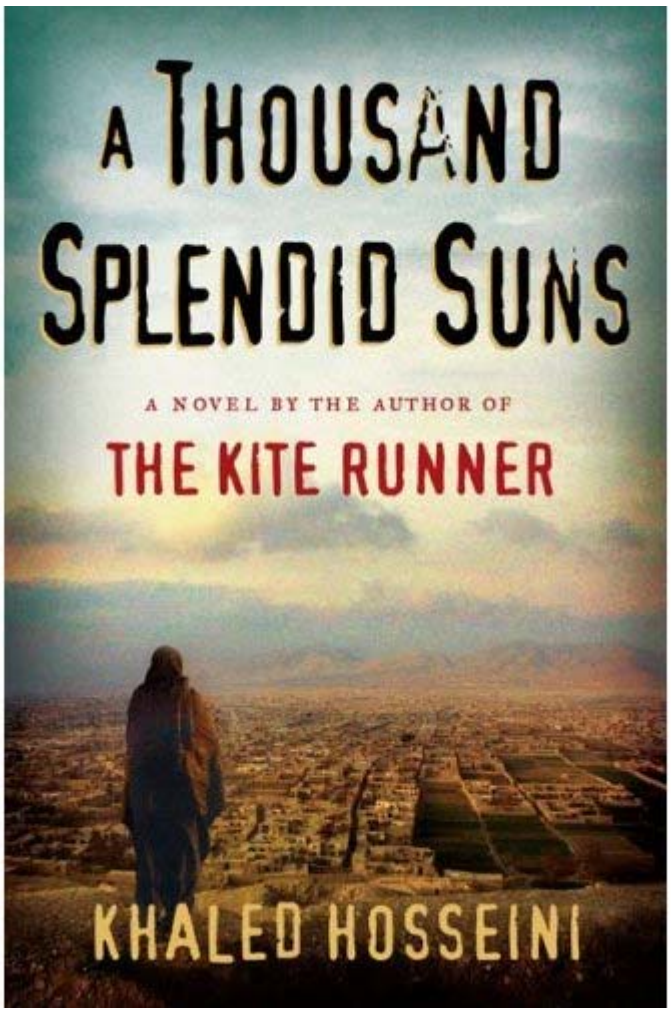
A Thousand Splendid Suns

Khaled Hosseini



Rivekhead Books

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2007

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ),*61* Apollo Drive,Rosedale, North Shore 0745, Auckland, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hosseini, Khaled. A thousand splendid suns / Khaled Hosseini.
p. cm.

ISBN: 1-4295-1460-4
1. Families-Fiction. 2. Afghanistan-Fiction. I. Title.

PS3608.O832K58 2003 2007008679

813'.6-dc22

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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.

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

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

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

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

At the ti-me, Ma-ri-am did not un-ders-tand. She did not know what this word*ha-ra-mi-bas-tard -me-ant*Nor was she old eno-ugh to ap-pre-ci-ate the inj-us-ti-ce, to see that it is the cre-ators of the*ha-ra-mi* who are cul-pab-le, not the*ha-ra-mi,* who-se only sin is be-ing born. Ma-ri-am*did* sur-mi-se, by the way Na-na sa-id the word, that it was an ugly, lo-ath-so-me thing to be a*ha-ra-mi,* li-ke an

in-sect, li-ke the scur-rying cock-ro-ac-hes Na-na was al-ways cur-sing and swe-eping out of the*kol-ba.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What rich li-es!" Na-na sa-id af-ter Jalil left. "Rich man tel-ling rich li-es. He ne-ver to-ok you to any tree. And don't let him charm you. He bet-ra-yed us, yo-ur be-lo-ved fat-her. He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy ho-use li-ke we we-re not-hing to him. He did it hap-pily."

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

* * *

Even if she had to sha-re him.

Jalil had three wi-ves and ni-ne child-ren, ni-ne le-gi-ti-ma-te child-ren, all of whom we-re stran-gers to Ma-ri-am. He was one of He-rat's we-alt-hi-est men. He ow-ned a ci-ne-ma, which Ma-ri-am had ne-ver se-en, but at her in-sis-ten-ce Jalil had desc-ri-bed it to her, and so she knew that the fa9ade was ma-de of blue-and-tan ter-ra-cot-ta ti-les, that it had pri-va-te bal-cony se-ats and a trel-li-sed ce-iling. Do-ub-le swin-ging do-ors ope-ned in-to a ti-led lobby, whe-re pos-ters of Hin-di films we-re en-ca-sed in glass disp-lays. On Tu-es-days, Jalil sa-id one day, kids got free ice cre-am at the con-ces-si-on stand

Na-na smi-led de-mu-rely when he sa-id this. She wa-ited un-til he had left the*kol-ba,* be-fo-re snic-ke-ring and sa-ying, "The child-ren of stran-gers get ice cre-am. What do you get, Ma-ri-am? Sto-ri-es of ice cre-am."

In ad-di-ti-on to the ci-ne-ma, Jalil ow-ned land in Ka-rokh, land in Fa-rah, three car-pet sto-res, a clot-hing shop, and a black 1956 Bu-ick Ro-ad-mas-ter. He was one of He-rat's best-con-nec-ted men, fri-end of the ma-yor and the pro-vin-ci-al go-ver-nor. He had a co-ok, a dri-ver, and three ho-use-ke-epers.

Na-na had be-en one of the ho-use-ke-epers. Un-til her belly be-gan to swell.

When that hap-pe-ned, Na-na sa-id, the col-lec-ti-ve gasp of Jalil's fa-mily suc-ked the air out of He-rat. His in-laws swo-re blo-od wo-uld flow. The wi-ves de-man-ded that he throw her out. Na-na's own fat-her, who was a lowly sto-ne car-ver in the ne-arby vil-la-ge of Gul Da-man, di-sow-ned her. Disg-ra-ced, he pac-ked his things and bo-ar-ded a bus to Bran, ne-ver to be se-en or he-ard from aga-in.

"So-me-ti-mes," Na-na sa-id early one mor-ning, as she was fe-eding the chic-kens out-si-de the*kol-ba,* "I wish my fat-her had had the sto-mach to shar-pen one of his kni-ves and do the ho-no-rab-le thing. It might ha-ve be-en bet-ter for me." She tos-sed anot-her hand-ful of se-eds in-to the co-op, pa-used, and lo-oked at Ma-ri-am. "Bet-ter for you too, may-be. It wo-uld ha-ve spa-red you the gri-ef of kno-wing that you are what you are. But he was a co-ward, my fat-her. He didn't ha-ve the*dil,* the he-art, for it."

Jalil didn't ha-ve the*dil* eit-her, Na-na sa-id, to do the ho-no-rab-le thing. To stand up to his fa-mily, to his wi-ves and in-laws, and ac-cept res-pon-si-bi-lity for what he had do-ne. Ins-te-ad, be-hind clo-sed do-ors, a fa-ce-sa-ving de-al had qu-ickly be-en struck. The next day, he had ma-de her gat-her her few things from the ser-vants' qu-ar-ters, whe-re she'd be-en li-ving, and sent her off.

"You know what he told his wi-ves by way of de-fen-se? That I*for-ced* myself on him. That it was my fa-ult.*Di-di?* You see? This is what it me-ans to be a wo-man in this world."

Na-na put down the bowl of chic-ken fe-ed. She lif-ted Ma-ri-am's chin with a fin-ger.

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

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

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

2.

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

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

"A we-ed," Na-na sa-id. "So-met-hing you rip out and toss asi-de."

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was Muh-sin, Jalil's el-dest son by his first wi-fe, Kha-di-ja, who sug-ges-ted the cle-aring- It was on the outs-kirts of Gul Da-man. To get to it, one to-ok a rut-ted, up-hill dirt track that branc-hed off the ma-in ro-ad bet-we-en He-rat and Gul Da-man. The track was flan-ked on eit-her si-de by knee-high grass and speck-les of whi-te and bright yel-low flo-wers. The track sna-ked up-hill and led to a flat fi-eld whe-re

pop-lars and cot-ton-wo-ods so-ared and wild bus-hes grew in clus-ters. From up the-re, one co-uld ma-ke out the tips of the rus-ted bla-des of Gul Da-man's wind-mill, on the left, and, on the right, all of He-rat spre-ad be-low. The path en-ded per-pen-di-cu-lar to a wi-de, tro-ut-fil-led stre-am, which rol-led down from the Sa-fid-koh mo-un-ta-ins sur-ro-un-ding Gul Da-man. Two hund-red yards upst-re-am, to-ward the mo-un-ta-ins, the-re was a cir-cu-lar gro-ve of we-eping wil-low tre-es. In the cen-ter, in the sha-de of the wil-lows, was the cle-aring.

Jalil went the-re to ha-ve a lo-ok. When he ca-me back, Na-na sa-id, he so-un-ded li-ke a war-den brag-ging abo-ut the cle-an walls and shiny flo-ors of his pri-son.

"And so, yo-ur fat-her bu-ilt us this rat-ho-le."

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

"His idea of pe-nan-ce."

*** * ***

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

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

"I'm sorry, Na-na."

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

"I'm sorry."

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

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

well-lit ro-om. Jalil sho-ok his he-ad with sad-ness when Ma-ri-am told him abo-ut the kni-fe.

Ma-ri-am al-so ca-me to do-ubt that she had ma-de her mot-her suf-fer for two full days.

"They told me it was all over wit-hin un-der an ho-ur," Jalil sa-id. "You we-re a go-od da-ugh-ter, Ma-ri-am jo. Even in birth you we-re a go-od da-ugh-ter."

"He wasn't even the-re!" Na-na spat. "He was in Takht-e-Sa-far, hor-se-back ri-ding with his pre-ci-o-us fri-ends."

When they in-for-med him that he had a new da-ugh-ter, Na-na sa-id, Jalil had shrug-ged, kept brus-hing his hor-se's ma-ne, and sta-yed in Takht-e-Sa-far anot-her two we-eks.

"The truth is, he didn't even hold you un-til you we-re a month old. And then only to lo-ok down on-ce, com-ment on yo-ur lon-gish fa-ce, and hand you back to me."

Ma-ri-am ca-me to dis-be-li-eve this part of the story as well. Yes, Jalil ad-mit-ted, he had be-en hor-se-back ri-ding in Takht-e-Sa-far, but, when they ga-ve him the news, he had not shrug-ged. He had hop-ped on the sad-dle and rid-den back to He-rat. He had bo-un-ced her in his arms, run his thumb over her flaky eyeb-rows, and hum-med a lul-laby. Ma-ri-am did not pic-tu-re Jalil sa-ying that her fa-ce was long, tho-ugh it was true that it was long.

Na-na sa-id she was the one who'd pic-ked the na-me Ma-ri-am be-ca-use it had be-en the na-me of her mot-her. Jalil sa-id he cho-se the na-me be-ca-use Ma-ri-am, the tu-be-ro-se, was a lo-vely flo-wer.

"Yo-ur fa-vo-ri-te?" Ma-ri-am as-ked.

"Well, one of," he sa-id and smi-led.

3.

One of Ma-ri-am's ear-li-est me-mo-ri-es was the so-und of a whe-el-bar-row's squ-e-aky iron whe-els bo-un-cing over rocks. The whe-el-bar-row ca-me on-ce a month, fil-led with ri-ce, flo-ur, tea, su-gar, co-oking oil, so-ap, to-oth-pas-te. It was pus-hed by two of Ma-ri-am's half brot-hers, usu-al-ly Muh-sin and Ra-min, so-me-ti-mes Ra-min and Far-had. Up the dirt track, over rocks and peb-bles, aro-und ho-les and bus-hes, the boys to-ok turns pus-hing un-til they re-ac-hed the stre-am. The-re, the whe-el-bar-row had to be emp-ti-ed and the items hand-car-ri-ed ac-ross the wa-ter. Then the boys wo-uld trans-fer the whe-el-bar-row ac-ross the stre-am and

lo-ad it up aga-in. Anot-her two hund-red yards of pus-hing fol-lo-wed, this ti-me thro-ugh tall, den-se grass and aro-und thic-kets of shrubs. Frogs le-aped out of the-ir way. The brot-hers wa-ved mos-qu-ito-es from the-ir swe-aty fa-ces.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you co-ming?"

"Yes, Na-na."

"They la-ugh at you. They do. I he-ar them."
"I'm co-ming."

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

"He-re I am."

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

*** * ***

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

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

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

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

He was a ga-unt, sto-oping old man with a to-oth-less smi-le and a whi-te be-ard that drop-ped to his na-vel. Usu-al-ly, he ca-me alo-ne to the*kol-ba,* tho-ugh so-me-ti-mes with his rus-set-ha-ired son Ham-za, who was a few ye-ars ol-der than Ma-ri-am.

When he sho-wed up at the*kol-ba,* Ma-ri-am kis-sed Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah's hand-which felt li-ke kis-sing a set of twigs co-ve-red with a thin la-yer of skin-and he kis-sed the top of her brow be-fo-re they sat in-si-de for the day's les-son. Af-ter, the two of them sat out-si-de the*kol-ba,* ate pi-ne nuts and sip-ped gre-en tea, watc-hed the bul-bul birds dar-ting from tree to tree. So-me-ti-mes they went for walks among the bron-ze fal-len le-aves and al-der bus-hes, along the stre-am and to-ward the mo-un-ta-ins. Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah twir-led the be-ads of his*tas-beh* ro-sary as they strol-led, and, in his qu-ive-ring vo-ice, told Ma-ri-am sto-ri-es of all the things he'd se-en in his yo-uth, li-ke the two-he-aded sna-ke he'd fo-und in Iran, on Is-fa-han's Thirty-three Arch Brid-ge, or the wa-ter-me-lon he had split on-ce out-si-de the Blue Mos-que in Ma-zar, to find the se-eds for-ming the words*Al-lah* on one half,*Ak-bar* on the ot-her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes.

"And you want me to ask yo-ur mot-her for per-mis-si-on."

Ma-ri-am smi-led. Ot-her than Jalil, she tho-ught the-re was no one in the world who un-ders-to-od her bet-ter than her old tu-tor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lo-ok at me."

Ma-ri-am did.

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

"Endu-re what, Na-na?"

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

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

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

Ma-ri-am nod-ded.

"And no mo-re talk abo-ut scho-ol. You're all I ha-ve. I won't lo-se you to them. Lo-ok
at me. No mo-re talk abo-ut scho-ol."

"Be re-aso-nab-le- Co-me now. If the girl wants-" Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah be-gan.

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

4.

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

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

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

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

Sus-pen-ded in the air, Ma-ri-am wo-uld see Jalil's up-tur-ned fa-ce be-low her, his wi-de, cro-oked smi-le, his wi-dow's pe-ak, his cleft chin-a per-fect poc-ket for the tip

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

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

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

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

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

"Well. You must be happy," Na-na sa-id. "How many is that for you, now? Ten, is it,*mas-hal-lah1?* Ten?"

Jalil sa-id yes, ten.

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

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

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

Li-li Mi bird-bath, Sit-ting on a dirt path, Min-now sat on the rim and drank, Slip-ped, and in the wa-ter she sank

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

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

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

Ma-ri-am as-ked him what a so-ci-alist was and Jalil be-gan**to exp-la-in,** but Ma-ri-am ba-rely he-ard him.

"Are you lis-te-ning?"

"I am."

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

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

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

She did. "What do you think?"

Jalil be-amed "I think you lo-ok li-ke a qu-e-en."

After he left, Na-na saw the pen-dant aro-und Ma-ri-am's neck.

"No-mad jewelry," she sa-id. "I've se-en them ma-ke it. They melt the co-ins pe-op-le throw at them and ma-ke jewelry. Let's see him bring you gold next ti-me, yo-ur pre-ci-o-us fat-her. Let's see him."

When it was ti-me for Jalil to le-ave, Ma-ri-am al-ways sto-od in the do-or-way and watc-hed him exit the cle-aring, def-la-ted at the tho-ught of the we-ek that sto-od, li-ke an im-men-se, im-mo-vab-le obj-ect, bet-we-en her and his next vi-sit. Ma-ri-am al-ways held her bre-ath as she watc-hed him go. She held her bre-ath and, in her he-ad, co-un-ted se-conds. She pre-ten-ded that for each se-cond that she didn't bre-at-he, God wo-uld grant her anot-her day with Jalil.

At night, Ma-ri-am lay in her cot and won-de-red what his ho-use in He-rat was li-ke. She won-de-red what it wo-uld be li-ke to li-ve with him, to see him every day. She pic-tu-red her-self han-ding him a to-wel as he sha-ved, tel-ling him when he nic-ked him-self. She wo-uld brew tea for him. She wo-uld sew on his mis-sing but-tons. They wo-uld ta-ke walks in He-rat to-get-her, in the va-ul-ted ba-za-ar whe-re Jalil sa-id you co-uld find anyt-hing you wan-ted. They wo-uld ri-de in his car, and pe-op-le wo-uld po-int and say, "The-re go-es Jalil Khan with his da-ugh-ter." He wo-uld show her the fa-med tree that had a po-et bu-ri-ed be-ne-ath it.

One day so-on, Ma-ri-am de-ci-ded, she wo-uld tell Jalil the-se things. And when he he-ard, when he saw how much she mis-sed him when he was go-ne, he wo-uld su-rely ta-ke her with him. He wo-uld bring her to He-rat, to li-ve in his ho-use, just li-ke his ot-her child-ren.

5.

I know what I want," Ma-ri-am sa-id to Jalil.

It was the spring of 1974, the ye-ar Ma-ri-am tur-ned fif-te-en. The three of them we-re sit-ting out-si-de the*kol-ba,* in a patch of sha-de thrown by the wil-lows, on fol-ding cha-irs ar-ran-ged in a tri-ang-le.

"For my birth-day…1 know what I want."

"You do?" sa-id Jalil, smi-ling en-co-ura-gingly.

Two we-eks be-fo-re, at Ma-ri-am's prod-ding, Jalil had let on that an Ame-ri-can film was pla-ying at his ci-ne-ma. It was**a** spe-ci-al kind of film, what he'd cal-led a car-to-on. The en-ti-re film was a se-ri-es of dra-wings, he sa-id, tho-usands of them, so that when they we-re ma-de in-to a film and pro-j-ec-ted on-to a scre-en you had the il-lu-si-on that the dra-wings we-re mo-ving. Jalil sa-id the film told the story of an old, child-less toy-ma-ker who is lo-nely and des-pe-ra-tely wants a son. So he car-ves a pup-pet, a boy, who ma-gi-cal-ly co-mes to li-fe. Ma-ri-am had as-ked him

to tell her mo-re, and Jalil sa-id**that** the old man and his pup-pet had all sorts of ad-ven-tu-res, that the-re was a pla-ce cal-led Ple-asu-re Is-land, and bad boys who tur-ned in-to don-keys. They even got swal-lo-wed by a wha-le at the end, the pup-pet and his fat-her. Ma-ri-am had told Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah all abo-ut this film.

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

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

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

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

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

"Aneh,"Na-na sa-id. "You see? Yo-ur fat-her ag-re-es."

*** * ***

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

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

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

"Ma-ri-am jo-"

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

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

Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red him tel-ling her that on the scre-en a hu-man fa-ce lo-oked as big as a ho-use, that when a car cras-hed up the-re you felt the me-tal twis-ting in yo-ur bo-nes. She pic-tu-red her-self sit-ting in the pri-va-te bal-cony se-ats, lap-ping at ice cre-am, along-si-de her sib-lings and Jalil. "It's what I want," she sa-id.

Jalil lo-oked at her with a for-lorn exp-res-si-on.

"To-mor-row. At no-on. I'll me-et you at this very spot. All right? To-mor-row?"

"Co-me he-re," he sa-id. He hun-ke-red down, pul-led her to him, and held her for a long, long ti-me.

*** * ***

At first. Na-na pa-ced aro-und the*kol-ba,* clen-c-hing and unc-lenc-hing her fists.

"Of all the da-ugh-ters I co-uld ha-ve had, why did God gi-ve me an ung-ra-te-ful one li-ke you? Everyt-hing I en-du-red for you! How da-re you! How da-re you aban-don me li-ke this, you tre-ac-he-ro-us lit-tle*ha-ra-mil"*

Then she moc-ked.

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

Then she tri-ed gu-ilt.

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

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

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

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

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

*You 're af-ra-id, Na-na,*she might ha-ve sa-id.*You 're af-ra-id that 1 might find the hap-pi-ness you ne-ver had. And you don 'i want me to be happy. You don't want a go-od li-fe for me. You 're the one with the wretc-hed he-art*

*** * ***

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

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

*** * ***

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

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

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

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

At the stre-am, Ma-ri-am wa-ited by the spot they had ag-re-ed on the day be-fo-re. In the sky, a few gray, ca-ulif-lo-wer-sha-ped clo-uds drif-ted by. Jalil had ta-ught her that gray clo-uds got the-ir co-lor by be-ing so den-se that the-ir top parts ab-sor-bed

the sun-light and cast the-ir own sha-dow along the ba-se.*That's what you see, Ma-ri-am jo,* he had sa-id,*the dark in the-ir un-der-bel-ly.*

So-me ti-me pas-sed.

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

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

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

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

*** * ***

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

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

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

Sprightly, she wal-ked back to the wi-de tho-ro-ugh-fa-re ne-ar the park. She pas-sed old ven-dors with le-at-hery fa-ces sit-ting un-der the sha-de of pla-ne tre-es, ga-zing

at her im-pas-si-vely be-hind pyra-mids of cher-ri-es and mo-unds of gra-pes. Ba-re-fo-ot boys ga-ve cha-se to cars and bu-ses, wa-ving bags of qu-in-ces. Ma-ri-am sto-od at a stre-et cor-ner and watc-hed the pas-sersby, unab-le to un-ders-tand how they co-uld be so in-dif-fe-rent to the mar-vels aro-und them.

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

"Can you po-int me?"

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*** * ***

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

For a mo-ment, Ma-ri-am he-ard Na-na's vo-ice in her he-ad, moc-king, do-using the de-ep-se-ated glow of her ho-pes. With shaky legs, Ma-ri-am ap-pro-ac-hed the front

do-or of the ho-use. She put her hands on the walls. They we-re so tall, so fo-re-bo-ding, Jalil's walls. She had to cra-ne her neck to see whe-re the tops of cypress tre-es prot-ru-ded over them from the ot-her si-de. The tre-etops swa-yed in the bre-eze, and she ima-gi-ned they we-re nod-ding the-ir wel-co-me to her. Ma-ri-am ste-adi-ed her-self aga-inst the wa-ves of dis-may pas-sing thro-ugh her.

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

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

A lo-ok of con-fu-si-on cros-sed the girl's fa-ce. Then, a flash of re-cog-ni-ti-on. The-re was a fa-int smi-le on her lips now, and an air of eager-ness abo-ut her, of an-ti-ci-pa-ti-on. "Wa-it he-re," the girl sa-id qu-ickly.

She clo-sed the do-or.

A few mi-nu-tes pas-sed. Then a man ope-ned the do-or. He was tall and squ-are-sho-ul-de-red, with sle-epy-lo-oking eyes and a calm fa-ce.

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

"His what?"

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

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

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

"When will he be back?"

"He didn't say."

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

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

"I'm used to the dark."

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

Ma-ri-am only lo-oked at him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The dri-ver sig-hed. "Let me ta-ke you ho-me. Co-me on,*dok-h-ta-rjo.* "

Ma-ri-am sto-od up and wal-ked to-ward him. But then, at the last mo-ment, she chan-ged di-rec-ti-on and ran to the front ga-tes. She felt the dri-ver's fin-gers fumb-ling for a grip at her sho-ul-der. She shed him and burst thro-ugh the open ga-tes.

In the hand-ful of se-conds that she was in Jalil's gar-den, Ma-ri-am's eyes re-gis-te-red se-e-ing a gle-aming glass struc-tu-re with plants in-si-de it, gra-pe vi-nes clin-ging to wo-oden trel-li-ses, a fish-pond bu-ilt with gray blocks of sto-ne, fru-it tre-es, and bus-hes of brightly co-lo-red flo-wers everyw-he-re. Her ga-ze skim-med over all of the-se things be-fo-re they fo-und a fa-ce, ac-ross the gar-den, in an ups-ta-irs win-dow. The fa-ce was the-re for only an ins-tant, a flash, but long eno-ugh. Long eno-ugh for Ma-ri-am to see the eyes wi-den, the mo-uth open. Then it snap-ped away from vi-ew. A hand ap-pe-ared and fran-ti-cal-ly pul-led at a cord. The cur-ta-ins fell shut.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She let him gu-ide her ac-ross the ro-ad and up the track. The-re was ho-ney-suck-le gro-wing along the path, and milk-we-ed too. Be-es we-re buz-zing over twink-ling wildf-lo-wers. The dri-ver to-ok her hand and hel-ped her cross the stre-am. Then he

let go, and he was tal-king abo-ut how He-rat's fa-mo-us one hund-red and twenty days' winds wo-uld start blo-wing so-on, from mid-mor-ning to dusk, and how the sand fli-es wo-uld go on a fe-eding frenzy, and then sud-denly he was stan-ding in front of her, trying to co-ver her eyes, pus-hing her back the way they had co-me and sa-ying, "Go back! No. Don't lo-ok now. Turn aro-und! Go back!"

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

6.

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

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

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

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

"Oh, Ma-ri-am jo."

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

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

But Ma-ri-am co-uld not he-ar com-fort in God's words. Not that day. Not then. All she co-uld he-ar was Na-na sa-ying,*I'll die if you go. I'll just die.* All she co-uld do was cry and cry and let her te-ars fall on the spot-ted, pa-per-thin skin of Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah's hands.

* * *

On the ri-de to his ho-use, Jalil sat in the back-se-at of his car with Ma-ri-am, his arm dra-ped over her sho-ul-der.

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

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

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

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

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

The ro-om had a bed with a gre-en-flo-we-red blan-ket knit in a tightly wo-ven, ho-ney-comb de-sign. The cur-ta-ins, pul-led back to re-ve-al the gar-den be-low, matc-hed the blan-ket. Be-si-de the bed was a three-dra-wer chest with a flo-wer va-se on it. The-re we-re shel-ves along the walls, with fra-med pic-tu-res of pe-op-le Ma-ri-am did not re-cog-ni-ze. On one of the shel-ves, Ma-ri-am saw a col-lec-ti-on of iden-ti-cal wo-oden dolls, ar-ran-ged in a li-ne in or-der of dec-re-asing si-ze.

Jalil saw her lo-oking.*"Mat-r-yos-h-ka* dolls. I got them in Mos-cow. You can play with them, if you want. No one will mind."

Ma-ri-am sat down on the bed.

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

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

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

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

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

But whe-re do I be-long? What am I go-ing to do now?

*I'm all you ha-ve in this world, Ma-ri-am, and when I'm go-ne you'll ha-ve not-hing. You'll ha-ve not-hing. You*are*not-hing!*

Li-ke the wind thro-ugh the wil-lows aro-und the*kol-ba,* gusts of an inexp-res-sib-le black-ness kept pas-sing thro-ugh Ma-ri-am.

On Ma-ri-am's se-cond full day at Jalil's ho-use, a lit-tle girl ca-me in-to the ro-om.

"I ha-ve to get so-met-hing," she sa-id.

Ma-ri-am sat up on the bed and cros-sed her legs, pul-led the blan-ket on her lap.

The girl hur-ri-ed ac-ross the ro-om and ope-ned the clo-set do-or. She fetc-hed a squ-are-sha-ped gray box.

"You know what this is?" she sa-id. She ope-ned the box. "It's cal-led a gra-mop-ho-ne.*Gra-mo. Pho-ne.* It plays re-cords. You know, mu-sic. A gra-mop-ho-ne."

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

The lit-tle girl smi-led. She had Jalil's smi-le and his dimp-led chin. "How did you know?"

Ma-ri-am shrug-ged. She didn't say to this girl that she'd on-ce na-med a peb-ble af-ter her.

"Do you want to he-ar a song?"

Ma-ri-am shrug-ged aga-in.
Ni-lo-ufar plug-ged in the gra-mop-ho-ne. She fis-hed a small re-cord from a po-uch be-ne-ath the box's lid. She put it on, lo-we-red the ne-ed-le. Mu-sic be-gan to play.

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

"Do you know it?"

"No."

"It's from an Ira-ni-an film. I saw it at my fat-her's ci-ne-ma. Hey, do you want to see so-met-hing?"
Be-fo-re Ma-ri-am co-uld ans-wer, Ni-lo-ufar had put her palms and fo-re-he-ad to the gro-und She pus-hed with her so-les and then she was stan-ding up-si-de down, on her he-ad, in a three-po-int stan-ce.

"Can you do that?" she sa-id thickly.

"No."

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

"I don't know."

"My mot-her says you're not re-al-ly my sis-ter li-ke you say you are."

"I ne-ver sa-id I was," Ma-ri-am li-ed.

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

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

"My mot-her says*a jinn* ma-de yo-ur mot-her hang her-self."

"You can stop that now," Ma-ri-am sa-id, tur-ning to her si-de. "The mu-sic, I me-an."

Bi-bi jo ca-me to see her that day too. It was ra-ining by the ti-me she ca-me. She lo-we-red her lar-ge body on-to the cha-ir be-si-de the bed, gri-ma-cing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How are you, my girl?"

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

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

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

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

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

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One ap-ter-no-on, a we-ek la-ter, the-re was a knock on the do-or, and a tall wo-man wal-ked in. She was fa-ir-skin-ned, had red-dish ha-ir and long fin-gers.
"I'm Af-so-on," she sa-id. "Ni-lo-ufar's mot-her. Why don't you wash up, Ma-ri-am, and co-me downs-ta-irs?"

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

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

7.

1 hey sat ac-ross from her, Jalil and his wi-ves, at a long, dark brown tab-le. Bet-we-en them, in the cen-ter of the tab-le, was a crystal va-se of fresh ma-ri-golds and a swe-ating pitc-her of wa-ter. The red-ha-ired wo-man who had int-ro-du-ced her-self as Ni-lo-ufar's mot-her, Af-so-on, was sit-ting on Jalil's right. The ot-her two, Kha-di-ja and Nar-gis, we-re on his left. The wi-ves each had on a flimsy black scarf, which they wo-re not on the-ir he-ads but ti-ed lo-osely aro-und the neck li-ke an

af-tert-ho-ught. Ma-ri-am, who co-uld not ima-gi-ne that they wo-uld we-ar black for Na-na, pic-tu-red one of them sug-ges-ting it, or may-be Jalil, just be-fo-re she'd be-en sum-mo-ned.

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

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

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

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

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

Ma-ri-am lo-oked up.

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

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

Ma-ri-am's sto-mach fell. "A what?" she sa-id thro-ugh sud-denly numb lips.

"A*kha-si-egar*. A su-itor. His na-me is Ras-he-ed," Kha-di-ja went on. "He is a fri-end of a bu-si-ness ac-qu-a-in-tan-ce of yo-ur fat-her's. He's a Pash-tun, from Kan-da-har ori-gi-nal-ly, but he li-ves in Ka-bul, in the Deh-Ma-zang dist-rict, in a two-story ho-use that he owns."

Afso-on was nod-ding. "And he do-es spe-ak Far-si, li-ke us, li-ke you. So you won't ha-ve to le-arn Pash-to."

Ma-ri-am's chest was tigh-te-ning. The ro-om was re-eling up and down, the gro-und shif-ting be-ne-ath her fe-et.

"He's a sho-ema-ker," Kha-di-ja was sa-ying now. "But not so-me kind of or-di-nary stre-et-si-de*mo-oc-hi,* no, no. He has his own shop, and he is one of the most so-ught-after sho-ema-kers in Ka-bul He ma-kes them for dip-lo-mats, mem-bers of the pre-si-den-ti-al fa-mily-that class of pe-op-le. So you see, he will ha-ve no tro-ub-le pro-vi-ding for you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't you want a fa-mily of yo-ur own?"

"Yes. A ho-me, child-ren of yo-ur own?"

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

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

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

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

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

"He's so old and we-ak," Kha-di-ja even-tu-al-ly sa-id. "And what will you do when he's go-ne? You'd be a bur-den to his fa-mily."

*As you are now to us.*Ma-ri-am al-most*saw* the uns-po-ken words exit Kha-di-ja's mo-uth, li-ke foggy bre-ath on a cold day.

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

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

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

"Tell them!" Ma-ri-am cri-ed

The wo-men grew qu-i-et now. Ma-ri-am sen-sed that they we-re watc-hing him too. Wa-iting. A si-len-ce fell over the ro-om. Jalil kept twir-ling his wed-ding band, with a bru-ised, help-less lo-ok on his fa-ce. From in-si-de the ca-bi-net, the clock tic-ked on and on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8.

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

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

Jalil sho-wed her to a cha-ir. He was we-aring a light brown su-it and a red tie. His ha-ir was was-hed. When he pul-led out the cha-ir for her, he tri-ed to smi-le en-co-ura-gingly. Kha-di-ja and Af-so-on sat on Ma-ri-am's si-de of the tab-le this ti-me.

The mul-lah mo-ti-oned to-ward the ve-il, and Nar-gis ar-ran-ged it on Ma-ri-am's he-ad be-fo-re ta-king a se-at. Ma-ri-am lo-oked down at her hands.

"You can call him in now," Jalil sa-id to so-me-one.

Ma-ri-am smel-led him be-fo-re she saw him. Ci-ga-ret-te smo-ke and thick, swe-et co-log-ne, not fa-int li-ke Jalil's. The scent of it flo-oded Ma-ri-am's nost-rils. Thro-ugh the ve-il, from the cor-ner of her eye, Ma-ri-am saw a tall man, thick-bel-li-ed and bro-ad-sho-ul-de-red, sto-oping in the do-or-way. The si-ze of him al-most ma-de her gasp, and she had to drop her ga-ze, her he-art ham-me-ring away. She sen-sed him lin-ge-ring in the do-or-way. Then his slow, he-avy-fo-oted mo-ve-ment ac-ross the ro-om. The candy bowl on the tab-le clin-ked in tu-ne with his steps. With a thick grunt, he drop-ped on a cha-ir be-si-de her. He bre-at-hed no-isily.

The mul-lah wel-co-med them. He sa-id this wo-uld not be a tra-di-ti-onal*nik-ka*

"I un-ders-tand that Ras-he-ed*ag-ha* has tic-kets for the bus to Ka-bul that le-aves shortly. So, in the in-te-rest of ti-me, we will bypass so-me of the tra-di-ti-onal steps to spe-ed up the pro-ce-edings."

The mul-lah ga-ve a few bles-sings, sa-id a few words abo-ut the im-por-tan-ce of mar-ri-age. He as-ked Jalil if he had any obj-ec-ti-ons to this uni-on, and Jalil sho-ok his he-ad. Then the mul-lah as-ked Ras-he-ed if he in-de-ed wis-hed to en-ter in-to a mar-ri-age cont-ract with Ma-ri-am. Ras-he-ed sa-id, "Yes." His harsh, raspy vo-ice re-min-ded Ma-ri-am of the so-und of dry autumn le-aves crus-hed un-der-fo-ot.

"And do you, Ma-ri-am jan, ac-cept this man as yo-ur hus-band?"

Ma-ri-am sta-yed qu-i-et. Thro-ats we-re cle-ared.

"She do-es," a fe-ma-le vo-ice sa-id from down the tab-le.

"Actu-al-ly," the mul-lah sa-id, "she her-self has to ans-wer. And she sho-uld wa-it un-til I ask three ti-mes. The po-int is, he's se-eking her, not the ot-her way aro-und."

He as-ked the qu-es-ti-on two mo-re ti-mes. When Ma-ri-am didn't ans-wer, he as-ked it on-ce mo-re, this ti-me mo-re

for-ce-ful-ly- Ma-ri-am co-uld fe-el Jalil be-si-de her shif-ting on his se-at, co-uld sen-se fe-et cros-sing and unc-ros-sing be-ne-ath the tab-le. The-re was mo-re thro-at cle-aring. A small, whi-te hand re-ac-hed out and flic-ked a bit of dust off the tab-le.

"Ma-ri-am," Jalil whis-pe-red.

"Yes," she sa-id sha-kily.

A mir-ror was pas-sed be-ne-ath the ve-il. In it, Ma-ri-am saw her own fa-ce first, the arch-less, uns-ha-pely eyeb-rows, the flat ha-ir, the eyes, mirth-less gre-en and set so clo-sely to-get-her that one might mis-ta-ke her for be-ing cross-eyed. Her skin was co-ar-se and had a dull, spotty ap-pe-aran-ce. She tho-ught her brow too wi-de, the chin too nar-row, the lips too thin. The ove-rall imp-res-si-on was of a long fa-ce, a tri-an-gu-lar fa-ce, a bit ho-und-li-ke. And yet Ma-ri-am saw that, oddly eno-ugh, the who-le of the-se un-me-mo-rab-le parts ma-de for a fa-ce that was not pretty but, so-me-how, not unp-le-asant to lo-ok at eit-her.

In the mir-ror, Ma-ri-am had her first glimp-se of Ras-he-ed: the big, squ-are, ruddy fa-ce; the ho-oked no-se; the flus-hed che-eks that ga-ve the imp-res-si-on of sly che-er-ful-ness; the wa-tery, blo-ods-hot eyes; the crow-ded te-eth, the front two pus-hed to-get-her li-ke a gab-led ro-of; the im-pos-sibly low ha-ir-li-ne, ba-rely two fin-ger widths abo-ve the bushy eyeb-rows; the wall of thick, co-ar-se, salt-and-pep-per ha-ir.

The-ir ga-zes met bri-efly in the glass and slid away.

*This is the fa-ce of my hus-band,*Ma-ri-am tho-ught.

They exc-han-ged the thin gold bands that Ras-he-ed fis-hed from his co-at poc-ket. His na-ils we-re yel-low-brown, li-ke the in-si-de of a rot-ting ap-ple, and so-me of the tips we-re cur-ling, lif-ting. Ma-ri-am's hands sho-ok when she tri-ed to slip the band on-to his fin-ger, and Ras-he-ed had to help her. Her own band was a lit-tle tight, but Ras-he-ed had no tro-ub-le for-cing it over her knuck-les.

"The-re," he sa-id.

"It's a pretty ring," one of the wi-ves sa-id. "It's lo-vely, Ma-ri-am."

"All that re-ma-ins now is the sig-ning of the cont-ract," the mul-lah sa-id.

Ma-ri-am sig-ned her na-me-the*me-em*, ther*eh*, the 3^ and the*me-em* aga-in-con-s-ci-o-us of all the eyes on her hand. The next ti-me Ma-ri-am sig-ned her na-me to a do-cu-ment, twenty-se-ven ye-ars la-ter, a mul-lah wo-uld aga-in be pre-sent.

"You are now hus-band and wi-fe," the mul-lah sa-id.*"Tab-re-ek.* Con-g-ra-tu-la-ti-ons."

*** * ***

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

Jalil was busy tel-ling her that Ka-bul was so be-a-uti-ful, the Mog-hul em-pe-ror Ba-bur had as-ked that he be bu-ri-ed the-re. Next, Ma-ri-am knew, he'd go on abo-ut Ka-bul's gar-dens, and its shops, its tre-es, and its air, and, be-fo-re long, she wo-uld be on the bus and he wo-uld walk along-si-de it, wa-ving che-er-ful-ly, uns-cat-hed, spa-red.

Ma-ri-am co-uld not bring her-self to al-low it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't le-ave li-ke this," he sa-id in a thin vo-ice.

"You didn't even ha-ve the de-cency to gi-ve me the ti-me to say go-od-bye to Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah."

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

"Ma-ri-amjo."

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

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

9.

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

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

Ma-ri-am qu-ickly sur-ve-yed the nar-row, un-pa-ved ro-ad along which Ras-he-ed's ho-use was si-tu-ated. The ho-uses on this ro-ad we-re crow-ded to-get-her and sha-red com-mon walls, with small, wal-led yards in front buf-fe-ring them from the stre-et. Most of the ho-mes had flat ro-ofs and we-re ma-de of bur-ned brick, so-me of mud the sa-me dusty co-lor as the mo-un-ta-ins that rin-ged the city. Gut-ters se-pa-ra-ted the si-de-walk from the ro-ad on both si-des and flo-wed with muddy wa-ter. Ma-ri-am saw small mo-unds of flyblown gar-ba-ge lit-te-ring the stre-et he-re

and the-re. Ras-he-ed's ho-use had two sto-ri-es. Ma-ri-am co-uld see that it had on-ce be-en blue.

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

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

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

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

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

Then she was crying.

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

"Do-ne?"

Ma-ri-am nod-ded.

"Su-re?"

"Yes."

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

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

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

Ras-he-ed sig-hed ir-ri-tably. A puff of his smoky bre-ath hit Ma-ri-am's fa-ce. "I won't ta-ke that per-so-nal-ly. This ti-me."

Aga-in, he to-ok her by the el-bow, and led her ups-ta-irs.

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

"This is my ro-om."

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

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

Ma-ri-am sat on the bed.

"You didn't no-ti-ce," he sa-id He was stan-ding in the do-or-way, sto-oping a lit-tle to fit.

"Lo-ok on the win-dow-sill. You know what kind they are? I put them the-re be-fo-re le-aving for He-rat."

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

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

"Yes."

"You can thank me then."

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

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

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

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

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

10.

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

For most of the days, Ma-ri-am sta-yed in bed, fe-eling ad-rift and for-lorn. So-me-ti-mes she went downs-ta-irs to the kitc-hen, ran her hands over the sticky, gre-ase-sta-ined co-un-ter, the vinyl, flo-we-red cur-ta-ins that smel-led li-ke bur-ned me-als. She lo-oked thro-ugh the ill-fit-ting dra-wers, at the mis-matc-hed spo-ons and

kni-ves, the co-lan-der and chip-ped, wo-oden spa-tu-las, the-se wo-uld-be inst-ru-ments of her new da-ily li-fe, all of it re-min-ding her of the ha-voc that had struck her li-fe, ma-king her fe-el up-ro-oted, disp-la-ced, li-ke an int-ru-der on so-me-one el-se's li-fe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He told her abo-ut his day. A pa-ir of lo-afers he had cus-tom-ma-de for the de-puty fo-re-ign mi-nis-ter-who, Ras-he-ed sa-id, bo-ught sho-es only from him. An or-der for san-dals from a Po-lish dip-lo-mat and his wi-fe. He told her of the su-pers-ti-ti-ons pe-op-le had abo-ut sho-es: that put-ting them on a bed in-vi-ted de-ath in-to the fa-mily, that a qu-ar-rel wo-uld fol-low if one put on the left shoe first.

"Unless it was do-ne unin-ten-ti-onal-ly on a Fri-day," he sa-id. "And did you know it's sup-po-sed to be a bad omen to tie sho-es to-get-her and hang them from a na-il?"

Ras-he-ed him-self be-li-eved no-ne of this. In his opi-ni-on, su-pers-ti-ti-ons we-re lar-gely a fe-ma-le pre-oc-cu-pa-ti-on.

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

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

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

"I ne-ed an ans-wer."

"Yes."

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

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

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

She set three cups of len-tils to so-ak in a pot, fo-und a kni-fe and cut so-me car-rots and a pa-ir of po-ta-to-es, left them too to so-ak. She se-arc-hed for flo-ur, fo-und it in the back of one of the ca-bi-nets be-hind a row of dirty spi-ce jars, and ma-de fresh

do-ugh, kne-ading it the way Na-na had shown her, pus-hing the do-ugh with the he-el of her hand, fol-ding the outer ed-ge, tur-ning it, and pus-hing it away aga-in. On-ce she had flo-ured the do-ugh, she wrap-ped it in a mo-ist cloth, put on a*hi-j-ab,* and set out for the com-mu-nal tan-do-or.

Ras-he-ed had told her whe-re it was, down the stre-et, a left then a qu-ick right, but all Ma-ri-am had to do was fol-low the flock of wo-men and child-ren who we-re he-aded the sa-me way. The child-ren Ma-ri-am saw, cha-sing af-ter the-ir mot-hers or run-ning ahe-ad of them, wo-re shirts patc-hed and patc-hed aga-in. They wo-re tro-users that lo-oked too big

or too small, san-dals with rag-ged straps that flap-ped back and forth. They rol-led dis-car-ded old bicyc-le ti-res with sticks.

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

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

This end-less con-ver-sa-ti-on, the to-ne pla-in-ti-ve but oddly che-er-ful, flew aro-und and aro-und in a circ-le. On it went, down the stre-et, aro-und the cor-ner, in li-ne at the tan-do-or. Hus-bands who gamb-led. Hus-bands who do-ted on the-ir mot-hers and wo-uldn't spend a ru-pi-ah on them, the wi-ves. Ma-ri-am won-de-red how so many wo-men co-uld suf-fer the sa-me mi-se-rab-le luck, to ha-ve mar-ri-ed, all of them, such dre-ad-ful men. Or was this a wi-fely ga-me that she did not know abo-ut, a da-ily ri-tu-al, li-ke so-aking ri-ce or ma-king do-ugh? Wo-uld they ex-pect her so-on to jo-in in?

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

With a cor-ner of her*hi-j-ab,* she dab-bed at the mo-is-tu-re abo-ve her up-per lip and tri-ed to gat-her her ner-ves. For a few mi-nu-tes, everyt-hing went well-Then so-me-one tap-ped her on the sho-ul-der. Ma-ri-am tur-ned aro-und and fo-und a light-skin-ned, plump wo-man we-aring a*hi-j-ab,* li-ke her. She had short, wiry black ha-ir and a go-od-hu-mo-red, al-most per-fectly ro-und fa-ce. Her lips we-re much ful-ler than Ma-ri-am's, the lo-wer one slightly dro-opy, as tho-ugh drag-ged down by

the big, dark mo-le just be-low the lip li-ne. She had big gre-enish eyes that sho-ne at Ma-ri-am with an in-vi-ting glint.

"You're Ras-he-ed jan's new wi-fe, aren't you?" the wo-man sa-id, smi-ling wi-dely.

"The one from He-rat. You're so yo-ung! Ma-ri-am jan, isn't it? My na-me is Fa-ri-ba. I li-ve on yo-ur stre-et, fi-ve ho-uses to yo-ur left, the one with the gre-en do-or. This is my son-No-or."

The boy at her si-de had a smo-oth, happy fa-ce and wiry ha-ir li-ke his mot-her's. The-re was a patch of black ha-irs on the lo-be of his left ear. His eyes had a misc-hi-evo-us, reck-less light in them. He ra-ised his hand.*"Sa-la-am, Kha-la* Jan."

"No-or is ten. I ha-ve an ol-der boy too, Ah-mad."

"He's thir-te-en," No-or sa-id.

"Thir-te-en go-ing on forty." The wo-man Fa-ri-ba la-ug-hed. "My hus-band's na-me is Ha-kim," she sa-id. "He's a te-ac-her he-re in Deh-Ma-zang. You sho-uld co-me by so-me-ti-me, we'll ha-ve a cup-"

And then sud-denly, as if em-bol-de-ned, the ot-her wo-men pus-hed past Fa-ri-ba and swar-med Ma-ri-am, for-ming a circ-le aro-und her with alar-ming spe-ed
"So you're Ras-he-ed jan's yo-ung bri-de-"

"How do you li-ke Ka-bul?"

"I've be-en to He-rat. I ha-ve a co-usin the-re"

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

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

"Boy is bet-ter, Ma-ri-am jan, they carry the fa-mily na-me-"

"Bah! Boys get mar-ri-ed and run off. Girls stay be-hind and ta-ke ca-re of you when you're old"

"We he-ard you we-re co-ming."

"Ha-ve twins. One of each! Then ever-yo-ne's happy."

Ma-ri-am bac-ked away. She was hyper-ven-ti-la-ting. Her ears buz-zed, her pul-se flut-te-red, her eyes dar-ted from one fa-ce to anot-her. She bac-ked away aga-in, but

the-re was now-he-re to go to-she was in the cen-ter of a circ-le. She spot-ted Fa-ri-ba, who was frow-ning, who saw that she was in dist-ress.

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

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

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

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

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

"You're ble-eding,*ham-s-hi-ral"*

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

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

"I ma-de*da-al"* Ma-ri-am sa-id.

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

She po-ured wa-ter for him from the*afi-awa* to wash his hands with. As he dri-ed with a to-wel, she put be-fo-re him a ste-aming bowl*of da-al* and a pla-te of fluffy

whi-te ri-ce. This was the first me-al she had co-oked for him, and Ma-ri-am wis-hed she had be-en in a bet-ter sta-te when she ma-de it. She'd still be-en sha-ken from the in-ci-dent at the tan-do-or as she'd co-oked, and all day she had fret-ted abo-ut the*da-al'%* con-sis-tency, its co-lor, wor-ri-ed that he wo-uld think she'd stir-red in too much gin-ger or not eno-ugh tur-me-ric.

He dip-ped his spo-on in-to the gold-co-lo-red*da-al.*

Ma-ri-am swa-yed a bit. What if he was di-sap-po-in-ted or angry? What if he pus-hed his pla-te away in disp-le-asu-re?

"Ca-re-ful," she ma-na-ged to say. "It's hot."

Ras-he-ed pur-sed his lips and blew, then put the spo-on in-to his mo-uth.

"It's go-od," he sa-id. "A lit-tle un-der-sal-ted but go-od. May-be bet-ter than go-od, even."

Re-li-eved, Ma-ri-am lo-oked on as he ate. A fla-re of pri-de ca-ught her off gu-ard. She had do-ne well -*may-be bet-ter than go-od, even*- and it surp-ri-sed her, this thrill she felt over his small comp-li-ment- The day's ear-li-er unp-le-asant-ness re-ce-ded a bit.

"To-mor-row is Fri-day," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "What do you say I show you aro-und?"

"Aro-und Ka-bul?"

"No. Cal-cut-ta."

Ma-ri-am blin-ked.

"It's a joke. Of co-ur-se Ka-bul. Whe-re el-se?" He re-ac-hed in-to the brown pa-per bag. "But first, so-met-hing I ha-ve to tell you."

