

A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

A NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF
THE KITE RUNNER

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KHALED HOSSEINI

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Translation of the poem "Kabul" by Josephine Barry Davis

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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.

Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the word *harami*

It happened on a Thursday. It must have, because Mariam remembered that she had been restless and preoccupied that day, the way she was only on Thursdays, the day when Jalil visited her at the *kolba*. To pass the time until the moment that she would see him at last, crossing the knee-high grass in the clearing and waving, Mariam had climbed a chair and taken down her mother's Chinese tea set. The tea set was the sole relic that Mariam's mother, Nana, had of her own mother, who had died when Nana was two. Nana cherished each blue-and-white porcelain piece, the graceful curve of the pot's spout, the hand-painted finches and chrysanthemums, the dragon on the sugar bowl, meant to ward off evil.

It was this last piece that slipped from Mariam's fingers, that fell to the wooden floorboards of the *kolba* and shattered.

When Nana saw the bowl, her face flushed red and her upper lip shivered, and her eyes, both the lazy one and the good, settled on Mariam in a flat, unblinking way. Nana looked so mad that Mariam feared *the jinn* would enter her mother's body again. But *the jinn* didn't come, not that time. Instead, Nana grabbed Mariam by the wrists, pulled her close, and, through gritted teeth, said, "You are a clumsy little *harami* This is my reward for everything I've endured An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little *harami*."

At the time, Mariam did not understand. She did not know what this

word *harami-bastard-meant* Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the *harami* who are culpable, not the *harami*, whose only sin is being born. Mariam *did* surmise, by the way Nana said the word, that it was an ugly, loath-some thing to be a *harami*, like an insect, like the scurrying cockroaches Nana was always cursing and sweeping out of the *kolba*.

Later, when she was older, Mariam did understand. It was the way Nana uttered the word-not so much saying it as spitting it at her-that made Mariam feel the full sting of it. She understood then what Nana meant, that a *harami* was an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance.

Jalil never called Mariam this name. Jalil said she was his little flower. He was fond of sitting her on his lap and telling her stories, like the time he told her that Herat, the city where Mariam was born, in 1959, had once been the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters, and Sufis.

"You couldn't stretch a leg here without poking a poet in the ass," he laughed.

Jalil told her the story of Queen Gauhar Shad, who had raised the famous minarets as her loving ode to Herat back in the fifteenth century. He described to her the green wheat fields of Herat, the orchards, the vines pregnant with plump grapes, the city's crowded, vaulted bazaars.

"There is a pistachio tree," Jalil said one day, "and beneath it, Mariam jo, is buried none other than the great poet Jami." He leaned in and whispered, "Jami lived over five hundred years ago. He did. I took you

there once, to the tree. You were little. You wouldn't remember."

It was true. Mariam didn't remember. And though she would live the first fifteen years of her life within walking distance of Herat, Mariam would never see this storied tree. She would never see the famous minarets up close, and she would never pick fruit from Herat's orchards or stroll in its fields of wheat. But whenever Jalil talked like this, Mariam would listen with enchantment. She would admire Jalil for his vast and worldly knowledge. She would quiver with pride to have a father who knew such things.

"What rich lies!" Nana said after Jalil left. "Rich man telling rich lies. He never took you to any tree. And don't let him charm you. He betrayed us, your beloved father. He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily."

Mariam would listen dutifully to this. She never dared say to Nana how much she disliked her talking this way about Jalil. The truth was that around Jalil, Mariam did not feel at all like a *harami*. For an hour or two every Thursday, when Jalil came to see her, all smiles and gifts and endearments, Mariam felt deserving of all the beauty and bounty that life had to give. And, for this, Mariam loved Jalil.

* * *

Even if she had to share him.

Jalil had three wives and nine children, nine legitimate 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 facade was made of blue-and-tan terra-cotta 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 encased in glass displays. On Tuesdays, Jalil said one day, kids got free ice cream at the concession 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 Daman, 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 *d//*either, Nana said, to do the honorable thing. To stand up to his family, to his wives and inlaws, 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. *Didi?* You see? This is what it means to be a woman in this world."

Nana put down the bowl of chicken feed. She lifted Mariam's chin with a finger.

"Look at me, Mariam."

Reluctantly, Mariam did.

Nana said, "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam."

2.

To Jalil and his wives, I was a pokeroot. A mugwort. You too. And you weren't even born yet."

"What's a mugwort?" Mariam asked

"A weed," Nana said. "Something you rip out and toss aside."

Mariam frowned internally. Jalil didn't treat her as a weed. He never had. But Mariam thought it wise to suppress this protest.

"Unlike weeds, I had to be replanted, you see, given food and water. On account of you. That was the deal Jalil made with his family."

Nana said she had refused to live in Herat.

"For what? To watch him drive his *kinchini* wives around town all day?"

She said she wouldn't live in her father's empty house either, in the village of Gul Daman, which sat on a steep hill two kilometers north of Herat. She said she wanted to live somewhere removed, detached, where neighbors wouldn't stare at her belly, point at her, snicker, or, worse yet, assault her with insincere kindnesses.

"And, believe me," Nana said, "it was a relief to your father having me out of sight. It suited him just fine."

It was Muhsin, Jalil's eldest son by his first wife, Khadija, who suggested the clearing- It was on the outskirts of Gul Daman. To get to it, one took a rutted, uphill dirt track that branched off the main road between Herat and Gul Daman. The track was flanked on either side by knee-high grass and speckles of white and bright yellow flowers. The track snaked uphill and led to a flat field where poplars and cottonwoods soared and wild bushes grew in clusters. From up there, one could make out the tips of the rusted blades of Gul Daman's windmill, on the left, and, on the right, all of Herat spread below. The path ended perpendicular to a wide, trout-filled stream, which rolled down from the Safid-koh mountains surrounding Gul Daman. Two hundred yards upstream, toward the mountains, there was a circular grove of weeping willow trees. In the

center, in the shade of the willows, was the clearing.

Jalil went there to have a look. When he came back, Nana said, he sounded like a warden bragging about the clean walls and shiny floors of his prison.

"And so, your father built us this rathole."

* * *

Nana had almost married once, when she was fifteen. The suitor had been a boy from Shindand, a young parakeet seller. Mariam knew the story from Nana herself, and, though Nana dismissed the episode, Mariam could tell by the wistful light in her eyes that she had been happy. Perhaps for the only time in her life, during those days leading up to her wedding, Nana had been genuinely happy.

As Nana told the story, Mariam sat on her lap and pictured her mother being fitted for a wedding dress. She imagined her on horseback, smiling shyly behind a veiled green gown, her palms painted red with henna, her hair parted with silver dust, the braids held together by tree sap. She saw musicians blowing the *shahnai* flute and banging on *dhol* drums, street children hooting and giving chase.

Then, a week before the wedding date, *ajinn* had entered Nana's body. This required no description to Mariam. She had witnessed it enough times with her own eyes: Nana collapsing suddenly, her body tightening, becoming rigid, her eyes rolling back, her arms and legs shaking as if something were throttling her from the inside, the froth at the corners of her mouth, white, sometimes pink with blood. Then the drowsiness, the frightening disorientation, the incoherent mumbling.

When the news reached Shindand, the parakeet seller's family called off the wedding.

"They got spooked" was how Nana put it.

The wedding dress was stashed away. After that, there were no more suitors.

* * *

In the clearing, Jalil and two of his sons, Farhad and Muhsin, built the small *kolba* where Mariam would live the first fifteen years of her life. They raised it with sun-dried bricks and plastered it with mud and handfuls of straw. It had two sleeping cots, a wooden table, two straight-backed chairs, a window, and shelves nailed to the walls where Nana placed clay pots and her beloved Chinese tea set. Jalil put in a new cast-iron stove for the winter and stacked logs of chopped wood behind the *kolba*. He added a tandoor outside for making bread and a chicken coop with a fence around it. He brought a few sheep, built them a feeding trough. He had Farhad and Muhsin dig a deep hole a hundred yards outside the circle of willows and built an outhouse over it.

Jalil could have hired laborers to build the *kolba*. Nana said, but he didn't.

"His idea of penance."

* * *

LstNana'S account of the day that she gave birth to Mariam, no one came to help. It happened on a damp, overcast day in the spring of 1959, she said, the twenty-sixth year of King Zahir Shah's mostly

uneventful forty-year reign. She said that Jalil hadn't bothered to summon a doctor, or even a midwife, even though he knew that *thejinn* might enter her body and cause her to have one of her fits in the act of delivering. She lay all alone on the *kolba's* floor, a knife by her side, sweat drenching her body.

"When the pain got bad, I'd bite on a pillow and scream into it until I was hoarse. And still no one came to wipe my face or give me a drink of water. And you, Mariam jo, you were in no rush. Almost two days you made me lay on that cold, hard floor. I didn't eat or sleep, all I did was push and pray that you would come out."

"I'm sorry, Nana."

"I cut the cord between us myself. That's why I had a knife."

"I'm sorry."

Nana always gave a slow, burdened smile here, one of lingering recrimination or reluctant forgiveness, Mariam could never tell. It did not occur to young Mariam to ponder the unfairness of apologizing for the manner of her own birth.

By the time it *did* occur to her, around the time she turned ten, Mariam no longer believed this story of her birth. She believed Jalil's version, that though he'd been away he'd arranged for Nana to be taken to a hospital in Herat where she had been tended to by a doctor. She had lain on a clean, proper 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 jo. Even in birth you were a good daughter."

"He wasn't even there!" Nana spat. "He was in Takht-e-Safar, horseback 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 once, comment on your longish face, and hand you back to me."

Mariam came to disbelieve this part of the story as well. Yes, Jalil admitted, he had been horseback 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 Muhsin and Ramin, sometimes Ramin and Farhad. 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 load it up again. Another two hundred yards of pushing followed, this time through tall, dense grass and around thickets of shrubs. Frogs leaped out of their way. The brothers waved mosquitoes from their sweaty faces.

"He has servants," Mariam said. "He could send a servant."

"His idea of penance," Nana said.

The sound of the wheelbarrow drew Mariam and Nana outside. Mariam would always remember Nana the way she looked on Ration Day: a tall, bony, barefoot woman leaning in the doorway, her lazy eye narrowed to a slit, arms crossed in a defiant and mocking way. Her short-cropped, sunlit hair would be uncovered and uncombed. She would wear an ill-fitting gray shirt buttoned to the throat. The pockets were filled with walnut-sized rocks.

The boys sat by the stream and waited as Mariam and Nana transferred

the rations to the *kolba*. They knew better than to get any closer than thirty yards, even though Nana's aim was poor and most of the rocks landed well short of their targets. Nana yelled at the boys as she carried bags of rice inside, and called them names Mariam didn't understand. She cursed their mothers, made hateful faces at them. The boys never returned the insults.

Mariam felt sorry for the boys. How tired their arms and legs must be, she thought pityingly, pushing that heavy load. She wished she were allowed to offer them water. But she said nothing, and if they waved at her she didn't wave back. Once, to please Nana, Mariam even yelled at Muhsin, told him he had a mouth shaped like a lizard's ass-and was consumed later with guilt, shame, and fear that they would tell Jalil. Nana, though, laughed so hard, her rotting front tooth in full display, that Mariam thought she would lapse into one of her fits. She looked at Mariam when she was done and said, "You're a good daughter."

When the barrow was empty, the boys scuffled back and pushed it away. Mariam would wait and watch them disappear into the tall grass and flowering weeds.

"Are you coming?"

"Yes, Nana."

"They laugh at you. They do. I hear them."

"I'm coming."

"You don't believe me?"

"Here I am."

"You know I love you, Mariam jo."

* * *

In the mornings, they awoke to the distant bleating of sheep and the high-pitched toot of a flute as Gul Daman's shepherds led their flock to graze on the grassy hillside. Mariam and Nana milked the goats, fed the hens, and collected eggs. They made bread together. Nana showed her how to knead dough, how to kindle the tandoor and slap the flattened dough onto its inner walls. Nana taught her to sew too, and to cook rice and all the different toppings: *shalqam* stew with turnip, spinach *sabzi*, cauliflower with ginger.

Nana made no secret of her dislike for visitors-and, in fact, people in general-but she made exceptions for a select few. And so there was Gul Daman's leader, the village *arbab*, Habib Khan, a small-headed, bearded man with a large belly who came by once a month or so, tailed by a servant, who carried a chicken, sometimes a pot of *kichiri* rice, or a basket of dyed eggs, for Mariam.

Then there was a rotund, old woman that Nana called Bibi jo, whose late husband had been a stone carver and friends with Nana's father. Bibi jo was invariably accompanied by one of her six brides and a grandchild or two. She limped and huffed her way across the clearing and made a great show of rubbing her hip and lowering herself, with a pained sigh, onto the chair that Nana pulled up for her. Bibi jo too always brought Mariam something, a box of *dishlemeh* candy, a basket of quinces. For Nana, she first brought complaints about her failing health, and then gossip from Herat and Gul Daman, delivered at length and with gusto, as her daughter-in-law sat listening quietly and dutifully behind her.

But Mariam's favorite, other than Jalil of course, was Mullah Faizullah,

the elderly village Koran tutor, its *akhund*. He came by once or twice a week from Gul Daman to teach Mariam the five daily *namaz* prayers and tutor her in Koran recitation, just as he had taught Nana when she'd been a little girl. It was Mullah Faizullah who had taught Mariam to read, who had patiently looked over her shoulder as her lips worked the words soundlessly, her index finger lingering beneath each word, pressing until the nail bed went white, as though she could squeeze the meaning out of the symbols. It was Mullah Faizullah who had held her hand, guided the pencil in it along the rise of each *alef*, the curve of each *beh*, the three dots of each *seh*.

He was a gaunt, stooping old man with a toothless smile and a white beard that dropped to his navel. Usually, he came alone to the *kolba*, though sometimes with his russet-haired son Hamza, who was a few years older than Mariam. When he showed up at the *kolba*, Mariam kissed Mullah Faizullah's hand-which felt like kissing a set of twigs covered with a thin layer of skin-and he kissed the top of her brow before they sat inside for the day's lesson. After, the two of them sat outside the *kolba*, ate pine nuts and sipped green tea, watched the bulbul birds darting from tree to tree. Sometimes they went for walks among the bronze fallen leaves and alder bushes, along the stream and toward the mountains. Mullah Faizullah twirled the beads of his *tasbeh* rosary as they strolled, and, in his quivering voice, told Mariam stories of all the things he'd seen in his youth, like the two-headed snake he'd found in Iran, on Isfahan's Thirty-three Arch Bridge, or the watermelon he had split once outside the Blue Mosque in Mazar, to find the seeds forming the words *Allah* on one half, *Akbar* on the other.

Mullah Faizullah admitted to Mariam that, at times, he did not understand the meaning of the Koran's words. But he said he liked the enchanting sounds the Arabic words made as they rolled off his tongue.

He said they comforted him, eased his heart.

"They'll comfort you too, Mariam jo," he said. "You can summon them in your time of need, and they won't fail you. God's words will never betray you, my girl"

Mullah Faizullah listened to stories as well as he told them. When Mariam spoke, his attention never wavered He nodded slowly and smiled with a look of gratitude, as if he had been granted a coveted privilege. It was easy to tell Mullah Faizullah things that Mariam didn't dare tell Nana.

One day, as they were walking, Mariam told him that she wished she would be allowed to go to school.

"I mean a real school, *akhund* sahib. Like in a classroom. Like my father's other kids."

Mullah Faizullah stopped.

The week before, Bibi jo had brought news that Jalil's daughters Saideh and Naheed were going to the Mehri School for girls in Herat. Since then, thoughts of classrooms and teachers had rattled around Mariam's head, images of notebooks with lined pages, columns of numbers, and pens that made dark, heavy marks. She pictured herself in a classroom with other girls her age. Mariam longed to place a ruler on a page and draw important-looking lines.

"Is that what you want?" Mullah Faizullah said, looking at her with his soft, watery eyes, his hands behind his stooping back, the shadow of his turban falling on a patch of bristling buttercups.

'Yes.

"And you want me to ask your mother for permission."

Mariam smiled. Other than Jalil, she thought there was no one in the world who understood her better than her old tutor.

"Then what can I do? God, in His wisdom, has given us each weaknesses, and foremost among my many is that I am powerless to refuse you, Mariam jo," he said, tapping her cheek with one arthritic finger.

But later, when he broached Nana, she dropped the knife with which she was slicing onions. "What for?"

"If the girl wants to learn, let her, my dear. Let the girl have an education."

"Learn? Learn what, Mullah sahib?" Nana said sharply. "What is there to learn?"

She snapped her eyes toward Mariam.

Mariam looked down at her hands.

"What's the sense schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon. And you'll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me."

"You should not speak like this to her, my child," Mullah Faizullah said.

"Look at me."

Mariam did.

"Only one skill And it's this: *iahamuL* Endure."

"Endure what, Nana?"

"Oh, don't you fret about *that*," Nana said. "There won't be any shortage of things."

She went on to say how Mil's wives had called her an ugly, lowly stone carver's daughter. How they'd made her wash laundry outside in the cold until her face went numb and her fingertips burned.

"It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have. Do you understand? Besides, they'll laugh at you in school. They will. They'll call you *haram!* They'll say the most terrible things about you. I won't have it."

Mariam nodded.

"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- Come now. If the girl wants-" Mullah Faizullah began.

"And you, *akhund* sahib, with all due respect, you should know better than to encourage these foolish ideas of hers. If you really care about her, then you make her see that she belongs here at home with her mother. There is nothing out there for her. Nothing but rejection and heartache. I know, *akhund* sahib. I *know*."

Mariam loved having visitors at the *kolba*. The village *arbab* and his gifts, Bibi jo and her aching hip and endless gossiping, and, of course, Mullah Faizullah. But there was no one, no one, that Mariam longed to see more than Jalil.

The anxiety set in on Tuesday nights. Mariam would sleep poorly, fretting that some business entanglement would prevent Jalil from coming on Thursday, that she would have to wait a whole other week to see him. On Wednesdays, she paced outside, around the *kolba*, tossed chicken feed absentmindedly into the coop. She went for aimless walks, picking petals from flowers and batting at the mosquitoes nibbling on her arms. Finally, on Thursdays, all she could do was sit against a wall, eyes glued to the stream, and wait. If Jalil was running late, a terrible dread filled her bit by bit. Her knees would weaken, and she would have to go somewhere and lie down.

Then Nana would call, "And there he is, your father. In all his glory."

Mariam would leap to her feet when she spotted him hopping stones across the stream, all smiles and hearty waves. Mariam knew that Nana was watching her, gauging her reaction, and it always took effort to stay in the doorway, to wait, to watch him slowly make his way to her, to not run to him. She restrained herself, patiently watched him walk through the tall grass, his suit jacket slung over his shoulder, the breeze lifting his red necktie.

When Jalil entered the clearing, he would throw his jacket on the tandoor and open his arms. Mariam would walk, then finally run, to him, and he would catch her under the arms and toss her up high. Mariam

would squeal.

Suspended in the air, Mariam would see Jalil's upturned face below her, his wide, crooked smile, his widow's peak, his cleft chin-a perfect pocket for the tip of her pinkie-his teeth, the whitest in a town of rotting molars. She liked his trimmed mustache, and she liked that no matter the weather he always wore a suit on his visits-dark brown, his favorite color, with the white triangle of a handkerchief in the breast pocket-and cuff links too, and a tie, usually red, which he left loosened Mariam could see herself too, reflected in the brown of Jalil's eyes: her hair billowing, her face blazing with excitement, the sky behind her.

Nana said that one of these days he would miss, that she, Mariam, would slip through his fingers, hit the ground, and break a bone. But Mariam did not believe that Jalil would drop her. She believed that she would always land safely into her father's clean, well-manicured hands.

They sat outside the *kolba*, in the shade, and Nana served them tea. Jalil and she acknowledged each other with an uneasy smile and a nod. Jalil never brought up Nana's rock throwing or her cursing.

Despite her rants against him when he wasn't around, Nana was subdued and mannerly when Jalil visited. Her hair was always washed. She brushed her teeth, wore her best *hijab* for him. She sat quietly on a chair across from him, hands folded on her lap. She did not look at him directly and never used coarse language around him. When she laughed, she covered her mouth with a fist to hide the bad tooth.

Nana asked about his businesses. And his wives too. When she told him

that she had heard, through Bibi jo, that his youngest wife, Nargis, was expecting her third child, Jalil smiled courteously and nodded.

"Well. You must be happy," Nana said. "How many is that for you, now? Ten, is it, *mashallah*? Ten?"

Jalil said yes, ten.

"Eleven, if you count Mariam, of course."

Later, after Jalil went home, Mariam and Nana had a small fight about this. Mariam said she had tricked him.

After tea with Nana, Mariam and Jalil always went fishing in the stream. He showed her how to cast her line, how to reel in the trout. He taught her the proper way to gut a trout, to clean it, to lift the meat off the bone in one motion. He drew pictures for her as they waited for a strike, showed her how to draw an elephant in one stroke without ever lifting the pen off the paper. He taught her rhymes. Together they sang:

*Lili Mi birdbath, Sitting on a dirt path, Minnow sat on the rim and drank,
Slipped, and in the water she sank*

Jalil brought clippings from Herat's newspaper, *Liifaq-i Islam*, and read from them to her. He was Mariam's link, her proof that there existed a world at large, beyond the *kolba*, beyond Gul Daman and Herat too, a world of presidents with unpronounceable names, and trains and museums and soccer, and rockets that orbited the earth and landed on the moon, and, every Thursday, Jalil brought a piece of that world with him to the *kolba*.

He was the one who told her in the summer of 1973, when Mariam was fourteen, that King Zahir Shah, who had ruled from Kabul for forty years, had been overthrown in a bloodless coup.

"His cousin Daoud Khan did it while the king was in Italy getting medical treatment- You remember Daoud Khan, right? I told you about him. He was prime minister in Kabul when you were bom. Anyway, Afghanistan is no longer a monarchy, Mariam. You see, it's a republic now, and Daoud Khan is the president. There are rumors that the socialists in Kabul helped him take power. Not that he's a socialist himself, mind you, but that they helped him. That's the rumor anyway."

Mariam asked him what a socialist was and Jalil began to explain, but Mariam barely heard him.

"Are you listening?"

"I am."

He saw her looking at the bulge in his coat's side pocket. "Ah. Of course. Well. Here, then. Without further ado..."

He fished a small box from his pocket and gave it to her. He did this from time to time, bring her small presents. A carnelian bracelet cuff one time, a choker with lapis lazuli beads another. That day, Mariam opened the box and found a leaf-shaped pendant, tiny coins etched with moons and stars hanging from it.

"Try it on, Mariam jo."

She did. "What do you think?"

Jalil beamed "I think you look like a queen."

After he left, Nana saw the pendant around Mariam's neck.

"Nomad 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 nicked 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 encouragingly.

Two weeks before, at Mariam's prodding, Jalil had let on that an American film was playing at his cinema. It was a special kind of film, what he'd called a cartoon. The entire film was a series of drawings, he said, thousands of them, so that when they were made into a film and projected onto a screen you had the illusion that the drawings were moving. Jalil said the film told the story of an old, childless toymaker who is lonely and desperately wants a son. So he carves a puppet, a boy, who magically comes to life. Mariam had asked him to tell her more, and Jalil said that the old man and his puppet had all sorts of adventures, that there was a place called Pleasure Island, and bad boys who turned into donkeys. They even got swallowed by a whale at the end, the puppet and his father. Mariam had told Mullah Faizullah all about this film.

"I want you to take me to your cinema," Mariam said now. "I want to see the cartoon. I want to see the puppet boy."

With this, Mariam sensed a shift in the atmosphere. Her parents stirred in their seats. Mariam could feel them exchanging looks.

"That's not a good idea," said Nana. Her voice was calm, had the controlled, polite tone she used around Jalil, but Mariam could feel her hard, accusing glare.

Jalil shifted on his chair. He coughed, cleared his throat.

"You know," he said, "the picture quality isn't that good. Neither is the sound. And the projector's been malfunctioning recently. Maybe your mother is right. Maybe you can think of another present, Mariam jo."

"Aneh," Nana said. "You see? Your father agrees."

* * *

But later, at the stream, Mariam said, "Take me."

"I'll tell you what," Jalil said. "I'll send someone to pick you up and take you. I'll make sure they get you a good seat and all the candy you want."

"Nay. I want you to take me."

"Mariam jo-"

"And I want you to invite my brothers and sisters too. I want to meet them. I want us all to go, together. It's what I want."

Jalil sighed. He was looking away, toward the mountains.

Mariam remembered him telling her that on the screen a human face looked as big as a house, that when a car crashed up there you felt the metal twisting in your bones. She pictured herself sitting in the private balcony seats, lapping at ice cream, alongside her siblings and Jalil. "It's what I want," she said.

Jalil looked at her with a forlorn expression.

"Tomorrow. At noon. I'll meet you at this very spot. All right? Tomorrow?"

"Come here," he said. He hunkered down, pulled her to him, and held her for a long, long time.

* * *

At first. Nana paced around the *kolba*, clenching and unclenching her fists.

"Of all the daughters I could have had, why did God give me an ungrateful one like you? Everything I endured for you! How dare you! How dare you abandon me like this, you treacherous little *haramil*"

Then she mocked.

"What a stupid girl you are! You think you matter to him, that you're wanted in his house? You think you're a daughter to him? That he's going to take you in? Let me tell you something- A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you. I'm the only one who loves you. I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You *are* nothing!"

Then she tried guilt.

"I'll die if you go. *The jinn* will come, and I'll have one of my fits. You'll see, I'll swallow my tongue and die. Don't leave me, Mariam jo. Please stay. I'll die if you go."

Mariam said nothing.

"You know I love you, Mariam jo."

Mariam said she was going for a walk.

She feared she might say hurtful things if she stayed: that she knew *the jinn* was a lie, that Jalil had told her that what Nana had was a disease with a name and that pills could make it better. She might have asked Nana why she refused to see Jalil's doctors, as he had insisted she do, why she wouldn't take the pills he'd bought for her. If she could articulate it, she might have said to Nana that she was tired of being an instrument, of being lied to, laid claim to, used. That she was sick of Nana twisting the truths of their life and making her, Mariam, another of her grievances against the world.

You 're afraid, Nana, she might have said. You 're afraid that I might find the happiness you never had. And you don 'i want me to be happy. You don't want a good life for me. You 're the one with the wretched heart

* * *

There was A lookout, on the edge of the clearing, where Mariam liked to go. She sat there now, on dry, warm grass. Herat was visible from here, spread below her like a child's board game: the Women's Garden

to the north of the city, Char-suq Bazaar and the ruins of Alexander the Great's old citadel to the south. She could make out the minarets in the distance, like the dusty fingers of giants, and the streets that she imagined were milling with people, carts, mules. She saw swallows swooping and circling overhead. She was envious of these birds. They had been to Herat. They had flown over its mosques, its bazaars. Maybe they had landed on the walls of Jalil's home, on the front steps of his cinema.

She picked up ten pebbles and arranged them vertically, in three columns. This was a game that she played privately from time to time when Nana wasn't looking. She put four pebbles in the first column, for Khadija's children, three for Afsoon's, and three in the third column for Nargis's children. Then she added a fourth column. A solitary, eleventh pebble.

* * *

The next morning, Mariam wore a cream-colored dress that fell to her knees, cotton trousers, and a green *hijab* over her hair. She agonized a bit over the *hijab*, its being green and not matching the dress, but it would have to do-moths had eaten holes into her white one.

She checked the clock. It was an old hand-wound clock with black numbers on a mint green face, a present from Mullah Faizullah. It was nine o'clock. She wondered where Nana was. She thought about going outside and looking for her, but she dreaded the confrontation, the aggrieved looks. Nana would accuse her of betrayal. She would mock her for her mistaken ambitions.

Mariam sat down. She tried to make time pass by drawing an elephant in one stroke, the way Jalil had shown her, over and over. She became stiff from all the sitting but wouldn't lie down for fear that her dress would wrinkle.

When the hands finally showed eleven-thirty, Mariam pocketed the eleven pebbles and went outside. On her way to the stream, she saw Nana sitting on a chair, in the shade, beneath the domed roof of a weeping willow. Mariam couldn't tell whether Nana saw her or not.

At the stream, Mariam waited by the spot they had agreed on the day before. In the sky, a few gray, cauliflower-shaped clouds drifted by. Jalil had taught her that gray clouds got their color by being so dense that their top parts absorbed the sunlight and cast their own shadow along the base. *That's what you see, Mariam jo, he had said, the dark in their underbelly.*

Some time passed.

Mariam went back to the *kolba*. This time, she walked around the west-facing periphery of the clearing so she wouldn't have to pass by Nana. She checked the clock. It was almost one o'clock.

He's a businessman, Mariam thought. Something has come up.

She went back to the stream and waited awhile longer. Blackbirds circled overhead, dipped into the grass somewhere. She watched a caterpillar inching along the foot of an immature thistle.

She waited until her legs were stiff. This time, she did not go back to the *kolba*. She rolled up the legs of her trousers to the knees, crossed the stream, and, for the first time in her life, headed down the hill for Herat.

* * *

Nana was "wrong about Herat too. No one pointed. No one laughed. Mariam walked along noisy, crowded, cypress-lined boulevards, amid a steady stream of pedestrians, bicycle riders, and mule-drawn *garis*, and no one threw a rock at her. No one called her a *harami*. Hardly anyone even looked at her. She was, unexpectedly, marvelously, an ordinary person here.

For a while, Mariam stood by an oval-shaped pool in the center of a big park where pebble paths crisscrossed. With wonder, she ran her fingers over the beautiful marble horses that stood along the edge of the pool and gazed down at the water with opaque eyes. She spied on a cluster of boys who were setting sail to paper ships. Mariam saw flowers everywhere, tulips, lilies, petunias, their petals awash in sunlight. People walked along the paths, sat on benches and sipped tea.

Mariam could hardly believe that she was here. Her heart was battering with excitement. She wished Mullah Faizullah could see her now. How daring he would find her. How brave! She gave herself over to the new life that awaited her in this city, a life with a father, with sisters and brothers, a life in which she would love and be loved back, without reservation or agenda, without shame.

