clutc-hed the bas-ket-ball clo-se to his chest and stuck a thumb in his mo-uth-so-met-hing he didn't do any-mo-re ex-cept when he was ap-pre-hen-si-ve. He had eyed Ta-riq with sus-pi-ci-on.
"Who is that man?" he sa-id now. "I don't li-ke him."

Ma-ri-am was go-ing to exp-la-in, say so-met-hing abo-ut him and La-ila gro-wing up to-get-her, but Zal-mai cut her off and sa-id to turn the am-bu-lan-ce aro-und, so the front gril-le fa-ced him, and, when she did, he sa-id he wan-ted his bas-ket-ball aga-in.
"Whe-re is it?" he sa-id. "Whe-re is the ball Ba-ba jan got me? Whe-re is it? I want it! I want it!" his vo-ice ri-sing and be-co-ming mo-re shrill with each word.

"It was just he-re," Ma-ri-am sa-id, and he cri-ed, "No, it's lost, I know it. I just know it's lost! Whe-re is it? Whe-re is it?"

"He-re," she sa-id, fetc-hing the ball from the clo-set whe-re it had rol-led to. But Zal-mai was baw-ling now and po-un-ding his fists, crying that it wasn't the sa-me ball, it co-uld'n't be, be-ca-use his ball was lost, and this was a fa-ke one, whe-re had his re-al ball go-ne? Whe-re? Whe-re whe-re whe-re?

He scre-amed un-til La-ila had to co-me ups-ta-irs to hold him, to rock him and run her fin-gers thro-ugh his tight, dark curls, to dry his mo-ist che-eks and cluck her ton-gue in his ear.

Ma-ri-am wa-ited out-si-de the ro-om. From atop the sta-ir-ca-se, all she co-uld see of Ta-riq we-re his long legs, the re-al one and the ar-ti-fi-ci-al one, in kha-ki pants, stre-tched out on the un-car-pe-ted li-ving-ro-om flo-or. It was then that she re-ali-zed why the do-or-man at the Con-ti-nen-tal had lo-oked fa-mi-li-ar to her ear-li-er. He'd be-en we-ar-ing a cap and sung-las-ses, that was why it hadn't co-me to her ear-li-er. But Ma-ri-am re-men-be-red now, from ni-ne ye-ars be-fo-re, re-men-be-red him sit-ting downs-ta-irs, pat-ting his brow with a hand-ker-chi-ef and as-king for wa-ter. Now all man-ner of qu-es-ti-ions ra-ced thro-ugh her mind: Had the sul-fa pills too be-en part of the ru-se? Which one of them had plot-ted the lie, pro-vi-ded the con-vin-cing de-ta-ils? And how much had Ras-he-ed pa-id Ab-dul Sha-rif-if that was even his na-me-to co-me and crush La-il-a with the story of Ta-riq's de-ath?

44.
La-ila

Iariq said that one of the men who shared his cell had a co-uncin who'd been publicly flogged on-the-for pub-licly flog-ed on-ce for pa-in-ting fla-min-gos. He, the co-uncin, had a se-eming in-cub-ral-ble thing for them.


"Fla-min-gos," La-ila said. She lo-oked at him sit-ting aga-inst the wall, his go-od leg bent at the knee. She had an ur-ge to to-uch him aga-in, as she had ear-li-er by the front ga-te when she'd run to him. It em-bar-ras-sed her now to think of how she'd thrown her arms aro-und his neck and wept in-to his chest, how she'd sa-id his na-me over and over in a slur-ring, thick vo-ice. Had she ac-ted too eagerly, she won-de-red, too des-pa-ra-tely? May-be so. But she hadn't be-en ab-le to help it. And now she lon-ged to to-uch him aga-in, to pro-ve to her-self aga-in that he was re-al-ly he-re, that he was not a dre-am, an ap-pa-ri-ti-on.

"Inde-ed," he said. "Fla-min-gos."

When the Ta-li-ban had fo-und the pa-in-tings, Ta-riq said, they'd ta-ken of-fen-se at the birds' long, ba-re legs. Af-ter they'd ti-ed the co-uncin's fe-et and flog-ged his so-les blo-ody, they had pre-sen-ted him with a cho-ice: Eit-her dest-roy the pa-in-tings or ma-ke the fla-min-gos de-cent. So the co-uncin had pic-ked up his brush and pa-in-ted tro-users on every last bird.

"And the-re you ha-ve it. Is-la-mic fla-min-gos," Ta-riq said-Laugh-ter ca-me up, but La-ila pus-hed it back down. She was as-ha-med of her yel-lo-wing te-eth, the mis-sing in-ci-sor-Asha-med of her wit-he-red lo-oks and swol-len lip. She wis-hed she'd had the chan-ce to wash her fa-ce, at le-ast comb her ha-ir.

"But he'll ha-ve the last la-ugh, the co-uncin," Ta-riq said- "He pa-in-ted tho-se tro-users with wa-ter-co-lor. When the Ta-li-ban are go-ne, he'll just wash them off" He smi-led-La-ila no-ti-ced that he had a mis-sing to-oth of his own and lo-oked down at his hands. "Inde-ed"

He was we-ar-ing apa-kol on his he-ad, hi-king bo-ots, and a black wo-ol swe-ater tuc-ked in-to the-wa-ist of kha-ki pants. He was half smi-ling, nod-ding slowly. La-ila didn't re-mem-ber him sa-ying this be-fo-re, this word-in-de-ed, and this pen-si-ve ges-tu-re, the fin-gers ma-king a tent in his lap, the nod-ding, it was new too. Such an adult word, such an adult ges-tu-re, and why sho-uld it be so start-ling? He was an adult now, Ta-riq, a twenty-fi-ve-ye-ar-old man with slow mo-ve-ments and a ti-red-ness to his smi-le. Tall, be-ar-ded, slim-mer than in her dre-ams of him, but with strong lo-oking hands, work-man's hands, with tor-tu-o-us ve-ins. His fa-ce was still le-an and hand-so-mo but not fa-ir-skin-ned any lon-ger; his brow had a
we-at-he-red lo-ok to it, sun-bur-ned, li-ke his neck, the brow of a tra-ve-ler at the end of a long and we-ar-ying jo-ur-ney. Hispa-kol was pus-hed back on his he-ad, and she co-uld see that he'd star-ted to lo-se his ha-ir. The ha-zel of his eyes was dul-ler than she re-mem-be-red, pa-ler, or per-haps it was me-rely the light in the ro-om.

La-ila tho-ught of Ta-riq's mot-her, her un-hur-ri-ed man-ners, the cle-ver smi-les, the dull purp-le wig. And his fat-her, with his squ-inty ga-ze, his wry hu-mor. Ear-li-er, at the do-or, with a vo-ice full of te-ars, trip-ping over her own words, she'd told Ta-riq what she tho-ught had hap-pe-n ed to him and his pa-rents, and he had sha-ken his he-ad. So now she as-ked him how they we-re do-ing, his pa-rents. But she reg-ret-ted the qu-es-ti-on when Ta-riq lo-oked down and sa-id, a bit dist-rac-tedly, "Pas-sed on."

"I'm so sorry."

"Well. Yes. Me too. He-re." He fis-hed a small pa-per bag from his poc-ket and pas-sed it to her. "Comp-li-ments of Al-yo-na." In-si-de was a block of che-ese in plas-tic wrap.

"Al-yo-na. It's a pretty na-me." La-ila tri-ed to say this next wit-ho-ut wa-iting for her to re-ti-eve a me-mory.

Then La-ila re-mem-be-red. The So-vi-et film. Al-yo-na had be-en the cap-ta-in's da-ugh-ter, the girl in lo-ve with the first ma-te. That was the day that she, Ta-riq, and Ha-si-na had watc-hed So-vi-et tanks and je-eps le-ave Ka-bul, the day Ta-riq had worn that ri-di-cu-lo-us Rus-si-an fur hat.

"I had to tie her to a sta-ke in the gro-und," Ta-riq was sa-ying. "And bu-ild a fen-ce. Be-ca-use of the wol-ves. In the fo-ot-hil-ls whe-re I li-ve, the-re's a wo-oded area ne-arby, may-be a qu-ar-ter of a mi-le away, pi-ne tre-es mostly, so-me fir, de-odars. They mostly stick to the wo-ods, the wol-ves do, but a ble-at-ing go-at, one that li-kes to go wan-de-ring, that can draw them out. So the fen-ce. The sta-ke."

La-ila as-ked him which fo-ot-hil-ls.

"Pir Pa-nj-aL Pa-kis-tan," he sa-id "Whe-re I li-ve is cal-led Mur-ree; it's a sum-mer ret-re-at, an ho-ur from Is-la-ma-bad. It's hilly and gre-en, lots of tre-es, high abo-ve sea le-vel So it's co-ol in the sum-mer. Per-feect for to-urists."

The Bri-tish had bu-ilt it as a hill sta-ti-on ne-ar the ir mi-li-tary he-ad-qu-ar-ters in Ra-wal-pin-di, he sa-id, for the Vic-to-ri-ans to es-ca-pe the he-at. You co-uld still spot a few re-lics of the co-lo-nil ti-mes, Ta-riq sa-id, the oc-ca-si-onal te-ar-oom,
tin-ro-ofed bun-ga-lows, cal-led cot-ta-ges, that sort of thing. The town it-self was small and ple-asant. The ma-in stre-et was cal-led the Mall, whe-re the-re was a post of-fi-ce, a ba-za-ar, a few res-ta-urants, shops that overc-har-ge-d to-urists for pa-in-ted glass and handk-not-ted car-pets. Cu-ri-o-usly, the Mall's one-way traf-fic flo-wed in one di-rec-ti-on on one we-ek, the op-po-si-te di-rec-ti-on on the next we-ek.


"With yo-ur go-at. With Al-yo-na."

La-ila me-ant this less as a joke than as a sur-rep-ti-ti-o-us entry in-to anot-her li-ne of talk, such as who el-se was the-re with him wor-rying abo-ut wol-ves eating go-ats. But Ta-riq only went on nod-ding.

"I'm sorry abo-ut yo-ur pa-rents too," he sa-id.

"You he-ard."

"I spo-ke to so-me ne-igh-bors ear-li-er," he sa-id. A pa-use, du-ring which La-ila won-de-red what el-se the ne-igh-bors had told him. "I don't re-cog-ni-ze any-body. From the old days, I me-an."

"They're all go-ne. The-re's no one left you'd know."

"I don't re-cog-ni-ze Ka-bul."

"Ne-it-her do I," La-ila sa-id. "And I ne-ver left."

* * *

"Mammy has a new fri-end," Zal-mai sa-id af-ter din-ner la-ter that sa-me night, af-ter Ta-riq had left. "A man."

Ras-he-ed lo-ok ed up."Do-es she, now?"

* * *

Ta-riqas-ked ifheco-uld smo-ke.

They had sta-yed aw-hi-le at the- Na-sir Bagh re-fu-gee camp ne-ar Pes-ha-war, Ta-riq sa-id, tap-ping ash in-to a sa-ucer. The-re we-re sixty tho-usand Afg-hans li-ving the-re al-re-ad-y when he and his pa-rents ar-ri-ved.
"It wasn't as bad as so-me of the ot-her camps li-ke, God for-bid, Jalo-zai," he sa-id. "I gu-ess at one po-int it was even

so-me kind of mo-del camp, back du-ring the Cold War, a pla-ce the West co-uld po-int to and pro-ve to the world they we-ren't just fun-nel ing arms in-to Afg-ha-nis-tan."

But that had be-en du-ring the So-vi-et war, Ta-riq sa-id, the days of jihad and world-wi-de in-te-rest and ge-ne-ro-ous fun-ding and vi-sits from Mar-ga-ret Thatc-her.

"You know the rest, La-ila. Af-ter the war, the So-vi-ets fell apart, and the West mo-ved on. The-re was not-h-ing at sta-ke for them in Afg-ha-nis-tan any-mo-re and the mo-ney dri-ed up. Now Na-sir Bagh is tents, dust, and open se-wers. When we got the-re, they han-ded us a stick and a she-et of can-vas and told us to bu-ild our-sel-ves a tent."


The-re was a le-af-less tree he clim-bed every day, whe-re he strad-dled a branch and watc-hed the re-fu-ge-es lying abo-ut in the sun, the-ir so-res and stumps in pla-in vi-ew. He watc-hed lit-tle ema-ci-ated boys car-rying wa-ter in the-ir jer-ry cans, gat-he-ring dog drop-pings to ma-ke fi-re, car-ving toy AK-47s out of wo-od with dull kni-ves, lug-ging the sacks of whe-at flo-ur that no one co-uld ma-ke bre-ad from that held to-get-her. All aro-und the re-fu-gee town, the wind ma-de the tents flap. It hur-led stub-bles of we-ed everyw-he-re, lif-ted ki-tes flown from the ro-ofs of mud ho-vels.

"A lot of kids di-ed. Dysen-tery, TB, hun-ger-you na-me it. Mostly, that damn dysen-tery. God, La-ila. I saw so many kids bu-ri-ed. The-re's not-h-ing wor-se a per-son can see."

He cros-sed his legs. It grew qu-i-et aga-in bet-we-en them for a whi-le.

"My fat-her didn't sur-vi-ve that first win-ter," he sa-id. "He di-ed in his sle-ep. I don't think the-re was any pa-in."

That sa-me win-ter, he sa-id, his mot-her ca-ught pne-umo-nia and al-most di-ed, wo-uld ha-ve di-ed, if not for a camp doc-tor who wor-ked out of a sta-tion wa-gon ma-de in-to a mo-bi-le cli-nic. She wo-uld wa-ke up all night long, fe-ve-rid, co-ug-hing out thick, rust-co-lo-red phlegm. The qu-e-u-es we-re long to see the doc-tor, Ta-riq sa-id. Ever-yo-ne was shi-ve-ring in li-ne, mo-aning, co-ug-hing, so-me with shit run-ning down the-ir legs, ot-hers too ti-red or hungry or sick to ma-ke words.
"But he was a de-cent man, the doc-tor. He tre-at-ed my mot-her, ga-ve her so-me pills, sa-ved her li-fe that win-ter."

That sa-me win-ter, Ta-riq had cor-ne-red a kid.

"Twel-ve, may-be thir-te-en ye-ars old," he sa-id evenly. "I held a shard of glass to his thro-at and to-ok his blan-ket from him. I ga-ve it to my mot-her."

He ma-de a vow to him-self, Ta-riq sa-id, af-ter his mot-her's il-lness, that they wo-uld not spend anot-her win-ter in camp. He'd work, sa-ve, mo-ve them to an apart-ment in Pes-ha-war with he-at-ing and cle-an wa-ter. When spring ca-me, he lo-oked for work. From ti-me to ti-me, a truck ca-me to camp early in the mor-ning and ro-un-ded up a co-up-le of do-zen boys, to-ok them to a fi-eld to mo-ve sto-nes or an orc-hard to pick ap-ples in exc-han-ge for a lit-tle mo-ney, so-me-ti-mes a blan-ket, a pa-ir of sho-es. But they ne-ver wan-ted him, Ta-riq sa-id.

"One lo-ok at my leg and it was over."

The-re we-re ot-her jobs. Ditc-hes to dig, ho-vels to bu-ild, wa-ter to carry, fe-ces to sho-vel from out-ho-uses. But yo-ung men fo-ught over the-se jobs, and Ta-riq ne-ver sto-od a chan-ce-Then he met a shop-ke-e-per one day, that fall of 1993.

"He of-fe-red me mo-ney to ta-ke a le-at-her co-at to La-ho-re. Not a lot but eno-ugh, eno-ugh for one or may-be two months' apart-ment rent."

The shop-ke-e-per ga-ve him a bus tic-ket, Ta-riq sa-id, and the ad-dress of a stre-et cor-ner ne-ar the La-ho-re Ra-il Sta-ti-on whe-re he was to de-li-ver the co-at to a fri-end of the shop-ke-e-per's.

"I knew al-re-ady. Of co-ur-se I knew," Ta-riq sa-id. "He sa-id that if I got ca-ught, I was on my own, that I sho-uld re-mem-ber that he knew whe-re my mot-her li-ved. But the mo-ney was too go-od to pass up. And win-ter was co-ming aga-in."

"How far did you get?" La-il-a as-ked.

"Not far," he sa-id and la-ug-hed, so-un-ding apo-lo-ge-tic, as-ha-med. "Ne-ver even got on the bus. But I tho-ugh I was im-mu-ne, you know, sa-fe. As tho-ugh the-re was so-me ac-co-un-tant up the-re so-mew-he-re, a guy with a pen-cil tuc-ked be-hind his ear who kept track of the-se things, who tal-li-ed things up, and he'd lo-ok down and say, 'Yes, yes, he can ha-ve this, we'll let it go. He's pa-id so-me du-es al-re-ady, this one.'"

It was in the se-ams, the has-hish, and it spil-led all over the stre-et when the po-li-ce to-ok a kni-fe to the co-at.
Ta-riq la-ug-hed aga-in when he sa-id this, a clim-bing, shaky kind of la-ugh, and La-ila re-mem-be-red how he used to la-ugh li-ke this when they we-re lit-tle, to clo-ak em-bar-ras-sment, to ma-ke light of things he'd do-ne that we-re fo-ol-hardy or scan-da-lo-us.

* * *

"He has A limp," Zal-mai sa-id. "Is this who I think it is?"

"He was only vi-si-ting," Ma-ri-am sa-id.


"You du-ped me. You li-ed to me," La-ila sa-id, grit-ting her te-eth. "You had that man sit ac-ross from me and… You knew I wo-uld le-ave if I tho-ught he was ali-ve."

"AND YOU DIDN'T LIE TO ME?" Ras-he-ed ro-ared. "You think I didn't fi-gu-re it out? Abo-ut yo-ur ha-ra-mil You ta-ke me for a fo-ol, you who-re?"

* * *

The mo-re Ta-riq tal-ked, the mo-re La-ila dre-aded the mo-ment when he wo-uld stop. The si-len-ce that wo-uld fol-low, the sig-nal that it was her turn to gi-ve ac-co-unt, to pro-vi-de the why and how and when, to ma-ke of-fi-ci-al what he su-rely al-re-ady knew. She felt a fa-int na-usea whe-ne-ver he pa-used. She aver-ted his eyes. She lo-oked down at his hands, at the co-ar-se, dark ha-irs that had spro-uted on the back of them in the in-ter-ve-ning ye-ars.

Ta-riq wo-uld'n't say much abo-ut his ye-ars in pri-son sa-ve that he'd le-ar-ned to spe-ak Ur-du the-re. When La-ila as-ked, he ga-ve an im-pa-ti-ent sha-ke of his he-ad. In this ges-tu-re, La-ila saw rusty bars and un-was-hed bo-di-es, vi-olent men and crow-ded halls, and ce-ilings rot-ting with moldy de-po-sits. She re-ad in his fa-ce that it had be-en a pla-ce of aba-se-ment, of deg-ra-da-ti-on and des-pa-ir.

Ta-riq sa-id his mot-her tri-ed to vi-sit him af-ter his ar-rest.

"Three ti-mes she ca-me. But I ne-ver got to see her," he sa-id.

He wro- te her a let-ter, and a few mo-re af-ter that, even tho-ugh he do-ub-ted that she wo-uld re-ce-ive them.
"And I wro-te you."

"You did?"

"Oh, vo-lu-mes," he sa-id. "Yo-ur fri-end Ru-mi wo-uld ha-ve en-vi-ed my pro-duc-ti-on." Then he la-ug-hed aga-in, up-ro-ari-o-usly this ti-me, as tho-ugh he was both start-led at his own bold-ness and em-bar-ras-sed by what he had let on.

Zal-mai be-gan baw-ling ups-ta-irs.

* * *

"Just li-ke old ti-mes, then," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "The two of you. I sup-po-se you let him see yo-ur fa-ce."

"She did," sa-id Zal-mai. Then, to La-ila, "You did, Mammy. I saw you."