He fis-hed a sky blue bur-qa from the bag. The yards of ple-ated cloth spil-led over his kne-es when he lif-ted it. He rol-led up the bur-qa, lo-oked at Ma-ri-am.

"I ha-ve cus-to-mers, Ma-ri-am, men, who bring the-ir wi-ves to my shop. The wo-men co-me un-co-ve-red, they talk to me di-rectly, lo-ok me in the eye wit-ho-ut sha-me. They we-ar ma-ke-up and skirts that show the-ir kne-es. So-me-ti-mes they even put the-ir fe-et in front of me, the wo-men do, for me-asu-re-ments, and the-ir hus-bands stand the-re and watch. They al-low it. They think not-hing of a stran-ger to-uc-hing the-ir wi-ves' ba-re fe-et! They think they're be-ing mo-dern men, in-tel-lec-tu-als, on ac-co-unt of the-ir edu-ca-ti-on, I sup-po-se. They don't see that they're spo-iling the-ir own*nang* and*na-mo-os,* the-ir ho-nor and pri-de."

He sho-ok his he-ad.

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

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

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

Ma-ri-am nod-ded. When he ex-ten-ded the bag to her, she to-ok it.

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

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

11.

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

"You'll get used to it," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "With ti-me, I bet you'll even li-ke it."

They to-ok a bus to a pla-ce Ras-he-ed cal-led the Shar-e-Nau Park, whe-re child-ren pus-hed each ot-her on swings and slap-ped vol-ley-bal-ls over rag-ged nets ti-ed to tree trunks. They strol-led to-get-her and watc-hed boys fly ki-tes, Ma-ri-am wal-king be-si-de Ras-he-ed, trip-ping now and then on the bur-qa's hem. For lunch, Ras-he-ed to-ok her to eat in a small ke-bab ho-use ne-ar a mos-que he cal-led the Ha-ji Yag-ho-ub. The flo-or was sticky and the air smoky. The walls smel-led fa-intly of raw me-at and the mu-sic, which Ras-he-ed desc-ri-bed to her as*lo-ga-ri,* was lo-ud. The co-oks we-re thin boys who fan-ned ske-wers with one hand and swat-ted gnats with the ot-her. Ma-ri-am, who had ne-ver be-en in-si-de a res-ta-urant, fo-und it odd at first to sit in a crow-ded ro-om with so many stran-gers, to lift her bur-qa to put mor-sels of fo-od in-to her mo-uth. A hint of the sa-me an-xi-ety as the day at the tan-do-or stir-red in her sto-mach, but Ras-he-ed's pre-sen-ce was of so-me com-fort, and, af-ter a whi-le, she did not mind so much the mu-sic, the smo-ke, even the

pe-op-le. And the bur-qa, she le-ar-ned to her surp-ri-se, was al-so com-for-ting. It was li-ke a one-way win-dow. In-si-de it, she was an ob-ser-ver, buf-fe-red from the scru-ti-ni-zing eyes of stran-gers. She no lon-ger wor-ri-ed that pe-op-le knew, with a sing-le glan-ce, all the sha-me-ful sec-rets of her past.

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

"Which is yo-ur fa-vo-ri-te?" he as-ked
Ma-ri-am he-si-ta-ted, po-in-ted to a Vol-ga, and Ras-he-ed la-ug-hed

Ka-bul was far mo-re crow-ded than the lit-tle that Ma-ri-am had se-en of He-rat. The-re we-re fe-wer tre-es and fe-wer*ga-ris* pul-led by hor-ses, but mo-re cars, tal-ler bu-il-dings, mo-re traf-fic lights and mo-re pa-ved ro-ads. And everyw-he-re Ma-ri-am he-ard the city's pe-cu-li-ar di-alect: "De-ar" wa-sj-on ins-te-ad*of jo*, "sis-ter" be-ca-me*ham-s-hi-ra* in-s-te-ad of*ham-s-hi-reh*, and so on.

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

They wal-ked on to a pla-ce cal-led Koc-heh-Morg-ha, Chic-ken Stre-et. It was a nar-row, crow-ded ba-za-ar in a ne-igh-bor-ho-od that Ras-he-ed sa-id was one of Ka-bul's we-alt-hi-er ones.
"Aro-und he-re is whe-re fo-re-ign dip-lo-mats li-ve, rich bu-si-nes-smen, mem-bers of the ro-yal fa-mily-that sort of pe-op-le. Not li-ke you and me."

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

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

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

They strol-led past car-pet shops, han-dic-raft shops, pastry shops, flo-wer shops, and shops that sold su-its for men and dres-ses for wo-men, and, in them, be-hind

la-ce cur-ta-ins, Ma-ri-am saw yo-ung girls se-wing but-tons and iro-ning col-lars. From ti-me to ti-me, Ras-he-ed gre-eted a shop-ke-eper he knew, so-me-ti-mes in Far-si, ot-her ti-mes in Pash-to. As they sho-ok hands and kis-sed on the che-ek, Ma-ri-am sto-od a few fe-et away. Ras-he-ed did not wa-ve her over, did not int-ro-du-ce her.

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

Ma-ri-am wa-ited out-si-de on the crow-ded si-de-walk. She watc-hed the cars craw-ling up Chic-ken Stre-et, thre-ading thro-ugh the hor-de of haw-kers and pe-dest-ri-ans, hon-king at child-ren and don-keys who wo-uldn't mo-ve. She watc-hed the bo-red-lo-oking merc-hants in-si-de the-ir tiny stalls, smo-king, or spit-ting in-to brass spit-to-ons, the-ir fa-ces emer-ging from the sha-dows now and then to ped-dle tex-ti-les and fur-col-la-red-*po-osi-in*co-ats to pas-sersby.

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

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

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

Then Ras-he-ed was tap-ping her on the sho-ul-der and han-ding her so-met-hing he-re.

It was a dark ma-ro-on silk shawl with be-aded frin-ges and ed-ges emb-ro-ide-red with gold thre-ad

"Do you li-ke it?"

Ma-ri-am lo-oked up. Ras-he-ed did a to-uc-hing thing then. He blin-ked and aver-ted her ga-ze.

Ma-ri-am tho-ught of Jalil, of the emp-ha-tic, jovi-al way in which he'd pus-hed his jewelry at her, the over-po-we-ring che-er-ful-ness that left ro-om for no res-pon-se but me-ek gra-ti-tu-de. Na-na had be-en right abo-ut Mil's gifts. They had be-en half-he-ar-ted to-kens of pe-nan-ce, in-sin-ce-re, cor-rupt ges-tu-res me-ant mo-re for his own ap-pe-ase-ment than hers. This shawl, Ma-ri-am saw, was a true gift.

"It's be-a-uti-ful," she sa-id.

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That night, Ras-he-ed vi-si-ted her ro-om aga-in. But ins-te-ad of smo-king in the do-or-way, he cros-sed the ro-om and sat be-si-de her whe-re she lay on the bed. The springs cre-aked as the bed til-ted to his si-de.

The-re was a mo-ment of he-si-ta-ti-on, and then his hand was on her neck, his thick fin-gers slowly pres-sing the knobs in the back of it. His thumb slid down, and now it was stro-king the hol-low abo-ve her col-lar-bo-ne, then the flesh be-ne-ath it. Ma-ri-am be-gan shi-ve-ring. His hand crept lo-wer still, lo-wer, his fin-ger-na-ils catc-hing in the cot-ton of her blo-use.
"I can't," she cro-aked, lo-oking at his mo-on-lit pro-fi-le, his thick sho-ul-ders and bro-ad chest, the tufts of gray ha-ir prot-ru-ding from his open col-lar.

His hand was on her right bre-ast now, squ-e-ezing it hard thro-ugh the blo-use, and she co-uld he-ar him bre-at-hing de-eply thro-ugh the no-se.

He slid un-der the blan-ket be-si-de her. She co-uld fe-el his hand wor-king at his belt, at the drawst-ring of her tro-users. Her own hands clenc-hed the she-ets in fist-fuls. He rol-led on top of her, wrig-gled and shif-ted, and she let out a whim-per. Ma-ri-am clo-sed her eyes, grit-ted her te-eth.

The pa-in was sud-den and as-to-nis-hing. Her eyes sprang open. She suc-ked air thro-ugh her te-eth and bit on the knuck-le of her thumb. She slung her free arm over Ras-he-ed's back and her fin-gers dug at his shirt.

Ras-he-ed bu-ri-ed his fa-ce in-to her pil-low, and Ma-ri-am sta-red, wi-de-eyed, at the ce-iling abo-ve his sho-ul-der, shi-ve-ring, lips pur-sed, fe-eling the he-at of his

qu-ick bre-aths on her sho-ul-der. The air bet-we-en them smel-led of to-bac-co, of the oni-ons and gril-led lamb they had eaten ear-li-er. Now and then, his ear rub-bed aga-inst her che-ek, and she knew from the scratchy fe-el that he had sha-ved it.

When it was do-ne, he rol-led off her, pan-ting. He drop-ped his fo-re-arm over his brow. In the dark, she co-uld see the blue hands of his watch. They lay that way for a whi-le, on the-ir backs, not lo-oking at each ot-her.

"The-re is no sha-me in this, Ma-ri-am," he sa-id, slur-ring a lit-tle. "It's what mar-ri-ed pe-op-le do. It's what the Prop-het him-self and his wi-ves did The-re is no sha-me."

A few mo-ments la-ter, he pus-hed back the blan-ket and left the ro-om, le-aving her with the imp-res-si-on of his he-ad on her pil-low, le-aving her to wa-it out the pa-in down be-low, to lo-ok at the fro-zen stars in the sky and a clo-ud that dra-ped the fa-ce of the mo-on li-ke a wed-ding ve-il.

12.

Jtva-ma-dan ca-me in the fall that ye-ar, 1974. For the first ti-me in her li-fe, Ma-ri-am saw how the sigh-ting of the new cres-cent mo-on co-uld trans-form an en-ti-re city, al-ter its rhythm and mo-od. She no-ti-ced a drowsy hush over-ta-king Ka-bul Traf-fic be-ca-me lan-gu-id, scant, even qu-i-et. Shops emp-ti-ed. Res-ta-urants tur-ned off the-ir lights, clo-sed the-ir do-ors. Ma-ri-am saw no smo-kers on the stre-ets, no cups of tea ste-aming from win-dow led-ges. And at*ifi-ar*, when the sun dip-ped in the west and the can-non fi-red from the Shir Dar-wa-za mo-un-ta-in, the city bro-ke its fast, and so did Ma-ri-am, with bre-ad and a da-te, tas-ting for the first ti-me in her fif-te-en ye-ars the swe-et-ness of sha-ring in a com-mu-nal ex-pe-ri-en-ce.

Except for a hand-ful of days, Ras-he-ed didn't ob-ser-ve the fast. The few ti-mes he did, he ca-me ho-me in a so-ur mo-od. Hun-ger ma-de him curt, ir-ri-tab-le, im-pa-ti-ent. One night, Ma-ri-am was a few mi-nu-tes la-te with din-ner, and he star-ted eating bre-ad with ra-dis-hes. Even af-ter Ma-ri-am put the ri-ce and the lamb and ok-ra*qur-ma* in front of him, he wo-uldn't to-uch it. He sa-id not-hing, and went on che-wing the bre-ad, his temp-les wor-king, the ve-in on his fo-re-he-ad, full and angry. He went on che-wing and sta-ring ahe-ad, and when Ma-ri-am spo-ke to him he lo-oked at her wit-ho-ut se-e-ing her fa-ce and put anot-her pi-ece of bre-ad in-to his mo-uth.

Ma-ri-am was re-li-eved when Ra-ma-dan en-ded.

Back at the*kol-ba*, on the first of three days of Eid-ul-Fitr ce-leb-ra-ti-on that fol-lo-wed Ra-ma-dan, Jalil wo-uld vi-sit Ma-ri-am and Na-na. Dres-sed in su-it and tie, he wo-uld co-me be-aring Eid pre-sents. One ye-ar, he ga-ve Ma-ri-am a wo-ol scarf. The three of them wo-uld sit for tea and then Jalil wo-uld ex-cu-se him-self

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

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

Ras-he-ed and she to-ok to the stre-ets. Ma-ri-am had ne-ver wal-ked amid such li-ve-li-ness. Un-da-un-ted by the chilly we-at-her, fa-mi-li-es had flo-oded the city on the-ir fre-ne-tic ro-unds to vi-sit re-la-ti-ves. On the-ir own stre-et, Ma-ri-am saw Fa-ri-ba and her son No-or, who was dres-sed in a su-it. Fa-ri-ba, we-aring a whi-te scarf, wal-ked be-si-de a small-bo-ned, shy-lo-oking man with eyeg-las-ses. Her ol-der son was the-re too-Ma-ri-am so-me-how re-mem-be-red Fa-ri-ba sa-ying his na-me, Ah-mad, at the tan-do-or that first ti-me. He had de-ep-set, bro-oding eyes, and his fa-ce was mo-re tho-ught-ful, mo-re so-lemn, than his yo-un-ger brot-her's, a fa-ce as sug-ges-ti-ve of early ma-tu-rity as his brot-her's was of lin-ge-ring bo-yish-ness. Aro-und Ah-mad's neck was a glit-te-ring al-lah pen-dant.

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

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

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

They went to Shar-e-Nau, whe-re kids rom-ped abo-ut in new shirts and be-aded, brightly co-lo-red vests and com-pa-red Eid gifts. Wo-men bran-dis-hed plat-ters of swe-ets. Ma-ri-am saw fes-ti-ve lan-terns han-ging from shop-win-dows, he-ard mu-sic bla-ring from lo-uds-pe-akers. Stran-gers cal-led out*"Eid-mu-ba-rak" to* her as they pas-sed.

That night they went to*Cha-man,* and, stan-ding be-hind Ras-he-ed, Ma-ri-am watc-hed fi-re-works light up the sky, in flas-hes of gre-en, pink, and yel-low. She mis-sed sit-ting with Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah out-si-de the*kol-ba,* wat-c-hing the fi-re-works exp-lo-de over He-rat in the dis-tan-ce, the sud-den bursts of co-lor ref-lec-ted in her tu-tor's soft, ca-ta-ract-rid-dled eyes. But, mostly, she mis-sed Na-na. Ma-ri-am wis-hed her mot-her we-re ali-ve to see this. To see*her,* amid all of it. To see at last that con-tent-ment and be-a-uty we-re not unat-ta-inab-le things. Even for the li-kes of them.

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They had Eid vi-si-tors at the ho-use. They we-re all men, fri-ends of Ras-he-ed's. When a knock ca-me, Ma-ri-am knew to go ups-ta-irs to her ro-om and clo-se the do-or. She sta-yed the-re, as the men sip-ped tea downs-ta-irs with Ras-he-ed, smo-ked, chat-ted. Ras-he-ed had told Ma-ri-am that she was not to co-me down un-til the vi-si-tors had left

Ma-ri-am didn't mind. In truth, she was even flat-te-red. Ras-he-ed saw sanc-tity in what they had to-get-her. Her ho-nor, her*na-mo-os,* was so-met-hing worth gu-ar-ding to him. She felt pri-zed by his pro-tec-ti-ve-ness. Tre-asu-red and sig-ni-fi-cant.

On the third and last day of Eid, Ras-he-ed went to vi-sit so-me fri-ends. Ma-ri-am, who'd had a qu-e-asy sto-mach all night, bo-iled so-me wa-ter and ma-de her-self a cup of gre-en tea sprink-led with crus-hed car-da-mom. In the li-ving ro-om, she to-ok in the af-ter-math of the pre-vi-o-us night's Eid vi-sits: the over-tur-ned cups, the half-che-wed pump-kin se-eds stas-hed bet-we-en mat-tres-ses, the pla-tes crus-ted with the out-li-ne of last night's me-al. Ma-ri-am set abo-ut cle-aning up the mess, mar-ve-ling at how ener-ge-ti-cal-ly lazy men co-uld be.

She didn't me-an to go in-to Ras-he-ed's ro-om. But the cle-aning to-ok her from the li-ving ro-om to the sta-irs, and then to the hal-lway ups-ta-irs and to his do-or, and, the next thing she knew, she was in his ro-om for the first ti-me, sit-ting on his bed, fe-eling li-ke a tres-pas-ser.

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

Gu-il-tily, she slid open the top dra-wer of his dres-ser.

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

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

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

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

Ma-ri-am sat on his bed, em-bar-ras-sed and con-fu-sed She cup-ped her fa-ce with her hands and clo-sed her eyes. She bre-at-hed and bre-at-hed un-til she felt cal-mer.

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

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

or what Jalil had do-ne? And what en-tit-led her any-way, a vil-la-ger, a*ha-ra-mi,* to pass judg-ment?

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

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

Be-ne-ath that, Ma-ri-am fo-und anot-her pho-to, al-so black-and-whi-te, this one slightly mo-re gra-iny. It was of a se-ated wo-man and, be-hind her, a thin-ner, yo-un-ger Ras-he-ed, with black ha-ir. The wo-man was be-a-uti-ful. Not as be-a-uti-ful as the wo-men in the ma-ga-zi-ne, per-haps, but be-a-uti-ful. Cer-ta-inly mo-re be-a-uti-ful than her, Ma-ri-am. She had a de-li-ca-te chin and long, black ha-ir par-ted in the cen-ter. High che-ek-bo-nes and a gent-le fo-re-he-ad. Ma-ri-am pic-tu-red her own fa-ce, her thin lips and long chin, and felt a flic-ker of je-alo-usy.

She lo-oked at this pho-to for a long ti-me. The-re was so-met-hing va-gu-ely un-set-tling abo-ut the way Ras-he-ed se-emed to lo-om over the wo-man. His hands on her sho-ul-ders. His sa-vo-ring, tight-lip-ped smi-le and her uns-mi-ling, sul-len fa-ce. The way her body til-ted for-ward subtly, as tho-ugh she we-re trying to wrig-gle free of his hands.

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

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

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

13.

On the bus ri-de ho-me from the doc-tor, the stran-gest thing was hap-pe-ning to Ma-ri-am. Everyw-he-re she lo-oked, she saw bright co-lors: on the drab, gray conc-re-te apart-ments, on the tin-ro-ofed, open-fron-ted sto-res, in the muddy wa-ter flo-wing in the gut-ters. It was as tho-ugh a ra-in-bow had mel-ted in-to her eyes.

Ras-he-ed was drum-ming his glo-ved fin-gers and hum-ming a song. Every ti-me the bus buc-ked over a pot-ho-le and jer-ked for-ward, his hand shot pro-tec-ti-vely over her belly.

"What abo-ut Zal-mai?" he sa-id. "It's a go-od Pash-tun na-me."

"What if it's a girl?" Ma-ri-am sa-id.

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

A mur-mur was pas-sing thro-ugh the bus. So-me pas-sen-gers we-re po-in-ting at so-met-hing and ot-her pas-sen-gers we-re le-aning ac-ross se-ats to see.

"Lo-ok," sa-id Ras-he-ed, tap-ping a knuck-le on the glass. He was smi-ling. "The-re. See?"

On the stre-ets, Ma-ri-am saw pe-op-le stop-ping in the-ir tracks. At traf-fic lights, fa-ces emer-ged from the win-dows of cars, tur-ned up-ward to-ward the fal-ling soft-ness. What was it abo-ut a se-ason's first snow-fall, Ma-ri-am won-de-red, that was so ent-ran-cing? Was it the chan-ce to see so-met-hing as yet un-so-iled, unt-rod-den? To catch the fle-eting gra-ce of a new se-ason, a lo-vely be-gin-ning, be-fo-re it was tramp-led and cor-rup-ted?

"If it's a girl," Ras-he-ed sa-id, "and it isn't, but, if it*is* a girl, then you can cho-ose wha-te-ver na-me you want."

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Ma-hi-am awo-ke the next mor-ning to the so-und of sa-wing and ham-me-ring- She wrap-ped a shawl aro-und her and went out in-to the snowb-lown yard. The he-avy snow-fall of the pre-vi-o-us night had stop-ped. Now only a scat-te-ring of light, swir-ling fla-kes tick-led her che-eks. The air was wind-less and smel-led li-ke bur-ning co-al. Ka-bul was eerily si-lent, qu-il-ted in whi-te, tend-rils of smo-ke sna-king up he-re and the-re.

She fo-und Ras-he-ed in the to-ols-hed, po-un-ding na-ils in-to a plank of wo-od. When he saw her, he re-mo-ved a na-il from the cor-ner of his mo-uth.

"It was go-ing to be a surp-ri-se. He'll ne-ed a crib. You we-ren't sup-po-sed to see un-til it was do-ne."

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

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

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

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

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

Ma-ri-am tho-ught of her six-hund-red-and-fifty-ki-lo-me-ter bus trip with Ras-he-ed, from He-rat in the west, ne-ar the bor-der with Iran, to Ka-bul in the east. They had pas-sed small towns and big towns, and knots of lit-tle vil-la-ges that kept sprin-ging up one af-ter anot-her. They had go-ne over mo-un-ta-ins and ac-ross raw-bur-ned de-serts, from one pro-vin-ce to the next. And he-re she was now, over tho-se bo-ul-ders and parc-hed hills, with a ho-me of her own, a hus-band of her own, he-ading to-ward one fi-nal, che-ris-hed pro-vin-ce: Mot-her-ho-od. How de-lec-tab-le it was to think of

this baby,*her* baby,*the-ir* baby. How glo-ri-o-us it was to know that her lo-ve for it al-re-ady dwar-fed anyt-hing she had ever felt as a hu-man be-ing, to know that the-re was no ne-ed any lon-ger for peb-ble ga-mes.

Downs-ta-irs, so-me-one was tu-ning a har-mo-ni-um. Then the clan-ging of a ham-mer tu-ning a tab-la. So-me-one cle-ared his thro-at. And then the-re was whist-ling and clap-ping and yip-ping and sin-ging.

Ma-ri-am stro-ked the soft-ness of her belly.*No big-ger than afin-ger-na-il,* the doc-tor had sa-id.

*I'm go-ing to be a mot-her,*she tho-ught.

"I'm go-ing to be a mot-her," she sa-id. Then she was la-ug-hing to her-self, and sa-ying it over and over, re-lis-hing the words.

When Ma-ri-am tho-ught of this baby, her he-art swel-led in-si-de of her. It swel-led and swel-led un-til all the loss, all the gri-ef, all the lo-ne-li-ness and self-aba-se-ment of her li-fe was-hed away. This was why God had bro-ught her he-re, all the way ac-ross the co-untry. She knew this now. She re-mem-be-red a ver-se from the Ko-ran that Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah had ta-ught her:*And Al-lah is the East and the West, the-re-fo-re whe-re-ver you turn the-re is Al-lah's pur-po-se* … She la-id down her pra-yer rug and did*na-maz.* When she was do-ne, she cup-ped her hands be-fo-re her fa-ce and as-ked God not to let all this go-od for-tu-ne slip away from her.

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It was Ras-he-ed'S idea to go to the*ha-mam.* Ma-ri-am had ne-ver be-en to a bath-ho-use, but he sa-id the-re was not-hing fi-ner than step-ping out and ta-king that first bre-ath of cold air, to fe-el the he-at ri-sing from the skin.

In the wo-men's*ha-mam,* sha-pes mo-ved abo-ut in the ste-am aro-und Ma-ri-am, a glimp-se of a hip he-re, the con-to-ur of a sho-ul-der the-re. The squ-e-als of yo-ung girls, the grunts of old wo-men, and the trick-ling of bath-wa-ter ec-ho-ed bet-we-en the walls as backs we-re scrub-bed and ha-ir so-aped. Ma-ri-am sat in the far cor-ner by her-self, wor-king on her he-els with a pu-mi-ce sto-ne, in-su-la-ted by a wall of ste-am from the pas-sing sha-pes.

Then the-re was blo-od and she was scre-aming.

The so-und of fe-et now, slap-ping aga-inst the wet cob-bles-to-nes. Fa-ces pe-ering at her thro-ugh the ste-am. Ton-gu-es cluc-king.

La-ter that night, in bed, Fa-ri-ba told her hus-band that when she'd he-ard the cry and rus-hed over she'd fo-und Ras-he-ed's wi-fe shri-ve-led in-to a cor-ner, hug-ging her kne-es, a po-ol of blo-od at her fe-et.

"You co-uld he-ar the po-or girl's te-eth rat-tling, Ha-kim, she was shi-ve-ring so hard."

When Ma-ri-am had se-en her, Fa-ri-ba sa-id, she had as-ked in a high, sup-pli-ca-ting vo-ice,*It's nor-mal, isn't it? Isn't it? Isn 'i it nor-mal?*

*** * ***

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

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

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

Ma-ri-am cur-led up her kne-es be-ne-ath the qu-ilt and sa-id he ought to get so-me rest.

"God's will," he sim-me-red.

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

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

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

14.

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

Then the-re we-re days when the dre-ari-ness didn't se-em qu-ite as un-re-len-ting to Ma-ri-am. Days when the me-re tho-ught of re-su-ming the old pat-terns of her li-fe did not se-em so ex-ha-us-ting, when it did not ta-ke enor-mo-us ef-forts of will to get out of bed, to do her pra-yers, to do the wash, to ma-ke me-als for Ras-he-ed.

Ma-ri-am dre-aded go-ing out-si-de. She was en-vi-o-us, sud-denly, of the ne-igh-bor-ho-od wo-men and the-ir we-alth of child-ren. So-me had se-ven or eight and didn't un-ders-tand how for-tu-na-te they we-re, how bles-sed that the-ir child-ren had flo-uris-hed in the-ir wombs, li-ved to squ-irm in the-ir arms and ta-ke the milk from the-ir bre-asts. Child-ren that they had not bled away with so-apy wa-ter and the bo-dily filth of stran-gers down so-me bath-ho-use dra-in. Ma-ri-am re-sen-ted them when she over-he-ard them comp-la-ining abo-ut mis-be-ha-ving sons and lazy da-ugh-ters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bles-sed is He in Who-se hand is the king-dom, and He Who has po-wer over all things, Who cre-ated de-ath and li-fe that He may try you.

Ran-sac-ked with gu-ilt, Ma-ri-am wo-uld kne-el and pray for for-gi-ve-ness for the-se tho-ughts.

* * *

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

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

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

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

"I worry that you are angry with me."

Ras-he-ed sig-hed

"Are you?"

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

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

"Is that the kind of man you ta-ke me for, af-ter everyt-hing I've do-ne for you?"

"No. Of co-ur-se not."

"Then stop pes-te-ring me!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"Thm you*do it," he sa-id sharply. "I've al-re-ady bu-ri-ed one son. I won't bury anot-her.

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

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

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

Gi-ve sus-te-nan-ce, Al-lah.

Gi-ve sus-te-nan-ce to me.

15.

April1978

On Ap-ril 17,1978, the ye-ar Ma-ri-am tur-ned ni-ne-te-en, a man na-med Mir Ak-bar Khyber was fo-und mur-de-red Two days la-ter, the-re was a lar-ge de-monst-ra-ti-on in Ka-bul. Ever-yo-ne in the ne-igh-bor-ho-od was in the stre-ets tal-king abo-ut it. Thro-ugh the win-dow, Ma-ri-am saw ne-igh-bors mil-ling abo-ut, chat-ting ex-ci-tedly, tran-sis-tor ra-di-os pres-sed to the-ir ears. She saw Fa-ri-ba le-aning aga-inst the wall of her ho-use, tal-king with a wo-man who was new to Deh-Ma-zang. Fa-ri-ba was smi-ling, and her palms we-re pres-sed aga-inst the swell of her preg-nant belly. The ot-her wo-man, who-se na-me es-ca-ped Ma-ri-am, lo-oked ol-der than Fa-ri-ba, and her ha-ir had an odd purp-le tint to it. She was hol-ding a lit-tle boy's hand. Ma-ri-am knew the boy's na-me was Ta-riq, be-ca-use she had he-ard this wo-man on the stre-et call af-ter him by that na-me.

Ma-ri-am and Ras-he-ed didn't jo-in the ne-igh-bors. They lis-te-ned in on the ra-dio as so-me ten tho-usand pe-op-le po-ured in-to the stre-ets and marc-hed up and down Ka-bul's go-vern-ment dist-rict. Ras-he-ed sa-id that Mir Ak-bar Khyber had be-en a pro-mi-nent com-mu-nist, and that his sup-por-ters we-re bla-ming the mur-der on Pre-si-dent Da-o-ud Khan's go-vern-ment. He didn't lo-ok at her when he sa-id this. The-se days, he ne-ver did any-mo-re, and Ma-ri-am wasn't ever su-re if she was be-ing spo-ken to.

"What's a com-mu-nist?" she as-ked.

Ras-he-ed snor-ted, and ra-ised both eyeb-rows. "You don't know what a com-mu-nist is? Such a simp-le thing.

Ever-yo-ne knows. It's com-mon know-led-ge. You don't…Bah. I don't know why I'm surp-ri-sed." Then he cros-sed his ank-les on the tab-le and mumb-led that it was so-me-one who be-li-eved in Karl Mar-xist.

"Who's Karl Mar-xist?"

Ras-he-ed sig-hed.

On the ra-dio, a wo-man's vo-ice was sa-ying that Ta-ra-ki, the le-ader of the Khalq branch of the PDPA, the Afg-han com-mu-nist party, was in the stre-ets gi-ving ro-using spe-ec-hes to de-monst-ra-tors.

"What I me-ant was, what do they want?" Ma-ri-am as-ked. "The-se com-mu-nists, what is it that they be-li-eve?"

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

"I ask be-ca-use-"

*"Chup-ko.*Shut up."

Ma-ri-am did.

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

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

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

was not-hing but a bur-den to him. She co-uld see it in the way he lo-oked at her,*when* he lo-oked at her. She was a bur-den to him.

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

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

*** * ***

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

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

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

"What do we do?"

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

*** * ***

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

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

"I ma-de*sab-zi*, " she sa-id.

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

After the mu-sic fa-ded, a man's vo-ice ca-me on the ra-dio. He an-no-un-ced him-self as Air For-ce Co-lo-nel Ab-dul Qa-der. He re-por-ted that ear-li-er in the day

the re-bel Fo-urth Ar-mo-red Di-vi-si-on had se-ized the air-port and key in-ter-sec-ti-ons in the city. Ka-bul Ra-dio, the mi-nist-ri-es of Com-mu-ni-ca-ti-on and the In-te-ri-or, and the Fo-re-ign Mi-nistry bu-il-ding had al-so be-en cap-tu-red. Ka-bul was in the hands of the pe-op-le now, he sa-id pro-udly. Re-bel MiGs had at-tac-ked the Pre-si-den-ti-al Pa-la-ce. Tanks had bro-ken in-to the pre-mi-ses, and a fi-er-ce bat-tle was un-der way the-re. Da-o-ud's lo-ya-list for-ces we-re all but de-fe-ated, Ab-dul Qa-der sa-id in a re-as-su-ring to-ne.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

"La-ila it is," Fa-ri-ba sa-id, smi-ling ti-redly. "Night Be-a-uty. It's per-fect."

* * *

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

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

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

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

"That's a bold lie."

"I swe-ar-"

He sho-ok the ri-ce ang-rily from his fin-gers and pus-hed the pla-te away, spil-ling sa-uce and ri-ce on the*so-jrah.* Ma-ri-am watc-hed as he stor-med out of the li-ving ro-om, then out of the ho-use, slam-ming the do-or on his way out.

Ma-ri-am kne-eled to the gro-und and tri-ed to pick up the gra-ins of ri-ce and put them back on the pla-te, but her hands we-re sha-king badly, and she had to wa-it for them to stop. Dre-ad pres-sed down on her chest. She tri-ed ta-king a few de-ep bre-aths. She ca-ught her pa-le ref-lec-ti-on in the dar-ke-ned li-ving-ro-om win-dow and lo-oked away.

Then she he-ard the front do-or ope-ning, and Ras-he-ed was back in the li-ving ro-om.

"Get up," he sa-id. "Co-me he-re. Get up."

He snatc-hed her hand, ope-ned it, and drop-ped a hand-ful of peb-bles in-to it.

"Put the-se in yo-ur mo-uth." "What?"

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

"Stop it, Ras-he-ed, I'm-"

His po-wer-ful hands clas-ped her jaw. He sho-ved two fin-gers in-to her mo-uth and pri-ed it open, then for-ced the cold, hard peb-bles in-to it. Ma-ri-am strug-gled aga-inst him, mumb-ling, but he kept pus-hing the peb-bles in, his up-per lip cur-led in a sne-er.
"Now chew," he sa-id.

Thro-ugh the mo-uth-ful of grit and peb-bles, Ma-ri-am mumb-led a plea. Te-ars we-re le-aking out of the cor-ners of her eyes.

"CHEW!" he bel-lo-wed. A gust of his smoky bre-ath slam-med aga-inst her fa-ce.
Ma-ri-am che-wed. So-met-hing in the back of her mo-uth crac-ked.

"Go-od," Ras-he-ed sa-id. His che-eks we-re qu-ive-ring. "Now you know what yo-ur ri-ce tas-tes li-ke. Now you know what you've gi-ven me in this mar-ri-age. Bad fo-od, and not-hing el-se."

Then he was go-ne, le-aving Ma-ri-am to spit out peb-bles, blo-od, and the frag-ments of two bro-ken mo-lars.

Part Two

16. Ka-bul,Spring1987

JN ine-ye-ar-old La-ila ro-se from bed, as she did most mor-nings, hungry for the sight of her fri-end Ta-riq. This mor-ning, ho-we-ver, she knew the-re wo-uld be no Ta-riq sigh-ting.

"How long will you be go-ne?" she'd as-ked when Ta-riq had told her that his pa-rents we-re ta-king him so-uth, to the city of Ghaz-ni, to vi-sit his pa-ter-nal unc-le.

"Thir-te-en days."

"Thir-te-en days?"

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

"I am not."

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

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

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

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

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

"One mi-nu-te!"

La-ila put on her sho-es and qu-ickly brus-hed her sho-ul-der-length, blond curls in the mir-ror. Mammy al-ways told La-ila that she had in-he-ri-ted her ha-ir co-lor-as well as her thick-las-hed, tur-qu-o-ise gre-en eyes, her dimp-led che-eks, her high che-ek-bo-nes, and the po-ut of her lo-wer lip, which Mammy sha-red-from her gre-at-grand-mot-her, Mammy's grand-mot-her.*She was a* pa-ri,*a stun-ner,* Mammy sa-id.*Her be-a-uty was the talk of the val-ley. It skip-ped two ge-ne-ra-ti-ons of wo-men in our fa-mily, but it su-re didn't bypass you, La-ila* The val-ley Mammy re-fer-red to was the Pa-njs-hir, the Far-si-spe-aking Ta-j-ik re-gi-on one hund-red ki-lo-me-ters nort-he-ast of Ka-bul. Both Mammy and Ba-bi, who we-re first co-usins, had be-en born and ra-ised in Pa-njs-hir; they had mo-ved to Ka-bul back in 1960 as ho-pe-ful, bright-eyed newly-weds when Ba-bi had be-en ad-mit-ted to Ka-bul Uni-ver-sity.

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

"Did you see this, La-ila?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, his flash-light will be go-ing off be-fo-re you know it," Ba-bi sa-id, re-fer-ring to La-ila and Ta-riq's nightly sig-na-ling ga-me. They had pla-yed it for so long it had be-co-me a bed-ti-me ri-tu-al, li-ke brus-hing te-eth.

Ba-bi ran his fin-ger thro-ugh the rip. "I'll patch this as so-on as I get a chan-ce. We'd bet-ter go." He ra-ised his vo-ice and cal-led over his sho-ul-der, "We're go-ing now, Fa-ri-ba! I'm ta-king La-ila to scho-ol. Don't for-get to pick her up!"

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

"Who are they?" she sa-id.

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

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

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

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

*** * ***

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

The te-ac-her's na-me was Shan-zai, but, be-hind her back, the stu-dents cal-led her Kha-la Rang-ma-al, Aun-tie Pa-in-ter, re-fer-ring to the mo-ti-on she fa-vo-red when she slap-ped stu-dents-palm, then back of the hand, back and forth, li-ke a pa-in-ter wor-king a brush. Kha-la Rang-ma-al was a sharp-fa-ced yo-ung wo-man with he-avy eyeb-rows. On the first day of scho-ol, she had pro-udly told the class that she was the da-ugh-ter of a po-or pe-asant from Khost. She sto-od stra-ight, and wo-re her jet-black ha-ir pul-led tightly back and ti-ed in a bun so that, when Kha-la Rang-ma-al tur-ned aro-und, La-ila co-uld see the dark brist-les on her neck. Kha-la Rang-ma-al

did not we-ar ma-ke-up or jewelry. She did not co-ver and for-ba-de the fe-ma-le stu-dents from do-ing it. She sa-id wo-men and men we-re equ-al in every way and the-re was no re-ason wo-men sho-uld co-ver if men didn't.

She sa-id that the So-vi-et Uni-on was the best na-ti-on in the world, along with Afg-ha-nis-tan. It was kind to its wor-kers, and its pe-op-le we-re all equ-al. Ever-yo-ne in the So-vi-et Uni-on was happy and fri-endly, un-li-ke Ame-ri-ca, whe-re cri-me ma-de pe-op-le af-ra-id to le-ave the-ir ho-mes. And ever-yo-ne in Afg-ha-nis-tan wo-uld be happy too, she sa-id, on-ce the an-tip-rog-res-si-ves, the back-ward ban-dits, we-re de-fe-ated.

"That's why our So-vi-et com-ra-des ca-me he-re in 1979. To lend the-ir ne-igh-bor a hand. To help us de-fe-at the-se bru-tes who want our co-untry to be a back-ward, pri-mi-ti-ve na-ti-on. And you must lend yo-ur own hand, child-ren. You must re-port an-yo-ne who might know abo-ut the-se re-bels. It's yo-ur duty. You must lis-ten, then re-port. Even if it's yo-ur pa-rents, yo-ur unc-les or aunts. Be-ca-use no-ne of them lo-ves you as much as yo-ur co-untry do-es. Yo-ur co-untry co-mes first, re-mem-ber! I will be pro-ud of you, and so will yo-ur co-untry."

On the wall be-hind Kha-la Rang-ma-al's desk was a map of the So-vi-et Uni-on, a map of Afg-ha-nis-tan, and a fra-med pho-to of the la-test com-mu-nist pre-si-dent, Na-j-ibul-lah, who, Ba-bi sa-id, had on-ce be-en the he-ad of the dre-aded KHAD, the Afg-han sec-ret po-li-ce. The-re we-re ot-her pho-tos too, ma-inly of yo-ung So-vi-et sol-di-ers sha-king hands with pe-asants, plan-ting ap-ple sap-lings, bu-il-ding ho-mes, al-ways smi-ling ge-ni-al-ly.

"Well," Kha-la Rang-ma-al sa-id now, "ha-ve I dis-tur-bed yo-ur dayd-re-aming,*In-qi-la-bi* Girl?"

This was her nick-na-me for La-ila, Re-vo-lu-ti-onary Girl, be-ca-use she'd be-en born the night of the Ap-ril co-up of 1978-except Kha-la Rang-ma-al be-ca-me angry if an-yo-ne in her class used the word*co-up.* What had hap-pe-ned, she in-sis-ted, was an*in-qi-lab,* a re-vo-lu-ti-on, an up-ri-sing of the wor-king pe-op-le aga-inst ine-qu-ality.*Jihad was* anot-her for-bid-den word. Ac-cor-ding to her, the-re wasn't even a war out the-re in the pro-vin-ces, just skir-mis-hes aga-inst tro-ub-le-ma-kers stir-red by pe-op-le she cal-led fo-re-ign pro-vo-ca-te-urs. And cer-ta-inly no one,*no one,* da-red re-pe-at in her pre-sen-ce the ri-sing ru-mors that, af-ter eight ye-ars of figh-ting, the So-vi-ets we-re lo-sing this war. Par-ti-cu-larly now that the Ame-ri-can pre-si-dent, Re-agan, had star-ted ship-ping the Mu-j-ahi-de-en Stin-ger Mis-si-les to down the So-vi-et he-li-cop-ters, now that Mus-lims from all over the world we-re jo-ining the ca-use: Egyp-ti-ans, Pa-kis-ta-nis, even we-althy Sa-udis, who left the-ir mil-li-ons be-hind and ca-me to Afg-ha-nis-tan to fight the jihad.

"Buc-ha-rest. Ha-va-na," La-ila ma-na-ged.

"And are tho-se co-unt-ri-es our fri-ends or not?"

"They are,*mo-olim* sa-hib. They are fri-endly co-unt-ri-es."

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

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

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

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

"You're not too yo-ung."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So will he."

La-ila co-uld ha-ve sa-id then that she didn't ne-ed this ad-vi-ce be-ca-use Ba-bi had no in-ten-ti-on of gi-ving her away any-ti-me so-on. Tho-ugh Ba-bi wor-ked at Si-lo, Ka-bul's gi-gan-tic bre-ad fac-tory, whe-re he la-bo-red amid the he-at and the

hum-ming mac-hi-nery sto-king the mas-si-ve ovens and mill gra-ins all day, he was a uni-ver-sity-edu-ca-ted man. He'd be-en a high scho-ol te-ac-her be-fo-re the com-mu-nists fi-red him-this was shortly af-ter the co-up of 1978, abo-ut a ye-ar and a half be-fo-re the So-vi-ets had in-va-ded. Ba-bi had ma-de it cle-ar to La-ila from ayo-ung age that the most im-por-tant thing in his li-fe, af-ter her sa-fety, was her scho-oling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What pe-op-le is that?"

"Pe-op-le who've be-en inj-ured be-ca-use of war," Gi-ti sa-id ear-nestly, ob-li-vi-o-us to Ha-si-na's to-ying.

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

"I do not ha-ve a crush. On an-yo-ne!"

They bro-ke off from La-ila, and, still ar-gu-ing this way, tur-ned in to the-ir stre-et.

La-ila wal-ked alo-ne the last three blocks. When she was on her stre-et, she no-ti-ced that the blue Benz was still par-ked the-re, out-si-de Ras-he-ed and Ma-ri-am's ho-use. The el-derly man in the brown su-it was stan-ding by the ho-od now, le-aning on a ca-ne, lo-oking up at the ho-use.

That was when a vo-ice be-hind La-ila sa-id, "Hey. Yel-low Ha-ir. Lo-ok he-re."

La-ila tur-ned aro-und and was gre-eted by the bar-rel of a gun.

17.

The gun was red, the trig-ger gu-ard bright gre-en. Be-hind the gun lo-omed Kha-dim's grin-ning fa-ce. Kha-dim was ele-ven, li-ke Ta-riq. He was thick, tall, and had a se-ve-re un-der-bi-te. His fat-her was a butc-her in Deh-Ma-zang, and, from ti-me to ti-me, Kha-dim was known to fling bits of calf in-tes-ti-ne at pas-sersby. So-me-ti-mes, if Ta-riq wasn't ne-arby, Kha-dim sha-do-wed La-ila in the scho-ol-yard at re-cess, le-ering, ma-king lit-tle whi-ning no-ises. One ti-me, he'd tap-ped her on the sho-ul-der and sa-id,*You 're so very pretty, Yel-low Ha-ir. I want to marry you.*

Now he wa-ved the gun. "Don't worry," he sa-id. "This won't show. Not*on yo-ur* ha-ir."

"Don't you do it! I'm war-ning you."

"What are you go-ing to do?" he sa-id. "Sic yo-ur crip-ple on me? 'Oh, Ta-riq jan. Oh, won't you co-me ho-me and sa-ve me from the*bad-mashl'"*

La-ila be-gan to back-pe-dal, but Kha-dim was al-re-ady pum-ping the trig-ger. One af-ter anot-her, thin jets of warm wa-ter struck La-ila's ha-ir, then her palm when she ra-ised it to shi-eld her fa-ce.

Now the ot-her boys ca-me out of the-ir hi-ding, la-ug-hing, cack-ling.

An in-sult La-ila had he-ard on the stre-et ro-se to her lips. She didn't re-al-ly un-ders-tand it-co-uldn't qu-ite pic-tu-re the lo-gis-tics of it-but the words pac-ked a fi-er-ce po-tency, and she un-le-as-hed them now.

"Yo-ur mot-her eats cock!"

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

The ot-her boys to-ok up the chant. "Smell yo-ur hands! Smell yo-ur hands!"

La-ila did, but she knew even be-fo-re she did, what he'd me-ant abo-ut it not sho-wing in her ha-ir. She let out a high-pitc-hed yelp. At this, the boys ho-oted even har-der.

La-ila tur-ned aro-und and, how-ling, ran ho-me.

*** * ***

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

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

When the worst of it had pas-sed, she went ac-ross the hal-lway to Mammy's do-or and knoc-ked. When she was yo-un-ger, La-ila used to sit for ho-urs out-si-de this do-or. She wo-uld tap on it and whis-per Mammy's na-me over and over, li-ke a ma-gic chant me-ant to bre-ak a spell:*Mammy, Mammy, Mammy, Mammy…* But Mammy ne-ver ope-ned the do-or. She didn't open it now. La-ila tur-ned the knob and wal-ked in.

*** * ***

So-me-ti-mes Mammy had go-od days. She sprang out of bed bright-eyed and play-ful. The dro-opy lo-wer lip stretc-hed up-ward in a smi-le. She bat-hed. She put on fresh clot-hes and wo-re mas-ca-ra. She let La-ila brush her ha-ir, which La-ila lo-ved do-ing, and pin ear-rings thro-ugh her ear-lo-bes. They went shop-ping to-get-her to Man-da-ii Ba-za-ar. La-ila got her to play sna-kes and lad-ders, and they ate sha-vings from blocks of dark cho-co-la-te, one of the few things they sha-red a com-mon tas-te for. La-ila's fa-vo-ri-te part of Mammy's go-od days was when Ba-bi ca-me ho-me, when she and Mammy lo-oked up from the bo-ard and grin-ned at him with brown te-eth. A gust of con-tent-ment puf-fed thro-ugh the ro-om then, and

La-ila ca-ught a mo-men-tary glimp-se of the ten-der-ness, the ro-man-ce, that had on-ce bo-und her pa-rents back when this ho-use had be-en crow-ded and no-isy and che-er-ful.

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

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

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

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

Mammy wo-uld slap her palms to-get-her as the wo-men, and La-ila, la-ug-hed.

Lis-te-ning to Mammy tell the-se sto-ri-es, La-ila knew that the-re had be-en a ti-me when Mammy al-ways spo-ke this way abo-ut Ba-bi. A ti-me when her pa-rents did not sle-ep in se-pa-ra-te ro-oms. La-ila wis-hed she hadn't mis-sed out on tho-se ti-mes.

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

"What abo-ut Azi-ta?"

"The rug-ma-ker's da-ugh-ter?" Mammy sa-id, slap-ping her che-ek with mock out-ra-ge.

"She has a thic-ker mus-tac-he than Ha-kim!"

"The-re's Ana-hi-ta. We he-ar she's top in her class at Zarg-ho-ona."

"Ha-ve you se-en the te-eth on that girl? Tombs-to-nes. She's hi-ding a gra-ve-yard be-hind tho-se lips."

"How abo-ut the Wa-hi-di sis-ters?"

"Tho-se two dwarfs? No, no, no. Oh, no. Not for my sons. Not for my sul-tans. They de-ser-ve bet-ter."

As the chat-ter went on, La-ila let her mind drift, and, as al-ways, it fo-und Ta-riq.

*** * ***

Mammy had pul-led the yel-lo-wish cur-ta-ins. In the dark-ness, the ro-om had a la-ye-red smell abo-ut it: sle-ep, un-was-hed li-nen, swe-at, dirty socks, per-fu-me, the pre-vi-o-us night's lef-to-ver*qur-ma*. La-ila wa-ited for her eyes to adj-ust be-fo-re she cros-sed the ro-om. Even so, her fe-et be-ca-me en-tang-led with items of clot-hing that lit-te-red the flo-or.

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

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

Be-ne-ath Mammy's bed, La-ila co-uld see the cor-ner of Ah-mad's shoe box prot-ru-ding. From ti-me to ti-me, Mammy sho-wed her the old, crump-led news-pa-per clip-pings in it, and pamph-lets that Ah-mad had ma-na-ged to col-lect from in-sur-gent gro-ups and re-sis-tan-ce or-ga-ni-za-ti-ons he-ad-qu-ar-te-red in Pa-kis-tan. One pho-to, La-ila re-mem-be-red, sho-wed a man in a long whi-te co-at han-ding a lol-li-pop to a leg-less lit-tle boy. The cap-ti-on be-low the pho-to re-ad:*Chil-d-ren are the in-ten-ded vic-tims of So-vi-et land mi-ne cam-pa-ign*. The ar-tic-le went on to say that the So-vi-ets al-so li-ked to hi-de exp-lo-si-ves in-si-de

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

"Mammy."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you le-arn anyt-hing?"

"The usu-al."

"Did you eat?"

"I did."

"Go-od."

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

"I ha-ve a he-adac-he."

"Sho-uld I fetch you so-me as-pi-rin?"

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

"It's only three."

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

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

"Stran-gest thing."

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

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

"Piss. Uri-ne."

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

"I ha-ven't told you who it was."
"Oh. Well, who was it?"

"Ne-ver-mind."

"You're angry."

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

18.

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

Anot-her we-ek pas-sed.

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

He wo-uld ne-ver co-me back. His pa-rents had mo-ved away for go-od; the trip to Ghaz-ni had be-en a ru-se. An adult sche-me to spa-re the two of them an up-set-ting fa-re-well.

A land mi-nehad got-ten to him aga-in. The way it did in 1981, when he was fi-ve, the last ti-me his pa-rents to-ok him so-uth to Ghaz-ni. That was shortly af-ter La-ila's third birth-day. He'd be-en lucky that ti-me, lo-sing only a leg; lucky that he'd sur-vi-ved at all.

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

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

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

"What did you*do1?"* she exc-la-imed when Ta-riq ope-ned the do-or. Only then did she re-mem-ber that his unc-le was a bar-ber.

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

"Li-ke it?"