Sprightly, she walked back to the wide thoroughfare near the park. She

passed old vendors with leathery faces sitting under the shade of plane trees, gazing at her impassively behind pyramids of cherries and mounds of grapes. Barefoot boys gave chase to cars and buses, waving bags of quinces. Mariam stood at a street corner and watched the passersby, unable to understand how they could be so indifferent to the marvels around them.

After a while, she worked up the nerve to ask the elderly owner of a horse-drawn *gari* if he knew where Jalil, the cinema's owner, lived. The old man had plump cheeks and wore a rainbow-striped *chapan*. "You're not from Herat, are you?" he said companionably. "Everyone knows where Jalil Khan lives."

"Can you point me?"

He opened a foil-wrapped toffee and said, "Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Climb on. I'll take you."

"I can't pay you. I don't have any money."

He gave her the toffee. He said he hadn't had a ride in two hours and he was planning on going home anyway. Jalil's house was on the way.

Mariam climbed onto the *gari*. They rode in silence, side by side. On the way there, Mariam saw herb shops, and open-fronted cubbyholes where shoppers bought oranges and pears, books, shawls, even falcons. Children played marbles in circles drawn in dust. Outside teahouses, on carpet-covered wooden platforms, men drank tea and smoked tobacco

from hookahs.

The old man turned onto a wide, conifer-lined street. He brought his horse to a stop at the midway point.

"There. Looks like you're in luck, *dokhiarjo*. That's his car."

Mariam hopped down. He smiled and rode on.

* * *

Mariam had never before touched a car. She ran her fingers along the hood of Jalil's car, which was black, shiny, with glittering wheels in which Mariam saw a flattened, widened version of herself. The seats were made of white leather. Behind the steering wheel, Mariam saw round glass panels with needles behind them.

For a moment, Mariam heard Nana's voice in her head, mocking, dousing the deep-seated glow of her hopes. With shaky legs, Mariam approached the front door of the house. She put her hands on the walls. They were so tall, so foreboding, Jalil's walls. She had to crane her neck to see where the tops of cypress trees protruded over them from the other side. The treetops swayed in the breeze, and she imagined they were nodding their welcome to her. Mariam steadied herself against the waves of dismay passing through her.

A barefoot young woman opened the door. She had a tattoo under her lower lip.

"I'm here to see Jalil Khan. I'm Mariam. His daughter."

A look of confusion crossed the girl's face. Then, a flash of recognition.

There was a faint smile on her lips now, and an air of eagerness about her, of anticipation. "Wait here," the girl said quickly.

She closed the door.

A few minutes passed. Then a man opened the door. He was tall and square-shouldered, with sleepy-looking eyes and a calm face.

"I'm Jalil Khan's chauffeur," he said, not unkindly.

"His what?"

"His driver. Jalil Khan is not here."

"I see his car," Mariam said.

"He's away on urgent business."

"When will he be back?"

"He didn't say."

Mariam said she would wait-He closed the gates. Mariam sat, and drew her knees to her chest. It was early evening already, and she was getting hungry. She ate the *gari* driver's toffee. A while later, the driver came out again.

"You need to go home now," he said. "It'll be dark in less than an hour."

"I'm used to the dark."

"It'll get cold too. Why don't you let me drive you home? I'll tell him you were here."

Mariam only looked at him.

"I'll take you to a hotel, then. You can sleep comfortably there. We'll see what we can do in the morning."

"Let me in the house."

"I've been instructed not to. Look, no one knows when he's coming back. It could be days."

Mariam crossed her arms.

The driver sighed and looked at her with gentle reproach.

Over the years, Mariam would have ample occasion to think about how things might have turned out if she had let the driver take her back to the *kolba*. But she didn't. She spent the night outside Jalil's house. She watched the sky darken, the shadows engulf the neighboring housefronts. The tattooed girl brought her some bread and a plate of rice, which Mariam said she didn't want. The girl left it near Mariam. From time to time, Mariam heard footsteps down the street, doors swinging open, muffled greetings. Electric lights came on, and windows glowed dimly. Dogs barked. When she could no longer resist the hunger, Mariam ate the plate of rice and the bread. Then she listened to the crickets chirping from gardens. Overhead, clouds slid past a pale moon.

In the morning, she was shaken awake. Mariam saw that during the night someone had covered her with a blanket.

It was the driver shaking her shoulder.

"This is enough. You've made a scene. *Bos*. It's time to go."

Mariam sat up and rubbed her eyes. Her back and neck were sore. "I'm

going to wait for him."

"Look at me," he said. "Jalil Khan says that I need to take you back now. Right now. Do you understand? Jalil Khan says so."

He opened the rear passenger door to the car. "*Bia* Come on," he said softly.

"I want to see him," Mariam said. Her eyes were tearing over.

The driver sighed. "Let me take you home. Come on, *dokhtarjo*."

Mariam stood up and walked toward him. But then, at the last moment, she changed direction and ran to the front gates. She felt the driver's fingers fumbling for a grip at her shoulder. She shed him and burst through the open gates.

In the handful of seconds that she was in Jalil's garden, Mariam's eyes registered seeing a gleaming glass structure with plants inside it, grape vines clinging to wooden trellises, a fishpond built with gray blocks of stone, fruit

trees, and bushes of brightly colored flowers everywhere. Her gaze skimmed over all of these things before they found a face, across the garden, in an upstairs window. The face was there for only an instant, a flash, but long enough. Long enough for Mariam to see the eyes widen, the mouth open. Then it snapped away from view. A hand appeared and frantically pulled at a cord. The curtains fell shut.

Then a pair of hands buried into her armpits and she was lifted off the ground. Mariam kicked. The pebbles spilled from her pocket. Mariam kept kicking and crying as she was carried to the car and lowered onto

the cold leather of the backseat.

* * *

The driver talked in a muted, consoling tone as he drove. Mariam did not hear him. All during the ride, as she bounced in the backseat, she cried. They were tears of grief, of anger, of disillusionment. But mainly tears of a deep, deep shame at how foolishly she had given herself over to Jalil, how she had fretted over what dress to wear, over the mismatching *hijab*, walking all the way here, refusing to leave, sleeping on the street like a stray dog. And

she was ashamed of how she had dismissed her mother's stricken looks, her puffy eyes. Nana, who had warned her, who had been right all along.

Mariam kept thinking of his face in the upstairs window. He let her sleep on the street. *On the street* Mariam cried lying down. She didn't sit up, didn't want to be seen. She imagined all of Herat knew this morning how she'd disgraced herself. She wished Mullah Faizullah were here so she could put her head on his lap and let him comfort her.

After a while, the road became bumpier and the nose of the car pointed up. They were on the uphill road between Herat and Gul Daman.

What would she say to Nana, Mariam wondered. How would she apologize? How could she even face Nana now?

The car stopped and the driver helped her out. "I'll walk you," he said.

She let him guide her across the road and up the track. There was

honeysuckle growing along the path, and milkweed too. Bees were buzzing over twinkling wildflowers. The driver took her hand and helped her cross the stream. Then he let go, and he was talking about how Herat's famous one hundred and twenty days' winds would start blowing soon, from midmorning to dusk, and how the sand flies would go on a feeding frenzy, and then suddenly he was standing in front of her, trying to cover her eyes, pushing her back the way they had come and saying, "Go back! No. Don't look now. Turn around! Go back!"

But he wasn't fast enough. Mariam saw. A gust of wind blew and parted the drooping branches of the weeping willow like a curtain, and Mariam caught a glimpse of what was beneath the tree: the straight-backed chair, overturned. The rope dropping from a high branch. Nana dangling at the end of it.

6.

They buried Nana in a corner of the cemetery in Gul Daman. Mariam stood beside Bibi Jo, with the women, as Mullah Faizullah recited prayers at the graveside and the men lowered Nana's shrouded body into the ground. Afterward, Jalil walked Mariam to the *kolba*, where, in front of the villagers who accompanied them, he made a great show of tending to Mariam. He collected a few of her things, put them in a suitcase. He sat beside her cot, where she lay down, and fanned her face. He stroked her forehead, and, with a woebegone expression on his face, asked if she needed *anything? anything?* he said it like that, twice.

"I want Mullah Faizullah," Mariam said.

"Of course. He's outside. I'll get him for you."

It was when Mullah Faizullah's slight, stooping figure appeared in the *kolba's* doorway that Mariam cried for the first time that day.

"Oh, Mariam jo."

He sat next to her and cupped her face in his hands. "You go on and cry, Mariam jo. Go on. There is no shame in it. But remember, my girl, what the Koran says, 'Blessed is He in Whose hand is the kingdom, and He Who has power over all things, Who created death and life that He may try you.' The Koran speaks the truth, my girl.

Behind every trial and every sorrow that He makes us shoulder, God has a reason."

But Mariam could not hear comfort in God's words. Not that day. Not then. All she could hear was Nana saying, *I'll die if you go. I'll just die.* All she could do was cry and cry and let her tears fall on the spotted, paper-thin skin of Mullah Faizullah's hands.

* * *

On the ride to his house, Jalil sat in the backseat of his car with Mariam, his arm draped over her shoulder.

"You can stay with me, Mariam jo," he said. "I've asked them already to clean a room for you. It's upstairs. You'll like it, I think. You'll have a view of the garden."

For the first time, Mariam could hear him with Nana's ears. She could hear so clearly now the insincerity that had always lurked beneath, the hollow, false assurances. She could not bring herself to look at him.

When the car stopped before Jalil's house, the driver opened the door for them and carried Mariam's suitcase. Jalil guided her, one palm cupped around each of her shoulders, through the same gates outside of which, two days before, Mariam had slept on the sidewalk waiting for him. Two days before-when Mariam could think of nothing in the world she wanted more than to walk in this garden with Jalil-felt like another lifetime. How could her life have turned upside down so quickly, Mariam asked herself. She kept her gaze to the ground, on her feet, stepping on the gray stone path. She was aware of the presence of people in the garden, murmuring, stepping aside, as she and Jalil walked past. She sensed the weight of eyes on her, looking down from the windows upstairs.

Inside the house too, Mariam kept her head down. She walked on a maroon carpet with a repeating blue-and-yellow octagonal pattern, saw out of the corner of her eye the marble bases of statues, the lower halves of vases, the frayed ends of richly colored tapestries hanging from walls. The stairs she and Jalil took were wide and covered with a similar carpet, nailed down at the base of each step. At the top of the stairs, Jalil led her to the left, down another long, carpeted hallway. He stopped by one of the doors, opened it, and let her in.

"Your sisters Niloufar and Atieh play here sometimes," Jalil said, "but mostly we use this as a guest room. You'll be comfortable here, I think. It's nice, isn't it?"

The room had a bed with a green-flowered blanket knit in a tightly woven, honeycomb design. The curtains, pulled back to reveal the garden below, matched the blanket. Beside the bed was a three-drawer

chest with a flower vase on it. There were shelves along the walls, with framed pictures of people Mariam did not recognize. On one of the shelves, Mariam saw a collection of identical wooden dolls, arranged in a line in order of decreasing size.

Jalil saw her looking. "*Matryoshka* dolls. I got them in Moscow. You can play with them, if you want. No one will mind."

Mariam sat down on the bed.

"Is there anything you want?" Jalil said.

Mariam lay down. Closed her eyes. After a while, she heard him softly shut the door.

* * *

Except for "when she had to use the bathroom down the hall, Mariam stayed in the room. The girl with the tattoo, the one who had opened the gates to her, brought her meals on a tray: lamb kebab, *sabzi*, *aush* soup. Most of it went uneaten. Jalil came by several times a day, sat on the bed beside her, asked her if she was all right.

"You could eat downstairs with the rest of us," he said, but without much conviction. He understood a little too readily when Mariam said she preferred to eat alone.

From the window, Mariam watched impassively what she had wondered about and longed to see for most of her life: the comings and goings of Jalil's daily life. Servants rushed in and out of the front gates. A gardener

was always trimming bushes, watering plants in the greenhouse. Cars with long, sleek hoods pulled up on the street. From them emerged men in suits, in *chapcms* and caracul hats, women in *hijabs*, children with neatly combed hair. And as Mariam watched Jalil shake these strangers' hands, as she saw him cross his palms on his chest and nod to their wives, she knew that Nana had spoken the truth. She did not belong here.

But where do I belong? What am I going to do now?

I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing!

Like the wind through the willows around the *kolba*, gusts of an inexpressible blackness kept passing through Mariam.

On Mariam's second full day at Jalil's house, a little girl came into the room.

"I have to get something," she said.

Mariam sat up on the bed and crossed her legs, pulled the blanket on her lap.

The girl hurried across the room and opened the closet door. She fetched a square-shaped gray box.

"You know what this is?" she said. She opened the box. "It's called a gramophone. *Gramo. Phone*. It plays records. You know, music. A gramophone."

"You're Niloufar. You're eight."

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

Mariam shrugged. She didn't say to this girl that she'd once named a pebble after her.

"Do you want to hear a song?"

Mariam shrugged again.

Niloufar plugged in the gramophone. She fished a small record from a pouch beneath the box's lid. She put it on, lowered the needle. Music began to play.

*1 will use a flower petal for paper, And write you the sweetest letter,
You are the sultan of my heart, the sultan of my heart*

"Do you know it?"

"No."

"It's from an Iranian film. I saw it at my father's cinema. Hey, do you want to see something?"

Before Mariam could answer, Niloufar had put her palms and forehead to the ground. She pushed with her soles and then she was standing upside down, on her head, in a three-point stance.

"Can you do that?" she said thickly.

"No."

Niloufar dropped her legs and pulled her blouse back down. "I could teach you," she said, pushing hair from her flushed brow. "So how long will you stay here?"

"I don't know."

"My mother says you're not really my sister like you say you are."

"I never said I was," Mariam lied.

"She says you did. I don't care. What I mean is, I don't mind if you did say it, or if you are my sister. I don't mind."

Mariam lay down. "I'm tired now."

"My mother says *a jinn* made your mother hang herself."

"You can stop that now," Mariam said, turning to her side. "The music, I mean."

Bibi jo came to see her that day too. It was raining by the time she came. She lowered her large body onto the chair beside the bed, grimacing.

"This rain, Mariam jo, it's murder on my hips. Just murder, I tell you. I hope...Oh, now, come here, child. Come here to Bibi jo. Don't cry. There, now. You poor thing. *Ask* You poor, poor thing."

That night, Mariam couldn't sleep for a long time. She lay in bed looking at the sky, listening to the footsteps below, the voices muffled by walls and the sheets of rain punishing the window. When she did doze off, she was startled awake by shouting. Voices downstairs, sharp and angry. Mariam couldn't make out the words. Someone slammed a door.

The next morning, Mullah Faizullah came to visit her. When she saw her

friend at the door, his white beard and his amiable, toothless smile, Mariam felt tears stinging the corners of her eyes again. She swung her feet over the side of the bed and hurried over. She kissed his hand as always and he her brow. She pulled him up a chair-He showed her the Koran he had brought with him and opened it. "I figured no sense in skipping our routine, eh?"

"You know I don't need lessons anymore, Mullah sahib. You taught me every *surrah* and *ayat* in the Koran years ago."

He smiled, and raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I confess, then. I've been found out. But I can think of worse excuses to visit you."

"You don't need excuses. Not you."

"You're kind to say that, Mariam jo."

He passed her his Koran. As he'd taught her, she kissed it three times-touching it to her brow between each kiss-and gave it back to him.

"How are you, my girl?"

"I keep," Mariam began. She had to stop, feeling like a rock had lodged itself in her throat. "I keep thinking of what she said to me before I left. She-"

"Nay, nay, nay." Mullah Faizullah put his hand on her knee. "Your mother, may Allah forgive her, was a troubled and unhappy woman, Mariam jo. She did a terrible thing to herself. To herself, to you, and also to Allah. He will forgive her, for He is all-forgiving, but Allah is saddened

by what she did. He does not approve of the taking of life, be it another's or one's own, for He says that life is sacred You see-" He pulled his chair closer, took Mariam's hand in both of his own. "You see, I knew your mother before you were born, when she was a little girl, and I tell you that she was unhappy then. The seed for what she did was planted long ago, I'm afraid. What I mean to say is that this was not your fault. It wasn't your fault, my girl."

"I shouldn't have left her. I should have-"

"You stop that. These thoughts are no good, Mariam jo. You hear me, child? No good. They will destroy you. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't your fault. No."

Mariam nodded, but as desperately as she wanted to she could not bring herself to believe him.

* * *

One afternoon, a week later, there was a knock on the door, and a tall woman walked in. She was fair-skinned, had reddish hair and long fingers.

"I'm Afsoon," she said. "Niloufar's mother. Why don't you wash up, Mariam, and come downstairs?"

Mariam said she would rather stay in her room.

"No, *nafahmidi*, you don't understand. You *medio* come down. We have to talk to you. It's important."

They sat across from her, Jalil and his wives, at a long, dark brown table. Between them, in the center of the table, was a crystal vase of fresh marigolds and a sweating pitcher of water. The red-haired woman who had introduced herself as Niloufar's mother, Afsoon, was sitting on Jalil's right. The other two, Khadija and Nargis, were on his left. The wives each had on a flimsy black scarf, which they wore not on their heads but tied loosely around the neck like an afterthought. Mariam, who could not imagine that they would wear black for Nana, pictured one of them suggesting it, or maybe Jalil, just before she'd been summoned.

Afsoon poured water from the pitcher and put the glass before Mariam on a checkered cloth coaster. "Only spring and it's warm already," she said. She made a fanning motion with her hand.

"Have you been comfortable?" Nargis, who had a small chin and curly black hair, asked. "We hope you've been comfortable. This... ordeal...must be very hard for you. So difficult."

The other two nodded. Mariam took in their plucked eyebrows, the thin, tolerant smiles they were giving her. There was an unpleasant hum in Mariam's head. Her throat burned. She drank some of the water.

Through the wide window behind Jalil, Mariam could see a row of flowering apple trees. On the wall beside the window stood a dark wooden cabinet. In it was a clock, and a framed photograph of Jalil and three young boys holding a fish. The sun caught the sparkle in the fish's scales. Jalil and the boys were grinning.

"Well," Afsoon began. "I-that is, we-have brought you here because we have some very good news to give you."

Mariam looked up.

She caught a quick exchange of glances between the women over Jalil, who slouched in his chair looking unseeingly at the pitcher on the table. It was Khadija, the oldest-looking of the three, who turned her gaze to Mariam, and Mariam had the impression that this duty too had been discussed, agreed upon, before they had called for her.

"You have a suitor," Khadija said.

Mariam's stomach fell. "A what?" she said through suddenly numb lips.

"A *khasiegar*. A suitor. His name is Rasheed," Khadija went on. "He is a friend of a business acquaintance of your father's. He's a Pashtun, from Kandahar originally, but he lives in Kabul, in the Deh-Mazang district, in a two-story house that he owns."

Afsoon was nodding. "And he does speak Farsi, like us, like you. So you won't have to learn Pashto."

Mariam's chest was tightening. The room was reeling up and down, the ground shifting beneath her feet.

"He's a shoemaker," Khadija was saying now. "But not some kind of ordinary street-side *moochi*, no, no. He has his own shop, and he is one of the most sought-after shoemakers in Kabul. He makes them for diplomats, members of the presidential family-that class of people. So you see, he will have no trouble providing for you."

Mariam fixed her eyes on Jalil, her heart somersaulting in her chest. "Is this true? What she's saying, is it true?"

But Jalil wouldn't look at her. He went on chewing the corner of his lower lip and staring at the pitcher.

"Now he *is* a little older than you," Afsoon chimed in. "But he can't be more than...forty. Forty-five at the most. Wouldn't you say, Nargis?"

"Yes. But I've seen nine-year-old girls given to men twenty years older than your suitor, Mariam. We all have. What are you, fifteen? That's a good, solid marrying age for a girl." There was enthusiastic nodding at this. It did not escape Mariam that no mention was made of her half sisters Saideh or Naheed, both her own age, both students in the Mehri School in Herat, both with plans to enroll in Kabul University. Fifteen, evidently, was not a good, solid marrying age for them.

"What's more," Nargis went on, "he too has had a great loss in his life. His wife, we hear, died during childbirth ten years ago. And then, three years ago, his son drowned in a lake."

"It's very sad, yes. He's been looking for a bride the last few years but hasn't found anyone suitable."

"I don't want to," Mariam said. She looked at Jalil. "I don't want this. Don't make me." She hated the sniffling, pleading tone of her voice but could not help it.

"Now, be reasonable, Mariam," one of the wives said.

Mariam was no longer keeping track of who was saying what. She went on staring at Jalil, waiting for him to speak up, to say that none of this was true.

"You can't spend the rest of your life here."

"Don't you want a family of your own?"

"Yes. A home, children of your own?"

"You have to move on."

"True that it would be preferable that you marry a local, a Tajik, but Rasheed is healthy, and interested in you. He has a home and a job. That's all that really matters, isn't it? And Kabul is a beautiful and exciting city. You may not get another opportunity this good."

Mariam turned her attention to the wives.

"I'll live with Mullah Faizullah," she said. "He'll take me in. I know he will."

"That's no good," Khadija said. "He's old and so..." She searched for the right word, and Mariam knew then that what she really wanted to say was *He's so close*. She understood what they meant to do. *You may not get another opportunity this good* And neither would they. They had been disgraced by her birth, and this was their chance to erase, once and for all, the last trace of their husband's scandalous mistake. She was being sent away because she was the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame.

"He's so old and weak," Khadija eventually said. "And what will you do when he's gone? You'd be a burden to his family."

As you are now to us. Mariam almost *saw* the unspoken words exit Khadija's mouth, like foggy breath on a cold day.

Mariam pictured herself in Kabul, a big, strange, crowded city that, Jalil had once told her, was some six hundred and fifty kilometers to the east of Herat. *Six hundred and fifty kilometers.* The farthest she'd ever been from the *kolba* was the two-kilometer walk she'd made to Jalil's house. She pictured herself living there, in Kabul, at the other end of that unimaginable distance, living in a stranger's house where she would have to concede to his moods and his issued demands. She would have to clean after this man, Rasheed, cook for him, wash his clothes. And there would be other chores as well—Nana had told her what husbands did to their wives. It was the thought of these intimacies in particular, which she imagined as painful acts of perversity, that filled her with dread and made her break out in a sweat.

She turned to Jalil again. "Tell them. Tell them you won't let them do this."

"Actually, your father has already given Rasheed his answer," Afsoon said. "Rasheed is here, in Herat; he has come all the way from Kabul. The *nikka* will be tomorrow morning, and then there is a bus leaving for Kabul at noon."

"Tell them!" Mariam cried

The women grew quiet now. Mariam sensed that they were watching him too. Waiting. A silence fell over the room. Jalil kept twirling his

wedding band, with a bruised, helpless look on his face. From inside the cabinet, the clock ticked on and on.

"Jalil jo?" one of the women said at last.

Mil's eyes lifted slowly, met Mariam's, lingered for a moment, then dropped. He opened his mouth, but all that came forth was a single, pained groan.

"Say something," Mariam said.

Then Jalil did, in a thin, threadbare voice. "Goddamn it, Mariam, don't do this to me," he said as though he was the one to whom something was being done.

And, with that, Mariam felt the tension vanish from the room.

As Jalil's wives began a new-and more sprightly-round of reassuring, Mariam looked down at the table. Her eyes traced the sleek shape of the table's legs, the sinuous curves of its corners, the gleam of its reflective, dark brown surface. She noticed that every time she breathed out, the surface fogged, and she disappeared from her father's table.

Afsoon escorted her back to the room upstairs. When Afsoon closed the door, Mariam heard the rattling of a key as it turned in the lock.

8.

In the morning, Mariam was given a long-sleeved, dark green dress to wear over white cotton trousers. Afsoon gave her a green *hijab* and a

pair of matching sandals.

She was taken to the room with the long, brown table, except now there was a bowl of sugar-coated almond candy in the middle of the table, a Koran, a green veil, and a mirror. Two men Mariam had never seen before- witnesses, she presumed-and a mullah she did not recognize were already seated at the table.

Jalil showed her to a chair. He was wearing a light brown suit and a red tie. His hair was washed. When he pulled out the chair for her, he tried to smile encouragingly. Khadija and Afsoon sat on Mariam's side of the table this time.

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-bellied 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 Rasheed *agha* 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 Rasheed if he indeed wished to enter into a marriage contract with Mariam. Rasheed 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 throat clearing. A small, white hand reached out and flicked a bit of dust off the table.

"Mariam," Jalil whispered.

"Yes," she said shakily.

A mirror was passed beneath the veil. In it, Mariam saw her own face first, the archless, unshapely eyebrows, the flat hair, the eyes, mirthless green and set so closely together that one might mistake her for being cross-eyed. Her skin was coarse 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 houndlike. 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 Rasheed: 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 pushed together 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 Rasheed 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 onto his finger, and Rasheed had to help her. Her own band was a little tight, but Rasheed 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-the *meem*, 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. "*Tabreek*. Congratulations."

* * *

Rasheed waited in the multicolored bus. Mariam could not see him from where she stood with Jalil, by the rear bumper, only the smoke of his cigarette curling up from the open window. Around them, hands shook and farewells were said. Korans were kissed, passed under. Barefoot boys bounced between travelers, their faces invisible behind their trays of chewing gum and cigarettes.

Jalil was busy telling her that Kabul was so beautiful, the Moghul emperor Babur had asked that he be buried there. Next, Mariam knew, he'd go on about Kabul's gardens, and its shops, its trees, and its air, and, before long, she would be on the bus and he would walk alongside it, waving cheerfully, unscathed, spared.

Mariam could not bring herself to allow it.

"I used to worship you," she said.

Jalil stopped in midsentence. He crossed and uncrossed his arms. A young Hindi couple, the wife cradling a boy, the husband dragging a suitcase, passed between them. Jalil seemed grateful for the interruption. They excused themselves, and he smiled back politely.

"On Thursdays, I sat for hours waiting for you. I worried myself sick that you wouldn't show up."

"It's a long trip. You should eat something." He said he could buy her some bread and goat cheese.

"I thought about you all the time. I used to pray that you'd live to be a hundred years old. I didn't know. I didn't know that you were ashamed of me."

Jalil looked down, and, like an overgrown child, dug at something with the toe of his shoe.

"You were ashamed of me."

"I'll visit you," he muttered "I'll come to Kabul and see you. We'll--"

"No. No," she said. "Don't come. I won't see you. Don't you come. I don't want to hear from you. Ever. *Ever.*"

He gave her a wounded look.

"It ends here for you and me. Say your good-byes."

"Don't leave like this," he said in a thin voice.

"You didn't even have the decency to give me the time to say good-bye to Mullah Faizullah."

She turned and walked around to the side of the bus. She could hear him following her. When she reached the hydraulic doors, she heard him behind her.

"Mariamjo."

She climbed the stairs, and though she could spot Jalil out of the corner of her eye walking parallel to her she did not look out the window. She made her way down the aisle to the back, where Rasheed sat with her suitcase between his feet. She did not turn to look when Jalil's palms pressed on the glass, when his knuckles rapped and rapped on it. When the bus jerked forward, she did not turn to see him trotting alongside it. And when the bus pulled away, she did not look back to see him receding, to see him disappear in the cloud of exhaust and dust.

Rasheed, who took up the window and middle seat, put his thick hand on hers.

"There now, girl There. There," he said. He was squinting out the window as he said this, as though something more interesting had caught his eye.

9.

It was early evening the following day by the time they arrived at Rasheed's house.

"We're in Deh-Mazang," he said. They were outside, on the sidewalk. He had her suitcase in one hand and was unlocking the wooden front gate with the other. "In the south and west part of the city. The zoo is nearby, and the university too."

Mariam nodded. Already she had learned that, though she could understand him, she had to pay close attention when he spoke. She was unaccustomed to the Kabuli dialect of his Farsi, and to the underlying layer of Pashto accent, the language of his native Kandahar. He, on the other hand, seemed to have no trouble understanding her Herati Farsi.

Mariam quickly surveyed the narrow, unpaved road along which Rasheed's house was situated. The houses on this road were crowded together and shared common walls, with small, walled yards in front buffering them from the street. Most of the homes had flat roofs and were made of burned brick, some of mud the same dusty color as the mountains that ringed the city. Gutters separated the sidewalk from the road on both sides and flowed with muddy water. Mariam saw small mounds of flyblown garbage littering the street here and there. Rasheed's house had two stories. Mariam could see that it had once been blue.

When Rasheed opened the front gate, Mariam found herself in a small, unkempt yard where yellow grass struggled up in thin patches. Mariam saw an outhouse on the right, in a side yard, and, on the left, a well with a hand pump, a row of dying saplings. Near the well was a toolshed, and a bicycle leaning against the wall.

"Your father told me you like to fish," Rasheed said as they were crossing the yard to the house. There was no backyard, Mariam saw.

"There are valleys north of here. Rivers with lots of fish. Maybe I'll take you someday."

He unlocked the front door and let her into the house.

Rasheed's house was much smaller than Jalil's, but, compared to Mariam and Nana's *kolba*, it was a mansion. There was a hallway, a living room downstairs, and a kitchen in which he showed her pots and pans and a pressure cooker and a kerosene *Lshiap*. The living room had a pistachio green leather couch. It had a rip down its side that had been clumsily sewn together. The walls were bare. There was a table, two cane-seat chairs, two folding chairs, and, in the corner, a black, cast-iron stove.

Mariam stood in the middle of the living room, looking around. At the *kolba*, she could touch the ceiling with her fingertips. She could lie in her cot and tell the time of day by the angle of sunlight pouring through the window. She knew how far her door would open before its hinges creaked. She knew every splinter and crack in each of the thirty wooden floorboards. Now all those familiar things were gone. Nana was dead, and she was here, in a strange city, separated from the life she'd known by valleys and chains of snow-capped mountains and entire deserts. She was in a stranger's house, with all its different rooms and its smell of cigarette smoke, with its unfamiliar cupboards full of unfamiliar utensils, its heavy, dark green curtains, and a ceiling she knew she could not reach. The space of it suffocated Mariam. Pangs of longing bore into her, for Nana, for Mullah Faizullah, for her old life.

Then she was crying.

"What's this crying about?" Rasheed said crossly. He reached into the pocket of his pants, uncurled Mariam's fingers, and pushed a handkerchief into her palm. He lit himself a cigarette and leaned against the wall. He watched as Mariam pressed the handkerchief to her eyes.

"Done?"

Mariam nodded.

"Sure?"

"Yes."

He took her by the elbow then and led her to the living-room window.