* * *

"Yo-ur son do-esn't ca-re for me muc h," Ta-riq sa-id when La-ila re-tur-ned down-irs.

"I'm sorry," she sa-id. "It's not that. He just…Don't mind him." Then qu-ickly she chan-ge-d the su-bj-ect be-ca-use it ma-de her fe-el per-ver-se and gu-il-ty to fe-el that abo-ut Zal-mai, who was a child, a lit-tle boy who lo-ved his fat-her, who-se ins-tinc-ti-ve aver-si-on to this stran-ger was un-ders-tan-dab-le and le-gi-ti-ma-te.

And I wro-te you.

"How long ha-ve you be-en in Mur-ree?"

"Less than a ye-ar," Ta-riq sa-id. He bef-ri-en-ded an ol-der man in pri-son, he sa-id, a fel-low na-med Sa-lim, a Pa-kis-ta-ni, a for-mer fi-el-d hoc-key pla-yer who had be-en in and out of pri-son for ye-ars and who was ser-ving ten ye-ars for stab-bing an un-der-co-ver po-li-ce-man. Every pri-son has a man li-ke Sa-lim, Ta-riq sa-id. The-re was al-ways so-me-one who was cun-ning and con-nec-ted, who wor-ked the sys-tem and fo-und you things, so-me-one aro-und whom the air buz-zed with both op-por-tu-ni-ty and dan-ger. It was Sa-lim who had sent out Ta-riq's qu-eri-es abo-ut his mot-her, Sa-lim who had sat him down and told him, in a soft, fat-herly vo-ice, that she had di-ed of ex-po-su-re.

Ta-riq spent se-ven ye-ars in the Pa-kis-ta-ni pri-son. "I got off easy," he sa-id. "I was lucky. The jud-ge sit-ting on my ca-se, it tur-ned out, had a brot-her who'd mar-ri-ed an Afg-han wo-man. May-be he sho-wed mercy. I don't know."
When Ta-riq's sen-ten-ce was up, early in the win-ter of 2000, Sa-lim ga-ve him his brot-her's ad-dress and pho-ne num-ber. The brot-her's na-me was Sa-ye-ed.

"He sa-id Sa-ye-ed ow-ned a small ho-tel in Mur-ree," Ta-riq sa-id. "Twenty ro-oms and a lo-un-ge, a lit-tle pla-ce to ca-ter to to-urists. He sa-id tell him I sent you."

Ta-riq had li-ked Mur-ree as so-on as he'd step-ped off the bus: the snow-la-den pi-nes; the cold, crisp air; the shut-te-red wo-oden cot-ta-ges, smo-ke cur-ling up from chim-neys.

He-re was a pla-ce, Ta-riq had tho-ught, knoc-king on Sa-ye-ed's do-or, a pla-ce not only worlds re-mo-ved from the wretc-hed-ness he'd known but one that ma-de even the no-ti-on of hards-hip and sor-row so-me-how obs-ce-ne, uni-ma-gi-nab-le.

"I sa-id to myself, he-re is a pla-ce whe-re a man can get on."

Ta-riq was hi-red as a ja ni-tor and handy-man. He did well, he sa-id, du-ring the one-month tri-al pe-ri-od, at half pay, that Sa-ye-ed gran-ted him. As Ta-riq spo-ke, La-ila saw Sa-ye-ed, whom she ima-gi-ned nar-row-eyed and rud-dy-fa-ced, stan-ding at the re-cep-ti-on of-fi-ce win-dow watc-hing Ta-riq chop wo-od and sho-vel snow off the dri-ve-way. She saw him sto-oping over Ta-riq's legs, ob-ser-ving, as Ta-riq lay be-ne-ath the sink fi-xing a le-aky pi-pe. She pic-tu-red him chec-king the re-gis-ter for mis-sing cash.

Ta-riq's shack was be-si-de the co-ok's lit-tle bun-ga-low, he sa-id. The co-ok was a mat-ronly old wi-dow na-med Adi-ba. Both shacks we-re de-tac-hed from the ho-tel it-self, se-pa-rated from the ma-in bu-il-ding by a scat-te-ring of al-mond tre-es, a park bench, and a py-ra-mid-sha-ped sto-ne fo-un-ta-in that, in the sum-mer, gurg-led wa-ter all day. La-ila pic-tu-red Ta-riq in his shack, sit-ting up in bed, watc-hing the le-afy world out-si-de his win-dow.

At the end of the gra-ce pe-ri-od, Sa-ye-ed ra-ised Ta-riq's pay to full, told him his lunc-hes we-re free, ga-ve him a wo-ol co-at, and fit-ted him for a new leg. Ta-riq sa-id he'd wept at the man's kind-ness.

With his first month's full sa-lary in his poc-ket, Ta-riq had go-ne to town and bo-ught Al-yo-na.

"Her fur is per-fectly whi-te," Ta-riq sa-id, smi-ling. "So-me mor-nings, when it's sno- wed all night, you lo-ok out the win-dow and all you see of her is two eyes and a muz-zle."

La-ila nod-ded Anot-her si-len-ce en-su-ed Ups-ta-irs, Zal-mai had be-gun bo-un-cing his ball aga-in aga-inst the wall.
"I thou-ght you we-re de-ad," La-ila sa-id.

"I know. You told me."

La-ila's vo-ice bro-ke. She had to cle-ar her thro-at, co l-lect her-self. "The man who ca-me to gi-ve the news, he was so ear-nest…be-li-eved him, Ta-riq. I wish I hadn't, but I did. And then I felt so alo-ne and sea-red. Ot-her-wi-se, I wo-uldn't ha-ve ag-re-ed to mar-ry Ras-he-ed. I wo-uldn't ha-ve…"

"You don't ha-ve to do this," he sa-id softly, avo-iding her eyes. The-re was no hid-den rep-ro-ach, no rec-ri-mi-na-ti-on, in the way he had sa-id this. No sug-ges-ti-on of bla-me.

"But I do. Be-ca-use the-re was a big-ger re-ason why I mar-ri-ed him. The-re's so-met-hing you don't know, Ta-riq. So-me-one. I ha-ve to tell you."

* * *

"Did you srr and talk with him too?" Ras-he-ed as-ked Zal-mai.

Zal-mai sa-id not-hing. La-ila saw he-si-ta-ti-on and un-cer-ta-inty in his eyes now, as if he had just re-al-i-zed that what he'd disc-lo-sed had tur-ned out to be far big-ger than he'd tho-ught.

"I as-ked you a qu-es-ti-on, boy."

Zal-mai swal-lo-wed. His ga-ze kept shif-ting. "I was ups-ta-irs, pla-y-ing with Ma-ri-am."

"And yo-ur mot-her?"

Zal-mai lo-oked at La-ila apo-lo-ge-ti-cal-ly, on the ver-ge of te-ars.

"It's all right, Zal-mai," La-ila sa-id. "Tell the truth."

"She was…She was downs-ta-irs, tal-king to that man," he sa-id in a thin vo-ice hardly lo-uder than a whis-per.

"I see," sa-id Ras-he-ed. "Te-am-work."

* * *

As he was le-aving, Ta-riq sa-id, "I want to me-et her. I want to see her."

"I'll ar-ran-ge it," La-ila sa-id.
"Azi-za. Azi-za." He smiled, tasting the word. Whe-ne-ver Ras-he-ed ut-te-red her da-ugh-ter's na-me, it ca-me out so-un-ding unw-ho-le-so-me to La-ila, al-most vul-gar.

"Azi-za. It's lo-vely."

"So is she. You'll see."

"I'll co-unt the mi-nu-tes."

Almost ten ye-ars had pas-sed sin-ce they had last se-en each ot-her. La-ila's mind flas-hed to all the ti-mes they'd met in the al-ley, kis-sing in sec-ret. She won-de-red how she must se-em to him now. Did he still find her pretty? Or did she se-em wit-he-red to him, re-du-ced, pi-ti-ab-le, li-ke a fe-ar-ful, shuf-fling old wo-man?

Al-most ten ye-ars. But, for a mo-men-t, stan-ding the-re with Ta-riq in the sun-light, it was as tho-ugh tho-se ye-ars had ne-ver hap-pe-ned. Her pa- rents' de-aths, her mar-ri-age to Ras-he-ed, the kil-lings, the Ta-li-ban, the be-atings, the hun-ger, even her child-ren, all of it se-emed li-ke a dre-am, a bi-zar-re de-to-ur, a me-re in-ter-lu-de bet-we-en that last af-ter-no-on to-get-her and this mo-men-t.

Then Ta-riq's fa-ce chan-ged, tur-ned gra-ve. She knew this exp-res-si-on. It was the sa-me lo-ok he'd had on his fa-ce that day, all tho-se ye-ars ago when they'd both be-en child-ren, when he'd unst-rap-ped his leg and go-ne af-ter Kha-dim. He re-ac-hed with one hand now and to-uc-hed the co-mer of her lo-wer lip.

"He did this to you," he sa-id coldly.

At his to-uch, La-ila re-men-be-red the frenzy of that af-ter-no-on aga-in when they'd con-ce-ived Azi-za. His bre-ath on her neck, the musc-les of his hips fle-xing, his chest pres-sing aga-inst her bre-asts, the-ir hands in-ter-loc-ked.

"I wish I'd ta-ken you with me," Ta-riq ne-arly whis-pe-red.

La-ila had to lo-wer her ga-ze, try not to cry.

"I know you're a mar-ri-ed wo-man and a mot-her now. And he-re I am, af-ter all the-se ye-ars, af-ter all that's hap-pe-ned, sho-wing up at yo-ur do-ors-tep. Pro-bably, it isn't pro-per, or fa-ir, but I've co-me such a long way to see you, and… Oh, La-ila, I wish I'd ne-ver left you."

"Don't," she cro-aked.

"I sho-uld ha-ve tri-ed har-der. I sho-uld ha-ve mar-ri-ed you when I had the chan-ce. Everyt-hing wo-uld ha-ve be-en dif-fe-rent, then."

"Don't talk this way. Ple-as-e. It hurts."
He nodded, started to take a step toward her, then stopped himself. "I don't want to assume anything. And I don't mean to turn your life upside down, appearing like this out of nowhere. If you want me to leave, if you want me to go back to Pakistan, say the word, La-ila. I mean it. Say it and I'll go. I'll never trouble you again. I'll-"

"No!" La-ila said more sharply than she'd intended to. She saw that she'd reached for his arm, that she was clutching it. She dropped her hand. "No. Don't leave, Ta-riq. No. Please stay."

Ta-riq nodded.

"He works from noon to eight. Come back tomorrow afternoon. I'll take you to Azi-za."

"I'm not afraid of him, you know."

"I know. Come back tomorrow afternoon."

"And then?"

"And then... I don't know. I have to think. This is..."

"I know it is," he said. "I understand. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for a lot of things."

"Don't be. You promised you'd come back. And you did."

His eyes watered. "It's good to see you, La-ila."
She watched him walk away, shivering where she stood. She thought, Volumes, and another shudder passed through her, a current of something sad and forlorn, but also something eager and recklessly hopeful.

45.

Ma-dam

I was upstairs, playing with Ma-ri-am," Zal-mai said.

"And your mother?"
"She was... She was downstairs, talking to that man."

"I see," said Ras-he-ed. "Te-am-work."
Ma-ri-am watc-hed his fa-ce re-lax, lo-o sen. She watc-hed the folds cle-ar from his brow. Sus-pi-ci-on and mis-gi-v ing win-ked out of his eyes. He sat up stra-ight, and, for a few bri-ef mo-ments, he ap-pe-ared me-rely tho-ught-ful, li-ke a cap-ta-in in-for-med of im-mi-nent mu-tiny ta-king his ti-me to pon-der his next mo-ve.

He lo-oked up.

Ma-ri-am be-gan to say so-met-hing, but he ra-ised a hand, and, wit-ho-ut lo-oking at her, sa-id, "It's too la-te, Ma-ri-am."

To Zal-mai he sa-id coldly, "You're go-ing ups-ta-irs, boy."

On Zal-mai's fa-ce, Ma-ri-am saw alarm. Ner-vo-usly, he lo-oked aro-und at the three of them. He sen-sed now that his tat-tle-ta-le ga-me had let so-met-hing se-ri-o-us-adult se-ri-o-us-into the ro-om. He cast a des- pon-dent, cont-ri-te glan-ce to-ward Ma-ri-am, then his mot-her.

In a chal-len-ging vo-ice, Ras-he-ed sa-id, "Now!"

He to-ok Zal-mai by the el-bow. Zal-mai me-ekly let him-self be led ups-ta-irs.

They sto-od fro-zen, Ma-ri-am and La-il-a, eyes to the gro-und, as tho-ugh lo-oking at each ot-her wo-uld gi-ve cre-den-ce to the way Ras-he-ed saw things, that whi-le he was ope-ning do-ors and lug-ging bag-ga-ge for pe-op-le who wo-uld'n't spa-re him a glan-ce a lewd cons-pi-racy was sha-ping be-hind his back, in his ho-me, in his be-lo-ved son's pre-sen-ce. Ne-it-her one of them sa-id a word. They lis-te-ned to the fo-ots-teps in the hal-lway abo-ve, one he-avy and fo-re-bo-ding, the ot-her the pat-te-ring of a skittish lit-tle ani-mal. They lis-te-ned to mu-ted words pas-sed, a squ-e-aky plea, a curt re-tort, a do-or shut, the rat-tle of a key as it tur-ned. Then one set of fo-ots-teps re-tur-ning, mo-re im-pa-ti-ent-ly now.

Ma-ri-am saw his fe-et po-un-ding the steps as he ca-me down. She saw him poc-ke-ting the key, saw his belt, the per-fo-ra-ted end wrap-ped tightly aro-und his knuck-les. The fa-ke brass buck-le drag-ge-d be-hind him, bo-un-cing on the steps.

She went to stop him, but he sho-ved her back and blew by her. Wit-ho-ut sa-ying a word, he swung the belt at La-il-a. He di-ved it with such spe-ed that she had no ti-me to ret-re-at or duck, or even ra-ise a pro-tec-ti-ve arm. La-il-a to-uc hed her fin-gers to her temp-le, lo-oked at the blo-od, lo-oked at Ras-he-ed, with as-to-ni-sh-ment. It las-ted only a mo-ment or two, this lo-ok of dis-be-li-ef, be fo-re it was rep-la-ced by so-met-hing ha-te-ful.

Ras-he-ed swung the belt aga-in.

This ti-me, La-il-a shi-el-ded her-self with a fo-re-arm and ma-de a grab at the belt. She mis-sed, and Ras-he-ed bro-ught the belt down aga-in. La-il-a ca-ught it bri-efly be-fo-re Ras-he-ed yan-ked it free and las-hed at her aga-in. Then La-il-a was das-hing
around the room, and Mariam was screaming words that ran to get her and
implooring Rasheed, as he chased Laila, as he blocked her way and cracked his
belt at her. At one point, Laila ducked and managed to land a punch across his
ear, which made him spit a curse and pursue her even more relentlessly. He
cought her, threw her up against the wall, and struck her with the belt again and
again, the buckle slamming against her chest, her shoulder, her raised arms, her
fingers, dra-wing blo-od whe-re-ve-ry it struck.

Mariam lost count of how many times the belt cracked, how many pleading
words she cried out to Rasheed, how many times she circled around the
incoherent tangle of teeth and fists and belt, before she saw fingers clawing at
Rasheed's face, chip-ped nails digging into his jowls and pull-ling at his hair and
scratc-hing his fo-re-he-ad. How long be-fo-re she re-ali-zed, with both shock and
re-li-sh, that the fin-gers we-re hers.

He let go of Laila and turned on her. At first, he lo-oked at her wit-ho-ut see-ing
her, then his eyes nar-ro-wed, ap-pra-ised Ma-ri-am with in-te-rest. The lo-ok in them
shif- ted from puz-zle-ment to shock, then di-sap-pro-int-ment even,
lin-ge-ring the re a mo-ment.

Mariam re-mem-be-red the first ti-me she had se-en his eyes, un-der the wed-ding
ve-il, in the mir-ror, with Jalil look-ing on, how their gazes had slid across the glass
and met, his in-dif-fe-rent, hers do-ci-le, con-ce-ding, al-most apo-lo-ge-tic.

Apo-lo-ge-tic.

Mariam saw now in tho-se sa-me eyes what a fool she had be-en.
Had she been a de-ce-it-ful wi-fe? sh-e as- ked her-self. A comp-la-cent wi-fe? A
dis-ho-no-rab-le wo-man? Disc-re-di-tab-le? Vul-gar? What harm-ful thing had she
wil-lful-ly do-ne to this man to war-rant his ma-li-ce, his con-ti-nu-al as-sa-ults, the
re-li-sh with which he tor-men-ted her? Had she not looked af-ter him when he was ill?
Fed him, and his fri-ends, cle-aned up af-ter him du-ti-ful-ly?

Had she not gi-ven this man her yo-uth?
Had she ever justly de-ser-ved his me-an-ness?

The belt made a thump when Rasheed dropped it to the ground and came for
her. So-me jobs, thatthump sa-id, we-re me-ant to be do-ne with ba-re hands.

But just as he was bearing down on her, Mariam saw Laila be-hind him pick
so-mething up from the ground. She watched Laila's hand rise over-he-ad, hold,
then come swooping down aga-inst the side of his face. Glass shat-te-red. The
jag-ged re-ma-ins of the drink-ing glass ra-ined down to the ground. The-re was
blo-od on Laila's hands, blo-od flo-wing from the open gash on Rashe-ed's che-ek,
blood down his neck, on his shirt. He tur-ned aro-und, all snar-ling te-eth and bla-zing eyes.

They cras-hed to the gro-und, Ras-he-ed and La-ila, thras-hing abo-ut. He en-ded up on top, his hands al-re-ady wrap-ped aro-und La-ila's neck.

Ma-ri-am cla-wed at him. She be-at at his chest. She hur-led her-self aga-inst him. She strug-gled to un-curl his fin-gers from La-ila's neck. She bit them. But they re-ma-ined tightly clam-ped aro-und La-ila's wind-pi-pe, and Ma-ri-am saw that he me-ant to carry this thro-ugh.

He me-ant to suf-fo-ca-te her, and the-re was not-hing eit-her of them co-uld do abo-ut it.

Ma-ri-am bac-ked away and left the ro-om. She was awa-re of a thum-ping so-und from ups-ta-irs, awa-re that tiny palms we-re slap-ping aga-inst a loc-ked do-or. She ran down the hal-lway. She burst thro-ugh the front do-or. Cros-sed the yard.

In the to-ols-hed, Ma-ri-am grab-bed the sho-vel. Ras-he-ed didn't no-ti-ce her co-ming back in-to the ro-om. He was still on top of La-ila, his eyes wi-de and crazy, his hands wrap-ped aro-und her neck. La-ila's fa-ce was tur-ning blue now, and her eyes had rol-led back. Ma-ri-am saw that she was no lon-ger strug-gling. He's go-ing to kill her, she tho-ught. He re-al-ly me-ans to. And Ma-ri-am co-uld not, wo-uld not, al-low that to hap-pen. He'd ta-ken so much from her in twenty-se-ven ye-ars of mar-ri-age. She wo-uld not watch him ta-ke La-ila too.

Ma-ri-am ste-adi-ed her fe-et and tigh-te-ned her grip aro-und the sho-vel's hand-les. She ra-ised it. She sa-id his na-me. She wan-ted him to see.

"Ras-he-ed."

He lo-ok-ed up.
Ma-ri-am swung.
She hit him ac-ross the temp-le. The blow knoc-ked him off La-ila.