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

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

The tiny brist-les scratc-hed La-ila's palm ple-asantly. Ta-riq wasn't li-ke so-me of the ot-her boys, who-se ha-ir con-ce-aled

co-ne-sha-ped skulls and un-sightly lumps. Ta-riq's he-ad was per-fectly cur-ved and lump-free.

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

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

"My unc-le was sick. Co-me on. Co-me in-si-de."

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

"Who is it?"

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

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

"You me-an our*aro-os,***our** da-ug-h-ter-in-law,"**his** fat-her an-no-un-ced, en-te-ring the ro-om. He was a car-pen-ter, a le-an, whi-te-ha-ired man in his early six-ti-es. He had gaps bet-we-en his front te-eth, and the squ-inty eyes of so-me-one who had spent most of his li-fe out-do-ors. He ope-ned his arms and La-ila went in-to them, gre-eted by his ple-asant and fa-mi-li-ar smell of saw-dust. They kis-sed on the che-ek three ti-mes.
"You ke-ep cal-ling her that and she'll stop co-ming he-re," Ta-riq's mot-her sa-id, pas-sing by them. She was car-rying a tray with a lar-ge bowl, a ser-ving spo-on, and fo-ur smal-ler bowls on it. She set the tray on the tab-le. "Don't mind the old man." She cup-ped La-ila's fa-ce. "It's go-od to see you, my de-ar. Co-me, sit down. I bro-ught back so-me wa-ter-so-aked fru-it with me."

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

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

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

"He-art at-tack. His se-cond," Ta-riq's mot-her sa-id, gi-ving her hus-band an ad-mo-nis-hing lo-ok.

Ta-riq's fat-her blew smo-ke and win-ked at La-ila. It struck her aga-in that Ta-riq's pa-rents co-uld easily pass for his grand-pa-rents. His mot-her hadn't had him un-til she'd be-en well in-to her for-ti-es.

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

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

"And yo-ur mot-her?"

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

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

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

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

"I don't want to be a*mo-za-hem.* "

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

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

"It's set-tled, then."

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

Over me-als, con-ver-sa-ti-on al-ways flo-wed. Tho-ugh Ta-riq and his pa-rents we-re eth-nic Pash-tuns, they spo-ke Far-si when La-ila was aro-und for her be-ne-fit,

even tho-ugh La-ila mo-re or less un-ders-to-od the-ir na-ti-ve Pash-to, ha-ving le-ar-ned it in scho-ol. Ba-bi sa-id that the-re we-re ten-si-ons bet-we-en the-ir pe-op-le-the Ta-j-iks, who we-re a mi-no-rity, and Ta-riq's pe-op-le, the Pash-tuns, who we-re the lar-gest eth-nic gro-up in Afg-ha-nis-tan.*Ta-j-iks ha-ve al-ways felt sligh-ted,* Ba-bi had sa-id.*Pas-hi-un kings ru-led this co-untry for al-most two hund-red and'fifty ye-ars, La-ila, and Ta-j-iks for all of ni-ne months, back in 1929.*

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

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

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

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

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

They lay on the-ir sto-machs in the mid-dle of Ta-riq's ro-om and to-ok turns de-aling for*pa-nj-par*. Pe-da-ling air with his fo-ot, Ta-riq told her abo-ut his trip. The pe-ach sap-lings he had hel-ped his unc-le plant. A gar-den sna-ke he had cap-tu-red.

This ro-om was whe-re La-ila and Ta-riq did the-ir ho-me-work, whe-re they bu-ilt pla-ying-card to-wers and drew ri-di-cu-lo-us port-ra-its of each ot-her. If it was ra-ining, they le-aned on the win-dow-sill, drin-king warm, fizzy oran-ge Fan-ta, and watc-hed the swol-len ra-in drop-lets trick-le down the glass.

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

"Wa-it." Ta-riq pus-hed him-self up and swung his ar-ti-fi-ci-al left leg aro-und. Win-cing, he lay on his si-de, le-aning on his el-bow. "Hand me that pil-low." He pla-ced it un-der his leg. "The-re. That's bet-ter."

La-ila re-mem-be-red the first ti-me he'd shown her his stump. She'd be-en six. With one fin-ger, she had po-ked the ta-ut.

shiny skin just be-low his left knee. Her fin-ger had fo-und lit-tle hard lumps the-re, and Ta-riq had told her they we-re spurs of bo-ne that so-me-ti-mes grew af-ter an am-pu-ta-ti-on. She'd as-ked him if his stump hurt, and he sa-id it got so-re at the end of the day, when it swel-led and didn't fit the prost-he-sis li-ke it was sup-po-sed to, li-ke a fin-ger in a thimb-le.*And so-me-ti-mes it gets rub-bed Es-pe-ci-al-ly when it's hot. Then I get ras-hes and blis-ters, but my mot-her has cre-ams that help. It's not so bad.*

La-ila had burst in-to te-ars.

*What are you crying for?*He'd strap-ped his leg back on.*You as-ked to see it, you* gir-ya-nok,*you crybaby! If I'd known you we-re go-ing to bawl, I wo-uldn 'i ha-ve shown you.*

"A stamp," he sa-id.

"What?"

"The rid-dle. The ans-wer is a stamp. We sho-uld go to the zoo af-ter lunch." "You knew that one. Did you?" "Abso-lu-tely not."

"You're a che-at."

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

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

"Yo-ur*mas-cu-li-ne* smarts? Re-al-ly? Tell me, who al-ways wins at chess?"

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

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

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

"I sup-po-se ge-og-raphy bo-res you too."

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

La-ila smi-led. "We're go-ing."

"Go-od."

"I mis-sed you."

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

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

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

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

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

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La-ila didn't me-an to tell him. She'd, in fact, de-ci-ded that tel-ling him wo-uld be a very bad idea. So-me-one wo-uld get hurt, be-ca-use Ta-riq wo-uldn't be ab-le to let it pass. But when they we-re on the stre-et la-ter, he-ading down to the**bus stop, she** saw Kha-dim aga-in, le-aning aga-inst a wall He was sur-ro-un-ded by his fri-ends, thumbs ho-oked in his belt lo-ops. He grin-ned at her de-fi-antly.

And so she told Ta-riq. The story spil-led out of her mo-uth be-fo-re she co-uld stop it.

"He did what?"

She told him aga-in.

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

"I'm su-re."

Ta-riq clenc-hed his te-eth and mut-te-red so-met-hing to him-self in Pash-to that La-ila didn't catch. "You wa-it he-re," he sa-id, in Far-si now.

"No, Ta-riq-"

He was al-re-ady cros-sing the stre-et.

Kha-dim was the first to see him. His grin fa-ded, and he pus-hed him-self off the wall. He un-ho-oked his thumbs from the belt lo-ops and ma-de him-self mo-re

up-right, ta-king on a self-cons-ci-o-us air of me-na-ce. The ot-hers fol-lo-wed his ga-ze.

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

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

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

The boys step-ped asi-de in a hurry. They ga-ve him a cle-ar path to Kha-dim.
Then it was all dust and fists and kicks and yelps.
Kha-dim ne-ver bot-he-red La-ila aga-in.

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

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

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

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

"Ah. Right."

Every night af-ter din-ner, Ba-bi hel-ped La-ila with her ho-me-work and ga-ve her so-me of his own. This was only to ke-ep La-ila a step or two ahe-ad of her class, not be-ca-use he di-sap-pro-ved of the work as-sig-ned by the scho-ol-the pro-pa-gan-da te-ac-hing not-withs-tan-ding. In fact, Ba-bi tho-ught that the one thing the com-mu-nists had do-ne right-or at le-ast in-ten-ded to-iro-ni-cal-ly, was in the fi-eld of edu-ca-ti-on, the vo-ca-ti-on from which they had fi-red him. Mo-re spe-ci-fi-cal-ly,

the edu-ca-ti-on of wo-men. The go-vern-ment had spon-so-red li-te-racy clas-ses for all wo-men. Al-most two-thirds of the stu-dents at Ka-bul Uni-ver-sity we-re wo-men now, Ba-bi sa-id, wo-men who we-re stud-ying law, me-di-ci-ne, en-gi-ne-ering.

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

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

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

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

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

19.

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

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

Then Ba-bi's hand was on La-ila's sho-ul-der, and he gently pul-led her from the do-or.

"Why don't you go ups-ta-irs, La-ila. Go on."

As she mo-ved to-ward the steps, La-ila he-ard the vi-si-tor say to Ba-bi that he had news from Pa-njs-hir. Mammy was in the ro-om now too. She had one hand clam-ped over her mo-uth, and her eyes we-re skip-ping from Ba-bi to the man in the*pa-kol*

La-ila pe-eked from the top of the sta-irs. She watc-hed the stran-ger sit down with her pa-rents. He le-aned to-ward them. Sa-id a few mu-ted words. Then Ba-bi's fa-ce was whi-te, and get-ting whi-ter, and he was lo-oking at his hands, and Mammy was scre-aming, scre-aming, and te-aring at her ha-ir.

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

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

Mammy's eyes drif-ted down. She blin-ked.

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

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

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

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

"Ke-ep him away from me." That was the only ti-me Mammy sa-id anyt-hing all mor-ning.

Ba-bi en-ded up sit-ting alo-ne on a fol-ding cha-ir in the hal-lway, lo-oking de-so-la-te and small Then one of the wo-men told him he was in the way the-re. He apo-lo-gi-zed and di-sap-pe-ared in-to his study.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was Ta-riq who was re-al, flesh and blo-od. Ta-riq, who ta-ught her cus-swords in Pash-to, who li-ked sal-ted clo-ver le-aves, who frow-ned and ma-de a low, mo-aning so-und when he che-wed, who had a light pink birth-mark just be-ne-ath his left col-lar-bo-ne sha-ped li-ke an up-si-de-down man-do-lin.

So she sat be-si-de Mammy and du-ti-ful-ly mo-ur-ned Ah-mad and No-or, but, in La-ila's he-art, her true brot-her was ali-ve and well.

20.

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

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

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

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

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

La-ila lay the-re and lis-te-ned, wis-hing Mammy wo-uld no-ti-ce that*she,* La-ila, hadn't be-co-me*sha-he-ed,* that she was ali-ve, he-re, in bed with her, that she had ho-pes and a fu-tu-re. But La-ila knew that her fu-tu-re was no match for her brot-hers' past. They had overs-ha-do-wed her in li-fe. They wo-uld ob-li-te-ra-te her in de-ath. Mammy was now the cu-ra-tor of the-ir li-ves' mu-se-um and she, La-ila, a

me-re vi-si-tor. A re-cep-tac-le for the-ir myths. Thepar-c-h-ment on which Mammy me-ant to ink the-ir le-gends.

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

Mammy rol-led on-to her back. La-ila shif-ted, res-ted her he-ad on Mammy's chest.

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

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

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

"Don't say that."

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

"Mammy?"

"Mm."

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

"I've be-en me-aning to ask you so-met-hing."

"What is it?"

"You wo-uldn't…" La-ila be-gan.

She'd tal-ked abo-ut it to Ha-si-na. At Ha-si-na's sug-ges-ti-on, the two of them had emp-ti-ed the bot-tle of as-pi-rin in the gut-ter, hid-den the kitc-hen kni-ves and the sharp ke-bab ske-wers be-ne-ath the rug un-der the co-uch. Ha-si-na had fo-und a ro-pe in the yard. When Ba-bi co-uldn't find his ra-zors, La-ila had to tell him of her fe-ars. He drop-ped on the ed-ge of the co-uch, hands bet-we-en his kne-es. La-ila wa-ited for so-me kind of re-as-su-ran-ce from him. But all she got was a be-wil-de-red, hol-low-eyed lo-ok.

"You wo-uldn't…Mam-my I worry that-"

"I tho-ught abo-ut it the night we got the news," Mammy sa-id. "I won't lie to you, I've tho-ught abo-ut it sin-ce too. But, no. Don't worry, La-ila. I want to see my sons' dre-am co-me true. I want to see the day the So-vi-ets go ho-me disg-ra-ced, the day the Mu-j-ahi-de-en co-me to Ka-bul in vic-tory. I want to be the-re when it hap-pens, when Afg-ha-nis-tan is free, so the boys see it too. They'll see it thro-ugh my eyes."

Mammy was so-on as-le-ep, le-aving La-ila with du-eling emo-ti-ons: re-as-su-red that Mammy me-ant to li-ve on, stung that*she* was not the re-ason.*She* wo-uld ne-ver le-ave her mark on Mammy's he-art the way her brot-hers had, be-ca-use Mammy's he-art was li-ke a pal-lid be-ach whe-re La-ila's fo-otp-rints wo-uld fo-re-ver wash away be-ne-ath the wa-ves of sor-row that swel-led and cras-hed, swel-led and cras-hed.

21.

The dri-ver pul-led his ta-xi over to let pass anot-her long con-voy of So-vi-et je-eps and ar-mo-red ve-hic-les. Ta-riq le-aned ac-ross the front se-at, over the dri-ver, and yel-led,*"Pa-j-al-mia! Pa-j-al-m-ta!"*

A je-ep hon-ked and Ta-riq whist-led back, be-aming and wa-ving che-er-ful-ly. "Lo-vely guns!" he yel-led "Fa-bu-lo-us je-eps! Fa-bu-lo-us army! Too bad you're lo-sing to a bunch of pe-asants fi-ring slings-hots!"

The con-voy pas-sed. The dri-ver mer-ged back on-to the ro-ad

"How much fart-her?" La-ila as-ked

"An ho-ur at the most," the dri-ver sa-id. "Bar-ring any mo-re con-voys or check-po-ints."

They we-re ta-king a day trip, La-ila, Ba-bi, and Ta-riq. Ha-si-na had wan-ted to co-me too, had beg-ged her fat-her, but he wo-uldn't al-low it. The trip was Ba-bi's idea. Tho-ugh he co-uld hardly af-ford it on his sa-lary, he'd hi-red a dri-ver for the day. He wo-uldn't disc-lo-se anyt-hing to La-ila abo-ut the-ir des-ti-na-ti-on ex-cept to say that, with it, he was cont-ri-bu-ting to her edu-ca-ti-on.

They had be-en on the ro-ad sin-ce fi-ve in the mor-ning. Thro-ugh La-ila's win-dow, the lands-ca-pe shif-ted from snow-cap-ped pe-aks to de-serts to can-yons and

sun-scorc-hed outc-rop-pings of rocks. Along the way, they pas-sed mud ho-uses with thatc-hed ro-ofs and fi-elds dot-ted with bund-les of whe-at. Pitc-hed out in the dusty fi-elds, he-re and the-re, La-ila re-cog-ni-zed the black tents of Ko-oc-hi no-mads. And, fre-qu-ently, the car-cas-ses of bur-ned-out So-vi-et tanks and wrec-ked he-li-cop-ters. This, she tho-ught, was Ah-mad and No-or's Afg-ha-nis-tan. This, he-re in the pro-vin-ces, was whe-re the war was be-ing fo-ught, af-ter all. Not in Ka-bul. Ka-bul was lar-gely at pe-ace. Back in Ka-bul, if not for the oc-ca-si-onal bursts of gun-fi-re, if not for the So-vi-et sol-di-ers smo-king on the si-de-walks and the So-vi-et je-eps al-ways bum-ping thro-ugh the stre-ets, war might as well ha-ve be-en a ru-mor.

It was la-te mor-ning, af-ter they'd pas-sed two mo-re check-po-ints, when they en-te-red a val-ley. Ba-bi had La-ila le-an ac-ross the se-at and po-in-ted to a se-ri-es of an-ci-ent-lo-oking walls of sun-dri-ed red in the dis-tan-ce.

"That's cal-led Shahr-e-Zo-hak. The Red City. It used to be a fort-ress. It was bu-ilt so-me ni-ne hund-red ye-ars ago to de-fend the val-ley from in-va-ders. Geng-his Khan's grand-son at-tac-ked it in the thir-te-enth cen-tury, but he was kil-led. It was Geng-his Khan him-self who then dest-ro-yed it."

"And that, my yo-ung fri-ends, is the story of our co-untry, one in-va-der af-ter anot-her," the dri-ver sa-id, flic-king ci-ga-ret-te ash out the win-dow. "Ma-ce-do-ni-ans. Sas-sa-ni-ans. Arabs. Mon-gols. Now the So-vi-ets. But we're li-ke tho-se walls up the-re. Bat-te-red, and not-hing pretty to lo-ok at, but still stan-ding. Isn't that the truth,*ba-dar?'*

"Inde-ed it is," sa-id Ba-bi.

*** * ***

Half an ho-ur la-ter,the dri-ver pul-led over.

"Co-me on, you two," Ba-bi sa-id. "Co-me out-si-de and ha-ve a lo-ok."

They got out of the ta-xi. Ba-bi po-in-ted "The-re they are. Lo-ok."

Ta-riq gas-ped. La-ila did too. And she knew then that she co-uld li-ve to be a hund-red and she wo-uld ne-ver aga-in see a thing as mag-ni-fi-cent.

The two Bud-dhas we-re enor-mo-us, so-aring much hig-her than she had ima-gi-ned from all the pho-tos she'd se-en of them. Chi-se-led in-to a sun-ble-ac-hed rock cliff, they pe-ered down at them, as they had ne-arly two tho-usand ye-ars be-fo-re, La-ila ima-gi-ned, at ca-ra-vans cros-sing the val-ley on the Silk Ro-ad. On eit-her si-de of them, along the over-han-ging nic-he, the cliff was poc-ked with myri-ad ca-ves.

"I fe-el so small," Ta-riq sa-id.

"You want to climb up?" Ba-bi sa-id.
"Up the sta-tu-es?" La-ila as-ked. "We can do that?"

Ba-bi smi-led and held out his hand. "Co-me on."

*** * ***

Theclimb was**hard** for Ta-riq, who had to hold on to both La-ila and Ba-bi as they inc-hed up a win-ding, nar-row, dimly lit sta-ir-ca-se. They saw sha-dowy ca-ves along the way, and tun-nels ho-ney-com-bing the cliff every which way.
"Ca-re-ful whe-re you step," Ba-bi sa-id His vo-ice ma-de a lo-ud ec-ho. "The gro-und is tre-ac-he-ro-us."

In so-me parts, the sta-ir-ca-se was open to the Bud-dha's ca-vity.

"Don't lo-ok down, child-ren. Ke-ep lo-oking stra-ight ahe-ad."

As they clim-bed, Ba-bi told them that Ba-mi-yan had on-ce be-en a thri-ving Bud-dhist cen-ter un-til it had fal-len un-der Is-la-mic Arab ru-le in the ninth cen-tury. The sands-to-ne cliffs we-re ho-me to Bud-dhist monks who car-ved ca-ves in them to use as li-ving qu-ar-ters and as sanc-tu-ary for we-ary tra-ve-ling pilg-rims. The monks, Ba-bi sa-id, pa-in-ted be-a-uti-ful fres-co-es along the walls and ro-ofs of the-ir ca-ves.

"At one po-int," he sa-id, "the-re we-re fi-ve tho-usand monks li-ving as her-mits in the-se ca-ves."

Ta-riq was badly out of bre-ath when they re-ac-hed the top. Ba-bi was pan-ting too. But his eyes sho-ne with ex-ci-te-ment.

"We're stan-ding atop its he-ad," he sa-id, wi-ping his brow with a hand-kerc-hi-ef "The-re's a nic-he over he-re whe-re we can lo-ok out."

They inc-hed over to the craggy over-hang and, stan-ding si-de by si-de, with Ba-bi in the mid-dle, ga-zed down on the val-ley.

"Lo-ok at this!" sa-id La-ila.

Ba-bi smi-led.
The Ba-mi-yan Val-ley be-low was car-pe-ted by lush far-ming fi-elds. Ba-bi sa-id they we-re gre-en win-ter whe-at and al-fal-fa, po-ta-to-es too. The fi-elds we-re bor-de-red by pop-lars and cris-scros-sed by stre-ams and ir-ri-ga-ti-on ditc-hes, on the banks of which tiny fe-ma-le fi-gu-res squ-at-ted and was-hed clot-hes. Ba-bi po-in-ted to ri-ce pad-di-es and bar-ley fi-elds dra-ping the slo-pes. It was autumn,

and La-ila co-uld ma-ke out pe-op-le in bright tu-nics on the ro-ofs of mud brick dwel-lings la-ying out the har-vest to dry. The ma-in ro-ad go-ing thro-ugh the town was pop-lar-li-ned too. The-re we-re small shops and te-aho-uses and stre-et-si-de bar-bers on eit-her si-de of it. Be-yond the vil-la-ge, be-yond the ri-ver and the stre-ams, La-ila saw fo-ot-hil-ls, ba-re and dusty brown, and, be-yond tho-se, as be-yond everyt-hing el-se in Afg-ha-nis-tan, the snow-cap-ped Hin-du Kush.

The sky abo-ve all of this was an im-ma-cu-la-te, spot-less blue.

"It's so qu-i-et," La-ila bre-at-hed. She co-uld see tiny she-ep and hor-ses but co-uldn't he-ar the-ir ble-ating and whin-nying.

"It's what I al-ways re-mem-ber abo-ut be-ing up he-re," Ba-bi sa-id. "The si-len-ce. The pe-ace of it. I wan-ted you to ex-pe-ri-en-ce it. But I al-so wan-ted you to see yo-ur co-untry's he-ri-ta-ge, child-ren, to le-arn of its rich past. You see, so-me things I can te-ach you. So-me you le-arn from bo-oks. But the-re are things that, well, you just ha-ve to*see* and*fe-el."*

"Lo-ok," sa-id Ta-riq.

They watc-hed a hawk, gli-ding in circ-les abo-ve the vil-la-ge.

"Did you ever bring Mammy up he-re?" La-ila as-ked

"Oh, many ti-mes. Be-fo-re the boys we-re born. Af-ter too. Yo-ur mot-her, she used to be ad-ven-tu-ro-us then, and…so*ali-ve.* She was just abo-ut the li-ve-li-est, hap-pi-est per-son I'd ever met." He smi-led at the me-mory. "She had this la-ugh. I swe-ar it's why I mar-ri-ed her, La-ila, for that la-ugh. It bul-ldo-zed you. You sto-od no chan-ce aga-inst it."

A wa-ve of af-fec-ti-on over-ca-me La-ila. From then on, she wo-uld al-ways re-mem-ber Ba-bi this way: re-mi-nis-cing abo-ut Mammy, with his el-bows on the rock, hands cup-ping his chin, his ha-ir ruf-fled by the wind, eyes crink-led aga-inst the sun.

"I'm go-ing to lo-ok at so-me of tho-se ca-ves," Ta-riq sa-id.

"Be ca-re-ful," sa-id Ba-bi.

"I will,*Ka-ka-j-an,"* Ta-riq's vo-ice ec-ho-ed back.

La-ila watc-hed a trio of men far be-low, tal-king ne-ar a cow tet-he-red to a fen-ce. Aro-und them, the tre-es had star-ted to turn, och-re and oran-ge, scar-let red.

"I miss the boys too, you know," Ba-bi sa-id. His eyes had wel-led up a tad. His chin was tremb-ling. "I may not… With yo-ur mot-her, both her joy and sad-ness are ext-re-me. She can't hi-de eit-her. She ne-ver co-uld. Me, I sup-po-se I'm dif-fe-rent. I tend to…But it bro-ke me too, the boys dying. I miss them too. Not a day pas-ses that I…It's very hard, La-ila. So very hard." He squ-e-ezed the in-ner cor-ners of his eyes with his thumb and fo-re-fin-ger. When he tri-ed to talk, his vo-ice bro-ke. He pul-led his lips over his te-eth and wa-ited. He to-ok a long, de-ep bre-ath, lo-oked at her. "But I'm glad I ha-ve you. Every day, I thank God for you. Every sing-le day. So-me-ti-mes, when yo-ur mot-her's ha-ving one of her re-al-ly dark days, I fe-el li-ke you're all I ha-ve, La-ila."

La-ila drew clo-ser to him and res-ted her che-ek up aga-inst his chest. He se-emed slightly start-led-unli-ke Mammy, he ra-rely exp-res-sed his af-fec-ti-on physi-cal-ly. He plan-ted a brisk kiss on the top of her he-ad and hug-ged her back awk-wardly. They sto-od this way for a whi-le, lo-oking down on the Ba-mi-yan Val-ley.

"As much as I lo-ve this land, so-me days I think abo-ut le-aving it," Ba-bi sa-id.

"Whe-re-to?"

"Anypla-ce whe-re it's easy to for-get. Pa-kis-tan first, I sup-po-se. For a ye-ar, may-be two. Wa-it for our pa-per-work to get pro-ces-sed."

"And then?"

"And then, well, it*is* a big world. May-be Ame-ri-ca. So-mew-he-re ne-ar the sea. Li-ke Ca-li-for-nia."

Ba-bi sa-id the Ame-ri-cans we-re a ge-ne-ro-us pe-op-le. They wo-uld help them with mo-ney and fo-od for a whi-le, un-til they co-uld get on the-ir fe-et.

"I wo-uld find work, and, in a few ye-ars, when we had eno-ugh sa-ved up, we'd open a lit-tle Afg-han res-ta-urant-Not-hing fancy, mind you, just a mo-dest lit-tle pla-ce, a few tab-les, so-me rugs. May-be hang so-me pic-tu-res of Ka-bul. We'd gi-ve the Ame-ri-cans a tas-te of Afg-han fo-od. And with yo-ur mot-her's co-oking, they'd li-ne up and down the stre-et.

"And you, you wo-uld con-ti-nue go-ing to scho-ol, of co-ur-se. You know how I fe-el abo-ut that. That wo-uld be our ab-so-lu-te top pri-ority, to get you a go-od edu-ca-ti-on, high scho-ol then col-le-ge. But in yo-ur free ti-me,*if you* wan-ted to, you co-uld help out, ta-ke or-ders, fill wa-ter pitc-hers, that sort of thing."

Ba-bi sa-id they wo-uld hold birth-day par-ti-es at the res-ta-urant, en-ga-ge-ment ce-re-mo-ni-es, New Ye-ar's get-to-get-hers. It wo-uld turn in-to a gat-he-ring pla-ce for ot-her Afg-hans who, li-ke them, had fled the war. And, la-te at night, af-ter

ever-yo-ne had left and the pla-ce was cle-aned up, they wo-uld sit for tea amid the empty tab-les, the three of them, ti-red but thank-ful for the-ir go-od for-tu-ne.

When Ba-bi was do-ne spe-aking, he grew qu-i-et. They both did. They knew that Mammy wasn't go-ing anyw-he-re. Le-aving Afg-ha-nis-tan had be-en unt-hin-kab-le to her whi-le Ah-mad and No-or we-re still ali-ve. Now that they we-re*sha-he-ed*, pac-king up and run-ning was an even wor-se af-front, a bet-ra-yal, a di-sa-vo-wal of the sac-ri-fi-ce her sons had ma-de.

*How can you think of it?*La-ila co-uld he-ar her sa-ying.*Do-es the-ir dying me-an not-hing to you, co-usin? The only so-la-ce I find is in kno-wing that I walk the sa-me gro-und that so-aked up the-ir blo-od. No. Ne-ver.*

And Ba-bi wo-uld ne-ver le-ave wit-ho-ut her, La-ila knew, even tho-ugh Mammy was no mo-re a wi-fe to him now than she was a mot-her to La-ila. For Mammy, he wo-uld brush asi-de this dayd-re-am of his the way he flic-ked specks of flo-ur from his co-at when he got ho-me from work. And so they wo-uld stay. They wo-uld stay un-til the war en-ded And they wo-uld stay for wha-te-ver ca-me af-ter war.

La-ila re-mem-be-red Mammy tel-ling Ba-bi on-ce that she had mar-ri-ed a man who had no con-vic-ti-ons. Mammy didn't un-ders-tand. She didn't un-ders-tand that if she lo-oked in-to a mir-ror, she wo-uld find the one un-fa-iling con-vic-ti-on of his li-fe lo-oking right back at her.

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La-ter, af-ter they'd eaten a lunch of bo-iled eggs and po-ta-to-es with bre-ad, Ta-riq nap-ped be-ne-ath a tree on the banks of a gurg-ling stre-am. He slept with his co-at ne-atly fol-ded in-to a pil-low, his hands cros-sed on his chest. The dri-ver went to the vil-la-ge to buy al-monds. Ba-bi sat at the fo-ot of a thick-trun-ked aca-cia tree re-ading a pa-per-back. La-ila knew the bo-ok; he'd re-ad it to her on-ce. It told the story of an old fis-her-man na-med San-ti-ago who catc-hes an enor-mo-us fish. But by the ti-me he sa-ils his bo-at to sa-fety, the-re is not-hing left of his pri-ze fish; the sharks ha-ve torn it to pi-eces.

La-ila sat on the ed-ge of the stre-am, dip-ping her fe-et in-to the co-ol wa-ter. Over-he-ad, mos-qu-ito-es hum-med and cot-ton-wo-od se-eds dan-ced. A dra-gonfly whir-red ne-arby. La-ila watc-hed its wings catch glints of sun-light as it buz-zed from one bla-de of grass to anot-her. They flas-hed purp-le, then gre-en, oran-ge. Ac-ross the stre-am, a gro-up of lo-cal Ha-za-ra boys we-re pic-king pat-ti-es of dri-ed cow dung from the gro-und and sto-wing them in-to bur-lap sacks tet-he-red to the-ir backs. So-mew-he-re, a don-key bra-yed. A ge-ne-ra-tor sput-te-red to li-fe.

La-ila tho-ught aga-in abo-ut Ba-bi's lit-tle dre-am.*So-mew-he-re ne-ar the sea*

The-re was so-met-hing she hadn't told Ba-bi up the-re atop the Bud-dha: that, in one im-por-tant way, she was glad they co-uldn't go. She wo-uld miss Gi-ti and her pinch-fa-ced ear-nest-ness, yes, and Ha-si-na too, with her wic-ked la-ugh and reck-less clow-ning aro-und But, mostly, La-ila re-mem-be-red all too well the ines-ca-pab-le drud-gery of tho-se fo-ur we-eks wit-ho-ut Ta-riq when he had go-ne to Ghaz-ni. She re-mem-be-red all too well how ti-me had drag-ged wit-ho-ut him, how she had shuf-fled abo-ut fe-eling way-la-id, out of ba-lan-ce. How co-uld she ever co-pe with his per-ma-nent ab-sen-ce?

May-be it was sen-se-less to want to be ne-ar a per-son so badly he-re in a co-untry whe-re bul-lets had shred-ded her own brot-hers to pi-eces. But all La-ila had to do was pic-tu-re Ta-riq go-ing at Kha-dim with his leg and then not-hing in the world se-emed mo-re sen-sib-le to her.

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Six months la-ter, in Ap-ril 1988, Ba-bi ca-me ho-me with big news.

"They sig-ned a tre-aty!" he sa-id. "In Ge-ne-va. It's of-fi-ci-al! They're le-aving. Wit-hin ni-ne months, the-re won't be any mo-re So-vi-ets in Afg-ha-nis-tan!"

Mammy was sit-ting up in bed. She shrug-ged.

"But the com-mu-nist re-gi-me is sta-ying," she sa-id. "Na-j-ibul-lah is the So-vi-ets' pup-pet pre-si-dent. He's not go-ing anyw-he-re. No, the war will go on. This is not the end"
"Na-j-ibul-lah won't last," sa-id Ba-bi.

"They're le-aving, Mammy! They're ac-tu-al-ly le-aving!"

"You two ce-leb-ra-te if you want to. But I won't rest un-til the Mu-j-ahi-de-en hold a vic-tory pa-ra-de right he-re in Ka-bul"

And, with that, she lay down aga-in and pul-led up the blan-ket.

22.

Janu-ary1989

One cold, over-cast day in Janu-ary 1989, three months be-fo-re La-ila tur-ned ele-ven, she, her pa-rents, and Ha-si-na went to watch one of the last So-vi-et con-voys exit the city. Spec-ta-tors had gat-he-red on both si-des of the tho-ro-ugh-fa-re out-si-de the Mi-li-tary Club ne-ar Wa-zir Ak-bar Khan. They sto-od in muddy snow and watc-hed the li-ne of tanks, ar-mo-red trucks, and je-eps as light

snow flew ac-ross the gla-re of the pas-sing he-ad-lights. The-re we-re heck-les and je-ers. Afg-han sol-di-ers kept pe-op-le off the stre-et. Every now and then, they had to fi-re a war-ning shot.

Mammy ho-is-ted a pho-to of Ah-mad and No-or high over her he-ad. It was the one of them sit-ting back-to-back un-der the pe-ar tree. The-re we-re ot-hers li-ke her, wo-men with pic-tu-res of the-ir*sha-he-ed* hus-bands, sons, brot-hers held high.
So-me-one tap-ped La-ila and Ha-si-na on the sho-ul-der. It was Ta-riq.

"Whe-re did you get that thing?" Ha-si-na exc-la-imed.

"I tho-ught I'd co-me dres-sed for the oc-ca-si-on." Ta-riq sa-id. He was we-aring an enor-mo-us Rus-si-an fur hat, comp-le-te with earf-laps, which he had pul-led down.

"How do I lo-ok?"

"Ri-di-cu-lo-us," La-ila la-ug-hed.

"That's the idea."

"Yo-ur pa-rents ca-me he-re with you dres-sed li-ke this?"
"They're ho-me, ac-tu-al-ly," he sa-id.

The pre-vi-o-us fall, Ta-riq's unc-le in Ghaz-ni had di-ed of a he-art at-tack, and, a few we-eks la-ter, Ta-riq's fat-her had suf-fe-red a he-art at-tack of his own, le-aving him fra-il and ti-red, pro-ne to an-xi-ety and bo-uts of dep-res-si-on that over-to-ok him for we-eks at a ti-me. La-ila was glad to see Ta-riq li-ke this, li-ke his old self aga-in. For we-eks af-ter his fat-her's il-lness, La-ila had watc-hed him mo-ping aro-und, he-avy-fa-ced and sul-len.
The three of them sto-le away whi-le Mammy and Ba-bi sto-od watc-hing the So-vi-ets. From a stre-et ven-dor, Ta-riq bo-ught them each a pla-te of bo-iled be-ans top-ped with thick ci-lant-ro chut-ney. They ate be-ne-ath the aw-ning of a clo-sed rug shop, then Ha-si-na went to find her fa-mily.

On the bus ri-de ho-me, Ta-riq and La-ila sat be-hind her pa-rents. Mammy was by the win-dow, sta-ring out, clutc-hing the pic-tu-re aga-inst her chest. Be-si-de her, Ba-bi was im-pas-si-vely lis-te-ning to a man who was ar-gu-ing that the So-vi-ets might be le-aving but that they wo-uld send we-apons to Na-j-ibul-lah in Ka-bul.

"He's the-ir pup-pet. They'll ke-ep the war go-ing thro-ugh him, you can bet on that."
So-me-one in the next ais-le vo-iced his ag-re-ement.

Mammy was mut-te-ring to her-self, long-win-ded pra-yers that rol-led on and on un-til she had no bre-ath left and had to eke out the last few words in a tiny, high-pitc-hed squ-e-ak.

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They "went to Ci-ne-ma Park la-ter that day, La-ila and Ta-riq, and had to set-tle for a So-vi-et film that was dub-bed, to unin-ten-ti-onal-ly co-mic ef-fect, in Far-si. The-re was a merc-hant ship, and a first ma-te in lo-ve with the cap-ta-in's da-ugh-ter. Her na-me was Al-yo-na. Then ca-me a fi-er-ce storm, light-ning, ra-in, the he-aving sea tos-sing the ship. One of the fran-tic sa-ilors yel-led so-met-hing. An ab-surdly calm Afg-han vo-ice trans-la-ted: "My de-ar sir, wo-uld you kindly pass the ro-pe?"

At this, Ta-riq burst out cack-ling. And, so-on, they both we-re in the grips of a ho-pe-less at-tack of la-ugh-ter. Just when one be-ca-me fa-ti-gu-ed, the ot-her wo-uld snort, and off they wo-uld go on anot-her ro-und. A man sit-ting two rows up tur-ned aro-und and shus-hed them.

The-re was a wed-ding sce-ne ne-ar the end. The cap-ta-in had re-len-ted and let Al-yo-na marry the first ma-te. The newly-weds we-re smi-ling at each ot-her. Ever-yo-ne was drin-king vod-ka.

"I'm ne-ver get-ting mar-ri-ed," Ta-riq whis-pe-red.

"Me ne-it-her," sa-id La-ila, but not be-fo-re a mo-ment of ner-vo-us he-si-ta-ti-on. She wor-ri-ed that her vo-ice had bet-ra-yed her di-sap-po-int-ment at what he had sa-id. Her he-art gal-lo-ping, she ad-ded, mo-re for-ce-ful-ly this ti-me, "Ne-ver."

"Wed-dings are stu-pid." "All the fuss."

"All the mo-ney spent." "For what?"

"For clot-hes you'll ne-ver we-ar aga-in."

"Ha!"

"If I ever*do* get mar-ri-ed," Ta-riq sa-id, "they'll ha-ve to ma-ke ro-om for three on the wed-ding sta-ge. Me, the bri-de, and the guy hol-ding the gun to my he-ad."

The man in the front row ga-ve them anot-her ad-mo-nis-hing lo-ok.
On the scre-en, Al-yo-na and her new hus-band loc-ked lips.
Watc-hing the kiss, La-ila felt stran-gely cons-pi-cu-o-us all at on-ce. She be-ca-me in-ten-sely awa-re of her he-art thum-ping, of the blo-od thud-ding in her ears, of the sha-pe of Ta-riq be-si-de her, tigh-te-ning up, be-co-ming still. The kiss drag-ged on.

It se-emed of ut-most ur-gency to La-ila, sud-denly, that she not stir or ma-ke a no-ise. She sen-sed that Ta-riq was ob-ser-ving her-one eye on the kiss, the ot-her on her-as she was ob-ser-ving*him.* Was he lis-te-ning to the air who-os-hing in and out of her no-se, she won-de-red, wa-iting for a subt-le fal-te-ring, a re-ve-aling ir-re-gu-la-rity, that wo-uld bet-ray her tho-ughts?

And what wo-uld it be li-ke to kiss him, to fe-el the fuzzy ha-ir abo-ve his lip tick-ling her own lips?

Then Ta-riq shif-ted un-com-for-tably in his se-at. In a stra-ined vo-ice, he sa-id, "Did you know that if you fling snot in Si-be-ria, it's a gre-en icic-le be-fo-re it hits the gro-und?"

They both la-ug-hed, but bri-efly, ner-vo-usly, this ti-me. And when the film en-ded and they step-ped out-si-de, La-ila was re-li-eved to see that the sky had dim-med, that she wo-uldn't ha-ve to me-et Ta-riq's eyes in the bright day-light.

23.

April1992

Three ye-ars pas-sed.

In that ti-me, Ta-riq's fat-her had a se-ri-es of stro-kes. They left him with a clumsy left hand and a slight slur to his spe-ech. When he was agi-ta-ted, which hap-pe-ned fre-qu-ently, the slur-ring got wor-se.

Ta-riq outg-rew his leg aga-in and was is-su-ed a new leg by the Red Cross, tho-ugh he had to wa-it six months for it.

As Ha-si-na had fe-ared, her fa-mily to-ok her to La-ho-re, whe-re she was ma-de to marry the co-usin who ow-ned the auto shop. The mor-ning that they to-ok her, La-ila and Gi-ti went to Ha-si-na's ho-use to say go-od-bye. Ha-si-na told them that the co-usin, her hus-band-to-be, had al-re-ady star-ted the pro-cess to mo-ve them to Ger-many, whe-re his brot-hers li-ved. Wit-hin the ye-ar, she tho-ught, they wo-uld be in Frank-furt. They cri-ed then in a three-way emb-ra-ce. Gi-ti was in-con-so-lab-le. The last ti-me La-ila ever saw Ha-si-na, she was be-ing hel-ped by her fat-her in-to the crow-ded back-se-at of a ta-xi.

The So-vi-et Uni-on crumb-led with as-to-nis-hing swift-ness. Every few we-eks, it se-emed to La-ila, Ba-bi was co-ming ho-me with news of the la-test re-pub-lic to dec-la-re in-de-pen-den-ce. Lit-hu-ania. Es-to-nia. Uk-ra-ine. The So-vi-et flag was lo-we-red over the Krem-lin. The Re-pub-lic of Rus-sia was born.

In Ka-bul, Na-j-ibul-lah chan-ged tac-tics and tri-ed to port-ray him-self as a de-vo-ut Mus-lim. "Too lit-tle and far too la-te," sa-id Ba-bi. "You can't be the chi-ef of KHAD one day and the next day pray in a mos-que with pe-op-le who-se re-la-ti-ves you tor-tu-red and kil-led" Fe-eling the no-ose tigh-te-ning aro-und Ka-bul,

Na-j-ibul-lah tri-ed to re-ach a set-tle-ment with the Mu-j-ahi-de-en but the Mu-j-ahi-de-en bal-ked.

From her bed, Mammy sa-id, "Go-od for them." She kept her vi-gils for the Mu-j-ahi-de-en and wa-ited for her pa-ra-de. Wa-ited for her sons' ene-mi-es to fall.

* * *

And, even-tu-al-ly, they did. In Ap-ril 1992, the ye-ar La-ila tur-ned fo-ur-te-en.

Na-j-ibul-lah sur-ren-de-red at last and was gi-ven sanc-tu-ary in the UN com-po-und ne-ar Da-ru-la-man Pa-la-ce, so-uth of the city.

The jihad was over. The va-ri-o-us com-mu-nist re-gi-mes that had held po-wer sin-ce the night La-ila was born we-re all de-fe-ated. Mammy's he-ro-es, Ah-mad's and No-or's brot-hers-in-war, had won. And now, af-ter mo-re than a de-ca-de of sac-ri-fi-cing everyt-hing, of le-aving be-hind the-ir fa-mi-li-es to li-ve in mo-un-ta-ins and fight for Afg-ha-nis-tan's so-ve-re-ignty, the Mu-j-ahi-de-en we-re co-ming to Ka-bul, in flesh, blo-od, and bat-tle-we-ary bo-ne.

Mammy knew all of the-ir na-mes.

The-re was Dos-tum, the flam-bo-yant Uz-bek com-man-der, le-ader of the Jun-bish-i-Mil-li fac-ti-on, who had a re-pu-ta-ti-on for shif-ting al-le-gi-an-ces. The in-ten-se, surly Gul-bud-din Hek-mat-yar, le-ader of the Hezb-e-Isla-mi fac-ti-on, a Pash-tun who had stu-di-ed en-gi-ne-ering and on-ce kil-led a Ma-o-ist stu-dent. Rab-ba-ni, Ta-j-ik le-ader of the Jami-at-e-Isla-mi fac-ti-on, who had ta-ught Is-lam at Ka-bul Uni-ver-sity in the days of the mo-narchy. Say-yaf, a Pash-tun from Pagh-man with Arab con-nec-ti-ons, a sto-ut Mus-lim and le-ader of the It-te-had-i-Isla-mi fac-ti-on. Ab-dul Ali Ma-za-ri, le-ader of the Hizb-e-Wah-dat fac-ti-on, known as Ba-ba Ma-za-ri among his fel-low Ha-za-ras, with strong Shi'a ti-es to Iran.

And, of co-ur-se, the-re was Mammy's he-ro, Rab-ba-ni's ally, the bro-oding, cha-ris-ma-tic Ta-j-ik com-man-der Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud, the Li-on of Pa-njs-hir. Mammy had na-iled up a pos-ter of him in her ro-om. Mas-so-ud's hand-so-me, tho-ught-ful fa-ce, eyeb-row coc-ked and tra-de-mar-k-*pa-kol*til-ted, wo-uld be-co-me ubi-qu-ito-us in Ka-bul. His so-ul-ful black eyes wo-uld ga-ze back from bil-lbo-ards, walls, sto-ref-ront win-dows, from lit-tle flags mo-un-ted on the an-ten-nas of ta-xi-cabs.

For Mammy, this was the day she had lon-ged for. This bro-ught to fru-iti-on all tho-se ye-ars of wa-iting.

At last, she co-uld end her vi-gils, and her sons co-uld rest in pe-ace.

* * *

The day af-ter Na-j-ibul-lah sur-ren-de-red, Mammy ro-se from bed a new wo-man. For the first ti-me in the fi-ve ye-ars sin-ce Ah-mad and No-or had be-co-mes*-ha-he-ed,*she didn't we-ar black. She put on a co-balt blue li-nen dress with whi-te pol-ka dots. She was-hed the win-dows, swept the flo-or, aired the ho-use, to-ok a long bath. Her vo-ice was shrill with mer-ri-ment.

"A party is in or-der," she dec-la-red-She sent La-ila to in-vi-te ne-igh-bors. "Tell them we're ha-ving a big lunch to-mor-row!"

In the kitc-hen, Mammy sto-od lo-oking aro-und, hands on her hips, and sa-id, with fri-endly rep-ro-ach, "What ha-ve you do-ne to my kitc-hen, La-ila?*Wboy*. Ever-y-t-hing is in a dif-fe-rent pla-ce."

She be-gan mo-ving pots and pans aro-und, the-at-ri-cal-ly, as tho-ugh she we-re la-ying cla-im to them anew, res-ta-king her ter-ri-tory, now that she was back. La-ila sta-yed out of her way. It was best. Mammy co-uld be as in-do-mi-tab-le in her fits of eup-ho-ria as in her at-tacks of ra-ge. With un-set-tling energy, Mammy set abo-ut co-oking:*aush* so-up with kid-ney be-ans and dri-ed dill,*ko-fia,* ste-aming hot*ma-niu* dren-c-hed with fresh yo-gurt and top-ped with mint.

"You're pluc-king yo-ur eyeb-rows," Mammy sa-id, as she was ope-ning a lar-ge bur-lap sack of ri-ce by the kitc-hen co-un-ter.

"Only a lit-tle."

Mammy po-ured ri-ce from the sack in-to a lar-ge black pot of wa-ter. She rol-led up her sle-eves and be-gan stir-ring.

"How is Ta-riq?"

"His fat-her's be-en ill," La-ila sa-id "How old is he now any-way?"
"I don't know. Six-ti-es, I gu-ess."

"I me-ant Ta-riq."

"Oh. Six-te-en."

"He's a ni-ce boy. Don't you think?"

La-ila shrug-ged.

"Not re-al-ly a boy any-mo-re, tho-ugh, is he? Six-te-en. Al-most a man. Don't you think?"

"What are you get-ting at, Mammy?"

"Not-hing," Mammy sa-id, smi-ling in-no-cently. "Not-hing. It's just that you…Ah, not-hing. I'd bet-ter not say any-way."

"I see you want to," La-ila sa-id, ir-ri-ta-ted by this cir-cu-ito-us, play-ful ac-cu-sa-ti-on.

"Well." Mammy fol-ded her hands on the rim of the pot. La-ila spot-ted an un-na-tu-ral, al-most re-he-ar-sed, qu-ality to the way she sa-id "Well" and to this fol-ding of hands. She fe-ared a spe-ech was co-ming.

"It was one thing when you we-re lit-tle kids run-ning aro-und. No harm in that. It was char-ming- But now. Now. I no-ti-ce you're we-aring a bra, La-ila."

La-ila was ca-ught off gu-ard.

"And you co-uld ha-ve told me, by the way, abo-ut the bra. I didn't know. I'm di-sap-po-in-ted you didn't tell me." Sen-sing her ad-van-ta-ge, Mammy pres-sed on.

"Anyway, this isn't abo-ut me or the bra. It's abo-ut you and Ta-riq. He's a boy, you see, and, as such, what do-es he ca-re abo-ut re-pu-ta-ti-on? But you? The re-pu-ta-ti-on of a girl, es-pe-ci-al-ly one as pretty as you, is a de-li-ca-te thing, La-ila. Li-ke a mynah bird in yo-ur hands. Slac-ken yo-ur grip and away it fli-es."

"And what abo-ut all yo-ur wall clim-bing, the sne-aking aro-und with Ba-bi in the orc-hards?" La-ila sa-id, ple-ased with her qu-ick re-co-very.

"We we-re co-usins. And we mar-ri-ed. Has this boy as-ked for yo-ur hand?"

"He's a fri-end. A*rqfiq.* It's not li-ke that bet-we-en us," La-ila sa-id, so-un-ding de-fen-si-ve, and not very con-vin-cing. "He's li-ke a brot-her to me," she ad-ded, mis-gu-idedly. And she knew, even be-fo-re a clo-ud pas-sed over Mammy's fa-ce and her fe-atu-res dar-ke-ned, that she'd ma-de a mis-ta-ke.

*"That*he is not," Mammy sa-id flatly. "You will not li-ken that one-leg-ged car-pen-ter's boy to yo-ur brot-hers. The-re is*no one* li-ke yo-ur brot-hers."

"I didn't say he…That's not how I me-ant it."

Mammy sig-hed thro-ugh the no-se and clenc-hed her te-eth.

"Anyway," she re-su-med, but wit-ho-ut the coy light-he-aded-ness of a few mo-ments ago, "what I'm trying to say is that if you're not ca-re-ful, pe-op-le will talk."

La-ila ope-ned her mo-uth to say so-met-hing. It wasn't that Mammy didn't ha-ve a po-int. La-ila knew that the days of in-no-cent, un-hin-de-red fro-lic-king in the stre-ets with Ta-riq had pas-sed. For so-me ti-me now, La-ila had be-gun to sen-se a new stran-ge-ness when the two of them we-re out in pub-lic. An awa-re-ness of be-ing lo-oked at, scru-ti-ni-zed, whis-pe-red abo-ut, that La-ila had ne-ver felt be-fo-re. And*wo-uldn't* ha-ve felt even now but for one fun-da-men-tal fact: She had fal-len for Ta-riq. Ho-pe-les-sly and des-pe-ra-tely. When he was ne-ar, she co-uldn't help but be con-su-med with the most scan-da-lo-us tho-ughts, of his le-an, ba-re body en-tang-led with hers. Lying in bed at night, she pic-tu-red him kis-sing her belly, won-de-red at the soft-ness of his lips, at the fe-el of his hands on her neck, her chest, her back, and lo-wer still. When she tho-ught of him this way, she was over-ta-ken with gu-ilt, but al-so with a pe-cu-li-ar, warm sen-sa-ti-on that spre-ad up-ward from her belly un-til it felt as if her fa-ce we-re glo-wing pink.