"This window looks north," he said, tapping the glass with the crooked nail of his index finger. "That's the Asmai mountain directly in front of us-see?-and, to the left, is the Ali Abad mountain. The university is at the foot of it. Behind us, east, you can't see from here, is the Shir Darwaza mountain. Every day, at noon, they shoot a cannon from it. Stop your crying, now. I mean it."

Mariam dabbed at her eyes.

"That's one thing I can't stand," he said, scowling, "the sound of a woman crying. I'm sorry. I have no patience for it."

"I want to go home," Mariam said.

Rasheed sighed irritably. A puff of his smoky breath hit Mariam's face. "I won't take that personally. This time."

Again, he took her by the elbow, and led her upstairs.

There was a narrow, dimly lit hallway there and two bedrooms. The door to the bigger one was ajar. Through it Mariam could see that it, like the rest of the house, was sparsely furnished: bed in the corner, with a brown blanket and a pillow, a closet, a dresser. The walls were bare except for a small mirror. Rasheed closed the door.

"This is my room."

He said she could take the guest room. "I hope you don't mind. I'm accustomed to sleeping alone."

Mariam didn't tell him how relieved she was, at least about this.

The room that was to be Mariam's was much smaller than the room she'd stayed in at Jalil's house. It had a bed, an old, gray-brown dresser, a small closet. The window looked into the yard and, beyond that, the street below. Rasheed put her suitcase in a corner.

Mariam sat on the bed.

"You didn't notice," he said. He was standing in the doorway, stooping a little to fit.

"Look on the windowsill. You know what kind they are? I put them there before leaving for Herat."

Only now Mariam saw a basket on the sill. White tuberose flowers spilled from its sides.

"You like them? They please you?"

"Yes."

"You can thank me then."

"Thank you. I'm sorry. *Tashakor-*"

"You're shaking. Maybe I scare you. Do I scare you? Are you frightened of me?"

Mariam was not looking at him, but she could hear something slyly playful in these questions, like a needling. She quickly shook her head in what she recognized as her first lie in their marriage.

"No? That's good, then. Good for you. Well, this is your home now. You're going to like it here. You'll see. Did I tell you we have electricity? Most days and every night?"

He made as if to leave. At the door, he paused, took a long drag, crinkled his eyes against the smoke. Mariam thought he was going to say something. But he didn't. He closed the door, left her alone with her suitcase and her flowers.

10.

The first few days, Mariam hardly left her room. She was awakened every dawn for prayer by the distant cry of *azan*, after which she crawled back into bed. She was still in bed when she heard Rasheed in the bathroom, washing up, when he came into her room to check on her before he went to his shop. From her window, she watched him in the yard, securing his lunch in the rear carrier pack of his bicycle, then walking his bicycle across the yard and into the street. She watched him

pedal away, saw his broad, thick-shouldered figure disappear around the turn at the end of the street.

For most of the days, Mariam stayed in bed, feeling adrift and forlorn. Sometimes she went downstairs to the kitchen, ran her hands over the sticky, grease-stained counter, the vinyl, flowered curtains that smelled like burned meals. She looked through the ill-fitting drawers, at the mismatched spoons and knives, the colander and chipped, wooden spatulas, these would-be instruments of her new daily life, all of it reminding her of the havoc that had struck her life, making her feel uprooted, displaced, like an intruder on someone else's life.

At the *kolba*, her appetite had been predictable. Here, her stomach rarely growled for food. Sometimes she took a plate of leftover white rice and a scrap of bread to the living room, by the window. From there, she could see the roofs of the one-story houses on their street. She could see into their yards too, the women working laundry lines and shooing their children, chickens pecking at dirt, the shovels and spades, the cows tethered to trees.

She thought longingly of all the summer nights that she and Nana had slept on the flat roof of the *kolba*, looking at the moon glowing over Gul Daman, the night so hot their shirts would cling to their chests like a wet leaf to a window. She missed the winter afternoons of reading in the *kolba* with Mullah Faizullah, the clink of icicles falling on her roof from the trees, the crows cawing outside from snow-burdened branches.

Alone in the house, Mariam paced restlessly, from the kitchen to the living room, up the steps to her room and down again. She ended up back in her room, doing her prayers or sitting on the bed, missing her

mother, feeling nauseated and homesick.

It was with the sun's westward crawl that Mariam's anxiety really ratcheted up. Her teeth rattled when she thought of the night, the time when Rasheed might at last decide to do to her what husbands did to their wives. She lay in bed, wracked with nerves, as he ate alone downstairs.

He always stopped by her room and poked his head in.

"You can't be sleeping already. It's only seven. Are you awake? Answer me. Come, now."

He pressed on until, from the dark, Mariam said, "I'm here."

He slid down and sat in her doorway. From her bed, she could see his large-framed body, his long legs, the smoke swirling around his hook-nosed profile, the amber tip of his cigarette brightening and dimming.

He told her about his day. A pair of loafers he had custom-made for the deputy foreign minister-who, Rasheed said, bought shoes only from him. An order for sandals from a Polish diplomat and his wife. He told her of the superstitions people had about shoes: that putting them on a bed invited death into the family, that a quarrel would follow if one put on the left shoe first.

"Unless it was done unintentionally on a Friday," he said. "And did you know it's supposed to be a bad omen to tie shoes together and hang them from a nail?"

Rasheed himself believed none of this. In his opinion, superstitions were largely a female preoccupation.

He passed on to her things he had heard on the streets, like how the American president Richard Nixon had resigned over a scandal.

Mariam, who had never heard of Nixon, or the scandal that had forced him to resign, did not say anything back. She waited anxiously for Rasheed to finish talking, to crush his cigarette, and take his leave. Only when she'd heard him cross the hallway, heard his door open and close, only then would the metal fist gripping her belly let go-Then one night he crushed his cigarette and instead of saying good night leaned against the doorway.

"Are you ever going to unpack that thing?" he said, motioning with his head toward her suitcase. He crossed his arms. "I figured you might need some time. But this is absurd. A week's gone and...Well, then, as of tomorrow morning I expect you to start behaving like a wife. *Fahmidi?* Is that understood?"

Mariam's teeth began to chatter.

"I need an answer."

"Yes."

"Good," he said. "What did you think? That this is a hotel? That I'm some kind of hotelkeeper? Well, it...Oh. Oh.

La illah u ilillah. What did I say about the crying? Mariam. What did I

say to you about the crying?"

* * *

The next morning, after Rasheed left for work, Mariam unpacked her clothes and put them in the dresser. She drew a pail of water from the well and, with a rag, washed the windows of her room and the windows to the living room downstairs- She swept the floors, beat the cobwebs fluttering in the corners of the ceiling. She opened the windows to air the house.

She set three cups of lentils to soak in a pot, found a knife and cut some carrots and a pair of potatoes, left them too to soak. She searched for flour, found it in the back of one of the cabinets behind a row of dirty spice jars, and made fresh dough, kneading it the way Nana had shown her, pushing the dough with the heel of her hand, folding the outer edge, turning it, and pushing it away again. Once she had floured the dough, she wrapped it in a moist cloth, put on a *hijab*, and set out for the communal tandoor.

Rasheed had told her where it was, down the street, a left then a quick right, but all Mariam had to do was follow the flock of women and children who were headed the same way. The children Mariam saw, chasing after their mothers or running ahead of them, wore shirts patched and patched again. They wore trousers that looked too big

or too small, sandals with ragged straps that flapped back and forth. They rolled discarded old bicycle tires with sticks.

Their mothers walked in groups of three or four, some in burqas, others not. Mariam could hear their high-pitched chatter, their spiraling laughs. As she walked with her head down, she caught bits of their banter, which seemingly always had to do with sick children or lazy, ungrateful husbands.

As if the meals cook themselves.

Wallah o billah, never a moment's rest!

And he says to me, I swear it, it's true, he actually says tome...

This endless conversation, the tone plaintive but oddly cheerful, flew around and around in a circle. On it went, down the street, around the corner, in line at the tandoor. Husbands who gambled. Husbands who doted on their mothers and wouldn't spend a rupiah on them, the wives. Mariam wondered how so many women could suffer the same miserable luck, to have married, all of them, such dreadful men. Or was this a wifely game that she did not know about, a daily ritual, like soaking rice or making dough? Would they expect her soon to join in?

In the tandoor line, Mariam caught sideways glances shot at her, heard whispers. Her hands began to sweat. She imagined they all knew that she'd been born a *harami*, a source of shame to her father and his family. They all knew that she'd betrayed her mother and disgraced herself.

With a corner of her *hijab*, she dabbed at the moisture above her upper lip and tried to gather her nerves. For a few minutes, everything went well-Then someone tapped her on the shoulder. Mariam turned around and found a light-skinned, plump woman wearing a *hijab*, like her. She had short, wiry black hair and a good-humored, almost perfectly round

face. Her lips were much fuller than Mariam's, the lower one slightly droopy, as though dragged down by the big, dark mole just below the lip line. She had big greenish eyes that shone at Mariam with an inviting glint.

"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 Fariba. 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. *"Salaam, Khala Jan."*

"Noor is ten. I have an older boy too, Ahmad."

"He's thirteen," Noor said.

"Thirteen going on forty." The woman Fariba laughed. "My husband's name is Hakim," she said. "He's a teacher here in Deh-Mazang. You should come by sometime, we'll have a cup-"

And then suddenly, as if emboldened, the other women pushed past Fariba 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 minarets! Oh, what beauty! What a gorgeous city!"

"Boy is better, Mariam jan, they carry the family name-"

"Bah! Boys get married 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 everyone's happy."

Mariam backed away. She was hyperventilating. Her ears buzzed, her pulse fluttered, her eyes darted from one face to another. She backed away again, but there was nowhere to go to-she was in the center of a circle. She spotted Fariba, who was frowning, who saw that she was in distress.

"Let her be!" Fariba was saying. "Move aside, let her be! You're frightening her!"

Mariam clutched the dough close to her chest and pushed through the crowd around her.

"Where are you going, *hamshira*?"

She pushed until somehow she was in the clear and then she ran up the street. It wasn't until she'd reached the intersection that she realized she'd run the wrong way. She turned around and ran back in the other direction, head down, tripping once and scraping her knee badly, then up

again and running, bolting past the women.

"What's the matter with you?"

"You're bleeding, *hamshiral*"

Mariam turned one corner, then the other. She found the correct street but suddenly could not remember which was Rasheed's house. She ran up then down the street, panting, near tears now, began trying doors blindly. Some were locked, others opened only to reveal unfamiliar yards, barking dogs, and startled chickens. She pictured Rasheed coming home to find her still searching this way, her knee bleeding, lost on her own street. Now she did start crying. She pushed on doors, muttering panicked prayers, her face moist with tears, until one opened, and she saw, with relief, the outhouse, the well, the toolshed. She slammed the door behind her and turned the bolt. Then she was on all fours, next to the wall, retching. When she was done, she crawled away, sat against the wall, with her legs splayed before her. She had never in her life felt so alone.

* * *

When Rasheed came home that night, he brought with him a brown paper bag. Mariam was disappointed that he did not notice the clean windows, the swept floors, the missing cobwebs. But he did look pleased that she had already set his dinner plate, on a clean *sofrah* spread on the living-room floor.

"I made *daal*" Mariam said.

"Good. I'm starving."

She poured water for him from the *afiawa* to wash his hands with. As he dried with a towel, she put before him a steaming bowl *of daal* and a plate of fluffy 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 *daal*'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 *daal*.

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 live in the richer parts of Kabul. I'll take you there. You'll see. But they're here too, Mariam, in this very neighborhood, these soft men. There's a teacher living down the street, Hakim is his name, and I see his wife Fariba all the time walking the streets alone with nothing on her head but a scarf. It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who's lost control of his wife."

He fixed Mariam with a hard glare.

"But I'm a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one

wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand?"

Mariam nodded. When he extended the bag to her, she took it.

The earlier pleasure over his approval of her cooking had evaporated. In its stead, a sensation of shrinking. This man's will felt to Mariam as imposing and immovable as the Safid-koh mountains looming over Gul Daman.

Rasheed passed the paper bag to her. "We have an understanding, then. Now, let me have some more of that *daal*."

11.

Mariam had never before worn a burqa. Rasheed had to help her put it on. The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. She practiced walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth.

"You'll get used to it," Rasheed said. "With time, I bet you'll even like it."

They took a bus to a place Rasheed called the Shar-e-Nau Park, where children pushed each other on swings and slapped volleyballs over ragged nets tied to tree trunks. They strolled together and watched boys fly kites, Mariam walking beside Rasheed, tripping now and then on the burqa's hem. For lunch, Rasheed took her to eat in a small kebab house near a mosque he called the Haji Yaghoub. The floor was sticky and the

air smoky. The walls smelled faintly of raw meat and the music, which Rasheed described to her as *logari*, was loud. The cooks were thin boys who fanned skewers with one hand and swatted gnats with the other. Mariam, who had never been inside a restaurant, found it odd at first to sit in a crowded room with so many strangers, to lift her burqa to put morsels of food into her mouth. A hint of the same anxiety as the day at the tandoor stirred in her stomach, but Rasheed's presence was of some comfort, and, after a while, she did not mind so much the music, the smoke, even the people. And the burqa, she learned to her surprise, was also comforting. It was like a one-way window. Inside it, she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past.

On the streets, Rasheed named various buildings with authority; this is the American Embassy, he said, that the Foreign Ministry. He pointed to cars, said their names and where they were made: Soviet Volgas, American Chevrolets, German Opels.

"Which is your favorite?" he asked

Mariam hesitated, pointed to a Volga, and Rasheed laughed

Kabul was far more crowded than the little that Mariam had seen of Herat. There were fewer trees and fewer *garis* pulled by horses, but more cars, taller buildings, more traffic lights and more paved roads. And everywhere Mariam heard the city's peculiar dialect: "Dear" was *jon* instead of *jo*, "sister" became *hamshira* instead of *hamshireh*, and so on.

From a street vendor, Rasheed bought her ice cream. It was the first

time she'd eaten ice cream and Mariam had never imagined that such tricks could be played on a palate. She devoured the entire bowl, the crushed-pistachio topping, the tiny rice noodles at the bottom. She marveled at the bewitching texture, the lapping sweetness of it.

They walked on to a place called Kocheh-Morgha, Chicken Street. It was a narrow, crowded bazaar in a neighborhood that Rasheed said was one of Kabul's wealthier ones.

"Around here is where foreign diplomats live, rich businessmen, members of the royal family-that sort of people. Not like you and me."

"I don't see any chickens," Mariam said.

"That's the one thing you can't find on Chicken Street." Rasheed laughed

The street was lined with shops and little stalls that sold lambskin hats and rainbow-colored *chapans*. Rasheed stopped to look at an engraved silver dagger in one shop, and, in another, at an old rifle that the shopkeeper assured Rasheed was a relic from the first war against the British.

"And I'm Moshe Dayan," Rasheed muttered. He half smiled, and it seemed to Mariam that this was a smile meant only for her. A private, married smile.

They strolled past carpet shops, handicraft shops, pastry shops, flower shops, and shops that sold suits for men and dresses for women, and, in them, behind lace curtains, Mariam saw young girls sewing buttons and ironing collars. From time to time, Rasheed greeted a shopkeeper he knew, sometimes in Farsi, other times in Pashto. As they shook hands

and kissed on the cheek, Mariam stood a few feet away. Rasheed did not wave her over, did not introduce her.

He asked her to wait outside an embroidery shop. "I know the owner," he said. "I'll just go in for a minute, say my *salaam*."

Mariam waited outside on the crowded sidewalk. She watched the cars crawling up Chicken Street, threading through the horde of hawkers and pedestrians, honking at children and donkeys who wouldn't move. She watched the bored-looking merchants inside their tiny stalls, smoking, or spitting into brass spittoons, their faces emerging from the shadows now and then to peddle textiles and fur-collared *poosin* coats to passersby.

But it was the women who drew Mariam's eyes the most.

The women in this part of Kabul were a different breed from the women in the poorer neighborhoods-like the one where she and Rasheed lived, where so many of the women covered fully. These women were-what was the word Rasheed had used?-"modern." Yes, modern Afghan women married to modern Afghan men who did not mind that their wives walked among strangers with makeup on their faces and nothing on their heads. Mariam watched them cantering uninhibited down the street, sometimes with a man, sometimes alone, sometimes with rosy-cheeked children who wore shiny shoes and watches with leather bands, who walked bicycles with high-rise handlebars and gold-colored spokes-unlike the children in Deh-Mazang, who bore sand-fly scars on their cheeks and rolled old bicycle tires with sticks.

These women were all swinging handbags and rustling skirts. Mariam

even spotted one smoking behind the wheel of a car. Their nails were long, polished pink or orange, their lips red as tulips. They walked in high heels, and quickly, as if on perpetually urgent business. They wore dark sunglasses, and, when they breezed by, Mariam caught a whiff of their perfume. She imagined that they all had university degrees, that they worked in office buildings, behind desks of their own, where they typed and smoked and made important telephone calls to important people. These women mystified Mariam. They made her aware of her own lowliness, her plain looks, her lack of aspirations, her ignorance of so many things.

Then Rasheed was tapping her on the shoulder and handing her something here.

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 emphatic, jovial way in which he'd pushed his jewelry at her, the overpowering cheerfulness that left room for no response but meek gratitude. Nana had been right about Mil's gifts. They had been halfhearted tokens of penance, insincere, 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 forearm over his brow. In the dark, she could see the blue hands of his watch. They lay that way for a while, on their 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.

Jtvamadan 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 *ifiar*, when the sun dipped in the west and the cannon fired from the Shir Darwaza mountain, the city broke its fast, and so did Mariam, with bread and a date, 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 the lamb and okra *qurma* in front of him, 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 excuse himself "Off to celebrate Eid with his real family," Nana would say as he crossed the stream and waved-Mullah Faizullah would come too. He would bring Mariam chocolate candy wrapped in foil, a basketful of dyed boiled eggs, cookies. After he was gone, Mariam would climb one of the willows with her treats. Perched on a high branch, she would eat Mullah Faizullah's chocolates and drop the foil wrappers until they lay scattered about the trunk of the tree like silver blossoms. When the chocolate was gone, she would start in on the cookies, and, with a pencil, she would draw faces on the eggs he had brought her now. But there was little pleasure in this for her. Mariam dreaded Eid, this time of hospitality and ceremony, when families dressed in their best and visited each other. She would imagine the air in Herat crackling with merriness, and high-spirited, bright-eyed people showering each other with endearments and goodwill. A forlornness would descend on her like a

shroud then and would lift only when Eid had passed.

This year, for the first time, Mariam saw with her eyes the Eid of her childhood imaginings.

Rasheed and she took to the streets. Mariam had never walked amid such liveliness. Undaunted by the chilly weather, families had flooded the city on their frenetic rounds to visit relatives. On their own street, Mariam saw Fariba and her son Noor, who was dressed in a suit. Fariba, wearing a white scarf, walked beside a small-boned, shy-looking man with eyeglasses. Her older son was there too-Mariam somehow remembered Fariba saying his name, Ahmad, at the tandoor that first time. He had deep-set, brooding eyes, and his face was more thoughtful, more solemn, than his younger brother's, a face as suggestive of early maturity as his brother's was of lingering boyishness. Around Ahmad's neck was a glittering allah pendant.

Fariba must have recognized her, walking in burqa beside Rasheed. She waved, and called out, *"Eidmubarak!"*

From inside the burqa, Mariam gave her a ghost of a nod.

"So you know that woman, the teacher's wife?" Rasheed said

Mariam said she didn't.

"Best you stay away. She's a nosy gossiper, that one. And the husband fancies himself some kind of educated intellectual But he's a mouse. Look at him. Doesn't he look like a mouse?"

They went to Shar-e-Nau, where kids romped about in new shirts and beaded, brightly colored vests and compared Eid gifts. Women brandished platters of sweets. Mariam saw festive lanterns hanging from shopwindows, heard music blaring from loudspeakers. Strangers called

out "*Eidmubarak*" to her as they passed.

That night they went to *Chaman*, and, standing behind Rasheed, Mariam watched fireworks light up the sky, in flashes of green, pink, and yellow. She missed sitting with Mullah Faizullah outside the *kolba*, 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 Nana. 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 Rasheed'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 Rasheed, smoked, chatted. Rasheed 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. Rasheed saw sanctity in what they had together. Her honor, her *namoos*, was something worth guarding to him. She felt prized by his protectiveness. Treasured and significant.

On the third and last day of Eid, Rasheed 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 Rasheed'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 beneath. 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.

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

She saw the gun first. It was black, with a wooden grip and a short muzzle. Mariam made sure to memorize which way it was facing before she picked it up. She turned it over in her hands. It was much heavier than it looked. The grip felt smooth in her hand, and the muzzle was cold. It was disquieting to her that Rasheed owned something whose sole purpose was to kill another person. But surely he kept it for their safety. Her safety.

Beneath the gun were several magazines with curling corners. Mariam opened one. Something inside her dropped. Her mouth gaped of its own will.

On every page were women, beautiful women, who wore no shirts, no trousers, no socks or underpants. They wore nothing at all. They lay in beds amid tumbled sheets and gazed back at Mariam with half-lidded eyes. In most of the pictures, their legs were apart, and Mariam had a full view of the dark place between. In some, the women were prostrated as if-God forbid this thought-in *sujda* for prayer. They looked back over their shoulders with a look of bored contempt.

Mariam quickly put the magazine back where she'd found it. She felt drugged. Who were these women? How could they allow themselves to be photographed this way? Her stomach revolted with distaste. Was this what he did then, those nights that he did not visit her room? Had she been a disappointment to him in this particular regard? And what about all his talk of honor and propriety, his disapproval of the female customers, who, after all, were only showing him their feet to get fitted for shoes? *A woman's face*, he'd said, *is her husband's business only*. Surely the women on these pages had husbands, some of them must. At the least, they had brothers. If so, why did Rasheed insist that *she* cover when he thought nothing of looking at the private areas of other men's wives and sisters?

Mariam sat on his bed, embarrassed and confused. She cupped her face with her hands and closed her eyes. She breathed and breathed until she felt calmer.

Slowly, an explanation presented itself. He was a man, after all, living alone for years before she had moved in. His needs differed from hers. For her, all these months later, their coupling was still an exercise in tolerating pain. His appetite, on the other hand, was fierce, sometimes

bordering on the violent. The way he pinned her down, his hard squeezes at her breasts, how furiously his hips worked. He was a man. All those years without a woman. Could she fault him for being the way God had created him?

Mariam knew that she could never talk to him about this. It was unmentionable. But was it unforgivable? She only had to think of the other man in her life. Jalil, a husband of three and father of nine at the time, having relations with Nana out of wedlock. Which was worse, Rasheed's magazine or what Jalil had done? And what entitled her anyway, a villager, a *harami*, to pass judgment?

Mariam tried the bottom drawer of the dresser.

It was there that she found a picture of the boy, Yunus. It was black-and-white. He looked four, maybe five. He was wearing a striped shirt and a bow tie. He was a handsome little boy, with a slender nose, brown hair, and dark, slightly sunken eyes. He looked distracted, as though something had caught his eye just as the camera had flashed.

Beneath that, Mariam found another photo, also black-and-white, this one slightly more grainy. It was of a seated woman and, behind her, a thinner, younger Rasheed, with black hair. The woman was beautiful. Not as beautiful as the women in the magazine, perhaps, but beautiful. Certainly more beautiful than her, Mariam. She had a delicate chin and long, black hair parted in the center. High cheekbones and a gentle forehead. Mariam pictured her own face, her thin lips and long chin, and felt a flicker of jealousy.

She looked at this photo for a long time. There was something vaguely

unsettling about the way Rasheed seemed to loom over the woman. His hands on her shoulders. His savoring, tight-lipped smile and her unsmiling, sullen face. The way her body tilted forward subtly, as though she were trying to wriggle free of his hands.

Mariam put everything back where she'd found it.

Later, as she was doing laundry, she regretted that she had sneaked around in his room. For what? What thing of substance had she learned about him? That he owned a gun, that he was a man with the needs of a man? And she shouldn't have stared at the photo of him and his wife for as long as she had. Her eyes had read meaning into what was random body posture captured in a single moment of time.

What Mariam felt now, as the loaded clotheslines bounced heavily before her, was sorrow for Rasheed. He too had had a hard life, a life marked by loss and sad turns of fate. Her thoughts returned to his boy Yunus, who had once built snowmen in this yard, whose feet had pounded these same stairs. The lake had snatched him from Rasheed, swallowed him up, just as a whale had swallowed the boy's namesake prophet in the Koran. It pained Mariam-it pained her considerably-to picture Rasheed panic-stricken and helpless, pacing the banks of the lake and pleading with it to spit his son back onto dry land. And she felt for the first time a kinship with her husband. She told herself that they would make good companions after 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 Pashtun 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, untrodden? 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."

* * *

Mahiam 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 up 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."

Mariam wished he wouldn't do that, hitch his hopes to its being a boy. As happy as she was about this pregnancy, his expectation weighed on her. Yesterday, Rasheed had gone out and come home with a suede winter coat for a boy, lined inside with soft sheepskin, the sleeves embroidered with fine red and yellow silk thread.

Rasheed lifted a long, narrow board. As he began to saw it in half, he said the stairs worried him. "Something will have to be done about them later, when he's old enough to climb." The stove worried him too, he said. The knives and forks would have to be stowed somewhere out of reach. "You can't be too careful Boys are reckless creatures."

Mariam pulled the shawl around her against the chill.

* * *

The next morning, Rasheed said he wanted to invite his friends for

dinner to celebrate. All morning, Mariam cleaned lentils and moistened rice. She sliced eggplants for *borani*, and cooked leeks and ground beef for *aushak*. She swept the floor, beat the curtains, aired the house, despite the snow that had started up again. She arranged mattresses and cushions along the walls of the living room, placed bowls of candy and roasted almonds on the table.

She was in her room by early evening before the first of the men arrived. She lay in bed as the hoots and laughter and bantering voices downstairs began to mushroom. She couldn't keep her hands from drifting to her belly. She thought of what was growing there, and happiness rushed in like a gust of wind blowing a door wide open. Her eyes watered.

Mariam thought of her six-hundred-and-fifty-kilometer bus trip with Rasheed, from Herat in the west, near the border with Iran, to Kabul in the east. They had passed small towns and big towns, and knots of little villages that kept springing up one after another. They had gone over mountains and across raw-burned deserts, from one province to the next. And here she was now, over those boulders and parched hills, with a home of her own, a husband of her own, heading toward one final, cherished province: Motherhood. How delectable it was to think of

this baby, *her* baby, *their* baby. How glorious it was to know that her love for it already dwarfed anything she had ever felt as a human being, to know that there was no need any longer for pebble games.

Downstairs, someone was tuning a harmonium. Then the clanging of a hammer tuning a tabla. Someone cleared his throat. And then there was whistling and clapping and yipping and singing.

Mariam stroked the softness of her belly. *No bigger than a fingernail*, the doctor had said.

I'm going to be a mother, she thought.

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

When Mariam 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 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 Mullah Faizullah had taught her: *And Allah is the East and the West, therefore wherever 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 Rasheed'S idea to go to the *hamam*. Mariam 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 *hamam*, shapes moved about in the steam around Mariam, 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 bathwater echoed between the walls as backs were scrubbed and hair soaped. Mariam sat in the far corner by herself, working on her heels with a pumice stone, insulated 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, Fariba told her husband that when she'd heard the cry and rushed over she'd found Rasheed's wife shriveled into a corner, hugging her knees, a pool of blood at her feet.

"You could hear the poor girl's teeth rattling, Hakim, she was shivering so hard."

When Mariam had seen her, Fariba said, she had asked in a high, supplicating voice, *It's normal, isn't it? Isn't it? Isn't it normal?*

* * *

Another bus ride with Rasheed. Snowing again. Falling thick this time. It was piling in heaps on sidewalks, on roofs, gathering in patches on the bark of straggly trees. Mariam watched the merchants plowing snow from their storefronts- A group of boys was chasing a black dog. They waved sportively at the bus. Mariam looked over to Rasheed. His eyes were closed He wasn't humming. Mariam reclined her head and closed her eyes too. She wanted out of her cold socks, out of the damp wool sweater that was prickly against her skin. She wanted away from this bus.

At the house, Rasheed covered her with a quilt when she lay on the couch, but there was a stiff, perfunctory air about this gesture.

"What kind of answer is that?" he said again. "That's what a mullah is supposed to say. You pay a doctor his fee, you want a better answer than 'God's will.'"

Mariam curled up her knees beneath the quilt and said he ought to get some rest.

"God's will," he simmered.

He sat in his room smoking cigarettes all day.

Mariam lay on the couch, hands tucked between her knees, watched the whirlpool of snow twisting and spinning outside the window. She remembered Nana saying once that each snowflake was a sigh heaved by an aggrieved woman somewhere in the world. That all the sighs drifted up the sky, gathered into clouds, then broke into tiny pieces that fell silently on the people below.

As a reminder of how women like us suffer, she'd said. How quietly we endure all that falls upon us.

14.

The grief kept surprising Mariam. All it took to unleash it was her thinking of the unfinished crib in the toolshed or the suede coat in Rasheed's closet. The baby came to life then and she could hear it, could hear its hungry grunts, its gurgles and jabbering- She felt it sniffing at her breasts. The grief washed over her, swept her up, tossed her upside down. Mariam was dumbfounded that she could miss in such a crippling manner a being she had never even seen.

Then there were days when the dreariness didn't seem quite as unrelenting to Mariam. Days when the mere thought of resuming the old

patterns of her life did not seem so exhausting, when it did not take enormous efforts of will to get out of bed, to do her prayers, to do the wash, to make meals for Rasheed.

Mariam dreaded going outside. She was envious, suddenly, of the neighborhood women and their wealth of children. Some had seven or eight and didn't understand how fortunate they were, how blessed that their children had flourished in their wombs, lived to squirm in their arms and take the milk from their breasts. Children that they had not bled away with soapy water and the bodily filth of strangers down some bathhouse drain. Mariam resented them when she overheard them complaining about misbehaving sons and lazy daughters.

A voice inside her head tried to soothe her with well-intended but misguided consolation.

You 'll have others, Inshallah. You 're young. Surely you'll have many other chances.