Ras-he-ed to-uc-hed his he-ad with the palm of his hand. He lo-ok-ed at the blo-od on his fin-ger-tips, then at Ma-ri-am. She tho-ught she saw his fa-ce sof-ten. She ima-gi-ned that so-met-hing had pas-sed bet-we-en them, that may-be she had qu-ite li-te-ral-ly knoc-ked so-me un-ders-tan-ding in-to his he-ad. May-be he saw so-met-hing in her fa-ce too, Ma-ri-am tho-ught, so-met-hing that ma-de him hed-ge. May-be he saw so-met-hing in her fa-ce too, Ma-ri-am tho-ught, so-met-hing that ma-de him hed-ge. May-be he saw so-met-hing in her fa-ce too, Ma-ri-am tho-ught, so-met-hing that ma-de him hed-ge. May-be he saw so-met-hing in her fa-ce too, Ma-ri-am tho-ught, so-met-hing that ma-de him hed-ge. May-be he saw so-met-hing in her fa-ce too, Ma-ri-am tho-ught, so-met-hing that ma-de him hed-ge. Was that re-spect she saw in his eyes? Reg-ret?
But then his upper lip curled back into a spiteful sneer, and Mariam knew then the futility, maybe even the irresponsibility, of not finishing this. If she let him walk now, how long before he fetched the key from his pocket and went for that gun of his upstairs in the room where he'd locked Zalmai? Had Mariam been certain that he would be satisfied with shooting only her, that there was a chance he would spare Laila, she might have dropped the shovel. But in Rasheed's eyes she saw murder for them both.

And so Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could, arching it so it touched the small of her back. She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time she was deciding the course of her own life.

And, with that, Mariam brought down the shovel. This time, she gave it everything she had.

Laila

Laila was aware of the face over her, all teeth and tobacco and foreboding eyes. She was dimly aware, too, of Mariam, a presence beyond the face, of her fists raining down. Above them was the ceiling, and it was the ceiling Laila was drawn to, the dark markings of mold spreading across it like ink on a dress, the crack in the plaster that was a stubborn smile or a frown, depending on which end of the room you looked at it from. Laila thought of all the times she had tied a rag around the end of a broom and cleaned cobwebs from this ceiling. The three times she and Mariam had put coats of white paint on it. The crack wasn't a smile any longer but a mocking leer. And it was receding. The ceiling was shrinking, lifting, rising away from her and toward some hazy dimness beyond. It rose until it shrank to the size of a postage stamp, white and bright, everything around it blotted out by the shutted darkness. In the dark, Rasheed's face was like a sunspot.

Brief little bursts of blinding light before her eyes now, like silver stars exploding. Bizarre geometric forms in the light, worms, egg-shaped things, moving up and down, sideways, melting into each other, breaking apart, morphing into something else, then fading, giving way to blackness.

Voices muffled and distant.

Behind the lids of her eyes, her children's faces flared and fizzled. Aziiza, alert and burdened, knowing, secret. Zalmai, looking up at his father with quivering eagerness.
It would end like this, then, Laila thought. What a pitiable end! But then the darkness began to lift. She had a sensation of rising up, of being hoisted up. The ceiling slowly came back, expanded, and now Laila could make out the crack again, and it was the same old dull smile.

She was being shaken. *Are you all right? Answer me, are you all right?* Mariam's face, eng-raved with scrathes, heavy with worry, ho-ve-red over Laila.

Laila tried a breath. It burned her throat. She tried another. It burned even more this time, and not just her throat but her chest too. And then she was co-ug-hing, and wheezing. Gasping. But bre-at-hing. Her go-od ear rang.

* * *

The first thing she saw when she sat up was Rashid. He was lying on his back, sta-ring at not-hing with an unb-lin-king, fish-mo-ut-hed exp-res-si-on. A bit of fo-am, lightly pink, had drib-bled from his mo-uth down his che-ek. The front of his pants was wet. She saw his fo-re-he-ad.

Then she saw the sho-vel.

A gro-an ca-me out of her. "Oh," she sa-id, tre-mu-lo-usly, ba-rely ab-le to ma-ke a vo-ice, "Oh, Ma-ri-am."

* * *

Laila pa-ced, mo-aning and ban-ging her hands to-get-her, as Ma-ri-am sat ne-ar Ras-he-ed, her hands in her lap, calm and mo-ti-on-less. Ma-ri-am didn't say anyt-hing for a long ti-me.

Laila's mo-uth was dry, and she was stam-me-ring her words, tremb-ling all over. She wil-led her-self not to lo-ok at Ras-he-ed, at the ric-tus of his mo-uth, his open eyes, at the blo-od con-ge-aling in the hol-low of his col-lar-bo-ne.

Out-si-de, the light was fa-ding, the sha-dows de-pe-ning. Ma-ri-am's fa-ce lo-oked thin and drawn in this light, but she did not ap-pe-ar agi-ta-ted or frigh-te-ned, me-rely pre-oc-cu-pi-ed, tho-ught-ful, so self-pos-ses-sed that when a fly lan-ded on her chin she pa-id it no at-ten-ti-on. She just sat the-re with her bot -tom lip stuck out, the way she did when she was ab-sor-bed in tho-ught.

At last, she sa-id, "Sit down, Laila jo."

Laila did, obe-di-ently.
"We ha-ve to mo-ve him. Zal-mai can't see this."

***

Ma-ri-am fis-hed the bed-ro-om key from Ras-he-ed's poc-ket be-fo-re they wrap-ped him in a beds-he-et. La-ila to-ok him by the legs, be-hind the kne-es, and Ma-ri-am grab-bed him un-der the arms. They tri-ed lif-ting him, but he was too he-avy, and they en-ded up drag-ging him. As they we-re pas-sing thro-ugh the front do-or and in-to the yard, Ras-he-ed's fo-ot ca-ught aga-inst the do-or-f-ra-me and his leg bent si-de-ways. They had to back up and try aga-in, and then so-met-hing thum-ped ups-ta-irs and La-ila's legs ga-ve out. She drop-ped Ras-he-ed. She slum-ped to the gro-und, sob-bing and sha-king, and Ma-ri-am had to stand over her, hands on hips, and say that she had to get her-self to-get-her. That what was do-ne was do-ne-After a ti-me, La-ila got up and wi-ped her fa-ce, and they car-ri-ed Ras-he-ed to the yard wit-ho-ut fur-tur-e in-ci-dent. They to-ok him in-to the to-ols-hed. They left him be-hind the work-bench, on which sat his saw, so-me na-ils, a chi-sel, a ham-mer, and a cylind-ri-cal block of wo-od that Ras-he-ed had be-en me-aning to car-ve in-to so-met-hing for Zal-mai but had ne-ver got-ten aro-und to do-ing. Then they went back in-si-de. Ma-ri-am was-hed her hands, ran them thro-ugh her ha-ir, to-ok a de-ep bre-ath and let it out. "Let me tend to yo-ur wo-unds now. You're all cut up, La-ila jo."

***

Ma-hi-am sa-id she ne-eded the night to think things over. To get her tho-ughts to-get-her and de-vi-se a plan.

"The-re is a way," she sa-id, "and I just ha-ve to find it."

"We ha-ve to le-ave! We can't stay he-re," La-ila sa-id in a bro-ken, husky vo-ice. She tho-ught sud-denly of the so-und the sho-vel must ha-ve ma-de stri-king Ras-he-ed's he-ad, and her body pitc-hed for-ward. Bi-le sur-ged up her chest.

Ma-ri-am wa-ited pa-ti-ently un-til La-ila felt bet-ter. Then she had La-ila lie down, and, as she stro-ked La-ila's ha-ir in her lap, Ma-ri-am sa-id not to worry, that everyt-hing wo-uld be fi-ne. She sa-id that they wo-uld le-ave she, La-ila, the child-ren, and Ta-riq too. They wo-uld le-ave this ho-use, and this un-for-gi-ving city. They wo-uld le-ave this des-pon-dent co-ountry al-to-get-her, Ma-ri-am sa-id, run-ning her hands thro-ugh La-ila's ha-ir, and go so-mep-la-ce re-mo-te and sa-fe whe-re no one wo-uld find them, whe-re they co-uld di-sown the-i r past and find shel-ter.


They wo-uld li-ve in a small ho-use on the ed-ge of so-me town they'd ne-ver he-ard of, Ma-ri-am sa-id, or in a re-mo-te vil-la-ge whe-re the ro-ad was nar-row and
un-paved but lined with all manner of plants and shrubs. Maybe the road would be a path to take, a path that led to a grass field where the children could play, or maybe a grave-led road that would take them to a clear blue lake where trout swam and reeds poked through the surface. They would raise sheep and chickens, and they would make bread together and teach the children to read. They would make new lives for themselves—peaceful, solitary lives—and the weight of all that they'd endured would lift from them, and they would be deserving of all the happiness and simple prosperity they would find.

Laila murmured encouragingly. It would be an existence ripe with difficulties, she saw, but of a pleasing kind, difficulties they could take pride in, possess, value, as one would a family heirloom. Mariam's soft maternal voice went on, brought a degree of comfort to her. There is a way, she'd said, and, in the morning, Mariam would tell her what needed to be done and they would do it, and maybe by tomorrow this time they would be on their way to this new life, a life lucent with possibility and joy and welcomed difficulties. Laila was grateful that Mariam was in charge, uncluttered and sober, able to think this through for both of them. Her own mind was a jittery, muddled mess.

Mariam got up. "You should tend to your son now." On her was the most stricken expression Laila had ever seen on a human face.

* * *

Laila found him in the dark, curled up on Rashid's side of the mattress. She slipped beneath the covers beside him and pulled the blanket over them.

"Are you asleep?"

Without turning around to face her, he said, "Can't sleep yet. Baba jan hasn't said the Baba loo prayers with me."

"Maybe I can say them with you tonight."

"You can't say them like he can."

She squeezed his little shoulder. Kissed the nape of his neck. "I can try."

"Where is Baba jan?"

"Baba jan has gone away," Laila said, her throat closing up again. And the lie was spoken for the first time, the great, damming lie. How many more times would this lie have to be told? Laila wondered miserably. How
many more times would Zalmai have to be deceived? She pictured Zalmai, his jubilant, running welcoming when Rasheed came home and Rasheed picking him up by the elbows and swinging him round and round until Zalmai's legs flew straight out, the two of them giggling afterward when Zalmai stumbled around like a drunk. She thought of their disorderly games and their boisterous laughs, their secret glances.

A pall of shame and grief for her son fell over Laila.

"Where did he go?"
"I don't know, my love."

When was he coming back? Would Baba Jan bring a present with him when he returned?

She did the prayers with Zalmai. Twenty-one Bis-mal-lah-e-rah-man-era-hims - one for each knuckle of seven fingers. She watched him cup his hands before his face and blow into them, then place the back of both hands on his forehead and make a casting-away motion, whispering, Baba-loo, be gone, do not come to Zalmai, he has no business with you. Baba-loo, be gone. Then, to finish off, they said Ailah-u-akbar three times. And later, much later that night, Laila was startled by a muted voice: Did Baba-jan leave because of me? Because of what I said, about you and the man downstairs? She leaned over him, meaning to reassure, meaning to say It had nothing to do with you, Zalmai. No. Nothing is your fault. But he was asleep, his small chest rising and sinking.

***

When Laila "went to bed, her mind was muffled up, clouded, incapable of sustained rational thought. But when she woke up, to the muezzin's call for morning prayer, much of the dullness had lifted.

She sat up and watched Zalmai sleep for a while, the ball of his fist under his chin. Laila pictured Maryam sneaking into the room in the middle of the night as she and Zalmai had slept, watching them, making plans in her head.

Laila slipped out of bed. It took effort to stand. She ached everywhere. Her neck, her shoulders, her back, her arms, her thighs, all engraved with the cuts of Rasheed's belt buckle. Wincing, she quietly left the bedroom.

In Maryam's room, the light was a shade darker than gray, the kind of light Laila had always associated with crowing roosters and dew rolling off blades of
grass. Ma-ri-am was sit-ting in a cor-ner, on a pra-yer rug fa-cing the win-dow. Slowly, La-ila lo-we-red her-self to the gro-und, sit-ting down ac-ross from her.

"You sho-uld go and vi-sit Azi-za this mor-ning," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"I know what you me-an to do."
"Don't walk. Ta-ke the bus, you'll blend in. Ta-xis are too cons-pi-cu-o-us. You're su-re to get stop-ped for ri-ding alo-ne."

"What you pro-mi-sed last night…"

La-ila co-uld not fi-nish. The tre-es, the la-ke, the na-me-less vil-la-ge. A de-lu-si-on, she saw. A lo-vely lie me-ant to so-ot-he. Li-ke co-o-ing to a dist-res-sed child.

"I me-ant it," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "I me-ant it for you, La-ila jo."

"I don't want any of it wit-ho-ut you," La-ila cro-aked.

Ma-ri-am smi-led wan-ly.

"I want it to be just li-ke you sa-id, Ma-ri-am, all of us go-ing to-get-her, you, me, the child-ren. Ta-riq has a pla-ce in Pa-kis-tan. We can hi-de out the-re for a whi-le, wa-it for things to calm down-"

"That's not pos-sib-le," Ma-ri-am sa-id pa-ti-ently, li-ke a pa-rent to a well-me-aning but mis-gu-ided child.

"We'll ta-ke ca-re of each ot-her," La-ila sa-id, cho-king on the words, her eyes wet with te-ars. "Li-ke you sa-id. No. I'll ta-ke ca-re of you for a chan-ge."

"Oh, La-ila jo."

La-ila went on a stam-me-ring rant. She bar-ga-ined. She pro-mi-sed. She wo-uld do all the cle-aning, she sa-id, and all the co-oking. "You won't ha-ve to do a thing. Ever aga-in. You rest, sle-ep in, plant a gar-den. Wha-te-ver you want, you ask and I'll get it for you. Don't do this, Ma-ri-am. Don't le-ave me. Don't bre-ak Azi-za's he-art."

"They chop off hands for ste-al-ing bre-ad," Ma-ri-am sa-id "What do you think they'll do when they find a de-ad hus-band and two mis-sing wi-ves?"

"No one will know," La-ila bre-at-hed. "No one will find us."

"They will. So-oner or la-ter. They're blo-od-ho-unds." Ma-ri-am's vo-ice was low, ca-uti-on-ing; it ma-de La-ila's pro-mi-ses so-und fan-tas-ti-cal, trum-ped-up, fo-olish.
"Ma-ri-am, ple-ase-"
"When they do, they'll find you as gu-ilty as me. Ta-riq too. I won't ha-ve the two of you li-ving on the run, li-ke fu-gi-ti-ves. What will hap-pen to yo-ur child-ren if you're ca-ught?"

La-il'a's eyes brim-ming, stin-ging.
"Who will ta-ke ca-re of them then? The Ta-li-ban? Think li-ke a mot-her, La-il'a jo. Think li-ke a mot-her. I am."

"I can't."

"You ha-ve to."

"It isn't fa-ir," La-il'a cro-aked.

"But it is. Co-me he-re. Co-me lie he-re."

La-il'a craw-led to her and aga-in put her he-ad on Ma-ri-am's lap. She re-mem-be-red all the af-ter-no-ons they'd spent to-get-her, bra-iding each ot-her's ha-ir, Ma-ri-am lis-te-ning pa-ti-ently to her ran-dom tho-ughts and or-di-nary sto-ri-es with an air of gra-tu-de, with the exp-res-si-on of a per-son to whom a uni-que and co-ve-ted pri-va-tes had be-en ex-ten-ded "It is fa-ir," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "I've kil-led our hus-band. I've dep-ri-ved yo-ur son of his fat-her. It isn't right that I run. I can't. Even if they ne-ver catch us, I'll ne-ver..." Her lips tremb-led. "I'll ne-ver es-ca-pe yo-ur son's gri-ef How do I lo-ok at him? How do I ever bring myself to lo-ok at him, La-il'a jo?"

Ma-ri-am twid-dled a strand of La-il'a's ha-ir, un-tang-led a stub-born curl.

"For me, it ends he-re. The-re's not-hing mo-re I want. Everyt-hing I'd ever wis-hed for as a lit-tle girl you've al-re-ady gi-ven me. You and yo-ur child-ren ha-ve ma-de me so very happy. It's all right, La-il'a jo. This is all right. Don't be sad."

La-il'a co-ul'd find no re-aso-nab-le ans-wer for anyt-hing Ma-ri-am sa-id. But she ramb-led on any-where, in-co-he-ren-tly, chil-dishly, abo-ut fru-it tre-es that awa-ited plan-ting and chic-kens that awa-ited ra-is-ing. She went on abo-ut small ho-uses in un-na-med towns, and walks to tro-ut-fil-led la-kes. And, in the end, when the words dri-ed up, the te-ars did not, and all La-il'a co-ul'd do was sur-ren-der and sob li-ke a child over-whel-med by an adult's unas-sa-ilab-le lo-gic. All she co-ul'd do was roll her-self up and bury her fa-ce one last ti-me in the wel-co-ming warmth of Ma-ri'am's lap.

***
Later that morning, Mariam packed Zalmai a small lunch of bread and dried figs. For Aziiza too she packed some figs, and a few co-okies shaped like animals. She put it all in a paper bag and gave it to Laila.

"Kiss Aziiza for me," she said. "Tell her she is the no-or of my eyes and the sul-tan of my he-art. Will you do that for me?"

La ila nodded, her lips pursed together.

"Ta-ke the bus, li-ke I sa-id, and ke-ep yo-ur he-ad low."

"When will I see you, Ma-ri-am? I want to see you be-fo-re I tes-tify. I'll tell them how it hap-pe-ned. I'll exp-la-in that it wasn't yo-ur fa-ult. That you had to do it. They'll un-ders-tand, won't they, Ma-ri-am? They'll un-ders-tand."

Ma-ri-am gave her a soft lo-ok.

She hun-ke-red down to eye le-vel with Zalmai. He was we-aring a red T-shirt, rag-ged kha-kis, and a used pa-ir of cow-boy bo-ots Ras-he-ed had bo-ught him from Man-da-ii. He was hol-ding his new bas-ket-ball with both hands. Ma-ri-am plan-ted a kiss on his che-ek.

"You be a go-od, strong boy, now," she said. "You tre-at yo-ur mot-her well." She cup- pedestal his fa-ce. He pul-led back but she held on. "I am so sorry, Zal-mai jo. Be-li-eve me that I'm so very sorry for all yo-ur pa-in and sad-ness."

La ila held Zal-mai's hand as they wal-ked down the ro-ad to-get-her. Just be-fo-re they tur-ned the cor-ner, La ila lo-oked back and saw Ma-ri-am at the do-or. Ma-ri-am was we-aring a red T-shirt, a dark blue swe-ater but-to-ned in the front, and a white scarf over her he-ad, a dark blue swe-ater but-to-ned in the front, and a white scarf over her he-ad. Bars of sun-light slas-hed ac-ross her fa-ce and sho-ul-ders. Ma-ri-am wa-ved ami-ably.

They tur-ned the cor-ner, and La ila ne-ver saw Ma-ri-am aga-in.

47.

Ma-dam

Back in akol-ba, it se-emed, af-ter all the-se ye-ars.

The Wa-la-yat wo-men's pri-son was a drab, squ-are-sha-ped bu-il-ding in Shar-e-Nau ne-ar Chic-ken Stre-et. It sat in the cen-ter of a lar-ger comp-lex that ho-used ma-le in-ma-tes. A pad-loc-ked do-or se-pa-ra-ted Ma-ri-am and the ot-her
wo-men from the sur-ro-un-ding men. Ma-ri-am co-un-ted fi-ve wor-king cells. They we-re un-fur-nis-hed ro-oms, with dirty, pe-eling walls, and small win-dows that lo-oked in-to the co-urt-yard. The win-dows we-re bar-red, even tho-ugh the do-ors to the cells we-re un-loc-ked and the wo-men we-re free to co-me and go to the co-urt-yard as they ple-ased. The win-dows had no glass. The-re we-re no cur-ta-ins eit-her, which me-ant the Ta-lib gu-ar-ds who ro-am-ed the co-urt-yard had an eye-ful of the in-te-ri-or of the cells. So-me of the wo-men comp-la-ined that the gu-ar-ds smo-ked out-si-de the win-dow and le-ered in, with the-ir inf-la-med eyes and wol-fish smi-les, that they mut-te-red in-de-cent jokes to each ot-her abo-ut them. Be-ca-use of this, most of the wo-men wo-re bur-qi-as all day and lif-ted them only af-ter sun-down, af-ter the ma-in ga-te was loc-ked and the gu-ar-ds had go-ne to the-ir posts.