No. Mammy had a po-int. Mo-re than she knew, in fact. La-ila sus-pec-ted that so-me, if not most, of the ne-igh-bors we-re al-re-ady gos-si-ping abo-ut her and Ta-riq. La-ila had no-ti-ced the sly grins, was awa-re of the whis-pers in the ne-igh-bor-ho-od that the two of them we-re a co-up-le. The ot-her day, for ins-tan-ce, she and Ta-riq we-re wal-king up the stre-et to-get-her when they'd pas-sed Ras-he-ed, the sho-ema-ker, with his bur-qa-clad wi-fe, Ma-ri-am, in tow. As he'd pas-sed by them, Ras-he-ed had play-ful-ly sa-id, "If it isn't La-ili and Ma-jno-on," re-fer-ring to the star-cros-sed lo-vers of Ne-za-mi's po-pu-lar twelfth-cen-tury ro-man-tic po-em-a Far-si ver-si-on of-*Ro-meo and Juli-et,*Ba-bi sa-id, tho-ugh he ad-ded that-Ne-za-mi had writ-ten his ta-le of ill-fa-ted lo-vers fo-ur cen-tu-ri-es be-fo-re Sha-kes-pe-are.

Mammy had a po-int.

What rank-led La-ila was that Mammy hadn't ear-ned the right to ma-ke it. It wo-uld ha-ve be-en one thing if Ba-bi had ra-ised this is-sue. But Mammy? All tho-se ye-ars of alo-of-ness, of co-oping her-self up and not ca-ring whe-re La-ila went and whom she saw and what she tho-ught…It was un-fa-ir. La-ila felt li-ke she was no bet-ter than the-se pots and pans, so-met-hing that co-uld go neg-lec-ted, then la-id cla-im to, at will, whe-ne-ver the mo-od struck.

But this was a big day, an im-por-tant day, for all of them. It wo-uld be petty to spo-il it over this. In the spi-rit of things, La-ila let it pass.

"I get yo-ur po-int," she sa-id.

"Go-od!" Mammy sa-id. "That's re-sol-ved, then. Now, whe-re is Ha-kim? Whe-re, oh whe-re, is that swe-et lit-tle hus-band of mi-ne?"

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It was a daz-zling, clo-ud-less day, per-fect for a party. The men sat on ric-kety fol-ding cha-irs in the yard. They drank tea and smo-ked and tal-ked in lo-ud ban-te-ring vo-ices abo-ut the Mu-j-ahi-de-en's plan. From Ba-bi, La-ila had le-ar-ned the out-li-ne of it: Afg-ha-nis-tan was now cal-led the Is-la-mic Sta-te of Afg-ha-nis-tan. An Is-la-mic Jihad Co-un-cil, for-med in Pes-ha-war by se-ve-ral of the Mu-j-ahi-de-en fac-ti-ons, wo-uld over-see things for two months, led by Sibg-ha-tul-lah Mo-j-adi-di. This wo-uld be fol-lo-wed then by a le-aders-hip co-un-cil led by Rab-ba-ni, who wo-uld ta-ke over for fo-ur months. Du-ring tho-se six months, a*lo-ya-j-ir-ga* wo-uld be held, a grand co-un-cil of le-aders and el-ders, who wo-uld form an in-te-rim go-vern-ment to hold po-wer for two ye-ars, le-ading up to de-moc-ra-tic elec-ti-ons.

One of the men was fan-ning ske-wers of lamb siz-zling over a ma-kes-hift grill Ba-bi and Ta-riq's fat-her we-re pla-ying a ga-me of chess in the sha-de of the old pe-ar tree. The-ir fa-ces we-re scrunc-hed up in con-cent-ra-ti-on. Ta-riq was sit-ting at the bo-ard too, in turns watc-hing the match, then lis-te-ning in on the po-li-ti-cal chat at the adj-acent tab-le.

The wo-men gat-he-red in the li-ving ro-om, the hal-lway, and the kitc-hen. They chat-ted as they ho-is-ted the-ir ba-bi-es and ex-pertly dod-ged, with mi-nu-te shifts of the-ir hips, the child-ren te-aring af-ter each ot-her aro-und the ho-use. An Us-tad Sa-ra-hang*gha-zal* bla-red from a cas-set-te pla-yer.

La-ila was in the kitc-hen, ma-king ca-ra-fes of*dogh* with Gi-ti. Gi-ti was no lon-ger as shy, or as se-ri-o-us, as be-fo-re. For se-ve-ral months now, the per-pe-tu-al se-ve-re scowl had cle-ared from her brow. She la-ug-hed openly the-se days, mo-re fre-qu-ently, and-it struck La-ila-a bit flir-ta-ti-o-usly. She had do-ne away with the drab pony-ta-ils, let her ha-ir grow, and stre-aked it with red high-lights. La-ila le-ar-ned even-tu-al-ly that the im-pe-tus for this trans-for-ma-ti-on was an eigh-te-en-ye-ar-old boy who-se at-ten-ti-on Gi-ti had ca-ught. His na-me was Sa-bir, and he was a go-al-ke-eper on Gi-ti's ol-der brot-her's soc-cer te-am.

"Oh, he has the most hand-so-me smi-le, and this thick, thick black ha-ir!" Gi-ti had told La-ila. No one knew abo-ut the-ir at-trac-ti-on, of co-ur-se. Gi-ti had sec-retly met him twi-ce for tea, fif-te-en mi-nu-tes each ti-me, at a small te-aho-use on the ot-her si-de of town, in Ta-ima-ni.

"He's go-ing to ask for my hand, La-ila! May-be as early as this sum-mer. Can you be-li-eve it? I swe-ar I can't stop thin-king abo-ut him."

"What abo-ut scho-ol?" La-ila had as-ked. Gi-ti had til-ted her he-ad and gi-ven her a*We both know bet-ter* lo-ok.

*By the ti-me we're twenty,*Ha-si-na used to say,*Gi-ti and I, we'll ha-ve pus-hed out fo-ur, fi-ve kids each Bui you, La-ila, you '1Ima-ke m two dum-mi-es pro-ud. You 're go-ing to be so-me-body. I know one day I'll pick up a news-pa-per and find yo-ur pic-tu-re on the fron-t-pa-ge.*

Gi-ti was be-si-de La-ila now, chop-ping cu-cum-bers, with a dre-amy, far-off lo-ok on her fa-ce.

Mammy was ne-arby, in her bril-li-ant sum-mer dress, pe-eling bo-iled eggs with Wa-jma, the mid-wi-fe, and Ta-riq's mot-her.

"I'm go-ing to pre-sent Com-man-der Mas-so-ud with a pic-tu-re of Ah-mad and No-or," Mammy was sa-ying to Wa-jma as Wa-jma nod-ded and tri-ed to lo-ok in-te-res-ted and sin-ce-re.

"He per-so-nal-ly over-saw the bu-ri-al. He sa-id a pra-yer at the-ir gra-ve. It'll be a to-ken of thanks for his de-cency." Mammy crac-ked anot-her bo-iled egg. "I he-ar he's a ref-lec-ti-ve, ho-no-rab-le man. I think he wo-uld ap-pre-ci-ate it."

All aro-und them, wo-men bol-ted in and out of the kitc-hen, car-ri-ed out bowls of*qur-ma,* plat-ters of*ma-si-awa,* lo-aves of bre-ad, and ar-ran-ged it all on*the-sof-rah* spre-ad on the li-ving-ro-om flo-or.

Every on-ce in a whi-le, Ta-riq sa-un-te-red in. He pic-ked at this, nib-bled on that.
"No men al-lo-wed," sa-id Gi-ti.

"Out, out, out," cri-ed Wa-jma.

Ta-riq smi-led at the wo-men's go-od-hu-mo-red sho-o-ing. He se-emed to ta-ke ple-asu-re in not be-ing wel-co-me he-re, in in-fec-ting this fe-ma-le at-mosp-he-re with his half-grin-ning, mas-cu-li-ne ir-re-ve-ren-ce.
La-ila did her best not to lo-ok at him, not to gi-ve the-se wo-men any mo-re gos-sip fod-der than they al-re-ady had So she kept her eyes down and sa-id not-hing to him, but she re-mem-be-red a dre-am she'd had a few nights be-fo-re, of his fa-ce and hers, to-get-her in a mir-ror, be-ne-ath a soft, gre-en ve-il. And gra-ins of ri-ce, drop-ping from his ha-ir, bo-un-cing off the glass with a*link.*

Ta-riq re-ac-hed to samp-le a mor-sel of ve-al co-oked with po-ta-to-es.

*"Ho bac-ha!"*Gi-ti slap-ped the back of his hand. Ta-riq sto-le it any-way and la-ug-hed.
He sto-od al-most a fo-ot tal-ler than La-ila now. He sha-ved. His fa-ce was le-aner, mo-re an-gu-lar. His sho-ul-ders had bro-ade-ned. Ta-riq li-ked to we-ar ple-ated tro-users, black shiny lo-afers, and short-sle-eve shirts that sho-wed off his newly

mus-cu-lar arms-comp-li-ments of an old, rusty set of bar-bel-ls that he lif-ted da-ily in his yard. His fa-ce had la-tely adop-ted an exp-res-si-on of play-ful con-ten-ti-o-us-ness. He had ta-ken to a self-cons-ci-o-us coc-king of his he-ad when he spo-ke, slightly to the si-de, and to arc-hing one eyeb-row when he la-ug-hed. He let his ha-ir grow and had fal-len in-to the ha-bit of tos-sing the floppy locks of-ten and un-ne-ces-sa-rily. The cor-rupt half grin was a new thing too.

The last ti-me Ta-riq was sho-o-ed out of the kitc-hen, his mot-her ca-ught La-ila ste-aling a glan-ce at him. La-ila's he-art jum-ped, and her eyes flut-te-red gu-il-tily. She qu-ickly oc-cu-pi-ed her-self with tos-sing the chop-ped cu-cum-ber in-to the pitc-her of sal-ted, wa-te-red-down yo-gurt. But she co-uld sen-se Ta-riq's mot-her watc-hing, her kno-wing, ap-pro-ving half smi-le.

The men fil-led the-ir pla-tes and glas-ses and to-ok the-ir me-als to the yard. On-ce they had ta-ken the-ir sha-re, the wo-men and child-ren set-tled on the flo-or aro-und the*sof-rah* and ate.

It was af-ter*fat sof-rah* was cle-ared and the pla-tes we-re stac-ked in the kitc-hen, when the frenzy of tea ma-king and re-mem-be-ring who to-ok gre-en and who black star-ted, that Ta-riq mo-ti-oned with his he-ad and slip-ped out the do-or.

La-ila wa-ited fi-ve mi-nu-tes, then fol-lo-wed.

She fo-und him three ho-uses down the stre-et, le-aning aga-inst the wall at the ent-ran-ce of a nar-row-mo-ut-hed al-ley bet-we-en two adj-acent ho-uses. He was hum-ming an old Pash-to song, by Us-tad Awal Mir:

Da ze ma zi-ba wa-i-an, da ze ma da-da wa-i-an. This is our be-a-uti-ful land, this is our be-lo-ved land.

And he was smo-king, anot-her new ha-bit, which he'd pic-ked up from the guys La-ila spot-ted him han-ging aro-und with the-se days. La-ila co-uldn't stand them, the-se new fri-ends of Ta-riq's. They all dres-sed the sa-me way, ple-ated tro-users, and tight shirts that ac-cen-tu-ated the-ir arms and chest. They all wo-re too much co-log-ne, and they all smo-ked. They strut-ted aro-und the ne-igh-bor-ho-od in gro-ups, joking, la-ug-hing lo-udly, so-me-ti-mes even cal-ling af-ter girls, with iden-ti-cal stu-pid, self-sa-tis-fi-ed grins on the-ir fa-ces. One of Ta-riq's fri-ends, on the ba-sis of the most pas-sing of re-semb-lan-ces to Sylves-ter Stal-lo-ne, in-sis-ted he be cal-led Ram-bo.

"Yo-ur mot-her wo-uld kill you if she knew abo-ut yo-ur smo-king," La-ila sa-id, lo-oking one way, then the ot-her, be-fo-re slip-ping in-to the al-ley.

"But she do-esn't," he sa-id. He mo-ved asi-de to ma-ke ro-om.

"That co-uld chan-ge."

"Who is go-ing to tell? You?"

La-ila tap-ped her fo-ot. "Tell yo-ur sec-ret to the wind, but don't bla-me it for tel-ling the tre-es."

Ta-riq smi-led, the one eyeb-row arc-hed. "Who sa-id that?"

"Kha-lil Gib-ran."

"You're a show-off."

"Gi-ve me a ci-ga-ret-te."

He sho-ok his he-ad no and cros-sed his arms. This was a new entry in his re-per-to-ire of po-ses: back to the wall, arms cros-sed, ci-ga-ret-te dang-ling from the cor-ner of his mo-uth, his go-od leg ca-su-al-ly bent.
"Why not?"

"Bad for you," he sa-id.
"And it's not bad for you?"

"I do it for the girls."

"What girls?"

He smir-ked. "They think it's sexy."

"It's not."

"No?"

"I as-su-re you."

"Not sexy?"

"You lo-ok*khi-la,* li-ke a half-wit."

"That hurts," he sa-id

"What girls any-way?"

"You're je-alo-us."

"I'm in-dif-fe-rently cu-ri-o-us."

"You can't be both." He to-ok anot-her drag and squ-in-ted thro-ugh the smo-ke. "I'll bet they're tal-king abo-ut us now."

In La-ila's he-ad, Mammy's vo-ice rang out.*Li-ke a mynah bird in yo-ur hands. Slac-ken yo-ur grip and away it fli-es.* Gu-ilt bo-re its te-eth in-to her. Then La-ila shut off Mammy's vo-ice. Ins-te-ad, she sa-vo-red the way Ta-riq had sa-id*us.* How thril-ling, how cons-pi-ra-to-ri-al, it so-un-ded co-ming from him. And how re-as-su-ring to he-ar him say it li-ke that-ca-su-al-ly, na-tu-ral-ly.*Us.* It ack-now-led-ged the-ir con-nec-ti-on, crystal-li-zed it.

"And what are they sa-ying?"

"That we're ca-no-e-ing down the Ri-ver of Sin," he sa-id. "Eating a sli-ce of Im-pi-ety Ca-ke."
"Ri-ding the Ricks-haw of Wic-ked-ness?" La-ila chi-med in.

"Ma-king Sac-ri-le-ge*Qur-ma."*

They both la-ug-hed. Then Ta-riq re-mar-ked that her ha-ir was get-ting lon-ger. "It's ni-ce," he sa-id La-ila ho-ped she wasn't blus-hing- "You chan-ged the su-bj-ect."
"From what?"

"The empty-he-aded girls who think you're sexy."

"You know."

"Know what?"

"That I only ha-ve eyes for you."

La-ila swo-oned in-si-de. She tri-ed to re-ad his fa-ce but was met by a lo-ok that was in-de-cip-he-rab-le: the che-er-ful, cre-ti-no-us grin at odds with the nar-row, half-des-pe-ra-te lo-ok in his eyes. A cle-ver lo-ok, cal-cu-la-ted to fall pre-ci-sely at the mid-po-int bet-we-en moc-kery and sin-ce-rity.

Ta-riq crus-hed his ci-ga-ret-te with the he-el of his go-od fo-ot. "So what do you think abo-ut all this?"

"The party?"

"Who's the half-wit now?**I me-ant** the Mu-j-ahi-de-en, La-ila. The-ir co-ming to Ka-bul."

Oh.

She star-ted to tell him so-met-hing Ba-bi had sa-id, abo-ut the tro-ub-le-so-me mar-ri-age of guns and ego, when she he-ard a com-mo-ti-on co-ming from the ho-use. Lo-ud vo-ices. Scre-aming.

La-ila to-ok off run-ning. Ta-riq hob-bled be-hind her.

The-re was a me-lee in the yard. In the mid-dle of it we-re two snar-ling men, rol-ling on the gro-und, a kni-fe bet-we-en them. La-ila re-cog-ni-zed one of them as a man from the tab-le who had be-en dis-cus-sing po-li-tics ear-li-er. The ot-her was the man who had be-en fan-ning the ke-bab ske-wers. Se-ve-ral men we-re trying to pull them apart. Ba-bi wasn't among them. He sto-od by the wall, at a sa-fe dis-tan-ce from the fight, with Ta-riq's fat-her, who was crying.

From the ex-ci-ted vo-ices aro-und her, La-ila ca-ught snip-pets that she put to-get-her: The fel-low at the po-li-tics tab-le, a Pash-tun, had cal-led Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud a tra-itor for "ma-king a de-al" with the So-vi-ets in the 1980s. The ke-bab man, a Ta-j-ik, had ta-ken of-fen-se and de-man-ded a ret-rac-ti-on. The Pash-tun had re-fu-sed. The Ta-j-ik had sa-id that if not for Mas-so-ud, the ot-her man's sis-ter wo-uld still be "gi-ving it" to So-vi-et sol-di-ers. They had co-me to blows. One of them had then bran-dis-hed a kni-fe; the-re was di-sag-re-ement as to who.

With hor-ror, La-ila saw that Ta-riq had thrown him-self in-to the scuf-fle. She al-so saw that so-me of the pe-ace-ma-kers we-re now thro-wing punc-hes of the-ir own. She tho-ught she spot-ted a se-cond kni-fe.

La-ter that eve-ning, La-ila tho-ught of how the me-lee had top-pled over, with men fal-ling on top of one anot-her, amid yelps and cri-es and sho-uts and flying punc-hes, and, in the mid-dle of it, a gri-ma-cing Ta-riq, his ha-ir dis-he-ve-led, his leg co-me un-do-ne, trying to crawl out.

*** * ***

It was diz-zyinghow qu-ickly everyt-hing un-ra-ve-led.

The le-aders-hip co-un-cil was for-med pre-ma-tu-rely. It elec-ted Rab-ba-ni pre-si-dent. The ot-her fac-ti-ons cri-ed**ne-po-tism.** Mas-so-ud cal-led for pe-ace and pa-ti-en-ce.

Hek-mat-yar, who had be-en exc-lu-ded, was in-cen-sed. The Ha-za-ras, with the-ir long his-tory of be-ing op-pres-sed and neg-lec-ted, se-et-hed.

Insults we-re hur-led. Fin-gers po-in-ted. Ac-cu-sa-ti-ons flew. Me-etings we-re ang-rily cal-led off and do-ors slam-med. The city held its bre-ath. In the mo-un-ta-ins, lo-aded ma-ga-zi-nes snap-ped in-to Ka-lash-ni-kovs.

The Mu-j-ahi-de-en, ar-med to the te-eth but now lac-king a com-mon enemy, had fo-und the enemy in each ot-her.

Ka-bul's day of rec-ko-ning had co-me at last.

And when the roc-kets be-gan to ra-in down on Ka-bul, pe-op-le ran for co-ver. Mammy did too, li-te-ral-ly. She chan-ged in-to black aga-in, went to her ro-om, shut the cur-ta-ins, and pul-led the blan-ket over her he-ad.

24.

It's the whist-ling," La-ila sa-id to Ta-riq, "the damn whist-ling, I ha-te mo-re than anyt-hing" Ta-riq nod-ded kno-wingly.

It wasn't so much the whist-ling it-self, La-ila tho-ught la-ter, but the se-conds bet-we-en the start of it and im-pact. The bri-ef and in-ter-mi-nab-le ti-me of fe-eling sus-pen-ded. The not kno-wing. The wa-iting. Li-ke a de-fen-dant abo-ut to he-ar the ver-dict.

Often it hap-pe-ned at din-ner, when she and Ba-bi we-re at the tab-le. When it star-ted, the-ir he-ads snap-ped up. They lis-te-ned to the whist-ling, forks in mi-da-ir, unc-he-wed fo-od in the-ir mo-uths. La-ila saw the ref-lec-ti-on of the-ir half-lit fa-ces in the pitch-black win-dow, the-ir sha-dows un-mo-ving on the wall. The whist-ling. Then the blast, blis-sful-ly el-sew-he-re, fol-lo-wed by an ex-pul-si-on of bre-ath and the know-led-ge that they had be-en spa-red for now whi-le so-mew-he-re el-se, amid cri-es and cho-king clo-uds of smo-ke, the-re was a scramb-ling, a ba-re-han-ded frenzy of dig-ging, of pul-ling from the deb-ris, what re-ma-ined of a sis-ter, a brot-her, a grandc-hild.

But the flip si-de of be-ing spa-red was the agony of won-de-ring who hadn't. Af-ter every roc-ket blast, La-ila ra-ced to the stre-et, stam-me-ring a pra-yer, cer-ta-in that, this ti-me, su-rely this ti-me, it was Ta-riq they wo-uld find bu-ri-ed be-ne-ath the rub-ble and smo-ke.

At night, La-ila lay in bed and watc-hed the sud-den whi-te flas-hes ref-lec-ted in her win-dow. She lis-te-ned to the rat-tling of auto-ma-tic gun-fi-re and co-un-ted the roc-kets whi-ning over-he-ad as the ho-use sho-ok and fla-kes of plas-ter ra-ined down on her from the ce-iling. So-me nights, when the light of roc-ket fi-re was so bright a per-son co-uld re-ad a bo-ok by it, sle-ep ne-ver ca-me. And, if it did, La-ila's dre-ams we-re suf-fu-sed with fi-re and de-tac-hed limbs and the mo-aning of the wo-un-ded.

Mor-ning bro-ught no re-li-ef. The mu-ez-zin's call for*na-maz* rang out, and the Mu-j-ahi-de-en set down the-ir guns, fa-ced west, and pra-yed. Then the rugs we-re fol-ded, the guns lo-aded, and the mo-un-ta-ins fi-red on Ka-bul, and Ka-bul fi-red

back at the mo-un-ta-ins, as La-ila and the rest of the city watc-hed as help-less as old San-ti-ago watc-hing the sharks ta-ke bi-tes out of his pri-ze fish.

*** * ***

Everyw-he-re La-ila "went, she saw Mas-so-ud's men. She saw them ro-am the stre-ets and every few hund-red yards stop cars for qu-es-ti-oning. They sat and smo-ked atop tanks, dres-sed in the-ir fa-ti-gu-es and ubi-qu-ito-us-*pa-kols.*They pe-eked at pas-sersby from be-hind stac-ked sand-bags at in-ter-sec-ti-ons.

Not that La-ila went out much any-mo-re. And, when she did, she was al-ways ac-com-pa-ni-ed by Ta-riq, who se-emed to re-lish this chi-val-ric duty.

"I bo-ught a gun," he sa-id one day. They we-re sit-ting out-si-de, on the gro-und be-ne-ath the pe-ar tree in La-ila's yard. He sho-wed her. He sa-id it was a se-mi-a-uto-ma-tic, a Be-ret-ta. To La-ila, it me-rely lo-oked black and de-adly.

"I don't li-ke it," she sa-id. "Guns sca-re me."

Ta-riq tur-ned the ma-ga-zi-ne over in his hand

"They fo-und three bo-di-es in a ho-use in Kar-teh-Seh last we-ek," he sa-id. "Did you he-ar? Sis-ters. All three ra-ped The-ir thro-ats slas-hed. So-me-one had bit-ten the rings off the-ir fin-gers. You co-uld tell, they had te-eth marks-"

"I don't want to he-ar this."

"I don't me-an to up-set you," Ta-riq sa-id "But I just…Ife-el bet-ter car-rying this."

He was her li-fe-li-ne to the stre-ets now. He he-ard the word of mo-uth and pas-sed it on to her. Ta-riq was the one who told her, for ins-tan-ce, that mi-li-ti-amen sta-ti-oned in the mo-un-ta-ins shar-pe-ned the-ir marks-mans-hip-and set-tled wa-gers over sa-id marks-mans-hip-by sho-oting ci-vi-li-ans down be-low, men, wo-men, child-ren, cho-sen at ran-dom. He told her that they fi-red roc-kets at cars but, for so-me re-ason, left ta-xis alo-ne-which exp-la-ined to La-ila the re-cent rash of pe-op-le spra-ying the-ir cars yel-low.

Ta-riq exp-la-ined to her the tre-ac-he-ro-us, shif-ting bo-un-da-ri-es wit-hin Ka-bul. La-ila le-ar-ned from him, for ins-tan-ce, that this ro-ad, up to the se-cond aca-cia tree on the left, be-lon-ged to one war-lord; that the next fo-ur blocks, en-ding with the ba-kery shop next to the de-mo-lis-hed phar-macy, was anot-her war-lord's sec-tor; and that if she cros-sed that stre-et and wal-ked half a mi-le west, she wo-uld find her-self in the ter-ri-tory of yet anot-her war-lord and, the-re-fo-re, fa-ir ga-me for sni-per fi-re. And this was what Mammy's he-ro-es we-re cal-led now. War-lords.

La-ila he-ard them cal-led*iofan-g-dar* too. Rif-le-men. Ot-hers still cal-led them Mu-j-ahi-de-en, but, when they did, they ma-de a fa-ce-a sne-ering, dis-tas-te-ful fa-ce-the word re-eking of de-ep aver-si-on and de-ep scorn. Li-ke an in-sult.

Ta-riq snap-ped the ma-ga-zi-ne back in-to his hand-gun. "Do**you ha-ve it in** you?" La-ila sa-id.**"To** what?"

"To use this thing. To kill with it."

Ta-riq tuc-ked the gun in-to the wa-ist of his de-nims. Then he sa-id a thing both lo-vely and ter-rib-le. "For you," he sa-id. "I'd kill with it for you, La-ila."

He slid clo-ser to her and the-ir hands brus-hed, on-ce, then aga-in. When Ta-riq's fin-gers ten-ta-ti-vely be-gan to slip in-to hers, La-ila let them. And when sud-denly he le-aned over and pres-sed his lips to hers, she let him aga-in.

At that mo-ment, all of Mammy's talk of re-pu-ta-ti-ons and mynah birds so-un-ded im-ma-te-ri-al to La-ila. Ab-surd, even. In the midst of all this kil-ling and lo-oting, all this ug-li-ness, it was a harm-less thing to sit he-re be-ne-ath a tree and kiss Ta-riq. A small thing. An easily for-gi-vab-le in-dul-gen-ce. So she let him kiss her, and when he pul-led back she le-aned in and kis-sed*him*, he-art po-un-ding in her thro-at, her fa-ce ting-ling, a fi-re bur-ning in the pit of her belly.

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In June of that ye-ah, 1992, the-re was he-avy figh-ting in West Ka-bul bet-we-en the Pash-tun for-ces of the war-lord Say-yaf and the Ha-za-ras of the Wah-dat fac-ti-on. The shel-ling knoc-ked down po-wer li-nes, pul-ve-ri-zed en-ti-re blocks of shops and ho-mes. La-ila he-ard that Pash-tun mi-li-ti-amen we-re at-tac-king Ha-za-ra ho-use-holds, bre-aking in and sho-oting en-ti-re fa-mi-li-es, exe-cu-ti-on style, and that Ha-za-ras we-re re-ta-li-ating by ab-duc-ting Pash-tun ci-vi-li-ans, ra-ping Pash-tun girls, shel-ling Pash-tun ne-igh-bor-ho-ods, and kil-ling in-disc-ri-mi-na-tely. Every day, bo-di-es we-re fo-und ti-ed to tre-es, so-me-ti-mes bur-ned be-yond re-cog-ni-ti-on. Of-ten, they'd be-en shot in the he-ad, had had the-ir eyes go-uged out, the-ir ton-gu-es cut out.

Ba-bi tri-ed aga-in to con-vin-ce Mammy to le-ave Ka-bul.

"They'll work it out," Mammy sa-id. "This figh-ting is tem-po-rary. They'll sit down and fi-gu-re so-met-hing out."

"Fa-ri-ba, all the-se pe-op-le*know* is war," sa-id Ba-bi. "They le-ar-ned to walk with a milk bot-tle in one hand and a gun in the ot-her."

"Who*zrtyou* to say?" Mammy shot back. "Did you fight jihad? Did you aban-don everyt-hing you had and risk yo-ur li-fe? If not for the Mu-j-ahi-de-en, we'd still be the So-vi-ets' ser-vants, re-mem-ber. And now you'd ha-ve us bet-ray them!"

"We aren't the ones do-ing the bet-ra-ying, Fa-ri-ba."

"You go, then. Ta-ke yo-ur da-ugh-ter and run away. Send me a post-card. But pe-ace is co-ming, and I, for one, am go-ing to wa-it for it."

The stre-ets be-ca-me so un-sa-fe that Ba-bi did an unt-hin-kab-le thing: He had La-ila drop out of scho-ol.

He to-ok over the te-ac-hing du-ti-es him-self. La-ila went in-to his study every day af-ter sun-down, and, as Hek-mat-yar la-unc-hed his roc-kets at Mas-so-ud from the so-ut-hern outs-kirts of the city, Ba-bi and she dis-cus-sed*theg-ha-zals* of Ha-fez and the works of the be-lo-ved Afg-han po-et Us-tad Kha-li-lul-lah Kha-li-li. Ba-bi ta-ught her to de-ri-ve the qu-ad-ra-tic equ-ati-on, sho-wed her how to fac-tor poly-no-mi-als and plot pa-ra-met-ric cur-ves. When he was te-ac-hing, Ba-bi was trans-for-med. In his ele-ment, amid his bo-oks, he lo-oked tal-ler to La-ila. His vo-ice se-emed to ri-se from a cal-mer, de-eper pla-ce, and he didn't blink ne-arly as much. La-ila pic-tu-red him as he must ha-ve be-en on-ce, era-sing his black-bo-ard with gra-ce-ful swi-pes, lo-oking over a stu-dent's sho-ul-der, fat-herly and at-ten-ti-ve.

But it wasn't easy to pay at-ten-ti-on. La-ila kept get-ting dist-rac-ted.

"What is the area of a pyra-mid?" Ba-bi wo-uld ask, and all La-ila co-uld think of was the ful-lness of Ta-riq's lips, the he-at of his bre-ath on her mo-uth, her own ref-lec-ti-on in his ha-zel eyes. She'd kis-sed him twi-ce mo-re sin-ce the ti-me be-ne-ath the tree, lon-ger, mo-re pas-si-ona-tely, and, she tho-ught, less clum-sily. Both ti-mes, she'd met him sec-retly in the dim al-ley whe-re he'd smo-ked a ci-ga-ret-te the day of Mammy's lunch party. The se-cond ti-me, she'd let him to-uch her bre-ast.

"La-ila?"

"Yes, Ba-bi."

"Pyra-mid. Area. Whe-re are you?"

"Sorry, Ba-bi. I was, uh…Let's see. Pyra-mid. Pyra-mid. One-third the area of the ba-se ti-mes the he-ight."

Ba-bi nod-ded un-cer-ta-inly, his ga-ze lin-ge-ring on her, and La-ila tho-ught of Ta-riq's hands, squ-e-ezing her bre-ast, sli-ding down the small of her back, as the two of them kis-sed and kis-sed.

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One daY that sa-me month of June, Gi-ti was wal-king ho-me from scho-ol with two clas-sma-tes. Only three blocks from Gi-ti's ho-use, a stray roc-ket struck the girls. La-ter that ter-rib-le day, La-ila le-ar-ned that Ni-la, Gi-ti's mot-her, had run up and down the stre-et whe-re Gi-ti was kil-led, col-lec-ting pi-eces of her da-ugh-ter's flesh

in an ap-ron, scre-ec-hing hyste-ri-cal-ly. Gi-ti's de-com-po-sing right fo-ot, still in its nylon sock and purp-le sne-aker, wo-uld be fo-und on a ro-of-top two we-eks la-ter.

At*Gi-ti'sfa-i-iha,* the day af-ter the kil-lings, La-ila sat stun-ned in a ro-om-ful of we-eping wo-men. This was the first ti-me that so-me-one whom La-ila had known, be-en clo-se to, lo-ved, had di-ed. She co-uldn't get aro-und the un-fat-ho-mab-le re-ality that Gi-ti wasn't ali-ve any-mo-re. Gi-ti, with whom La-ila had exc-han-ged sec-ret no-tes in class, who-se fin-ger-na-ils she had po-lis-hed, who-se chin ha-ir she had pluc-ked with twe-ezers. Gi-ti, who was go-ing to marry Sa-bir the go-al-ke-eper. Gi-ti was de-ad.*De-ad.* Blown to pi-eces. At last, La-ila be-gan to we-ep for her fri-end. And all the te-ars that she hadn't be-en ab-le to shed at her brot-hers' fu-ne-ral ca-me po-uring down.

25.

JLa-ila co-uld hardly mo-ve, as tho-ugh ce-ment had so-li-di-fi-ed in every one of her jo-ints. The-re was a con-ver-sa-ti-on go-ing on, and La-ila knew that she was at one end of it, but she felt re-mo-ved from it, as tho-ugh she we-re me-rely eavesd-rop-ping. As Ta-riq tal-ked, La-ila pic-tu-red her li-fe as a rot-ted ro-pe, snap-ping, un-ra-ve-ling, the fi-bers de-tac-hing, fal-ling away.

It was a hot, muggy af-ter-no-on that August of 1992, and they we-re in the li-ving ro-om of La-ila's ho-use. Mammy had had a sto-mac-hac-he all day, and, mi-nu-tes be-fo-re, des-pi-te the roc-kets that Hek-mat-yar was la-unc-hing from the so-uth, Ba-bi had ta-ken her to see a doc-tor. And he-re was Ta-riq now, se-ated be-si-de La-ila on the co-uch, lo-oking at the gro-und, hands bet-we-en his kne-es.

Sa-ying that he was le-aving.

Not the ne-igh-bor-ho-od. Not Ka-bul. But Afg-ha-nis-tan al-to-get-her.

Le-aving.

La-ila was struck blind.

"Whe-re? Whe-re will you go?"

"Pa-kis-tan first. Pes-ha-war. Then I don't know. May-be Hin-dus-tan. Iran."

"How long?"

"I don't know."

"I me-an, how long ha-ve you known?"

"A few days. I was go-ing to tell you, La-ila, I swe-ar, but I co-uldn't bring myself to. I knew**how up-set** you'd be."

"When?"

"To-mor-row."

"To-mor-row?"

"La-ila, lo-ok at me."

"To-mor-row."

"It'smy fat-her. His he-art**can't** ta-ke it any-mo-re, all this figh-ting and kil-ling."

La-ila bu-ri-ed her fa-ce in her hands, a bub-ble of dre-ad fil-ling her chest.

She sho-uld ha-ve se-en this co-ming, she tho-ught. Al-most ever-yo-ne she knew had pac-ked the-ir things and left. The ne-igh-bor-ho-od had be-en all but dra-ined of fa-mi-li-ar fa-ces, and now, only fo-ur months af-ter figh-ting had bro-ken out bet-we-en the Mu-j-ahi-de-en fac-ti-ons, La-ila hardly re-cog-ni-zed any-body on the stre-ets any-mo-re. Ha-si-na's fa-mily had fled in May, off to Teh-ran. Wa-jma and her clan had go-ne to Is-la-ma-bad that sa-me month. Gi-ti's pa-rents and her sib-lings left in June, shortly af-ter Gi-ti was kil-led. La-ila didn't know whe-re they had go-ne-she he-ard a ru-mor that they had he-aded for Mas-had, in Iran. Af-ter pe-op-le left, the-ir ho-mes sat unoc-cu-pi-ed for a few days, then eit-her mi-li-ti-amen to-ok them or stran-gers mo-ved in.

Ever-yo-ne was le-aving. And now Ta-riq too.

"And my mot-her is not a yo-ung wo-man any-mo-re," he was sa-ying. "They're so af-ra-id all the ti-me. La-ila, lo-ok at me."

"You sho-uld ha-ve told me."

"Ple-ase lo-ok at me."

A gro-an ca-me out of La-ila. Then a wa-il. And then she was crying, and when he went to wi-pe her che-ek with the pad of his thumb she swi-ped his hand away. It was sel-fish and ir-ra-ti-onal, but she was fu-ri-o-us with him for aban-do-ning her, Ta-riq, who was li-ke an ex-ten-si-on of her, who-se sha-dow sprung be-si-de hers in every me-mory. How co-uld he le-ave her? She slap-ped him. Then she slap-ped him aga-in and pul-led at his ha-ir, and he had to ta-ke her by the wrists, and he was sa-ying so-met-hing she co-uldn't ma-ke out, he was sa-ying it softly, re-aso-nably, and, so-me-how, they en-ded up brow to brow, no-se to no-se, and she co-uld fe-el the he-at of his bre-ath on her lips aga-in.

And when, sud-denly, he le-aned in, she did too.

*** * ***

In the co-ming days and we-eks, La-ila wo-uld scramb-le fran-ti-cal-ly to com-mit it all to me-mory, what hap-pe-ned next-Li-ke an art lo-ver run-ning out of a bur-ning mu-se-um, she wo-uld grab wha-te-ver she co-uld-a lo-ok, a whis-per, a mo-an-to sal-va-ge from pe-ris-hing, to pre-ser-ve. But ti-me is the most un-for-gi-ving of fi-res, and she co-uldn't, in the end, sa-ve it all Still, she had the-se: that first, tre-men-do-us pang of pa-in down be-low. The slant of sun-light on the rug. Her he-el gra-zing the cold hard-ness of his leg, lying be-si-de them, has-tily unst-rap-ped. Her hands cup-ping his el-bows. The up-si-de-down, man-do-lin-sha-ped birth-mark be-ne-ath his col-lar-bo-ne, glo-wing red. His fa-ce ho-ve-ring over hers. His black curls dang-ling, tick-ling her lips, her chin. The ter-ror that they wo-uld be dis-co-ve-red. The dis-be-li-ef at the-ir own bold-ness, the-ir co-ura-ge. The stran-ge and in-desc-ri-bab-le ple-asu-re, in-ter-la-ced with the pa-in. And the lo-ok, the myri-ad of*lo-oks,* on Ta-riq: of ap-pre-hen-si-on, ten-der-ness, apo-logy, em-bar-ras-sment, but mostly, mostly, of hun-ger.

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The-re was frenzy af-ter. Shirts hur-ri-edly but-to-ned, belts buck-led, ha-ir fin-ger-com-bed. They sat, then, they sat be-si-de each ot-her, smel-ling of each ot-her, fa-ces flus-hed pink, both of them stun-ned, both of them spe-ech-less be-fo-re the enor-mity of what had just hap-pe-ned. What they had do-ne.

La-ila saw three drops of blo-od on the rug,*her* blo-od, and pic-tu-red her pa-rents sit-ting on this co-uch la-ter, ob-li-vi-o-us to the sin that she had com-mit-ted. And now the sha-me set in, and the gu-ilt, and, ups-ta-irs, the clock tic-ked on, im-pos-sibly lo-ud to La-ila's ears. Li-ke a jud-ge's ga-vel po-un-ding aga-in and aga-in, con-dem-ning her.

Then Ta-riq sa-id, "Co-me with me."

For a mo-ment, La-ila al-most be-li-eved that it co-uld be do-ne. She, Ta-riq, and his pa-rents, set-ting out to-get-her-Pac-king the-ir bags, clim-bing abo-ard a bus, le-aving be-hind all this vi-olen-ce, go-ing to find bles-sings, or tro-ub-le, and whic-he-ver ca-me they wo-uld fa-ce it to-get-her. The ble-ak iso-la-ti-on awa-iting her, the mur-de-ro-us lo-ne-li-ness, it didn't ha-ve to be.

She co-uld go. They co-uld be to-get-her.

They wo-uld ha-ve mo-re af-ter-no-ons li-ke this.

"I want to marry you, La-ila."

For the first ti-me sin-ce they we-re on the flo-or, she ra-ised her eyes to me-et his. She se-arc-hed his fa-ce. The-re was no play-ful-ness this ti-me. His lo-ok was one of con-vic-ti-on, of gu-ile-less yet ironc-lad ear-nest-ness.

"Ta-riq-"

"Let me marry you, La-ila. To-day. We co-uld get mar-ri-ed to-day."

He be-gan to say mo-re, abo-ut go-ing to a mos-que, fin-ding a mul-lah, a pa-ir of wit-nes-ses, a qu-ick*nik-ka.* …

But La-ila was thin-king of Mammy, as obs-ti-na-te and un-comp-ro-mi-sing as the Mu-j-ahi-de-en, the air aro-und her cho-ked with ran-cor and des-pa-ir, and she was thin-king of Ba-bi, who had long sur-ren-de-red, who ma-de such a sad, pat-he-tic op-po-nent to Mammy.

So-me-ti-mes…I fe-el li-ke you 're all I ha-ve, La-ila.

The-se we-re the cir-cums-tan-ces of her li-fe, the ines-ca-pab-le truths of it.

"I'll ask Ka-ka Ha-kim for yo-ur hand He'll gi-ve us his bles-sing, La-ila, I know it."

He was right. Ba-bi wo-uld. But it wo-uld shat-ter him.

Ta-riq was still spe-aking, his vo-ice hus-hed, then high, be-se-ec-hing, then re-aso-ning; his fa-ce ho-pe-ful, then stric-ken.

"I can't," La-ila sa-id.

"Don't say that. I lo-ve you."

"I'm sorry-"

"I lo-ve you."

How long had she wa-ited to he-ar tho-se words from him? How many ti-mes had she dre-amed them ut-te-red? The-re

they we-re, spo-ken at last, and the irony crus-hed her.

"It's my fat-her I can't le-ave," La-ila sa-id "I'm all he has left. His he-art co-uldn't ta-ke it eit-her."

Ta-riq knew this. He knew she co-uld not wi-pe away the ob-li-ga-ti-ons of her li-fe any mo-re than he co-uld his, but it went on, his ple-adings and her re-but-tals, his pro-po-sals and her apo-lo-gi-es, his te-ars and hers.

In the end, La-ila had to ma-ke him le-ave.

At the do-or, she ma-de him pro-mi-se to go wit-ho-ut go-od-byes. She clo-sed the do-or on him. La-ila le-aned her back aga-inst it, sha-king aga-inst his po-un-ding fists, one arm grip-ping her belly and a hand ac-ross her mo-uth, as he spo-ke thro-ugh the do-or and pro-mi-sed that he wo-uld co-me back, that he wo-uld co-me back for her. She sto-od the-re un-til he ti-red, un-til he ga-ve up, and then she lis-te-ned to his une-ven fo-ots-teps un-til they fa-ded, un-til all was qu-i-et, sa-ve for the gun-fi-re crac-king in the hills and her own he-art thud-ding in her belly, her eyes, her bo-nes.

26.

It was, by far, the hot-test day of the ye-ar. The mo-un-ta-ins trap-ped the bo-ne-scorc-hing he-at, stif-led the city li-ke smo-ke. Po-wer had be-en out for days. All over Ka-bul, elect-ric fans sat id-le, al-most moc-kingly so.

La-ila was lying still on the li-ving-ro-om co-uch, swe-ating thro-ugh her blo-use. Every ex-ha-led bre-ath bur-ned the tip of her no-se. She was awa-re of her pa-rents tal-king in Mammy's ro-om. Two nights ago, and aga-in last night, she had awa-ke-ned and tho-ught she he-ard the-ir vo-ices downs-ta-irs. They we-re tal-king every day now, ever sin-ce the bul-let, ever sin-ce the new ho-le in the ga-te.

Out-si-de, the far-off*bo-om* of ar-til-lery, then, mo-re clo-sely, the stam-me-ring of a long string of gun-fi-re, fol-lo-wed by anot-her.

Insi-de La-ila too a bat-tle was be-ing wa-ged: gu-ilt on one si-de, part-ne-red with sha-me, and, on the ot-her, the con-vic-ti-on that what she and Ta-riq had do-ne was not sin-ful; that it had be-en na-tu-ral, go-od, be-a-uti-ful, even ine-vi-tab-le, spur-red by the know-led-ge that they might ne-ver see each ot-her aga-in.

La-ila rol-led to her si-de on the co-uch now and tri-ed to re-mem-ber so-met-hing: At one po-int, when they we-re on the flo-or, Ta-riq had lo-we-red his fo-re-he-ad on hers. Then he had pan-ted so-met-hing, eit-her*Am I hur-ting you?* or*Is this hur-ting you?*

La-ila co-uldn't de-ci-de which he had sa-id.

Am Ihur-ting you?

Is this hur-ting you?

Only two we-eks sin-ce he had left, and it was al-re-ady hap-pe-ning- Ti-me, blun-ting the ed-ges of tho-se sharp me-mo-ri-es. La-ila bo-re down men-tal-ly. What had he sa-id? It se-emed vi-tal, sud-denly, that she know.

La-ila clo-sed her*eyes*. Con-cen-t-ra-ted.

With the pas-sing of ti-me, she wo-uld slowly ti-re of this exer-ci-se. She wo-uld find it inc-re-asingly ex-ha-us-ting to co-nj-ure up, to dust off, to re-sus-ci-ta-te on-ce aga-in what was long de-ad. The-re wo-uld co-me a day, in fact, ye-ars la-ter, when La-ila wo-uld no lon-ger be-wa-il his loss. Or not as re-lent-les-sly; not ne-arly. The-re wo-uld co-me a day when the de-ta-ils of his fa-ce wo-uld be-gin to slip from me-mory's grip, when over-he-aring a mot-her on the stre-et call af-ter her child by Ta-riq's na-me wo-uld no lon-ger cut her ad-rift. She wo-uld not miss him as she did now, when the ac-he of his ab-sen-ce was her un-re-mit-ting com-pa-ni-on-li-ke the phan-tom pa-in of an am-pu-tee.

Except every on-ce in a long whi-le, when La-ila was a grown wo-man, iro-ning a shirt or pus-hing her child-ren on a swing set, so-met-hing tri-vi-al, may-be the warmth of a car-pet be-ne-ath her fe-et on a hot day or the cur-ve of a stran-ger's fo-re-he-ad, wo-uld set off a me-mory of that af-ter-no-on to-get-her. And it wo-uld all co-me rus-hing back. The spon-ta-ne-ity of it. The-ir as-to-nis-hing imp-ru-den-ce. The-ir clum-si-ness. The pa-in of the act, the ple-asu-re of it, the sad-ness of it. The he-at of the-ir en-tang-led bo-di-es.

It wo-uld flo-od her, ste-al her bre-ath.

But then it wo-uld pass. The mo-ment wo-uld pass. Le-ave her def-la-ted, fe-eling not-hing but a va-gue rest-les-sness.

She de-ci-ded that he had sa-id*Ami hur-ting you?* Yes. That was**it.** La-ila was happy that she'd re-mem-be-red

Then Ba-bi was in the hal-lway, cal-ling her na-me from the top of the sta-irs, as-king her to co-me up qu-ickly.

"She's ag-re-ed!"**he sa-id, his vo-ice** tre-mu-lo-us with sup-pres-sed ex-ci-te-ment-"We're le-aving, La-ila. All three of us. We're le-aving**Ka-bul."**

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InMammy's ro-om, the three of them sat on the bed.**Out-si-de, roc-kets** we-re zip-ping ac-ross**the** sky as Hek-mat-yar's and Mas-so-ud's**for-ces** fo-ught and fo-ught. La-ila knew that so-mew-he-re in the city so-me-one had just**di-ed,** and that a pall of black smo-ke was ho-ve-ring over so-me bu-il-ding that had col-lap-sed in a puf-fing mass of dust. The-re wo-uld be bo-di-es to step aro-und in the mor-ning. So-me wo-uld be col-lec-ted. Ot-hers not. Then Ka-bul's dogs, who had de-ve-lo-ped a tas-te for hu-man me-at, wo-uld fe-ast.

All the sa-me, La-ila had an ur-ge to run thro-ugh tho-se stre-ets.**She** co-uld ba-rely con-ta-in her own hap-pi-ness. It to-ok ef-fort**to sit, to** not shri-ek with**joy. Ba-bi** sa-id they wo-uld go to Pa-kis-tan first, to apply for**vi-sas. Pa-kis-tan,** whe-re Ta-riq was! Ta-riq was only go-ne se-ven-te-en days, La-ila cal-cu-la-ted ex-ci-tedly. If only Mammy had ma-de up her mind**se-ven-te-en** days ear-li-er, they co-uld ha-ve left to-get-her. She wo-uld ha-ve be-en with Ta-riq right now! But that didn't**mat-ter now.** They we-re go-ing**to** Pes-ha-war-**she,**Mammy, and Ba-bi-and they wo-uld find Ta-riq

and his pa-rents the-re. Su-rely they wo-uld. They wo-uld pro-cess the-ir pa-per-work to-get-her. Then, who knew? Who knew? Euro-pe?

Ame-ri-ca? May-be, as Ba-bi was al-ways sa-ying, so-mew-he-re ne-ar the sea…

Mammy was half lying, half sit-ting aga-inst the he-ad-bo-ard. Her eyes we-re puffy. She was pic-king at her ha-ir.

Three days be-fo-re, La-ila had go-ne out-si-de for a bre-ath of air. She'd sto-od by the front ga-tes, le-aning aga-inst them, when she'd he-ard a lo-ud crack and so-met-hing had zip-ped by her right ear, sen-ding tiny splin-ters of wo-od flying be-fo-re her eyes. Af-ter Gi-ti's de-ath, and the tho-usands of ro-unds fi-red and myri-ad roc-kets that had fal-len on Ka-bul, it was the sight of that sing-le ro-und ho-le in the ga-te, less than three fin-gers away from whe-re La-ila's he-ad had be-en, that sho-ok Mammy awa-ke. Ma-de her see that one war had cost her two child-ren al-re-ady; this la-test co-uld cost her her re-ma-ining one.

From the walls of the ro-om, Ah-mad and No-or smi-led down. La-ila watc-hed Mammy's eyes bo-un-cing now, gu-il-tily, from one pho-to to the ot-her. As if lo-oking for the-ir con-sent. The-ir bles-sing. As if as-king for for-gi-ve-ness.