But Mariam's grief wasn't aimless or unspecific. Mariam grieved for *this* baby, this particular child, who had made her so happy for a while-Some days, she believed that the baby had been an undeserved blessing, that she was being punished for what she had done to Nana. Wasn't it true that she might as well have slipped that noose around her mother's neck herself? Treacherous daughters did not deserve to be mothers, and this was just punishment- She had fitful dreams, of *Nma'sjinn* sneaking into her room at night, burrowing its claws into her womb, and stealing her baby. In these dreams, Nana cackled with delight and vindication.

Other days, Mariam was besieged with anger. It was Rasheed's fault for his premature celebration. For his foolhardy faith that she was carrying a boy. Naming the baby as he had. Taking God's will for granted. His fault, for making her go to the bathhouse. Something there, the steam, the dirty water, the soap, something there had caused this to happen. No. Not Rasheed. *She* was to blame. She became furious with herself for sleeping in the wrong position, for eating meals that were too spicy, for not eating enough fruit, for drinking too much tea.

It was God's fault, for taunting her as He had. For not granting her what He had granted so many other women. For dangling before her, tantalizingly, what He knew would give her the greatest happiness, then pulling it away.

But it did no good, all this fault laying, all these harangues of accusations bouncing in her head. It was *kojr*, sacrilege, to think these thoughts. Allah was not spiteful. He was not a petty God. Mullah Faizullah's words whispered in her head:

Blessed is He in Whose hand is the kingdom, and He Who has power over all things, Who created death and life that He may try you.

Ransacked with guilt, Mariam would kneel and pray for forgiveness for these thoughts.

* * *

Meanwhile, a change had come over Rasheed ever since the day at the bathhouse. Most nights when he came home, he hardly talked anymore.

He ate, smoked, went to bed, sometimes came back in the middle of the night for a brief and, of late, quite rough session of coupling. He was more apt to sulk these days, to fault her cooking, to complain about clutter around the yard or point out even minor uncleanliness in the house. Occasionally, he took her around town on Fridays, like he used to, but on the sidewalks he walked quickly and always a few steps ahead of her, without speaking, unmindful of Mariam who almost had to run to keep up with him. He wasn't so ready with a laugh on these outings anymore. He didn't buy her sweets or gifts, didn't stop and name places to her as he used to. Her questions seemed to irritate him.

One night, they were sitting in the living room listening to the radio. Winter was passing. The stiff winds that plastered snow onto the face and made the eyes water had calmed. Silvery fluffs of snow were melting off the branches of tall elms and would be replaced in a few weeks with stubby, pale green buds. Rasheed was shaking his foot absently to the tabla beat of a Hamahang song, his eyes crinkled against cigarette smoke.

"Are you angry with me?" Mariam asked.

Rasheed said nothing. The song ended and the news came on. A woman's voice reported that President Daoud Khan had sent yet another group of Soviet consultants back to Moscow, to the expected displeasure of the Kremlin.

"I worry that you are angry with me."

Rasheed sighed

"Are you?"

His eyes shifted to her. "Why would I be angry?"

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

"Is that the kind of man you take me for, after everything I've done for you?"

"No. Of course not."

"Then stop pestering me!"

"I'm sorry. *Bebakhsh*, Rasheed. I'm sorry."

He crushed out his cigarette and lit another. He turned up the volume on the radio.

"I've been thinking, though," Mariam said, raising her voice so as to be heard over the music.

Rasheed sighed again, more irritably this time, turned down the volume once more. He rubbed his forehead wearily. "What now?"

"I've been thinking, that maybe we should have a proper burial For the baby, I mean. Just us, a few prayers, nothing more."

Mariam had been thinking about it for a while. She didn't want to forget this baby. It didn't seem right, not to mark this loss in some way that was permanent.

"What for? It's idiotic."

"It would make me feel better, I think."

"Thm you do it," he said sharply. "I've already buried one son. I won't bury another.

Now, if you don't mind, I'm trying to listen."

He turned up the volume again, leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

One sunny morning that week, Mariam picked a spot in the yard and dug a hole.

"In the name of Allah and with Allah, and in the name of the messenger of Allah upon whom be the blessings and peace of Allah," she said under her breath as her shovel bit into the ground. She placed the suede coat that Rasheed had bought for the baby in the hole and shoveled dirt over it.

"You make the night to pass into the day and You make the day to pass into the night, and You bring forth the living from the dead and You bring forth the dead from the living, and You give sustenance to whom You please without measure."

She patted the dirt with the back of the shovel. She squatted by the mound, closed her eyes.

Give sustenance, Allah.

Give sustenance to me.

15.

April 1978

On April 17, 1978, the year Mariam turned nineteen, a man named Mir Akbar 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 Rasheed 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. Rasheed said that Mir Akbar 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.

Rasheed 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 Marxist.

"Who's Karl Marxist?"

Rasheed 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 rousing speeches to demonstrators.

"What I meant was, what do they want?" Mariam asked. "These communists, what is it that they believe?"

Rasheed chortled and shook his head, but Mariam thought she saw uncertainty in the way he crossed his arms, the way his eyes shifted. "You know nothing, do you? You're like a child. Your brain is empty. There is no information in it."

"I ask because-"

"Chupko. Shut up."

Mariam did.

It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid. And Mariam *was* afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for with polluted

apologies and sometimes not.

In the four years since the day at the bathhouse, there had been six more cycles of hopes raised then dashed, each loss, each collapse, each trip to the doctor more crushing for Mariam than the last. With each disappointment, Rasheed had grown more remote and resentful. Now nothing she did pleased him. She cleaned the house, made sure he always had a supply of clean shirts, cooked him his favorite dishes. Once, disastrously, she even bought makeup and put it on for him. But when he came home, he took one look at her and winced with such distaste that she rushed to the bathroom and washed it all off, tears of shame mixing with soapy water, rouge, and mascara.

Now Mariam dreaded the sound of him coming home in the evening. The key rattling, the creak of the door- these were sounds that set her heart racing. From her bed, she listened to the *click-clack* of his heels, to the muffled shuffling of his feet after he'd shed his shoes. With her ears, she took inventory of his doings: chair legs dragged across the floor, the plaintive squeak of the cane seat when he sat, the clinking of spoon against plate, the flutter of newspaper pages flipped, the slurping of water. And as her heart pounded, her mind wondered what excuse he would use that night to pounce on her. There was always something, some minor thing that would infuriate him, because no matter what she did to please him, no matter how thoroughly she submitted to his wants and demands, it wasn't enough. She could not give him his son back. In this most essential way, she had failed him-seven times she had failed him-and now she was nothing but a burden to him. She could see it in the way he looked at her, *when* he looked at her. She was a burden to him.

"What's going to happen?" she asked him now.

Rasheed shot her a sidelong glance. He made a sound between a sigh and a groan, dropped his legs from the table, and turned off the radio. He took it upstairs to his room. He closed the door.

* * *

On April 27, Mariam's question was answered with crackling sounds and intense, sudden roars. She ran barefoot down to the living room and found Rasheed already by the window, in his undershirt, his hair disheveled, palms pressed to the glass. Mariam made her way to the window next to him. Overhead, she could see military planes zooming past, heading north and east. Their deafening shrieks hurt her ears. In the distance, loud booms resonated and sudden plumes of smoke rose to the sky.

"What's going on, Rasheed?" she said. "What is all this?"

"God knows," he muttered. He tried the radio and got only static.

"What do we do?"

Impatiently, Rasheed said, "We wait."

* * *

Later in the day, Rasheed was still trying the radio as Mariam made rice with spinach sauce in the kitchen. Mariam remembered a time when she had enjoyed, even looked forward to, cooking for Rasheed. Now cooking was an exercise in heightened anxiety. The *qurma%* were always too

salty or too bland for his taste. The rice was judged either too greasy or too dry, the bread declared too doughy or too crispy. Rasheed's faultfinding left her stricken in the kitchen with self-doubt.

When she brought him his plate, the national anthem was playing on the radio.

"I made *sabzi*," she said.

"Put it down and be quiet."

After the music faded, a man's voice came on the radio. He announced himself as Air Force Colonel Abdul Qader. He reported that earlier in the day the rebel Fourth Armored Division had seized the airport and key intersections in the city. Kabul Radio, the ministries of Communication and the Interior, and the Foreign Ministry building had also been captured. Kabul was in the hands of the people now, he said proudly. Rebel MiGs had attacked the Presidential Palace. Tanks had broken into the premises, and a fierce battle was under way there. Daoud's loyalist forces were all but defeated, Abdul Qader said in a reassuring tone.

Days later, when the communists began the summary executions of those connected with Daoud Khan's regime, when rumors began floating about Kabul of eyes gouged and genitals electrocuted in the Pol-e-Charkhi Prison, Mariam would hear of the slaughter that had taken place at the Presidential Palace. Daoud Khan *hadbten* killed, but not before the communist rebels had killed some twenty members of his family, including women and grandchildren. There would be rumors that he had taken his own life, that he'd been gunned down in the heat of battle; rumors that he'd been saved for last, made to watch the massacre of his family, then shot.

Rasheed turned up the volume and leaned in closer.

"A revolutionary council of the armed forces has been established, and our *watan* will now be known as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan," Abdul Qader said. "The era of aristocracy, nepotism, and inequality is over, fellow *hamwaians*. We have ended decades of tyranny. Power is now in the hands of the masses and freedom-loving people. A glorious new era in the history of our country is afoot. A new Afghanistan is born. We assure you that you have nothing to fear, fellow Afghans. The new regime will maintain the utmost respect for principles, both Islamic and democratic. This is a time of rejoicing and celebration."

Rasheed turned off the radio.

"So is this good or bad?" Mariam asked.

"Bad for the rich, by the sound of it," Rasheed said. "Maybe not so bad for us."

Mariam's thoughts drifted to Jalil. She wondered if the communists would go after him, then. Would they jail him? Jail his sons? Take his businesses and properties from him?

"Is this warm?" Rasheed said, eyeing the rice.

"I just served it from the pot."

He grunted, and told her to hand him a plate.

* * *

Down the street, as the night lit up in sudden flashes of red and

yellow, an exhausted Fariba had propped herself up on her elbows. Her hair was matted with sweat, and droplets of moisture teetered on the edge of her upper lip. At her bedside, the elderly midwife, Wajma, watched as Fariba's husband and sons passed around the infant. They were marveling at the baby's light hair, at her pink cheeks and puckered, rosebud lips, at the slits of jade green eyes moving behind her puffy lids. They smiled at each other when they heard her voice for the first time, a cry that started like the mewl of a cat and exploded into a healthy, full-throated yowl. Noor said her eyes were like gemstones. Ahmad, who was the most religious member of the family, sang the *azan* in his baby sister's ear and blew in her face three times.

"Laila it is, then?" Hakim asked, bouncing his daughter.

"Laila it is," Fariba said, smiling tiredly. "Night Beauty. It's perfect."

* * *

Rasheed made a ball of rice with his fingers. He put it in his mouth, chewed once, then twice, before grimacing and spitting it out on the *sofrah*.

"What's the matter?" Mariam asked, hating the apologetic tone of her voice. She could feel her pulse quickening, her skin shrinking.

"What's the matter?" he mewled, mimicking her. "What's the matter is that you've done it again."

"But I boiled it five minutes more than usual."

"That's a bold lie."

"I swear-"

He shook the rice angrily from his fingers and pushed the plate away, spilling sauce and rice on the *sojrah*. Mariam watched as he stormed out of the living room, then out of the house, slamming the door on his way out.

Mariam kneeled to the ground and tried to pick up the grains of rice and put them back on the plate, but her hands were shaking badly, and she had to wait for them to stop. Dread pressed down on her chest. She tried taking a few deep breaths. She caught her pale reflection in the darkened living-room window and looked 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. These. In your mouth."

"Stop it, Rasheed, I'm-"

His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Mariam struggled against him, mumbling, 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

Nine-year-old Laila rose from bed, as she did most mornings, hungry for the sight of her friend Tariq. This morning, however, she knew 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."

"Thirteen days?"

"It's not so long. You're making a face, Laila."

"I am not."

"You're not going to cry, are you?"

"I am not going to cry! Not over you. Not in a thousand years."

She'd kicked at his shin, not his artificial but his real one, and he'd playfully whacked the back of her head.

Thirteen days. Almost two weeks. And, just five days in, Laila had learned a fundamental truth about time: Like the accordion on which Tariq's father sometimes played old Pashto songs, time stretched and contracted depending on Tariq's absence or presence—Downstairs, her

parents were fighting. Again. Laila knew the routine: Mammy, ferocious, indomitable, pacing and ranting; Babi, sitting, looking sheepish and dazed, nodding obediently, waiting for the storm to pass. Laila closed her door and changed. But she could still hear them. She could still hear *her*. Finally, a door slammed. Pounding footsteps. Mammy's bed creaked loudly. Babi, it seemed, would survive to see another day.

"Laila!" he called now. "I'm going to be late for work!"

"One minute!"

Laila put on her shoes and quickly brushed her shoulder-length, blond curls in the mirror. Mammy always told Laila that she had inherited her hair color-as well as her thick-lashed, turquoise green eyes, her dimpled cheeks, her high cheekbones, and the pout of her lower lip, which Mammy shared-from her great-grandmother, Mammy's grandmother. *She was a pari, a stunner*, Mammy said. *Her beauty was the talk of the valley. It skipped two generations of women in our family, but it sure didn't bypass you, Laila* The valley Mammy referred to was the Panjshir, the Farsi-speaking Tajik region one hundred kilometers northeast of Kabul. Both Mammy and Babi, who were first cousins, had been born and raised in Panjshir; they had moved to Kabul back in 1960 as hopeful, bright-eyed newlyweds when Babi had been admitted to Kabul University.

Laila scrambled downstairs, hoping Mammy wouldn't come out of her room for another round. She found Babi kneeling by the screen door.

"Did you see this, Laila?"

The rip in the screen had been there for weeks. Laila hunkered down

beside him. "No. Must be new."

"That's what I told Fariba." He looked shaken, reduced, as he always did after Mammy was through with him. "She says it's been letting in bees."

Laila's heart went out to him. Babi was a small man, with narrow shoulders and slim, delicate hands, almost like a woman's. At night, when Laila walked into Babi's room, she always found the downward profile of his face burrowing into a book, his glasses perched on the tip of his nose. Sometimes he didn't even notice that she was there. When he did, he marked his page, smiled a close-lipped, companionable smile. Babi knew most of Rumi's and Hafez's *ghazals* by heart. He could speak at length about the struggle between Britain and czarist Russia over Afghanistan. He knew the difference between a stalactite and a stalagmite, and could tell you that the distance between the earth and the sun was the same as going from Kabul to Ghazni one and a half million times. But if Laila needed the lid of a candy jar forced open, she had to go to Mammy, which felt like a betrayal. Ordinary tools befuddled Babi. On his watch, squeaky door hinges never got oiled. Ceilings went on leaking after he plugged them. Mold thrived defiantly in kitchen cabinets. Mammy said that before he left with Noor to join the jihad against the Soviets, back in 1980, it was Ahmad who had dutifully and competently minded these things.

"But if you have a book that needs urgent reading," she said, "then Hakim is your man."

Still, Laila could not shake the feeling that at one time, before Ahmad and Noor had gone to war against the Soviets-before Babi had *let* them

go to war-Mammy too had thought Babi's bookishness endearing, that, once upon a time, she too had found his forgetfulness and ineptitude charming.

"So what is today?" he said now, smiling coyly. "Day five? Or is it six?"

"What do I care? I don't keep count," Laila lied, shrugging, loving him for remembering- Mammy had no idea that Tariq had left.

"Well, his flashlight will be going off before you know it," Babi said, referring to Laila and Tariq's nightly signaling game. They had played it for so long it had become a bedtime ritual, like brushing teeth.

Babi ran his finger through the rip. "I'll patch this as soon as I get a chance. We'd better go." He raised his voice and called over his shoulder, "We're going now, Fariba! I'm taking Laila to school. Don't forget to pick her up!"

Outside, as she was climbing on the carrier pack of Babi's bicycle, Laila spotted a car parked up the street, across from the house where the shoemaker, Rasheed, lived with his reclusive wife. It was a Benz, an unusual car in this neighborhood, blue with a thick white stripe bisecting the hood, the roof, and the trunk. Laila could make out two men sitting inside, one behind the wheel, the other in the back.

"Who are they?" she said.

"It's not our business," Babi said. "Climb on, you'll be late for class."

Laila remembered another fight, and, that time, Mammy had stood

over Babi and said in a mincing way, *That's your business, isn't it, cousin? To make nothing your business. Even your own sons going to war. Howl pleaded with you. Bui you buried your nose in those cursed books and let our sons go like they were a pair of haramis.*

Babi pedaled up the street, Laila on the back, her arms wrapped around his belly. As they passed the blue Benz, Laila caught a fleeting glimpse of the man in the backseat: thin, white-haired, dressed in a dark brown suit, with a white handkerchief triangle in the breast pocket. The only other thing she had time to notice was that the car had Herat license plates.

They rode the rest of the way in silence, except at the turns, where Babi braked cautiously and said, "Hold on, Laila. Slowing down. Slowing down. There."

* * *

In class that day, Laila found it hard to pay attention, between Tariq's absence and her parents' fight. So when the teacher called on her to name the capitals of Romania and Cuba, Laila was caught off guard.

The teacher's name was Shanzai, but, behind her back, the students called her Khala Rangmaal, Auntie Painter, referring to the motion she favored when she slapped students-palm, then back of the hand, back and forth, like a painter working a brush. Khala Rangmaal was a sharp-faced young woman with heavy eyebrows. On the first day of school, she had proudly told the class that she was the daughter of a poor peasant from Khost. She stood straight, and wore her jet-black hair

pulled tightly back and tied in a bun so that, when Khala Rangmaal turned around, Laila could see the dark bristles on her neck. Khala Rangmaal did not wear makeup 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 there was no 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 antiprogressives, 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 these 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. Because none 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 Khala Rangmaal'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," Khala Rangmaal said now, "have I disturbed your daydreaming,

Inqilabi Girl?"

This was her nickname for Laila, Revolutionary Girl, because she'd been born the night of the April coup of 1978-except Khala Rangmaal became angry if anyone in her class used the word *coup*. What had happened, she insisted, was an *inqilab*, 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, *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 millions behind and came to Afghanistan to fight the jihad.

"Bucharest. Havana," Laila managed.

"And are those countries our friends or not?"

"They are, *moolim* sahib. They are friendly countries."

Khala Rangmaal gave a curt nod.

* * *

When school let out. Mammy again didn't show up like she was supposed to. Laila ended up walking home with two of her classmates, Giti and Hasina.

Giti was a tightly wound, bony little girl who wore her hair in twin ponytails held by elastic bands. She was always scowling, and walking

with her books pressed to her chest, like a shield. Hasina was twelve, three years older than Laila and Giti, but had failed third grade once and fourth grade twice. What she lacked in smarts Hasina made up for in mischief and a mouth that, Giti said, ran like a sewing machine. It was Hasina who had come up with the Khala Rangmaal nickname-Today, Hasina was dispensing advice on how to fend off unattractive suitors. "Foolproof method, guaranteed to work. I give you my word."

"This is stupid. I'm too young to have a suitor!" Giti said.

"You're not too young."

"Well, no one's come to ask for *my* hand."

"That's because you have a beard, my dear."

Giti's hand shot up to her chin, and she looked with alarm to Laila, who smiled pityingly-Giti was the most humorless person Laila had ever met-and shook her head with reassurance.

"Anyway, you want to know what to do or not, ladies?"

"Go ahead," Laila said.

"Beans. No less than four cans. On the evening the toothless lizard comes to ask for your hand. But the timing, ladies, the timing is everything- You have to suppress the fireworks 'til it's time to serve him his tea."

"I'll remember that," Laila said.

"So will he."

Laila could have said then that she didn't need this advice because Babi had no intention of giving her away anytime soon. Though Babi worked at Silo, Kabul's gigantic bread factory, where he labored amid the heat and the humming machinery stoking the massive ovens and mill grains all day, he was a university-educated man. He'd been a high school teacher before the communists fired him-this was shortly after the coup of 1978, about a year and a half before the Soviets had invaded. Babi had made it clear to Laila from a young age that the most important thing in his life, after her safety, was her schooling.

I know you're still young, but you have to understand and learn this now, he said. *Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, very bright girl. Truly, you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance.*

But Laila didn't tell Hasina that Babi had said these things, or how glad she was to have a father like him, or how proud she was of his regard for her, or how determined she was to pursue her education just as he had his. For the last two years, Laila had received the *awal numra* certificate, given yearly to the top-ranked student in each grade.

She said nothing of these things to Hasina, though, whose own father was an ill-tempered taxi driver who in two or three years would almost certainly give her away. Hasina had told Laila, in one of her infrequent serious moments, that it had already been decided that she would marry a first cousin who was twenty years older than her and owned an auto shop in Lahore. *I've seen him twice,* Hasina had said. *Both times he ate with his mouth open.*

"Beans, girls," Hasina said. "You remember that. Unless, of course"-here she flashed an impish grin and nudged Laila with an elbow-"it's your young handsome, one-legged prince who comes knocking- Then..."

Laila slapped the elbow away. She would have taken offense if anyone else had said that about Tariq. But she knew that Hasina wasn't malicious. She mocked-it was what she did-and her mocking spared no one, least of all herself.

"You shouldn't talk that way about people!" Giti said.

"What people is that?"

"People who've been injured because of war," Giti said earnestly, oblivious to Hasina's toying.

"I think Mullah Giti here has a crush on Tariq. I knew it! Ha! But he's already spoken for, don't you know? Isn't he, Laila?"

"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 Rasheed 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 house.

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 Khadim's grinning face. Khadim was eleven, like Tariq. He was thick, tall, and had a severe underbite. His father was a butcher in Deh-Mazang, and, from time to time, Khadim was known to fling bits of calf intestine at passersby. Sometimes, if Tariq wasn't nearby, Khadim 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, Tariq jan. Oh, won't you come home and save me from the *badmashi!*'"

Laila began to backpedal, but Khadim 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 unleashed them now.

"Your mother eats cock!"

"At least she's not a loony like yours," Khadim shot back, unruffled "At least my father's not a sissy! And, by the way, why don't you smell your hands?"

The other boys took up the chant. "Smell your hands! Smell your hands!"

Laila did, but she knew even before she did, what he'd meant about it not showing in her hair. She let out a high-pitched yelp. At this, the boys hooted even harder.

Laila turned around and, howling, ran home.

* * *

She drew water from the well, and, in the bathroom, filled a basin, tore off her clothes. She soaped her hair, frantically digging fingers into her scalp, whimpering with disgust. She rinsed with a bowl and soaped her hair again. Several times, she thought she might throw up. She kept mewling and shivering, as she rubbed and rubbed the soapy washcloth against her face and neck until they reddened.

This would have never happened if Tariq had been with her, she thought as she put on a clean shirt and fresh trousers. Khadim wouldn't have dared. Of course, it wouldn't have happened if Mammy had shown up like she was supposed to either. Sometimes Laila wondered why Mammy had even bothered having her. People, she believed now, shouldn't be allowed to have new children if they'd already given away

all their love to their old ones. It wasn't fair. A fit of anger claimed her. Laila went to her room, collapsed on her bed.

When the worst of it had passed, she went across the hallway to Mammy's door and knocked. When she was younger, Laila used to sit for hours outside this door. She would tap on it and whisper Mammy's name over and over, like a magic chant meant to break a spell: *Mammy, Mammy, Mammy, Mammy, Mammy..* But Mammy never opened the door. She didn't open it now. Laila turned the knob and walked in.

* * *

Sometimes Mammy had good days. She sprang out of bed bright-eyed and playful. The droopy lower lip stretched upward in a smile. She bathed. She put on fresh clothes and wore mascara. She let Laila brush her hair, which Laila loved doing, and pin earrings through her earlobes. They went shopping together to Mandaii Bazaar. Laila got her to play snakes and ladders, and they ate shavings from blocks of dark chocolate, one of the few things they shared a common taste for. Laila's favorite part of Mammy's good days was when Babi came home, when she and Mammy looked up from the board and grinned at him with brown teeth. A gust of contentment puffed through the room then, and Laila caught a momentary glimpse of the tenderness, the romance, that had once bound her parents back when this house had been crowded and noisy and cheerful.

Mammy sometimes baked on her good days and invited neighborhood women over for tea and pastries. Laila got to lick the bowls clean, as Mammy set the table with cups and napkins and the good plates. Later, Laila would take her place at the living-room table and try to break into

the conversation, as the women talked boisterously and drank tea and complimented Mammy on her baking. Though there was never much for her to say, Laila liked to sit and listen in because at these gatherings she was treated to a rare pleasure: She got to hear Mammy speaking affectionately about Babi.

"What a first-rate teacher he was," Mammy said. "His students loved him. And not only because he wouldn't beat them with rulers, like other teachers did. They respected him, you see, because he respected *them*. He was marvelous."

Mammy loved to tell the story of how she'd proposed to him.

"I was sixteen, he was nineteen. Our families lived next door to each other in Panjshir. Oh, I had the crush on him, *hamshiras!* I used to climb the wall between our houses, and we'd play in his father's orchard. Hakim was always scared that we'd get caught and that my father would give him a slapping. 'Your father's going to give me a slapping,' he'd always say. He was so cautious, so serious, even then. And then one day I said to him, I said, 'Cousin, what will it be? Are you going to ask for my hand or are you going to make me come *khasiegari* to you?' I said it just like that. You should have seen the face on him!"

Mammy would slap her palms together as the women, and Laila, laughed.

Listening to Mammy tell these stories, Laila knew that there had been a time when Mammy always spoke this way about Babi. A time when her parents did not sleep in separate rooms. Laila wished she hadn't missed out on those times.

Inevitably, Mammy's proposal story led to matchmaking schemes.

When Afghanistan was free from the Soviets and the boys returned home, they would need brides, and so, one by one, the women paraded the neighborhood girls who might or might not be suitable for Ahmad and Noon. Laila always felt excluded when the talk turned to her brothers, as though the women were discussing a beloved film that only she hadn't seen. She'd been two years old when Ahmad and Noor had left Kabul for Panjshir up north, to join Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud's forces and fight the jihad. Laila hardly remembered anything at all about them. A shiny Allah pendant around Ahmad's neck. A patch of black hairs on one of Noor's ears. And that was it.

"What about Azita?"

"The rugmaker's daughter?" Mammy said, slapping her cheek with mock outrage.

"She has a thicker mustache than Hakim!"

"There's Anahita. We hear she's top in her class at Zarghoona."

"Have you seen the teeth on that girl? Tombstones. 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 chatter went on, Laila let her mind drift, and, as always, it found Tariq.

* * *

Mammy had pulled the yellowish curtains. In the darkness, the room had a layered smell about it: sleep, unwashed linen, sweat, dirty socks, perfume, the previous night's leftover *gurma*. Laila waited for her eyes to adjust before she crossed the room. Even so, her feet became entangled with items of clothing that littered the floor.

Laila pulled the curtains open. At the foot of the bed was an old metallic folding chair. Laila sat on it and watched the unmoving blanketed mound that was her mother.

The walls of Mammy's room were covered with pictures of Ahmad and Noor. Everywhere Laila looked, two strangers smiled back. Here was Noor mounting a tricycle. Here was Ahmad doing his prayers, posing beside a sundial Babi and he had built when he was twelve. And there they were, her brothers, sitting back to back beneath the old pear tree in the yard.

Beneath Mammy's bed, Laila could see the corner of Ahmad's shoe box protruding. From time to time, Mammy showed her the old, crumpled newspaper clippings in it, and pamphlets that Ahmad had managed to collect from insurgent groups and resistance organizations headquartered in Pakistan. One photo, Laila remembered, showed a man in a long white coat handing a lollipop to a legless little boy. The caption below the photo read: *Children are the intended victims of Soviet land mine campaign*. The article went on to say that the Soviets also liked to hide explosives inside brightly colored toys. If a child picked it up, the toy exploded, tore off fingers or an entire hand. The father could not join the

jihad then; he'd have to stay home and care for his child. In another article in Ahmad's box, a young Mujahid was saying that the Soviets had dropped gas on his village that burned people's skin and blinded them. He said he had seen his mother and sister running for the stream, coughing up blood.

"Mammy."

The mound stirred slightly. It emitted a groan.

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

Another groan. A hand emerged, like a submarine periscope breaking surface, and dropped. The mound moved more discernibly this time. Then the rustle of blankets as layers of them shifted over each other. Slowly, in stages, Mammy materialized: first the slovenly hair, then the white, grimacing face, eyes pinched shut against the light, a hand groping for the headboard, the sheets sliding down as she pulled herself up, grunting. Mammy made an effort to look up, flinched against the light, and her head drooped over her chest.

"How was school?" she muttered.

So it would begin. The obligatory questions, the perfunctory answers. Both pretending. Unenthusiastic partners, the two of them, in this tired old dance.

"School was fine," Laila said.

"Did you learn anything?"

"The usual."

"Did you eat?"

"I did."

"Good."

Mammy raised her head again, toward the window. She winced and her eyelids fluttered. The right side of her face was red, and the hair on that side had flattened.

"I have a headache."

"Should I fetch you some aspirin?"

Mammy massaged her temples. "Maybe later. Is your father home?"

"It's only three."

"Oh. Right. You said that already." Mammy yawned. "I was dreaming just now," she said, her voice only a bit louder than the rustle of her nightgown against the sheets. "Just now, before you came in. But I can't remember it now. Does that happen to you?"

"It happens to everybody, Mammy."

"Strangest thing."

"I should tell you that while you were dreaming, a boy shot piss out of a water gun on my hair."

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

"Piss. Urine."

"That's...that's terrible. God I'm sorry. Poor you. I'll have a talk with him first thing in the morning. Or maybe with his mother. Yes, that would be better, I think."

"I haven't told you who it was."

"Oh. Well, who was it?"

"Nevermind."

"You're angry."

"You were supposed to pick me up."

"I was," Mammy croaked. Laila could not tell whether this was a question. Mammy began picking at her hair. This was one of life's great mysteries to Laila, that Mammy's picking had not made her bald as an egg. "What about...What's his name, your friend, Tariq? Yes, what about him?"

"He's been gone for a week."

"Oh." Mammy sighed through her nose. "Did you wash?"

"Yes."

"So you're clean, then." Mammy turned her tired gaze to the window. "You're clean, and everything is fine."