At night, the cell Ma-ri-am sha-red with fi-ve wo-men and fo-ur child-ren was dark. On tho-se nights when the-re was elect-ri-cal po-wer, they ho-is-ted Nagh-ma, a short, flat-ches-ted girl with black frizzy ha-ir, up to the ce-il-ing. The-re was a wi-re the-re from which the co-ating had be-en strip-ped. Nagh-ma wo-uld hand-wrap the li-ve wi-re aro-und the ba-se of the light-bulb then to ma-ke a cir-cu-it.

The to-ilets we-re clo-set-si-zed, the ce-ment flo-or crac-ked The-re was a small, rec-tan-gu-lar ho-le in the gro-und, at the bot-tom of which was a he-af of fe-ces. Fli-es buz-zed in and out of the ho-le-In the mid-dle of the pri-son was an open, rec-tan-gu-lar co-urt-yard, and, in the mid-dle of that, a well The well had no dra-ina-ge, me-aning the co-urt-yard was of-ten a swamp and the wa-ter tas-ted rot-ten. La-undry li-nes, lo-aded with hand-was-hed socks and di-apers, slas-hed ac-ross each ot-her in the co-urt-yard. This was whe-re in-ma-tes met vi-si-tors, whe-re they bo-iled the ri-ce the-ir fa-mi-li-es bro-ught them-the pri-son pro-vi-ded no fo-od The co-urt-yard was al-so the child-ren's playg-ro-und Ma-ri-am had le-ar-ned that many of the child-ren had be-en born in Wa-la-yat, had ne-ver se-en the world out-si-de the-se walls. Ma-ri-am watc-hed them cha-se each ot-her aro-und, watc-hed the-ir sho-eless fe-et sling mud. All day, they ran aro-und, ma-king up li-ve-ly ga-mes, una-wa-re of the stench of fe-ces and uri-ne that per-me-ated Wa-la-yat and the-ir own bo-di-es, un-mind-ful of the Ta-lib gu-ar-ds un-til one smac-ked them.

Ma-ri-am had no vi-si-tors. That was the first and only thing she had as-ked the Ta-lib of-fi-ci-als he-re. No vi-si-tors.

* * *

No-ne of the wo-men in Ma-ri-am's cell we-re ser-ving ti-me for vi-olent cri-me-they we-re all the-re for the com-mon of-fen-se of "run-ning away from ho-me." As a re-sult, Ma-ri-am ga-ined so-me no-to-ri-et-y among them, be-ca-me a kind of ce-leb-rity. The wo-men eyed her with a re-ve-rent, al-most awest-ruck, exp-res-si-on. They of-fe-red her the-ir blan-kets. They com-pe-ted to sha-re the-ir fo-od with her.
The most avid was Nagh-ma, who was al-ways hug-ging her el-bows and fol-lo-wing Ma-ri-am everyw-he-re she went. Nagh-ma was the sort of per-son who fo-und it en-ter-tain-ing to dis-pen-se news of mis-for-tu-ne, whet-her ot-hers' or her own. She sa-id her fat-her had pro-mi-sed her to a ta-ilor so-me thirty ye-ars ol-der than her.

"He smellsli-ke goh, and has fe-fer te-eth than fin-gers," Nagh-ma sa-id of the ta-ilor.

She'd tri-ed to elo-pe to Gar-dez with a yo-ung man she'd fal-len in lo-ve with, the son of a lo-cal mul-lah. They'd ba-rely ma-de it out of Ka-bul. When they we-re ca-ught and sent back, the mul-lah's son was flog-ged be-fo-re he re-pen-ted and sa-id that Nagh-ma had se-du-ced him with her fe-mi-ni-ne charms. She'd cast a spell on him, he sa-id. He pro-mi-sed he wo-ul-d re-de-di-ca-te him-self to the study of the Ko-ran. The mul-lah's son was fre-ed. Nagh-ma was sen-ten-ced to fi-ve ye-ars.

It was just as well, she sa-id, her be-ing he-re in pri-son. Her fat-her had sworn that the day she was re-le-ased he wo-ul-d ta-ke a kni-fe to her thro-at.

Lis-te-ning to Nagh-ma, Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red the dim glim-mer of cold stars and the stringy pink clo-uds stre-a-king over the Sa-fid-koh mo-un-ta-ins that long-ago mor-ning when Na-na had sa-id to her, *Li-ke a com-pass ne-ed-le that po-ints north, a man's ac-cu-sing fin-ger al-ways finds a wo-man. Al-ways. You re-mem-ber that, Ma-ri-am.*

***

Ma-mam'S tri-al had ta-ken pla-ce the we-ek be-fo-re. The-re was no le-gal co-un-cil, no pub-lic he-ar-ing, no cross-exa-mi-ning of evi-den-ce, no ap-pe-als. Ma-ri-am dec-li-ned her right to wit-nes-ses. The en-ti-re thing las-ted less than fif-te-en mi-nu-tes.

The mid-dle jud-ge, a brit-tle-lo-oking Ta-lib, was the le-ader. He was stri-kingly ga-unt, with yel-low, le-at-hery skin and a curly red be-ard. He wo-re eyeg-las-ses that mag-ni-fi-ed his eyes and re-ve-aled how yel-low the whi-tes we-re. His neck lo-oked too thin to sup-port the int-ri-ca-tely wrap-ped tur-ban on his he-ad.

"You ad-mit to this, ham-s-hi-ra?I he as-ke-d aga-in in a ti-red vo-ice.

"I do," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

The man nod-ded. Or may-be he didn't. It was hard to tell; he had a pro-no-un-ced sha-king of his hands and he-ad that re-min-ded Ma-ri-am of Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah's tre-mor. When he sip-ped tea, he did not re-ach for his cup. He mo-ti-oned to the squ-are-sho-ul-de-red man to his left, who re-pect-ful-ly bro-ught it to his lips. Af-ter, the Ta-lib clo-sed his eyes gently, a mu-ted and ele-gant ges-tu-re of gra-ti-tu-de.
Ma-ri-am fo-und a di-sar-ming qu-ality abo-ut him. When he spo-ke, it was with a tin-ge of gu-ile and ten-der-ness. His smi-le was pa-ti-ent. He did not lo-ok at Ma-ri-am des-pi-singly. He did not ad-dress her with spi-te or ac-cu-sa-ti-on but with a soft to-ne of apo-logy.

"Do you fully un-ders-tand what you're sa-ying?" the bony-fa-ced Ta-lib to the jud-ge's right, not the tea gi-ver, sa-id. This one was the yo-un-gest of the three. He spo-ke qu-ickly and with emp-ha-tic, ar-ro-gant con-fi-den-ce. He'd be-en ir-ri-ta-ted that Ma-ri-am co-uld not spe-ak Pash-to. He struck Ma-ri-am as the sort of qu-ar-rel-so-me yo-ung man who re-lis-hed his aut-ho-rit-y, who saw of-fen-ses everyw-he-re, tho-ught it his birth-right to pass judg-ment.

"I do un-ders-tand," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"I won-der," the yo-ung Ta-lib sa-id. "God has ma-de us dif-fe-rently, you wo-men and us men. Our bra-ins are dif-fe-rent. You are not ab-le to think li-ke we can. Wes-tern doc-tors and the-ir sci-en-ce ha-ve pro-ven this. This is why we re-qu-ire only one ma-le wit-ness but two fe-ma-le ones."

"I ad-mit to what I did, brot-her," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "But, if I hadn't, he wo-uld ha-ve kil-led her. He was strang-ling her."

"So you say. But, then, wo-men swe-ar to all sorts of things all the ti-me." "It's the truth."

"Do you ha-ve wit-nes-ses? Ot-her than yo-ram-bagh?"

"I do not," sa-id Ma-ri-am.

"Well, then." He threw up his hands and snic-ke-red.

It was the sickly Ta-lib who spo-ke next. "I ha-ve a doc-tor in Pes-ha-war," he sa-id. "A fi-ne, yo-ung Pa-kis-ta-ni fel-low. I saw him a month ago, and then aga-in last we-ek. I sa-id, tell me the truth, fri-end, and he sa-id to me, three months, Mul-lah sa-hib, may-be six at most-all God's will, of co-ur-se."

He nod-ded disc-re-etly at the squ-are-sho-ul-de-red man on his left and to-ok anot-her sip of the tea he was of-fe-red. He wi-ped his mo-uth with the back of his tre-mu-lo-us hand. "It do-es not frigh-ten me to le-ave this li-fe that in-sists we be-ar sor-row upon sor-row long af-ter we can be-ar no mo-re. No, I be-li-eve I shall gladly ta-ke my le-ave when the ti-me co-mes.
“What frightens me, ham-s-hi-ra, is the day God summons me before Him and asks, Why did you not do as I said, Mul-lah? Why did you not obey my laws? How shall I exp-la-in myself to Him, ham-s-hi-ra? What will be my de-fen-se for not he-eding His com-mands? All I can do, all any of us can do, in the ti-me we are gran-ted, is to go on abi-ding by the laws He has set for us. The ele-er-er I see my end, ham-s-hi-ra, the ne-er-er I am to my day of rec-ko-ning, the mo-re de-ter-mi-ned I grow to carry out His word. Ho-ve-ver pa-in-ful it may pro-ve.”

He shif- ted on his cus-hi-on and win-ced.

“I be-li-eve you when you say that yo-ur hus-band was a man of di-sag-re-e-ab-le tem-pe-ra-ment,” he re-su-med, fi-xing Ma-ri-am with his bes-pec-tac-led eyes, his ga-ze both stern and com-pas-si-on-a-te. "But I can-not help but be dis-tur-bed by the bru-ta-lity of yo-ur ac-ti-on, ham-s-hi-ra I am tro-ub-led by what you ha-ve do-ne; I am tro-ub-led that his lit-tle boy was crying for him ups-ta-irs when you did it.

"I am ti-red and dying, and I want to be mer-ci-ful. I want to for-gi-ve you. But when God sum-mons me and says, But it wasn't for you to for-gi-ve you, Mul-lah, what shall I say?"

His com-pa-ni-ons nod-ded and lo-oked at him with ad-mi-ra-ti-on.

"So-met-hing tells me you are not a wic-ked wo-man, ham-s-hi-ra But you ha-ve do-ne a wic-ked thing. And you must pay for this thing you ha-ve do-ne. Sha-ri'a is not va-gue on this mat-ter. It says I must send you whe-re I will so-on jo-in you my-self.

"Do you un-ders-tand, ham-s-hi-ra?"

Ma-ri-am lo-oked down at her hands. She sa-id she did.

"May Al-lah for-gi-ve you."

Be-fo-re they led her out, Ma-ri-am was gi-ven a do-cu-ment, told to sign be-ne-ath her sta-te-ment and the mul-lah's sen-ten-ce. As the three Ta-li-ban watc-hed, Ma-ri-am wro-te it out, her na-me-the-me-em, thereh, the-yah, and theme-em -re-mem-be-ring the last ti-me she'd sig-ned her na-me to a do-cu-ment, twenty-se-ven ye-ar-s be-fo-re, at Jalil's tab-le, be-ne-ath the watch-ful ga-ze of anot-her mul-lah.

* * *
mu-tiny in the dust, whip-ping it in-to vi-o-lent spi-rals that rip-ped thro-ugh the co-urt-yard. Ever-yo-ne-the gu-ar-ds, the in-ma-tes, the child-ren, Ma-ri-am-bur-ro-wed the-ir fa-ces in the ho-ok of the-ir el-bows, but the dust wo-uld not be de-ni-ed. It ma-de ho-mes of ear ca-nals and nost-rils, of eye-las-hes and skin folds, of the spa-ce bet-we-en mo-lars. Only at dusk did the winds die down. And then if a night bre-eze blew, it did so ti-midly, as if to ato-ne for the ex-ces-ses of its day-ti-me sib-ling.

On Ma-ri-am's last day at Wa-la-yat, Nagh-ma ga-ve her a tan-ge-ri-ne. She put it in Ma-ri-am's palm and clo-sed her fin-gers aro-und it. Then she burst in-to te-ars.
"You're the best fri-end I ever had," she sa-id.

Ma-ri-am spent the rest of the day by the bar-red win-ow watc-hing the in-ma-tes be-low. So-me-one was co-oking a me-al, and a stre-am of cu-min-scen-ted smo-ke and warm air waf-ted thro-ugh the win-dow. Ma-ri-am co-uld see the child-ren pla-ying a blind-fol-ded ga-me. Two lit-tle girls we-re sin-ging a rhyme, and Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red it from her child-ho-od, re-mem-be-red Jalil sin-ging it to her as they'd sat on a rock, fis-hing in the stre-am:


\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Li-li Mi bird-bath, Sit-ting on a dirt path, Min-now sat on the rim and drank,} \\
\text{Slip-ped, and in the wa-ter she sank}
\end{align*}
\]

Ma-ri-am had di-sj-o-in-t dre-ams that last night. She dre-amed of peb-bles, ele-ven of them, ar-ran ged ver-ti-cal-ly. Jalil, yo-ung aga-in, all win-nings smi-les and dimp-led chins and sve-at patc-hes, co-at flung over his sho-ul-der, co-me at last to ta-ke his da-ugh-ter away for a ri-de in his shiny black Bu-ick Ro-ad-mas-ter. Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah twir-ling his ro-sary be-ads, wal-king with he r along the stre-am, the-ir twin sha-dows gli-ding on the wa-ter and on the grassy banks sprink-led with a blue-la-ven-der wild iris that, in this dre-am, smel-led li-ke clo-ves. She dre-amed of Na-na in the do-or-way of the kol-ba, her vo-ice dim and dis-tant, cal-ling her to din-ner, as Ma-ri-am pla-yed in co-ol, tang-led grass whe-re ants craw-led and be-et-les scur-ri-ed and gras-shop-pers skip-ped amid all the dif-fe-rent sha-des of gre-en. The squ-e-ak of a whe-el-bar-ro w la-bo-ring up a dusty path. Cow-bel-ls clan-ging. She-ep ba-a-ing on a hill.

* * *

On the way to Gha-zi Sta-di-um, Ma-ri-am bo-un-ced in the bed of the truck as it skid-ded aro-und pot-ho-les and dit-s whe-els spat peb-bles. The bo-un-cing hurt her ta-il-bo-ne. A yo-ung, ar-med Ta-lib sat ac-ross from her lo-oking at her.

Ma-ri-am won-de-red if he wo-uld be the one, this ami-ab-le-lo-oking yo-ung man with the de-ep-set bright eyes and slightly po-in- ted fa-ce, with the black-na-iled in-dex fin-ger drum-ming the si-de of the truck.
"Are you hungry, mot-her?" he said.

Ma-ri-am shook her he-ad.

"I ha-ve a bis-cu-it. It's go-od. You can ha-ve it if you're hungry. I don't mind."

"No. Tas-ha-kor, brot-her."

He nod-ded, lo-oked at her be-nignly. "Are you af-ra-id, mot-her?"

A lump clo-sed off her thro-at. In a qu-ive-ring vo-ice, Ma-ri-am told him the truth.

"Yes. I'm very af-ra-id."

"I ha-ve a pic-tu-re of my fat-her," he sa-id. "I don't re-mem-ber him. He was a bicyc-le re-pa-ir-man on-ce, I know that much. But I don't re-mem-ber how he mo-ved, you know, how he la-ug-hed or the so-und of his vo-ice." He lo-oked away, then back at Ma-ri-am. "My mot-her used to say that he was the bra-vest man she knew. Li-ke a li-on, she'd say.

But she told me he was crying li-ke a child the mor-ning the com-mu-nists to-ok him. I'm tel-ling you so you know that it's nor-mal to be sca-red. It's not-hing to be as-ha-med of, mot-her."

For the first ti-me that day, Ma-ri-am cri-ed a lit-tle.

* * *

Tho-usands of eyes bo-re down on her. In the crow-ded ble-ac-hers, necks we-re cra-ned for the be-ne-fit of a bet-ter vi-ew. Ton-gu-es cluc-ked. A mur-mu-ring so-und rip-pled thro-ugh the sta-di-um when Ma-ri-am was hel-ped down from the truck. Ma-ri-am ima-gi-ned he-ads sha-king when the lo-uds-pe-aker an-no-un-ced her cri-me. But she did not lo-ok up to see whet-her they we-re sha-king with di-sap-pro-val or cha-rity, with rep-ro-ach or pity. Ma-ri-am blin-ded her-self to them all.

Ear-li-er that mor-ning, she had be-en af-ra-id that she wo-uld ma-ke a fo-ol of her-self, that she wo-uld turn in-to a ple-ad-ing, we-eping spec-tac-le. She had fe-ared that she might scre-am or vo-mit or even wet her-self, that, in her last mo-ments, she wo-uld be bet-ra-yed by ani-mal ins-tinct or bo-dily disg-ra-ce. But when she was ma-de to des-cend from the truck, Ma-ri-am's legs did not buck-le. Her arms did not fla-il. She did not ha-ve to be drag-ged. And when she did fe-el her-self fal-te-ring, she tho-ught of Zal-mai, from whom she had ta-ken the lo-ve of his li-fe, who-se days...
now would be shaped by the sorrow of his father's disappearance. And then Mariam's stride steadied and she could walk without protest.

An armed man approached her and told her to walk toward the southern goal-post. Mariam could sense the crowd tightening up with anticipation. She did not look up. She kept her eyes to the ground, on her shadow, on her executioner's shadow trailing hers.

Though there had been moments of beauty in it, Mariam knew that life for the most part had been unkind to her. But as she walked the final twenty paces, she could not help but wish for more of it. She wished she could see Laila again, wished to hear the clangor of her laugh, to sit with her once more for a pot of chai and leftover halwa under a starlit sky. She mourned that she would never see Aiza grow up, would not see the beauteous young woman that she would one day become, would not get to paint her hands with henna and tossno-qul candy at her wedding. She would never play with Aiza's children. She would have liked that very much, to be old and play with Aiza's children.

Near the goal-post, the man behind her asked her to stop. Mariam did. Through the crossing grid of the burqa, she saw his shadow arms lift his shadow Kalashnikov.

Mariam wished for so much in those final moments. Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sense of peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the hara-mi child of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Mariam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings.

Mariam's final thoughts were a few words from the Koran, which she muttered under her breath.

*He has created the heavens and the earth with the truth; He makes the night cover the day and makes the day overtake the night, and He has made the sun and the moon subservient; each one runs on to an assigned term; now surely He is the Mighty, the Great For-giver."

"Kneel," the Ta-lib said

O my Lord! For-ve and have mercy, for you are the best of the mer-ci-ful ones.

"Kneel here, ham-s-hi-ra And look down."
One last time, Mariam did as she was told.

PART FOUR

48.

Ta-riq has he-adac-hes now.

So-me nights, La-ila awa-kens and finds him on the ed-ge of the-ir bed, roc-king, his un-ders-hirt pul-led over his he-ad The he-adac-hes be-gan in Na-sir Bagh, he says, then wor-se-ned in pri-son. So-me-ti-mes they ma-ke him vo-mit, blind him in one eye. He says it fe-els li-ke a but-c-her's kni-fe bur-ro-wing in one temp-le, twis-ting slowly thro-ugh his bra-in, then po-king out the ot-her si-de.

"I can tas-te the me-tal, even, when they be-gin."

So-me-ti-mes La-ila wets a cloth and lays it on his fo-re-he-ad and that helps a lit-tle. The lit-tle ro-und whi-te pills Sa-ye-ed's doc-tor ga-ve Ta-riq help too. But so-me nights, all Ta-riq can do is hold his he-ad and mo-an, his eyes blo-ods-hot, his no-se drip-ping. La-ila sits with him when he's in the grip of it li-ke that, rubs the back of his neck, ta-kes his hand in hers, the me-tal of his wed-ding ba nd cold aga-inst her palm.