"The-re's not-hing left for us he-re," Ba-bi sa-id. "Our sons are go-ne, but we still ha-ve La-ila. We still ha-ve each ot-her, Fa-ri-ba. We can ma-ke a new li-fe."

Ba-bi re-ac-hed ac-ross the bed. When he le-aned to ta-ke her hands, Mammy let him. On her fa-ce, a lo-ok of con-ces-si-on. Of re-sig-na-ti-on. They held each ot-her's hands, lightly, and then they we-re swa-ying qu-i-etly in an emb-ra-ce. Mammy bu-ri-ed her fa-ce in his neck. She grab-bed a hand-ful of his shirt.

For ho-urs that night, the ex-ci-te-ment rob-bed La-ila of sle-ep. She lay in bed and watc-hed the ho-ri-zon light up in ga-rish sha-des of oran-ge and yel-low. At so-me po-int, tho-ugh, des-pi-te the ex-hi-la-ra-ti-on in-si-de and the crack of

artil-lery fi-re out-si-de, she fell as-le-ep.

And dre-amed

They are on a rib-bon of be-ach, sit-ting on a**qu-ilt. It's a** chilly, over-cast day,**but** it's warm next to Ta-riq un-der the blan-ket dra-ped over the-ir sho-ul-ders. She can see cars par-ked be-hind a low fen-ce of chip-ped whi-te pa-int be-ne-ath a row of winds-wept palm tre-es. The wind ma-kes her eyes wa-ter and bu-ri-es the-ir sho-es in sand, hurls knots of de-ad grass from the cur-ved rid-ges**of** one du-ne to anot-her. They're watc-hing sa-il-bo-ats bob in the dis-tan-ce. Aro-und them, se-agul-ls squ-awk and shi-ver in the wind. The wind whips up anot-her spray of sand off the shal-low, wind-ward**slo-pes. The-re is a no-ise** then li-ke**a chant, and she tells** him so-met-hing Ba-bi had ta-ught her ye-ars be-fo-re abo-ut sin-ging sand.

He rubs at her eyeb-row, wi-pes**gra-ins of sand from it. She** cat-c-hes a flic-ker of the band on his fin-ger. It's iden-ti-cal**to hers** -gold with a sort of ma-ze pat-tern**et-c-hed all** the way aro-und.

It's true,**she tells**him.*It's the fric-ti-on, of gra-in aga-inst gra-in. Lis-ten.* He**do-es.** He frowns. They wa-it. They he-ar it aga-in. A gro-aning so-und, when the wind is soft, when it blows hard, a mew-ling, high-pitc-hed cho-rus.

* * * Ba-bi sa-id they**sho-uld** ta-ke only what was ab-so-lu-tely ne-ces-sary. They wo-uld sell the rest.

"That sho-uld hold us in Pes-ha-war un-til I find work."

For the next two days, they gat-he-red items to be sold. They put them in big pi-les.

In her ro-om, La-ila set asi-de old blo-uses, old sho-es, bo-oks, toys. Lo-oking un-der her bed, she fo-und a tiny yel-low glass cow Ha-si-na had pas-sed to her du-ring re-cess in fifth gra-de. A mi-ni-atu-re-soc-cer-ball key cha-in, a gift from Gi-ti. A lit-tle wo-oden zeb-ra on whe-els. A ce-ra-mic ast-ro-na-ut she and Ta-riq had fo-und one day in a gut-ter. She'd be-en six and he eight. They'd had a mi-nor row, La-ila re-mem-be-red, over which one of them had fo-und it.

Mammy too gat-he-red her things. The-re was a re-luc-tan-ce in her mo-ve-ments, and her eyes had a let-har-gic, fa-ra-way lo-ok in them. She did away with her go-od pla-tes, her nap-kins, all her jewelry-sa-ve for her wed-ding band-and most of her old clot-hes.

"You're not sel-ling this, are you?" La-ila sa-id, lif-ting Mammy's wed-ding dress. It cas-ca-ded open on-to her lap. She to-uc-hed the la-ce and rib-bon along the neck-li-ne, the hand-sewn se-ed pe-arls on the sle-eves.

Mammy shrug-ged and to-ok it from her. She tos-sed it brus-qu-ely on a pi-le of clot-hes. Li-ke rip-ping off a Band-Aid in one stro-ke, La-ila tho-ught.

It was Ba-bi who had the most pa-in-ful task.

La-ila fo-und him stan-ding in his study, a ru-eful exp-res-si-on on his fa-ce as he sur-ve-yed his shel-ves. He was we-aring a se-cond-hand T-shirt with a pic-tu-re of San Fran-cis-co's red brid-ge on it. Thick fog ro-se from the whi-te-cap-ped wa-ters and en-gul-fed the brid-ge's to-wers.

"You know the old bit," he sa-id. "You're on a de-ser-ted is-land. You can ha-ve fi-ve bo-oks. Which do you cho-ose? I ne-ver tho-ught I'd ac-tu-al-ly ha-ve to."

"We'll ha-ve to start you a new col-lec-ti-on, Ba-bi."

"Mm." He smi-led sadly. "I can't be-li-eve I'm le-aving Ka-bul. I went to scho-ol he-re, got my first job he-re, be-ca-me a fat-her in this town. It's stran-ge to think that I'll be sle-eping be-ne-ath anot-her city's ski-es so-on."

"It's stran-ge for me too."

"All day, this po-em abo-ut Ka-bul has be-en bo-un-cing aro-und in my he-ad. Sa-ib-e-Tab-ri-zi wro-te it back in the se-ven-te-enth cen-tury, I think. I used to know the who-le po-em, but all I can re-mem-ber now is two li-nes:

"One co-uld not co-unt the mo-ons that shim-mer on her ro-ofs, Or the tho-usand splen-did suns that hi-de be-hind her -walls."

La-ila lo-oked up, saw he was we-eping. She put an arm aro-und his wa-ist. "Oh, Ba-bi. We'll co-me back. When this war is over. We'll co-me back to Ka-bul,*in-s-hal-lah.* You'll see."

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On the third mor-ning, La-ila be-gan mo-ving the pi-les of things to the yard and de-po-si-ting them by the front do-or. They wo-uld fetch a ta-xi then and ta-ke it all to a pawns-hop.

La-ila kept shuf-fling bet-we-en the ho-use and the yard, back and forth, car-rying stacks of clot-hes and dis-hes and box af-ter box of Ba-bi's bo-oks. She sho-uld ha-ve be-en ex-ha-us-ted by no-on, when the mo-und of be-lon-gings by the front do-or had grown wa-ist high. But, with each trip, she knew that she was that much clo-ser to se-e-ing Ta-riq aga-in, and, with each trip, her legs be-ca-me mo-re sprightly, her arms mo-re ti-re-less.

"We're go-ing to ne-ed a big ta-xi."

La-ila lo-oked up. It was Mammy cal-ling down from her bed-ro-om ups-ta-irs. She was le-aning out the win-dow, res-ting her el-bows on the sill. The sun, bright and warm, ca-ught in her gra-ying ha-ir, sho-ne on her drawn, thin fa-ce. Mammy was we-aring the sa-me co-balt blue dress she had worn the day of the lunch party fo-ur months ear-li-er, a yo-uth-ful dress me-ant for a yo-ung wo-man, but, for a mo-ment, Mammy lo-oked to La-ila li-ke an old wo-man. An old wo-man with stringy arms and sun-ken temp-les and slow eyes rim-med by dar-ke-ned circ-les of we-ari-ness, an al-to-get-her dif-fe-rent cre-atu-re from the plump, ro-und-fa-ced wo-man be-aming ra-di-antly from tho-se gra-iny wed-ding pho-tos.

"Two big ta-xis," La-ila sa-id.

She co-uld see Ba-bi too, in the li-ving ro-om stac-king bo-xes of bo-oks atop each ot-her.

"Co-me up when you're do-ne with tho-se," Mammy sa-id. "We'll sit down for lunch. Bo-iled eggs and lef-to-ver be-ans."

"My fa-vo-ri-te," La-ila sa-id.

She tho-ught sud-denly of her dre-am. She and Ta-riq on a qu-ilt. The oce-an. The wind. The du-nes.

What had it so-un-ded li-ke, she won-de-red now, the sin-ging sands?

La-ila stop-ped. She saw a gray li-zard crawl out of a crack in the gro-und. Its he-ad shot si-de to si-de. It blin-ked. Dar-ted un-der a rock.

La-ila pic-tu-red the be-ach aga-in. Ex-cept now the sin-ging was all aro-und. And gro-wing. Lo-uder and lo-uder by the mo-ment, hig-her and hig-her. It flo-oded her ears. Drow-ned everyt-hing el-se out. The gulls we-re fe-at-he-red mi-mes now, ope-ning and clo-sing the-ir be-aks no-ise-les-sly, and the wa-ves we-re cras-hing with fo-am and spray but no ro-ar. The sands sang on. Scre-aming now. A so-und li-ke…a tink-ling?

Not a tink-ling. No. A whist-ling.

La-ila drop-ped the bo-oks at her fe-et. She lo-oked up to the sky. Shi-el-ded her eyes with one hand.

Then a gi-ant ro-ar.

Be-hind her, a flash of whi-te.

The gro-und lurc-hed be-ne-ath her fe-et.

So-met-hing hot and po-wer-ful slam-med in-to her from be-hind. It knoc-ked her out of her san-dals. Lif-ted her up. And now she was flying, twis-ting and ro-ta-ting in the air, se-e-ing sky, then earth, then sky, then earth. A big bur-ning chunk of wo-od whip-ped by. So did a tho-usand shards of glass, and it se-emed to La-ila that she co-uld see each in-di-vi-du-al one flying all aro-und her, flip-ping slowly end over end, the sun-light catc-hing in each. Tiny, be-a-uti-ful ra-in-bows.

Then La-ila struck the wall. Cras-hed to the gro-und. On her fa-ce and arms, a sho-wer of dirt and peb-bles and glass. The last thing she was awa-re of was se-e-ing so-met-hing thud to the gro-und ne-arby. A blo-ody chunk of so-met-hing. On it, the tip of a red brid-ge po-king thro-ugh thick fog.

* * *

Sha-pes mo-ving abo-ut. A flu-ores-cent light shi-nes from the ce-iling abo-ve. A wo-man's fa-ce ap-pe-ars, ho-vers over hers.

La-ila fa-des back to the dark.

* * *

Anot-her fa-ce. This ti-me a man's. His fe-atu-res se-em bro-ad and dro-opy. His lips mo-ve but ma-ke no so-und. All La-ila he-ars is rin-ging.

The man wa-ves his hand at her. Frowns. His lips mo-ve aga-in.

It hurts. It hurts to bre-at-he. It hurts everyw-he-re.

A glass of wa-ter. A pink pill.

Back to the dark-ness.

* * *

The wo-man aga-in. Long fa-ce, nar-row-set eyes. She says so-met-hing. La-ila can't he-ar anyt-hing but the rin-ging. But she can see the words, li-ke thick black syrup, spil-ling out of the wo-man's mo-uth.

Her chest hurts. Her arms and legs hurt.

All aro-und, sha-pes mo-ving.

Whe-re is Ta-riq?

Why isn't he he-re?

Dark-ness. A flock of stars.

Ba-bi and she, perc-hed so-mew-he-re high up. He is po-in-ting to a fi-eld of bar-ley. A ge-ne-ra-tor co-mes to li-fe.

The long-fa-ced wo-man is stan-ding over her lo-oking down.

It hurts to bre-at-he.

So-mew-he-re, an ac-cor-di-on pla-ying.

Mer-ci-ful-ly, the pink pill aga-in. Then a de-ep hush. A de-ep**hush falls over** ever-y-t-hing.

PART THREE

27.

Ma-dam
Do you know who I am?"
The girl's eyes flut-te-red
"Do you know what has hap-pe-ned?"
The girl's mo-uth qu-ive-red. She clo-sed her eyes. Swal-lo-wed. Her hand gra-zed her left che-ek. She mo-ut-hed so-met-hing.
Ma-ri-am le-aned in clo-ser.
"This ear," the girl bre-at-hed. "I can't he-ar."

*** * ***

For the first "we-ek, the girl did lit-tle but sle-ep, with help from the pink pills Ras-he-ed pa-id for at the hos-pi-tal. She mur-mu-red in her sle-ep. So-me-ti-mes she spo-ke gib-be-rish, cri-ed out, cal-led out na-mes Ma-ri-am did not re-cog-ni-ze. She wept in her sle-ep, grew agi-ta-ted, kic-ked the blan-kets off, and then Ma-ri-am had to hold her down. So-me-ti-mes she retc-hed and retc-hed, threw up everyt-hing Ma-ri-am fed her.

When she wasn't agi-ta-ted, the girl was a sul-len pa-ir of eyes sta-ring from un-der the blan-ket, bre-at-hing out short lit-tle ans-wers to Ma-ri-am and Ras-he-ed's qu-es-ti-ons. So-me days she was child-li-ke, whip-ped her he-ad si-de to si-de, when Ma-ri-am, then Ras-he-ed, tri-ed to fe-ed her. She went ri-gid when Ma-ri-am ca-me at her with a spo-on. But she ti-red easily and sub-mit-ted even-tu-al-ly to the-ir per-sis-tent bad-ge-ring. Long bo-uts of we-eping fol-lo-wed sur-ren-der.

Ras-he-ed had Ma-ri-am rub an-ti-bi-otic oint-ment on the cuts on the girl's fa-ce and neck, and on the su-tu-red gas-hes on her sho-ul-der, ac-ross her fo-re-arms and lo-wer legs. Ma-ri-am dres-sed them with ban-da-ges, which she was-hed and recyc-led. She held the girl's ha-ir back, out of her fa-ce, when she had to retch.

"How long is she sta-ying?" she as-ked Ras-he-ed.
"Until she's bet-ter. Lo-ok at her. She's in no sha-pe to go. Po-or thing."

*** * ***

It was Ras-he-ed who fo-und the girl, who dug her out from be-ne-ath the rub-ble.

"Lucky I was ho-me," he sa-id to the girl. He was sit-ting on a fol-ding cha-ir be-si-de Ma-ri-am's bed, whe-re the girl lay. "Lucky for you, I me-an. I dug you out with my own hands. The-re was a scrap of me-tal this big-" He-re, he spre-ad his thumb and in-dex fin-ger apart to show her, at le-ast do-ub-ling, in Ma-ri-am's

es-ti-ma-ti-on, the ac-tu-al si-ze of it. "This big. Stic-king right out of yo-ur sho-ul-der. It was re-al-ly em-bed-ded in the-re. I tho-ught I'd ha-ve to use a pa-ir of pli-ers.

But you're all right. In no ti-me, you'll be*nau soc-ha.* Go-od as new."

It was Ras-he-ed who sal-va-ged a hand-ful of Ha-kim's bo-oks.

"Most of them we-re ash. The rest we-re lo-oted, I'm af-ra-id."

He hel-ped Ma-ri-am watch over the girl that first we-ek. One day, he ca-me ho-me from work with a new blan-ket and pil-low. Anot-her day, a bot-tle of pills.

"Vi-ta-mins," he sa-id.

It was Ras-he-ed who ga-ve La-ila the news that her fri-end Ta-riq's ho-use was oc-cu-pi-ed now.

"A gift," he sa-id. "From one of Say-yaf s com-man-ders to three of his men. A gift. Ha!"

The three*men* we-re ac-tu-al-ly boys with sun-tan-ned, yo-uth-ful fa-ces. Ma-ri-am wo-uld see them when she pas-sed by, al-ways dres-sed in the-ir fa-ti-gu-es, squ-at-ting by the front do-or of Ta-riq's ho-use, pla-ying cards and smo-king, the-ir Ka-lash-ni-kovs le-aning aga-inst the wall. The brawny one, the one with the self-sa-tis-fi-ed, scorn-ful de-me-anor, was the le-ader. The yo-un-gest was al-so the qu-i-etest, the one who se-emed re-luc-tant to who-le-he-ar-tedly emb-ra-ce his fri-ends' air of im-pu-nity. He had ta-ken to smi-ling and tip-ping his he-ad*sa-la-am* when Ma-ri-am pas-sed by. When he did, so-me of his sur-fa-ce smug-ness drop-ped away, and Ma-ri-am ca-ught a glint of hu-mi-lity as yet un-cor-rup-ted.

Then one mor-ning roc-kets slam-med in-to the ho-use. They we-re ru-mo-red la-ter to ha-ve be-en fi-red by the Ha-za-ras of Wah-dat. For so-me ti-me, ne-igh-bors kept fin-ding bits and pi-eces of the boys.

"They had it co-ming," sa-id Ras-he-ed.

*** * ***

The girl was ext-ra-or-di-na-rily lucky, Ma-ri-am tho-ught, to es-ca-pe with re-la-ti-vely mi-nor inj-uri-es, con-si-de-ring the roc-ket had tur-ned her ho-use in-to smo-king rub-ble. And so,**slowly, the** girl got bet-ter. She be-gan to eat mo-re, be-gan to brush her own ha-ir. She to-ok baths on her own. She be-gan ta-king her me-als downs-ta-irs, with Ma-ri-am and Ras-he-ed.

But then so-me me-mory wo-uld ri-se, un-bid-den, and the-re wo-uld be stony si-len-ces or spells of chur-lish-ness. Withd-ra-wals and col-lap-ses. Wan lo-oks. Night-ma-res and sud-den at-tacks of gri-ef. Retc-hing.

And so-me-ti-mes reg-rets.

"I sho-uldn't even be he-re,"she sa-id one day.

Ma-ri-am was chan-ging the she-ets. The girl watc-hed**from** the**flo-or,** her**bru-ised kne-es** drawn up aga-inst her chest.

"My fat-her wan-ted to ta-ke out the bo-xes. The bo-oks. He sa-id they we-re too he-avy**for** me. But I wo-uldn't let him. I was so eager. I sho-uld ha-ve be-en the one in-si-de the ho-use when it hap-pe-ned."

Ma-ri-am snap-ped the cle-an she-et and let it set-tle on the bed She lo-oked at the girl, at her blond curls, her slen-der neck and gre-en eyes, her high che-ek-bo-nes and plump lips. Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red se-e-ing her on the stre-ets when she was lit-tle, tot-te-ring af-ter her mot-her on the way to the tan-do-or, ri-ding on the sho-ul-ders of her brot-her, the yo-un-ger one, with the patch of ha-ir on his ear. Sho-oting marb-les with the car-pen-ter's boy.

The girl was lo-oking back as if wa-iting for Ma-ri-am to pass on so-me mor-sel of wis-dom, to say so-met-hing en-co-ura-ging- But what wis-dom did Ma-ri-am ha-ve to of-fer? What en-co-ura-ge-ment? Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red the day they'd bu-ri-ed Na-na and how lit-tle com-fort she had fo-und when Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah had qu-oted the Ko-ran for her.*Bles-sed is He in Who-se hand is the king-dom, and He Who has po-wer over all things, Who cre-ated de-ath and li-fe that He may try you.* Or when he'd sa-id of her own gu-ilt,*The-se tho-ughts are no go-od, Ma-ri-am jo. They will dest-roy you. It wasn't yo-ur fa-ult It wasn't yo-ur fa-ult.*

What co-uld she say to this girl that wo-uld ease her bur-den?

As it tur-ned out, Ma-ri-am didn't ha-ve to say anyt-hing. Be-ca-use the girl's fa-ce twis-ted, and she was on all fo-urs then sa-ying she was go-ing to be sick.

"Wa-it! Hold on. I'll get a pan. Not on the flo-or. I just cle-aned…Oh. Oh.*Kho-da-ya*. God."

*** * ***

Then one day, abo-ut a month af-ter the blast that kil-led the girl's pa-rents, a man ca-me knoc-king. Ma-ri-am ope-ned the do-or. He sta-ted his bu-si-ness.

"The-re is a man he-re to see you," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

The girl ra-ised her he-ad from the pil-low.

"He says his na-me is Ab-dul Sha-rif."

"I don't know any Ab-dul Sha-rif."

"Well, he's he-re as-king for you. You ne-ed to co-me down and talk to him."

28.

La-ila

JLa-ila sat ac-ross from Ab-dul Sha-rif, who was a thin, small-he-aded man with a bul-bo-us no-se poc-ked with the sa-me cra-te-red scars that pit-ted his che-eks. His ha-ir, short and brown, sto-od on his scalp li-ke ne-ed-les in a pin-cus-hi-on.

"You'll ha-ve to for-gi-ve me,*ham-s-hi-ra,"* he sa-id, adj-us-ting his lo-ose col-lar and dab-bing at his brow with a hand-kerc-hi-ef "I still ha-ven't qu-ite re-co-ve-red, I fe-ar. Fi-ve mo-re days of the-se, what are they cal-led…sul-fa pills."

La-ila po-si-ti-oned her-self in her se-at so that her right ear, the go-od one, was clo-sest to him. "We-re you a fri-end of my pa-rents?"

"No, no," Ab-dul Sha-rif sa-id qu-ickly. "For-gi-ve me." He ra-ised a fin-ger, to-ok a long sip of the wa-ter that Ma-ri-am had pla-ced in front of him.

"I sho-uld be-gin at the be-gin-ning, I sup-po-se." He dab-bed at his lips, aga-in at his brow. "I am a bu-si-nes-sman. I own clot-hing sto-res, mostly men's clot-hing.*Cha-pans,* hats,*ium-ban%,* su-its, ti-es-you na-me it. Two sto-res he-re in Ka-bul, in Ta-ima-ni and Shar-e-Nau, tho-ugh I just sold tho-se. And two in Pa-kis-tan, in Pes-ha-war. That's whe-re my wa-re-ho-use is as well. So I tra-vel a lot, back and forth. Which, the-se days"-he sho-ok his he-ad and chuck-led ti-redly-"let's just say that it's an ad-ven-tu-re.

"I was in Pes-ha-war re-cently, on bu-si-ness, ta-king or-ders, go-ing over in-ven-tory, that sort of thing. Al-so to vi-sit my fa-mily. We ha-ve three da-ugh-ters,*al-ham-du-lel-lah.* I mo-ved them and my wi-fe to Pes-ha-war af-ter the Mu-j-ahi-de-en be-gan go-ing at each ot-her's thro-ats. I won't ha-ve the-ir na-mes ad-ded to the*s-ha-he-ed*list. Nor mi-ne, to be ho-nest. I'll be jo-ining them the-re very so-on,*in-s-hal-lah.*

"Anyway, I was sup-po-sed to be back in Ka-bul the Wed-nes-day be-fo-re last. But, as luck wo-uld ha-ve it, I ca-me down with an il-lness. I won't bot-her you with it,*ham-s-hi-ra,* suf-fi-ce it to say that when I went to do my pri-va-te bu-si-ness, the simp-ler of the two, it felt li-ke pas-sing chunks of bro-ken glass. I wo-uldn't wish it on Hek-mat-yar him-self. My wi-fe, Na-dia jan, Al-lah bless her, she beg-ged me to see a doc-tor. But I tho-ught I'd be-at it with as-pi-rin and a lot of wa-ter. Na-dia jan in-sis-ted and I sa-id no, back and forth we went. You know the sa-ying^*stub-born ass ne-eds a stub-born dri-ver.* This ti-me, I'm af-ra-id, the ass won. That wo-uld be me."

He drank the rest of this wa-ter and ex-ten-ded the glass to Ma-ri-am. "If it's not too much*zah-mat."*

Ma-ri-am to-ok the glass and went to fill it.

"Ne-ed-less to say, I sho-uld ha-ve lis-te-ned to her. She's al-ways be-en the mo-re sen-sib-le one, God gi-ve her a long li-fe. By the ti-me I ma-de it to the hos-pi-tal, I was bur-ning with a fe-ver and sha-king li-ke a*be-id* tree in the wind. I co-uld ba-rely stand. The doc-tor sa-id I had blo-od po-iso-ning. She sa-id two or three mo-re days and I wo-uld ha-ve ma-de my wi-fe a wi-dow.

"They put me in a spe-ci-al unit, re-ser-ved for re-al-ly sick pe-op-le, I sup-po-se. Oh,*ias-ha-kor."* He to-ok the glass from Ma-ri-am and from his co-at poc-ket pro-du-ced a lar-ge whi-te pill. "The*si-ze* of the-se things."

La-ila watc-hed him swal-low his pill She was awa-re that her bre-at-hing had qu-ic-ke-ned Her legs felt he-avy, as tho-ugh we-ights had be-en tet-he-red to them. She told her-self that he wasn't do-ne, that he hadn't told her anyt-hing as yet. But he wo-uld go on in a se-cond, and she re-sis-ted an ur-ge to get up and le-ave, le-ave be-fo-re he told her things she didn't want to he-ar.

Abdul Sha-rif set his glass on the tab-le.

"That's whe-re I met yo-ur fri-end, Mo-ham-mad Ta-riq Wa-li-zai."

La-ila's he-art sped up. Ta-riq in a hos-pi-tal? A spe-ci-al unit?*For re-al-ly sick pe-op-le?*

She swal-lo-wed dry spit. Shif-ted on her cha-ir. She had to ste-el her-self. If she didn't, she fe-ared she wo-uld co-me un-hin-ged. She di-ver-ted her tho-ughts from hos-pi-tals and spe-ci-al units and tho-ught ins-te-ad abo-ut the fact that she hadn't he-ard Ta-riq cal-led by his full na-me sin-ce the two of them had en-rol-led in a Far-si win-ter co-ur-se ye-ars back. The te-ac-her wo-uld call roll af-ter the bell and say his na-me li-ke that-Mo-ham-mad Ta-riq Wa-li-zai. It had struck her as co-mi-cal-ly of-fi-ci-o-us then, he-aring his full na-me ut-te-red.

"What hap-pe-ned to him I he-ard from one of the nur-ses," Ab-dul Sha-rif re-su-med, tap-ping his chest with a fist as if to ease the pas-sa-ge of the pill. "With all the ti-me I've spent in Pes-ha-war, I've be-co-me pretty pro-fi-ci-ent in Ur-du. Any-way, what I gat-he-red was that yo-ur fri-end was in a lorry full of re-fu-ge-es, twenty-three of them, all he-aded for Pes-ha-war. Ne-ar the bor-der, they we-re ca-ught in cross fi-re. A roc-ket hit the lorry. Pro-bably a stray, but you ne-ver know with the-se pe-op-le, you ne-ver know. The-re we-re only six sur-vi-vors, all of them ad-mit-ted to the sa-me unit. Three di-ed wit-hin twenty-fo-ur ho-urs. Two of them li-ved-sis-ters, as I un-ders-to-od it-and had be-en disc-har-ged.

Yo-ur fri-end Mr. Wa-li-zai was the last. He'd be-en the-re for al-most three we-eks by the ti-me I ar-ri-ved."

So he was ali-ve. But how badly had they hurt him? La-ila won-de-red fran-ti-cal-ly. How badly? Badly eno-ugh to be put in a spe-ci-al unit, evi-dently. La-ila was awa-re that she had star-ted swe-ating, that her fa-ce felt hot. She tri-ed to think of so-met-hing el-se, so-met-hing ple-asant, li-ke the trip to Ba-mi-yan to see the Bud-dhas with Ta-riq and Ba-bi. But ins-te-ad an ima-ge of Ta-riq's pa-rents pre-sen-ted it-self: Ta-riq's mot-her trap-ped in the lorry, up-si-de down, scre-aming for Ta-riq thro-ugh the smo-ke, her arms and chest on fi-re, the wig mel-ting in-to her scalp…

La-ila had to ta-ke a se-ri-es of ra-pid bre-aths.

"He was in the bed next to mi-ne. The-re we-re no walls, only a cur-ta-in bet-we-en us. So I co-uld see him pretty well."

Abdul Sha-rif fo-und a sud-den ne-ed to toy with his wed-ding band. He spo-ke mo-re slowly now.

"Yo-ur fri-end, he was badly-very badly-inj-ured, you un-ders-tand. He had rub-ber tu-bes co-ming out of him everyw-he-re. At first-" He cle-ared his thro-at. "At first, I tho-ught he'd lost both legs in the at-tack, but a nur-se sa-id no, only the right, the left one was on ac-co-unt of an old inj-ury. The-re we-re in-ter-nal inj-uri-es too. They'd ope-ra-ted three ti-mes al-re-ady. To-ok out sec-ti-ons of in-tes-ti-nes, I don't re-mem-ber what el-se. And he was bur-ned. Qu-ite badly. That's all I'll say abo-ut that. I'm su-re you ha-ve yo-ur fa-ir sha-re of night-ma-res,*ham-s-hi-ra.* No sen-se in me ad-ding to them."

Ta-riq was leg-less now. He was a tor-so with two stumps.*Leg-less.* La-ila tho-ught she might col-lap-se. With de-li-be-ra-te, des-pe-ra-te ef-fort, she sent the tend-rils of her mind out of this ro-om, out the win-dow, away from this man, over the stre-et

out-si-de, over the city now, and its flat-top-ped ho-uses and ba-za-ars, its ma-ze of nar-row stre-ets tur-ned to sand cast-les.

"He was drug-ged up most of the ti-me. For the pa-in, you un-ders-tand. But he had mo-ments when the drugs we-re we-aring off when he was cle-ar. In pa-in but cle-ar of mind I wo-uld talk to him from my bed. I told him who I was, whe-re I was from. He was glad, I think, that the-re was a*ham-wa-i-an* next to him.

"I did most of the tal-king. It was hard for him to. His vo-ice was ho-ar-se, and I think it hurt him to mo-ve his lips. So I told him abo-ut my da-ugh-ters, and abo-ut our ho-use in Pes-ha-war and the ve-ran-da my brot-her-in-law and I are bu-il-ding out in the back. I told him I had sold the sto-res in Ka-bul and that I was go-ing back to fi-nish up the pa-per-work. It wasn't much. But it oc-cu-pi-ed him. At le-ast, I li-ke to think it did.

"So-me-ti-mes he tal-ked too. Half the ti-me, I co-uldn't ma-ke out what he was sa-ying, but I ca-ught eno-ugh. He desc-ri-bed whe-re he'd li-ved.

He tal-ked abo-ut his unc-le in Ghaz-ni. And his mot-her's co-oking and his fat-her's car-pentry, him pla-ying the ac-cor-di-on.

"But, mostly, he tal-ked abo-ut you,*ham-s-hi-ra.* He sa-id you we-re-how did he put it-his ear-li-est me-mory. I think that's right, yes. I co-uld tell he ca-red a gre-at de-al abo-ut you.*Ba-lay,* that much was pla-in to see. But he sa-id he was glad you we-ren't the-re. He sa-id he didn't want you se-e-ing him li-ke that."

La-ila's fe-et felt he-avy aga-in, anc-ho-red to the flo-or, as if all her blo-od had sud-denly po-oled down the-re. But her mind was far away, free and fle-et, hurt-ling li-ke a spe-eding mis-si-le be-yond Ka-bul, over craggy brown hills and over de-serts rag-ged with clumps of sa-ge, past can-yons of jag-ged red rock and over snow-cap-ped mo-un-ta-ins…

"When I told him I was go-ing back to Ka-bul, he as-ked me to find you. To tell you that he was thin-king of you. That he mis-sed you. I pro-mi-sed him I wo-uld I'd ta-ken qu-ite a li-king to him, you see. He was a de-cent sort of boy, I co-uld tell."

Abdul Sha-rif wi-ped his brow with the hand-kerc-hi-ef.

"I wo-ke up one night," he went on, his in-te-rest in the wed-ding band re-ne-wed, "I think it was night any-way, it's hard

to tell in tho-se pla-ces. The-re aren't any win-dows. Sun-ri-se, sun-down, you just don't know. But I wo-ke up, and the-re was so-me sort of com-mo-ti-on aro-und the bed next to mi-ne. You ha-ve to un-ders-tand that I was full of drugs myself, al-ways slip-ping in and out, to the po-int whe-re it was hard to tell what was re-al and what you'd dre-amed up. All I re-mem-ber is, doc-tors hud-dled aro-und the bed, cal-ling for this and that, alarms ble-eping, syrin-ges all over the gro-und.

"In the mor-ning, the bed was empty. I as-ked a nur-se. She sa-id he fo-ught va-li-antly."

La-ila was dimly awa-re that she was nod-ding. She'd known. Of co-ur-se she'd known. She'd known the mo-ment she had sat ac-ross from this man why he was he-re, what news he was brin-ging.

"At first, you see, at first I didn't think you even exis-ted," he was sa-ying now. "I tho-ught it was the morp-hi-ne tal-king. May-be I even*ho-ped-you* didn't exist; I've

al-ways dre-aded be-aring bad news. But I pro-mi-sed him. And, li-ke I sa-id, I'd be-co-me rat-her fond of him. So I ca-me by he-re a few days ago. I as-ked aro-und for you, tal-ked to so-me ne-igh-bors. They po-in-ted to this ho-use. They al-so told me what had hap-pe-ned to yo-ur pa-rents. When I he-ard abo-ut that, well, I tur-ned aro-und and left. I wasn't go-ing to tell you. I de-ci-ded it wo-uld be too much for you. For any-body."

Abdul Sha-rif re-ac-hed ac-ross the tab-le and put a hand on her kne-ecap. "But I ca-me back. Be-ca-use, in the end, I think he wo-uld ha-ve wan-ted you to know. I be-li-eve that. I'm so sorry. I wish…"

La-ila wasn't lis-te-ning any-mo-re. She was re-mem-be-ring the day the man from Pa-njs-hir had co-me to de-li-ver the news of Ah-mad's and No-or's de-aths. She re-mem-be-red Ba-bi, whi-te-fa-ced, slum-ping on the co-uch, and Mammy, her hand flying to her mo-uth when she he-ard. La-ila had watc-hed Mammy co-me un-do-ne that day and it had sca-red her, but she hadn't felt any true sor-row. She hadn't un-ders-to-od the aw-ful-ness of her mot-her's loss. Now anot-her stran-ger brin-ging news of anot-her de-ath. Now*she* was the one sit-ting on the cha-ir. Was this her pe-nalty, then, her pu-nish-ment for be-ing alo-of to her own mot-her's suf-fe-ring?

La-ila re-mem-be-red how Mammy had drop-ped to the gro-und, how she'd scre-amed, torn at her ha-ir. But La-ila co-uldn't even ma-na-ge that. She co-uld hardly mo-ve. She co-uld hardly mo-ve a musc-le.

She sat on the cha-ir ins-te-ad, hands limp in her lap, eyes sta-ring at not-hing, and let her mind fly on. She let it fly on un-til it fo-und the pla-ce, the go-od and sa-fe pla-ce, whe-re the bar-ley fi-elds we-re gre-en, whe-re the wa-ter ran cle-ar and the cot-ton-wo-od se-eds dan-ced by the tho-usands in the air; whe-re Ba-bi was re-ading a bo-ok be-ne-ath an aca-cia and Ta-riq was nap-ping with his hands la-ced ac-ross his chest, and whe-re she co-uld dip her fe-et in the stre-am and dre-am go-od dre-ams be-ne-ath the watch-ful ga-ze of gods of an-ci-ent, sun-ble-ac-hed rock.

29.

Ma-dam

I'm so sorry," Ras-he-ed sa-id to the girl, ta-king his bowl of*ma-si-awa* and me-at-bal-ls from Ma-ri-am wit-ho-ut lo-oking at her. "I know you we-re very clo-se….*fri-en-ds.* ..the two of you. Al-ways to-get-her, sin-ce you we-re kids. It's a ter-rib-le thing, what's hap-pe-ned. Too many yo-ung Afg-han men are dying this way."

He mo-ti-oned im-pa-ti-ently with his hand, still lo-oking at the girl, and Ma-ri-am pas-sed him a nap-kin.

For ye-ars, Ma-ri-am had lo-oked on as he ate, the musc-les of his temp-les chur-ning, one hand ma-king com-pact lit-tle ri-ce balls, the back of the ot-her wi-ping gre-ase, swi-ping stray gra-ins, from the cor-ners of his mo-uth. For ye-ars, he had eaten wit-ho-ut lo-oking up, wit-ho-ut spe-aking, his si-len-ce con-dem-ning, as tho-ugh so-me judg-ment we-re be-ing pas-sed, then bro-ken only by an ac-cu-sa-tory

grunt, a di-sap-pro-ving cluck of his ton-gue, a one-word com-mand for mo-re bre-ad, mo-re wa-ter.

Now he ate with a spo-on. Used a nap-kin. Sa-id*lot/an* when as-king for wa-ter. And tal-ked. Spi-ri-tedly and in-ces-santly.

"If you ask me, the Ame-ri-cans ar-med the wrong man in Hek-mat-yar. All the guns the CIA han-ded him in the eigh-ti-es to fight the So-vi-ets. The So-vi-ets are go-ne, but he still has the guns, and now he's tur-ning them on in-no-cent pe-op-le li-ke yo-ur pa-rents. And he calls this jihad. What a far-ce! What do-es jihad ha-ve to do with kil-ling wo-men and child-ren? Bet-ter the CIA had ar-med Com-man-der Mas-so-ud."

Ma-ri-am's eyeb-rows shot up of the-ir own will.*Com-man-der* Mas-so-ud? In her he-ad, she co-uld he-ar Ras-he-ed's rants aga-inst Mas-so-ud, how he was a tra-itor and a com-mu-nist- But, then, Mas-so-ud was a Ta-j-ik, of co-ur-se. Li-ke La-ila.

"Now,*the-re* is a re-aso-nab-le fel-low. An ho-no-rab-le Afg-han. A man ge-nu-inely in-te-res-ted in a pe-ace-ful re-so-lu-ti-on."

Ras-he-ed shrug-ged and sig-hed.

"Not that they gi-ve a damn in Ame-ri-ca, mind you. What do they ca-re that Pash-tuns and Ha-za-ras and Ta-j-iks and Uz-beks are kil-ling each ot-her? How many Ame-ri-cans can even tell one from the ot-her? Don't ex-pect help from them, I say. Now that the So-vi-ets ha-ve col-lap-sed, we're no use to them. We ser-ved our pur-po-se. To them, Afg-ha-nis-tan is a*ke-na-rab,* a shit ho-le. Ex-cu-se my lan-gu-age, but it's true. What do you think, La-ila jan?"

The girl mumb-led so-met-hing unin-tel-li-gib-le and pus-hed a me-at-ball aro-und in her bowl.

Ras-he-ed nod-ded tho-ught-ful-ly, as tho-ugh she'd sa-id the most cle-ver thing he'd ever he-ard. Ma-ri-am had to lo-ok away.

"You know, yo-ur fat-her, God gi-ve him pe-ace, yo-ur fat-her and I used to ha-ve dis-cus-si-ons li-ke this. This was be-fo-re you we-re born, of co-ur-se. On and on we'd go abo-ut po-li-tics. Abo-ut bo-oks too. Didn't we, Ma-ri-am? You re-mem-ber."

Ma-ri-am bu-si-ed her-self ta-king a sip of wa-ter.

"Anyway, I ho-pe I am not bo-ring you with all this talk of po-li-tics."

La-ter, Ma-ri-am was in the kitc-hen, so-aking dis-hes in so-apy wa-ter, a tightly wo-und knot in her bel-ly-It wasn't so much*what* he sa-id, the bla-tant li-es, the cont-ri-ved em-pathy, or even the fact that he had not ra-ised a hand to her, Ma-ri-am, sin-ce he had dug the girl out from un-der tho-se bricks.

It was thes*ta-ged* de-li-very. Li-ke a per-for-man-ce. An at-tempt on his part, both sly and pat-he-tic, to imp-ress. To charm.

And sud-denly Ma-ri-am knew that her sus-pi-ci-ons we-re right. She un-ders-to-od with a dre-ad that was li-ke a blin-ding whack to the si-de of her he-ad that what she was wit-nes-sing was not-hing less than a co-urts-hip.

*** * ***

When shed at last wor-ked up the ner-ve, Ma-ri-am went to his ro-om.

Ras-he-ed lit a ci-ga-ret-te, and sa-id, "Why not?"

Ma-ri-am knew right then that she was de-fe-ated. She'd half ex-pec-ted, half ho-ped, that he wo-uld deny everyt-hing, fe-ign surp-ri-se, may-be even out-ra-ge, at what she was impl-ying. She might ha-ve had the up-per hand then. She might ha-ve suc-ce-eded in sha-ming him. But it sto-le her grit, his calm ack-now-ledg-ment, his mat-ter-of-fact to-ne.

"Sit down," he sa-id. He was lying on his bed, back to the wall, his thick, long legs spla-yed on the mat-tress. "Sit down be-fo-re you fa-int and cut yo-ur he-ad open."

Ma-ri-am felt her-self drop on-to the fol-ding cha-ir be-si-de his bed.

"Hand me that asht-ray, wo-uld you?" he sa-id.

Obe-di-ently, she did.

Ras-he-ed had to be sixty or mo-re now-tho-ugh Ma-ri-am, and in fact Ras-he-ed him-self did not know his exact age. His ha-ir had go-ne whi-te, but it was as thick and co-ar-se as ever. The-re was a sag now to his eye-lids and the skin of his neck, which was wrink-led and le-at-hery. His che-eks hung a bit mo-re than they used to. In the mor-nings, he sto-oped just a tad. But he still had the sto-ut sho-ul-ders, the thick tor-so, the strong hands, the swol-len belly that en-te-red the ro-om be-fo-re any ot-her part of him did.

On the who-le, Ma-ri-am tho-ught that he had we-at-he-red the ye-ars con-si-de-rably bet-ter than she.

"We ne-ed to le-gi-ti-mi-ze this si-tu-ati-on," he sa-id now, ba-lan-cing the asht-ray on his belly. His lips scrunc-hed up in a play-ful puc-ker. "Pe-op-le will talk. It lo-oks dis-ho-no-rab-le, an un-mar-ri-ed yo-ung wo-man li-ving he-re. It's bad for my re-pu-ta-ti-on. And hers. And yo-urs, I might add."

"Eigh-te-en ye-ars," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "And I ne-ver as-ked you for a thing. Not one thing. I'm as-king now."

He in-ha-led smo-ke and let it out slowly. "She can't just*stay* he-re, if that's what you're sug-ges-ting. I can't go on fe-eding her and clot-hing her and gi-ving her a pla-ce to sle-ep. I'm not the Red Cross, Ma-ri-am."

"But this?"

"What of it? What? She's too yo-ung, you think? She's fo-ur-te-en.**Hardly a child. You we-re** fif-te-en, re-mem-ber? My mot-her was fo-ur-te-en when she had me. Thir-te-en when she mar-ri-ed."

"I...Idon't want**this,"** Ma-ri-am sa-id, numb with con-tempt and help-les-sness.

"It's not yo-ur de-ci-si-on. It's hers andmi-ne."

"I'm too old."

"She's tooyo-ung, you're**too old. This is non-sen-se."**

"I*am* too old. Too old for you to do this to me," Ma-ri-am sa-id, bal-ling up fist-fuls of her dress so**tightly her** hands sho-ok.**"For you, af-ter all the-se** ye-ars, to ma-ke me an*am-bagh"*

"Don't be so dra-ma-tic. It's a com-mon thing and you know it. I ha-ve fri-ends who ha-ve two, three, fo-ur wi-ves. Yo-ur own fat-her had three. Be-si-des, what I'm do-ing now most men I know wo-uld ha-ve do-ne long ago. You know it's true."

"I won't al-low it."

At this, Ras-he-ed smi-led sadly.

"The-re *is* anot-her op-ti-on," he sa-id, scratc-hing the so-le of one fo-ot with the cal-lo-used he-el of the ot-her. "She can le-ave. I won't stand in her way. But I sus-pect she won't get far. No fo-od, no wa-ter, not a ru-pi-ah in her poc-kets, bul-lets and roc-kets flying everyw-he-re. How many days do you sup-po-se she'll last be-fo-re she's ab-duc-ted, ra-ped, or tos-sed in-to so-me ro-ad-si-de ditch with her thro-at slit? Or all three?"

He co-ug-hed and adj-us-ted the pil-low be-hind his back.

"The ro-ads out the-re are un-for-gi-ving, Ma-ri-am, be-li-eve me. Blo-od-ho-unds and ban-dits at every turn. I wo-uldn't li-ke her chan-ces, not at all. But let's say that by so-me mi-rac-le she gets to Pes-ha-war. What then? Do you ha-ve any idea what tho-se camps are li-ke?"

He ga-zed at her from be-hind a co-lumn of smo-ke.

"Pe-op-le li-ving un-der scraps of card-bo-ard. TB, dysen-tery, fa-mi-ne, cri-me. And that's be-fo-re win-ter. Then it's frost-bi-te se-ason. Pne-umo-nia. Pe-op-le tur-ning to icic-les. Tho-se camps be-co-me fro-zen gra-ve-yards.

"Of co-ur-se," he ma-de a play-ful, twir-ling mo-ti-on with his hand, "she co-uld ke-ep warm in one of tho-se Pes-ha-war brot-hels. Bu-si-ness is bo-oming the-re, I he-ar. A be-a-uty li-ke her ought to bring in a small for-tu-ne, don't you think?"

He set the asht-ray on the nights-tand and swung his legs over the si-de of the bed.

"Lo-ok," he sa-id, so-un-ding mo-re con-ci-li-atory now, as a vic-tor co-uld af-ford to. "I knew you wo-uldn't ta-ke this well. I don't re-al-ly bla-me you. But this is for the best. You'll see. Think of it this way, Ma-ri-am. I'm gi-ving *you* help aro-und the ho-use and *her* a sanc-tu-ary. A ho-me and a hus-band. The-se days, ti-mes be-ing what they are, a wo-man ne-eds a hus-band. Ha-ven't you no-ti-ced all the wi-dows sle-eping on the stre-ets? They wo-uld kill for this chan-ce. In fact, this is. … Well, I'd say this is down-right cha-ri-tab-le of me."

He smi-led.

"The way I see it, I de-ser-ve a me-dal."

* * *

La-ter, in the dark, Ma-ri-am told the girl.

For a long ti-me, the girl sa-id not-hing.

"He wants an ans-wer by this mor-ning," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"He can ha-ve it now," the girl sa-id. "My ans-wer is yes."

30.

La-ila

Thenext day,**La-ila** sta-yed in bed. She was un-der the blan-ket in the mor-ning when Ras-he-ed po-ked his he-ad in and sa-id he was go-ing to the bar-ber. She was still in bed when he ca-me ho-me la-te in the af-ter-no-on, when he sho-wed her his new ha-ir-cut, his new used su-it, blue with cre-am pinst-ri-pes, and the wed-ding band he'd bo-ught her.

Ras-he-ed sat on the bed be-si-de her, ma-de a gre-at show of slowly un-do-ing the rib-bon, of ope-ning the box and pluc-king out the ring de-li-ca-tely. He let on that he'd tra-ded in Ma-ri-am's old wed-ding ring for it.

"She do-esn't ca-re. Be-li-eve me. She won't even no-ti-ce."

La-ila pul-led away to the far end of the bed. She co-uld he-ar Ma-ri-am downs-ta-irs, the his-sing of her iron.

"She ne-ver wo-re it any-way," Ras-he-ed sa-id.

"I don't want it," La-ila sa-id, we-akly. "Not li-ke this. You ha-ve to ta-ke it back."

"Ta-ke it back?" An im-pa-ti-ent lo-ok flas-hed ac-ross his fa-ce and was go-ne. He smi-led. "I had to add so-me cash too-qu-ite a lot, in fact. This is a bet-ter ring, twenty-two-ka-rat gold. Fe-el how he-avy? Go on, fe-el it. No?" He clo-sed the box. "How abo-ut flo-wers? That wo-uld be ni-ce. You li-ke flo-wers? Do you ha-ve a fa-vo-ri-te? Da-isi-es?

Tu-lips? Li-lacs? No flo-wers? Go-od! I don't see the po-int myself. I just tho-ught…Now, I know a ta-ilor he-re in Deh-Ma-zang. I was thin-king we co-uld ta-ke you the-re to-mor-row, get you fit-ted for a pro-per dress."

La-ila sho-ok her he-ad.

Ras-he-ed ra-ised his eyeb-rows.

"I'd just as so-on-" La-ila be-gan.

He put a hand on her neck. La-ila co-uldn't help win-cing and re-co-iling. His to-uch felt li-ke we-aring a prickly old wet wo-ol swe-ater with no un-ders-hirt.

"Yes?"

"I'd just as so-on we get it do-ne."

Ras-he-ed's mo-uth ope-ned, then spre-ad in a yel-low, to-othy grin. "Eager," he sa-id.

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Be-fo-re Ab-dul Sha-rif's vi-sit, La-ila had de-ci-ded to le-ave for Pa-kis-tan. Even af-ter Ab-dul Sha-rif ca-me be-aring his news, La-ila tho-ught now, she might ha-ve left. Go-ne so-mew-he-re far from he-re. De-tac-hed her-self from this city whe-re every stre-et cor-ner was a trap, whe-re every al-ley hid a ghost that sprang at her li-ke a jack-in-the-box. She might ha-ve ta-ken the risk.

But, sud-denly, le-aving was no lon-ger an op-ti-on.

Not with this da-ily retc-hing.

This new ful-lness in her bre-asts.

And the awa-re-ness, so-me-how, amid all of this tur-mo-il, that she had mis-sed a cycle.

La-ila pic-tu-red her-self in a re-fu-gee camp, a stark fi-eld with tho-usands of she-ets of plas-tic strung to ma-kes-hift po-les flap-ping in the cold, stin-ging wind. Be-ne-ath one of the-se ma-kes-hift tents, she saw her baby, Ta-riq's baby, its temp-les was-ted, its jaws slack, its skin mot-tled, blu-ish gray. She pic-tu-red its tiny body was-hed by stran-gers, wrap-ped in a tawny shro-ud, lo-we-red in-to a ho-le dug in a patch of winds-wept land un-der the di-sap-po-in-ted ga-ze of vul-tu-res.

How co-uld she run now?