Laila stood up. "I have homework now."

"Of course you do. Shut the curtains before you go, my love," Mammy said, her voice fading. She was already sinking beneath the sheets.

As Laila reached for the curtains, she saw a car pass by on the street tailed by a cloud of dust. It was the blue Benz with the Herat license plate finally leaving. She followed it with her eyes until it vanished around a turn, its back window twinkling in the sun.

"I won't forget tomorrow," Mammy was saying behind her. "I promise."

"You said that yesterday."

"You don't know, Laila."

"Know what?" Laila wheeled around to face her mother. "What don't I know?"

Mammy's hand floated up to her chest, tapped there. "In *here*. What's in *here*." Then it fell flaccid. "You just don't know."

18.

A week passed, but there was still no sign of Tariq. Then another week came and went.

To fill the time, Laila fixed the screen door that Babi still hadn't got around to. She took down Babi's books, dusted and alphabetized them. She went to Chicken Street with Hasina, Giti, and Giti's mother, Nila, who was a seamstress and sometime sewing partner of Mammy's. In that week, Laila came to believe that of all the hardships a person had to face none was more punishing than the simple act of waiting.

Another week passed.

Laila found herself caught in a net of terrible thoughts.

He would never come back. His parents had moved away for good; the trip to Ghazni had been a ruse. An adult scheme to spare the two of them an upsetting farewell.

A land mine had gotten to him again. The way it did in 1981, when he was five, the last time his parents took him south to Ghazni. That was shortly after Laila's third birthday. He'd been lucky that time, losing only a leg; lucky that he'd survived at all.

Her head rang and rang with these thoughts.

Then one night Laila saw a tiny flashing light from down the street. A sound, something between a squeak and a gasp, escaped her lips. She quickly fished her own flashlight from under the bed, but it wouldn't work. Laila banged it against her palm, cursed the dead batteries. But it didn't matter. He was back. Laila sat on the edge of her bed, giddy with relief, and watched that beautiful, yellow eye winking on and off.

* * *

On her way to Tariq's house the next day, Laila saw Khadim and a group of his friends across the street. Khadim was squatting, drawing something in the dirt with a stick. When he saw her, he dropped the stick and wiggled his fingers. He said something and there was a round of chuckles. Laila dropped her head and hurried past.

"What did you *do*?" she exclaimed when Tariq opened the door. Only then did she remember that his uncle was a barber.

Tariq ran his hand over his newly shaved scalp and smiled, showing white, slightly uneven teeth.

"Like it?"

"You look like you're enlisting in the army."

"You want to feel?" He lowered his head.

The tiny bristles scratched Laila's palm pleasantly. Tariq wasn't like some of the other boys, whose hair concealed

cone-shaped skulls and unsightly lumps. Tariq's head was perfectly curved and lump-free.

When he looked up, Laila saw that his cheeks and brow had sunburned

"What took you so long?" she said

"My uncle was sick. Come on. Come inside."

He led her down the hallway to the family room. Laila loved everything about this house. The shabby old rug in the family room, the patchwork quilt on the couch, the ordinary clutter of Tariq's life: his mother's bolts of fabric, her sewing needles embedded in spools, the old magazines, the accordion case in the corner waiting to be cracked open.

"Who is it?"

It was his mother calling from the kitchen.

"Laila," he answered

He pulled her a chair. The family room was brightly lit and had double windows that opened into the yard. On the sill were empty jars in which Tariq's mother pickled eggplant and made carrot marmalade.

"You mean our *arros*, our daughter-in-law," his father announced, entering the room. He was a carpenter, a lean, white-haired man in his early sixties. He had gaps between his front teeth, and the squinty eyes of someone who had spent most of his life outdoors. He opened his arms and Laila went into them, greeted by his pleasant and familiar smell of sawdust. They kissed on the cheek three times.

"You keep calling her that and she'll stop coming here," Tariq's mother said, passing by them. She was carrying a tray with a large bowl, a serving spoon, and four smaller bowls on it. She set the tray on the table. "Don't mind the old man." She cupped Laila's face. "It's good to see you, my dear. Come, sit down. I brought back some water-soaked fruit with me."

The table was bulky and made of a light, unfinished wood-Tariq's father had built it, as well as the chairs. It was covered with a moss green vinyl tablecloth with little magenta crescents and stars on it. Most of the living-room wall was taken up with pictures of Tariq at various ages. In some of the very early ones, he had two legs.

"I heard your brother was sick," Laila said to Tariq's father, dipping a spoon into her bowl of soaked raisins, pistachios, and apricots.

He was lighting a cigarette. "Yes, but he's fine now, *shokr e Khoda*,

thanks to God."

"Heart attack. His second," Tariq's mother said, giving her husband an admonishing look.

Tariq's father blew smoke and winked at Laila. It struck her again that Tariq's parents could easily pass for his grandparents. His mother hadn't had him until she'd been well into her forties.

"How is your father, my dear?" Tariq's mother said, looking on over her bowl-As long as Laila had known her, Tariq's mother had worn a wig. It was turning a dull purple with age. It was pulled low on her brow today, and Laila could see the gray hairs of her sideburns. Some days, it rode high on her forehead. But, to Laila, Tariq's mother never looked pitiable in it- What Laila saw was the calm, self-assured face beneath the wig, the clever eyes, the pleasant, unhurried manners.

"He's fine," Laila said. "Still at Silo, of course. He's fine."

"And your mother?"

"Good days. Bad ones too. The same-"

"Yes," Tariq's mother said thoughtfully, lowering her spoon into the bowl "How hard it must be, how terribly hard, for a mother to be away from her sons."

"You're staying for lunch?" Tariq said-

"You have to," said his mother. "I'm making *shorwa*"

"I don't want to be a *mozahem*."

"Imposing?" Tariq's mother said. "We leave for a couple of weeks and you turn polite on us?"

"All right, I'll stay," Laila said, blushing and smiling.

"It's settled, then."

The truth was, Laila loved eating meals at Tariq's house as much as she disliked eating them at hers. At Tariq's, there was no eating alone; they always ate as a family. Laila liked the violet plastic drinking glasses they used and the quarter lemon that always floated in the water pitcher. She liked how they started each meal with a bowl of fresh yogurt, how they squeezed sour oranges on everything, even their yogurt, and how they made small, harmless jokes at each other's expense.

Over meals, conversation always flowed. Though Tariq and his parents were ethnic Pashtuns, they spoke Farsi when Laila was around for her benefit, even though Laila more or less understood their native Pashto, having learned it in school. Babi said that there were tensions between their people-the Tajiks, who were a minority, and Tariq's people, the Pashtuns, who were the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. *Tajiks have always felt slighted*, Babi had said. *Pashiun kings ruled this country for almost two hundred and fifty years, Laila, and Tajiks for all of nine months, back in 1929.*

And you, Laila had asked, *do you feel slighted, Babi?*

Babi had wiped his eyeglasses clean with the hem of his shirt. *To me*,

it's nonsense-and very dangerous nonsense at that-all this talk of I'm Tajik and you 're Pashiun and he's Hazara and she's Uzbek. We 're all Afghans, and that's all that should matter. But when one group rules over the others for so long... There's contempt. Rivalry. There is. There always has been.

Maybe so. But Laila never felt it in Tariq's house, where these matters never even came up. Her time with Tariq's family always felt natural to Laila, effortless, uncomplicated by differences in tribe or language, or by the personal spites and grudges that infected the air at her own home.

"How about a game of cards?" Tariq said.

"Yes, go upstairs," his mother said, swiping disapprovingly at her husband's cloud of smoke. "I'll get *the shorwa* going."

They lay on their stomachs in the middle of Tariq's room and took turns dealing for *panjpar*. Pedaling air with his foot, Tariq told her about his trip. The peach saplings he had helped his uncle plant. A garden snake he had captured.

This room was where Laila and Tariq did their homework, where they built playing-card towers and drew ridiculous portraits of each other. If it was raining, they leaned on the windowsill, drinking warm, fizzy orange Fanta, and watched the swollen rain droplets trickle down the glass.

"All right, here's one," Laila said, shuffling. "What goes around the world but stays in a corner?"

"Wait." Tariq pushed himself up and swung his artificial left leg around. Wincing, he lay on his side, leaning on his elbow. "Hand me that pillow."

He placed it under his leg. "There. That's better."

Laila remembered the first time he'd shown her his stump. She'd been six. With one finger, she had poked the taut.

shiny skin just below his left knee. Her finger had found little hard lumps there, and Tariq had told her they were spurs of bone that sometimes grew after an amputation. 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 prosthesis like it was supposed to, like a finger in a thimble. *And sometimes it gets rubbed Especially when it's hot. Then I get rashes and blisters, but my mother has creams that help. It's not so bad.*

Laila had burst into tears.

What are you crying for? He'd strapped his leg back on. *You asked to see it, you giryanok, you crybaby! If I'd known you were going to bawl, I wouldn't have shown you.*

"A stamp," he said.

"What?"

"The riddle. The answer is a stamp. We should go to the zoo after lunch." "You knew that one. Did you?" "Absolutely not."

"You're a cheat."

"And you're envious." "Of what?"

"My masculine smarts."

"Your *masculine* smarts? Really? Tell me, who always wins at chess?"

"I let you win." He laughed. They both knew that wasn't true.

"And who failed math? Who do you come to for help with your math homework even though you're a grade ahead?"

"I'd be two grades ahead if math didn't bore me."

"I suppose geography bores you too."

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

Laila smiled. "We're going."

"Good."

"I missed you."

There was a pause. Then Tariq turned to her with a half-grinning, half-grimacing look of distaste. "What's the *matter* with you?"

How many times had she, Hasina, and Giti said those same three words to each other, Laila wondered, said it without hesitation, after only two or three days of not seeing each other? *I missed you, Hasina Oh, I missed you too.* In Tariq's grimace, Laila learned that boys differed from girls in this regard. They didn't make a show of friendship. They felt no urge, no need, for this sort of talk. Laila imagined it had been this way for her brothers too. Boys, Laila came to see, treated friendship the way they treated the sun: its existence undisputed; its radiance best enjoyed, not beheld directly.

"I was trying to annoy you," she said.

He gave her a sidelong glance. "It worked."

But she thought his grimace softened. And she thought that maybe the sunburn on his cheeks deepened momentarily.

* * *

Laila didn't mean to tell him. She'd, in fact, decided that telling him would be a very bad idea. Someone would get hurt, because Tariq wouldn't be able to let it pass. But when they were on the street later, heading down to the bus stop, she saw Khadim again, leaning against a wall. He was surrounded by his friends, thumbs hooked in his belt loops. He grinned at her defiantly.

And so she told Tariq. The story spilled out of her mouth before she could stop it.

"He did what?"

She told him again.

He pointed to Khadim. "Him? He's the one? You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

Tariq clenched his teeth and muttered something to himself in Pashto that Laila didn't catch. "You wait here," he said, in Farsi now.

"No, Tariq-

He was already crossing the street.

Khadim was the first to see him. His grin faded, and he pushed himself off the wall. He unhooked his thumbs from the belt loops and made

himself more upright, taking on a self-conscious air of menace. The others followed his gaze.

Laila wished she hadn't said anything. What if they banded together? How many of them were there-ten? eleven? twelve? What if they hurt him?

Then Tariq stopped a few feet from Khadim and his band. There was a moment of consideration, Laila thought, maybe a change of heart, and, when he bent down, she imagined he would pretend his shoelace had come undone and walk back to her. Then his hands went to work, and she understood.

The others understood too when Tariq straightened up, standing on one leg. When he began hopping toward Khadim, then charging him, his unstrapped leg raised high over his shoulder like a sword.

The boys stepped aside in a hurry. They gave him a clear path to Khadim.

Then it was all dust and fists and kicks and yelps.

Khadim never bothered Laila again.

* * *

That night, as most nights, Laila set the dinner table for two only. Mammy said she wasn't hungry. On those nights that she was, she made a point of taking a plate to her room before Babi even came home. She was usually asleep or lying awake in bed by the time Laila and Babi sat down to eat.

Babi came out of the bathroom, his hair-peppered white with flour when he'd come home-washed clean now and combed back.

"What are we having, Laila?"

"Leftover *aush* soup."

"Sounds good," he said, folding the towel with which he'd dried his hair. "So what are we working on tonight? Adding fractions?"

"Actually, converting fractions to mixed numbers."

"Ah. Right."

Every night after dinner, Babi helped Laila with her homework and gave her some of his own. This was only to keep Laila a step or two ahead of her class, not because he disapproved of the work assigned by the school-the propaganda teaching notwithstanding. In fact, Babi thought that the one thing the communists had done right-or at least intended to-ironically, was in the field of education, the vocation from which they had fired him. More specifically, the education of women. The government had sponsored literacy classes for all women. Almost two-thirds of the students at Kabul University were women now, Babi said, women who were studying law, medicine, engineering.

Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they're probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before, Babi said, always lowering his voice, aware of how intolerant Mammy was of even remotely positive talk of the communists. *But it's true,* Babi said, *it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Laila. Of course, women's freedom-* here, he shook his head ruefully-*is also one of the*

reasons people out there took up arms in the first place.

By "out there," he didn't mean Kabul, which had always been relatively liberal and progressive. Here in Kabul, women taught at the university, ran schools, held office in the government- No, Babi meant the tribal areas, especially the Pashtun regions in the south or in the east near the Pakistani border, where women were rarely seen on the streets and only then in burqa and accompanied by men. He meant those regions where men who lived by ancient tribal laws had rebelled against the communists and their decrees to liberate women, to abolish forced marriage, to raise the minimum marriage age to sixteen for girls. There, men saw it as an insult to their centuries-old tradition, Babi said, to be told by the government-and a godless one at that-that their daughters had to leave home, attend school, and work alongside men.

God forbid that should happen! Babi liked to say sarcastically. Then he would sigh, and say, *Laila, my love, the only enemy an Afghan cannot defeat is himself*

Babi took his seat at the table, dipped bread into his bowl of *aush*.

Laila decided that she would tell him about what Tariq had done to Khadim, over the meal, before they started in on fractions. But she never got the chance. Because, right then, there was a knock at the door, and, on the other side of the door, a stranger with news.

19.

I need to speak to your parents, *dokhiarjan*"he said when Laila opened the door. He was a stocky man, with a sharp, weather-roughened face. He wore a potato-colored coat, and a brown wool *pako* on his head

"Can I tell them who's here?"

Then Babi's hand was on Laila's shoulder, and he gently pulled her from the door.

"Why don't you go upstairs, Laila. Go on."

As she moved toward the steps, Laila heard the visitor say to Babi that he had news from Panjshir. Mammy was in the room now too. She had one hand clamped over her mouth, and her eyes were skipping from Babi to the man in the *pakor*

Laila peeked from the top of the stairs. She watched the stranger sit down with her parents. He leaned toward them. Said a few muted words. Then Babi's face was white, and getting whiter, and he was looking at his hands, and Mammy was screaming, screaming, and tearing at her hair.

* * *

The next morning, the day of *thefaiiha*, a flock of neighborhood women descended on the house and took charge of preparations for the *khatm* dinner that would take place after the funeral. Mammy sat on the couch the whole morning, her fingers working a handkerchief, her face bloated. She was tended to by a pair of sniffing women who took turns patting Mammy's hand gingerly, like she was the rarest and most fragile doll in the world. Mammy did not seem aware of their presence.

Laila kneeled before her mother and took her hands. "Mammy."

Mammy's eyes drifted down. She blinked.

"We'll take care of her, Laila jan," one of the women said with an air of self-importance. Laila had been to funerals before where she had seen women like this, women who relished all things that had to do with death, official consolers who let no one trespass on their self-appointed

duties.

"It's under control. You go on now, girl, and do something else. Leave your mother be."

Shooed away, Laila felt useless. She bounced from one room to the next. She puttered around the kitchen for a while. An uncharacteristically subdued Hasina and her mother came. So did Giti and her mother. When Giti saw Laila, she hurried over, threw her bony arms around her, and gave Laila a very long, and surprisingly strong, embrace. When she pulled back, tears had pooled in her eyes. "I am so sorry, Laila," she said. Laila thanked her. The three girls sat outside in the yard until one of the women assigned them the task of washing glasses and stacking plates on the table.

Babi too kept walking in and out of the house aimlessly, looking, it seemed, for something to do.

"Keep him away from me." That was the only time Mammy said anything all morning.

Babi ended up sitting alone on a folding chair in the hallway, looking desolate and small. Then one of the women told him he was in the way there. He apologized and disappeared into his study.

* * *

That afternoon, the men went to a hall in Karteh-Seh that Babi had rented for the *fatiha*. The women came to the house. Laila took her spot

beside Mammy, next to the living-room entrance where it was customary for the family of the deceased to sit. Mourners removed their shoes at the door, nodded at acquaintances as they crossed the room, and sat on folding chairs arranged along the walls. Laila saw Wajma, the elderly midwife who had delivered her. She saw Tariq's mother too, wearing a black scarf over the wig. She gave Laila a nod and a slow, sad, close-lipped smile.

From a cassette player, a man's nasal voice chanted verses from the Koran. In between, the women sighed and shifted and sniffled. There were muted coughs, murmurs, and, periodically, someone let out a theatrical, sorrow-drenched sob.

Rasheed's wife, Mariam, came in. She was wearing a black *hijab*. Strands of her hair strayed from it onto her brow. She took a seat along the wall across from Laila.

Next to Laila, Mammy kept rocking back and forth. Laila drew Mammy's hand into her lap and cradled it with both of hers, but Mammy did not seem to notice.

"Do you want some water, Mammy?" Laila said in her ear. "Are you thirsty?"

But Mammy said nothing. She did nothing but sway back and forth and stare at the rug with a remote, spiritless look.

Now and then, sitting next to Mammy, seeing the drooping, woebegone looks around the room, the magnitude of the disaster that had struck her family would register with Laila. The possibilities denied. The hopes dashed.

But the feeling didn't last. It was hard to feel, *really* feel, Mammy's loss. Hard to summon sorrow, to grieve the deaths of people Laila had never really thought of as alive in the first place. Ahmad and Noor had always been like lore to her. Like characters in a fable. Kings in a history book.

It was Tariq who was real, flesh and blood. Tariq, who taught her cusswords in Pashto, who liked salted clover leaves, who frowned and made a low, moaning sound when he chewed, who had a light pink birthmark just beneath his left collarbone shaped like an upside-down mandolin.

So she sat beside Mammy and dutifully mourned Ahmad and Noor, but, in Laila's heart, her true brother was alive and well.

20.

The ailments that would hound Mammy for the rest of her days began. Chest pains and headaches, joint aches and night sweats, paralyzing pains in her ears, lumps no one else could feel. Babi took her to a doctor, who took blood and urine, shot X-rays of Mammy's body, but found no physical illness.

Mammy lay in bed most days. She wore black. She picked at her hair and gnawed on the mole below her lip. When Mammy was awake, Laila found her staggering through the house. She always ended up in Laila's room, as though she would run into the boys sooner or later if she just kept walking into the room where they had once slept and farted and fought with pillows. But all she ran into was their absence. And Laila. Which, Laila believed, had become one and the same to Mammy.

The only task Mammy never neglected was her five daily *namaz* prayers. She ended each *namaz* with her head hung low, hands held before her face, palms up, muttering a prayer for God to bring victory to the Mujahideen. Laila had to shoulder more and more of the chores. If she didn't tend to the house, she was apt to find clothes, shoes, open rice bags, cans of beans, and dirty dishes strewn about everywhere. Laila washed Mammy's dresses and changed her sheets. She coaxed her out of bed for baths and meals. She was the one who ironed Babi's shirts and folded his pants. Increasingly, she was the cook.

Sometimes, after she was done with her chores, Laila crawled into bed next to Mammy. She wrapped her arms around her, laced her fingers with her mother's, buried her face in her hair. Mammy would stir, murmur something. Inevitably, she would start in on a story about the boys.

One day, as they were lying this way, Mammy said, "Ahmad was going to be a leader. He had the charisma for it—People three times his age listened to him with respect, Laila. It was something to see. And Noon Oh, my Noor. He was always making sketches of buildings and bridges. He was going to be an architect, you know. He was going to transform Kabul with his designs. And now they're both *shaheed*, my boys, both martyrs."

Laila lay there and listened, wishing Mammy would notice that *she*, Laila, hadn't become *shaheed*, that she was alive, here, in bed with her, that she had hopes and a future. But Laila knew that her future was no match for her brothers' past. They had overshadowed her in life. They

would obliterate her in death. Mammy was now the curator of their lives' museum and she, Laila, a mere visitor. A receptacle for their myths. The parchment on which Mammy meant to ink their legends.

"The messenger who came with the news, he said that when they brought the boys back to camp, Ahmad Shah Massoud personally oversaw the burial. He said a prayer for them at the gravesite. That's the kind of brave young men your brothers were, Laila, that Commander Massoud himself, the Lion of Panjshir, God bless him, would oversee their burial."

Mammy rolled onto her back. Laila shifted, rested her head on Mammy's chest.

"Some days," Mammy said in a hoarse voice, "I listen to that clock ticking in the hallway. Then I think of all the ticks, all the minutes, all the hours and days and weeks and months and years waiting for me. All of it without them. And I can't breathe then, like someone's stepping on my heart, Laila. I get so weak. So weak I just want to collapse somewhere."

"I wish there was something I could do," Laila said, meaning it. But it came out sounding broad, perfunctory, like the token consolation of a kind stranger.

"You're a good daughter," Mammy said, after a deep sigh. "And I haven't been much of a mother to you."

"Don't say that."

"Oh, it's true. I know it and I'm sorry for it, my love."

"Mammy?"

"Mm."

Laila sat up, looking down at Mammy. There were gray strands in Mammy's hair now. And it startled Laila how much weight Mammy, who'd always been plump, had lost. Her cheeks had a sallow, drawn look. The blouse she was wearing drooped over her shoulders, and there was a gaping space between her neck and the collar. More than once Laila had seen the wedding band slide off Mammy's finger.

"I've been meaning to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"You wouldn't..." Laila began.

She'd talked about it to Hasina. At Hasina's suggestion, the two of them had emptied the bottle of aspirin in the gutter, hidden the kitchen knives and the sharp kebab skewers beneath the rug under the couch. Hasina had found a rope in the yard. When Babi couldn't find his razors, Laila had to tell him of her fears. He dropped on the edge of the couch, hands between his knees. Laila waited for some kind of reassurance from him. But all she got was a bewildered, hollow-eyed look.

"You wouldn't...Mammy I worry that-"

"I thought about it the night we got the news," Mammy said. "I won't lie to you, I've thought about it since too. But, no. Don't worry, Laila. I want to see my sons' dream come true. I want to see the day the Soviets go home disgraced, the day the Mujahideen come to Kabul in victory. I want

to be there when it happens, when Afghanistan is free, so the boys see it too. They'll see it through my eyes."

Mammy was soon asleep, leaving Laila with dueling emotions: reassured that Mammy meant to live on, stung that *she* was not the reason. *She* would never leave her mark on Mammy's heart the way her brothers had, because Mammy's heart was like a pallid beach where Laila's footprints would forever wash away beneath the waves of sorrow that swelled and crashed, swelled and crashed.

21.

The driver pulled his taxi over to let pass another long convoy of Soviet jeeps and armored vehicles. Tariq leaned across the front seat, over the driver, and yelled, "*Pajalmia! Pajalmta!*"

A jeep honked and Tariq whistled back, beaming and waving cheerfully. "Lovely guns!" he yelled "Fabulous jeeps! Fabulous army! Too bad you're losing to a bunch of peasants firing slingshots!"

The convoy passed. The driver merged back onto the road

"How much farther?" Laila asked

"An hour at the most," the driver said. "Barring any more convoys or checkpoints."

They were taking a day trip, Laila, Babi, and Tariq. Hasina had wanted to come too, had begged her father, but he wouldn't allow it. The trip was Babi's idea. Though he could hardly afford it on his salary, he'd hired a driver for the day. He wouldn't disclose anything to Laila about their destination except to say that, with it, he was contributing to her education.

They had been on the road since five in the morning. Through Laila's window, the landscape shifted from snowcapped peaks to deserts to canyons and sun-scorched outcroppings of rocks. Along the way, they passed mud houses with thatched roofs and fields dotted with bundles of wheat. Pitched out in the dusty fields, here and there, Laila recognized the black tents of Koochi nomads. And, frequently, the carcasses of burned-out Soviet tanks and wrecked helicopters. This, she thought, was Ahmad and Noor's Afghanistan. This, here in the provinces, was where the war was being fought, after all. Not in Kabul. Kabul was largely at peace. Back in Kabul, if not for the occasional bursts of gunfire, if not for the Soviet soldiers smoking on the sidewalks and the Soviet jeeps always bumping through the streets, war might as well have been a rumor.

It was late morning, after they'd passed two more checkpoints, when they entered a valley. Babi had Laila lean across the seat and pointed to a series of ancient-looking walls of sun-dried red in the distance.

"That's called Shahr-e-Zohak. The Red City. It used to be a fortress. It was built some nine hundred years ago to defend the valley from invaders. Genghis Khan's grandson attacked it in the thirteenth century, but he was killed. It was Genghis Khan himself who then destroyed it."

"And that, my young friends, is the story of our country, one invader after another," the driver said, flicking cigarette ash out the window. "Macedonians. Sassanians. Arabs. Mongols. Now the Soviets. But we're like those walls up there. Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing. Isn't that the truth, *badar?*"

"Indeed it is," said Babi.

* * *

Half an hour later, the driver pulled over.

"Come on, you two," Babi said. "Come outside and have a look."

They got out of the taxi. Babi pointed "There they are. Look."

Tariq gasped. Laila did too. And she knew then that she could live to be a hundred and she would never again see a thing as magnificent.

The two Buddhas were enormous, soaring much higher than she had imagined from all the photos she'd seen of them. Chiseled into a sun-bleached rock cliff, they peered down at them, as they had nearly two thousand years before, Laila imagined, at caravans crossing the valley on the Silk Road. On either side of them, along the overhanging niche, the cliff was pocked with myriad caves.

"I feel so small," Tariq said.

"You want to climb up?" Babi said.

"Up the statues?" Laila asked. "We can do that?"

Babi smiled and held out his hand. "Come on."

* * *

The climb was hard for Tariq, who had to hold on to both Laila and Babi as they inched up a winding, narrow, dimly lit staircase. They saw shadowy caves along the way, and tunnels honeycombing the cliff every which way.

"Careful where you step," Babi said His voice made a loud echo. "The ground is treacherous."

In some parts, the staircase was open to the Buddha's cavity.

"Don't look down, children. Keep looking straight ahead."

As they climbed, Babi told them that Bamiyan had once been a thriving Buddhist center until it had fallen under Islamic Arab rule in the ninth century. The sandstone cliffs were home to Buddhist monks who carved caves in them to use as living quarters and as sanctuary for weary traveling pilgrims. The monks, Babi said, painted beautiful frescoes along the walls and roofs of their caves.

"At one point," he said, "there were five thousand monks living as hermits in these caves."

Tariq was badly out of breath when they reached the top. Babi was panting too. But his eyes shone with excitement.

"We're standing atop its head," he said, wiping his brow with a handkerchief "There's a niche over here where we can look out."

They inched over to the craggy overhang and, standing side by side, with Babi in the middle, gazed down on the valley.

"Look at this!" said Laila.

Babi smiled.

The Bamiyan Valley below was carpeted by lush farming fields. Babi said they were green winter wheat and alfalfa, potatoes too. The fields were bordered by poplars and crisscrossed by streams and irrigation

ditches, on the banks of which tiny female figures squatted and washed clothes. Babi pointed to rice paddies and barley fields draping the slopes. It was autumn, and Laila could make out people in bright tunics on the roofs of mud brick dwellings laying out the harvest to dry. The main road going through the town was poplar-lined too. There were small shops and teahouses and street-side barbers on either side of it. Beyond the village, beyond the river and the streams, Laila saw foothills, bare and dusty brown, and, beyond those, as beyond everything else in Afghanistan, the snowcapped Hindu Kush.

The sky above all of this was an immaculate, spotless blue.

"It's so quiet," Laila breathed. She could see tiny sheep and horses but couldn't hear their bleating and whinnying.

"It's what I always remember about being up here," Babi said. "The silence. The peace of it. I wanted you to experience it. But I also wanted you to see your country's heritage, children, to learn of its rich past. You see, some things I can teach you. Some you learn from books. But there are things that, well, you just have to *see* and *feel*."

"Look," said Tariq.

They watched a hawk, gliding in circles above the village.

"Did you ever bring Mammy up here?" Laila asked

"Oh, many times. Before the boys were born. After too. Your mother, she used to be adventurous then, and...so *alive*. She was just about the liveliest, happiest person I'd ever met." He smiled at the memory. "She had this laugh. I swear it's why I married her, Laila, for that laugh. It

bulldozed you. You stood no chance against it."

A wave of affection overcame Laila. From then on, she would always remember Babi this way: reminiscing about Mammy, with his elbows on the rock, hands cupping his chin, his hair ruffled by the wind, eyes crinkled against the sun.

"I'm going to look at some of those caves," Tariq said.

"Be careful," said Babi.

"I will, *Kakajan*," Tariq's voice echoed back.

Laila watched a trio of men far below, talking near a cow tethered to a fence. Around them, the trees had started to turn, ochre and orange, scarlet red.

"I miss the boys too, you know," Babi said. His eyes had welled up a tad. His chin was trembling. "I may not... With your mother, both her joy and sadness are extreme. She can't hide either. She never could. Me, I suppose I'm different. I tend to...But it broke me too, the boys dying. I miss them too. Not a day passes that I...It's very hard, Laila. So very hard." He squeezed the inner corners of his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. When he tried to talk, his voice broke. He pulled his lips over his teeth and waited. He took a long, deep breath, looked at her. "But I'm glad I have you. Every day, I thank God for you. Every single day. Sometimes, when your mother's having one of her really dark days, I feel like you're all I have, Laila."

Laila drew closer to him and rested her cheek up against his chest. He seemed slightly startled-unlike Mammy, he rarely expressed his affection

physically. He planted a brisk kiss on the top of her head and hugged her back awkwardly. They stood this way for a while, looking down on the Bamiyan Valley.

"As much as I love this land, some days I think about leaving it," Babi said.

"Whereto?"

"Anyplace where it's easy to forget. Pakistan first, I suppose. For a year, maybe two. Wait for our paperwork to get processed."