They mar-ri-ed the day that they ar-ri-ved in Mur-ree. Sa-ye-ed lo-oked re-li-eved when Ta-riq told him they wo-uld. He wo-uld not ha-ve to bro-ach with Ta-riq the de-li-ca-te mat-ter of an un-mar-ri-ed co-up-le li-ving in his ho-tel. Sa-ye-ed is not at all as La-ila had pic-tu-red him, rud-dy-fa-ced and pea-eyed. He has a salt-and-pep-per mus-tac-he who-se ends he rolls to a sharp tip, and a shock of long gray ha-ir com-bed back from the brow. He is a soft-spo-ken, man-nerly man, with me-asu-red spe-ech and gra-ce-ful mo-ve-ments.

It was Sa-ye-ecl who sum-mo-ned a fri-end and a mul-lah for the niki-ka that day, Sa-ye-ed who pul-led Ta-riq asi-de and ga-ve him mo-ney. Ta-riq wo-uld'n't ta-ke it, but Sa-ye-ed in-sis-ted. Ta-riq went to the Mall then and ca-me back with two simp-le, thin wed-ding bands. They mar-ri-ed la-ter that night, af-ter the child-ren had go-ne to bed.

In the mir-ror, be-ne-ath the gre-en ve-il that the mul-lah dra-ped over the-ir he-ads, La-ila's eyes met Ta-riq's. The-re we-re no te-ars, no wed-ding-day smi-les, no whis-pe-red oaths of long-las-ting lo-ve. In si-len-ce, La-ila lo-oked at the-ir ref-lec-ti-on, at fa-ces that had aged be-yond the-ir ye-ars, at the po-uc-hes and li-nes and sags that now mar-ked the-ir on-ce-sc rub-bed, yo-uth-ful fa-ces. Ta-riq ope-ned his mo-uth and be-gan to say so-met-hing, but, just as he did, so-me-one pul-led the ve-il, and La-ila mis-sed what it was that he was go-ing to say.
That night, they lay in bed as husband and wife, as the children snored below them on sleeping cots. Laila remembered the ease with which they would crowd the air between them with words, she and Tarik, when they were younger, the haywire, brisk flow of their speech, always interrupting each other, tugging each other's collar to emphasize a point, the quickness to laugh, the eagerness to delight. So much had happened since those childhood days, so much that needed to be said. But that first night the enormity of it all stole the words from her. That night, it was blessing enough to be beside him. It was blessing enough to know that he was here, to feel the warmth of him next to her, to lie with him, their heads touching, his right hand laced in her left.

In the middle of the night, when Laila woke up thirsty, she found their hands still clamped together, in the white-knuckled, anxious way of children clutching balloon strings.

* * *

Laila likes Mukree's cool, foggy mornings and its dazzling twilights, the dark brilliancy of the sky at night; the green of the pines and the soft brown of the squirrels darting up and down the sturdy tree trunks; the sudden downpours that send shoppers in the Mall scrambling for awning cover. She likes the souvenir shops, and the various hotels that house tourists, even as the locals bemoan the constant construction, the expansion of infrastructure that they say is eating away at Murree's natural beauty. Laila finds it odd that people should lament the building of buildings. In Kabul, they would celebrate it.

She likes that they have a bathroom, not an outhouse but an actual bathroom, with a toilet that flushes, a shower, and a sink too, with twin faucets from which she can draw, with a flick of her wrist, water, either hot or cold. She likes waking up to the sound of Alyona bleating in the morning, and the harmlessly cantankerous cook, Adiba, who works marvels in the kitchen.

Sometimes, as Laila watches Tarik sleep, as her children mutter and stir in their own sleep, a great big lump of gratitude catches in her throat, makes her eyes water.

In the mornings, Laila follows Tarik from room to room. Keys jingle from a ring clipped to his waist and a spray bottle of window cleaner dangles from the belt loops of his jeans. Laila brings a pail filled with rags, disinfectant, a toilet brush, and spray wax for the dressers. Aziza tags along, a mop in one hand, the bean-stuffed doll Mariam had made for her in the other. Zalmai trails them reluctantly, sulkily, always a few steps behind.
La-ila va-cu-ums, ma-kes the bed, and dusts. Ta-riq was-hes the bath-ro-om sink and tub, scrubs the to-ilet and m ops the li-no-le-um flo-or. He stocks the shel-ves with cle-an to-wels, mi-ni-atu-re sham-poo bot-tles, and bars of al-mond-scen-ted so-ap. Azi-za has la-id cla-im to the task of spra-ying and wi-ping the win-dows. The doll is ne-ver far from whe-re she works.

La-ila told Azi-za abo-ut Ta-riq a few days af-ter thenik-ka

It is stran-ge, La-ila thinks, al-most un-set-tling, the thing bet-we-en Azi-za and Ta-riq. Al-re-ady, Azi-za is fi-nis-hing his sen-ten-ces and he hers. She hands him things be-fo-re he asks for them. Pri-va-t e smi-les sho-ot bet-we-en them ac-ross the din-ner tab-le as if they are not stran-gers at all but com-pa-ni-ons re-uni-ted af-ter a lengthy se-pa-ra-ti-on.

Azi-za lo-oked down tho-ught-ful-ly at her hands when La-ila told her.

"I li-ke him," she sa-id, af-ter a long pa-use.

"He lo-ves you."

"He sa-id that?"

"He do-esn't ha-ve to, Azi-za."

"Tell me the rest, Mammy. Tell me so I know."

And La-ila did.

"Yo-ur fat-her is a go-od man. He is the best man I've ever known."

"What if he le-aves?" Azi-za sa-id

"He will ne-ver le-ave. Lo-ok at me, Azi-za. Yo-ur fat-her will ne-ver hurt you, and he will ne-ver le-ave."

The re-li-ef on Azi-za's fa-ce bro-ke La-ila's he-art.

* * *

Ta-riq has bo-ught Zal-mai a roc-king ho r-se, bu-ilt him a wa-gon. From a pri-son in-ma-te, he le-ar-ned to ma-ke pa-per an i-mals, and so he has fol-ded, cut, and tuc-ked co-unt-less she-ets of pa-per in-to li-ons and kan-ga-ro-os for Zal-mai, in-to hor-ses and brightly plu-med birds. But the-se over-tu-res are dis-mis-sed by Zal-mai un-ce-re-mo-ni-o-usly, so-me-ti-mes ve-no-mo-usly.

"You're a don-key!" he cri-es. "I don't want yo-ur toys!"
"Zal-mai!" La-ila gasps.

"It's all right," Ta-riq says. "La-ila, it's all right. Let him."

"You're not my Ba-ba jan! My re-al Ba-ba jan is away on a trip, and when he gets back he's go-ing to be-at you up! And you won't be ab-le to run away, be-ca-use he has two legs and you only ha-ve one!"

At night, La-ila holds Zal-mai aga-inst her chest and re-ci-tes Ba-ba-loo pra-y-ers with him. When he asks, she tells him the lie aga-in, tells him his Ba-ba jan has go-ne away and she do-esn't know when he wo-uld co-me back. She ab-hors this task, ab-hors her-self for lying li-ke this to a child

La-ila knows that this sha-me-ful lie will ha-ve to be told aga-in and aga-in. It will ha-ve to be-ca-use Zal-mai will ask, hop-ping down from a swing, wa-king from an af-ter-no-on nap, and, la-ter, when he's old eno-ugh to tie his own sho-es, to walk to scho-ol by him-self, the lie will ha-ve to be de-li-ve-red aga-in.

At so-me po-int, La-ila knows, the qu-es-ti-ons will dry up. Slowly, Zal-mai will ce-ase won-de-ring why his fat-her has aban-do-ned him. He will not spot his fat-her any lon-ger at traf-fic lights, in sto-oping old men shuf-fling down the stre-et or sip-ping tea in open-fron-ted sa-mo-var ho-uses. And one day it will hit him, wal-king along so-me me-an-de-ring ri-ver, or ga-zing out at an unt-rac-ked snow-fi-eld, that his fat-her's di-sap-pear-ance is no lon-ger an open, raw wo-und. That it has be-co-me so-met-hing el-se al-to-get-her, so-met-hing mo-re soft-edged and in-do-lent. Li-ke a lo-re. So-met-hing to be re-ve-red, mysti-fi-ed by.

La-ila is happy he-re in Mur-ree. But it is not an easy hap-pi-ness. It is not a hap-pi-ness wit-ho-ut cost.

* * *

On his days off, Ta-riq ta-kes La-ila and the child-ren to the Mall, along which are shops that sell trin-kets and next to which is an Ang-li-can church bu-ilt in the mid-ni-ne-enth cen-tury. Ta-riq buys them spicy chap-li ke-babs from stre-et ven-dors. They stroll amid the crowds of lo-cals, the Euro-pe-ans and the-ir cel-lu-lar pho-nes and di-gi-tal ca-me-ras, the Pu-nj-ab is who co-me he-re to es-ca-pe the he-at of the pla-ins.

Occa-si-onal-ly, they bo-ard a bus to Kash-mir Po-int. From the-re, Ta-riq shows them the val-ley of the Jhe-lum Ri-ver, the pi-ne-car-pe-ted slo-pes, and the lush, den-sely wo-oded hills, whe-re he says mon-keys can still be spot- ted hop-ping from branch to branch. They go to the map-le-clad Nat-hia Ga-li too, so-me thirty ki-lo-me-ters from Mur-ree, whe-re Ta-riq holds La-ila's hand as they walk the tree-sha-ded ro-ad to the Go-ver-nor's Ho-use. They stop by the old Bri-tish
ce-me-tery, or ta-ke a ta-xi up a mo-un-ta-in pe-ak for a vi-ew of the ver-dant, fog-shro-uded val-ley be-low.

So-me-ti-mes on the-se out-ings, when they pass by a sto-re win-dow, La-il-a cate-hes the-ir ref-lec-ti-ons in it. Man, wi-fe, da-ugh-ter, son. To stran-gers, she knows, they must ap-pe-ar li-ke the most or-di-nary of fa-mi-li-es, free of sec-rets, li-es, and reg-rets.

* * *

Azi-za-has night-ma-res from which she wa-kes up shri-eking. La-il-a has to lie be-si-de her on the cot, dry her che-eks with her sle-eve, so-ot-he her back to sle-ep.

La-il-a has her own dre-ams. In them, she's al-ways back at the ho-use in Ka-bul, wal-king the hall, clim-bing the sta-irs.

She is alo-ne, but be-hind the do-ors she he-ars the rhythmic hiss of an iron, beds-he-ets snap-ped, then fol-ded. So-me-ti-mes she he-ars a wo-man's low-pitc-hed hum-ming of an old He-ra-ti song. But when she walks in, the ro-om is empty. The-re is no one the-re.
The dre-ams le-ave La-il-a sha-ken. She wa-kes from them co-ated in swe-at, her eyes prick-ling with te-ars. It is de-vas-ta-ting. Every ti-me, it is de-vas-ta-ting.

49.

One Sun-day that Sep-tem-ber, La-il-a is put-ting Zal-mai, who has a cold, down for a nap when Ta-riq bursts in-to the-ir bun-ga-low.

"Did you he-ar?" he says, pan-ting a lit-tle. "They kil-led him. Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud. He's de-ad."

"What?"

From the do-or-way, Ta-riq tells her what he knows.

"They say he ga-ve an in-ter-vi-ew to a pa-ir of jo-ur-na-lists who cla-imed they we-re Bel-gi-ans ori-gi-nal-ly from Mo-roc-co. As they're tal-king, a bomb hid-den in the vi-deo ca-me-ra go-es off. Kills Mas-so-ud and one of the jo-ur-na-lists. They sho-ot the ot-her one as he tri-es to run. They're sa-ying now the jo-ur-na-lists we-re pro-bably Al-Qa-eda men."

La-il-a re-mem-bers the pos-ter of Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud that Mammy had na-iled to the wall of her bed-ro-om. Mas-so-ud le-an-ing for-ward, one eye-brow coc-ked, his fa-ce fur-ro-wed in con-cent-ra-tion, as tho-ugh he was res-pect-ful-ly lis-te-ning to
so-me-one. La-ila re-men-bers how gra-te-ful Mammy was that Mas-so-ud had sa-id a gra-ve-si-de pra-yer at her sons' bu-ri-al, how she told ever-yo-ne abo-ut it. Even af-ter war bro-ke out bet-we-en his fac-ti-on and the ot-hers, Mammy had re-fu-sed to bla-me him. He's a go-od man, she used to say.

_He wants pe-ace. He wants to re-bu-ild Afg-ha-nis-tan. But they won't let him. They just won't let him._ For Mammy, even in the end, even af-ter everyt-hing went so ter-ri-bly wrong and Ka-bul lay in ru-ins, Mas-so-ud was still the Li-on of Pa-njs-hir.

La-ila is not as for-gi-ving- Mas-so-ud's vi-olent end brings her no joy, but she re-men-bers too well the ne-igh-bor-ho-ods ra-zed un-der his watch, the bo-di-es drag-ged from the rub-ble, the hands and fe-et of child-ren dis-co-ve-red on ro-of-tops or the high branch of so-me tree days af-ter the ir fu-ne-ral She re-men-bers too cle-arly the lo-ok on Mammy's own fa-ce mo-ments be-fo-re the roc-ket slam-med in and, much as she has tri-ed to for-get, Ba-bi's he-ad-less tor-so lan-ding ne-ar-by, the brid-ge to-her prin-ten-ded on his T-shirt po-king thro-ugh thick fog and blo-od. "The-re is go-ing to be a fu-ne-ral," Ta-riq is sa-ying. "I'm su-re of it. Pro-bably in Ra-wal-pin-di. It'll be hu-ge."

Zal-mai, who was al-most as-le-ep, is sit-ting up now, rub-bing his eyes with bal-led fists.

Two days la-ter, they are cle-aning a ro-om when they he-ar a com-mo-ti-on. Ta-riq drops the mop and hur-ri-es out. La-ila ta-ils him.

Tho-ne-ise is co-ming from the ho-tel lobby. The-re is a lo-un-ge area to the right of the re cep-ti-on desk, with se-ve-ral cha-irs and two co-uc-hes up-hols-te-red in be-ige su-ede. In the cor-ner, fa-cing the co-uc-hes, is a te-le-vi-sion, and Sa-ye-ed, the con-ci-er-ge, and se-ve-ral gu-ests are gat-he-red in front of.

La-ila and Ta-riq work the-ir way in.

The TV is tu-ned to BBC. On the scre-en is a bu-il-ding, a to-her, black smo-ke bil-lo-wing from its top flo-or-s. Ta-riq says so-met-hing to Sa-ye-ed and Sa-ye-ed is in mid-reply when a pla-ne ap-pe-ars from the cor-ner of the scre-en. It cras-hes in-to the adj-acent to-her, exp-lo-ding in-to a fi-re-ball that dwarfs any ball of fi-re that La-ila has ever se-en. A col-lec-ti-ve yelp ri-ses from ever-yo-ne in the lobby.

In less than two ho-urs, both to-wers ha-ve col-lap-sed

So-on all the TV sta-ti-ons are tal-king abo-ut Afg-ha-nis-tan and the Ta-li-ban and Osa-ma bin La-den.

* * *
"Did you hear what the Taliban said?" Tariq asks. "About bin Laden?"

Aziza is sitting across from him on the bed, conside-ring the board. Tariq has taught her to play chess. She is frowning and tapping her lower lip now, mimicking the body lan-guage her father assumes when he's de-ci-ding on a mo-ve.

Zal-mai's cold is a lit-tle bet-ter. He is as-le-ep, and La-ila is rub-bing Vicks on his chest.
"I hear," she says.

The Taliban have an-no-un-ced that they won't re-lin-qu-ish bin Laden be-ca-use he is ameh-man, a gu-est, who has fo-und sanc-tu-ary in Afg-ha-nis-tan and it is aga-inst the Pas-hi-un-wa-li co-de of et-hics to turn over a gu-est. Tar-qi chuck-les bit-terly, and La-ila he-ars in his chuck-le that he is re-vol-ted by this dis-tor-ti-on of an ho-no-rab-le Pash-tun cus-tom, this mis-rep-re-sen-ta-ti-on of his pe-op-le's ways.

A few days af-ter the at-tacks, La-ila and Ta-riq are in the ho-tel lobby aga-in. On the TV sce-en, Ge-or-ge W. Bush is spe-aking. The re is a big Ame-ri-can flag be-hind him. At one po-int, his vo-ice wa-vers, and La-ila thinks he is go-ing to we-ep.
Sa-ye-ed, who spe-a ks Eng-lish, exp-la-ins to them that Bush has just dec-la-red war.
"On whom?" says Ta-riq.
"On yo-ur co-un-try, to be-gin with."

* * *

"It may not be such a bad thing," Tariq says.

They ha-ve fi-nis-hed ma-king lo-ve. He's lying be-si-de her, his he-ad on her chest, his arm dra-ped over her belly. The first few ti-mes they tri-ed, the-re was dif-fi-culty. Ta-riq was all apo-lo-gi-es, La-ila all re-as-su-ran-ces. The-re are still dif-fi-cul-ti-es, not physi-cal now but lo-gis-ti-cal. The shack they sha-re with the child-ren is small. The child-ren sle-ep on cots be-low them and so the-re is lit-tle pri-vacy. Most ti-mes, La-ila and Ta-riq ma-ke lo-ve in si-len-ce, with cont-rol-led, mu-ted pas-si-on, fully clot-hed be-ne-ath the blan-ket as a pre-ca-uti-on aga-inst in-ter-rup-ti-ons by the child-ren. They are fo-re-ver wary of the rust-ling she-ets, the cre-aking bed-springs. But for La-ila, be-ing with Ta-riq is worth we-at-he-ring the-se ap-pre-hen-si-ons. When they ma-ke lo-ve, La-ila fe-els anc-ho-red, she fe-els shel-te-red. Her an-xi-eti-es, that the-ir li-fe  to-get-her is a tem-po-rary bles-sing, that so-on it will co-me lo-ose aga-in in strips and tat-ters, are al-la-yed. Her fe-ars of se-pa-ra-ti-on va-nish.

"What do you mean?" she says now.
"What's go-ing on back ho-me. It may not be so bad in the end."

Back ho-me, bombs are fal-ling on-ce aga-in, this ti-me Ame-ri-can bombs-La-ila has be-en watc-h-ing ima-ges of the war every day on the te-le-vi-si-on as she chan-ges she-ets and va-cu-ums. The Ame-ri-cans ha-ve ar-med the war-lords on-ce mo-re, and en-lis-ted the help of the Nort-hern Al-li-an-ce to dri-ve out the Ta-li-ban and find bin La-den.
But it rank-les La-ila, what Ta-riq is sa-ying. She pus-hes his he-ad ro-ughly off her chest.


"Shh. You'll wa-ke the child-ren."

"How can you say that, Ta-riq?" she snaps. "After the so-cal-led blun-der in Ka-ram? A hund-red in-no-cent pe-op-le! You saw the bo-di-es for yo-ur-self!"

"No," Ta-riq says. He props him-self up on his el-bow, lo-oks down at La-ila. "You mi-sun-ders-tand. What I me-ant was-"
"You wo-uld'n't know," La-ila says. She is awa-re that her vo-ice is ri-sing, that they are ha-ving the-ir first fight as hus-band and wi-fe. "You left when the Mu-j-ahi-de-en be-gan figh-ting, re-men-ber? I'm the one who sta-yed be-hind. Me. I know war. I lost my pa-rents to war. My pa-rents, Ta-riq. And now to he-ar you say that war is not so bad?"