La-ila to-ok grim in-ven-tory of the pe-op-le in her li-fe. Ah-mad and No-or, de-ad. Ha-si-na, go-ne. Gi-ti, de-ad. Mammy, de-ad. Ba-bi, de-ad. Now Ta-riq…

But, mi-ra-cu-lo-usly, so-met-hing of her for-mer li-fe re-ma-ined, her last link to the per-son that she had be-en be-fo-re she had be-co-me so ut-terly alo-ne. A part of Ta-riq still ali-ve in-si-de her, spro-uting tiny arms, gro-wing trans-lu-cent hands.

How co-uld she je-opar-di-ze the only thing she had left of him, of her old li-fe?

She ma-de her de-ci-si-on qu-ickly. Six we-eks had pas-sed sin-ce her ti-me with Ta-riq. Any lon-ger and Ras-he-ed wo-uld grow sus-pi-ci-o-us.

She knew that what she was do-ing was dis-ho-no-rab-le. Dis-ho-no-rab-le, di-sin-ge-nu-o-us, and sha-me-ful. And spec-ta-cu-larly un-fa-ir to Ma-ri-am. But even tho-ugh the baby in-si-de her was no big-ger than a mul-ber-ry, La-ila al-re-ady saw the sac-ri-fi-ces a mot-her had to ma-ke. Vir-tue was only the first.

She put a hand on her belly. Clo-sed her eyes.

* * *

La-ila wo-uld re-mem-ber the mu-ted ce-re-mony in bits and frag-ments. The cre-am-co-lo-red stri-pes of Ras-he-ed's su-it. The sharp smell of his ha-ir spray. The small sha-ving nick just abo-ve his Adam's ap-ple. The ro-ugh pads of his to-bac-co-sta-ined fin-gers when he slid the ring on her. The pen. Its not wor-king. The se-arch for a new pen. The cont-ract. The sig-ning, his su-re-han-ded, hers qu-ave-ring. The pra-yers. No-ti-cing, in the mir-ror, that Ras-he-ed had trim-med his eyeb-rows.

And, so-mew-he-re in the ro-om, Ma-ri-am watc-hing. The air cho-king with her di-sap-pro-val.

La-ila co-uld not bring her-self to me-et the ol-der wo-man's ga-ze.

* * *

Lying be-ne-ath his cold she-ets that night, she watc-hed him pull the cur-ta-ins shut. She was sha-king even be-fo-re his fin-gers wor-ked her shirt but-tons, tug-ged at the drawst-ring of her tro-users. He was agi-ta-ted. His fin-gers fumb-led end-les-sly with his own shirt, with un-do-ing his belt. La-ila had a full vi-ew of his sag-ging bre-asts, his prot-ru-ding belly but-ton, the small blue ve-in in the cen-ter of it, the tufts of thick

whi-te ha-ir on his chest, his sho-ul-ders, and up-per arms. She felt his eyes craw-ling all over her.

"God help me, I think I lo-ve you," he sa-id-Thro-ugh chat-te-ring te-eth, she as-ked him to turn out the lights.

La-ter, when she was su-re that he was as-le-ep, La-ila qu-i-etly re-ac-hed be-ne-ath the mat-tress for the kni-fe she had hid-den the-re ear-li-er. With it, she punc-tu-red the pad of her in-dex fin-ger. Then she lif-ted the blan-ket and let her fin-ger ble-ed on the she-ets whe-re they had la-in to-get-her.

31.

Ma-dam

In the day-ti-me, the girl was no mo-re than a cre-aking bedsp-ring, a pat-ter of fo-ots-teps over-he-ad. She was wa-ter splas-hing in the bath-ro-om, or a te-as-po-on clin-king aga-inst glass in the bed-ro-om ups-ta-irs. Oc-ca-si-onal-ly, the-re we-re sigh-tings: a blur of bil-lo-wing dress in the pe-rip-hery of Ma-dam's vi-si-on, scur-rying up the steps, arms fol-ded ac-ross the chest, san-dals slap-ping the he-els.

But it was ine-vi-tab-le that they wo-uld run in-to each ot-her. Ma-dam pas-sed the girl on the sta-irs, in the nar-row hal-lway, in the kitc-hen, or by the do-or as she was co-ming in from the yard. When they met li-ke this, an awk-ward ten-si-on rus-hed in-to the spa-ce bet-we-en them. The girl gat-he-red her skirt and bre-at-hed out a word or two of apo-logy, and, as she hur-ri-ed past, Ma-dam wo-uld chan-ce a si-de-long glan-ce and catch a blush. So-me-ti-mes she co-uld smell Ras-he-ed on her. She co-uld smell his swe-at on the girl's skin, his to-bac-co, his ap-pe-ti-te. Sex, mer-ci-ful-ly, was a clo-sed chap-ter in her own li-fe. It had be-en for so-me ti-me, and now even the tho-ught of tho-se la-bo-ri-o-us ses-si-ons of lying be-ne-ath Ras-he-ed ma-de Ma-dam qu-e-asy in the gut.

At night, ho-we-ver, this mu-tu-al-ly orc-hest-ra-ted dan-ce of avo-idan-ce bet-we-en her and the girl was not pos-sib-le. Ras-he-ed sa-id they we-re a fa-mily. He in-sis-ted they we-re, and fa-mi-li-es had to eat to-get-her, he sa-id.

"What is this?" he sa-id, his fin-gers wor-king the me-at off a bo-ne-the spo-on-and-fork cha-ra-de was aban-do-ned a we-ek af-ter he mar-ri-ed the girl. "Ha-ve I mar-ri-ed a pa-ir of sta-tu-es? Go on, Ma-dam,*gap be-zan,* say so-met-hing to her. Whe-re are yo-ur man-ners?"

Suc-king mar-row from a bo-ne, he sa-id to the girl, "But you mustn't bla-me her. She is qu-i-et. A bles-sing, re-al-ly, be-ca-use,*wal-lah,* if a per-son hasn't got much to say she might as well be stingy with words. We are city pe-op-le, you and I, but she is*de-ha-ti.* A vil-la-ge girl. Not even a vil-la-ge girl. No. She grew up in a*kol-ba* ma-de of mud*out-si-de* the vil-la-ge. Her fat-her put her the-re. Ha-ve you told her, Ma-ri-am, ha-ve you told her that you are a*ha-ra-mi1?* Well, she is. But she is not wit-ho-ut qu-ali-ti-es, all things con-si-de-red. You will see for yo-ur-self, La-ila jan. She is sturdy, for one thing, a go-od wor-ker, and wit-ho-ut pre-ten-si-ons. I'll say it this way: If she we-re a car, she wo-uld be a Vol-ga."

Ma-ri-am was a thirty-three-ye-ar-old wo-man now, but that word,*ha-ra-mi,* still had sting. He-aring it still ma-de her fe-el li-ke she was a pest, a cock-ro-ach. She re-mem-be-red Na-na pul-ling her wrists.*You are a clumsy Uti-le* ha-ra-mi.*This is my re-ward for everyt-hing I've en-du-red. An he-ir-lo-om-bre-aking clumsy Uti-le* ha-ra-mi.

"You," Ras-he-ed sa-id to the girl, "you, on the ot-her hand, wo-uld be a Benz. A brand-new, first-class, shiny Benz.*Wah wah.* But. But." He ra-ised one gre-asy in-dex fin-ger. "One must ta-ke cer-ta-in…ca-res…with a Benz. As a mat-ter of res-pect for its be-a-uty and crafts-mans-hip, you see. Oh, you must be thin-king that I am crazy,*di-wa-na,* with all this talk of auto-mo-bi-les. I am not sa-ying you are cars. I am me-rely ma-king a po-int."

For what ca-me next, Ras-he-ed put down the ball of ri-ce he'd ma-de back on the pla-te. His hands dang-led idly over his me-al, as he lo-oked down with a so-ber, tho-ught-ful exp-res-si-on.

"One mustn't spe-ak ill of the de-ad much less the,*sha-he-ed.*And I in-tend no dis-res-pect when I say this, I want you to know, but I ha-ve cer-ta-in… re-ser-va-ti-ons…abo-ut the way yo-ur pa-rents-Allah, for-gi-ve them and grant them a pla-ce in pa-ra-di-se-abo-ut the-ir, well, the-ir le-ni-ency with you. I'm sorry."

The cold, ha-te-ful lo-ok the girl flas-hed Ras-he-ed at this did not es-ca-pe Ma-ri-am, but he was lo-oking down and did not no-ti-ce.

"No mat-ter. The po-int is, I am yo-ur hus-band now, and it falls on me to gu-ard not only*yo-ur* ho-nor but*ours,* yes, our*nang* and*na-mo-os.* That is the hus-band's bur-den. You let me worry abo-ut that. Ple-ase. As for you, you are the qu-e-en, the*ma-li-ka,* and this ho-use is yo-ur pa-la-ce. Anyt-hing you ne-ed do-ne you ask Ma-ri-am and she will do it for you. Won't you, Ma-ri-am? And if you fancy so-met-hing, I will get it-for-you. You see, that is the sort of hus-band I am.

"All I ask in re-turn, well, it is a simp-le thing. I ask that you avo-id le-aving this ho-use wit-ho-ut my com-pany. That's all. Simp-le, no? If I am away and you ne-ed so-met-hing ur-gently, I me-an*ab-so-lu-tely* ne-ed it and it can-not wa-it for me, then you can send Ma-ri-am and she will go out and get it for you. You've no-ti-ced a disc-re-pancy, su-rely. Well, one do-es not dri-ve a Vol-ga and a Benz in the sa-me man-ner. That wo-uld be fo-olish, wo-uldn't it? Oh, I al-so ask that when we are out to-get-her, that you we-ar a bur-qa. For yo-ur own pro-tec-ti-on, na-tu-ral-ly. It is best. So many lewd men in this town now. Such vi-le in-ten-ti-ons, so eager to dis-ho-nor even a mar-ri-ed wo-man. So. That's all."

He co-ug-hed.

"I sho-uld say that Ma-ri-am will be my eyes and ears when I am away." He-re, he shot Ma-ri-am a fle-eting lo-ok that was as hard as a ste-el-to-ed kick to the temp-le. "Not that I am mist-rus-ting. Qu-ite the cont-rary. Frankly, you stri-ke me as far wi-ser than yo-ur ye-ars. But you are still a yo-ung wo-man, La-ila jan, a*dok-h-tar ej-awan,* and yo-ung wo-men can ma-ke un-for-tu-na-te cho-ices. They can be pro-ne to misc-hi-ef. Any-way, Ma-ri-am will be ac-co-un-tab-le. And if the-re is a sli-pup…"

On and on he went. Ma-ri-am sat watc-hing the girl out of the cor-ner of her eye as Ras-he-ed's de-mands and judg-ments ra-ined down on them li-ke the roc-kets on Ka-bul.

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One day, Ma-ri-am was in the li-ving ro-om fol-ding so-me shirts of Ras-he-ed's that she had pluc-ked from the clot-hes-li-ne in the yard. She didn't know how long the girl had be-en stan-ding the-re, but, when she pic-ked up a shirt and tur-ned aro-und, she fo-und her stan-ding by the do-or-way, hands cup-ped aro-und a glas-sful of tea.

"I didn't me-an to start-le you," the girl sa-id. "I'm sorry."

Ma-ri-am only lo-oked at her.

The sun fell on the girl's fa-ce, on her lar-ge gre-en eyes and her smo-oth brow, on her high che-ek-bo-nes and the ap-pe-aling, thick eyeb-rows, which we-re not-hing li-ke Ma-ri-am's own, thin and fe-atu-re-less. Her yel-low ha-ir, un-com-bed this mor-ning, was mid-dle-par-ted.

Ma-ri-am co-uld see in the stiff way the girl clutc-hed the cup, the tigh-te-ned sho-ul-ders, that she was ner-vo-us. She ima-gi-ned her sit-ting on the bed wor-king up the ner-ve.

"The le-aves are tur-ning," the girl sa-id com-pa-ni-onably. "Ha-ve you se-en? Autumn is my fa-vo-ri-te. I li-ke the smell of it, when pe-op-le burn le-aves in the-ir gar-dens. My mot-her, she li-ked spring-ti-me the best. You knew my mot-her?"

"Not re-al-ly."

The girl cup-ped a hand be-hind her ear. "I'm sorry?"

Ma-ri-am ra-ised her vo-ice. "I sa-id no. I didn't know yo-ur mot-her."

"Oh."

"Is the-re so-met-hing you want?"

"Ma-ri-am jan, I want to…Abo-ut the things he sa-id the ot-her night-"

"I ha-ve be-en me-aning to talk to you abo-ut it." Ma-ri-am bro-ke in.

"Yes, ple-ase," the girl sa-id ear-nestly, al-most eagerly. She to-ok a step for-ward. She lo-oked re-li-eved.

Out-si-de, an ori-ole was warb-ling. So-me-one was pul-ling a cart; Ma-ri-am co-uld he-ar the cre-aking of its hin-ges, the bo-un-cing and rat-tling of its iron whe-els. The-re was the so-und of gun-fi-re not so far away, a sing-le shot fol-lo-wed by three mo-re, then not-hing.

"I won't be yo-ur ser-vant," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "I won't."

The girl flinc-hed "No. Of co-ur-se not!"

"You may be the pa-la-ce*ma-li-ka* and me a*de-ha-ti,* but I won't ta-ke or-ders from you. You can comp-la-in to him and he can slit my thro-at, but I won't do it. Do you he-ar me? I won't be yo-ur ser-vant."

"No! I don't ex-pect-"

"And if you think you can use yo-ur lo-oks to get rid of me, you're wrong. I was he-re first. I won't be thrown out. I won't ha-ve you cast me out."

"It's not what I want," the girl sa-id we-akly.

"And I see yo-ur wo-unds are he-aled up now. So you can start do-ing yo-ur sha-re of the work in this ho-use-"

The girl was nod-ding qu-ickly. So-me of her tea spil-led, but she didn't no-ti-ce. "Yes, that's the ot-her re-ason I ca-me down, to thank you for ta-king ca-re of me-"

"Well, I wo-uldn't ha-ve," Ma-ri-am snap-ped. "I wo-uldn't ha-ve fed you and was-hed you and nur-sed you if I'd known you we-re go-ing to turn aro-und and ste-al my hus-band."

"Ste-al-"

"I will still co-ok and wash the dis-hes. You will do the la-undry and the swe-eping-The rest we will al-ter-na-te da-ily. And one mo-re thing. I ha-ve no use for yo-ur com-pany. I don't want it. What I want is to be alo-ne. You will le-ave me be, and I will re-turn the fa-vor. That's how we will get on. Tho-se are the ru-les."

When she was do-ne spe-aking, her he-art was ham-me-ring and her mo-uth felt parc-hed. Ma-ri-am had ne-ver be-fo-re spo-ken in this man-ner, had ne-ver sta-ted her will so for-ce-ful-ly. It ought to ha-ve felt ex-hi-la-ra-ting, but the girl's eyes had te-ared up and her fa-ce was dro-oping, and what sa-tis-fac-ti-on Ma-ri-am fo-und from this out-burst felt me-ager, so-me-how il-li-cit.

She ex-ten-ded the shirts to-ward the girl.

"Put them in the*al-ma-ri*, not the clo-set. He li-kes the whi-tes in the top dra-wer, the rest in the mid-dle, with the socks."

The girl set the cup on the flo-or and put her hands out for the shirts, palms up. "I'm sorry abo-ut all of this," she cro-aked.

"You sho-uld be," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "You sho-uld be sorry."

32.

La-ila

JLa-ila re-mem-be-red a gat-he-ring on-ce, ye-ars be-fo-re at the ho-use, on one of Mammy's go-od days. The wo-men had be-en sit-ting in the gar-den, eating from a plat-ter of fresh mul-ber-ri-es that Wa-jma had pic-ked from the tree in her yard. The plump mul-ber-ri-es had be-en whi-te and pink, and so-me the sa-me dark purp-le as the bursts of tiny ve-ins on Wa-jma's no-se.

"You he-ard how his son di-ed?" Wa-jma had sa-id, ener-ge-ti-cal-ly sho-ve-ling anot-her hand-ful of mul-ber-ri-es in-to her sun-ken mo-uth.

"He drow-ned, didn't he?" Ni-la, Gi-ti's mot-her, sa-id. "At Gharg-ha La-ke, wasn't it?"

"But did you know, did you know that Ras-he-ed…" Wa-jma ra-ised a fin-ger, ma-de a show of nod-ding and che-wing and ma-king them wa-it for her to swal-low. "Did you know that he used to drink*sha-rab* back then, that he was crying drunk that day? It's true. Crying drunk, is what I he-ard. And that was mid-mor-ning. By no-on,

he had pas-sed out on a lo-un-ge cha-ir. You co-uld ha-ve fi-red the no-on can-non next to his ear and he wo-uldn't ha-ve bat-ted an eye-lash."

La-ila re-mem-be-red how Wa-jma had co-ve-red her mo-uth, bur-ped; how her ton-gue had go-ne exp-lo-ring bet-we-en her few re-ma-ining te-eth.

"You can ima-gi-ne the rest. The boy went in-to the wa-ter un-no-ti-ced. They spot-ted him a whi-le la-ter, flo-ating fa-ce-down. Pe-op-le rus-hed to help, half trying to wa-ke up the boy, the ot-her half the fat-her. So-me-one bent over the boy, did the…the mo-uth-to-mo-uth thing you're sup-po-sed to do. It was po-int-less. They co-uld all see that. The boy was go-ne."

La-ila re-mem-be-red Wa-jma ra-ising a fin-ger and her vo-ice qu-ive-ring with pi-ety. "This is why the Holy Ko-ran for-bids*sha-rab.* Be-ca-use it al-ways falls on the so-ber to pay for the sins of the drunk. So it do-es."

It was this story that was circ-ling in La-ila's he-ad af-ter she ga-ve Ras-he-ed the news abo-ut the baby. He had im-me-di-ately hop-ped on his bicyc-le, rid-den to a mos-que, and pra-yed for a boy.

That night, all du-ring the me-al, La-ila watc-hed Ma-ri-am push a cu-be of me-at aro-und her pla-te. La-ila was the-re when Ras-he-ed sprang the news on Ma-ri-am in a high, dra-ma-tic vo-ice-La-ila had ne-ver be-fo-re wit-nes-sed such che-er-ful cru-elty. Ma-ri-am's las-hes flut-te-red when she he-ard. A flush spre-ad ac-ross her fa-ce. She sat sul-king, lo-oking de-so-la-te.

After, Ras-he-ed went ups-ta-irs to lis-ten to his ra-dio, and La-ila hel-ped Ma-ri-am cle-ar the*so-jrah.*

"I can't ima-gi-ne what you are now," Ma-ri-am sa-id, pic-king gra-ins of ri-ce and bre-ad crumbs, "if you we-re a Benz be-fo-re."

La-ila tri-ed a mo-re light-he-aded tac-tic. "A tra-in? May-be a big jum-bo jet."

Ma-ri-am stra-igh-te-ned up. "I ho-pe you don't think this ex-cu-ses you from cho-res."

La-ila ope-ned her mo-uth, tho-ught bet-ter of it. She re-min-ded her-self that Ma-ri-am was the only in-no-cent party in this ar-ran-ge-ment. Ma-ri-am and the baby-La-ter, in bed, La-ila burst in-to te-ars.

What was the mat-ter? Ras-he-ed wan-ted to know, lif-ting her chin. Was she ill? Was it the baby, was so-met-hing wrong with the baby? No?

Was Ma-ri-am mist-re-ating her?

"That's it, isn't it?"

"No."

"*Wal-lah o bil-lah,* I'll go down and te-ach her a les-son. Who do-es she think she is, that*ha-ra-mi,* tre-ating you-"

"No!"

He was get-ting up al-re-ady, and she had to grab him by the fo-re-arm, pull him back down. "Don't! No! She's be-en de-cent to me. I ne-ed a mi-nu-te, that's all. I'll be fi-ne."

He sat be-si-de her, stro-king her neck, mur-mu-ring- His hand slowly crept down to her back, then up aga-in. He le-aned in, flas-hed his crow-ded te-eth.

"Let's see, then," he pur-red, "if I can't help you fe-el bet-ter."

* * *

First, the tre-es-tho-se that hadn't be-en cut down for fi-re-wo-od-shed the-ir spotty yel-low-and-cop-per le-aves. Then ca-me the winds, cold and raw, rip-ping thro-ugh the city. They to-re off the last of the clin-ging le-aves, and left the tre-es lo-oking ghostly aga-inst the mu-ted brown of the hills. The se-ason's first snow-fall was light, the fla-kes no so-oner fal-len than mel-ted. Then the ro-ads fro-ze, and snow gat-he-red in he-aps on the ro-of-tops, pi-led half-way up frost-ca-ked win-dows. With snow ca-me the ki-tes, on-ce the ru-lers of Ka-bul's win-ter ski-es, now ti-mid tres-pas-sers in ter-ri-tory cla-imed by stre-aking roc-kets and figh-ter jets.

Ras-he-ed kept brin-ging ho-me news of the war, and La-ila was baf-fled by the al-le-gi-an-ces that Ras-he-ed tri-ed to exp-la-in to her. Say-yaf was figh-ting the Ha-za-ras, he sa-id. The Ha-za-ras we-re figh-ting Mas-so-ud.

"And he's figh-ting Hek-mat-yar, of co-ur-se, who has the sup-port of the Pa-kis-ta-nis. Mor-tal ene-mi-es, tho-se two, Mas-so-ud and Hek-mat-yar. Say-yaf, he's si-ding with Mas-so-ud. And Hek-mat-yar sup-ports the Ha-za-ras for now."

As for the unp-re-dic-tab-le Uz-bek com-man-der Dos-tum, Ras-he-ed sa-id no one knew whe-re he wo-uld stand. Dos-tum had fo-ught the So-vi-ets in the 1980s along-si-de the Mu-j-ahi-de-en but had de-fec-ted and jo-ined Na-j-ibul-lah's com-mu-nist pup-pet re-gi-me af-ter the So-vi-ets had left. He had even ear-ned a me-dal, pre-sen-ted by Na-j-ibul-lah him-self, be-fo-re de-fec-ting on-ce aga-in and re-tur-ning to the Mu-j-ahi-de-en's si-de. For the ti-me be-ing, Ras-he-ed sa-id, Dos-tum was sup-por-ting Mas-so-ud.

In Ka-bul, par-ti-cu-larly in wes-tern Ka-bul, fi-res ra-ged, and black palls of smo-ke mush-ro-omed over snow-clad bu-il-dings. Em-bas-si-es clo-sed down. Scho-ols col-lap-sed In hos-pi-tal wa-iting ro-oms, Ras-he-ed sa-id, the wo-un-ded we-re ble-eding to de-ath. In ope-ra-ting ro-oms, limbs we-re be-ing am-pu-ta-ted wit-ho-ut anest-he-sia.

"But don't worry," he sa-id. "You're sa-fe with me, my flo-wer, my*gul*. An-yo-ne tri-es to harm you, I'll rip out the-ir li-ver and ma-ke them eat it."

That win-ter, everyw-he-re La-ila tur-ned, walls bloc-ked her way. She tho-ught lon-gingly of the wi-de-open ski-es of her child-ho-od, of her days of go-ing to*buz-kas-hi* to-ur-na-ments with Ba-bi and shop-ping at Man-da-ii with Mammy, of her days of run-ning free in the stre-ets and gos-si-ping abo-ut boys with Gi-ti and Ha-si-na. Her days of sit-ting with Ta-riq in a bed of clo-ver on the banks of a stre-am so-mew-he-re, tra-ding rid-dles and candy, watc-hing the sun go down.

But thin-king of Ta-riq was tre-ac-he-ro-us be-ca-use, be-fo-re she co-uld stop, she saw him lying on a bed, far from ho-me, tu-bes pi-er-cing his bur-ned body. Li-ke the bi-le that kept bur-ning her thro-at the-se days, a de-ep, pa-raly-zing gri-ef wo-uld

co-me ri-sing up La-ila's chest. Her legs wo-uld turn to wa-ter. She wo-uld ha-ve to hold on to so-met-hing.

La-ila pas-sed that win-ter of 1992 swe-eping the ho-use, scrub-bing the pump-kin-co-lo-red walls of the bed-ro-om she sha-red with Ras-he-ed, was-hing clot-hes out-si-de in a big cop-per*la-go-on.* So-me-ti-mes she saw her-self as if ho-ve-ring abo-ve her own body, saw her-self squ-at-ting over the rim of the*lo-go-on,* sle-eves rol-led up to the el-bows, pink hands wrin-ging so-apy wa-ter from one of Ras-he-ed's un-ders-hirts. She felt lost then, cas-ting abo-ut, li-ke a shipw-reck sur-vi-vor, no sho-re in sight, only mi-les and mi-les of wa-ter.

When it was too cold to go out-si-de, La-ila amb-led aro-und the ho-use. She wal-ked, drag-ging a fin-ger-na-il along the wall, down the hal-lway, then back, down the steps, then up, her fa-ce un-was-hed, ha-ir un-com-bed. She wal-ked un-til she ran in-to Ma-ri-am, who shot her a che-er-less glan-ce and went back to sli-cing the stem off a bell pep-per and trim-ming strips of fat from me-at. A hurt-ful si-len-ce wo-uld fill the ro-om, and La-ila co-uld al-most see the word-less hos-ti-lity ra-di-ating from Ma-ri-am li-ke wa-ves of he-at ri-sing from asp-halt. She wo-uld ret-re-at back to her ro-om, sit on the bed, and watch the snow fal-ling.

*** * ***

Ras-he-ed to-ok her to his shoe shop one day.

When they we-re out to-get-her, he wal-ked along-si-de her, one hand grip-ping her by the el-bow. For La-ila, be-ing out in the stre-ets had be-co-me an exer-ci-se in avo-iding inj-ury. Her eyes we-re still adj-us-ting to the li-mi-ted, grid-li-ke vi-si-bi-lity of the bur-qa, her fe-et still stumb-ling over the hem. She wal-ked in per-pe-tu-al fe-ar of trip-ping and fal-ling, of bre-aking an ank-le step-ping in-to a pot-ho-le. Still, she fo-und so-me com-fort in the anony-mity that the bur-qa pro-vi-ded. She wo-uldn't be re-cog-ni-zed this way if she ran in-to an old ac-qu-a-in-tan-ce of hers. She wo-uldn't ha-ve to watch the surp-ri-se in the-ir eyes, or the pity or the glee, at how far she had fal-len, at how her lofty as-pi-ra-ti-ons had be-en das-hed.

Ras-he-ed's shop was big-ger and mo-re brightly lit than La-ila had ima-gi-ned. He had her sit be-hind his crow-ded work-bench, the top of which was lit-te-red with old so-les and scraps of lef-to-ver le-at-her. He sho-wed her his ham-mers, de-monst-ra-ted how the sand-pa-per whe-el wor-ked, his**vo-ice** rin-ging high and pro-ud-He felt her belly, not thro-ugh the shirt but un-der it, his fin-ger-tips cold and ro-ugh li-ke bark on her dis-ten-ded skin. La-ila re-mem-be-red**Ta-riq's hands, soft** but strong, the tor-tu-o-us, full ve-ins on the backs of them, which she had al-ways fo-und so**ap-pe-alingly mas-cu-li-ne.**

"Swel-ling so qu-ickly," Ras-he-ed sa-id.**"It's** go-ing to be a big boy. My son**will** be*apah-la-wanl* Li-ke his fat-her."

La-ila pul-led down her shirt. It fil-led her with fe-ar when he spo-ke li-ke**this.**

"Howare things with Ma-ri-am?"

She sa-id they we-re fi-ne.

"Go-od. Go-od."

She didn't tell him that they'd had the-ir first true fight.

It had hap-pe-ned a few days ear-li-er. La-ila had go-ne to the kitc-hen and fo-und Ma-ri-am yan-king dra-wers and slam-ming them**shut. She** was lo-oking, Ma-ri-am sa-id, for**the** long wo-oden spo-on she used to stir ri-ce.

"Whe-re did you put it?" she sa-id, whe-eling aro-und to fa-ce La-ila.

"Me?" La-ila sa-id "I didn't ta-ke it. I hardly co-me in he-re."

"I've no-ti-ced."

"Is that an ac-cu-sa-ti-on? It's how you wan-ted it, re-mem-ber. You sa-id you wo-uld ma-ke the me-als. But if you want to switch-"

"So you're sa-ying it grew lit-tle legs and wal-ked out.*Te-ep, te-ep, te-ep, te-ep.* Is that what hap-pe-ned,*de-geh?'*

"I'm sa-ying…" La-ila sa-id, trying to ma-in-ta-in cont-rol. Usu-al-ly, she co-uld will her-self to ab-sorb Ma-ri-am's de-ri-si-on and fin-ger-po-in-ting. But her ank-les had swol-len, her he-ad hurt, and the he-art-burn was vi-ci-o-us that day. "I am sa-ying that may-be you've misp-la-ced it."

"Misp-la-ced it?" Ma-ri-am pul-led a dra-wer. The spa-tu-las and kni-ves in-si-de it clan-ked. "How long ha-ve you be-en he-re, a few months? I've li-ved in this ho-use for ni-ne-te-en ye-ars,*dok-hi-arjo.* I ha-ve kept*that* spo-on in*this* dra-wer sin-ce you we-re shit-ting yo-ur di-apers."

"Still," La-ila sa-id, on the brink now, te-eth clenc-hed, "it's pos-sib-le you put it so-mew-he-re and for-got."

"And it's*pos-sib-le you* hid it so-mew-he-re, to ag-gra-va-te me."

"You're a sad, mi-se-rab-le wo-man," La-ila sa-id.

Ma-ri-am flinc-hed, then re-co-ve-red, pur-sed her lips. "And you're a who-re. A who-re and a*dozd. A* thi-eving who-re, that's what you are!"

Then the-re was sho-uting- Pots ra-ised tho-ugh not hur-led. They'd cal-led each ot-her na-mes, na-mes that ma-de La-ila blush now. They hadn't spo-ken sin-ce. La-ila was still shoc-ked at how easily she'd co-me un-hin-ged, but, the truth was, part of her had li-ked it, had li-ked how it felt to scre-am at Ma-ri-am, to cur-se at her, to ha-ve a tar-get at which to fo-cus all her sim-me-ring an-ger, her gri-ef.

La-ila won-de-red, with so-met-hing li-ke in-sight, if it wasn't the sa-me for Ma-ri-am.

After, she had run ups-ta-irs and thrown her-self on Ras-he-ed's bed. Downs-ta-irs, Ma-ri-am was still yel-ling, "Dirt on

yo-ur he-ad! Dirt on yo-ur he-ad!" La-ila had la-in on the bed, gro-aning in-to the pil-low, mis-sing her pa-rents sud-denly and with an over-po-we-ring in-ten-sity she hadn't felt sin-ce tho-se ter-rib-le days just af-ter the at-tack. She lay the-re, clutc-hing hand-fuls of the beds-he-et, un-til, sud-denly, her bre-ath ca-ught. She sat up, hands sho-oting down to her belly.

The baby had just kic-ked for the first ti-me.

33.

Ma-dam

Jbarly one mor-ning the next spring, of 1993, Ma-ri-am sto-od by the li-ving-ro-om win-dow and watc-hed Ras-he-ed es-cort the girl out of the ho-use. The girl was tot-te-ring for-ward, bent at the wa-ist, one arm dra-ped pro-tec-ti-vely ac-ross the ta-ut drum of her belly, the sha-pe of which was vi-sib-le thro-ugh her bur-qa. Ras-he-ed, an-xi-o-us and overly at-ten-ti-ve, was hol-ding her el-bow, di-rec-ting her ac-ross the yard li-ke a traf-fic po-li-ce-man. He ma-de a*Wa-it he-re* ges-tu-re, rus-hed to the front ga-te, then mo-ti-oned for the girl to co-me for-ward, one fo-ot prop-ping the ga-te open. When she re-ac-hed him, he to-ok her by the hand, hel-ped her thro-ugh the ga-te. Ma-ri-am co-uld al-most he-ar him say,*"Watch yo-ur step, now, my flo-wer*, my gul."

They ca-me back early the next eve-ning.

Ma-ri-am saw Ras-he-ed en-ter the yard first. He let the ga-te go pre-ma-tu-rely, and it al-most hit the girl on the fa-ce. He cros-sed the yard in a few, qu-ick steps. Ma-ri-am de-tec-ted a sha-dow on his fa-ce, a dark-ness un-derl-ying the cop-pery light of dusk. In the ho-use, he to-ok off his co-at, threw it on the co-uch. Brus-hing past Ma-ri-am, he sa-id in a brus-que vo-ice, "I'm hungry. Get sup-per re-ady."

The front do-or to the ho-use ope-ned. From the hal-lway, Ma-ri-am saw the girl, a swad-dled bund-le in the ho-ok of her left arm. She had one fo-ot out-si-de, the ot-her in-si-de, aga-inst the do-or, to pre-vent it from sprin-ging shut. She was sto-oped over and was grun-ting, trying to re-ach for the pa-per bag of be-lon-gings that she had put down in or-der to open the do-or. Her**fa-ce** was gri-ma-cing with ef-fort. She lo-oked up and saw Ma-ri-am.

Ma-ri-am tur-ned aro-und and went to the kitc-hen to warm Ras-he-ed's**me-al.**

*** * ***

"Irs li-ke so-me-one is ram-ming a screwd-ri-ver in-to my ear," Ras-he-ed sa-id, rub-bing his eyes.**He was** stan-ding in Ma-ri-am's do-or, puf-fy-eyed, we-aring only a*ium-ban* ti-ed with a floppy knot.**His** whi-te ha-ir was straggly, po-in-ting every which way. "This crying. I can't stand it."

Downs-ta-irs, the girl was wal-king the baby ac-ross the flo-or, trying to sing to her.

"I ha-ven't had ade-cent night's sle-ep in two**months," Ras-he-ed sa-id.** "And the ro-om smells li-ke a se-wer. The-re's**shit cloths** lying all over the pla-ce. I step-ped on one**just the** ot-her night."

Ma-ri-am smir-ked in-wardly with per-ver-se ple-asu-re.

"Ta-ke her out-si-de!" Ras-he-ed yel-led over his sho-ul-der. "Can't you ta-ke her out-si-de?"

The sin-ging was sus-pen-ded bri-efly.**"She'll** catch pne-umo-nia!"

"It's sum-mer-ti-me!"

'What?

Ras-he-ed clenc-hed his te-eth and ra-ised his vo-ice. "I sa-id, It's warm out!"

"I'm not ta-king her out-si-de!"

The sin-ging re-su-med

"So-me-ti-mes, I swe-ar, so-me-ti-mes I want to put that thing in a box and let her flo-at down Ka-bul Ri-ver. Li-ke baby Mo-ses."

Ma-ri-am ne-ver he-ard him call his da-ugh-ter by the na-me the girl had gi-ven her, Azi-za, the Che-ris-hed One. It was al-ways*the baby*, or, when he was re-al-ly exas-pe-ra-ted,*thai thing.*

So-me nights, Ma-ri-am over-he-ard them ar-gu-ing. She tip-to-ed to the-ir do-or, lis-te-ned to him comp-la-in abo-ut the baby-always the baby-the in-sis-tent crying, the smells, the toys that ma-de him trip, the way the baby had hi-j-ac-ked La-ila's at-ten-ti-ons from him with cons-tant de-mands to be fed, bur-ped, chan-ged, wal-ked, held. The girl, in turn, scol-ded him for smo-king in the ro-om, for not let-ting the baby sle-ep with them.

The-re we-re ot-her ar-gu-ments wa-ged in vo-ices pitc-hed low.

"The doc-tor sa-id six we-eks."

"Not yet, Ras-he-ed. No. Let go. Co-me on. Don't do that."

"It's be-en two months."

*"Sshi.*The-re. You wo-ke up the baby." Then mo-re sharply,*"Khosh sho-di?* Happy now?"

Ma-ri-am wo-uld sne-ak back to her ro-om.

"Can't you help?" Ras-he-ed sa-id now. "The-re must be so-met-hing you can do."

"What do I know abo-ut ba-bi-es?" Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"Ras-he-ed! Can you bring the bot-tle? It's sit-ting on the*al-ma-ri.* She won't fe-ed. I want to try the bot-tle aga-in."

The baby's scre-ec-hing ro-se and fell li-ke a cle-aver on me-at.

Ras-he-ed clo-sed his eyes. "That thing is a war-lord. Hek-mat-yar. I'm tel-ling you, La-ila's gi-ven birth to Gul-bud-din Hek-mat-yar."

*** * ***

Ma-ri-am watc-hed as the girl's days be-ca-me con-su-med with cycles of fe-eding, roc-king, bo-un-cing, wal-king. Even when the baby nap-ped, the-re we-re so-iled di-apers to scrub and le-ave to so-ak in a pa-il of the di-sin-fec-tant that the girl had in-sis-ted Ras-he-ed buy for her. The-re we-re fin-ger-na-ils to trim with sand-pa-per, co-ve-ral-ls and pa-j-amas to wash and hang to dry. The-se clot-hes, li-ke ot-her things abo-ut the baby, be-ca-me a po-int of con-ten-ti-on.

"What's the mat-ter with them?" Ras-he-ed sa-id

"They're boys' clot-hes. For a*bac-ha"*

"You think she knows the dif-fe-ren-ce? I pa-id go-od mo-ney for tho-se clot-hes. And anot-her thing, I don't ca-re for that to-ne. Con-si-der that a war-ning."

Every we-ek, wit-ho-ut fa-il, the girl he-ated a black me-tal bra-zi-er over a fla-me, tos-sed a pinch of wild rue se-eds in it, and waf-ted the*es-pan-di* smo-ke in her baby's di-rec-ti-on to ward off evil.

Ma-ri-am fo-und it ex-ha-us-ting to watch the girl's lol-lo-ping ent-hu-si-asm-and had to ad-mit, if only pri-va-tely, to a deg-ree of ad-mi-ra-ti-on. She mar-ve-led at how the girl's eyes sho-ne with wors-hip, even in the mor-nings when her fa-ce dro-oped and her comp-le-xi-on was waxy from a night's worth of wal-king the baby. The girl had fits of la-ugh-ter when the baby pas-sed gas. The ti-ni-est chan-ges in the baby enc-han-ted her, and everyt-hing it did was dec-la-red spec-ta-cu-lar.

"Lo-ok! She's re-ac-hing for the rat-tle. How cle-ver she is."

"I'll call the news-pa-pers," sa-id Ras-he-ed.

Every night, the-re we-re de-monst-ra-ti-ons. When the girl in-sis-ted he wit-ness so-met-hing, Ras-he-ed tip-ped his chin up-ward and cast an im-pa-ti-ent, si-de-long glan-ce down the blue-ve-ined ho-ok of his no-se.

"Watch. Watch how she la-ughs when I snap my fin-gers. The-re. See? Did you see?"

Ras-he-ed wo-uld grunt, and go back to his pla-te. Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red how the girl's me-re pre-sen-ce used to overw-helm him. Everyt-hing she sa-id used to ple-ase him, int-ri-gue him, ma-ke him lo-ok up from his pla-te and nod with ap-pro-val.

The stran-ge thing was, the girl's fall from gra-ce ought to ha-ve ple-ased Ma-ri-am, bro-ught her a sen-se of vin-di-ca-ti-on. But it didn't. It didn't. To her own surp-ri-se, Ma-ri-am fo-und her-self pit-ying the girl.

It was al-so over din-ner that the girl let lo-ose a ste-ady stre-am of wor-ri-es. Top-ping the list was pne-umo-nia, which was sus-pec-ted with every mi-nor co-ugh. Then the-re was dysen-tery, the spec-ter of which was ra-ised with every lo-ose sto-ol. Every rash was eit-her chic-ken pox or me-as-les.

"You sho-uld not get so at-tac-hed," Ras-he-ed sa-id one night.

"What do you me-an?"

"I was lis-te-ning to the ra-dio the ot-her night. Vo-ice of Ame-ri-ca. I he-ard an in-te-res-ting sta-tis-tic. They sa-id that in Afg-ha-nis-tan one out of fo-ur child-ren will die be-fo-re the age of fi-ve. That's what they sa-id. Now, they-What? What? Whe-re are you go-ing? Co-me back he-re. Get back he-re this ins-tant!"

He ga-ve Ma-ri-am a be-wil-de-red lo-ok. "What's the mat-ter with her?"

That night, Ma-ri-am was lying in bed when the bic-ke-ring star-ted aga-in. It was a hot, dry sum-mer night, typi-cal of the month of*Sa-ra-tan* in Ka-bul. Ma-ri-am had ope-ned her win-dow, then shut it when no bre-eze ca-me thro-ugh to tem-per the he-at, only mos-qu-ito-es. She co-uld fe-el the he-at ri-sing from the gro-und out-si-de, thro-ugh the whe-at brown, splin-te-red planks of the out-ho-use in the yard, up thro-ugh the walls and in-to her ro-om.

Usu-al-ly, the bic-ke-ring ran its co-ur-se af-ter a few mi-nu-tes, but half an ho-ur pas-sed and not only was it still go-ing on, it was es-ca-la-ting. Ma-ri-am co-uld he-ar Ras-he-ed sho-uting now. The girl's vo-ice, un-der-ne-ath his, was ten-ta-ti-ve and shrill. So-on the baby was wa-iling.

Then Ma-ri-am he-ard the-ir do-or open vi-olently. In the mor-ning, she wo-uld find the do-ork-nob's cir-cu-lar imp-res-si-on in the hal-lway wall. She was sit-ting up in bed when her own do-or slam-med open and Ras-he-ed ca-me thro-ugh.

He was we-aring whi-te un-der-pants and a matc-hing un-ders-hirt, sta-ined yel-low in the un-de-rarms with swe-at. On his fe-et he wo-re flip-flops. He held a belt in his hand, the brown le-at-her one he'd bo-ught for his*nik-ka* with the girl, and was wrap-ping the per-fo-ra-ted end aro-und his fist.

"It's yo-ur do-ing. I know it is," he snar-led, ad-van-cing on her.

Ma-ri-am slid out of her bed and be-gan back-pe-da-ling. Her arms ins-tinc-ti-vely cros-sed over her chest, whe-re he of-ten struck her first.

"What are you tal-king abo-ut?" she stam-me-red.

"Her den-ying me. You're te-ac-hing her to."

Over the ye-ars, Ma-ri-am had le-ar-ned to har-den her-self aga-inst his scorn and rep-ro-ach, his ri-di-cu-ling and rep-ri-man-ding. But this fe-ar she had no cont-rol over. All the-se ye-ars and still she shi-ve-red with fright when he was li-ke this, sne-ering, tigh-te-ning the belt aro-und his fist, the cre-aking of the le-at-her, the glint in his blo-ods-hot eyes. It was the fe-ar of the go-at, re-le-ased in the ti-ger's ca-ge, when the ti-ger first lo-oks up from its paws, be-gins to growl-Now the girl was in the ro-om, her eyes wi-de, her fa-ce con-tor-ted

"I sho-uld ha-ve known that you'd cor-rupt her," Ras-he-ed spat at Ma-ri-am. He swung the belt, tes-ting it aga-inst his own thigh. The buck-le jing-led lo-udly.

"Stop it,*basl"* the girl sa-id. "Ras-he-ed, you can't do this."

"Go back to the ro-om."

Ma-ri-am back-pe-da-led aga-in.

"No! Don't do this!"

Now!

Ras-he-ed ra-ised the belt aga-in and this ti-me ca-me at Ma-ri-am.

Then an as-to-nis-hing thing hap-pe-ned: The girl lun-ged at him. She grab-bed his arm with both hands and tri-ed to drag him down, but she co-uld do no mo-re than dang-le from it. She did suc-ce-ed in slo-wing Ras-he-ed's prog-ress to-ward Ma-ri-am.

"Let go!" Ras-he-ed cri-ed.

"You win. You win. Don't do this. Ple-ase, Ras-he-ed, no be-ating! Ple-ase don't do this."

They strug-gled li-ke this, the girl han-ging on, ple-ading, Ras-he-ed trying to sha-ke her off, ke-eping his eyes on Ma-ri-am, who was too stun-ned to do anyt-hing.

In the end, Ma-ri-am knew that the-re wo-uld be no be-ating, not that night. He'd ma-de his po-int. He sta-yed that way a few mo-ments lon-ger, arm ra-ised, chest he-aving, a fi-ne she-en of swe-at fil-ming his brow. Slowly, Ras-he-ed lo-we-red his arm. The girl's fe-et to-uc-hed gro-und and still she wo-uldn't let go, as if she didn't trust him. He had to yank his arm free of her grip.

"I'm on to you," he sa-id, slin-ging the belt over his sho-ul-der. "I'm on to you both. I won't be ma-de an*ah-maq*, a fo-ol, in my own ho-use."

He threw Ma-ri-am one last, mur-de-ro-us sta-re, and ga-ve the girl a sho-ve in the back on the way out.

When she he-ard the-ir do-or clo-se, Ma-ri-am clim-bed back in-to bed, bu-ri-ed her he-ad be-ne-ath the pil-low, and wa-ited for the sha-king to stop.

*** * ***

Three ti-mes that night, Ma-ri-am was awa-ke-ned from sle-ep. The first ti-me, it was the rumb-le of roc-kets in the west, co-ming from the di-rec-ti-on of Kar-teh-Char. The se-cond ti-me, it was the baby crying downs-ta-irs, the girl's shus-hing, the clat-ter of spo-on aga-inst milk bot-tle. Fi-nal-ly, it was thirst that pul-led her out of bed.

Downs-ta-irs, the li-ving ro-om was dark, sa-ve for a bar of mo-on-light spil-ling thro-ugh the win-dow. Ma-ri-am co-uld he-ar the buz-zing of a fly so-mew-he-re, co-uld ma-ke out the out-li-ne of the cast-iron sto-ve in the cor-ner, its pi-pe jut-ting up, then ma-king a sharp ang-le just be-low the ce-iling.

On her way to the kitc-hen, Ma-ri-am ne-arly trip-ped over so-met-hing. The-re was a sha-pe at her fe-et. When her eyes adj-us-ted, she ma-de out the girl and her baby lying on the flo-or on top of a qu-ilt.

The girl was sle-eping on her si-de, sno-ring. The baby was awa-ke. Ma-ri-am lit the ke-ro-se-ne lamp on the tab-le and hun-ke-red down. In the light, she had her first re-al clo-se-up lo-ok at the baby, the tuft of dark ha-ir, the thick-las-hed ha-zel eyes, the pink che-eks, and lips the co-lor of ri-pe po-meg-ra-na-te.

Ma-ri-am had the imp-res-si-on that the baby too was exa-mi-ning her. She was lying on her back, her he-ad til-ted si-de-ways, lo-oking at Ma-ri-am in-tently with a mix-tu-re of amu-se-ment, con-fu-si-on, and sus-pi-ci-on. Ma-ri-am won-de-red if her fa-ce might frigh-ten her, but then the baby squ-e-aled hap-pily and Ma-ri-am knew that a fa-vo-rab-le judg-ment had be-en pas-sed on her be-half.

"Shh,"Ma-ri-am whis-pe-red "You'll wa-ke up yo-ur mot-her, half de-af as she is."

The baby's hand bal-led in-to a fist. It ro-se, fell, fo-und a spas-tic path to her mo-uth. Aro-und a mo-uth-ful of her own hand, the baby ga-ve Ma-ri-am a grin, lit-tle bub-bles of spit-tle shi-ning on her lips.

"Lo-ok at you. What a sorry sight you are, dres-sed li-ke a damn boy. And all bund-led up in this he-at. No won-der you're still awa-ke."

Ma-ri-am pul-led the blan-ket off the baby, was hor-ri-fi-ed to find a se-cond one be-ne-ath, cluc-ked her ton-gue, and pul-led that one off too. The baby gig-gled with re-li-ef. She flap-ped her arms li-ke a bird.

"Bet-ter,*nayT*

As Ma-ri-am was pul-ling back, the baby grab-bed her pin-kie. The tiny fin-gers cur-led them-sel-ves tightly aro-und it. They felt warm and soft, mo-ist with dro-ol.

*"Gu-nuh,"*the baby sa-id.

"All right, Ms; let go."

The baby hung on, kic-ked her legs aga-in.

Ma-ri-am pul-led her fin-ger free. The baby smi-led and ma-de a se-ri-es of gurg-ling so-unds. The knuck-les went back to the mo-uth.

"What are you so happy abo-ut? Huh? What are you smi-ling at? You're not so cle-ver as yo-ur mot-her says. You ha-ve a bru-te for a fat-her and a fo-ol for a mot-her. You wo-uldn't smi-le so much if you knew. No you wo-uldn't. Go to sle-ep, now. Go on."

Ma-ri-am ro-se to her fe-et and wal-ked a few steps be-fo-re the baby star-ted ma-king the*eh, eh, eh* so-unds that Ma-ri-am knew sig-na-led the on-set of a he-arty cry. She ret-ra-ced her steps.

"What is it? What do you want from-me?"

The baby grin-ned to-oth-les-sly.

Ma-ri-am sig-hed. She sat down and let her fin-ger be grab-bed, lo-oked on as the baby squ-e-aked, as she fle-xed her plump legs at the hips and kic-ked air. Ma-ri-am sat the-re, watc-hing, un-til the baby stop-ped mo-ving and be-gan sno-ring softly.

Out-si-de, moc-king-birds we-re sin-ging blit-hely, and, on-ce in a whi-le, when the songs-ters to-ok flight, Ma-ri-am co-uld see the-ir wings catc-hing the phosp-ho-res-cent blue of mo-on-light be-aming thro-ugh the clo-uds. And tho-ugh her thro-at was parc-hed with thirst and her fe-et bur-ned with pins and ne-ed-les, it was a long ti-me be-fo-re Ma-ri-am gently fre-ed her fin-ger from the baby's grip and got up.

34.