"And then?"

"And then, well, it *is* a big world. Maybe America. Somewhere near the sea. Like California."

Babi said the Americans were a generous people. They would help them with money and food for a while, until they could get on their feet.

"I would find work, and, in a few years, when we had enough saved up, we'd open a little Afghan restaurant-Nothing fancy, mind you, just a modest little place, a few tables, some rugs. Maybe hang some pictures of Kabul. We'd give the Americans a taste of Afghan food. And with your mother's cooking, they'd line up and down the street.

"And you, you would continue going to school, of course. You know how I feel about that. That would be our absolute top priority, to get you a good education, high school then college. But in your free time, *if you* wanted to, you could help out, take orders, fill water pitchers, that sort of

thing."

Babi said they would hold birthday parties at the restaurant, engagement ceremonies, New Year's get-togethers. It would turn into a gathering place for other Afghans who, like them, had fled the war. And, late at night, after everyone had left and the place was cleaned up, they would sit for tea amid the empty tables, the three of them, tired but thankful for their good fortune.

When Babi was done speaking, he grew quiet. They both did. They knew that Mammy wasn't going anywhere. Leaving Afghanistan had been unthinkable to her while Ahmad and Noor were still alive. Now that they were *shaheed*, packing up and running was an even worse affront, a betrayal, a disavowal of the sacrifice her sons had made.

How can you think of it? Laila could hear her saying. Does their dying mean nothing to you, cousin? The only solace I find is in knowing that I walk the same ground that soaked up their blood. No. Never.

And Babi would never leave without her, Laila knew, even though Mammy was no more a wife to him now than she was a mother to Laila. For Mammy, he would brush aside this daydream of his the way he flicked specks of flour from his coat when he got home from work. And so they would stay. They would stay until the war ended. And they would stay for whatever came after war.

Laila remembered Mammy telling Babi once that she had married a man who had no convictions. Mammy didn't understand. She didn't understand that if she looked into a mirror, she would find the one unflinching conviction of his life looking right back at her.

* * *

Later, after they'd eaten a lunch of boiled eggs and potatoes with bread, Tariq napped beneath a tree on the banks of a gurgling stream. He slept with his coat neatly folded into a pillow, his hands crossed on his chest. The driver went to the village to buy almonds. Babi sat at the foot of a thick-trunked acacia tree reading a paperback. Laila knew the book; he'd read it to her once. It told the story of an old fisherman named Santiago who catches an enormous fish. But by the time he sails his boat to safety, there is nothing left of his prize fish; the sharks have torn it to pieces.

Laila sat on the edge of the stream, dipping her feet into the cool water. Overhead, mosquitoes hummed and cottonwood seeds danced. A dragonfly whirred nearby. Laila watched its wings catch glints of sunlight as it buzzed from one blade of grass to another. They flashed purple, then green, orange. Across the stream, a group of local Hazara boys were picking patties of dried cow dung from the ground and stowing them into burlap sacks tethered to their backs. Somewhere, a donkey brayed. A generator sputtered to life.

Laila thought again about Babi's little dream. *Somewhere near the sea*

There was something she hadn't told Babi up there atop the Buddha: that, in one important way, she was glad they couldn't go. She would miss Giti and her pinch-faced earnestness, yes, and Hasina too, with her wicked laugh and reckless clowning around. But, mostly, Laila remembered all too well the inescapable drudgery of those four weeks without Tariq when he had gone to Ghazni. She remembered all too well

how time had dragged without him, how she had shuffled about feeling waylaid, out of balance. How could she ever cope with his permanent absence?

Maybe it was senseless to want to be near a person so badly here in a country where bullets had shredded her own brothers to pieces. But all Laila had to do was picture Tariq going at Khadim with his leg and then nothing in the world seemed more sensible to her.

* * *

Six months later, in April 1988, Babi came home with big news.

"They signed a treaty!" he said. "In Geneva. It's official! They're leaving. Within nine months, there won't be any more Soviets in Afghanistan!"

Mammy was sitting up in bed. She shrugged.

"But the communist regime is staying," she said. "Najibullah is the Soviets' puppet president. He's not going anywhere. No, the war will go on. This is not the end"

"Najibullah won't last," said Babi.

"They're leaving, Mammy! They're actually leaving!"

"You two celebrate if you want to. But I won't rest until the Mujahideen hold a victory parade right here in Kabul"

And, with that, she lay down again and pulled up the blanket.

22.

January 1989

One cold, overcast day in January 1989, three months before Laila turned eleven, she, her parents, and Hasina went to watch one of the last Soviet convoys exit the city. Spectators had gathered on both sides of the thoroughfare outside the Military Club near Wazir Akbar Khan. They stood in muddy snow and watched the line of tanks, armored trucks, and jeeps as light snow flew across the glare of the passing headlights. There were heckles and jeers. Afghan soldiers kept people off the street. Every now and then, they had to fire a warning shot.

Mammy hoisted a photo of Ahmad and Noor high over her head. It was the one of them sitting back-to-back under the pear tree. There were others like her, women with pictures of their *shaheed* husbands, sons, brothers held high.

Someone tapped Laila and Hasina on the shoulder. It was Tariq.

"Where did you get that thing?" Hasina exclaimed.

"I thought I'd come dressed for the occasion." Tariq said. He was wearing an enormous Russian fur hat, complete with earflaps, which he had pulled down.

"How do I look?"

"Ridiculous," Laila laughed.

"That's the idea."

"Your parents came here with you dressed like this?"

"They're home, actually," he said.

The previous fall, Tariq's uncle in Ghazni had died of a heart attack, and, a few weeks later, Tariq's father had suffered a heart attack of his own, leaving him frail and tired, prone to anxiety and bouts of depression that overtook him for weeks at a time. Laila was glad to see Tariq like this, like his old self again. For weeks after his father's illness, Laila had watched him moping around, heavy-faced and sullen.

The three of them stole away while Mammy and Babi stood watching the Soviets. From a street vendor, Tariq bought them each a plate of boiled beans topped with thick cilantro chutney. They ate beneath the awning of a closed rug shop, then Hasina went to find her family.

On the bus ride home, Tariq and Laila sat behind her parents. Mammy was by the window, staring out, clutching the picture against her chest. Beside her, Babi was impassively listening to a man who was arguing that the Soviets might be leaving but that they would send weapons to Najibullah in Kabul.

"He's their puppet. They'll keep the war going through him, you can bet on that."

Someone in the next aisle voiced his agreement.

Mammy was muttering to herself, long-winded prayers that rolled on and on until she had no breath left and had to eke out the last few words in a tiny, high-pitched squeak.

* * *

They "went to Cinema Park later that day, Laila and Tariq, and had to settle for a Soviet film that was dubbed, to unintentionally comic effect, in Farsi. There was a merchant ship, and a first mate in love with the captain's daughter. Her name was Alyona. Then came a fierce storm, lightning, rain, the heaving sea tossing the ship. One of the frantic sailors yelled something. An absurdly calm Afghan voice translated: "My dear sir, would you kindly pass the rope?"

At this, Tariq burst out cackling. And, soon, they both were in the grips of a hopeless attack of laughter. Just when one became fatigued, the other would snort, and off they would go on another round. A man sitting two rows up turned around and shushed them.

There was a wedding scene near the end. The captain had relented and let Alyona marry the first mate. The newlyweds were smiling at each other. Everyone was drinking vodka.

"I'm never getting married," Tariq whispered.

"Me neither," said Laila, but not before a moment of nervous hesitation. She worried that her voice had betrayed her disappointment at what he had said. Her heart galloping, she added, more forcefully this time, "Never."

"Weddings are stupid." "All the fuss."

"All the money spent." "For what?"

"For clothes you'll never wear again."

"Ha!"

"If I ever *do* get married," Tariq said, "they'll have to make room for three on the wedding stage. Me, the bride, and the guy holding the gun to my head."

The man in the front row gave them another admonishing look.

On the screen, Alyona and her new husband locked lips.

Watching the kiss, Laila felt strangely conspicuous all at once. She became intensely aware of her heart thumping, of the blood thudding in her ears, of the shape of Tariq beside her, tightening up, becoming still. The kiss dragged on. It seemed of utmost urgency to Laila, suddenly, that she not stir or make a noise. She sensed that Tariq was observing her—one eye on the kiss, the other on her—as she was observing *him*. Was he listening to the air whooshing in and out of her nose, she wondered, waiting for a subtle faltering, a revealing irregularity, that would betray her thoughts?

And what would it be like to kiss him, to feel the fuzzy hair above his lip tickling her own lips?

Then Tariq shifted uncomfortably in his seat. In a strained voice, he said, "Did you know that if you fling snot in Siberia, it's a green icicle before it hits the ground?"

They both laughed, but briefly, nervously, this time. And when the film ended and they stepped outside, Laila was relieved to see that the sky had dimmed, that she wouldn't have to meet Tariq's eyes in the bright daylight.

23.

April 1992

Three years passed.

In that time, Tariq's father had a series of strokes. They left him with a clumsy left hand and a slight slur to his speech. When he was agitated, which happened frequently, the slurring got worse.

Tariq outgrew his leg again and was issued a new leg by the Red Cross, though he had to wait six months for it.

As Hasina had feared, her family took her to Lahore, where she was made to marry the cousin who owned the auto shop. The morning that they took her, Laila and Giti went to Hasina's house to say good-bye. Hasina told them that the cousin, her husband-to-be, had already started the process to move them to Germany, where his brothers lived. Within the year, she thought, they would be in Frankfurt. They cried then in a three-way embrace. Giti was inconsolable. The last time Laila ever saw Hasina, she was being helped by her father into the crowded backseat of a taxi.

The Soviet Union crumbled with astonishing swiftness. Every few weeks, it seemed to Laila, Babi was coming home with news of the latest republic to declare independence. Lithuania. Estonia. Ukraine. The Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin. The Republic of Russia was born.

In Kabul, Najibullah changed tactics and tried to portray himself as a devout Muslim. "Too little and far too late," said Babi. "You can't be the chief of KHAD one day and the next day pray in a mosque with people whose relatives you tortured and killed" Feeling the noose tightening around Kabul, Najibullah tried to reach a settlement with the Mujahideen but the Mujahideen balked.

From her bed, Mammy said, "Good for them." She kept her vigils for

the Mujahideen and waited for her parade. Waited for her sons' enemies to fall.

* * *

And, eventually, they did. In April 1992, the year Laila turned fourteen.

Najibullah surrendered at last and was given sanctuary in the UN compound near Darulaman Palace, south of the city.

The jihad was over. The various communist regimes that had held power since the night Laila was born were all defeated. Mammy's heroes, Ahmad's and Noor's brothers-in-war, had won. And now, after more than a decade of sacrificing everything, of leaving behind their families to live in mountains and fight for Afghanistan's sovereignty, the Mujahideen were coming to Kabul, in flesh, blood, and battle-weary bone.

Mammy knew all of their names.

There was Dostum, the flamboyant Uzbek commander, leader of the Junbish-i-Milli faction, who had a reputation for shifting allegiances. The intense, surly Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Hezb-e-Islami faction, a Pashtun who had studied engineering and once killed a Maoist student. Rabbani, Tajik leader of the Jamiat-e-Islami faction, who had taught Islam at Kabul University in the days of the monarchy. Sayyaf, a Pashtun from Paghman with Arab connections, a stout Muslim and leader of the Ittehad-i-Islami faction. Abdul Ali Mazari, leader of the Hizb-e-Wahdat faction, known as Baba Mazari among his fellow Hazaras, with strong Shi'a ties to Iran.

And, of course, there was Mammy's hero, Rabbani's ally, the brooding, charismatic Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Lion of Panjshir. Mammy had nailed up a poster of him in her room. Massoud's handsome,

thoughtful face, eyebrow cocked and trademark *pakol* tilted, would become ubiquitous in Kabul. His soulful black eyes would gaze back from billboards, walls, storefront windows, from little flags mounted on the antennas of taxicabs.

For Mammy, this was the day she had longed for. This brought to fruition all those years of waiting.

At last, she could end her vigils, and her sons could rest in peace.

* * *

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 *shaheed*, she didn't wear black. She put on a cobalt 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? *Wboy*. 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 indomitable in her fits of euphoria as in her attacks of rage. With unsettling energy, Mammy set about cooking: *aus* soup with kidney

beans and dried dill, *kofia*, steaming hot *maniu* 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 anymore, though, is he? Sixteen. Almost a man. Don't you think?"

"What are you getting at, Mammy?"

"Nothing," Mammy said, smiling innocently. "Nothing. It's just that you...Ah, nothing. I'd better not say anyway."

"I see you want to," Laila said, irritated by this circuitous, playful accusation.

"Well." Mammy folded her hands on the rim of the pot. Laila 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 notice you're wearing a bra, Laila."

Laila was caught off guard.

"And you could have told me, by the way, about the bra. I didn't know. I'm disappointed you didn't tell me." Sensing her advantage, Mammy pressed on.

"Anyway, this isn't about me or the bra. It's about you and Tariq. He's a boy, you see, and, as such, what does he care about reputation? But you? The reputation of a girl, especially one as pretty as you, is a delicate thing, Laila. Like a mynah bird in your hands. Slacken your grip and away it flies."

"And what about all your wall climbing, the sneaking around with Babi in the orchards?" Laila said, pleased with her quick recovery.

"We were cousins. And we married. Has this boy asked for your hand?"

"He's a friend. A *rafiq*. It's not like that between us," Laila said, sounding defensive, and not very convincing. "He's like a brother to me,"

she added, misguidedly. And she knew, even before a cloud passed over Mammy's face and her features darkened, that she'd made a mistake.

"*That* he is not," Mammy said flatly. "You will not liken that one-legged carpenter's boy to your brothers. There is *no one* like your brothers."

"I didn't say he...That's not how I meant it."

Mammy sighed through the nose and clenched her teeth.

"Anyway," she resumed, but without the coy lightheadedness of a few moments ago, "what I'm trying to say is that if you're not careful, people will talk."

Laila opened her mouth to say something. It wasn't that Mammy didn't have a point. Laila knew that the days of innocent, unhindered frolicking in the streets with Tariq had passed. For some time now, Laila had begun to sense a new strangeness when the two of them were out in public. An awareness of being looked at, scrutinized, whispered about, that Laila had never felt before. And *wouldn't* have felt even now but for one fundamental fact: She had fallen for Tariq. Hopelessly and desperately. When he was near, she couldn't help but be consumed with the most scandalous thoughts, of his lean, bare body entangled with hers. Lying in bed at night, she pictured him kissing her belly, wondered at the softness of his lips, at the feel of his hands on her neck, her chest, her back, and lower still. When she thought of him this way, she was overtaken with guilt, but also with a peculiar, warm sensation that spread upward from her belly until it felt as if her face were glowing pink.

No. Mammy had a point. More than she knew, in fact. Laila suspected

that some, if not most, of the neighbors were already gossiping about her and Tariq. Laila had noticed the sly grins, was aware of the whispers in the neighborhood that the two of them were a couple. The other day, for instance, she and Tariq were walking up the street together when they'd passed Rasheed, the shoemaker, with his burqa-clad wife, Mariam, in tow. As he'd passed by them, Rasheed had playfully said, "If it isn't Laili and Majnoon," referring to the star-crossed lovers of Nezami's popular twelfth-century romantic poem—a Farsi version of *Romeo and Juliet*, Babi said, though he added that Nezami had written his tale of ill-fated lovers four centuries before Shakespeare.

Mammy had a point.

What rankled Laila was that Mammy hadn't earned the right to make it. It would have been one thing if Babi had raised this issue. But Mammy? All those years of aloofness, of cooping herself up and not caring where Laila went and whom she saw and what she thought...It was unfair. Laila felt like she was no better than these pots and pans, something that could go neglected, then laid claim to, at will, whenever the mood struck.

But this was a big day, an important day, for all of them. It would be petty to spoil it over this. In the spirit of things, Laila let it pass.

"I get your point," she said.

"Good!" Mammy said. "That's resolved, then. Now, where is Hakim? Where, oh where, is that sweet little husband of mine?"

* * *

It was a dazzling, cloudless day, perfect for a party. The men sat on rickety folding chairs in the yard. They drank tea and smoked and talked

in loud bantering voices about the Mujahideen's plan. From Babi, Laila had learned the outline of it: Afghanistan was now called the Islamic State of Afghanistan. An Islamic Jihad Council, formed in Peshawar by several of the Mujahideen factions, would oversee things for two months, led by Sibghatullah Mojadidi. This would be followed then by a leadership council led by Rabbani, who would take over for four months. During those six months, a *loyajirga* would be held, a grand council of leaders and elders, who would form an interim government to hold power for two years, leading up to democratic elections.

One of the men was fanning skewers of lamb sizzling over a makeshift grill. Babi and Tariq's father were playing a game of chess in the shade of the old pear tree. Their faces were scrunched up in concentration. Tariq was sitting at the board too, in turns watching the match, then listening in on the political chat at the adjacent table.

The women gathered in the living room, the hallway, and the kitchen. They chatted as they hoisted their babies and expertly dodged, with minute shifts of their hips, the children tearing after each other around the house. An Ustad Sarahang *ghazal* blared from a cassette player.

Laila was in the kitchen, making carafes of *dogh* with Giti. Giti was no longer as shy, or as serious, as before. For several months now, the perpetual severe scowl had cleared from her brow. She laughed openly these days, more frequently, and-it struck Laila-a bit flirtatiously. She had done away with the drab ponytails, let her hair grow, and streaked it with red highlights. Laila learned eventually that the impetus for this transformation was an eighteen-year-old boy whose attention Giti had caught. His name was Sabir, and he was a goalkeeper on Giti's older brother's soccer team.

"Oh, he has the most handsome smile, and this thick, thick black hair!" Giti had told Laila. No one knew about their attraction, of course. Giti had secretly met him twice for tea, fifteen minutes each time, at a small teahouse on the other side of town, in Taimani.

"He's going to ask for my hand, Laila! Maybe as early as this summer. Can you believe it? I swear I can't stop thinking about him."

"What about school?" Laila had asked. Giti had tilted her head and given her a *We both know better* look.

By the time we're twenty, Hasina used to say, Giti and I, we'll have pushed out four, five kids each. Bui you, Laila, you 'll make m two dummies proud. You 're going to be somebody. I know one day I'll pick up a newspaper and find your picture on the frontpage.

Giti was beside Laila now, chopping cucumbers, with a dreamy, far-off look on her face.

Mammy was nearby, in her brilliant summer dress, peeling boiled eggs with Wajma, the midwife, and Tariq's mother.

"I'm going to present Commander Massoud with a picture of Ahmad and Noor," Mammy was saying to Wajma as Wajma nodded and tried to look interested and sincere.

"He personally oversaw the burial. He said a prayer at their grave. It'll be a token of thanks for his decency." Mammy cracked another boiled

egg. "I hear he's a reflective, honorable man. I think he would appreciate it."

All around them, women bolted in and out of the kitchen, carried out bowls of *qurma*, platters of *masiawa*, loaves of bread, and arranged it all on *thesofrah* spread on the living-room floor.

Every once in a while, Tariq sauntered in. He picked at this, nibbled on that.

"No men allowed," said Giti.

"Out, out, out," cried Wajma.

Tariq smiled at the women's good-humored shooing. He seemed to take pleasure in not being welcome here, in infecting this female atmosphere with his half-grinning, masculine irreverence.

Laila did her best not to look at him, not to give these women any more gossip fodder than they already had. So she kept her eyes down and said nothing to him, but she remembered a dream she'd had a few nights before, of his face and hers, together in a mirror, beneath a soft, green veil. And grains of rice, dropping from his hair, bouncing off the glass with a *link*.

Tariq reached to sample a morsel of veal cooked with potatoes.

"*Ho bacha!*" Giti slapped the back of his hand. Tariq stole it anyway and laughed.

He stood almost a foot taller than Laila now. He shaved. His face was leaner, more angular. His shoulders had broadened. Tariq liked to wear pleated trousers, black shiny loafers, and short-sleeve shirts that showed

off his newly muscular arms-compliments of an old, rusty set of barbells that he lifted daily in his yard. His face had lately adopted an expression of playful contentiousness. He had taken to a self-conscious cocking of his head when he spoke, slightly to the side, and to arching one eyebrow when he laughed. He let his hair grow and had fallen into the habit of tossing the floppy locks often and unnecessarily. The corrupt half grin was a new thing too.

The last time Tariq was shooed out of the kitchen, his mother caught Laila stealing a glance at him. Laila's heart jumped, and her eyes fluttered guiltily. She quickly occupied herself with tossing the chopped cucumber into the pitcher of salted, watered-down yogurt. But she could sense Tariq's mother watching, her knowing, approving half smile.

The men filled their plates and glasses and took their meals to the yard. Once they had taken their share, the women and children settled on the floor around the *sofrah* and ate.

It was after *fat sofrah* was cleared and the plates were stacked in the kitchen, when the frenzy of tea making and remembering who took green and who black started, that Tariq motioned with his head and slipped out the door.

Laila waited five minutes, then followed.

She found him three houses down the street, leaning against the wall at the entrance of a narrow-mouthed alley between two adjacent houses. He was humming an old Pashto song, by Ustad Awal Mir:

Da ze ma ziba waian, da ze ma dada waian. This is our beautiful land, this is our beloved land.

And he was smoking, another new habit, which he'd picked up from the guys Laila spotted him hanging around with these days. Laila couldn't stand them, these new friends of Tariq's. They all dressed the same way, pleated trousers, and tight shirts that accentuated their arms and chest. They all wore too much cologne, and they all smoked. They strutted around the neighborhood in groups, joking, laughing loudly, sometimes even calling after girls, with identical stupid, self-satisfied grins on their faces. One of Tariq's friends, on the basis of the most passing of resemblances to Sylvester Stallone, insisted he be called Rambo.

"Your mother would kill you if she knew about your smoking," Laila said, looking one way, then the other, before slipping into the alley.

"But she doesn't," he said. He moved aside to make room.

"That could change."

"Who is going to tell? You?"

Laila tapped her foot. "Tell your secret to the wind, but don't blame it for telling the trees."

Tariq smiled, the one eyebrow arched. "Who said that?"

"Khalil Gibran."

"You're a show-off."

"Give me a cigarette."

He shook his head no and crossed his arms. This was a new entry in his

repertoire of poses: back to the wall, arms crossed, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, his good leg casually 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 assure you."

"Not sexy?"

"You look *khila*, like a half-wit."

"That hurts," he said

"What girls anyway?"

"You're jealous."

"I'm indifferently curious."

"You can't be both." He took another drag and squinted through the smoke. "I'll bet they're talking about us now."

In Laila's head, Mammy's voice rang out. *Like a mynah bird in your hands. Slacken your grip and away it flies.* Guilt bore its teeth into her. Then Laila shut off Mammy's voice. Instead, she savored the way Tariq had said *us*. How thrilling, how conspiratorial, it sounded coming from him. And how reassuring to hear him say it like that-casually, naturally. *Us*. It acknowledged their connection, crystallized it.

"And what are they saying?"

"That we're canoeing down the River of Sin," he said. "Eating a slice of Impiety Cake."

"Riding the Rickshaw of Wickedness?" Laila chimed in.

"Making Sacrilege *Qurma*."

They both laughed. Then Tariq remarked that her hair was getting longer. "It's nice," he said Laila hoped she wasn't blushing- "You changed the subject."

"From what?"

"The empty-headed girls who think you're sexy."

"You know."

"Know what?"

"That I only have eyes for you."

Laila swooned inside. She tried to read his face but was met by a look that was indecipherable: the cheerful, cretinous grin at odds with the narrow, half-desperate look in his eyes. A clever look, calculated to fall

precisely at the midpoint between mockery and sincerity.

Tariq crushed his cigarette with the heel of his good foot. "So what do you think about all this?"

"The party?"

"Who's the half-wit now? I meant the Mujahideen, Laila. Their coming to Kabul."

Oh.

She started to tell him something Babi had said, about the troublesome marriage of guns and ego, when she heard a commotion coming from the house. Loud voices. Screaming.

Laila took off running. Tariq hobbled behind her.

There was a melee in the yard. In the middle of it were two snarling men, rolling on the ground, a knife between them. Laila recognized one of them as a man from the table who had been discussing politics earlier. The other was the man who had been fanning the kebab skewers. Several men were trying to pull them apart. Babi wasn't among them. He stood by the wall, at a safe distance from the fight, with Tariq's father, who was crying.

From the excited voices around her, Laila caught snippets that she put together: The fellow at the politics table, a Pashtun, had called Ahmad Shah Massoud a traitor for "making a deal" with the Soviets in the 1980s. The kebab man, a Tajik, had taken offense and demanded a retraction. The Pashtun had refused. The Tajik had said that if not for Massoud, the other man's sister would still be "giving it" to Soviet soldiers. They had come to blows. One of them had then brandished a knife; there was

disagreement as to who.

With horror, Laila saw that Tariq had thrown himself into the scuffle. She also saw that some of the peacemakers were now throwing punches of their own. She thought she spotted a second knife.

Later that evening, Laila thought of how the melee had toppled over, with men falling on top of one another, amid yelps and cries and shouts and flying punches, and, in the middle of it, a grimacing Tariq, his hair disheveled, his leg come undone, trying to crawl out.

* * *

It was dizzying how quickly everything unraveled.

The leadership council was formed prematurely. It elected Rabbani president. The other factions cried nepotism. Massoud called for peace and patience.

Hekmatyar, who had been excluded, was incensed. The Hazaras, with their long history of being oppressed and neglected, seethed.

Insults were hurled. Fingers pointed. Accusations flew. Meetings were angrily called off and doors slammed. The city held its breath. In the mountains, loaded magazines snapped into Kalashnikovs.

The Mujahideen, armed to the teeth but now lacking a common enemy, had found the enemy in each other.

Kabul's day of reckoning had come at last.

And when the rockets began to rain down on Kabul, people ran for cover. Mammy did too, literally. She changed into black again, went to her room, shut the curtains, and pulled the blanket over her head.

24.

"It's the whistling," Laila said to Tariq, "the damn whistling, I hate more than anything" Tariq nodded knowingly.

It wasn't so much the whistling itself, Laila thought later, but the seconds between the start of it and impact. The brief and interminable time of feeling suspended. The not knowing. The waiting. Like a defendant about to hear the verdict.

Often it happened at dinner, when she and Babi were at the table. When it started, their heads snapped up. They listened to the whistling, forks in midair, unchewed food in their mouths. Laila saw the reflection of their half-lit faces in the pitch-black window, their shadows unmoving on the wall. The whistling. Then the blast, blissfully elsewhere, followed by an expulsion of breath and the knowledge that they had been spared for now while somewhere else, amid cries and choking clouds of smoke, there was a scrambling, a barehanded frenzy of digging, of pulling from the debris, what remained of a sister, a brother, a grandchild.

But the flip side of being spared was the agony of wondering who hadn't. After every rocket blast, Laila raced to the street, stammering a prayer, certain that, this time, surely this time, it was Tariq they would find buried beneath the rubble and smoke.

At night, Laila lay in bed and watched the sudden white flashes reflected in her window. She listened to the rattling of automatic gunfire and counted the rockets whining overhead as the house shook and flakes of plaster rained down on her from the ceiling. Some nights, when the light of rocket fire was so bright a person could read a book by it, sleep never came. And, if it did, Laila's dreams were suffused with fire and detached limbs and the moaning of the wounded.

Morning brought no relief. The muezzin's call for *namaz* rang out, and the Mujahideen set down their guns, faced west, and prayed. Then the rugs were folded, the guns loaded, and the mountains fired on Kabul, and Kabul fired back at the mountains, as Laila and the rest of the city watched as helpless as old Santiago watching the sharks take bites out of his prize fish.

* * *

Everywhere Laila "went, she saw Massoud's men. She saw them roam the streets and every few hundred yards stop cars for questioning. They sat and smoked atop tanks, dressed in their fatigues and ubiquitous *pakols*. They peeked at passersby from behind stacked sandbags at intersections.

Not that Laila went out much anymore. And, when she did, she was always accompanied by Tariq, who seemed to relish this chivalric duty.

"I bought a gun," he said one day. They were sitting outside, on the ground beneath the pear tree in Laila's yard. He showed her. He said it was a semiautomatic, a Beretta. To Laila, it merely looked black and deadly.

"I don't like it," she said. "Guns scare me."

Tariq turned the magazine over in his hand

"They found three bodies in a house in Karteh-Seh last week," he said. "Did you hear? Sisters. All three raped Their throats slashed. Someone had bitten the rings off their fingers. You could tell, they had teeth marks-"

"I don't want to hear this."

"I don't mean to upset you," Tariq said "But I just...I feel better carrying this."

He was her lifeline to the streets now. He heard the word of mouth and passed it on to her. Tariq was the one who told her, for instance, that militiamen stationed in the mountains sharpened their marksmanship-and settled wagers over said marksmanship-by shooting civilians down below, men, women, children, chosen at random. He told her that they fired rockets at cars but, for some reason, left taxis alone-which explained to Laila the recent rash of people spraying their cars yellow.

Tariq explained to her the treacherous, shifting boundaries within Kabul. Laila learned from him, for instance, that this road, up to the second acacia tree on the left, belonged to one warlord; that the next four blocks, ending with the bakery shop next to the demolished pharmacy, was another warlord's sector; and that if she crossed that street and walked half a mile west, she would find herself in the territory

of yet another warlord and, therefore, fair game for sniper fire. And this was what Mammy's heroes were called now. Warlords. Laila heard them called *iofangdar* too. Riflemen. Others still called them Mujahideen, but, when they did, they made a face-a sneering, distasteful face-the word reeking of deep aversion and deep scorn. Like an insult.

Tariq snapped the magazine back into his handgun. "Do you have it in you?" Laila said. "To what?"

"To use this thing. To kill with it."

Tariq tucked the gun into the waist of his denims. Then he said a thing both lovely and terrible. "For you," he said. "I'd kill with it for you, Laila."

He slid closer to her and their hands brushed, once, then again. When Tariq's fingers tentatively began to slip into hers, Laila let them. And when suddenly he leaned over and pressed his lips to hers, she let him again.

At that moment, all of Mammy's talk of reputations and mynah birds sounded immaterial to Laila. Absurd, even. In the midst of all this killing and looting, all this ugliness, it was a harmless thing to sit here beneath a tree and kiss Tariq. A small thing. An easily forgivable indulgence. So she let him kiss her, and when he pulled back she leaned in and kissed *him*, heart pounding in her throat, her face tingling, a fire burning in the pit of her belly.