"I'm sorry, La-ila. I'm sorry." He cups her fa-ce in his hands. "You're right. I'm sorry. For-gi-ve me. What I me-ant was

that may-be the-re will be ho-pe at the ot-her end of this war, that may-be for the first ti-me in a long ti-me-"

"I don't want to talk abo-ut this any-mo-re," La-ila says, surp-ri-sed at how she has las-hed out at him. It's un-fa-ir, she knows, what she sa-id to him-hadn't war ta-ken his pa-rents too?-and wha-te-ver fla-red in her is sof-te-ing al-re-ady. Ta-riq con-ti-nues to spe-ak gently, and, when he pulls her to him, she lets him. When he kis-ses her hand, then her brow, she lets him. She knows that he is pro-bably right. She knows how his com-ment was in-ten-ded. May-be this is ne-ces-sary. May-be the-remi be ho-pe when Bush's bombs stop fal-ling. But she can-not bring her-self to say it, not when what hap-pe-ned to Ba-bi and Mammy is hap-pe-ning to so-me-one now in Afg-ha-nis-tan, not when so-me un-sus-pec-ting girl or boy back ho-me has just be-en orp-ha-ned by a roc-ket as she was. La-ila can-not bring her-self to say it. It's hard to re-j-o-ice. It se-ems hypoc-ri-ti-cal, per-ver-se.
That night, Zal-mai wa-kes up co-ug-hing. Be-fo-re La-ila can mo-ve, Ta-riq swings his legs over the si-de of the bed. He stra ps on his prost-he-sis and walks over to Zal-mai, lifts him up in-to his arms. From the bed, La-ila watc-hes Ta-riq's sha-pe mo-ving back and forth in the dark-ness. She se-es the out-li-ne of Zal-mai's he-ad on his sho-ul-der, the knot of his hands at Ta-riq's neck, his small fe-et bo-un-cing by Ta-riq's hip.

When Ta-riq co-mes back to bed, ne-it-her of them says anyt-hing. La-ila re-ac-hes over and to-uc-hes his fa-ce. Ta-riq's che-eks are wet.

For La-ila, li-fe in Mur-ree is one of com-fort and tran-qu-il-lity. The work is not cum-ber-so-me, and, on the-ir days off, she and Ta-riq ta-ke the child-ren to ri-de the cha-ir-lift to Pat-ri-ata hill, or go to Pin-di Po-int, whe-re, on a cle-ar day, you can see as far as Is-la-ma-bad and down-town Ra-wal-pin-di. The-re, they spre-ad a blan-ket on the grass and eat me-at-ball sand-wic-hes with cu-cum-bers and drink cold gin-ger ale.

It is a go-od li-fe, La-ila tells her-self, a li-fe to be thank-ful for. It is, in fact, pre-ci-sely the sort of li-fe she used to dre-am for her-self in her dar-kest days with Ras-he-ed. Every day, La-ila re-minds her-self of this.

Then one warm night in July 2002, she and Ta-riq are lying in bed tal-king in hus-hed vo-ices abo-ut all the chan-ges back ho-me. The-re ha-ve be-en so many. The co-ali-ti-on for-ces ha-ve dri-ven the Ta-li-ban out of every ma-j-or city, pus-hed them ac-ross the bor-der to Pa-kis-tan and to the mo-un-ta-ins in the so-uth and east of Afg-ha-nis-tan. ISAF, an in-ter-na-ti-onal pe-ace-ke-eping for-ce, has be-en sent to Ka-bul. The co-un-try has an in-te-rim pre-si-dent now, Ha-mid Kar-zai.

La-ila de-ci-des that now is the ti-me to tell Ta-riq.

A ye-ar ago, she wo-uld ha-ve glad-ly gi-ven an arm to get out of Ka-bul. But in the last few months, she has fo-und her-self mis-sing the city of her child-ho-od. She mis-ses the bust-le of Shor Ba-za-ar, the Gar-dens of Ba-bur, the call of the wa-ter car-ri-ers lug-ging the-ir go-ats-kin bags. She mis-ses the gar-ment hag-glers at Chic-ken Stre-et and the me-lon haw-kers in Kar-teh-Par-wan.

But it isn't me-re ho-me-sick-ness or nos-tal-gia that has La-ila thin-king of Ka-bul so much the-se days. She has be-co-me pla-gu-ed by rest-les-sness. She he-ars of scho-ols bu-ilt in Ka-bul, ro-ads re-pa-ved, wo-men re-tur-ning to work, and her li-fe he-re, ple-asant as it is, gra-te-ful as she is for it, se-ems... in-suf-fi-ci-ent to her. In-con-se-qu-en-ti-al Wor-se yet, was-te-ful. Of la-te, she has star-ted he-ar-ing Ba-bi's vo-ice in her he-ad. You can be anyt-hing you want, La-ila, he says. I know this abo-ut
you. And I-al-so know that when this war is over, Afg-ha-nis-tan is go-ing to ne-ed you.

La-ila he-ars Mammy's vo-ice too. She re-mem-bers Mammy's res-pon-se to Ba-bi when he wo-uld sug-gest that they le-ave Afg-ha-nis-tan. I want to see my sons' dre-am co-me true. I want to be the-re when it hap-pens, when Afg-ha-nis-tan is free, so the boys see it too. They'll see it thro-ugh my eyes. The-re is a part of La-ila now that wants to re-turn to Ka-bul, for Mammy and Ba-bi, for them to see it thro-ugh her eyes.

And then, most com-pel-lingly for La-ila, the-re is Ma-ri-am. Did Ma-ri-am die for this? La-ila asks her-self. Did she sac-ri-fi-ce her-self so she, La-ila, co-uld be a ma-id in a fo-re-ign land? May-be it wo-uld'n't mat-ter to Ma-ri-am what La-ila did as long as she and the child-ren we-re sa-fe and happy. But it mat-ters to La-ila. Sud-denly, it mat-ters very much.

"I want to go back," she says.

Ta-riq sits up in bed and lo-oks down at her.

La-ila is struck aga-in by how be-a-uti-ful he is, the per-fect cur-ve of his fo-re-he-ad, the slen-der musc-les of his arms, his bro-oding, in-tel-li-gent eyes. A ye-a-r has pas-sed, and still the-re are ti-mes, at mo-ments li-ke this, when La-ila can-not be-li-eve that they ha-ve fo-und each ot-her aga-in, that he is re-al-ly he-re, with her, that he is her hus-band.

"Back? To Ka-bul?" he asks.

"Only if you want it too."

"Are you un-hap-py he-re? You se-em happy. The child-ren too."

La-ila sits up. Ta-riq shifts on the bed, ma-kes ro-om for her.

"I am happy," La-ila says. "Of co-ur-se I am. But…whe-re do we go from he-re, Ta-riq? How long do we stay? This isn't ho-me. Ka-bul is, and back the-re so much is hap-pe-ning, a lot of it go-od. I want to be a part of it all. I want todo so-met-hing. I want to con-ti-ri-bu-te. Do you un-ders-tand?"

Ta-riq nods slowly. "This is what you want, then? You're su-re?"

"I want it, yes, I'm su-re. But it's mo-re than that. I fe-el li-ke I ha-ve to go back. Sta-ying he-re, it do-esn't fe-el right any-mo-re."

Ta-riq lo-oks at his hands, then back up at her.
"But only-only-if you want to go too."

Ta-riq smi-les. The fur-rows from his brow cle-ar, and for a bri-e-f mo-ment he is the old Ta-riq aga-in, the Ta-riq who did not get he-adac-hes, who had on-ce sa-id that in Si-be-ria snot tur-ned to ice be-fo-re it hit the gro-und. It may be her ima-gi-na-ti-on, but La-il-a be-li-eves the-re are mo-re fre- qu-ent sigh-tings of this old Ta-riq the-se clays.

"Me?" he says. "I'll fol-low you to the end of the world, La-il-a."

She pulls him clo-se and kis-ses his lips. She be-li-eves she has ne-ver lo-ved him mo-re than at this mo-ment. "Thank you," she says, her fo-re-he-ad res-ting aga-inst his.

"Let's go ho-me."

"But first, I want to go to He-rat," she says.

"He-rat?"

La-il-a exp-la-ins.

* * *

The child-ren ne-ed re-as-su-ring, each in the-ir own way. La-il-a has to sit down with an agi-ta-ted Azi-za, who still has night-ma-res, who'd be-en start-led to te-ars the we-ek be-fo-re when so-me-one had shot ro-unds in-to the sky at a wed-ding ne-ar by. La-il-a has to exp-la-in to Azi-za that when they re-turn to Ka-bul the Ta-li-ban won't be the-re, that the-re will not be any figh-ting, and that she will not be sent back to the orp-ha-na-ge. "We'll all li-ve to-get-her. Yo-ur fat-her, me, Zal-mai. And you, Azi-za. You'll ne-ver, ever, ha-ve to be apart from me aga-in. I pro-mi-se." She smi-les at her da-ugh-ter. "Until the day you want to, that is. When you fall in lo-ve with so-me yo-ung man and want to marry him."

On the day they le-ave Mur-ree, Zal-mai is in-con-so-lab-le. He has wrap-ped his arms aro-und Al-yo-na's neck and will not let go.

"I can't pry him off of her, Mammy," says Azi-za.

"Zal-mai. We can't ta-ke a go-at on the bus," La-il-a exp-la-ins aga-in.

It isn't un-til Ta-riq kne-els down be-si-de him, un-til he pro-mi-ses Zal-mai that he will buy him a go-at just li-ke Al-yo-na in Ka-bul, that Zal-mai re-luc-tantly lets go.

The-re are te-ar-ful fa-re-wel-ls with Sa-ye-ed as well For go-od luck, he holds a Ko-ran by the do-or-way for Ta-riq, La-il-a, and the child-ren to kiss three ti-mes, then
A Thousand Splendid Suns

holds it high so they can pass under it. He helps Ta-riq load the two suitcases into the trunk of his car. It is Sa-ye-ed who drives them to the sta-tion, who stands on the curb waving goodbye as the bus pulls away.

As she leans back and watches Sa-ye-ed receding in the rear window of the bus, La-il'a hears the voice of doubt whispering in her head. Are they being foolish, she wonders, leaving behind the safety of Mur-ree? Going back to the land where her parents and brothers perished, where the smoke of bombs is only now settling?

And then, from the darkened spirals of her memory, rise two lines of poetry, Ba-bi’s farewell ode to Ka-bul:

One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs, or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls.

La-il'a settles back in her seat, blinking the wetness from her eyes. Ka-bul is waiting. Needing. This journey home is the right thing to do.

But first there is one last farewell to be said.

* * *

The wars in Afg-ha-nis-tan have raged the roads connecting Ka-bul, He-rat, and Kan-da-har. The easiest way to He-rat now is through Mas-had, in Iran. La-il'a and her family are there only over-night. They spend the night at a hotel, and, the next mor-ning, they board another bus.

Mas-had is a crowded, bust-ling city. La-il'a watches as parks, mos-qu-es, and che-lo ke-bab res-taurants pass by. When the bus passes the shri-ne to Imam Re-za, the eighth Shi'a imam, La-il'a cranes her neck to get a better view of its gleam-ing ti-les, the mi-na-rets, the mag-ni-fi-cent gol-den do-me, all of it im-ma-cu-la-tely and lo-vingly pre-served. She thinks of the Bud-dhas in her own co-untry. They are gra-ins of dust now, blow-ing about the Ba-mi-yan Val-ley in the wind.

The bus ri-de to the Ira-ni-an-Afghan bor-der takes al-most ten ho-urs. The ter-ra-in grows mo-re de-so-la-te, mo-re bar-ren, as they near Afg-ha-nis-tan. Shortly before they cross the bor-der into He-rat, they pass an Afg-han re-fu-gee camp. To La-il'a, it is a blur of yellow dust and black tents and scanty struc-tu-res made of cor-rug-a-ted she-ets. She reaches across the seat and takes Ta-riq's hand.

* * *

In He-rat, most of the stre-ets are pa-ved, lined with frag-rant pi-nes. The re are mu-ni-ci-pal parks and lib-ra-ri-es in re-con-struc-tion, ma-ni-cu-red co-urt-yards,
freshly painted buildings. The traffic lights work, and, most surprisingly to La-ila, electric-city is ste-ady. La-ila has he ard that He-rat's fe-udal-style war-lord, Is-ma-il Khan, has hel-ped re-bu-ild the city with the con-si-de-rab-le cus-toms re-ve-nue that he col-lects at the Afg-han-Ira-ni-an bor-der, mo-ney that Ka-bul says be- longs not to him but to the cent-ral go-vern-ment. The-re is both a re-ve-ren-ti-al and fe-ar-ful to-ne when the ta-xi dri-ver who ta-kes them to Mu-waf-faq Ho-tel men-ti-ons Is-ma-il Khan's na-me.

The two-night stay at the Mu-waf-faq will cost them ne-arly a fifth of the ir sa-vings, but the trip from Mas-had has be-en long and we-ar-ying, and the child-ren are ex-ha-us-ted. The el-derly clerk at the desk tells Ta-riq, as he fetc-hes the ro-om key, that the Mu-waf-faq is po-pu-lar with jo-ur-na-lists and NGO wor-kers.

"Bin La-den slept he-re on-ce," he bo-asts.

The ro-om has two beds, and a bath-ro-om with run-ning cold wa-ter. The-re is a pa-in-ting of the po-et Kha-ja Ab-dul-lah An-sary on the wall bet-we-en the beds. From the win-dow, La-ila has a vi-ew of the busy stre-et be-low, and of a park ac-ross the stre-et with pas-tel-co-lo-red brick paths cut-ting thro-ugh thick clus-ters of flo-wers. The child-ren, who ha-ve grown ac-cus-to-med to te-le-vi-si-on, are di-sap-po-in-ted that the-re isn't one in the ro-om. So-on eno-ugh, tho-ugh, they are as-le-ep. So-on eno-ugh, Ta-riq and La-ila too ha-ve col-lap-sed. La-ila sle-eps so-undly in Ta-riq's arms, ex-cept for on-ce in the mid-dle of the night when she wa-kes from a dre-am she can-not re-mem-ber.

* * *

The next mor-ning, af-ter a bre-ak-fast of tea with fresh bre-ad, qu-in-ce mar-ma-la-de, and bo-iled eggs, Ta-riq finds her a ta-xi.

"Are you su-re you don't want me to co-me along?" Ta-riq says. Azi-za is hol-ding his hand Zal-mai isn't, but he is stan-ding clo-se to Ta-riq, le-aning one sho-ul-der on Ta-riq's hip.

"I'm su-re."

"I worry."

"I'll be fi-ne," La-ila says. "I pro-mi-se. Ta-ke the child-ren to a mar-ket. Buy them so-met-hing."

Zal-mai be-gins to cry when the ta-xi pulls away, and, when La-ila lo-oks back, she se-es that he is re-ac-hing for Ta-riq. That he is be-gin-ning to ac-cept Ta-riq both eases and bre-aks La-ila's he-art.
"You're not from he-rat," the dri-ver says.

He has dark, sho-ul-der-length ha-ir-a com-mon thum-bing of the no-se at the
de-par-ted Ta-li-ban, La-ila has dis-co-ve-red-and so-me kind of scar in-ter-rup-ting
his mus-tac-he on the left si-de. The-re is a pho-to ta-ped to the winds-hi-eld, on his
si-de. It's of a yo-ung girl with pink che-eks and ha-ir par-ted down the mid-dle in-to
bra-ids.

La-ila tells him that she has be-en in Pa-kis-tan for the last ye-ar, that she is
re-tur-ning to Ka-bul. "Deh-Ma-zang."

Thro-ugh the winds-hi-eld, she se-es cop-pers-miths wel-ding brass hand-les to jugs,
sad-dle-ma-kers la-ying out cuts of raw-hi-de to dry in the sun.
"Ha-ve you li-ved he-re long, brot-her?" she asks.

"Oh, my who-le li-fe. I was born he-re. I've se-en everyt-hing. You re-men-ber the
up-ri-sing?"

La-ila says she do-es, but he go-es on.

"This was back in March 1979, abo-ut ni-ne months be-fo-re the So-vi-eets in-va-ded.
So-me angry He-ra-tis kil-led a few So-vi-et ad- vi-sers, so the So-vi-eets sent in tanks
and he-li-cop-ters and po-un-ded this pla-ce. For three days, ham-s-hi-ra, they fi-red
on the city. They col-lap-sed bu-il-dings, dest-ro-yed one of the mi-na-rets, kil-led
Tho-usands of pe-op-le. I lost two sis-ters in tho-se three days. One of
them was twel-ve ye-ars old." He taps the pho-to on his winds-hi-eld. "That's her."

"I'm sorry," La-ila says, mar-ve-ling at how every Afg-han story is mar-ked by
de-ath and loss and uni-ma-gi-nab-le gri-ef. A nd yet, she se-es, pe-op-le find a way to
sur- vi-ve, to go on. La-ila thinks of her own li-fe and all that has hap-pe-ned to her,
and she is as-to-nis-hed that she too has sur- vi-ved, that she is ali-ve and sit-ting in
this ta-xi lis-te-ning to this man's
story.

Gul Da-man is a vil-la-ge of a few wal-led ho-uses ri-sing among flatkol-bas bu-ilt
with mud and straw. Out-si-de the kol-bas, La-ila se-es sun-bur-ned wo-men co-oking,
the-ir fa-ces swe-ating in ste-am ri-sing from big blac-ke-ned pots set on ma-kes-hift
fi-re-wo-od grills. Mu-les eat from tro-u-ghs. Child-ren gi-ving cha-se to chic-kens
be-gin cha-sing the ta-xi. La-ila se-es men pus-hing whe-el-bar-rows fil-led with
sto-nes. They stop and watch the car pass by. The dri-ver ta-kes a turn, and they pass a
ce-me-ter-y with a we-at-her-worn ma-uso-le-um in the cen-ter of it. The dri-ver tells
her that a vil-la-ge Su-fi is bu-ri-ed the-re.
The re is a wind-mill too. In the sha-dow of its id-le, rust-co-lo-red va-nes, three lit-tle boys are squ-at-ting, pla-ying with mud. The dri-ver pulls over and le-ans out of the win-dow. The ol-dest-lo-oking of the three boys is the one to ans-wer. He po-ints to a ho-use fart-er up the ro-ad. The dri-ver thanks him, puts the car back in ge-ar.

He parks out-si-de the wal-led, one-story ho-use. La-ila se-es the tops of fig tre-es abo-ve the walls, so-me of the branc-hes spil-ling over the si-de.

"I won't be long," she says to the dri-ver.

* * *

The mid-dle-aged man who opens the do-or is short, thin, rus-set-ha-ired. His be-ard is stre-ak-ed with pa-ral-lel stri-pes of gray. He is we-ar-ing acha-pan over hispir-han-tum-ban.

They exc-han-ge sa-la-am alay-kums.

"Is this Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah's ho-use?" La-ila asks.

"Yes. I am his son, Ham-za. Is the-re so-met-hing I can do for you, ham-s-hi-reh?"

"I've co-me he-re abo-ut an old fri-end of yo-ur fat-her's, Ma-ri-am."

Ham-za blinks. A puz-zled lo-ok pas-ses ac-ross his fa-ce. "Ma-ri-am…"

"Jalil Khan's da-ugh-ter."

He blinks aga-in. Then he puts a palm to his che-ek and his fa-ce lights up with a smi-le that re-ve-als mis-sing and rot-ting te-eth. "Oh!" he says. It co-mes out so-un-ding li-ke Ohhhhhhh, li-ke an ex-pel-led bre-ath. "Oh! Ma-ri-am! Are you her da-ugh-ter? Is she?" He is twis-ting his neck now, lo-oking be-hind her eagerly, se-arc-hing. "Is she he-re? It's be-en so long! Is Ma-ri-am he-re?"

"She has pas-sed on, I'm af-ra-id."

The smi-le fa-des from Ham-za's fa-ce.

For a mo-ment, they stand the-re, at the do-or-way, Ham-za lo-oking at the gro-und. A don-key brays so-mew-he-re.

"Co-me in," Ham-za says. He swings the do-or open. "Ple-a-se co-me in."