La-ila

Of all earthly ple-asu-res, La-ila's fa-vo-ri-te was lying next to Azi-za, her baby's fa-ce so clo-se that she co-uld watch her big pu-pils di-la-te and shrink. La-ila lo-ved run-ning her fin-ger over Azi-za's ple-asing, soft skin, over the dimp-led knuck-les, the folds of fat at her el-bows. So-me-ti-mes she lay Azi-za down on her chest and whis-pe-red in-to the soft crown of her he-ad things abo-ut Ta-riq, the fat-her who wo-uld al-ways be a stran-ger to Azi-za, who-se fa-ce Azi-za wo-uld ne-ver know. La-ila told her of his ap-ti-tu-de for sol-ving rid-dles, his tric-kery and misc-hi-ef, his easy la-ugh.

"He had the pret-ti-est las-hes, thick li-ke yo-urs. A go-od chin, a fi-ne no-se, and a ro-und fo-re-he-ad. Oh, yo-ur fat-her was hand-so-me, Azi-za. He was per-fect. Per-fect, li-ke you are."

But she was ca-re-ful ne-ver to men-ti-on him by na-me.

So-me-ti-mes she ca-ught Ras-he-ed lo-oking at Azi-za in the most pe-cu-li-ar way. The ot-her night, sit-ting on the bed-ro-om flo-or, whe-re he was sha-ving a corn from his fo-ot, he sa-id qu-ite ca-su-al-ly, "So what was it li-ke bet-we-en you two?"

La-ila had gi-ven him a puz-zled lo-ok, as tho-ugh she didn't un-ders-tand.

"La-ili and Ma-jno-on. You and the-*yak-knga,*the crip-ple. What was it you had, he and you?"

"He was my fri-end," she sa-id, ca-re-ful that her vo-ice not shift too much in key.**She bu-si-ed her-self** ma-king a bot-tle.**"You know that."**

"I don't know*what* I**know."** Ras-he-ed de-po-si-ted the sha-vings on the win-dow-sill and drop-ped on-to the bed. The springs pro-tes-ted with a lo-ud cre-ak. He spla-yed his legs, pic-ked at his crotch. "And as….*fri-ends,* did the two of you ever do anyt-hing out of or-der?"

"Out of or-der?"

Ras-he-ed smi-led light-he-ar-tedly, but La-ila co-uld fe-el his ga-ze, cold and watch-ful. "Let me see, now. Well, did he**ever gi-ve you** a kiss? May-be**put his** hand whe-re it didn't be-long?"

La-ila win-ced with, she ho-ped, an in-dig-nant air. She co-uld fe-el her he-art drum-ming in her thro-at.**"He was li-ke** a*brot-her* to me."

"So he was a fri-end or a brot-her?"

"Both. He^"

"Which was it?"

"He was li-ke both."

"But brot-hers and sis-ters are cre-atu-res of cu-ri-osity.**Yes.** So-me-ti-mes a brot-her lets his sis-ter see his pec-ker, and a**sis-ter** will-"

"You sic-ken me," La-ila sa-id.

"So the-re was not-hing."

"I don't want to talk abo-ut this any-mo-re."

Ras-he-ed til-ted his he-ad, pur-sed his lips, nod-ded. "Pe-op-le gos-si-ped, you know. I re-mem-ber. They sa-id all sorts of things abo-ut you two. But you're sa-ying the-re was not-hing."

She wil-led her-self to gla-re at**him.**

He held her eyes**for** an exc-ru-ci-atingly long ti-me in an unb-lin-king way that ma-de her knuck-les go pa-le aro-und the milk**bot-tle, and it** to-ok all that La-ila co-uld mus-ter to not fal-ter.

She shud-de-red at what he wo-uld do if he**fo-und out that she had** be-en ste-aling from him. Every we-ek, sin-ce Azi-za's birth, she pri-ed his wal-let open when he was**as-le-ep** or in the out-ho-use and to-ok a sing-le bill. So-me we-eks, if the wal-let was light, she to-ok only a fi-ve-afgha-ni**bill, or** not-hing at all, for fe-ar that he wo-uld no-ti-ce. When the wal-let was plump, she hel-ped**her-self to a ten or a** twenty, on-ce even ris-king two twen-ti-es. She hid the mo-ney in a po-uch**she'd** sewn in the li-ning of her chec-ke-red win-ter co-at.

She won-de-red what he wo-uld do if he knew that she was plan-ning to run away next spring. Next sum-mer at the la-test. La-ila ho-ped to ha-ve a tho-usand afg-ha-nis or mo-re sto-wed away, half of which wo-uld go to the bus fa-re from Ka-bul to Pes-ha-war. She wo-uld pawn her wed-ding ring when the ti-me drew clo-se, as well

as the ot-her jewelry that Ras-he-ed had gi-ven her the ye-ar be-fo-re when she was still the*ma-li-ka* of his pa-la-ce.

"Anyway," he sa-id at last, fin-gers drum-ming his belly, "I can't be bla-med. I am a hus-band. The-se are the things a hus-band won-ders. But he's lucky he di-ed the way he did. Be-ca-use if he was he-re now, if I got my hands on him…" He suc-ked thro-ugh his te-eth and sho-ok his he-ad.

"What hap-pe-ned to not spe-aking ill of the de-ad?"

"I gu-ess so-me pe-op-le can't be de-ad eno-ugh," he sa-id.

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Two days la-ter, La-ila wo-ke up in the mor-ning and fo-und a stack of baby clot-hes, ne-atly fol-ded, out-si-de her bed-ro-om do-or. The-re was a twirl dress with lit-tle pink fis-hes sewn aro-und the bo-di-ce, a blue flo-ral wo-ol dress with matc-hing socks and mit-tens, yel-low pa-j-amas with car-rot-co-lo-red pol-ka dots, and gre-en cot-ton pants with a dot-ted ruf-fle on the cuff.

"The-re is a ru-mor," Ras-he-ed sa-id over din-ner that night, smac-king his lips, ta-king no no-ti-ce of Azi-za or the pa-j-amas La-ila had put on her, "that Dos-tum is go-ing to chan-ge si-des and jo-in Hek-mat-yar. Mas-so-ud will ha-ve his hands full then, figh-ting tho-se two. And we mustn't for-get the Ha-za-ras." He to-ok a pinch of the pick-led eg-gplant Ma-ri-am had ma-de that sum-mer. "Let's ho-pe it's just that, a ru-mor. Be-ca-use if that hap-pens, this war," he wa-ved one gre-asy hand, "will se-em li-ke a Fri-day pic-nic at Pagh-man."

La-ter, he mo-un-ted her and re-li-eved him-self with word-less has-te, fully dres-sed sa-ve for his*tum-ban*, not re-mo-ved but pul-led down to the ank-les. When the fran-tic roc-king was over, he rol-led off her and was as-le-ep in mi-nu-tes.

La-ila slip-ped out of the bed-ro-om and fo-und Ma-ri-am in the kitc-hen squ-at-ting, cle-aning a pa-ir of tro-ut. A pot of ri-ce was al-re-ady so-aking be-si-de her. The kitc-hen smel-led li-ke cu-min and smo-ke, brow-ned oni-ons and fish.

La-ila sat in a co-mer and dra-ped her kne-es with the hem of her dress.

"Thank you," she sa-id.

Ma-ri-am to-ok no no-ti-ce of her. She fi-nis-hed cut-ting up the first tro-ut and pic-ked up the se-cond. With a ser-ra-ted kni-fe, she clip-ped the fins, then tur-ned the fish over, its un-der-bel-ly fa-cing her, and sli-ced it ex-pertly from the ta-il to the gills. La-ila watc-hed her put her thumb in-to its mo-uth, just over the lo-wer jaw, push it in, and, in one down-ward stro-ke, re-mo-ve the gills and the ent-ra-ils.

"The clot-hes are lo-vely."

"I had no use for them," Ma-ri-am mut-te-red. She drop-ped the fish on a news-pa-per smud-ged with slimy, gray ju-ice and sli-ced off its he-ad. "It was eit-her yo-ur da-ugh-ter or the moths."

"Whe-re did you le-arn to cle-an fish li-ke that?"

"When I was a lit-tle girl, I li-ved by a stre-am. I used to**catch** my own**fish."**

"I've ne-ver fis-hed"

"Not much to**it. It's mostly wa-iting."**

La-ilawat-c-hed her cut the gut-ted tro-ut in-to thirds. "Did you sew the clot-hes yo-ur-self?"

Ma-ri-am nod-ded.

"When?"

Ma-ri-am**rin-sed sec-ti-ons of-fish in a** bowl of wa-ter. "When I was preg-nant the first ti-me. Or may-be the se-cond ti-me. Eigh-te-en, ni-ne-te-en ye-ars ago. Long ti-me, any-how. Li-ke I sa-id, I ne-ver had any**use** for them."

"You're a re-al-ly go-od*kha-yai.* May-be you can te-ach me."

Ma-ri-am pla-ced the rin-sed chunks of tro-ut in-to a cle-an bowl.**Drops** of wa-ter drip-ping**from** her fin-ger-tips,**she** ra-ised her he-ad and lo-oked at La-ila, lo-oked at her**as if for the first** ti-me.

"The ot-her night, when he…No-body's ever sto-od up for me**be-fo-re,"** she sa-id.

La-ila exa-mi-ned Ma-ri-am's dro-oping che-eks, the eye-lids that sag-ged in ti-red folds, the de-ep li-nes that fra-med her mo-uth-she saw the-se things as tho-ugh she too we-re lo-oking at so-me-one for the first ti-me. And, for the first ti-me, it was not an ad-ver-sary's fa-ce La-ila saw but a fa-ce of gri-evan-ces uns-po-ken, bur-dens go-ne unp-ro-tes-ted, a des-tiny sub-mit-ted to and en-du-red. If she sta-yed, wo-uld this be her own fa-ce, La-ila won-de-red, twenty ye-ars from now?

"I co-uldn't let him," La-ila sa-id "I wasn't ra-ised in a ho-use-hold whe-re pe-op-le did things li-ke that."

*"This*is yo-ur ho-use-hold now. You ought to get used to it."

"Not to/to I won't."

"He'll turn on you too, you know," Ma-ri-am sa-id, wi-ping her hands dry with a rag. "So-on eno-ugh. And you ga-ve him a da-ugh-ter. So, you see, yo-ur sin is even less for-gi-vab-le than mi-ne."

La-ila ro-se to her fe-et. "I know it's chilly out-si-de, but what do you say we sin-ners ha-ve us a cup of*chai* in the yard?"

Ma-ri-am lo-oked surp-ri-sed "I can't. I still ha-ve to cut and wash the be-ans."

"I'll help you do it in the mor-ning."

"And I ha-ve to cle-an up he-re."

"We'll do it to-get-her. If I'm not mis-ta-ken, the-re's so-me*hal-wa* left over. Aw-ful-ly go-od with*chat."*

Ma-ri-am put the rag on the co-un-ter. La-ila sen-sed an-xi-ety in the way she tug-ged at her sle-eves, adj-us-ted her*hi-j-ab,* pus-hed back a curl of ha-ir.

"The Chi-ne-se say it's bet-ter to be dep-ri-ved of fo-od for three days than tea for one."

Ma-ri-am ga-ve a half smi-le. "It's a go-od sa-ying."

"It is."

"But I can't stay long."

"One cup."

They sat on fol-ding cha-irs out-si-de and ate*hal-wa* with the-ir fin-gers from a com-mon bowl. They had a se-cond cup, and when La-ila as-ked her if she wan-ted a third Ma-ri-am sa-id she did. As gun-fi-re crac-ked in the hills, they watc-hed the clo-uds sli-de over the mo-on and the last of the se-ason's fi-ref-li-es char-ting bright yel-low arcs in the dark. And when Azi-za wo-ke up crying and Ras-he-ed yel-led for La-ila to co-me up and shut her up, a lo-ok pas-sed bet-we-en La-ila and Ma-ri-am. An un-gu-ar-ded, kno-wing lo-ok. And in this fle-eting, word-less exc-han-ge with Ma-ri-am, La-ila knew that they we-re not ene-mi-es any lon-ger.

35.

Ma-dam

Jr rom that night on, Ma-ri-am and La-ila did the-ir cho-res to-get-her. They sat in the kitc-hen and rol-led do-ugh, chop-ped gre-en oni-ons, min-ced gar-lic, of-fe-red bits of cu-cum-ber to Azi-za, who ban-ged spo-ons ne-arby and pla-yed with car-rots. In the yard, Azi-za lay in a wic-ker bas-si-net, dres-sed in la-yers of clot-hing, a win-ter muf-fler wrap-ped snugly aro-und her neck. Ma-ri-am and La-ila kept a watch-ful eye on her as they did the wash, Ma-ri-am's knuck-les bum-ping La-ila's as they scrub-bed shirts and tro-users and di-apers.

Ma-ri-am slowly grew ac-cus-to-med to this ten-ta-ti-ve but ple-asant com-pa-ni-ons-hip. She was eager for the three cups of*chai* she and La-ila wo-uld sha-re in the yard, a nightly ri-tu-al now. In the mor-nings, Ma-ri-am fo-und her-self lo-oking for-ward to the so-und of La-ila's crac-ked slip-pers slap-ping the steps as she ca-me down for bre-ak-fast and to the tink-le of Azi-za's shrill la-ugh, to the sight of her eight lit-tle te-eth, the milky scent of her skin. If La-ila and Azi-za slept in, Ma-ri-am be-ca-me an-xi-o-us wa-iting. She was-hed dis-hes that didn't ne-ed was-hing. She re-ar-ran-ged cus-hi-ons in the li-ving ro-om. She dus-ted cle-an win-dow-sil-ls. She kept her-self oc-cu-pi-ed un-til La-ila en-te-red the kitc-hen, Azi-za ho-is-ted on her hip.

When Azi-za first spot-ted Ma-ri-am in the mor-ning, her eyes al-ways sprang open, and she be-gan mew-ling and squ-ir-ming in her mot-her's grip. She thrust her arms to-ward Ma-ri-am, de-man-ding to be held, her tiny hands ope-ning and clo-sing ur-gently, on her fa-ce a lo-ok of both ado-ra-ti-on and qu-ive-ring an-xi-ety.

"What a sce-ne you're ma-king," La-ila wo-uld say, re-le-asing her to crawl to-ward Ma-ri-am. "What a sce-ne! Calm down. Kha-la Ma-ri-am isn't go-ing anyw-he-re. The-re she is, yo-ur aunt. See? Go on, now."

As so-on as she was in Ma-ri-am's arms, Azi-za's thumb shot in-to her mo-uth and she bu-ri-ed her fa-ce in Ma-ri-am's neck.

Ma-ri-am bo-un-ced her stiffly, a half-be-wil-de-red, half-gra-te-ful smi-le on her lips. Ma-ri-am had ne-ver be-fo-re be-en wan-ted li-ke this. Lo-ve had ne-ver be-en dec-la-red to her so gu-ile-les-sly, so un-re-ser-vedly.

Azi-za ma-de Ma-ri-am want to we-ep.

"Why ha-ve you pin-ned yo-ur lit-tle he-art to an old, ugly hag li-ke me?" Ma-ri-am wo-uld mur-mur in-to Azi-za's ha-ir. "Huh? I am no-body, don't you see? A*de-hatl* What ha-ve I got to gi-ve you?"

But Azi-za only mut-te-red con-ten-tedly and dug her fa-ce in de-eper. And when she did that, Ma-ri-am swo-oned. Her eyes wa-te-red. Her he-art to-ok flight. And she mar-ve-led at how, af-ter all the-se ye-ars of rat-tling lo-ose, she had fo-und in this lit-tle cre-atu-re the first true con-nec-ti-on in her li-fe of fal-se, fa-iled con-nec-ti-ons.

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Early the fol-lo-wing ye-ah, in Janu-ary 1994, Dos-tum*did* switch si-des. He jo-ined Gul-bud-din Hek-mat-yar, and to-ok up po-si-ti-on ne-ar Ba-la His-sar, the old ci-ta-del walls that lo-omed over the city from the Koh-e-Shir-da-wa-za

mo-un-ta-ins. To-get-her, they fi-red on Mas-so-ud and Rab-ba-ni for-ces at the Mi-nistry of De-fen-se and the Pre-si-den-ti-al Pa-la-ce. From eit-her si-de of the Ka-bul Ri-ver, they re-le-ased ro-unds of ar-til-lery at each ot-her. The stre-ets be-ca-me lit-te-red with bo-di-es, glass, and crump-led chunks of me-tal. The-re was lo-oting, mur-der, and, inc-re-asingly, ra-pe, which was used to in-ti-mi-da-te ci-vi-li-ans and re-ward mi-li-ti-amen. Ma-ri-am he-ard of wo-men who we-re kil-ling them-sel-ves out of fe-ar of be-ing ra-ped, and of men who, in the na-me of ho-nor, wo-uld kill the-ir wi-ves or da-ugh-ters if they'd be-en ra-ped by the mi-li-tia.

Azi-za shri-eked at the thum-ping of mor-tars. To dist-ract her, Ma-ri-am ar-ran-ged gra-ins of ri-ce on the flo-or, in the sha-pe of a ho-use or a ro-os-ter or a star, and let Azi-za scat-ter them. She drew elep-hants for Azi-za the way Jalil had shown her, in one stro-ke, wit-ho-ut ever lif-ting the tip of the pen.

Ras-he-ed sa-id ci-vi-li-ans we-re get-ting kil-led da-ily, by the do-zens. Hos-pi-tals and sto-res hol-ding me-di-cal sup-pli-es we-re get-ting shel-led. Ve-hic-les car-rying emer-gency fo-od sup-pli-es we-re be-ing bar-red from en-te-ring the city, he sa-id, ra-ided, shot at. Ma-ri-am won-de-red if the-re was figh-ting li-ke this in He-rat too, and, if so, how Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah was co-ping, if he was still ali-ve, and Bi-bi-jo too, with all her sons, bri-des, and grandc-hild-ren. And, of co-ur-se, Jalil. Was

he hi-ding out, Ma-ri-am won-de-red, as she was? Or had he ta-ken his wi-ves and child-ren and fled the co-untry? She ho-ped Jalil was so-mew-he-re sa-fe, that he'd ma-na-ged to get away from all of this kil-ling.

For a we-ek, the figh-ting for-ced even Ras-he-ed to stay ho-me. He loc-ked the do-or to the yard, set bo-oby traps, loc-ked the front do-or too and bar-ri-ca-ded it with the co-uch. He pa-ced the ho-use, smo-king, pe-ering out the win-dow, cle-aning his gun, lo-ading and lo-ading it aga-in. Twi-ce, he fi-red his we-apon in-to the stre-et cla-iming he'd se-en so-me-one trying to climb the wall.

"They're for-cing yo-ung boys to jo-in," he sa-id. "The-Mu-j-ahi-de-ena-re. In pla-in day-light, at gun-po-int. They drag boys right off the stre-ets. And when sol-di-ers from a ri-val mi-li-tia cap-tu-re the-se boys, they tor-tu-re them. I he-ard they elect-ro-cu-te them-it's what I he-ard-that they crush the-ir balls with pli-ers. They

ma-ke the boys le-ad them to the-ir ho-mes. Then they bre-ak in, kill the-ir fat-hers, ra-pe the-ir sis-ters and mot-hers."

He wa-ved his gun over his he-ad. "Let's see them try to bre-ak in-to my ho-use. I'll crush*the-ir* balls! I'll blow the-ir he-ads off! Do you know how lucky you two are to ha-ve a man who's not af-ra-id of Sha-itan him-self?"

He lo-oked down at the gro-und, no-ti-ced Azi-za at his fe-et. "Get off my he-els!" he snap-ped, ma-king a sho-o-ing mo-ti-on with his gun. "Stop fol-lo-wing me! And you can stop twir-ling yo-ur wrists li-ke that. I'm not pic-king you up. Go on! Go on be-fo-re you get step-ped on."

Azi-za flinc-hed. She craw-led back to Ma-ri-am, lo-oking bru-ised and con-fu-sed. In Ma-ri-am's lap, she suc-ked her thumb che-er-les-sly and watc-hed Ras-he-ed in a sul-len, pen-si-ve way. Oc-ca-si-onal-ly, she lo-oked up, Ma-ri-am ima-gi-ned, with a lo-ok of wan-ting to be re-as-su-red.

But when it ca-me to fat-hers, Ma-ri-am had no as-su-ran-ces to gi-ve.

*** * ***

Ma-e-i-am was re-li-eved when the figh-ting sub-si-ded aga-in, mostly be-ca-use they no lon-ger had to be co-oped up with Ras-he-ed, with his so-ur tem-per in-fec-ting the ho-use-hold. And he'd frigh-te-ned her badly wa-ving that lo-aded gun ne-ar Azi-za.

One day that win-ter, La-ila as-ked to bra-id Ma-ri-am's ha-ir.

Ma-ri-am sat still and watc-hed La-ila's slim fin-gers in the mir-ror tigh-ten her pla-its, La-ila's fa-ce scrunc-hed in con-cent-ra-ti-on. Azi-za was cur-led up as-le-ep on the flo-or. Tuc-ked un-der her arm was a doll Ma-ri-am had hand-stitc-hed for her. Ma-ri-am had stuf-fed it with be-ans, ma-de it a dress with tea-dyed fab-ric and a neck-la-ce with tiny empty thre-ad spo-ols thro-ugh which she'd thre-aded a string.

Then Azi-za pas-sed gas in her sle-ep. La-ila be-gan to la-ugh, and Ma-ri-am jo-ined in. They la-ug-hed li-ke this, at each ot-her's ref-lec-ti-on in the mir-ror, the-ir eyes te-aring, and the mo-ment was so na-tu-ral, so ef-fort-less, that sud-denly Ma-ri-am star-ted tel-ling her abo-ut Jalil, and Na-na, and*the jinn.* La-ila sto-od with her hands id-le on Ma-ri-am's sho-ul-ders, eyes loc-ked on Ma-ri-am's fa-ce in the mir-ror. Out the words ca-me, li-ke blo-od gus-hing from an ar-tery. Ma-ri-am told her abo-ut Bi-bi jo, Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah, the hu-mi-li-ating trek to Jalil's ho-use, Na-na's su-ici-de. She told abo-ut Jalil's wi-ves, and the hur-ri-ed*nik-ka* with Ras-he-ed, the trip to Ka-bul, her preg-nan-ci-es, the end-less cycles of ho-pe and di-sap-po-int-ment, Ras-he-ed's tur-ning on her.

After, La-ila sat at the fo-ot of Ma-ri-am's cha-ir. Ab-sently, she re-mo-ved a scrap of lint en-tang-led in Azi-za's ha-ir. A si-len-ce en-su-ed.

"I ha-ve so-met-hing to tell you too," La-ila sa-id.

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Ma-e-i-am-did not sle-ep that night. She sat in bed, watc-hed the snow fal-ling so-und-les-sly.

Se-asons had co-me and go-ne; pre-si-dents in Ka-bul had be-en ina-ugu-ra-ted and mur-de-red; an em-pi-re had be-en de-fe-ated; old wars had en-ded and new ones had bro-ken out. But Ma-ri-am had hardly no-ti-ced, hardly ca-red. She had pas-sed the-se ye-ars in a dis-tant cor-ner of her mind A dry, bar-ren fi-eld, out be-yond wish and la-ment, be-yond dre-am and di-sil-lu-si-on-ment- The-re, the fu-tu-re did not mat-ter. And the past held only this wis-dom: that lo-ve was a da-ma-ging mis-ta-ke, and its ac-comp-li-ce, ho-pe, a tre-ac-he-ro-us il-lu-si-on. And whe-ne-ver tho-se twin po-iso-no-us flo-wers be-gan to spro-ut in the parc-hed land of that fi-eld, Ma-ri-am up-ro-oted them. She up-ro-oted them and ditc-hed them be-fo-re they to-ok hold.

But so-me-how, over the-se last months, La-ila and Azi-za-a*ha-ra-mi* li-ke her-self, as it tur-ned out-had be-co-me ex-ten-si-ons of her, and now, wit-ho-ut them, the li-fe Ma-ri-am had to-le-ra-ted for so long sud-denly se-emed in-to-le-rab-le.

We're le-aving this spring, Azi-za and I. Co-me with us, Ma-ri-am.

The ye-ars had not be-en kind to Ma-ri-am. But per-haps, she tho-ught, the-re we-re kin-der ye-ars wa-iting still. A new li-fe, a li-fe in which she wo-uld find the bles-sings that Na-na had sa-id a*ha-ra-mi* li-ke her wo-uld ne-ver see. Two new flo-wers had unex-pec-tedly spro-uted in her li-fe, and, as Ma-ri-am watc-hed the snow co-ming down, she pic-tu-red Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah twir-ling his*ias-beh* be-ads, le-aning in and whis-pe-ring to her in his soft, tre-mu-lo-us vo-ice,*But it is God Who has plan-ted them, Ma-ri-am jo. And it is His will that you tend to them. It is His will, my girl.*

36.

La-ila

As day-light ste-adily ble-ac-hed dark-ness from the sky**that** spring mor-ning of**1994,** La-ila be-ca-me cer-ta-in that Ras-he-ed knew. That, any mo-ment now, he wo-uld drag her out of bed and ask whet-her she'd re-al-ly ta-ken him for such a*khar,* such a don-key, that he wo-uldn't find out. But*azan* rang out, and then the mor-ning sun was fal-ling flat on the ro-of-tops and the ro-os-ters we-re cro-wing and not-hing out of the or-di-nary hap-pe-ned

She co-uld he-ar him now in the bath-ro-om, the tap-ping of his ra-zor aga-inst the ed-ge of the ba-sin. Then downs-ta-irs, mo-ving abo-ut, he-ating tea. The keys jing-led. Now he was cros-sing the yard, wal-king his bicyc-le.

La-ila pe-ered thro-ugh a crack in the li-ving-ro-om cur-ta-ins. She watc-hed him pe-dal away, a big man on a small bicyc-le, the mor-ning sun gla-ring off the hand-le-bars.

"La-ila?"

Ma-ri-am was in the do-or-way. La-ila co-uld tell that she hadn't slept eit-her. She won-de-red if Ma-ri-am too had be-en se-ized all night by bo-uts of eup-ho-ria and at-tacks of mo-uth-drying an-xi-ety.

"We'll le-ave in half an ho-ur," La-ila sa-id.

* * *

In the back-se-at of the ta-xi, they did not spe-ak. Azi-za sat on Ma-ri-am's lap, clutc-hing her doll, lo-oking with wi-de-eyed puz-zle-ment at the city spe-eding by.

*"Ona!"*she cri-ed, po-in-ting to a gro-up of lit-tle girls skip-ping ro-pe. "Ma-yam!*Ona"*

Everyw-he-re she lo-oked, La-ila saw Ras-he-ed. She spot-ted him co-ming out of bar-bers-hops with win-dows the co-lor of co-al dust, from tiny bo-oths that sold part-rid-ges, from bat-te-red, open-fron-ted sto-res pac-ked with old ti-res pi-led from flo-or to ce-iling.

She sank lo-wer in her se-at.

Be-si-de her, Ma-ri-am was mut-te-ring a pra-yer. La-ila wis-hed she co-uld see her fa-ce, but Ma-ri-am was in bur-qa-they both we-re-and all she co-uld see was the glit-ter of her eyes thro-ugh the grid.

This was La-ila's first ti-me out of the ho-use in we-eks, dis-co-un-ting the short trip to the pawns-hop the day be-fo-re-whe-re she had pus-hed her wed-ding ring ac-ross a glass co-un-ter, whe-re she'd wal-ked out thril-led by the fi-na-lity of it, kno-wing the-re was no go-ing back.

All aro-und her now, La-ila saw the con-se-qu-en-ces of the re-cent figh-ting who-se so-unds she'd he-ard from the ho-use. Ho-mes that lay in ro-of-less ru-ins of brick and jag-ged sto-ne, go-uged bu-il-dings with fal-len be-ams po-king thro-ugh the ho-les, the char-red, mang-led husks of cars, upen-ded, so-me-ti-mes stac-ked on top of each ot-her, walls poc-ked by ho-les of every con-ce-ivab-le ca-li-ber, shat-te-red glass everyw-he-re. She saw a fu-ne-ral pro-ces-si-on marc-hing to-ward a mos-que, a black-clad old wo-man at the re-ar te-aring at her ha-ir. They pas-sed a ce-me-tery lit-te-red with rock-pi-led gra-ves and rag-ged*sha-he-ed* flags flut-te-ring in the bre-eze.

La-ila re-ac-hed ac-ross the su-it-ca-se, wrap-ped her fin-gers aro-und the soft-ness of her da-ugh-ter's arm.

* * *

At the La-ho-re Ga-te bus sta-ti-on, ne-ar Pol Mah-mo-od Khan in East Ka-bul, a row of bu-ses sat id-ling along the curb-si-de. Men in tur-bans we-re busy he-aving bund-les and cra-tes on-to bus tops, se-cu-ring su-it-ca-ses down with ro-pes. In-si-de the sta-ti-on, men sto-od in a long li-ne at the tic-ket bo-oth. Bur-qa-clad wo-men sto-od in gro-ups and chat-ted, the-ir be-lon-gings pi-led at the-ir fe-et. Ba-bi-es we-re bo-un-ced, child-ren scol-ded for stra-ying too far.

Mu-j-ahi-de-en mi-li-ti-amen pat-rol-led the sta-ti-on and the curb-si-de, bar-king curt or-ders he-re and the-re. They wo-re bo-ots,*pa-kols,* dusty gre-en fa-ti-gu-es. They all car-ri-ed Ka-lash-ni-kovs.

La-ila felt watc-hed. She lo-oked no one in the fa-ce, but she felt as tho-ugh every per-son in this pla-ce knew, that they we-re lo-oking on with di-sap-pro-val at what she and Ma-ri-am we-re do-ing.

"Do you see any-body?" La-ila as-ked.

Ma-ri-am shif-ted Azi-za in her arms. "I'm lo-oking."

This, La-ila had known, wo-uld be the first risky part, fin-ding a man su-itab-le to po-se with them as a fa-mily mem-ber. The fre-edoms and op-por-tu-ni-ti-es that wo-men had enj-oyed bet-we-en 1978 and 1992 we-re a thing of the past now- La-ila co-uld still re-mem-ber Ba-bi sa-ying of tho-se ye-ars of com-mu-nist ru-le,*It's a go-od ti-me to be a wo-man in Afg-ha-nis-tan, La-ila* Sin-ce the Mu-j-ahi-de-en ta-ke-over in Ap-ril 1992, Afg-ha-nis-tan's na-me had be-en chan-ged to the Is-la-mic Sta-te of Afg-ha-nis-tan. The Sup-re-me Co-urt un-der Rab-ba-ni was fil-led now with hard-li-ner mul-lahs who did away with the com-mu-nist-era dec-re-es that em-po-we-red wo-men and ins-te-ad pas-sed ru-lings ba-sed on Sha-ri'a, strict Is-la-mic laws that or-de-red wo-men to co-ver, for-ba-de the-ir tra-vel wit-ho-ut a ma-le re-la-ti-ve, pu-nis-hed adul-tery with sto-ning. Even if the ac-tu-al en-for-ce-ment of the-se laws was spo-ra-dic at best.*But they'd en-for-ce them on us mo-re,* La-ila had sa-id to Ma-ri-am,*if they we-ren't so busy kil-ling each ot-her. And us.*

The se-cond risky part of this trip wo-uld co-me when they ac-tu-al-ly ar-ri-ved in Pa-kis-tan. Al-re-ady bur-de-ned with ne-arly two mil-li-on Afg-han re-fu-ge-es, Pa-kis-tan had clo-sed its bor-ders to Afg-hans in Janu-ary of that ye-ar. La-ila had he-ard that only tho-se with vi-sas wo-uld be ad-mit-ted. But the bor-der was po-ro-us-always had be-en-and La-ila knew that tho-usands of Afg-hans we-re still cros-sing in-to Pa-kis-tan eit-her with bri-bes or by pro-ving hu-ma-ni-ta-ri-an gro-unds- and the-re we-re al-ways smug-glers who co-uld be hi-red.*We'll find a way when we get the-re,* she'd told Ma-ri-am.

"How abo-ut him?" Ma-ri-am sa-id, mo-ti-oning with her chin.

"He do-esn't lo-ok trust-worthy."

"And him?"

"Too old. And he's tra-ve-ling with two ot-her men."

Even-tu-al-ly,La-ila fo-und him sit-ting out-si-de on a park bench,**with a ve-iled** wo-man at his si-de and a lit-tle boy in a skul-lcap, ro-ughly Azi-za's age, bo-un-cing on his kne-es.**He** was**tall** and slen-der, be-ar-ded, we-aring an open-col-la-red**shirt** and a mo-dest gray co-at with mis-sing but-tons.

"Wa-it he-re,"**she sa-id to** Ma-ri-am. Wal-king away, she aga-in he-ard Ma-ri-am mut-te-ring a pra-yer.

When La-ila ap-pro-ac-hed the yo-ung man, he lo-oked up, shi-el-ded the sun from his eyes with a hand.

"For-gi-ve me, brot-her, but are you go-ing to Pes-ha-war?"

"Yes," he sa-id, squ-in-ting.

"I won-der if**you** can help us. Can you do us a fa-vor?"

He pas-sed the boy to his wi-fe. He and La-ila step-ped away.

"What is it,*ham-s-hi-raT'*

She was en-co-ura-ged to see that he had soft eyes, a kind fa-ce.

She told him the story that she and Ma-ri-am had ag-re-ed on. She was a*bi-wa,***she sa-id,** a wi-dow. She and her mot-her and da-ugh-ter had no one**left in Ka-bul.** They we-re go-ing to Pes-ha-war to stay with her unc-le.

"You want to co-me with my fa-mily," the yo-ung man sa-id

"I know it's*zah-mat* for you. But you lo-ok li-ke a de-cent brot-her, and I-"

"Don't worry,*ham-s-hi-ra* I un-ders-tand. It's no tro-ub-le. Let me go and buy yo-ur tic-kets."

"Thank you, brot-her. This is*sa-wab,* a go-od de-ed. God will re-mem-ber."

She fis-hed the en-ve-lo-pe from her poc-ket be-ne-ath the bur-qa and pas-sed it to him. In it was ele-ven hund-red afg-ha-nis, or abo-ut half of the mo-ney she'd stas-hed over the past ye-ar plus the sa-le of the ring. He slip-ped the en-ve-lo-pe in his tro-user poc-ket.

"Wa-it he-re."

She watc-hed him en-ter the sta-ti-on. He re-tur-ned half an ho-ur la-ter.

"It's best I hold on to yo-ur tic-kets," he sa-id. The bus le-aves in one ho-ur, at ele-ven. We'll all bo-ard to-get-her. My na-me is Wa-kil. If they ask-and they sho-uldn't-I'll tell them you're my co-usin."

La-ila ga-ve him the-ir na-mes, and he sa-id he wo-uld re-mem-ber.

"Stay clo-se," he sa-id.

They sat on the bench adj-acent to Wa-kil and his fa-mily's. It was a sunny, warm mor-ning, the sky stre-aked only by a few wispy clo-uds ho-ve-ring in the dis-tan-ce over the**hills.** Ma-ri-am be-gan fe-eding Azi-za a few of the crac-kers she'd re-mem-be-red to bring in the-ir rush to pack. She of-fe-red one to La-ila.

"I'll throw**up," La-ila la-ug-hed. "I'm too ex-ci-ted."**

"Metoo."

"Thank**you,** Ma-ri-am."

"For what?"

"For this.**For** co-ming with us," La-ila sa-id. "I don't think I co-uld do this alo-ne."

"You won't ha-ve to."

"We're go-ing to be all right, aren't we, Ma-ri-am, whe-re we're go-ing?"

Ma-ri-am's hand slid ac-ross the bench and clo-sed over hers. "The Ko-ran says Al-lah is the East and the West, the-re-fo-re whe-re-ver you turn the-re is Al-lah's pur-po-se."

*"Bov!"*Azi-za cri-ed, po-in-ting to a bus. "Ma-yam,*bov"*

"I see it, Azi-za jo," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "That's right,*bov.* So-on we're all go-ing to ri-de on a*bov.* Oh, the things you're go-ing to see."

La-ila smi-led. She watc-hed a car-pen-ter in his shop ac-ross the stre-et sa-wing wo-od, sen-ding chips flying. She watc-hed the cars bol-ting past, the-ir win-dows

co-ated with so-ot and gri-me. She watc-hed the bu-ses grow-ling idly at the curb, with pe-acocks, li-ons, ri-sing suns, and glit-tery swords pa-in-ted on the-ir si-des.

In the warmth of the mor-ning sun, La-ila felt giddy and bold. She had anot-her of tho-se lit-tle sparks of eup-ho-ria, and when a stray dog with yel-low eyes lim-ped by, La-ila le-aned for-ward and pet its back.

A few mi-nu-tes be-fo-re ele-ven, a man with a bul-lhorn cal-led for all pas-sen-gers to Pes-ha-war to be-gin bo-ar-ding. The bus do-ors ope-ned with a vi-olent hydra-ulic hiss. A pa-ra-de of tra-ve-lers rus-hed to-ward it, scam-pe-ring past each ot-her to squ-e-eze thro-ugh.

Wa-kil mo-ti-oned to-ward La-ila as he pic-ked up his son.

"We're go-ing," La-ila sa-id.

Wa-kil led the way. As they ap-pro-ac-hed the bus, La-ila saw fa-ces ap-pe-ar in the win-dows, no-ses and palms pres-sed to the glass. All aro-und them, fa-re-wel-ls we-re yel-led.

A yo-ung mi-li-tia sol-di-er was chec-king tic-kets at the bus do-or.

*"Bov!" Azxzz.*cri-ed.

Wa-kil han-ded tic-kets to the sol-di-er, who to-re them in half and han-ded them back. Wa-kil let his wi-fe bo-ard first. La-ila saw a lo-ok pass bet-we-en Wa-kil and the mi-li-ti-aman. Wa-kil, perc-hed on the first step of the bus, le-aned down and sa-id so-met-hing in his ear. The mi-li-ti-aman nod-ded.

La-ila's he-art plum-me-ted.

"You two, with the child, step asi-de," the sol-di-er sa-id.

La-ila pre-ten-ded not to he-ar. She went to climb the steps, but he grab-bed her by the sho-ul-der and ro-ughly pul-led her out of the li-ne. "You too," he cal-led to Ma-ri-am. "Hurry up! You're hol-ding up the li-ne."

"What's the prob-lem, brot-her?" La-ila sa-id thro-ugh numb lips. "We ha-ve tic-kets. Didn't my co-usin hand them to you?"

He ma-de a*Shh* mo-ti-on with his fin-ger and spo-ke in a low vo-ice to anot-her gu-ard. The se-cond gu-ard, a ro-tund fel-low with a scar down his right che-ek, nod-ded.

"Fol-low me," this one sa-id to La-ila.

"We ha-ve to bo-ard this bus," La-ila cri-ed, awa-re that her vo-ice was sha-king. "We ha-ve tic-kets. Why are you do-ing this?"

"You're not go-ing to get on this bus. You might as well ac-cept that. You will fol-low me. Un-less you want yo-ur lit-tle girl to see you drag-ged."

As they we-re led to a truck, La-ila lo-oked over her sho-ul-der and spot-ted Wa-kil's boy at the re-ar of the bus. The boy saw her too and wa-ved hap-pily.

*** * ***

At the po-li-ce sta-ti-on at To-ra-baz Khan In-ter-sec-ti-on, they we-re ma-de to sit apart, on op-po-si-te ends of a long, crow-ded cor-ri-dor, bet-we-en them a desk,

be-hind which a man smo-ked one ci-ga-ret-te af-ter anot-her and clac-ked oc-ca-si-onal-ly on a typew-ri-ter. Three ho-urs pas-sed this way. Azi-za tot-te-red from La-ila to Ma-ri-am, then back. She pla-yed with a pa-per clip that the man at the desk ga-ve her. She fi-nis-hed the crac-kers. Even-tu-al-ly, she fell as-le-ep in Ma-ri-am's lap.

At aro-und three o'clock, La-ila was ta-ken to an in-ter-vi-ew ro-om. Ma-ri-am was ma-de to wa-it with Azi-za in the cor-ri-dor.

The man sit-ting on the ot-her si-de of the desk in the in-ter-vi-ew ro-om was in his thir-ti-es and wo-re ci-vi-li-an clot-hes- black su-it, tie, black lo-afers. He had a ne-atly trim-med be-ard, short ha-ir, and eyeb-rows that met. He sta-red at La-ila, bo-un-cing a pen-cil by the era-ser end on the desk.

"We know," he be-gan, cle-aring his thro-at and po-li-tely co-ve-ring his mo-uth with a fist, "that you ha-ve al-re-ady told one lie to-day,*kam-s-hi-ra* The yo-ung man at the sta-ti-on was not yo-ur co-usin. He told us as much him-self. The qu-es-ti-on is whet-her you will tell mo-re li-es to-day. Per-so-nal-ly, I ad-vi-se you aga-inst it."

"We we-re go-ing to stay with my unc-le," La-ila sa-id "That's the truth."

The po-li-ce-man nod-ded. "The*ham-s-hi-ra* in the cor-ri-dor, she's yo-ur mot-her?"

"Yes."

"She has a He-ra-ti ac-cent. You don't."

"She was ra-ised in He-rat, I was born he-re in Ka-bul."

"Of co-ur-se. And you are wi-do-wed? You sa-id you we-re. My con-do-len-ces. And this unc-le, this*ka-ka*, whe-re do-es he li-ve?"

"In Pes-ha-war."

"Yes, you sa-id that." He lic-ked the po-int of his pen-cil and po-ised it over a blank she-et of pa-per. "But whe-re in Pes-ha-war? Which ne-igh-bor-ho-od, ple-ase? Stre-et na-me, sec-tor num-ber."

La-ila tri-ed to push back the bub-ble of pa-nic that was co-ming up her chest. She ga-ve him the na-me of the only stre-et she knew in Pes-ha-war-she'd he-ard it men-ti-oned on-ce, at the party Mammy had thrown when the Mu-j-ahi-de-en had first co-me to Ka-bul-"Jam-rud Ro-ad."

"Oh, yes. Sa-me stre-et as the Pe-arl Con-ti-nen-tal Ho-tel. He might ha-ve men-ti-oned it."

La-ila se-ized this op-por-tu-nity and sa-id he had. "That very sa-me stre-et, yes."

"Except the ho-tel is on Khyber Ro-ad."

La-ila co-uld he-ar Azi-za crying in the cor-ri-dor. "My da-ugh-ter's frigh-te-ned. May I get her, brot-her?"

"I pre-fer 'Offi-cer.' And you'll be with her shortly. Do you ha-ve a te-lep-ho-ne num-ber for this unc-le?"

"I do. I did. I…" Even with the bur-qa bet-we-en them, La-ila was not buf-fe-red from his pe-net-ra-ting eyes. "I'm so up-set, I se-em to ha-ve for-got-ten it."

He sig-hed thro-ugh his no-se. He as-ked for the unc-le's na-me, his wi-fe's na-me. How many child-ren did he ha-ve? What we-re the-ir na-mes? Whe-re did he work? How old was he? His qu-es-ti-ons left La-ila flus-te-red.

He put down his pen-cil, la-ced his fin-gers to-get-her, and le-aned for-ward the way pa-rents do when they want to con-vey so-met-hing to a tod-dler. "You do re-ali-ze,*ham-s-hi-ra,* that it is a cri-me for a wo-man to run away. We see a lot of it. Wo-men tra-ve-ling alo-ne, cla-iming the-ir hus-bands ha-ve di-ed. So-me-ti-mes they're tel-ling the truth, most ti-mes not. You can be imp-ri-so-ned for run-ning away, I as-su-me you un-ders-tand that,*nay1?"*

"Let us go, Of-fi-cer…" She re-ad the na-me on his la-pel tag. "Offi-cer Rah-man. Ho-nor the me-aning of yo-ur na-me and show com-pas-si-on. What do-es it mat-ter to you to let a me-re two wo-men go? What's the harm in re-le-asing us? We are not cri-mi-nals."

"I can't."

"I beg you, ple-ase."

"It's a mat-ter of*qa-no-on, hams-hi-ra,* a mat-ter of law," Rah-man sa-id, inj-ec-ting his vo-ice with a gra-ve, self-impor-tant to-ne. "It is my res-pon-si-bi-lity, you see, to ma-in-ta-in or-der."

In spi-te of her dist-ra-ught sta-te, La-ila al-most la-ug-hed. She was stun-ned that he'd used that word in the fa-ce of all that the Mu-j-ahi-de-en fac-ti-ons had do-ne-the mur-ders, the lo-otings, the ra-pes, the tor-tu-res, the exe-cu-ti-ons, the bom-bings, the tens of tho-usands of roc-kets they had fi-red at each ot-her, he-ed-less of all the in-no-cent pe-op-le who wo-uld die in the cross fi-re.*Or-der.* But she bit her ton-gue.

"If you send us back," she sa-id ins-te-ad, slowly, "the-re is no sa-ying what he will do to us."

She co-uld see the ef-fort it to-ok him to ke-ep his eyes from shif-ting. "What a man do-es in his ho-me is his bu-si-ness."

"What abo-ut the law,*then,* Of-fi-cer Rah-man?" Te-ars of ra-ge stung her eyes. "Will you be the-re to ma-in-ta-in or-der?"

"As a mat-ter of po-licy, we do not in-ter-fe-re with pri-va-te fa-mily mat-ters,*ham-s-hi-ra"*

"Of co-ur-se you don't. When it be-ne-fits the man. And isn't this a 'pri-va-te fa-mily mat-ter,' as you say? Isn't it?"

He pus-hed back from his desk and sto-od up, stra-igh-te-ned his jac-ket. "I be-li-eve this in-ter-vi-ew is fi-nis-hed. I must say,*ham-s-hi-ra,* that you ha-ve ma-de a very po-or ca-se for yo-ur-self. Very po-or in-de-ed. Now, if you wo-uld wa-it out-si-de I will ha-ve a few words with yo-ur…who-ever she is."

La-ila be-gan to pro-test, then to yell, and he had to sum-mon the help of two mo-re men to ha-ve her drag-ged out of his of-fi-ce.

Ma-ri-am's in-ter-vi-ew las-ted only a few mi-nu-tes. When she ca-me out, she lo-oked sha-ken.

"He as-ked so many qu-es-ti-ons," she sa-id. "I'm sorry, La-ila jo. I am not smart li-ke you. He as-ked so many qu-es-ti-ons, I didn't know the ans-wers. I'm sorry."

"It's not yo-ur fa-ult, Ma-ri-am," La-ila sa-id we-akly. "It's mi-ne. It's all my fa-ult. Everyt-hing is my fa-ult."

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It was past six o'clock when the po-li-ce car pul-led up in front of the ho-use. La-ila and Ma-ri-am we-re ma-de to wa-it in the back-se-at, gu-ar-ded by a Mu-j-ahid sol-di-er in the pas-sen-ger se-at. The dri-ver was the one who got out of the car, who knoc-ked on the do-or, who spo-ke to Ras-he-ed. It was he who mo-ti-oned for them to co-me.

"Wel-co-me ho-me," the man in the front se-at sa-id, ligh-ting a ci-ga-ret-te.

* * *

"You," he sa-id to Ma-ri-am. "You wa-it he-re."

Ma-ri-am qu-i-etly to-ok a se-at on the co-uch.

"You two, ups-ta-irs."

Ras-he-ed grab-bed La-ila by the el-bow and pus-hed her up the steps. He was still we-aring the sho-es he wo-re to work, hadn't yet chan-ged to his flip-flops, ta-ken off his watch, hadn't even shed his co-at yet. La-ila pic-tu-red him as he must ha-ve be-en an ho-ur, or may-be mi-nu-tes, ear-li-er, rus-hing from one ro-om to anot-her, slam-ming do-ors, fu-ri-o-us and inc-re-du-lo-us, cur-sing un-der his bre-ath.

At the top of the sta-irs, La-ila tur-ned to him.

"She didn't want to do it," she sa-id. "I ma-de her do it. She didn't want to go-"

La-ila didn't see the punch co-ming. One mo-ment she was tal-king and the next she was on all fo-urs, wi-de-eyed and red-fa-ced, trying to draw a bre-ath. It was as if a car had hit her at full spe-ed, in the ten-der pla-ce bet-we-en the lo-wer tip of the bre-ast-bo-ne and the belly but-ton. She re-ali-zed she had drop-ped Azi-za, that Azi-za was scre-aming. She tri-ed to bre-at-he aga-in and co-uld only ma-ke a husky, cho-king so-und. Drib-ble hung from her mo-uth.

Then she was be-ing drag-ged by the ha-ir. She saw Azi-za lif-ted, saw her san-dals slip off, her tiny fe-et kic-king. Ha-ir was rip-ped from La-ila's scalp, and her eyes wa-te-red with pa-in. She saw his fo-ot kick open the do-or to Ma-ri-am's ro-om, saw Azi-za flung on-to the bed. He let go of La-ila's ha-ir, and she felt the toe of his shoe con-nect with her left but-tock. She how-led with pa-in as he slam-med the do-or shut. A key rat-tled in the lock.

Azi-za was still scre-aming. La-ila lay cur-led up on the flo-or, gas-ping. She pus-hed her-self up on her hands, craw-led to whe-re Azi-za lay on the bed. She re-ac-hed for her da-ugh-ter.

Downs-ta-irs, the be-ating be-gan. To La-ila, the so-unds she he-ard we-re tho-se of a met-ho-di-cal, fa-mi-li-ar pro-ce-eding. The-re was no cur-sing, no scre-aming, no ple-ading, no surp-ri-sed yelps, only the syste-ma-tic bu-si-ness of be-ating and be-ing be-aten, the*thump, thump* of so-met-hing so-lid re-pe-atedly stri-king flesh, so-met-hing, so-me-one, hit-ting a wall with a thud, cloth rip-ping. Now and then, La-ila he-ard run-ning fo-ots-teps, a word-less cha-se, fur-ni-tu-re tur-ning over, glass shat-te-ring, then the thum-ping on-ce mo-re.

La-ila to-ok Azi-za in her arms. A warmth spre-ad down the front of her dress when Azi-za's blad-der let go.

Downs-ta-irs, the run-ning and cha-sing fi-nal-ly stop-ped. The-re was a so-und now li-ke a wo-oden club re-pe-atedly slap-ping a si-de of be-ef.