* * *

In June of that year, 1992, there was heavy fighting in West Kabul between the Pashtun forces of the warlord Sayyaf and the Hazaras of the Wahdat faction. The shelling knocked down power lines, pulverized entire blocks of shops and homes. Laila heard that Pashtun militiamen were attacking Hazara households, breaking in and shooting entire families, execution style, and that Hazaras were retaliating by abducting Pashtun civilians, raping Pashtun girls, shelling Pashtun neighborhoods, and killing indiscriminately. Every day, bodies were found tied to trees, sometimes burned beyond recognition. Often, they'd been shot in the head, had had their eyes gouged out, their tongues cut out.

Babi tried again to convince Mammy to leave Kabul.

"They'll work it out," Mammy said. "This fighting is temporary. They'll sit down and figure something out."

"Fariba, all these people *know* is war," said Babi. "They learned to walk with a milk bottle in one hand and a gun in the other."

"Who *zrt* you to say?" Mammy shot back. "Did you fight jihad? Did you abandon everything you had and risk your life? If not for the Mujahideen, we'd still be the Soviets' servants, remember. And now you'd have us betray them!"

"We aren't the ones doing the betraying, Fariba."

"You go, then. Take your daughter and run away. Send me a postcard. But peace is coming, and I, for one, am going to wait for it."

The streets became so unsafe that Babi did an unthinkable thing: He had Laila drop out of school.

He took over the teaching duties himself. Laila went into his study

every day after sundown, and, as Hekmatyar launched his rockets at Massoud from the southern outskirts of the city, Babi and she discussed *the ghazals* of Hafez and the works of the beloved Afghan poet Ustad Khalilullah Khalili. Babi taught her to derive the quadratic equation, showed her how to factor polynomials and plot parametric curves. When he was teaching, Babi was transformed. In his element, amid his books, he looked taller to Laila. His voice seemed to rise from a calmer, deeper place, and he didn't blink nearly as much. Laila pictured him as he must have been once, erasing his blackboard with graceful swipes, looking over a student's shoulder, fatherly and attentive.

But it wasn't easy to pay attention. Laila kept getting distracted.

"What is the area of a pyramid?" Babi would ask, and all Laila could think of was the fullness of Tariq's lips, the heat of his breath on her mouth, her own reflection in his hazel eyes. She'd kissed him twice more since the time beneath the tree, longer, more passionately, and, she thought, less clumsily. Both times, she'd met him secretly in the dim alley where he'd smoked a cigarette the day of Mammy's lunch party. The second time, she'd let him touch her breast.

"Laila?"

"Yes, Babi."

"Pyramid. Area. Where are you?"

"Sorry, Babi. I was, uh...Let's see. Pyramid. Pyramid. One-third the area of the base times the height."

Babi nodded uncertainly, his gaze lingering on her, and Laila thought of Tariq's hands, squeezing her breast, sliding down the small of her back, as the two of them kissed and kissed.

One daY that same month of June, Giti was walking home from school with two classmates. Only three blocks from Giti's house, a stray rocket struck the girls. Later that terrible day, Laila learned that Nila, Giti's mother, had run up and down the street where Giti was killed, collecting pieces of her daughter's flesh in an apron, screeching 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'sfaiiha*, 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 unfathomable reality that Giti wasn't alive anymore. 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 brothers' 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 Tariq 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 Tariq now, seated beside Laila on the couch, looking at the ground, hands between his knees.

Saying that he was leaving.

Not the neighborhood. Not Kabul. But Afghanistan altogether.

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?"

"Laila, look at me."

"Tomorrow."

"It's my father. His heart can't take it anymore, all this fighting and killing."

Laila buried her face in her hands, a bubble of dread filling her chest.

She should have seen this coming, she thought. Almost everyone she knew had packed their things and left. The neighborhood had been all but drained of familiar faces, and now, only four months after fighting had broken out between the Mujahideen factions, Laila hardly recognized anybody on the streets anymore. Hasina's family had fled in May, off to Tehran. Wajma and her clan had gone to Islamabad that same month. Giti's parents and her siblings left in June, shortly after Giti was killed. Laila didn't know where they had gone-she heard a rumor that they had headed for Mashad, in Iran. After people left, their homes sat unoccupied for a few days, then either militiamen took them or strangers moved in.

Everyone was leaving. And now Tariq too.

"And my mother is not a young woman anymore," he was saying. "They're so afraid all the time. Laila, look at me."

"You should have told me."

"Please look at me."

A groan came out of Laila. Then a wail. And then she was crying, and when he went to wipe her cheek with the pad of his thumb she swiped his hand away. It was selfish and irrational, but she was furious with him for abandoning her, Tariq, who was like an extension of her, whose shadow sprung beside hers in every memory. How could he leave her? She slapped him. Then she slapped him again and pulled at his hair, and he had to take her by the wrists, and he was saying something she couldn't make out, he was saying it softly, reasonably, and, somehow, they ended up brow to brow, nose to nose, and she could feel the heat of his breath on her lips again.

And when, suddenly, he leaned in, she did too.

* * *

In the coming days and weeks, Laila would scramble frantically to commit it all to memory, what happened next-Like an art lover running out of a burning museum, she would grab whatever she could-a look, a whisper, a moan-to salvage from perishing, to preserve. But time is the most unforgiving of fires, and she couldn't, in the end, save it all Still, she had these: that first, tremendous pang of pain down below. The slant of sunlight on the rug. Her heel grazing the cold hardness of his leg, lying beside them, hastily unstrapped. Her hands cupping his elbows. The upside-down, mandolin-shaped birthmark beneath his collarbone, glowing red. His face hovering over hers. His black curls dangling, tickling her lips, her chin. The terror that they would be discovered. The

disbelief at their own boldness, their courage. The strange and indescribable pleasure, interlaced with the pain. And the look, the myriad of *looks*, on Tariq: of apprehension, tenderness, apology, embarrassment, but mostly, mostly, of hunger.

* * *

There was frenzy after. Shirts hurriedly buttoned, belts buckled, hair finger-combed. They sat, then, they sat beside each other, smelling of each other, faces flushed pink, both of them stunned, both of them speechless before the enormity of what had just happened. What they had done.

Laila saw three drops of blood on the rug, *her* blood, and pictured her parents sitting on this couch later, oblivious to the sin that she had committed. And now the shame set in, and the guilt, and, upstairs, the clock ticked on, impossibly loud to Laila's ears. Like a judge's gavel pounding again and again, condemning her.

Then Tariq said, "Come with me."

For a moment, Laila almost believed that it could be done. She, Tariq, and his parents, setting out together-Packing their bags, climbing aboard a bus, leaving behind all this violence, going to find blessings, or trouble, and whichever came they would face it together. The bleak isolation awaiting her, the murderous loneliness, it didn't have to be.

She could go. They could be together.

They would have more afternoons like this.

"I want to marry you, Laila."

For the first time since they were on the floor, she raised her eyes to meet his. She searched his face. There was no playfulness this time. His look was one of conviction, of guileless yet ironclad earnestness.

"Tariq-"

"Let me marry you, Laila. Today. We could get married today."

He began to say more, about going to a mosque, finding a mullah, a pair of witnesses, a quick *nikka*...

But Laila was thinking of Mammy, as obstinate and uncompromising as the Mujahideen, the air around her choked with rancor and despair, and she was thinking of Babi, who had long surrendered, who made such a sad, pathetic opponent to Mammy.

Sometimes... I feel like you 're all I have, Laila.

These were the circumstances of her life, the inescapable truths of it.

"I'll ask Kaka Hakim for your hand He'll give us his blessing, Laila, I know it."

He was right. Babi would. But it would shatter him.

Tariq was still speaking, his voice hushed, then high, beseeching, then reasoning; his face hopeful, then stricken.

"I can't," Laila said.

"Don't say that. I love you."

"I'm sorry-"

"I love you."

How long had she waited to hear those words from him? How many times had she dreamed them uttered? There

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 heart couldn't take it either."

Tariq knew this. He knew she could not wipe away the obligations of her life any more than he could his, but it went on, his pleadings and her rebuttals, his proposals and her apologies, his tears and hers.

In the end, Laila had to make him leave.

At the door, she made him promise to go without good-byes. She

closed the door on him. Laila leaned her back against it, shaking against his pounding fists, one arm gripping her belly and a hand across her mouth, as he spoke through the door and promised that he would come back, that he would come back for her. She stood there until he tired, until he gave up, and then she listened to his uneven footsteps until they faded, until all was quiet, save for the gunfire cracking in the hills and her own heart thudding in her belly, her eyes, her bones.

26.

It was, by far, the hottest day of the year. The mountains trapped the bone-scorching heat, stifled the city like smoke. Power had been out for days. All over Kabul, electric fans sat idle, almost mockingly so.

Laila was lying still on the living-room couch, sweating through her blouse. Every exhaled breath burned the tip of her nose. She was aware of her parents talking in Mammy's room. Two nights ago, and again last night, she had awakened and thought she heard their voices downstairs. They were talking every day now, ever since the bullet, ever since the new hole in the gate.

Outside, the far-off *boom* of artillery, then, more closely, the stammering of a long string of gunfire, followed by another.

Inside Laila too a battle was being waged: guilt on one side, partnered with shame, and, on the other, the conviction that what she and Tariq had done was not sinful; that it had been natural, good, beautiful, even inevitable, spurred by the knowledge that they might never see each other again.

Laila rolled to her side on the couch now and tried to remember something: At one point, when they were on the floor, Tariq had lowered his forehead on hers. Then he had panted something, either *Am I hurting you?* or *Is this hurting you?*

Laila couldn't decide which he had said.

Am I hurting you?

Is this hurting you?

Only two weeks since he had left, and it was already happening- Time, blunting the edges of those sharp memories. Laila bore down mentally. What had he said? It seemed vital, suddenly, that she know.

Laila closed her *eyes*. Concentrated.

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 resuscitate 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 unremitting 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, something 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 astonishing imprudence. Their clumsiness. The pain of the act, the pleasure of it, the sadness of it. The heat of their entangled bodies.

It would flood her, steal her breath.

But then it would pass. The moment would pass. Leave her deflated, feeling nothing 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 Babi 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 Massoud'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. There would be bodies to step around in the morning. Some would be collected. 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. Babi said they would go to Pakistan first, to apply for visas. Pakistan, where Tariq was! Tariq 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 Tariq right now! But that didn't matter now. They were going to Peshawar-she, Mammy, and Babi-and they would find Tariq and his parents there. Surely they would. They would process their paperwork together. Then, who knew? Who knew? Europe?

America? Maybe, as Babi was always saying, somewhere near the sea...

Mammy was half lying, half sitting against the headboard. Her eyes were puffy. She was picking at her hair.

Three days before, Laila had gone outside for a breath of air. She'd

stood by the front gates, leaning against them, when she'd heard a loud crack and something had zipped by her right ear, sending tiny splinters of wood flying before her eyes. After Giti's death, and the thousands of rounds fired and myriad rockets that had fallen on Kabul, it was the sight of that single round hole in the gate, less than three fingers away from where Laila's head had been, that shook Mammy awake. Made her see that one war had cost her two children already; this latest could cost her her remaining one.

From the walls of the room, Ahmad and Noor smiled down. Laila watched Mammy's eyes bouncing now, guiltily, from one photo to the other. As if looking for their consent. Their blessing. As if asking for forgiveness.

"There's nothing left for us here," Babi said. "Our sons are gone, but we still have Laila. We still have each other, Fariba. We can make a new life."

Babi reached across the bed. When he leaned to take her hands, Mammy let him. On her face, a look of concession. Of resignation. They held each other's hands, lightly, and then they were swaying quietly in an embrace. Mammy buried her face in his neck. She grabbed a handful of his shirt.

For hours that night, the excitement robbed Laila of sleep. She lay in bed and watched the horizon light up in garish shades of orange and yellow. At some point, though, despite the exhilaration inside and the crack of

artillery fire outside, she fell asleep.

And dreamed

They are on a ribbon of beach, sitting on a quilt. It's a chilly, overcast day, but it's warm next to Tariq under the blanket draped over their shoulders. She can see cars parked behind a low fence of chipped white

paint beneath a row of windswept palm trees. The wind makes her eyes water and buries their shoes in sand, hurls knots of dead grass from the curved ridges of one dune to another. They're watching sailboats bob in the distance. Around them, seagulls squawk and shiver in the wind. The wind whips up another spray of sand off the shallow, windward slopes. There is a noise then like a chant, and she tells him something Babi had taught her years before about singing sand.

He rubs at her eyebrow, wipes grains of sand from it. She catches a flicker of the band on his finger. It's identical to hers-gold with a sort of maze pattern etched all the way around.

It's true, she tells him. *It's the friction, of grain against grain. Listen.* He does. He frowns. They wait. They hear it again. A groaning sound, when the wind is soft, when it blows hard, a mewling, high-pitched chorus.

* * * Babi said they should take only what was absolutely necessary. They would sell the rest.

"That should hold us in Peshawar until I find work."

For the next two days, they gathered items to be sold. They put them in big piles.

In her room, Laila set aside old blouses, old shoes, books, toys. Looking under her bed, she found a tiny yellow glass cow Hasina had passed to her during recess in fifth grade. A miniature-soccer-ball key chain, a gift from Giti. A little wooden zebra on wheels. A ceramic astronaut she and Tariq had found one day in a gutter. She'd been six and he eight. They'd had a minor row, Laila remembered, over which one of them had found it.

Mammy too gathered her things. There was a reluctance in her movements, and her eyes had a lethargic, faraway look in them. She did away with her good plates, her napkins, all her jewelry-save for her

wedding band-and most of her old clothes.

"You're not selling this, are you?" Laila said, lifting Mammy's wedding dress. It cascaded open onto her lap. She touched the lace and ribbon along the neckline, the hand-sewn seed pearls on the sleeves.

Mammy shrugged and took it from her. She tossed it brusquely on a pile of clothes. Like ripping off a Band-Aid in one stroke, Laila thought.

It was Babi who had the most painful task.

Laila found him standing in his study, a rueful expression on his face as he surveyed his shelves. He was wearing a secondhand T-shirt with a picture of San Francisco's red bridge on it. Thick fog rose from the whitecapped waters and engulfed the bridge's towers.

"You know the old bit," he said. "You're on a deserted island. You can have five books. Which do you choose? I never thought I'd actually have to."

"We'll have to start you a new collection, Babi."

"Mm." He smiled sadly. "I can't believe I'm leaving Kabul. I went to school here, got my first job here, became a father in this town. It's strange to think that I'll be sleeping beneath another city's skies soon."

"It's strange for me too."

"All day, this poem about Kabul has been bouncing around in my head. Saib-e-Tabrizi wrote it back in the seventeenth century, I think. I used to know the whole poem, but all I can remember now is two lines:

"One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs, Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her -walls."

Laila looked up, saw he was weeping. She put an arm around his waist. "Oh, Babi. We'll come back. When this war is over. We'll come back to Kabul, *inshallah*. You'll see."

* * *

On the third morning, Laila began moving the piles of things to the yard and depositing them by the front door. They would fetch a taxi then and take it all to a pawnshop.

Laila kept shuffling between the house and the yard, back and forth, carrying stacks of clothes and dishes and box after box of Babi's books. She should have been exhausted by noon, when the mound of belongings by the front door had grown waist high. But, with each trip, she knew that she was that much closer to seeing Tariq again, and, with each trip, her legs became more sprightly, her arms more tireless.

"We're going to need a big taxi."

Laila looked up. It was Mammy calling down from her bedroom upstairs. She was leaning out the window, resting her elbows on the sill. The sun, bright and warm, caught in her graying hair, shone on her drawn, thin face. Mammy was wearing the same cobalt blue dress she had worn the day of the lunch party four months earlier, a youthful dress meant for a young woman, but, for a moment, Mammy looked to Laila like an old woman. An old woman with stringy arms and sunken temples and slow eyes rimmed by darkened circles of weariness, an altogether different creature from the plump, round-faced woman beaming radiantly from those grainy wedding photos.

"Two big taxis," Laila said.

She could see Babi too, in the living room stacking boxes of books atop each other.

"Come up when you're done with those," Mammy said. "We'll sit down for lunch. Boiled eggs and leftover beans."

"My favorite," Laila said.

She thought suddenly of her dream. She and Tariq on a quilt. The ocean. The wind. The dunes.

What had it sounded like, she wondered now, the singing sands?

Laila stopped. She saw a gray lizard crawl out of a crack in the ground. Its head shot side to side. It blinked. Darted under a rock.

Laila pictured the beach again. Except now the singing was all around. And growing. Louder and louder by the moment, higher and higher. It flooded her ears. Drowned everything else out. The gulls were feathered mimes now, opening and closing their beaks noiselessly, and the waves were crashing with foam and spray but no roar. The sands sang on. Screaming now. A sound like...a tinkling?

Not a tinkling. No. A whistling.

Laila dropped the books at her feet. She looked up to the sky. Shielded her eyes with one hand.

Then a giant roar.

Behind her, a flash of white.

The ground lurched beneath her feet.

Something hot and powerful slammed into her from behind. It knocked her out of her sandals. Lifted her up. And now she was flying, twisting and rotating in the air, seeing sky, then earth, then sky, then earth. A big burning chunk of wood whipped by. So did a thousand shards of glass, and it seemed to Laila that she could see each individual one flying all around her, flipping slowly end over end, the sunlight catching in each. Tiny, beautiful rainbows.

Then Laila struck the wall. Crashed to the ground. On her face and arms, a shower of dirt and pebbles and glass. The last thing she was aware of was seeing something thud to the ground nearby. A bloody chunk of something. On it, the tip of a red bridge poking through thick fog.

* * *

Shapes moving about. A fluorescent light shines from the ceiling above.
A woman's face appears, hovers over hers.

Laila fades back to the dark.

* * *

Another face. This time a man's. His features seem broad and droopy.
His lips move but make no sound. All Laila hears is ringing.

The man waves his hand at her. Frowns. His lips move again.

It hurts. It hurts to breathe. It hurts everywhere.

A glass of water. A pink pill.

Back to the darkness.

* * *

The woman again. Long face, narrow-set eyes. She says something.
Laila can't hear anything but the ringing. But she can see the words, like
thick black syrup, spilling out of the woman's mouth.

Her chest hurts. Her arms and legs hurt.

All around, shapes moving.

Where is Tariq?

Why isn't he here?

Darkness. A flock of stars.

Babi and she, perched somewhere high up. He is pointing to a field of
barley. A generator comes to life.

The long-faced woman is standing over her looking down.

It hurts to breathe.

Somewhere, an accordion playing.

Mercifully, the pink pill again. Then a deep hush. A deep hush falls over everything.

PART THREE

27.

Madam

Do you know who I am?"

The girl's eyes fluttered

"Do you know what has happened?"

The girl's mouth quivered. She closed her eyes. Swallowed. Her hand grazed her left cheek. She mouthed something.

Mariam leaned in closer.

"This ear," the girl breathed. "I can't hear."

* * *

For the first "week, the girl did little but sleep, with help from the pink pills Rasheed paid for at the hospital. She murmured in her sleep. Sometimes she spoke gibberish, cried out, called out names Mariam did not recognize. She wept in her sleep, grew agitated, kicked the blankets off, and then Mariam had to hold her down. Sometimes she retched and retched, threw up everything Mariam fed her.

When she wasn't agitated, the girl was a sullen pair of eyes staring from under the blanket, breathing out short little answers to Mariam and Rasheed's questions. Some days she was childlike, whipped her head side to side, when Mariam, then Rasheed, tried to feed her. She went rigid when Mariam came at her with a spoon. But she tired easily and submitted eventually to their persistent badgering. Long bouts of weeping followed surrender.

Rasheed had Mariam rub antibiotic ointment on the cuts on the girl's face and neck, and on the sutured gashes on her shoulder, across her forearms and lower legs. Mariam dressed them with bandages, which she washed and recycled. She held the girl's hair back, out of her face, when

she had to retch.

"How long is she staying?" she asked Rasheed.

"Until she's better. Look at her. She's in no shape to go. Poor thing."

* * *

It was Rasheed who found the girl, who dug her out from beneath the rubble.

"Lucky I was home," he said to the girl. He was sitting on a folding chair beside Mariam's bed, where the girl lay. "Lucky for you, I mean. I dug you out with my own hands. There was a scrap of metal this big-" Here, he spread his thumb and index finger apart to show her, at least doubling, in Mariam's estimation, the actual size of it. "This big. Sticking right out of your shoulder. It was really embedded in there. I thought I'd have to use a pair of pliers.

But you're all right. In no time, you'll be *nau socha*. Good as new."

It was Rasheed who salvaged a handful of Hakim's books.

"Most of them were ash. The rest were looted, I'm afraid."

He helped Mariam watch over the girl that first week. One day, he came home from work with a new blanket and pillow. Another day, a bottle of pills.

"Vitamins," he said.

It was Rasheed who gave Laila the news that her friend Tariq's house was occupied now.

"A gift," he said. "From one of Sayyaf's commanders to three of his men. A gift. Ha!"

The three *men* were actually boys with suntanned, youthful faces. Mariam would see them when she passed by, always dressed in their fatigues, squatting by the front door of Tariq's house, playing cards and smoking, their Kalashnikovs leaning against the wall. The brawny one,

the one with the self-satisfied, scornful demeanor, was the leader. The youngest was also the quietest, the one who seemed reluctant to wholeheartedly embrace his friends' air of impunity. He had taken to smiling and tipping his head *salaam* when Mariam passed by. When he did, some of his surface smugness dropped away, and Mariam caught a glint of humility as yet uncorrupted.

Then one morning rockets slammed into the house. They were rumored later to have been fired by the Hazaras of Wahdat. For some time, neighbors kept finding bits and pieces of the boys.

"They had it coming," said Rasheed.

* * *

The girl was extraordinarily lucky, Mariam thought, to escape with relatively minor injuries, considering the rocket had turned her house into smoking rubble. And so, slowly, the girl got better. She began to eat more, began to brush her own hair. She took baths on her own. She began taking her meals downstairs, with Mariam and Rasheed.

But then some memory would rise, unbidden, and there would be stony silences or spells of churlishness. Withdrawals and collapses. Wan looks. Nightmares and sudden attacks of grief. Retching.

And sometimes regrets.

"I shouldn't even be here," she said one day.

Mariam was changing the sheets. The girl watched from the floor, her bruised knees drawn up against her chest.

"My father wanted to take out the boxes. The books. He said they were too heavy for me. But I wouldn't let him. I was so eager. I should have been the one inside the house when it happened."

Mariam snapped the clean sheet and let it settle on the bed. She looked

at the girl, at her blond curls, her slender neck and green eyes, her high cheekbones and plump lips. Mariam remembered seeing her on the streets when she was little, tottering after her mother on the way to the tandoor, riding on the shoulders of her brother, the younger one, with the patch of hair on his ear. Shooting marbles with the carpenter's boy.

The girl was looking back as if waiting for Mariam to pass on some morsel of wisdom, to say something encouraging- But what wisdom did Mariam have to offer? What encouragement? Mariam remembered the day they'd buried Nana and how little comfort she had found when Mullah Faizullah had quoted the Koran for her. *Blessed is He in Whose hand is the kingdom, and He Who has power over all things, Who created death and life that He may try you.* Or when he'd said of her own guilt, *These thoughts are no good, Mariam jo. They will destroy you. It wasn't your fault It wasn't your fault.*

What could she say to this girl that would ease her burden?

As it turned out, Mariam didn't have to say anything. Because the girl's face twisted, and she was on all fours then saying she was going to be sick.

"Wait! Hold on. I'll get a pan. Not on the floor. I just cleaned...Oh. Oh. *Khodaya.* God."

* * *

Then one day, about a month after the blast that killed the girl's parents, a man came knocking. Mariam opened the door. He stated his business.

"There is a man here to see you," Mariam said.

The girl raised her head from the pillow.

"He says his name is Abdul Sharif."

"I don't know any Abdul Sharif."

"Well, he's here asking for you. You need to come down and talk to him."

28.

Laila

Laila sat across from Abdul Sharif, who was a thin, small-headed man with a bulbous nose pocked with the same cratered scars that pitted his cheeks. His hair, short and brown, stood on his scalp like needles in a pincushion.

"You'll have to forgive me, *hamshira*," he said, adjusting his loose collar and dabbing at his brow with a handkerchief "I still haven't quite recovered, I fear. Five more days of these, what are they called...sulfa pills."

Laila positioned herself in her seat so that her right ear, the good one, was closest to him. "Were you a friend of my parents?"

"No, no," Abdul Sharif said quickly. "Forgive me." He raised a finger, took a long sip of the water that Mariam had placed in front of him.

"I should begin at the beginning, I suppose." He dabbed at his lips, again at his brow. "I am a businessman. I own clothing stores, mostly men's clothing. *Chapans*, hats, *iumban%*, suits, ties-you name it. Two stores here in Kabul, in Taimani and Shar-e-Nau, though I just sold those. And two in Pakistan, in Peshawar. That's where my warehouse is as well. So I travel a lot, back and forth. Which, these days"-he shook his head and chuckled tiredly-"let's just say that it's an adventure.

"I was in Peshawar recently, on business, taking orders, going over inventory, that sort of thing. Also to visit my family. We have three daughters, *alhamdulillah*. I moved them and my wife to Peshawar after the Mujahideen began going at each other's throats. I won't have their

names added to the *shaheed* list. Nor mine, to be honest. I'll be joining them there very soon, *inshallah*.

"Anyway, I was supposed to be back in Kabul the Wednesday before last. But, as luck would have it, I came down with an illness. I won't bother you with it, *hamshira*, suffice it to say that when I went to do my private business, the simpler of the two, it felt like passing chunks of broken glass. I wouldn't wish it on Hekmatyar himself. My wife, Nadia jan, Allah bless her, she begged me to see a doctor. But I thought I'd beat it with aspirin and a lot of water. Nadia jan insisted and I said no, back and forth we went. You know the saying^ *stubborn ass needs a stubborn driver*. This time, I'm afraid, the ass won. That would be me."

He drank the rest of this water and extended the glass to Mariam. "If it's not too much *zahmat*."

Mariam took the glass and went to fill it.

"Needless to say, I should have listened to her. She's always been the more sensible one, God give her a long life. By the time I made it to the hospital, I was burning with a fever and shaking like a *beid* tree in the wind. I could barely stand. The doctor said I had blood poisoning. She said two or three more days and I would have made my wife a widow.

"They put me in a special unit, reserved for really sick people, I suppose. Oh, *iashakor*." He took the glass from Mariam and from his coat pocket produced a large white pill. "The *size* of these things."

Laila watched him swallow his pill. She was aware that her breathing had quickened. Her legs felt heavy, as though weights had been tethered to them. She told herself that he wasn't done, that he hadn't told her anything as yet. But he would go on in a second, and she resisted an urge to get up and leave, leave before he told her things she didn't want to hear.

Abdul Sharif set his glass on the table.

"That's where I met your friend, Mohammad Tariq Walizai."

Laila's heart sped up. Tariq in a hospital? A special unit? *For really sick people?*

She swallowed dry spit. Shifted on her chair. She had to steel herself. If she didn't, she feared she would come unhinged. She diverted her thoughts from hospitals and special units and thought instead about the fact that she hadn't heard Tariq called by his full name since the two of them had enrolled in a Farsi winter course years back. The teacher would call roll after the bell and say his name like that-Mohammad Tariq Walizai. It had struck her as comically officious then, hearing his full name uttered.

"What happened to him I heard from one of the nurses," Abdul Sharif resumed, tapping his chest with a fist as if to ease the passage of the pill. "With all the time I've spent in Peshawar, I've become pretty proficient in Urdu. Anyway, what I gathered was that your friend was in a lorry full of refugees, twenty-three of them, all headed for Peshawar. Near the border, they were caught in cross fire. A rocket hit the lorry. Probably a stray, but you never know with these people, you never know. There were only six survivors, all of them admitted to the same unit. Three died within twenty-four hours. Two of them lived-sisters, as I understood it-and had been discharged.

Your friend Mr. Walizai was the last. He'd been there for almost three weeks by the time I arrived."

So he was alive. But how badly had they hurt him? Laila wondered frantically. How badly? Badly enough to be put in a special unit, evidently. Laila was aware that she had started sweating, that her face felt hot. She tried to think of something else, something pleasant, like the trip to Bamiyan to see the Buddhas with Tariq and Babi. But instead

an image of Tariq's parents presented itself: Tariq's mother trapped in the lorry, upside down, screaming for Tariq through the smoke, her arms and chest on fire, the wig melting into her scalp...

Laila had to take a series of rapid breaths.

"He was in the bed next to mine. There were no walls, only a curtain between us. So I could see him pretty well."

Abdul Sharif found a sudden need to toy with his wedding band. He spoke more slowly now.

"Your friend, he was badly-very badly-injured, you understand. He had rubber tubes coming out of him everywhere. At first-" He cleared his throat. "At first, I thought he'd lost both legs in the attack, but a nurse said no, only the right, the left one was on account of an old injury. There were internal injuries too. They'd operated three times already. Took out sections of intestines, I don't remember what else. And he was burned. Quite badly. That's all I'll say about that. I'm sure you have your fair share of nightmares, *hamshira*. No sense in me adding to them."

Tariq was legless now. He was a torso with two stumps. *Legless*. Laila thought she might collapse. With deliberate, desperate effort, she sent the tendrils of her mind out of this room, out the window, away from this man, over the street outside, over the city now, and its flat-topped houses and bazaars, its maze of narrow streets turned to sand castles.

"He was drugged up most of the time. For the pain, you understand. But he had moments when the drugs were wearing off when he was clear. In pain but clear of mind I would talk to him from my bed. I told him who I was, where I was from. He was glad, I think, that there was a *hamwaiian* next to him.

"I did most of the talking. It was hard for him to. His voice was hoarse, and I think it hurt him to move his lips. So I told him about my daughters, and about our house in Peshawar and the veranda my brother-in-law and I are building out in the back. I told him I had sold

the stores in Kabul and that I was going back to finish up the paperwork. It wasn't much. But it occupied him. At least, I like to think it did.

"Sometimes he talked too. Half the time, I couldn't make out what he was saying, but I caught enough. He described where he'd lived.