* * *

250
They srr on the flo-or in a spar-sely fur-nis-hed ro-om. The-re is a He-ra-ti rug on the flo-or, be-aded cus-hi-ons to sit on, and a fra-med pho-to of Mec-ca on the wall They sit by the open win-dow, on eit-her si-de of an ob-long patch of sun-light- La-ila he-ars wo-men's vo-ices whis-pe-ring from anot-her ro-om. A lit-tle ba-re-fo-ot boy pla-ces be-fo-re them a plat-ter of gre-en tea and pis-tac-hioga-az no-ugats. Ham-za nods at him.

"My son."

The boy le-aves so-und-les-sly.

"So tell me," Ham-za says ti-redly.

La-ila do-es. She tells him everyt-hing. It ta-kes lon-ger than she'd ima-gi-ned. To-ward the end, she strug-gles to ma-in-ta-in com-po-su-re. It still isn't easy, one ye-ar la-ter, tal-king abo-ut Ma-ri-am.

When she's do-ne, Ham-za do-esn't say anyt-hing for a long ti-me. He slowly turns his te-acup on its sa-ucer, one way, then the ot-her.

"My fat-her, may he rest in pe-ace, was so very fond of her," he says at last. "He was the one who sang azan in her ear when she was born, you know. He vi-si-ted her every we-ek, ne-ver mis-sed. So-me-ti-mes he to-ok me with him. He was her tu-tor, yes, but he was a fri-end too. He was a cha-ri-tab-le man, my fat-her. It ne-arly bro-ke him when Jalil Khan ga-ve her away."

"I'm sorry to he-ar abo-ut yo-ur fat-her. May God for-gi-ve him."

Ham-za nods his thanks. "He li-ved to be a very old man. He out-li-ved Jalil Khan, in fact. We bu-ri-ed him in the vil-la-ge ce-me-tery, not far from whe-re Ma-ri-am's mot-her is bu-ri-ed. My fat-her was a de-ar, de-ar man, su-rely he-a-ven-bo-und."

La-ila lo-wers her cup.

"May I ask you so-met-hing?"

"Of co-ur-se."

"Can you show me?" she says. "Whe-re Ma-ri-am li-ved. Can you ta-ke me the-re?"

* * *

The dri-ver ag-re-es to wa-it aw-hi-le lon-ger.
Ham-za and La-ila exit the vil-la-ge and walk down-hill on the ro-ad that con-nects Gul Da-man to He-rat. Af-ter fif-teen mi-nu-tes or so, he po-in-ts to a nar-row gap in the tall grass that flanks the ro-ad on both si-des.

"That's how you get the-re," he says. "The-re is a path the-re."

The path is ro-ugh, win-ding, and dim, be-ne-ath the ve-ge-ta-tion and un-der-growth. The wind ma-kes the tall grass slam aga-inst La-ila's cal-ves as she and Ham-za climb the path, ta-ke the turns. On eit-her si-de of them is a ka-le-idos-co-pe of wil-cif-lo-wers swa-ying in the wind, so-me tall with cur-ved pe-tals, ot-hers low, fan-le-afed. He-re and the-re a few rag-ged but-ter-cups pe-ep thro-ugh the low bus-hes. La-ila he-ars the twit-ter of swal-lows over-he-ad and the busy chat-ter of gras-shop-pers un-der-fo-ot.

They walk up-hill this way for two hund-red yards or mo-re. Then the path le-vels, and opens in-to a flat-ter patch of land. They stop, catch the-ir bre-ath. La-ila dabs at her brow with her sle-eve and bats at a sw arm of mos-qu-ito-es ho-ve-ring in front of her fa-ce. He-re she se-es the low-sl ung mo-un-ta-ins in the ho-ri-zon, a few cot-ton-wo-ods, so-me pop-lars, va-ri-o-us wild bus-hes that she can-not na-me.

"The-re used to be a stre-am he-re," Ham-za says, a lit-tle out of bre-ath. "But it's long dri-ed up now."

He says he will wa-it he-re. He tells her to cross the dry stre-am-bed, walk to-ward the mo-un-ta-ins.

"I'll wa-it he-re," he says, sit-ting on a rock be-ne-ath a pop-lar. "You go on."

"I won't-"

"Don't worry. Ta-ke yo-ur ti-me. Go on,ham-s-hi-reh. "

La-ila thanks him. She cros-ses the stre-am-bed, step-ping from one sto-ne to anot-her. She spots bro-ken so-da bot-tles amid the rocks, rus-ted cans, and a mold-co-ated me-tal-lic con-ta-iner with a zinc lid half bu-ri-ed in the gro-und.

She he-ads to-ward the mo-un-ta-ins, to-ward the we-eping wil-lows, which she can see now, the long dro-oping branc-hes sha-king with each gust of wind. In her chest, her he-art is drum-ming. She se-es that the wil-lows are ar-ran-ged as Ma-ri-am had sa-id, in a cir-cu-lar gro-ve with a ele-ar-ing in the mid-dle. La-ila walks fas-ter, al-most run-ning now. She lo-oks back over her sho-ul-der and se-es that Ham-za is a tiny fi-gu-re, hischa-pan a burst of co-lor aga-inst the brown of the tre-es' bark. She trips over a sto-ne and al-most falls, then re-ga-ins her fo-o-ting. She hur-ri-es the rest of the way with the legs of her tro-users pul-led up. She is pan-ting by the ti-me she re-ac-hes the wil-lows.
Ma-ri-am's kol-ba is still he-re. When she ap-pro-ac hes it, La-ila se-es that the lo-ne win dow-pa-ne is empty and that the do-or is go-ne. Ma-ri-am had desc-ri-bed a chic-ken co-op and a tan-do-or, a wo-oden out-ho-use too, but La-ila se-es no sign of them. She pa-uses at the ent-ran-ce to the kol-ba She can he-ar fli-es buz-zing in-si-de.

To get in, she has to si-des-tep a lar-g-e flut-te-ring spi-der-web. It's dim in-si-de. La-ila has to gi-ve her eyes a few mo-ments to adj-ust. When they do, she se-es that the in-te-ri-or is even smal-ler than she'd ima-gi-ned. Only half of a sing-le rot-ting, splin-te-red bo-ard re-ma-ins of the flo-or-bo-ar ds. The rest, she ima-gi-nes, ha-ve be-en rip-ped up for bur-ning as fi-re-wo-od. The flo-or is car-pe-ted now with dry-edged le-aves, bro-ken bot-tles, dis-car-ded che-wing gum wrap-pers, wild mush-ro-oms, old yel-lo-wed ci-ga-ret-te butts. But mostly with we-eds, so-me stun-ted, so-me sprin-ging im-pu-dently half-way up the walls.

La-ila sits down, her back to the wall. She lis-ten-s to the wind fil-te-ring thro-ugh the wil-lows. The-re are mo-re spi-der-webs stre-tche-d ac-cross the ce-ili-ng. So-me-one has spray-pa-in-ted so-met-hing on one of the walls, but much of it has slo-ug-hed off, and La-ila can-not de-cip-her what it says. Then she re-ali-zes the let-ters are Rus-si-an. The-re is a de-ser-ted bird's nest in one cor-ner and a bat han-ging up-si-de down in anot-her cor-ner, whe-re the wall me-ets the low ce-ili-ng.
La-ila clo-ses her eyes and sits the-re aw-hi-le.
In Pa-kis-tan, it was dif-fi-cult so-me-ti-mes to re-mem-ber the de-ta-ils of Ma-ri-am's fa-ce. The-re we-re ti-mes when, li-ke a word on the tip of her ton-gue, Ma-ri-am's fa-ce elu-ded her. But now, he-re in this pla-ce, it's easy to sum-mon Ma-ri-am be-hind the lids of her eyes: the soft ra-di-an-ce of her ga-ze, the long chin, the co-ar-se-ned skin of her neck, the tight -lip-ped smi-le. He-re, La-ila can lay her che-ek on the soft-ness of Ma-ri-am's lap aga-in, can fe-el Ma-ri-am swa-ying back and forth, re-ci-ting ver-ses from the Ko-ran, can fe-el the words vib-ra-ting down Ma-ri-am's body, to her kne-es, and in-to her own ears.

Then, sud-denly, the we-eds be-gin to re-ce-de, as if so-met-hing is pul-ling them by the ro-ots from be-ne-ath the gro-und. They sink lo-wer and lo-wer un-til the earth in the kol-ba has swal-lo-wed the last of the ir spi-ny le-aves. The spi-der-webs ma-gi-cal-ly uns-pin them-sel-ves. The bird's nest self-di-sas-semb-les, the twigs snap-ping lo-ose one by one, flying out of the kol-ba end over end. An in-vi-sib-le era-ser wi-pes the Rus-si-an graf-fi-ti off the wall.

The flo-or-bo-ar ds are back. La-ila se-es a pa-ir of sle-eping cots now, a wo-oden tab-le, two cha-irs, a cast-iron sto-ve in the cor-ner, shel-ves along the walls, on which sit clay pots and pans, a blac-ke-ned te-aket-tle, cups and spo-ons. She he-ars chic-kens cluc-king out-si-de, the dis-tant gurg-ling of the stre-am.
A young Mariam is sitting at the table making a doll by the glow of an oil lamp. She's humming something. Her face is smooth and youthful, her hair washed, combed back. She has all her teeth.

Laila watches Mariam glue strands of yam onto her doll's head. In a few years, this little girl will be a woman who will make small demands on life, who will never burden others, who will never let on that she too has had sorrows, disappointments, dreams that have been ridiculed. A woman who will be like a rock in a riverbed, enduring without complaint, her grace not sullied but shaped by the turbulence that washes over her. Already Laila sees something behind this young girl's eyes, something deep in her core, that neither Rasheed nor the Taliban will be able to break. Something as hard and unyielding as a block of limestone. Something that, in the end, will be her undoing and Laila's salvation.

The little girl looks up. Puts down the doll. Smiles.

La ila jo?

Laila's eyes snap open. She gasps, and her body pitches forward. She startles the bat, which zips from one end of the kolba to the other, its beating wings like the flurrying pages of a book, before it flies out the window.

Laila gets to her feet, beats the dead leaves from the seat of her trousers. She steps out of the kolba.

Outside, the light has shifted slightly. A wind is blowing, making the grass ripple and the willow branches click.

Before she leaves the clearing, Laila takes one last look at the kolba where Mariam had slept, eaten, dreamed, held her breath for Jalil. On sagging walls, the willows cast crooked patterns that shift with each gust of wind. A crow has landed on the flat roof. It pecks at something, squawks, flies off.

"Goodbye, Mariam."

And, with that, unaware that she is weeping, Laila begins to run through the grass.

She finds Hamza still sitting on the rock. When he spots her, he stands up.

"Let's go back," he says. Then, "I have something to give you."

* * *

Laila waits for Hamza in the garden by the front door. The boy who had served them tea earlier is standing beneath one of the fig trees holding a chicken, watching her impassively. Laila spies two faces, an old woman and a young girl in hijab observing her demurely from a window.
The do-or to the ho-use opens and Ham-za emer-ges. He is car-ry-ing a box.

He gi-ves it to La-ila.
"Jalil Khan ga-ve this to my fat-her a month or so be-fo-re he di-ed/' Ham-za says.
"He as-ked my fat-her to sa-fe-gu-ard it for Ma-ri-am un-til she ca-me to cla-im it. My fat-her kept it for two ye-ars. Then, just be-fo-re he pas-sed away, he ga-ve it to me, and as-ked me to sa-ve it for Ma-ri-am. But she…you know, she ne-ver ca-me."

La-ila lo-oks down at the oval-sha-ped tin box. It lo-oks li-ke an old cho-co-la-te box. It's oli-ve gre-en, with fa-ding gilt scrolls all aro-und the hin-ged lid The-re is a lit-tle rust on the si-des, and two tiny dents on the front rim of the lid. La-ila tri-es to open the box, but the latch is loc-ked.
"What's in it?" she asks.
Ham-za puts a key in her palm. "My fat-her ne-ver un-loc-ked it. Ne-it-her did I. Isup-po-se it was God's will that it be you."

* * *
Back at the ho-tel, Ta-riq and the child-ren are not back yet.
La-ila sits on the bed, the box on her lap. Part of her wants to le-ave it uno-pe-ned, let wha-te-ver Jalil had in-ten-d ed re-ma-in a sec-ret. But, in the end, the cu-ri-osity pro-ves too strong. She sli-des in the key. It ta-kes so-me rat-tling and sha-king, but she opens the box.

In it, she finds three things: an en-ve-lo-pe, a bur-lap sack, and a vi-de-ocas-set-te.
La-ila ta-kes the ta-pe and go-es down to the re-cep-ti-on desk. She le-arns from the el-derly clerk who had gre-eted them the day be-fo-re that the ho-tel has only one VCR, in its big-gest su-ite. The su-ite is va-cant at the mo-ment, and he ag-re-es to ta-ke her. He le-aves the desk to a mus-tac-hi-o-ed yo-ung man in a su-it who is tal-king on a cel-lu-lar pho-ne.

The old clerk le-ads La-ila to the se-cond flo-or, to a do-or at the end of a long hal-lway. He works the lock, lets her in.

La-ila's eyes find the TV in the cor-ner. They re-gis-ter not-hing el-se abo-ut the su-ite. She turns on the TV, turns on the VCR. Puts the ta-pe in and pus-hes the play but-ton. The scre-en is blank for a few mo-ments, and La-ila be-gins to won-der why Jalil had go-ne to the tro-ub-le of pas-sing a blank ta-pe to Ma-ri-am. But then the-re is mu-sic, and ima-ges be-gin to play on the scre-en.

La-ila frowns. She ke-eps watc-hing for a mi-nu-te or two. Then she pus-hes stop, fast-for-wards the ta-pe, and pus-hes play aga-in. It's the sa-me film.

The old man is lo-oking at her qu-iz-zi-cal-ly.
The film playing on the screen is Walt Disney's *Pinocchio*. La-ila does not understand.

* * *

Ta-riq and the children come back to the hotel just after six o'clock. Azi-za runs to La-ila and shows her the earrings Ta-riq has bought for her, silver with an enamel butterfly on each. Zal-mai is clutching an inflatable dolphin that squeaks when its snout is squeezed.

"How are you?" Ta-riq asks, putting his arm around her shoulder.

"I'm fine," La-ila says. "I'll tell you later."

They walk to a nearby kebab house to eat. It's a small place, with sticky, vinyl tablecloths, smoky and loud. But the lamb is tender and moist and the bread hot. They walk the streets for a while after. Ta-riq buys the children rosewater ice cream from a street-side kiosk. They eat, sitting on a bench, the mountains behind them silhouetted against the scarlet red of dusk. The air is warm, rich with the fragrance of cedar.

La-ila had opened the envelope earlier when she came back to the room after viewing the videotape. In it was a letter, handwritten in blue ink on a yellow, lined sheet of paper.

It read:

May 13, 1987

My de-ar Ma-ri-am:

I pray that this letter finds you in go-od he-alth.

As you kno w, I ca-me to Ka-bul a month ago to spe-ak with you. Bui you wo-uld not see me. I was di-sap-po-in- ted but co-uld not bla-me you. In yo-ur pla-ce, Imight ha-ve do-ne the sa-me. I lost the pri- vi-le-ge of yo-ur go-od gra-ces a long ti-me ago and for that I only ha-ve myself to bla-me. Bui if you are re-ad-ing this let-ter, then you ha-ve re-ad the let-ter that I le-fi at yo-ur do-or. You ha-ve re-ad it and you ha-ve co-me to see Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah, as I had as- ked that you do. I am gra-te-ful that you did, Ma-ri-am jo. I am gra-te-ful for this chan-ce to say a few words to you.

Whe-re do I be-gin?

Yo-ur fat-her has known so much sor-row sin-ce we last spo-ke, Ma-ri-amjo. Yo-ur step-mot-her Af-so-on was kil-led on the first day of the 1979 up-ri-sing. A stray bul-let kil-led yo-ur sis-ter Ni-lo-ufar that sa-me day. I can still see her, my Uti-le Ni-lo-ufar, do-ing he-ad-si-ands to imp-ress gu-ests. Yo-ur brot-her Far-had jo-ined
the jihad in J 980. The So-vi-ets kil-led him in J 982, just out-si-de of Hel-mand. I ne-ver got to see his body. I don 't know if you ha-ve child-ren of yo-ur own, Ma-ri-amjo, but if you do I pray that God lo-ok af-ter them and spa-re you the gri-ef that I ha-ve known. I still dre-am of them. I still dre-am of my de-ad chil-d-ren.

I ha-ve dre-ams of you too, Ma-ri-am jo. I miss you. I miss the so-und of yo-ur vo-ice, yo-ur la-ugh-ter. Do you re-mem-ber all tho-se ti-mes we fis-hed to-get-her? You we-re a go-od da-ugh-ter, Ma-ri-am jo, and I can-not ever think of you wit-ho-ut fe-el-ing sha-me and reg-ret. Reg-ret... When it co-mes to you, Ma-ri-amjo, I ha-ve oce-ans of it. I reg-ret that I did not see you the day you ca-me to He-rat. I reg-ret that I did not open the do-or and ta-ke you in. I reg-ret that I did not ma-ke you a da-ugh-ter to me, ihat le-iyou li-ve in that pla-ce for all tho-se ye-ars. And-for what? Fe-ar of lo-sing fa-ce? Of sta-ning my so-cal-led go-od na-me? How Uti-le tho-se things mat-ter to me now af-ter all the loss, all the ter-rib-le things I ha-ve se-en in this cur-sed war. Bui now, of co-ur-se, it is too la-te. Per-haps this is just pu-nish-ment for tho-se who ha-ve be-en he-art-less, to un-ders-tand only when not-hing can be un-do-ne. Now all I can do is say that you we-re a go-od da-ugh-ter, Ma-ri-amjo, and that Ine-ver de-ser ved you. Now all I can do is ask for yo-ur for-gi-ve-ness. So for-gi-ve me, Ma-ri-amjo. For-gi-ve me. For-gi-ve me. For-gi-ve me.

I am not the we-althy man you on-ce knew. The com-mu-nists con-fis-ca-ted so much of my land, and all of my sto-res as well. But it is petty to comp-la-in, for God-for re-as-ons that I do not un-der-s-tand has still bles-sed me with far mo-re than most pe-op-le. Sin-ce my re-turn from Ka-bul, I ha-ve ma-na-ged to sell what Uti-le re-ma-ined of my land. I ha-ve enc-lo-sed for you yo-ur sha-re of the in-he-ri-tan-ce. You can see that it is far from afor-tu-nes, but it is so-met-hing. It is so-met-hing. (You will al-so no-ti-ce that I ha-ve ta-ken the li-berty of exc-han-ging the mo-ney in-to dol-lars. I think it is for the best God alo-ne knows the fa-te of our own be-le-agu-ered cur-rency.)

I ho-pe you do not think that I am trying to buy yo-ur for-gi-ve-ness. I ho-pe you will cre-dit me with kno-ing that yo-ur for-gi-ve-ness is not for sa-le. It ne-ver was. I am me-rely gi-ving you, if be-la-tedly, what was right-ful-ly yo-urs all along. I was not a du-ti-ful fat-her to you in li-fe. Per-haps in de-ath I can be.

Ah, de-ath. I won't bur-den you with de-ta-ils, but de-ath is wit-hin sight for me now. We-ak he-art, the doc-tors say. It is a fit-ting man-ner of de-ath, I think, for a we-ak man.

Ma-ri-amjo,

I da-re, I da-re al-low myself the ho-pe that, af-ter you re-ad this, you will be mo-re cha-ri-tab-le to me than I ever was to you. That you might find it in yo-ur he-art to co-me and see yo-ur fat-her. That you will knock on my do-or one mo-re ti-me and gi-ve me the chan-ce to open it this ti-me, to wel-co-me you, to ta-ke you in my arms, my da-ugh-ter, as I sho-uld ha-ve all tho-se ye-ars ago. It is a ho-pe as we-ak as my he-art. This I know. But I will be wa-iting. I will be lis-te-ning for yo-ur knock I will be ho-ping.
May God grant you a long and prosperous life, my daughter. May God give you many healthy and beautiful children. May you find the happiness, peace, and acceptance that I did not give you. Be well. I leave you in the loving hands of God.

Your undeserving father, Jalil

That night, after they return to the hotel, after the children have played and gone to bed, Laila tells Tarig about the letter. She shows him the money in the burlap sack. When she begins to cry, he kisses her face and holds her in his arms.

April 2003

The drought has ended. It snowed at last this past winter, needed, and now it has been raining for days. The Kabul River is flowing again. Its spring floods have washed away Titanic City.

There is mud on the streets now. Shoes squish. Cars get trapped. Donkeys loaded with apples slog heavily, their hooves splashing muck from rain puddles. But no one is complaining about the mud, no one is mourning Titanic City. We need Kabul to be green again, people say.

Yesterday, Laila watched her children play in the downpour, hopping from one puddle to another in the backyard beneath a lead-colored sky. She was watching from the kitchen window of the small two-bedroom house that they are renting in Deh-Mazang. There is a pomegranate tree in the yard and a thick thicket of sweetbrier bushes. Tarig has patched the walls and built the children a slide, a swing set, a little fenced area for Zalmai's new goat. Laila watched the rain slide off Zalmai's scalp—he has asked that he be shaved, like Tarig, who is in charge now of saying the Baba-loo prayers. The rain flattened Aziza's long hair, turned it into sodden tendrils that sprayed Zalmai when she snapped her head.

Zalmai is almost six. Aziza is ten. They celebrated her birthday last week, took her to Cinema Park, where, at last, Titanic was openly screened for the people of Kabul.

***

"Come on, children, we're going to be late," Laila calls, putting the-ir lunches in a paper bag. It's eight o'clock in the morning. Laila was up at five. As always, it was Aziza who shook her awake for morning prayer. The prayerers, Laila knows, are Aziza's way of clinging to Maryam, her way of keeping Maryam close.
aw-hi-le yet be-fo-re ti-me has its way, be-fo-re it snac-hes Ma-ri-am from the
gar-den of her me-mory li-ke a we-ed pul-led by its ro-ots.

Afterna-maz, La-ila had go-ne back to bed, and was still as-le-ep when Ta-riq left
the ho-use. She va-gu-ely re-men-bers him kis-sing her che-ek. Ta-riq has fo-und
work with a French NGO that fits land mi-ne sur-vi-vors and am-pu-te-es with
prost-he-tic limbs.

Zal-mai co-mes cha-sing Azi-za in-to the kitc-hen.

"You ha-ve yo-ur no-te-bo-oks, you two? Pen-cils? Text-bo-oks?"

"Right he-re," Azi-za says, lif-ting her back-pack. Aga-in, La-ila no-ti-ces how her
stut-ter is les-se-ning.

"Let's go, then."

La-ila lets the child-ren out of the ho-use, locks the do-or. They step out in-to the
cool mor-ning. It isn't ra-in-ing to-day. The sky is blue, and La-ila se-es no clumps of
clo-uds in the ho-ri-zon. Hol-ding hands, the three of them ma-ke the-ir way to the
bus stop. The stre-ets are busy al-re-ady, te-eming with a ste-ady stre-am of
ricks-haws, ta-xi-cabs, UN trucks, bu-ses, ISAF je-eps. Sle-epy-eyed merc-hants are
un-loc-king sto-re ga-tes that had be-en rol-led down for the night-Ven-dors sit
be-hind to-wers of che-wing gum and ci-ga-ret-te packs. Al-re-ady the wi-dows ha-ve
cla-imed the-ir spots at stre-et cor-ners, as-king the pas-sersby for co-ins.

La-ila finds it stran-ge to be back in Ka-bul The city has chan-ged Every day now
she se-es pe-op-le plan-ting sap-lings, pa-in-ting old ho-uses, car-ry-ing bricks for new
ones. They dig gut-ters and wells. On win-dow-sil-ls, La-ila spots flo-wers pot-ted in
the empty shells of old Mu-j-ahi-de-en roc-kets-roc-ket flo-wers, Ka-bul is call them.
Re-cent-ly, Ta-riq to-ok La-ila and the child-ren to the Gar-dens of Ba-bur, which are
be-ing re-no-va-ted. For the first ti-me in ye-ars, La-ila he-ar-s mu-sic at Ka-bul's
stre-et cor-ners, ru-bab and tab-la, do-o-i-ar, har-mo-ni-um and tam-bo-ura, old
Ah-mad Za-hir songs.

La-ila wis-hes Mammy and Ba-bi we-re ali-ve to see the-se chan-ges. But, li-ke Mil's
let-ter, Ka-bul's pe-nan-ces has ar-ri-ved too la-te.

La-ila and the child-ren are abo-ut to cross the stre-et to the bus stop when sud-denly
a black Land Cru-is-er with tin-terd win-dows blows by. It swer-ves at the last ins-tant
and mis-ses La-ila by less than an arm's length. It splat-ters tea-co-lo-red ra-in wa-ter
all over the child-ren's shirts.

La-ila yanks her child-ren back on-to the si-de-walk, he-art so-mer-sa-ul-ting in her
thro-at.
The Land Cru-is-er spe-eds down the stre-et, honks twi-ce, and ma-kes a sharp left. La-ila stands the-re, try-ing to catch her bre-ath, her fin-gers grip-ped tightly aro-und her child-ren's wrists.

It slays La-ila. It slays her that the war-lords ha-ve be-en al-lo-wed back to Ka-bul. That her pa-rents' mur-de-rers li-ve in posh ho-mes with wal-led gar-den-s, that they ha-ve be-en ap-po-in-ted mi-nis-ter of this and de-puty mi-nis-ter of that, that they ri-de with im-pu-ni-ty in shiny, bul-letp-ro-of SUVs thro-ugh ne-i gh-or-ho-ods that they de-mo-lis-hed. It slays her.

But La-ila has de-ci-ded that she will not be crip-pled by re-sent-ment. Ma-ri-am wo-uld'n't want it that way. What's the sen-se? she wo-uld say with a smi-le both in-no-cent and wi-se. What go-od is it, La-ila jo? And so La-ila has re-sig-ned her-self to mo-v-ing on. For her own sa-ke, for Ta-riq's, for her child-ren's. And for Ma-ri-am, who still vi-sits La-ila in her dre-ams, who is ne-ver mo-re than a bre-ath or two be-low her cons-ci-o-us-ness. La-ila has mo-ved on. Be-ca-use in the end she knows that's all she can do. That and ho-pe.

* * *

Za-man is stan-ding at the free throw li-ne, his kne-es bent, bo-un-cing a bas-ket-ball. He is inst-ruc-ting a gro-up of boys in matc-hing jer-seys sit-ting in a se-mi-circ-le on the co-urt. Za-man spots La-ila, tucks the ball un-der his arm, and wa-ves. He says so-met-hing to the boys, who then wa-ve and cry out, "Sa-la-am, mo-alim sa-hib!"

La-ila wa-ves back.

The orp-ha-na-ge play-gro-und has a row of ap-ple sap-lings now along the east-fa-cing wall. La-ila is plan-ning to plant so-me on the so-uth wall as well as so-on as it is re-bu-ilt. The-re is a new swing set, new mon-key bars, and a jung-le gym. La-ila walks back in-si-de thro-ugh the scre-en do-or.

They ha-ve re-pa-in-ted both the ex-te-ri-or and the in-te-ri-or of the orp-ha-na-ge. Ta-riq and Za-man ha-ve re-pa-ired all the ro-of le-aks, patc-hed the walls, rep-la-ced the win-dows, car-pe-ted the ro-oms whe-re the child-ren sle-ep and play. This past win-ter, La-ila bo-ught a few beds for the child-ren's sle-eping qu-ar-ters, pil-lows too, and pro-per wo-ol blan-kets. She had cast-iron sto-ves ins-tal-led for the win-ter.

Anis, one of Ka-bul's news-pa-pers, had run a story the month be-fo-re on the re-no-va-ti-on of the orp-ha-na-ge. They'd ta-ken a pho-to too, of Za-man, Ta-riq, La-ila, and one of the at-ten-dants, stan-ding in a row be-hind the child-ren. When La-ila saw the ar-tic-le, she'd tho-ught of her child-ho-od fri-ends Gi-ti and Ha-si-na, and Ha-si-na sa-y-ing, By the ti-me we're twenty, Gi-ti and I, we'll ha-ve pus-hed out fo-ur, fi-ve kids each Bui you, La-ila, you'll ma-ke us two dum-mi-es pro-ud. You're go-ing to be so-me-body. I know one day I'll pick up a news-pa-per and find yo-ur
picture on the front-page. The photo hadn't made the front page, but there it was nevertheless, as Hasina had predicted.

La-ila takes a turn and makes her way down the same hall-way where, two ye-ars be-fo-re, she and Ma-ri-ah had de-li-ve-red Azi-za to Za-man. La-ila still re-mem-bers how they had to pry Azi-za's fin-gers from her wrist. She re-mem-bers run-ning down this hall-way, hol-ding back a howl, Ma-ri-ah cal-ling af-ter her, Azi-za scre-aming with pa-nic. The hal-lway's walls are co-ve-red now with pos-ters, of di-no-sa-urs, car-to-on cha-rac-ters, the Bud-dhas of Ba-mi-yan, and disp-lays of art-work by the orp-hans. Many of the dra-wings de-pict tanks run-ning over huts, men bran-dis-hing AK-47s, re-fu-gee camp tents, sce-nes of jihad.

La-ila turns a cor-ner in the hall-way and sees the child-ren now, wa-iting out-si-de the clas-sro-om. She is gre-eted by the ir scar-ves, the ir sha-ved scalps co-ve-red by skul-lcaps, the ir small, le-an fi-gu-res, the be-a-uty of the ir drab-ness.

When the child-ren spot La-ila, they co-me run-ning. They co-me run-ning at full tilt. La-ila is swar-med. The re is a flurry of high-pitc-hed gre-etings, of shrill vo-ices, of pat-ting, clutc-hing, tug-ging, gro-ping, of jost-ling with one anot-her to climb in-to her arms. The-re are outst-re tc-hed lit-tle hands and ap-pe-als for at-ten-ti-on. So-me of them call her Mot-her. La-ila do-es not cor-rect them.

It ta-kes La-ila so-me work this mor-ning to calm the child-ren down, to get them to form a pro-per qu-e-ue, to us-her them in-to the clas-sro-om.

It was Ta-riq and Za-man who bu-ilt the clas-sro-om by knoc-king down the wall bet-we-en two adj-acent ro-oms. The flo-or is still badly crac-ke-d and has mis-sing ti-les. For the ti-me be-ing, it is co-ve-red with tar-pa-ulin, but Ta-riq has pro-mi-sed to ce-ment so-me new ti-les and lay down car-pe-ting so-on.

Na-iled abo-ve the clas-sro-om do-or-way is a rec-tan-gu-lar bo-ard, which Za-man has san-ded and pa-in-ted in gle-am-ing whi-te. On it, with a brush, Za-man has writ-ten fo-ur li-nes of po-etry, his ans-wer, La-ila knows, to tho-se who grumb-le that the pro-mi-sed aid mo-ney to Afg-ha-nis-tan isn't co-ming, that the re-bu-il-ding is go-ing too slowly, that the re is cor-rup-ti-on, that the Ta-li-ban are reg-ro-uping al-re-ady and will co-me back with a ven-ge-an-ce, that the world will for-get on-ce aga-in abo-ut Afg-ha-nis-tan. The li-nes are from his fa-vo-ri-te of Ha-fez's ghazals:

Joseph shall re-turn to Ca-na-an, gri-eve not, Ho-vels shall turn to ro-se gar-dens, gri-eve not. If a flo-od sho-uld ar-ri-ve, to drown all that's ali-ve, No-ah is yo-ur gu-ide in the typho-on's eye, gri-eve not

La-ila pas-ses be-ne-ath the sign and en-ters the clas-sro-om. The child-ren are ta-king the ir se-ats, flip-ping no-te-bo-oks open, chat-te-ring- Azi-za is tal-king to a girl in the adj-acent row. A pa-per airp-la-ne flo-ats ac-ross the ro-om in a high arc. So-me-one tos-ses it back.
"Open yo-ur Far-si bo-oks, child-ren," La-ila says, drop-ping her own bo-oks on her desk.

To a cho-rus of flip-ping pa-ges, La-ila ma-kes her way to the cur-ta-in-less win-dow. Thro-ugh the glass, she can see the boys in the playg-ro-und li-ni ng up to prac-ti-ce the-ir free throws. Abo-ve them, over the mo-un-ta-ins, the mor-ning sun is ri-sing. It catc-hes the me-tal-lic rim of the bas-ket-ball ho-op, the cha-in link of the ti-re swings, the whist-le han-ging aro-und Za-man's neck, his new, unc-hip-ped spec-tac-les. La-ila flat-ten-s her palms aga-inst the warm glass pa-nes. Clo-ses her eyes. She lets the sun-light fall on her che-eks, her eye-lids, her brow.

When they first ca-me back to Ka-bul, it dis-tres-sed La-ila that she didn't know whe-re the Ta-li-ban had bu-ri-ed Ma-ri-am. She wis-hed she co-uld vi-sit Ma-ri-am's gra-ve, to sit with her aw-hi-le, le-ave a flo-er or two. But La-ila se-es now that it do-esn't mat-ter. Ma-ri-am is ne-ver very far. She is he-re, in the-se walls they've re-pa-in-ted, in the tre-es they've plan-ted, in the blan-kets that ke-ep the child-ren warm, in the-se pil-lows and bo-oks and pen-cils. She is in the child-ren's la-ugh-ter. She is in the ver-ses Azi-za re-ci-tes and in the pra-yers she mut-ters when she bows west-ward. But, mostly, Ma-ri-am is in La-ilas own he-art, whe-re she shi-nes with the burs-ting ra-di-an-ce of a tho-usand suns.

So-mo-ne has be-en cal-ling her na-me, La-ila re-ali-zes. She turns aro-und, ins-tinc-ti-vely tilts her he-ad, lif-ting her go-od ear just a tad. It's Azi-za. "Mammy? Are you all right?"

The ro-om has be-co-me qu-i-et. The child-ren are watc-hing her.

La-ila is abo-ut to ans-wer when her bre-ath sud-denly catc-hes. Her hands sho-ot down. They pat the spot whe-re, a mo-ment be-fo-re, she'd felt a wa-ve go thro-ugh her. She wa-its. But the-re is no mo-re mo-ve-ment.

"Mammy?"

"Yes, my lo-ve." La-ila smi-les. "I'm all right. Yes. Very much."

As she walks to her desk at the front of the class, La-ila thinks of the na-ming ga-me they'd pla-yed aga-in over din-ner the night be-fo-re. It has be-co-me a nightly ri-tu-al ever sin-ce La-ilas ga-ve Ta-riq and the child-ren the news. Back and forth they go, ma-king a ca-se for the-ir own cho-ice. Ta-riq li-kes Mo-ham-mad. Zal-mai, who has re-cently watc-hed Su-per-man on ta-pe, is puz-zled as to why an Afg-han boy can-not be na-med Clark. Azi-za is cam-pa-ig-ning hard for Aman. La-ila li-kes Omar.

But the ga-me in-vol-ves only ma-le na-mes. Be-ca-use, if it's a girl, La-ila has al-re-ady na-med her.
Afterword

For al-most three de-ca-des now, the Afg-han re-fu-gee cri-sis has be-en one of the most se-ve-re aro-und the glo-be. War, hun-ger, anarchy, and op-pres-si-on for-ced mil-li-ons of pe-op-le-li-ke Ta-riq and his fa-mily in this ta-le-to aban-don the-ir ho-mes and flee Afg-ha-nis-tan to set-tle in ne-igh-bo-ring Pa-kis-tan and Iran. At the he-ight of the exo-dus, as many as eight mil-li-on Afg-hans we-re li-ving ab-ro-ad as re-fu-ge-es. To-day, mo-re than two mil-li-on Afg-han re-fu-ge-es re-ma-in in Pa-kis-tan.

Over the past ye-ar, I ha-ve had the pri-vi-le-ge of wor-king as a U.S. en-voy for UNHCR, the UN re-fu-gee agency, one of the world's fo-re-most hu-ma-ni-ta-ri-an a-gen-ci-es. UNHCR's man-da-te is to pro-tect the ba-sic hu-man rights of re-fu-ge-es, pro-vi-de emer-gency re-li-ef, and to help re-fu-ge-es res-tart the-ir li-ves in a sa-fe en-vi-ron-ment. UNHCR pro-vi-des as-sis-tance to mo-re than twenty mil-li-on disp-la-ced pe-op-le aro-und the world, not only in Afg-ha-nis-tan but al-so in pla-ces such as Co-lom-bia, Bu-run-di, the Con-go, Chad, and the Dat-fur re-gi-on of Su-dan. Wor-king with UNHCR to help re-fu-ge-es has be-en one of the most re-war-ding and me-aning-ful ex-pe-ri-en-ces of my li-fe.

To help, or simply to le-arn mo-re abo-ut UNHCR, its work, or the plight of re-fu-ge-es in ge-ne-ral, ple-ase vi-sit:www.UNre-fu-ge-es.org .

Thank you.
Kha-led Hos-se-ini Janu-ary 31, 2007

Acknowledgments

A few cla-ri-fi-ca-ti-ons be-fo-re I gi-ve thanks. The vil-la-ge of Gul Da-man is a fic-ti-onal pla-ce-as far as I know. Tho-se who are fa-mi-li-ar with the city of He-rat will no-ti-ce that I ha-ve ta-ken mi-nor li-ber-ti-es desc-ri-bing the ge-og-raphy aro-und it. Last, the tit-le of this no-vel co-mes from a po-em com-po-sed by Sa-eb-e-Tab-ri-zi, a se-ven-te-enth-cen-tury Per-si-an po-et. Tho-se who know the ori-gi-nal Far-si po-em will do-ubt-less no-te that the Eng-lish trans-la-tion of the li-ne con-ta-ining the tit-le of this no-vel is not a li-te-ral one. But it is the ge-ne-ral-ly ac-cep-ted trans-la-tion, by Dr. Josep-hi-ne Da-vis, and I fo-und it lo-vely. I am gra-te-ful to her.

I wo-uld li-ke to thank Qa-yo-um Sar-war, Hek-mat Sa-dat, Ely-se Hat-ha-way, Ro-se-mary Sta-sek, Law-ren-ce Qu-ill, and Ha-leema Jaz-min Qu-ill for the-ir as-sis-tance and sup-port.
Very spe-ci-al thanks to my fat-her, Ba-ba, for re-ading this ma-nusc-ript, for his fe-ed-back, and, as ever, for his lo-ve and sup-port. And to my mot-her, who-se self-less, gent-le spi-rit per-me-ates this ta-le. You are my re-ason, Mot-her jo. My thanks go to my in-laws for the-ir ge-ne-ro-sity and many kind-nes-ses. To the rest of my won-der-ful fa-mily, I re-ma-in in-deb-ted and gra-te-ful to each and every one of you.


not-hing, and, lastly, to my ta-len-ted edi-tor, Sa-rah McGrath, for her pa-ti-en-ce, fo-re-sight, and gu-idan-ce.

Fi-nal-ly, thank you, Ro-ya. For re-ading this story, aga-in and aga-in, for we-at-he-ring my mi-nor cri-ses of con-fi-den-ce (and a co-up-le of ma-jor ones), for ne-ver do-ub-ting. This bo-ok wo-uld not be wit-ho-ut you. I lo-ve you.

DISCLAIMER !!!

DONT DISTRIBUTE THIS PRIVATE BACKUP EBOOK IF U DONT HAVE ORIGINAL BOOKS !!!
SUPPORT THE AUTHOR FOR BUYING THEIR REAL BOOK FROM WWW.AMAZON.COM OR BOOKSTORE NEAR YOUR TOWN !!!

Upload by Quetzalcoatl