He talked about his uncle in Ghazni. And his mother's cooking and his father's carpentry, him playing the accordion.

"But, mostly, he talked about you, *hamshira*. He said you were-how did he put it-his earliest memory. I think that's right, yes. I could tell he cared a great deal about you. *Balay*, that much was plain to see. But he said he was glad you weren't there. He said he didn't want you seeing him like that."

Laila's feet felt heavy again, anchored to the floor, as if all her blood had suddenly pooled down there. But her mind was far away, free and fleet, hurtling like a speeding missile beyond Kabul, over craggy brown hills and over deserts ragged with clumps of sage, past canyons of jagged red rock and over snowcapped mountains...

"When I told him I was going back to Kabul, he asked me to find you. To tell you that he was thinking of you. That he missed you. I promised him I would I'd taken quite a liking to him, you see. He was a decent sort of boy, I could tell."

Abdul Sharif wiped his brow with the handkerchief.

"I woke up one night," he went on, his interest in the wedding band renewed, "I think it was night anyway, it's hard

to tell in those places. There aren't any windows. Sunrise, sundown, you just don't know. But I woke up, and there was some sort of commotion around the bed next to mine. You have to understand that I was full of drugs myself, always slipping in and out, to the point where it was hard to tell what was real and what you'd dreamed up. All I remember is, doctors huddled around the bed, calling for this and that, alarms

bleeping, syringes all over the ground.

"In the morning, the bed was empty. I asked a nurse. She said he fought valiantly."

Laila was dimly aware that she was nodding. She'd known. Of course she'd known. She'd known the moment she had sat across from this man why he was here, what news he was bringing.

"At first, you see, at first I didn't think you even existed," he was saying now. "I thought it was the morphine talking. Maybe I even *hoped 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 anybody."

Abdul Sharif reached across the table and put a hand on her kneecap. "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 Noor'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 had 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 could hardly move. She could hardly 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 Tariq 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.

29.

Madam

"I'm so sorry," Rasheed said to the girl, taking his bowl of *masiawa* and meatballs from Mariam without looking at her. "I know you were very close... *friends*...the two of you. Always together, 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 disapproving cluck of his tongue, a one-word command for more bread, more water.

Now he ate with a spoon. Used a napkin. Said *lot/an* when asking for water. And talked. Spiritedly and incessantly.

"If you ask me, the Americans armed the wrong man in Hekmatyar. All

the guns the CIA handed him in the eighties to fight the Soviets. The Soviets are gone, but he still has the guns, and now he's turning them on innocent people like your parents. And he calls this jihad. What a farce! What does jihad have to do with killing women and children? Better the CIA had armed Commander Massoud."

Mariam's eyebrows shot up of their own will. *Commander* Massoud? In her head, she could hear Rasheed's rants against Massoud, how he was a traitor and a communist- But, then, Massoud was a Tajik, of course. Like Laila.

"Now, *there* is a reasonable fellow. An honorable Afghan. A man genuinely interested in a peaceful resolution."

Rasheed shrugged and sighed.

"Not that they give a damn in America, mind you. What do they care that Pashtuns and Hazaras and Tajiks and Uzbeks are killing each other? How many Americans can even tell one from the other? Don't expect help from them, I say. Now that the Soviets have collapsed, we're no use to them. We served our purpose. To them, Afghanistan is a *kenarab*, a shit hole. Excuse my language, but it's true. What do you think, Laila jan?"

The girl mumbled something unintelligible and pushed a meatball around in her bowl.

Rasheed nodded thoughtfully, as though she'd said the most clever thing he'd ever heard. Mariam had to look away.

"You know, your father, God give him peace, your father and I used to have discussions like this. This was before you were born, of course. On and on we'd go about politics. About books too. Didn't we, Mariam? You remember."

Mariam busied herself taking a sip of water.

"Anyway, I hope I am not boring you with all this talk of politics."

Later, Mariam was in the kitchen, soaking dishes in soapy water, a tightly wound knot in her belly-It wasn't so much *what* he said, the blatant lies, the contrived empathy, or even the fact that he had not raised a hand to her, Mariam, since he had dug the girl out from under those bricks.

It was the *staged* delivery. Like a performance. An attempt on his part, both sly and pathetic, to impress. To charm.

And suddenly Mariam knew that her suspicions were right. She understood with a dread that was like a blinding whack to the side of her head that what she was witnessing was nothing less than a courtship.

* * *

When shed at last worked up the nerve, Mariam went to his room.

Rasheed lit a cigarette, and said, "Why not?"

Mariam knew right then that she was defeated. She'd half expected, half hoped, that he would deny everything, feign surprise, maybe even outrage, at what she was implying. She might have had the upper hand then. She might have succeeded in shaming him. But it stole her grit, his calm acknowledgment, his matter-of-fact tone.

"Sit down," he said. He was lying on his bed, back to the wall, his thick, long legs splayed on the mattress. "Sit down before you faint and cut your head open."

Mariam felt herself drop onto the folding chair beside his bed.

"Hand me that ashtray, would you?" he said.

Obediently, she did.

Rasheed had to be sixty or more now-though Mariam, and in fact Rasheed himself did not know his exact age. His hair had gone white, but

it was as thick and coarse as ever. There was a sag now to his eyelids and the skin of his neck, which was wrinkled and leathery. His cheeks hung a bit more than they used to. In the mornings, he stooped just a tad. But he still had the stout shoulders, the thick torso, the strong hands, the swollen belly that entered the room before any other part of him did.

On the whole, Mariam thought that he had weathered the years considerably better than she.

"We need to legitimize this situation," he said now, balancing the ashtray on his belly. His lips scrunched up in a playful pucker. "People will talk. It looks dishonorable, an unmarried young woman living here. It's bad for my reputation. And hers. And yours, I might add."

"Eighteen years," Mariam said. "And I never asked you for a thing. Not one thing. I'm asking now."

He inhaled smoke and let it out slowly. "She can't just *stay* here, if that's what you're suggesting. I can't go on feeding her and clothing her and giving her a place to sleep. I'm not the Red Cross, Mariam."

"But this?"

"What of it? What? She's too young, you think? She's fourteen. Hardly a child. You were fifteen, remember? My mother was fourteen when she had me. Thirteen when she married."

"I.. .I don't want this," Mariam said, numb with contempt and helplessness.

"It's not your decision. It's hers and mine."

"I'm too old."

"She's too young, you're too old. This is nonsense."

"I *am* too old. Too old for you to do this to me," Mariam said, balling up fistfuls of her dress so tightly her hands shook. "For you, after all these years, to make me an *ambagh*"

"Don't be so dramatic. It's a common thing and you know it. I have

friends who have two, three, four wives. Your own father had three. Besides, what I'm doing now most men I know would have done long ago. You know it's true."

"I won't allow it."

At this, Rasheed smiled sadly.

"There *is* another option," he said, scratching the sole of one foot with the calloused heel of the other. "She can leave. I won't stand in her way. But I suspect she won't get far. No food, no water, not a rupiah in her pockets, bullets and rockets flying everywhere. How many days do you suppose she'll last before she's abducted, raped, or tossed into some roadside ditch with her throat slit? Or all three?"

He coughed and adjusted the pillow behind his back.

"The roads out there are unforgiving, Mariam, believe me. Bloodhounds and bandits at every turn. I wouldn't like her chances, not at all. But let's say that by some miracle she gets to Peshawar. What then? Do you have any idea what those camps are like?"

He gazed at her from behind a column of smoke.

"People living under scraps of cardboard. TB, dysentery, famine, crime. And that's before winter. Then it's frostbite season. Pneumonia. People turning to icicles. Those camps become frozen graveyards.

"Of course," he made a playful, twirling motion with his hand, "she could keep warm in one of those Peshawar brothels. Business is booming there, I hear. A beauty like her ought to bring in a small fortune, don't you think?"

He set the ashtray on the nightstand and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Look," he said, sounding more conciliatory now, as a victor could afford to. "I knew you wouldn't take this well. I don't really blame you.

But this is for the best. You'll see. Think of it this way, Mariam. I'm giving *you* help around the house and *her* a sanctuary. A home and a husband. These days, times being what they are, a woman needs a husband. Haven't you noticed all the widows sleeping on the streets? They would kill for this chance. In fact, this is.... Well, I'd say this is downright charitable of me."

He smiled.

"The way I see it, I deserve a medal."

* * *

Later, in the dark, Mariam told the girl.

For a long time, the girl said nothing.

"He wants an answer by this morning," Mariam said.

"He can have it now," the girl said. "My answer is yes."

30.

Laila

The next day, Laila stayed in bed. She was under the blanket in the morning when Rasheed 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.

Rasheed sat on the bed beside her, made a great show of slowly undoing the ribbon, of opening the box and plucking out the ring delicately. He let on that he'd traded in Mariam's old wedding ring for it.

"She doesn't care. Believe me. She won't even notice."

Laila pulled away to the far end of the bed. She could hear Mariam downstairs, the hissing of her iron.

"She never wore it anyway," Rasheed said.

"I don't want it," Laila 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-Mazang. I was thinking we could take you there tomorrow, get you fitted for a proper dress."

Laila shook her head.

Rasheed raised his eyebrows.

"I'd just as soon-" Laila began.

He put a hand on her neck. Laila 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."

Rasheed's mouth opened, then spread in a yellow, toothy grin. "Eager," he said.

* * *

Before Abdul Sharif's visit, Laila had decided to leave for Pakistan. Even after Abdul Sharif came bearing his news, Laila thought now, she might have left. Gone somewhere far from here. Detached herself 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 fullness in her breasts.

And the awareness, somehow, amid all of this turmoil, that she had missed a cycle.

Laila pictured herself in a refugee camp, a stark field with thousands of sheets of plastic strung to makeshift poles flapping in the cold, stinging wind. Beneath one of these makeshift tents, she saw her baby, Tariq's baby, its temples wasted, its jaws slack, its skin mottled, bluish gray. She pictured its tiny body washed by strangers, wrapped in a tawny shroud, lowered into a hole dug in a patch of windswept land under the disappointed gaze of vultures.

How could she run now?

Laila took grim inventory of the people in her life. Ahmad and Noor, dead. Hasina, gone. Giti, dead. Mammy, dead. Babi, dead. Now Tariq..

But, miraculously, something of her former life remained, her last link to the person that she had been before she had become so utterly alone. A part of Tariq still alive inside her, sprouting tiny arms, growing translucent hands.

How could she jeopardize the only thing she had left of him, of her old life?

She made her decision quickly. Six weeks had passed since her time with Tariq. Any longer and Rasheed would grow suspicious.

She knew that what she was doing was dishonorable. Dishonorable, disingenuous, and shameful. And spectacularly unfair to Mariam. But even though the baby inside her was no bigger than a mulberry, Laila already saw the sacrifices a mother had to make. Virtue was only the first.

She put a hand on her belly. Closed her eyes.

* * *

Laila would remember the muted ceremony in bits and fragments. The cream-colored stripes of Rasheed's suit. The sharp smell of his hair spray. The small shaving nick just above his Adam's apple. The rough pads of his tobacco-stained fingers when he slid the ring on her. The pen. Its not working. The search for a new pen. The contract. The signing, his sure-handed, hers quavering. The prayers. Noticing, in the mirror, that Rasheed had trimmed his eyebrows.

And, somewhere in the room, Mariam watching. The air choking with her disapproval.

Laila could not bring herself to meet the older woman's gaze.

* * *

Lying beneath his cold sheets that night, she watched him pull the curtains shut. She was shaking even before his fingers worked her shirt buttons, tugged at the drawstring of her trousers. He was agitated. His fingers fumbled endlessly with his own shirt, with undoing his belt. Laila had a full view of his sagging breasts, his protruding belly button, the small blue vein in the center 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 there 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.

Madam

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 Madam'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. Madam 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, Madam would chance a sidelong glance and catch a blush. Sometimes she could smell Rasheed 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 some time, and now even the thought of those laborious sessions of lying beneath Rasheed made Madam queasy in the gut.

At night, however, this mutually orchestrated dance of avoidance between her and the girl was not possible. Rasheed 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, Madam, *gap bezan*, 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 is *dehati*. A village girl. Not even a village girl. No. She grew up in a *kolba* made of mud *outside* the village. Her father put her there. Have you told her, Mariam, have you told her that you are a *harami*? Well, she is. But she is not without qualities, all things considered. You will see for yourself, Laila 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 Volga."

Mariam was a thirty-three-year-old woman now, but that word, *harami*, still had sting. Hearing it still made her feel like she was a pest, a cockroach. She remembered Nana pulling her wrists. *You are a clumsy Utile harami. This is my reward for everything I've endured. An heirloom-breaking clumsy Utile harami.*

"You," Rasheed said to the girl, "you, on the other hand, would be a Benz. A brand-new, first-class, shiny Benz. *Wah wah*. But. But." He raised one greasy index finger. "One must take certain...cares...with a Benz. As a matter of respect for its beauty and craftsmanship, you see. Oh, you must be thinking that I am crazy, *diwana*, with all this talk of automobiles. I am not saying you are cars. I am merely making a point."

For what came next, Rasheed put down the ball of rice he'd made back on the plate. His hands dangled idly over his meal, as he looked down with a sober, thoughtful expression.

"One mustn't speak ill of the dead much less the, *shaheed*. And I intend no disrespect when I say this, I want you to know, but I have certain...reservations...about the way your parents-Allah, forgive them and grant them a place in paradise-about their, well, their leniency with you. I'm sorry."

The cold, hateful look the girl flashed Rasheed at this did not escape Mariam, but he was looking down and did not notice.

"No matter. The point is, I am your husband now, and it falls on me to guard not only *your* honor but *ours*, yes, our *nang* and *namoos*. That is the husband's burden. You let me worry about that. Please. As for you, you are the queen, the *malika*, and this house is your palace. Anything you need done you ask Mariam and she will do it for you. Won't you, Mariam? And if you fancy something, I will get it for you. You see, that is the sort of husband I am.

"All I ask in return, well, it is a simple thing. I ask that you avoid leaving this house without my company. That's all. Simple, no? If I am away and you need something urgently, I mean *absolutely* need it and it cannot wait for me, then you can send Mariam and she will go out and get it for you. You've noticed a discrepancy, surely. Well, one does not drive a Volga and a Benz in the same manner. That would be foolish, wouldn't it? Oh, I also ask that when we are out together, that you wear a burqa. For your own protection, naturally. It is best. So many lewd men in this town now. Such vile intentions, so eager to dishonor even a married woman. So. That's all."

He coughed.

"I should say that Mariam will be my eyes and ears when I am away." Here, he shot Mariam a fleeting look that was as hard as a steel-toed kick to the temple. "Not that I am mistrusting. Quite the contrary. Frankly, you strike me as far wiser than your years. But you are still a young woman, Laila jan, a *dokhtar ejawan*, and young women can make unfortunate choices. They can be prone to mischief. Anyway, Mariam will be accountable. And if there is a slipup..."

On and on he went. Mariam sat watching the girl out of the corner of her eye as Rasheed's demands and judgments rained down on them like the rockets on Kabul.

* * *

One day, Mariam was in the living room folding some shirts of Rasheed's that she had plucked from the clothesline in the yard. She didn't know how long the girl had been standing there, but, when she picked up a shirt and turned around, she found her standing by the doorway, hands cupped around a glassful of tea.

"I didn't mean to startle you," the girl said. "I'm sorry."

Mariam only looked at her.

The sun fell on the girl's face, on her large green eyes and her smooth brow, on her high cheekbones and the appealing, thick eyebrows, which were nothing like Mariam's own, thin and featureless. Her yellow hair, uncombed this morning, was middle-parted.

Mariam could see in the stiff way the girl clutched the cup, the tightened shoulders, that she was nervous. She imagined her sitting on the bed working up the nerve.

"The leaves are turning," the girl said companionably. "Have you seen? Autumn is my favorite. I like the smell of it, when people burn leaves in their gardens. My mother, she liked springtime the best. You knew my mother?"

"Not really."

The girl cupped a hand behind her ear. "I'm sorry?"

Mariam raised her voice. "I said no. I didn't know your mother."

"Oh."

"Is there something you want?"

"Mariam jan, I want to...About the things he said the other night-"

"I have been meaning to talk to you about it." Mariam broke in.

"Yes, please," the girl said earnestly, almost eagerly. She took a step forward. She looked relieved.

Outside, an oriole was warbling. Someone was pulling a cart; Mariam

could hear the creaking of its hinges, the bouncing and rattling of its iron wheels. There was the sound of gunfire not so far away, a single shot followed by three more, then nothing.

"I won't be your servant," Mariam said. "I won't."

The girl flinched "No. Of course not!"

"You may be the palace *malika* and me a *dehati*, but I won't take orders from you. You can complain to him and he can slit my throat, but I won't do it. Do you hear me? I won't be your servant."

"No! I don't expect-"

"And if you think you can use your looks to get rid of me, you're wrong. I was here first. I won't be thrown out. I won't have you cast me out."

"It's not what I want," the girl said weakly.

"And I see your wounds are healed up now. So you can start doing your share of the work in this house-"

The girl was nodding quickly. Some of her tea spilled, but she didn't notice. "Yes, that's the other reason I came down, to thank you for taking care of me-"

"Well, I wouldn't have," Mariam snapped. "I wouldn't have fed you and washed you and nursed you if I'd known you were going to turn around and steal my husband."

"Steal-"

"I will still cook and wash the dishes. You will do the laundry and the sweeping- The rest we will alternate daily. And one more thing. I have no use for your company. I don't want it. What I want is to be alone. You will leave me be, and I will return the favor. That's how we will get on. Those are the rules."

When she was done speaking, her heart was hammering and her mouth felt parched. Mariam had never before spoken in this manner, had never stated her will so forcefully. It ought to have felt exhilarating, but the

girl's eyes had teared up and her face was drooping, and what satisfaction Mariam found from this outburst felt meager, somehow illicit.

She extended the shirts toward the girl.

"Put them in the *almari*, not the closet. He likes the whites in the top drawer, the rest in the middle, with the socks."

The girl set the cup on the floor and put her hands out for the shirts, palms up. "I'm sorry about all of this," she croaked.

"You should be," Mariam said. "You should be sorry."

32.

Laila

Laila remembered a gathering once, years before at the house, on one of Mammy's good days. The women had been sitting in the garden, eating from a platter of fresh mulberries that Wajma had picked from the tree in her yard. The plump mulberries had been white and pink, and some the same dark purple as the bursts of tiny veins on Wajma's nose.

"You heard how his son died?" Wajma had said, energetically shoveling another handful of mulberries into her sunken mouth.

"He drowned, didn't he?" Nila, Giti's mother, said. "At Ghargha Lake, wasn't it?"

"But did you know, did you know that Rasheed..." Wajma raised a finger, made a show of nodding and chewing and making them wait for her to swallow. "Did you know that he used to drink *sharab* back then, that he was crying drunk that day? It's true. Crying drunk, is what I heard. And that was midmorning. By noon, he had passed out on a lounge chair. You could have fired the noon cannon next to his ear and he wouldn't have batted an eyelash."

Laila remembered how Wajma had covered her mouth, burped; how her tongue had gone exploring between her few remaining teeth.

"You can imagine the rest. The boy went into the water unnoticed. They spotted him a while later, floating facedown. 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."

Laila remembered Wajma 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 circling in Laila's head after she gave Rasheed 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, Laila watched Mariam push a cube of meat around her plate. Laila was there when Rasheed sprang the news on Mariam in a high, dramatic voice-Laila had never before witnessed such cheerful cruelty. Mariam's lashes fluttered when she heard. A flush spread across her face. She sat sulking, looking desolate.

After, Rasheed went upstairs to listen to his radio, and Laila helped Mariam clear the *sojrah*.

"I can't imagine what you are now," Mariam said, picking grains of rice and bread crumbs, "if you were a Benz before."

Laila tried a more lightheaded tactic. "A train? Maybe a big jumbo jet."

Mariam straightened up. "I hope you don't think this excuses you from chores."

Laila opened her mouth, thought better of it. She reminded herself that Mariam was the only innocent party in this arrangement. Mariam and the baby-Later, in bed, Laila burst into tears.

What was the matter? Rasheed wanted to know, lifting her chin. Was she ill? Was it the baby, was something wrong with the baby? No?

Was Mariam mistreating her?

"That's it, isn't it?"

"No."

" *Wallah o billah*, I'll go down and teach her a lesson. Who does she think she is, that *harami*, 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 decent to me. I need a minute, that's all. I'll be fine."

He sat beside her, stroking her neck, murmuring- His hand slowly crept down to her back, then up again. He leaned in, flashed his crowded teeth.

"Let's see, then," he purred, "if I can't help you feel better."

* * *

First, the trees-those that hadn't been cut down for firewood-shed their spotty yellow-and-copper leaves. Then came the winds, cold and raw, ripping through the city. They tore off the last of the clinging leaves, and left the trees looking ghostly against the muted brown of the hills. The season's first snowfall was light, the flakes no sooner fallen than melted. Then the roads froze, and snow gathered in heaps on the rooftops, piled halfway up frost-caked windows. With snow came the kites, once the rulers of Kabul's winter skies, now timid trespassers in territory claimed by streaking rockets and fighter jets.

Rasheed kept bringing home news of the war, and Laila was baffled by the allegiances that Rasheed tried to explain to her. Sayyaf was fighting the Hazaras, he said. The Hazaras were fighting Massoud.

"And he's fighting Hekmatyar, of course, who has the support of the Pakistanis. Mortal enemies, those two, Massoud and Hekmatyar. Sayyaf,

he's siding with Massoud. And Hekmatyar supports the Hazaras for now."

As for the unpredictable Uzbek commander Dostum, Rasheed said no one knew where he would stand. Dostum had fought the Soviets in the 1980s alongside the Mujahideen but had defected and joined Najibullah's communist puppet regime after the Soviets had left. He had even earned a medal, presented by Najibullah himself, before defecting once again and returning to the Mujahideen's side. For the time being, Rasheed said, Dostum was supporting Massoud.

In Kabul, particularly in western Kabul, fires raged, and black palls of smoke mushroomed over snow-clad buildings. Embassies closed down. Schools collapsed. In hospital waiting rooms, Rasheed said, the wounded were bleeding to death. In operating rooms, limbs were being amputated without anesthesia.

"But don't worry," he said. "You're safe with me, my flower, my *gul*. Anyone tries to harm you, I'll rip out their liver and make them eat it."

That winter, everywhere Laila turned, walls blocked her way. She thought longingly of the wide-open skies of her childhood, of her days of going to *buzkashi* tournaments with Babi and shopping at Mandaii with Mammy, of her days of running free in the streets and gossiping about boys with Giti and Hasina. Her days of sitting with Tariq in a bed of clover on the banks of a stream somewhere, trading riddles and candy, watching the sun go down.

But thinking of Tariq was treacherous because, before she could stop, she saw him lying on a bed, far from home, tubes piercing his burned body. Like the bile that kept burning her throat these days, a deep, paralyzing grief would come rising up Laila's chest. Her legs would turn to water. She would have to hold on to something.

Laila passed that winter of 1992 sweeping the house, scrubbing the pumpkin-colored walls of the bedroom she shared with Rasheed, washing

clothes outside in a big copper *lagoon*. Sometimes she saw herself as if hovering above her own body, saw herself squatting over the rim of the *lagoon*, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, pink hands wringing soapy water from one of Rasheed's undershirts. She felt lost then, casting about, like a shipwreck survivor, no shore in sight, only miles and miles of water.

When it was too cold to go outside, Laila ambled around the house. She walked, dragging a fingernail along the wall, down the hallway, then back, down the steps, then up, her face unwashed, hair uncombed. She walked until she ran into Mariam, who shot her a cheerless glance and went back to slicing the stem off a bell pepper and trimming strips of fat from meat. A hurtful silence would fill the room, and Laila could almost see the wordless hostility radiating from Mariam like waves of heat rising from asphalt. She would retreat back to her room, sit on the bed, and watch the snow falling.

* * *

Rasheed took her to his shoe shop one day.

When they were out together, he walked alongside her, one hand gripping her by the elbow. For Laila, being out in the streets had become an exercise in avoiding injury. Her eyes were still adjusting to the limited, gridlike visibility of the burqa, her feet still stumbling over the hem. She walked in perpetual fear of tripping and falling, of breaking an ankle stepping into a pothole. Still, she found some comfort in the anonymity that the burqa provided. She wouldn't be recognized this way if she ran into an old acquaintance of hers. She wouldn't have to watch the surprise in their eyes, or the pity or the glee, at how far she had fallen, at how her lofty aspirations had been dashed.

Rasheed's shop was bigger and more brightly lit than Laila had

imagined. He had her sit behind his crowded workbench, the top of which was littered with old soles and scraps of leftover leather. He showed her his hammers, demonstrated how the sandpaper wheel worked, his voice ringing high and proud-He felt her belly, not through the shirt but under it, his fingertips cold and rough like bark on her distended skin. Laila remembered Tariq's hands, soft but strong, the tortuous, full veins on the backs of them, which she had always found so appealingly masculine.

"Swelling so quickly," Rasheed said. "It's going to be a big boy. My son will be *apahlawan*/Like his father."

Laila pulled down her shirt. It filled her with fear when he spoke like this.

"How are things with Mariam?"

She said they were fine.

"Good. Good."

She didn't tell him that they'd had their first true fight.

It had happened a few days earlier. Laila had gone to the kitchen and found Mariam yanking drawers and slamming them shut. She was looking, Mariam said, for the long wooden spoon she used to stir rice.

"Where did you put it?" she said, wheeling around to face Laila.

"Me?" Laila said "I didn't take it. I hardly come in here."

"I've noticed."

"Is that an accusation? It's how you wanted it, remember. You said you would make the meals. But if you want to switch-"

"So you're saying it grew little legs and walked out. *Teep, teep, teep, teep*. Is that what happened, *degeh?*'

"I'm saying..." Laila said, trying to maintain control. Usually, she could will herself to absorb Mariam's derision and finger-pointing. But her ankles had swollen, her head hurt, and the heartburn was vicious that day. "I am saying that maybe you've misplaced it."

"Misplaced it?" Mariam pulled a drawer. The spatulas and knives inside it clanked. "How long have you been here, a few months? I've lived in this house for nineteen years, *dokhiarjo*. I have kept *that* spoon in *this* drawer since you were shitting your diapers."

"Still," Laila said, on the brink now, teeth clenched, "it's possible you put it somewhere and forgot."

"And it's *possible you* hid it somewhere, to aggravate me."

"You're a sad, miserable woman," Laila said.

Mariam flinched, then recovered, pursed her lips. "And you're a whore. A whore and a *dozd*. A thieving whore, that's what you are!"

Then there was shouting- Pots raised though not hurled. They'd called each other names, names that made Laila blush now. They hadn't spoken since. Laila was still shocked at how easily she'd come unhinged, but, the truth was, part of her had liked it, had liked how it felt to scream at Mariam, to curse at her, to have a target at which to focus all her simmering anger, her grief.

Laila wondered, with something like insight, if it wasn't the same for Mariam.

After, she had run upstairs and thrown herself on Rasheed's bed. Downstairs, Mariam was still yelling, "Dirt on your head! Dirt on your head!" Laila had lain on the bed, groaning into the pillow, missing her parents suddenly and with an overpowering intensity she hadn't felt since those terrible days just after the attack. She lay there, clutching handfuls of the bedsheet, until, suddenly, her breath caught. She sat up, hands shooting down to her belly.

The baby had just kicked for the first time.

Jbarly one morning the next spring, of 1993, Mariam stood by the living-room window and watched Rasheed escort the girl out of the house. The girl was tottering forward, bent at the waist, one arm draped protectively across the taut drum of her belly, the shape of which was visible through her burqa. Rasheed, anxious and overly attentive, was holding her elbow, directing her across the yard like a traffic policeman. He made a *Wait here* gesture, rushed to the front gate, then motioned for the girl to come forward, one foot propping the gate open. When she reached him, he took her by the hand, helped her through the gate. Mariam could almost hear him say, "*Watch your step, now, my flower, my gul.*"

They came back early the next evening.

Mariam saw Rasheed enter the yard first. He let the gate go prematurely, and it almost hit the girl on the face. He crossed the yard in a few, quick steps. Mariam detected a shadow on his face, a darkness underlying the coppery light of dusk. In the house, he took off his coat, threw it on the couch. Brushing past Mariam, he said in a brusque voice, "I'm hungry. Get supper ready."

The front door to the house opened. From the hallway, Mariam saw the girl, a swaddled bundle in the hook of her left arm. She had one foot outside, the other inside, against the door, to prevent it from springing shut. She was stooped over and was grunting, trying to reach for the paper bag of belongings that she had put down in order to open the door. Her face was grimacing with effort. She looked up and saw Mariam.

Mariam turned around and went to the kitchen to warm Rasheed's meal.

* * *

"Irs like someone is ramming a screwdriver into my ear," Rasheed said, rubbing his eyes. He was standing in Mariam's door, puffy-eyed, wearing

only a *iumban* tied with a floppy knot. His white hair was straggly, pointing every which way. "This crying. I can't stand it."

Downstairs, the girl was walking the baby across the floor, trying to sing to her.

"I haven't had a decent night's sleep in two months," Rasheed said. "And the room smells like a sewer. There's shit cloths lying all over the place. I stepped on one just the other night."

Mariam smirked inwardly with perverse pleasure.

"Take her outside!" Rasheed yelled over his shoulder. "Can't you take her outside?"

The singing was suspended briefly. "She'll catch pneumonia!"

"It's summertime!"

'What?

Rasheed clenched his teeth and raised his voice. "I said, It's warm out!"

"I'm not taking her outside!"

The singing resumed

"Sometimes, I swear, sometimes I want to put that thing in a box and let her float down Kabul River. Like baby Moses."

Mariam never heard him call his daughter by the name the girl had given her, Aziza, the Cherished One. It was always *the baby*, or, when he was really exasperated, *thai thing*.

Some nights, Mariam overheard them arguing. She tiptoed to their door, listened to him complain about the baby-always the baby-the insistent crying, the smells, the toys that made him trip, the way the baby had hijacked Laila's attentions from him with constant demands to be fed, burped, changed, walked, held. The girl, in turn, scolded him for smoking in the room, for not letting the baby sleep with them.

There were other arguments waged in voices pitched low.

"The doctor said six weeks."