La-ila roc-ked Azi-za un-til the so-unds stop-ped, and, when she he-ard the scre-en do-or cre-ak open and slam shut, she lo-we-red Azi-za to the gro-und and pe-eked out the win-dow. She saw Ras-he-ed le-ading Ma-ri-am ac-ross the yard by the na-pe of her neck. Ma-ri-am was ba-re-fo-ot and do-ub-led over. The-re was blo-od on his hands, blo-od on Ma-ri-am's fa-ce, her ha-ir, down her neck and back. Her shirt had be-en rip-ped down the front.

"I'm so sorry, Ma-ri-am," La-ila cri-ed in-to the glass.

She watc-hed him sho-ve Ma-ri-am in-to the to-ols-hed. He went in, ca-me out with a ham-mer and se-ve-ral long planks of wo-od. He shut the do-ub-le do-ors to the shed, to-ok a key from his poc-ket, wor-ked the pad-lock. He tes-ted the do-ors, then went aro-und the back of the shed and fetc-hed a lad-der.

A few mi-nu-tes la-ter, his fa-ce was in La-ila's win-dow, na-ils tuc-ked in the co-mer of his mo-uth. His ha-ir was dis-he-ve-led. The-re was a swath of blo-od on his brow. At the sight of him, Azi-za shri-eked and bu-ri-ed her fa-ce in La-ila's arm-pit.

Ras-he-ed be-gan na-iling bo-ards ac-ross the win-dow.

*** * ***

The dark was to-tal, im-pe-net-rab-le and cons-tant, wit-ho-ut la-yer or tex-tu-re. Ras-he-ed had fil-led the cracks bet-we-en the bo-ards with so-met-hing, put a lar-ge and im-mo-vab-le obj-ect at the fo-ot of the do-or so no light ca-me from un-der it. So-met-hing had be-en stuf-fed in the key-ho-le.

La-ila fo-und it im-pos-sib-le to tell the pas-sa-ge of ti-me with her eyes, so she did it with her go-od ear.*Azan* and cro-wing ro-os-ters sig-na-led mor-ning. The so-unds of pla-tes clan-king in the kitc-hen downs-ta-irs, the ra-dio pla-ying, me-ant eve-ning.

The first day, they gro-ped and fumb-led for each ot-her in the dark. La-ila co-uldn't see Azi-za when she cri-ed, when she went craw-ling.

*"Ais-hee,"*Azi-za mew-led.*"Ais-hee."*

"So-on." La-ila kis-sed her da-ugh-ter, aiming for the fo-re-he-ad, fin-ding the crown of her he-ad ins-te-ad. "We'll ha-ve milk so-on. You just be pa-ti-ent. Be a go-od, pa-ti-ent lit-tle girl for Mammy, and I'll get you so-me*ais-hee.* "

La-ila sang her a few songs.

*Azan*rang out a se-cond ti-me and still Ras-he-ed had not gi-ven them any fo-od, and, wor-se, no wa-ter. That day, a thick, suf-fo-ca-ting he-at fell on them. The ro-om tur-ned in-to a pres-su-re co-oker. La-ila drag-ged a dry ton-gue over her lips, thin-king of the well out-si-de, the wa-ter cold and fresh. Azi-za kept crying, and La-ila no-ti-ced with alarm that when she wi-ped her che-eks her hands ca-me back dry. She strip-ped the clot-hes off Azi-za, tri-ed to find so-met-hing to fan her with,

set-tled for blo-wing on her un-til she be-ca-me light-he-aded. So-on, Azi-za stop-ped craw-ling aro-und. She slip-ped in and out of sle-ep.

Se-ve-ral ti-mes that day, La-ila ban-ged her fists aga-inst the walls, used up her energy scre-aming for help, ho-ping that a ne-igh-bor wo-uld he-ar. But no one ca-me, and her shri-eking only frigh-te-ned Azi-za, who be-gan to cry aga-in, a we-ak, cro-aking so-und. La-ila slid to the gro-und. She tho-ught gu-il-tily of Ma-ri-am, be-aten and blo-odi-ed, loc-ked in this he-at in the to-ols-hed.

La-ila fell as-le-ep at so-me po-int, her body ba-king in the he-at. She had a dre-am that she and Azi-za had run in-to Ta-riq. He was ac-ross a crow-ded stre-et from them, be-ne-ath the aw-ning of a ta-ilor's shop. He was sit-ting on his ha-unc-hes and samp-ling from a cra-te of figs.*That's yo-ur fat-her,* La-ila sa-id.*That man the-re, you see him? He's yo-ur re-al* ba-ba. She cal-led his na-me, but the stre-et no-ise drow-ned her vo-ice, and Ta-riq didn't he-ar.

She wo-ke up to the whist-ling of roc-kets stre-aking over-he-ad. So-mew-he-re, the sky she co-uldn't see erup-ted with blasts and the long, fran-tic ham-me-ring of mac-hi-ne-gun fi-re. La-ila clo-sed her eyes. She wo-ke aga-in to Ras-he-ed's he-avy fo-ots-teps in the hal-lway. She drag-ged her-self to the do-or, slap-ped her palms aga-inst it.

"Just one glass, Ras-he-ed. Not for me. Do it for her. You don't want her blo-od on yo-ur hands." He wal-ked past-She be-gan to ple-ad with him. She beg-ged for for-gi-ve-ness, ma-de pro-mi-ses. She cur-sed him. His do-or clo-sed. The ra-dio ca-me on.

The mu-ez-zin cal-led*azan* a third ti-me. Aga-in the he-at. Azi-za be-ca-me even mo-re list-less. She stop-ped crying, stop-ped mo-ving al-to-get-her.

La-ila put her ear over Azi-za's mo-uth, dre-ading each ti-me that she wo-uld not he-ar the shal-low who-os-hing of bre-ath. Even this simp-le act of lif-ting her-self ma-de her he-ad swim. She fell as-le-ep, had dre-ams she co-uld not re-mem-ber. When she wo-ke up, she chec-ked on Azi-za, felt the parc-hed cracks of her lips, the fa-int pul-se at her neck, lay down aga-in. They wo-uld die he-re, of that La-ila was su-re now, but what she re-al-ly dre-aded was that she wo-uld out-last Azi-za, who was yo-ung and brit-tle. How much mo-re co-uld Azi-za ta-ke? Azi-za wo-uld die in this he-at, and La-ila wo-uld ha-ve to lie be-si-de her stif-fe-ning lit-tle body and wa-it for her own de-ath. Aga-in she fell as-le-ep. Wo-ke up. Fell as-le-ep. The li-ne bet-we-en dre-am and wa-ke-ful-ness blur-red.

It wasn't ro-os-ters or*azan* that wo-ke her up aga-in but the so-und of so-met-hing he-avy be-ing drag-ged. She he-ard a rat-tling- Sud-denly, the ro-om was flo-oded with light. Her eyes scre-amed in pro-test. La-ila ra-ised her he-ad, win-ced, and shi-el-ded her eyes. Thro-ugh the cracks bet-we-en her fin-gers, she saw a big, blurry sil-ho-u-et-te stan-ding in a rec-tang-le of light. The sil-ho-u-et-te mo-ved. Now the-re was a sha-pe cro-uc-hing be-si-de her, lo-oming over her, and a vo-ice by her ear.

"You try this aga-in and I will find you. I swe-ar on the Prop-het's na-me that I will find you. And, when I do, the-re isn't a co-urt in this god-for-sa-ken co-untry that will

hold me ac-co-un-tab-le for what I will do. To Ma-ri-am first, then to her, and you last. I'll ma-ke you watch. You un-ders-tand me?*I'll ma-ke you watch."*

And, with that, he left the ro-om. But not be-fo-re de-li-ve-ring a kick to the flank that wo-uld ha-ve La-ila pis-sing blo-od for days.

37.

Ma-dam SEP-TEM-BER 1996

Iwo and a half ye-ars la-ter, Ma-ri-am awo-ke on the mor-ning of Sep-tem-ber 27 to the so-unds of sho-uting and

whist-ling, fi-rec-rac-kers and mu-sic. She ran to the li-ving ro-om, fo-und La-ila al-re-ady at the win-dow, Azi-za mo-un-ted on her sho-ul-ders. La-ila tur-ned and smi-led.

"The Ta-li-ban are he-re," she sa-id.

*** * ***

Ma-ri-am had first he-ard of the Ta-li-ban two ye-ars be-fo-re, in Oc-to-ber 1994, when Ras-he-ed had bro-ught ho-me news that they had overth-rown the war-lords in Kan-da-har and ta-ken the city. They we-re a gu-er-ril-la for-ce, he sa-id, ma-de up of yo-ung Pash-tun men who-se fa-mi-li-es had fled to Pa-kis-tan du-ring the war aga-inst the So-vi-ets. Most of them had be-en ra-ised-so-me even born-in re-fu-gee camps along the Pa-kis-ta-ni bor-der, and in Pa-kis-ta-ni mad-ra-sas, whe-re they we-re scho-oled in*Sha-ri'a* by mul-lahs. The-ir le-ader was a myste-ri-o-us, il-li-te-ra-te, one-eyed rec-lu-se na-med Mul-lah Omar, who, Ras-he-ed sa-id with so-me amu-se-ment, cal-led him-self*Ame-er-ul-Mu-mi-ne-eny* Le-ader of the Fa-ith-ful.

"It's true that the-se boys ha-ve no*ris-ha*, no ro-ots," Ras-he-ed sa-id, ad-dres-sing ne-it-her Ma-ri-am nor La-ila. Ever sin-ce the fa-iled es-ca-pe, two and a half ye-ars ago, Ma-ri-am knew that she and La-ila had be-co-me one and the sa-me be-ing to him, equ-al-ly wretc-hed, equ-al-ly de-ser-ving of his dist-rust, his dis-da-in and dis-re-gard. When he spo-ke, Ma-ri-am had the sen-se that he was ha-ving a con-ver-sa-ti-on with him-self, or with so-me in-vi-sib-le pre-sen-ce in the ro-om, who, un-li-ke her and La-ila, was worthy of his opi-ni-ons.

"They may ha-ve no past," he sa-id, smo-king and lo-oking up at the ce-iling. "They may know not-hing of the world or this co-untry's his-tory. Yes. And, com-pa-red to them, Ma-ri-am he-re might as well be a uni-ver-sity pro-fes-sor. Ha! All

true. But lo-ok aro-und you. What do you see? Cor-rupt, gre-edy Mu-j-ahi-de-en com-man-ders, ar-med to the te-eth, rich off he-ro-in, dec-la-ring jihad on one anot-her and kil-ling ever-yo-ne in bet-we-en-that's what. At le-ast the Ta-li-ban are pu-re and in-cor-rup-tib-le. At le-ast they're de-cent Mus-lim boys.*Wal-lah*, when they co-me, they will cle-an up this pla-ce. They'll bring pe-ace and or-der. Pe-op-le won't get shot any-mo-re go-ing out for milk. No mo-re roc-kets! Think of it."

For two ye-ars now, the Ta-li-ban had be-en ma-king the-ir way to-ward Ka-bul, ta-king ci-ti-es from the Mu-j-ahi-de-en, en-ding fac-ti-onal war whe-re-ver they'd set-tled. They had cap-tu-red the Ha-za-ra com-man-der Ab-dul Ali Ma-za-ri and exe-cu-ted him. For months, they'd set-tled in the so-ut-hern outs-kirts of Ka-bul, fi-ring on the city, exc-han-ging roc-kets with Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud. Ear-li-er in that Sep-tem-ber of 1996, they had cap-tu-red the ci-ti-es of Jala-la-bad and Sa-ro-bi.

The Ta-li-ban had one thing the Mu-j-ahi-de-en did not, Ras-he-ed sa-id. They we-re uni-ted.

"Let them co-me," he sa-id. "I, for one, will sho-wer them with ro-se pe-tals."

*** * ***

They "went our that day, the fo-ur of them, Ras-he-ed le-ading them from one bus to the next, to gre-et the-ir new world, the-ir new le-aders. In every bat-te-red ne-igh-bor-ho-od, Ma-ri-am fo-und pe-op-le ma-te-ri-ali-zing from the rub-ble and mo-ving in-to the stre-ets. She saw an old wo-man was-ting hand-fuls of ri-ce, tos-sing it at pas-sersby, a dro-oping, to-oth-less smi-le on her fa-ce. Two men we-re hug-ging by the re-ma-ins of a gut-ted bu-il-ding, in the sky abo-ve them the whist-le, hiss, and pop of a few fi-rec-rac-kers set off by boys perc-hed on ro-of-tops. The na-ti-onal ant-hem pla-yed on cas-set-te decks, com-pe-ting with the hon-king of cars.

"Lo-ok, Ma-yam!" Azi-za po-in-ted to a gro-up of boys run-ning down Jadeh May-wand. They we-re po-un-ding the-ir fists in-to the air and drag-ging rusty cans ti-ed to strings. They we-re yel-ling that Mas-so-ud and Rab-ba-ni had withd-rawn from Ka-bul.

Everyw-he-re, the-re we-re sho-uts:*Ailah-u-akbar!*

Ma-ri-am saw a beds-he-et han-ging from a win-dow on Jadeh May-wand. On it, so-me-one had pa-in-ted three words in big, black let-ters: zen-da-ba-ad ta-li-ban! Long li-ve the Ta-li-ban!

As they wal-ked the stre-ets, Ma-ri-am spot-ted mo-re signs-pa-in-ted on win-dows, na-iled to do-ors, bil-lo-wing from car an-ten-nas-that proc-la-imed the sa-me.

*** * ***

Ma-ri-am saw-her first of the Ta-li-ban la-ter that day, at Pash-tu-nis-tan Squ-are, with Ras-he-ed, La-ila, and Azi-za. A me-lee of pe-op-le had gat-he-red the-re. Ma-ri-am saw pe-op-le cra-ning the-ir necks, pe-op-le crow-ded aro-und the blue fo-un-ta-in in the cen-ter of the squ-are, pe-op-le perc-hed on its dry bed. They we-re trying to get a vi-ew of the end of the squ-are, ne-ar the old Khyber Res-ta-urant.

Ras-he-ed used his si-ze to push and sho-ve past the on-lo-okers, and led them to whe-re so-me-one was spe-aking thro-ugh a lo-uds-pe-aker.

When Azi-za saw, she let out a shri-ek and bu-ri-ed her fa-ce in Ma-ri-am's bur-qa.

The lo-uds-pe-aker vo-ice be-lon-ged to a slen-der, be-ar-ded yo-ung man who wo-re a black tur-ban. He was stan-ding on so-me sort of ma-kes-hift scaf-fol-ding. In his free hand, he held a roc-ket la-unc-her. Be-si-de him, two blo-odi-ed men hung from

ro-pes ti-ed to traf-fic-light posts. The-ir clot-hes had be-en shred-ded. The-ir blo-ated fa-ces had tur-ned purp-le-blue.

"I know him," Ma-ri-am sa-id, "the one on the left."

A yo-ung wo-man in front of Ma-ri-am tur-ned aro-und and sa-id it was Na-j-ibul-lah. The ot-her man was his brot-her. Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red Na-j-ibul-lah's plump, mus-tac-hi-o-ed fa-ce, be-aming from bil-lbo-ards and sto-ref-ront win-dows du-ring the So-vi-et ye-ars.

She wo-uld la-ter he-ar that the Ta-li-ban had drag-ged Na-j-ibul-lah from his sanc-tu-ary at the UN he-ad-qu-ar-ters ne-ar Da-ru-la-man Pa-la-ce. That they had tor-tu-red him for ho-urs, then ti-ed his legs to a truck and drag-ged his li-fe-less body thro-ugh the stre-ets.

"He kil-led many, many Mus-lims!" the yo-ung Ta-lib was sho-uting thro-ugh the lo-uds-pe-aker. He spo-ke Far-si with a Pash-to ac-cent, then wo-uld switch to Pash-to. He punc-tu-ated his words by po-in-ting to the corp-ses with his we-apon. "His cri-mes are known to every-body. He was a com-mu-nist and a*kqfir* This is what we do with in-fi-dels who com-mit cri-mes aga-inst Is-lam!"

Ras-he-ed was smir-king.

In Ma-ri-am's arms, Azi-za be-gan to cry.

*** * ***

The fol-lo-wing day, Ka-bul was over-run by trucks. In Kha-ir kha-na, in Shar-e-Nau, in Kar-teh-Par-wan, in Wa-zir Ak-bar Khan and Ta-ima-ni, red To-yo-ta trucks we-aved thro-ugh the stre-ets. Ar-med be-ar-ded men in black tur-bans sat in the-ir beds. From each truck, a lo-uds-pe-aker bla-red an-no-un-ce-ments, first in Far-si, then Pash-to. The sa-me mes-sa-ge pla-yed from lo-uds-pe-akers perc-hed atop mos-qu-es, and on the ra-dio, which was now known as the Vo-ice of*Short* 'a. The mes-sa-ge was al-so writ-ten in flyers, tos-sed in-to the stre-ets. Ma-ri-am fo-und one in the yard.

*Our*wa-tan*is now known as the Is-la-mic Emi-ra-te of Afg-ha-nis-tan. The-se are the laws that we will en-for-ce and you will obey:*

Ail ci-ti-zens must pray fi-ve ti-mes a day. If it is pra-yer ti-me and you are ca-ught do-ing so-met-hing ot-her, you will be be-aten.

Ail men will grow the-ir be-ards. The cor-rect length is at le-ast one clenc-hed fist be-ne-ath the chin. If you do not abi-de by this, you will be be-aten.

Ml boys will we-ar tur-bans. Boys in gra-de one thro-ugh six will we-ar black tur-bans, hig-her gra-des will we-ar whi-te. Ail boys will we-ar Is-la-mic clot-hes. Shirt col-lars will be but-to-ned.

Sin-ging is for-bid-den.

Dan-cing is for-bid-den.

Pla-ying cards, pla-ying chess, gamb-ling, and ki-tefl-ying are for-bid-den.

Wri-ting bo-oks, watc-hing films, and pa-in-ting pic-tu-res are for-bid-den.

If you ke-ep pa-ra-ke-ets, you will be be-aten. Yo-ur birds will be kil-led.

If you ste-al, yo-ur hand will be cut off at the wrist. If you ste-al aga-in, yo-ur fo-ot will be cut off.

If you are not Mus-lim, do not wors-hip whe-re you can be se-en by Mus-lims. If you do, you will be be-aten and imp-ri-so-ned. If you are ca-ught trying to con-vert a Mus-lim to yo-ur fa-ith, you will be exe-cu-ted.

Atten-ti-on wo-men:

*You will stay in-si-de yo-ur ho-mes at all ti-mes. It is not pro-per for wo-men to wan-der aim-les-sly abo-ut the stre-ets. If you go out-si-de, you must be ac-com-pa-ni-ed by a*mah-ram,*a ma-le re-la-ti-ve. If you are ca-ught alo-ne on the stre-et, you will be be-aten and sent ho-me.*

You will not, un-der any cir-cums-tan-ce, show yo-ur fa-ce. You will co-ver with bur-qa when out-si-de. If you do not, you will be se-ve-rely be-aten.

Cos-me-tics are for-bid-den.

Jewelry is for-bid-den.

You will not we-ar char-ming clot-hes.

You will not spe-ak un-less spo-ken to.

You will not ma-ke eye con-tact with men.

You will not la-ugh in pub-lic. If you do, you will be be-aten.

You will not pa-int yo-ur na-ils. If you do, you will lo-se a fin-ger.

Girls are for-bid-den from at-ten-ding scho-ol All scho-ols for girls will be clo-sed im-me-di-ately.

Wo-men are for-bid-den from wor-king.

If you are fo-und gu-ilty of adul-tery, you will be sto-ned to de-ath

*Lis-ten. Lis-ten well. Obey.*Al-lah-u-akbar.

Ras-he-ed tur-ned off the ra-dio. They we-re sit-ting on the li-ving-ro-om flo-or, eating din-ner less than a we-ek af-ter they'd se-en Na-j-ibul-lah's corp-se han-ging by a ro-pe.

"They can't ma-ke half the po-pu-la-ti-on stay ho-me and do not-hing," La-ila sa-id.

"Why not?" Ras-he-ed sa-id. For on-ce, Ma-ri-am ag-re-ed with him. He'd do-ne the sa-me to her and La-ila, in ef-fect, had he not? Su-rely La-ila saw that.

"This isn't so-me vil-la-ge. This is*Ka-bul.* Wo-men he-re used to prac-ti-ce law and me-di-ci-ne; they held of-fi-ce in the

go-vern-ment-"

Ras-he-ed grin-ned. "Spo-ken li-ke the ar-ro-gant da-ugh-ter of a po-etry-re-ading uni-ver-sity man that you are. How ur-ba-ne, how Ta-j-ik, of you. You think this is so-me new, ra-di-cal idea the Ta-li-ban are brin-ging? Ha-ve you ever li-ved out-si-de of yo-ur pre-ci-o-us lit-tle shell in Ka-bul, my*gull* Ever ca-red to vi-sit the*re-al* Af-g-ha-nis-tan, the so-uth, the east, along the tri-bal bor-der with Pa-kis-tan? No? I ha-ve. And I can tell you that the-re are many pla-ces in this co-untry that ha-ve al-ways li-ved this way, or clo-se eno-ugh any-how. Not that you wo-uld know."

"I re-fu-se to be-li-eve it," La-ila sa-id "They're not se-ri-o-us."

"What the Ta-li-ban did to Na-j-ibul-lah lo-oked se-ri-o-us to me," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "Wo-uldn't you ag-ree?"

"He was a com-mu-nist! He was the he-ad of the Sec-ret Po-li-ce."

Ras-he-ed la-ug-hed.

Ma-ri-am he-ard the ans-wer in his la-ugh: that in the eyes of the Ta-li-ban, be-ing a com-mu-nist and the le-ader of the dre-aded KHAD ma-de Na-j-ibul-lah only*slightly* mo-re con-temp-tib-le than a wo-man.

38.

La-ila

JLa-ila was glad, when the Ta-li-ban went to work, that Ba-bi wasn't aro-und to wit-ness it. It wo-uld ha-ve crip-pled him.

Men wi-el-ding pic-ka-xes swar-med the di-la-pi-da-ted Ka-bul Mu-se-um and smas-hed pre-Isla-mic sta-tu-es to rub-ble-that is, tho-se that hadn't al-re-ady be-en lo-oted by the Mu-j-ahi-de-en. The uni-ver-sity was shut down and its stu-dents sent ho-me. Pa-in-tings we-re rip-ped from walls, shred-ded with bla-des. Te-le-vi-si-on scre-ens we-re kic-ked in. Bo-oks, ex-cept the Ko-ran, we-re bur-ned in he-aps, the sto-res that sold them clo-sed down. The po-ems of Kha-li-li, Pa-jwak, An-sa-ri, Ha-ji Deh-qan, Ash-ra-qi, Bey-ta-ab, Ha-fez, Jami, Ni-za-mi, Ru-mi, Khay-yam, Bey-del, and mo-re went up in smo-ke.

La-ila he-ard of men be-ing drag-ged from the stre-ets, ac-cu-sed of skip-ping*na-maz,* and sho-ved in-to mos-qu-es. She le-ar-ned that Mar-co Po-lo Res-ta-urant, ne-ar Chic-ken Stre-et, had be-en tur-ned in-to an in-ter-ro-ga-ti-on cen-ter. So-me-ti-mes scre-aming was he-ard from be-hind its black-pa-in-ted win-dows. Everyw-he-re, the Be-ard Pat-rol ro-amed the stre-ets in To-yo-ta trucks on the lo-oko-ut for cle-an-sha-ven fa-ces to blo-ody.

They shut down the ci-ne-mas too. Ci-ne-ma Park. Ari-ana. Ar-yub. Pro-j-ec-ti-on ro-oms we-re ran-sac-ked and re-els of films set to fi-re. La-ila re-mem-be-red all the ti-mes she and Ta-riq had sat in tho-se the-aters and watc-hed Hin-di films, all tho-se me-lod-ra-ma-tic ta-les of lo-vers se-pa-ra-ted by so-me tra-gic turn of fa-te, one ad-rift in so-me fa-ra-way land, the ot-her for-ced in-to mar-ri-age, the we-eping, the sin-ging in fi-elds of ma-ri-golds, the lon-ging for re-uni-ons. She re-mem-be-red how Ta-riq wo-uld la-ugh at her for crying at tho-se films.

"I won-der what they've do-ne to my fat-her's ci-ne-ma," Ma-ri-am sa-id to her one day. "If it's still the-re, that is. Or if he still owns it."

Kha-ra-bat, Ka-bul's an-ci-ent mu-sic ghet-to, was si-len-ced. Mu-si-ci-ans we-re be-aten and imp-ri-so-ned, the-ir*ru-bab%›iam-bo-ura%›* and har-mo-ni-ums tramp-led upon. The Ta-li-ban went to the gra-ve of Ta-riq's fa-vo-ri-te sin-ger, Ah-mad Za-hir, and fi-red bul-lets in-to it.

"He's be-en de-ad for al-most twenty ye-ars," La-ila sa-id to Ma-ri-am. "Isn't dying on-ce eno-ugh?"

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Ras-he-ed wasnt bot-he-red much by the Ta-li-ban. All he had to do was grow a be-ard, which he did, and vi-sit the mos-que, which he al-so did. Ras-he-ed re-gar-ded the Ta-li-ban with a for-gi-ving, af-fec-ti-ona-te kind of be-mu-se-ment, as one might re-gard an er-ra-tic co-usin pro-ne to unp-re-dic-tab-le acts of hi-la-rity and scan-dal.

Every Wed-nes-day night, Ras-he-ed lis-te-ned to the Vo-ice of*Sha-ri'a* when the Ta-li-ban wo-uld an-no-un-ce the na-mes of tho-se sche-du-led for pu-nish-ment. Then, on Fri-days, he went to Gha-zi Sta-di-um, bo-ught a Pep-si, and watc-hed the spec-tac-le. In bed, he ma-de La-ila lis-ten as he desc-ri-bed with a qu-e-er sort of ex-hi-la-ra-ti-on the hands he'd se-en se-ve-red, the las-hings, the han-gings, the be-he-adings.

"I saw a man to-day slit the thro-at of his brot-her's mur-de-rer," he sa-id one night, blo-wing ha-los of smo-ke.

"They're sa-va-ges," La-ila sa-id.

"You think?" he sa-id "Com-pa-red to what? The So-vi-ets kil-led a mil-li-on pe-op-le. Do you know how many pe-op-le the Mu-j-ahi-de-en kil-led in Ka-bul alo-ne the-se last fo-ur ye-ars? Fifty tho-usand*Fifty tho-usand!* Is it so in-sen-sib-le, by com-pa-ri-son, to chop the hands off a few thi-eves? Eye for an eye, to-oth for a to-oth. It's in the Ko-ran. Be-si-des, tell me this: If so-me-one kil-led Azi-za, wo-uldn't you want the chan-ce to aven-ge her?"

La-ila shot him a dis-gus-ted lo-ok.

"I'm ma-king a po-int," he sa-id.

"You're just li-ke them."

"It's an in-te-res-ting eye co-lor she has, Azi-za. Don't you think? It's ne-it-her yo-urs nor mi-ne."

Ras-he-ed rol-led over to fa-ce her, gently scratc-hed her thigh with the cro-oked na-il of his in-dex fin-ger.

"Let me exp-la-in," he sa-id. "If the fancy sho-uld stri-ke me-and I'm not sa-ying it will, but it co-uld, it co-uld-I wo-uld be wit-hin my rights to gi-ve Azi-za away. How wo-uld you li-ke that? Or I co-uld go to the Ta-li-ban one day, just walk in and say that I ha-ve my sus-pi-ci-ons abo-ut you. That's all it wo-uld ta-ke. Who-se word do you think they wo-uld be-li-eve? What do you think they'd do to you?"

La-ila pul-led her thigh from him.

"Not that I wo-uld," he sa-id. "I wo-uldn't.*Nay.* Pro-bably not. You know me."

"You're des-pi-cab-le," La-ila sa-id.

"That's a big word," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "I've al-ways dis-li-ked that abo-ut you. Even when you we-re lit-tle, when you we-re run-ning aro-und with that crip-ple, you tho-ught you we-re so cle-ver, with yo-ur bo-oks and po-ems. What go-od are all yo-ur smarts to you now? What's ke-eping you off the stre-ets, yo-ur smarts or me? I'm des-pi-cab-le? Half the wo-men in this city wo-uld kill to ha-ve a hus-band li-ke me. They wo-uld*kill* for it."

He rol-led back and blew smo-ke to-ward the ce-iling.

"You li-ke big words? I'll gi-ve you one: pers-pec-ti-ve. That's what I'm do-ing he-re, La-ila. Ma-king su-re you don't lo-se pers-pec-ti-ve."

What tur-ned La-ila's sto-mach the rest of the night was that every word Ras-he-ed had ut-te-red, every last one, was true.

But, in the mor-ning, and for se-ve-ral mor-nings af-ter that, the qu-e-asi-ness in her gut per-sis-ted, then wor-se-ned, be-ca-me so-met-hing dis-ma-yingly fa-mi-li-ar.

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One cold, over-cast af-ter-no-on so-on af-ter, La-ila lay on her back on the bed-ro-om flo-or. Ma-ri-am was nap-ping with Azi-za in her ro-om.

In La-ila's hands was a me-tal spo-ke she had snap-ped with a pa-ir of pli-ers from an aban-do-ned bicyc-le whe-el She'd fo-und it in the sa-me al-ley whe-re she had kis-sed Ta-riq ye-ars back. For a long ti-me, La-ila lay on the flo-or, suc-king air thro-ugh her te-eth, legs par-ted

She'd ado-red Azi-za from the mo-ment when she'd first sus-pec-ted her exis-ten-ce. The-re had be-en no-ne of this self-do-ubt, this un-cer-ta-inty. What a ter-rib-le thing it was, La-ila tho-ught now, for a mot-her to fe-ar that she co-uld not sum-mon lo-ve for her own child. What an un-na-tu-ral thing. And yet she had to won-der, as she lay on the flo-or, her swe-aty hands po-ised to gu-ide the spo-ke, if in-de-ed she co-uld ever lo-ve Ras-he-ed's child as she had Ta-riq's.

In the end, La-ila co-uldn't do it.

It wasn't the fe-ar of ble-eding to de-ath that ma-de her drop the spo-ke, or even the idea that the act was dam-nab-le- which she sus-pec-ted it was. La-ila drop-ped the spo-ke be-ca-use she co-uld not ac-cept what the Mu-j-ahi-de-en re-adily had: that so-me-ti-mes in war in-no-cent li-fe had to be ta-ken. Her war was aga-inst Ras-he-ed. The baby was bla-me-less. And the-re had be-en eno-ugh kil-ling al-re-ady. La-ila had se-en eno-ugh kil-ling of in-no-cents ca-ught in the cross fi-re of ene-mi-es.

39.

Ma-dam Sep-tem-ber 1997

Ihis hos-pi-tal no lon-ger tre-ats wo-men," the gu-ard bar-ked. He was stan-ding at the top of the sta-irs, lo-oking down icily on the crowd gat-he-red in front of Ma-la-lai Hos-pi-tal.

A lo-ud gro-an ro-se from the crowd.

"But this is a wo-men's hos-pi-tal!" a wo-man sho-uted be-hind Ma-ri-am. Cri-es of ap-pro-val fol-lo-wed this.

Ma-ri-am shif-ted Azi-za from one arm to the ot-her. With her free arm, she sup-por-ted La-ila, who was mo-aning, and had her own arm flung aro-und Ras-he-ed's neck.

"Not any-mo-re," the Ta-lib sa-id.

"My wi-fe is ha-ving a baby!" a he-avy-set man yel-led. "Wo-uld you ha-ve her gi-ve birth he-re on the stre-et, brot-her?"

Ma-ri-am had he-ard the an-no-un-ce-ment, in Janu-ary of that ye-ar, that men and wo-men wo-uld be se-en in dif-fe-rent hos-pi-tals, that all fe-ma-le staff wo-uld be disc-har-ged from Ka-bul's hos-pi-tals and sent to work in one cent-ral fa-ci-lity. No one had be-li-eved it, and the Ta-li-ban hadn't en-for-ced the po-licy. Un-til now.

"What abo-ut Ali Aba-ci Hos-pi-tal?" anot-her man cri-ed.

The gu-ard sho-ok his he-ad.

"Wa-zi-rAk-barK-han?"

"Men only," he sa-id.

"What are we sup-po-sed to do?"

"Go to Ra-bia Balk-hi," the gu-ard sa-id.

A yo-ung wo-man pus-hed for-ward, sa-id she had al-re-ady be-en the-re. They had no cle-an wa-ter, she sa-id, no oxy-gen, no me-di-ca-ti-ons, no elect-ri-city. "The-re is not-hing the-re."

"That's whe-re you go," the gu-ard sa-id.

The-re we-re mo-re gro-ans and cri-es, an in-sult or two. So-me-one threw a rock.

The Ta-lib lif-ted his Ka-lash-ni-kov and fi-red ro-unds in-to the air. Anot-her Ta-lib be-hind him bran-dis-hed a whip.

The crowd dis-per-sed qu-ickly.

*** * ***

The wa-iting ro-om at Ra-bia Balk-hi was te-eming with wo-men in bur-qas and the-ir child-ren. The air stank of swe-at and un-was-hed bo-di-es, of fe-et, uri-ne, ci-ga-ret-te smo-ke, and an-ti-sep-tic. Be-ne-ath the id-le ce-iling fan, child-ren cha-sed each ot-her, hop-ping over the stretc-hed-out legs of do-zing fat-hers.

Ma-ri-am hel-ped La-ila sit aga-inst a wall from which patc-hes of plas-ter sha-ped li-ke fo-re-ign co-unt-ri-es had slid off La-ila roc-ked back and forth, hands pres-sing aga-inst her belly.

"I'll get you se-en, La-ila jo. I pro-mi-se."

"Be qu-ick," sa-id Ras-he-ed.

Be-fo-re the re-gist-ra-ti-on win-dow was a hor-de of wo-men, sho-ving and pus-hing aga-inst each ot-her. So-me we-re still hol-ding the-ir ba-bi-es. So-me bro-ke from the mass and char-ged the do-ub-le do-ors that led to the tre-at-ment ro-oms. An ar-med Ta-lib gu-ard bloc-ked the-ir way, sent them back.

Ma-ri-am wa-ded in. She dug in her he-els and bur-ro-wed aga-inst the el-bows, hips, and sho-ul-der bla-des of stran-gers. So-me-one el-bo-wed her in the ribs, and she el-bo-wed back. A hand ma-de a des-pe-ra-te grab at her fa-ce. She swat-ted it away. To pro-pel her-self for-ward, Ma-ri-am cla-wed at necks, at arms and el-bows, at ha-ir, and, when a wo-man ne-arby his-sed, Ma-ri-am his-sed back.

Ma-ri-am saw now the sac-ri-fi-ces a mot-her ma-de. De-cency was but one. She tho-ught ru-eful-ly of Na-na, of the sac-ri-fi-ces that she too had ma-de. Na-na, who co-uld ha-ve gi-ven her away, or tos-sed her in a ditch so-mew-he-re and run. But she hadn't. Ins-te-ad, Na-na had en-du-red the sha-me of be-aring a*ha-ra-mi,* had sha-ped her li-fe aro-und the thank-less task of ra-ising Ma-ri-am and, in her own way, of lo-ving her. And, in the end, Ma-ri-am had cho-sen Jalil over her. As she fo-ught her way with im-pu-dent re-sol-ve to the front of the me-lee, Ma-ri-am wis-hed she had be-en a bet-ter da-ugh-ter to Na-na. She wis-hed she'd un-ders-to-od then what she un-ders-to-od now abo-ut mot-her-ho-od-She fo-und her-self fa-ce-to-fa-ce with a nur-se, who was co-ve-red he-ad to toe in a dirty gray bur-qa. The nur-se was tal-king to a yo-ung wo-man, who-se bur-qa he-ad-pi-ece had so-aked thro-ugh with a patch of mat-ted blo-od

"My da-ugh-ter's wa-ter bro-ke and the baby won't co-me," Ma-ri-am cal-led.

*"I'm*tal-king to her!" the blo-odi-ed yo-ung wo-man cri-ed "Wa-it yo-ur turn!"

The who-le mass of them swa-yed si-de to si-de, li-ke the tall grass aro-und the*kol-ba* when the bre-eze swept ac-ross the cle-aring. A wo-man be-hind Ma-ri-am was yel-ling that her girl had bro-ken her el-bow fal-ling from a tree. Anot-her wo-man cri-ed that she was pas-sing blo-ody sto-ols.

"Do-es she ha-ve a fe-ver?" the nur-se as-ked. It to-ok Ma-ri-am a mo-ment to re-ali-ze she was be-ing spo-ken to.

"No," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

Ble-eding?

"No."

"Whe-reis she?"

Over the co-ve-red he-ads, Ma-ri-am po-in-ted to whe-re La-ila was sit-ting with Ras-he-ed.

"We'll get to her," the nur-se sa-id

"How long?" Ma-ri-am cri-ed So-me-one had grab-bed her by the sho-ul-ders and was pul-ling her back.

"I don't know,"**the nur-se** sa-id. She sa-id they had only two doc-tors**and** both we-re ope-ra-ting at the mo-ment.

"She's in pa-in," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"Me too!" the wo-man with the blo-odi-ed scalp cri-ed. "Wa-it yo-ur turn!"

Ma-ri-am was be-ing drag-ged back. Her vi-ew of the nur-se was bloc-ked now by sho-ul-ders and the backs of he-ads. She smel-led a baby's milky burp.

"Ta-ke her for awalk," the nur-se yel-led. "And wa-it."

*** * ***

It was dark out-si-de when a nur-se fi-nal-ly cal-led them in. The de-li-very ro-om had eight beds, on which wo-men mo-aned and twis-ted ten-ded to by fully co-ve-red nur-ses. Two of the wo-men we-re in the act of de-li-ve-ring. The-re we-re no cur-ta-ins bet-we-en the beds. La-ila was gi-ven a bed at the far end, be-ne-ath a

win-dow that so-me-one had pa-in-ted black. The-re was a sink ne-arby, crac-ked and dry, and a string over the sink from which hung sta-ined sur-gi-cal glo-ves. In the mid-dle of the ro-om Ma-ri-am saw an alu-mi-num tab-le. The top shelf had a so-ot-co-lo-red blan-ket on it; the bot-tom shelf was empty.

One of the wo-men saw Ma-ri-am lo-oking.

"They put the li-ve ones on the top," she sa-id ti-redly.

The doc-tor, in a dark blue bur-qa, was a small, har-ri-ed wo-man with bird-li-ke mo-ve-ments. Everyt-hing she sa-id ca-me out so-un-ding im-pa-ti-ent, ur-gent.

"First baby." She sa-id it li-ke that, not as a qu-es-ti-on but as a sta-te-ment.

"Se-cond," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

La-ila let out a cry and rol-led on her si-de. Her fin-gers clo-sed aga-inst Ma-ri-am's.

"Any prob-lems with the first de-li-very?"

'No.

"You're the mot-her?"

"Yes," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

The doc-tor lif-ted the lo-wer half of her bur-qa and pro-du-ced a me-tal-lic, co-ne-sha-ped inst-ru-ment- She ra-ised La-ila's bur-qa and pla-ced the wi-de end of the inst-ru-ment on her belly, the nar-row end to her own ear. She lis-te-ned for

almost a mi-nu-te, switc-hed spots, lis-te-ned aga-in, switc-hed spots aga-in.

"I ha-ve to fe-el the baby now,*ham-s-hi-ra* "

She put on one of the glo-ves hung by a clot-hes-pin over the sink. She pus-hed on La-ila's belly with one hand and slid the ot-her in-si-de. La-ila whim-pe-red. When the doc-tor was do-ne, she ga-ve the glo-ve to a nur-se, who rin-sed it and

pin-ned it back on the string.

"Yo-ur da-ugh-ter ne-eds a ca-esa-ri-an. Do you know what that is? We ha-ve to open her womb and ta-ke the baby out, be-ca-use it is in the bre-ech po-si-ti-on."

"I don't un-ders-tand," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

The doc-tor sa-id the baby was po-si-ti-oned so it wo-uldn't co-me out on its own. "And too much ti-me has pas-sed as is. We ne-ed to go to the ope-ra-ting ro-om now."

La-ila ga-ve a gri-ma-cing nod, and her he-ad dro-oped to one si-de.

"The-re*is* so-met-hing I ha-ve to tell you," the doc-tor sa-id. She mo-ved clo-ser to Ma-ri-am, le-aned in, and spo-ke in a lo-wer, mo-re con-fi-den-ti-al to-ne. The-re was a hint of em-bar-ras-sment in her vo-ice now.

"What is she sa-ying?" La-ila gro-aned. "Is so-met-hing wrong with the baby?"

"But how will she stand it?" Ma-ri-am sa-id.

The doc-tor must ha-ve he-ard ac-cu-sa-ti-on in this qu-es-ti-on, jud-ging by the de-fen-si-ve shift in her to-ne.

"You think I want it this way?" she sa-id. "What do you want me to do? They won't gi-ve me what I ne-ed. I ha-ve no X-ray eit-her, no suc-ti-on, no oxy-gen, not even simp-le an-ti-bi-otics. When NGOs of-fer mo-ney, the Ta-li-ban turn them away. Or they fun-nel the mo-ney to the pla-ces that ca-ter to men."

"But, Doc-tor sa-hib, isn't the-re so-met-hing you can gi-ve her?" Ma-ri-am as-ked.

"What's go-ing on?" La-ila mo-aned.

"You can buy the me-di-ci-ne yo-ur-self, but-"

"Wri-te the na-me," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "You wri-te it down and I'll get it."

Be-ne-ath the bur-qa, the doc-tor sho-ok her he-ad curtly. "The-re is no ti-me," she sa-id. "For one thing, no-ne of the ne-arby phar-ma-ci-es ha-ve it. So you'd ha-ve to fight thro-ugh traf-fic from one pla-ce to the next, may-be all the way ac-ross town, with lit-tle li-ke-li-ho-od that you'd ever find it. It's al-most eight-thirty now, so you'll pro-bably get ar-res-ted for bre-aking cur-few. Even if you find the me-di-ci-ne, chan-ces are you can't af-ford it. Or you'll find yo-ur-self in a bid-ding war with so-me-one just as des-pe-ra-te. The-re is no ti-me. This baby ne-eds to co-me out now."

"Tell me what's go-ing on!" La-ila sa-id She had prop-ped her-self up on her el-bows.

The doc-tor to-ok a bre-ath, then told La-ila that the hos-pi-tal had no anest-he-tic.

"But if we de-lay, you will lo-se yo-ur baby."

"Then cut me open," La-ila sa-id. She drop-ped back on the bed and drew up her kne-es. "Cut me open and gi-ve me my baby."

*** * ***

Insi-de the old, dingy ope-ra-ting ro-om, La-ila lay on a gur-ney bed as the doc-tor scrub-bed her hands in a ba-sin. La-ila was shi-ve-ring. She drew in air thro-ugh her te-eth every ti-me the nur-se wi-ped her belly with a cloth so-aked in a yel-low-brown li-qu-id. Anot-her nur-se sto-od at the do-or. She kept crac-king it open to ta-ke a pe-ek out-si-de.

The doc-tor was out of her bur-qa now, and Ma-ri-am saw that she had a crest of sil-very ha-ir, he-avy-lid-ded eyes, and lit-tle po-uc-hes of fa-ti-gue at the cor-ners of her mo-uth.

"They want us to ope-ra-te in bur-qa," the doc-tor exp-la-ined, mo-ti-oning with her he-ad to the nur-se at the do-or. "She ke-eps watch. She se-es them co-ming; I co-ver."

She sa-id this in a prag-ma-tic, al-most in-dif-fe-rent, to-ne, and Ma-ri-am un-ders-to-od that this was a wo-man far past out-ra-ge. He-re was a wo-man, she tho-ught, who had un-ders-to-od that she was lucky to even be wor-king, that the-re was al-ways so-met-hing, so-met-hing el-se, that they co-uld ta-ke away.

The-re we-re two ver-ti-cal, me-tal-lic rods on eit-her si-de of La-ila's sho-ul-ders. With clot-hes-pins, the nur-se who'd cle-an-sed La-ila's belly pin-ned a she-et to them. It for-med a cur-ta-in bet-we-en La-ila and the doc-tor.

Ma-ri-am po-si-ti-oned her-self be-hind the crown of La-ila's he-ad and lo-we-red her fa-ce so the-ir che-eks to-uc-hed. She co-uld fe-el La-ila's te-eth rat-tling. The-ir hands loc-ked to-get-her.

Thro-ugh the cur-ta-in, Ma-ri-am saw the doc-tor's sha-dow mo-ve to La-ila's left, the nur-se to the right. La-ila's lips had stretc-hed all the way back. Spit bub-bles

for-med and pop-ped on the sur-fa-ce of her clenc-hed te-eth. She ma-de qu-ick, lit-tle his-sing so-unds.

The doc-tor sa-id, "Ta-ke he-art, lit-tle sis-ter."

She bent over La-ila.

La-ila's eyes snap-ped open. Then her mo-uth ope-ned. She held li-ke this, held, held, shi-ve-ring, the cords in her neck stretc-hed, swe-at drip-ping from her fa-ce, her fin-gers crus-hing Ma-ri-am's.

Ma-ri-am wo-uld al-ways ad-mi-re La-ila for how much ti-me pas-sed be-fo-re she scre-amed.

40.

La-ila Fall 1999

It was Ma-ri-am's idea to dig the ho-le. One mor-ning, she po-in-ted to a patch of so-il be-hind the to-ols-hed. "We can do it he-re," she sa-id. "This is a go-od spot"

They to-ok turns stri-king the gro-und with a spa-de, then sho-ve-ling the lo-ose dirt asi-de. They hadn't plan-ned on a big ho-le, or a de-ep one, so the work of dig-ging sho-uldn't ha-ve be-en as de-man-ding as it tur-ned out. It was the dro-ught, star-ted in 1998, in its se-cond ye-ar now, that was wre-aking ha-voc everyw-he-re. It had hardly sno-wed that past win-ter and didn't ra-in at all that spring. All over the co-untry, far-mers we-re le-aving be-hind the-ir parc-hed lands, sel-ling off the-ir go-ods, ro-aming from vil-la-ge to vil-la-ge lo-oking for wa-ter. They mo-ved to Pa-kis-tan or Iran. They set-tled in Ka-bul. But wa-ter tab-les we-re low in the city too, and the shal-low wells had dri-ed up. The li-nes at the de-ep wells we-re so long, La-ila and Ma-ri-am wo-uld spend ho-urs wa-iting the-ir turn. The Ka-bul Ri-ver, wit-ho-ut its ye-arly spring flo-ods, had tur-ned bo-ne-dry. It was a pub-lic to-ilet now, not-hing in it but hu-man was-te and rub-ble.

So they kept swin-ging the spa-de and stri-king, but the sun-blis-te-red gro-und had har-de-ned li-ke a rock, the dirt un-yi-el-ding, comp-res-sed, al-most pet-ri-fi-ed.

Ma-ri-am was forty now. Her ha-ir, rol-led up abo-ve her fa-ce, had a few stri-pes of gray in it. Po-uc-hes sag-ged be-ne-ath her eyes, brown and cres-cent-sha-ped. She'd lost two front te-eth. One fell out, the ot-her Ras-he-ed knoc-ked out when she'd ac-ci-den-tal-ly drop-ped Zal-mai. Her skin had co-ar-se-ned, tan-ned from all the ti-me they we-re spen-ding in the yard**sit-ting** be-ne-ath the bra-zen sun. They wo-uld sit and watch Zal-mai cha-se Azi-za.

When it was do-ne, when the ho-le was dug, they sto-od over it and lo-oked down.

"It sho-uld do," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

*** * ***

Zal-mai was two**now.** He was a plump lit-tle boy with curly ha-ir. He had small brow-nish*eyes,* and a rosy tint to**his** che-eks, li-ke Ras-he-ed, no mat-ter the we-at-her. He had**his** fat-her's**ha-ir-li-ne** too, thick and half-mo-on-sha-ped,**set** low on his brow.

When La-ila was alo-ne with him, Zal-mai was swe-et, go-od-hu-mo-red, and play-ful. He li-ked to climb La-ila's**sho-ul-ders, play** hi-de-and-se-ek in the yard with her and Azi-za. So-me-ti-mes, in**his** cal-mer mo-ments, he li-ked to**sit on** La-ila's lap and ha-ve her sing to**him. His fa-vo-ri-te song** was "Mul-lah Mo-ham-mad Jan." He swung his me-aty lit-tle fe-et as she sang in-to his curly ha-ir and jo-ined in when she got to the cho-rus, sin-ging what words he co-uld ma-ke with his raspy vo-ice:

Co-me and lei's go to Ma-zar, Mul-lah Mo-ham-ma-dj-an, To see the fi-elds of tu-lips, o be-lo-ved com-pa-ni-on.

La-ila lo-ved the mo-ist kis-ses Zal-mai plan-ted on her che-eks, lo-ved his dimp-led el-bows and sto-ut lit-tle to-es. She lo-ved tick-ling him, bu-il-ding tun-nels with cus-hi-ons and pil-lows for him to crawl thro-ugh, watc-hing him fall as-le-ep in her arms with one of his hands al-ways clutc-hing her ear. Her sto-mach tur-ned when she tho-ught of that af-ter-no-on, lying on the flo-or with the spo-ke of a bicyc-le whe-el bet-we-en her legs. How clo-se she'd co-me. It was unt-hin-kab-le to her now that she co-uld ha-ve even en-ter-ta-ined the idea. Her son was a bles-sing, and La-ila was re-li-eved to dis-co-ver that her fe-ars had pro-ved ba-se-less, that she lo-ved Zal-mai with the mar-row of her bo-nes, just as she did Azi-za.

But Zal-mai wors-hip-ped his fat-her, and, be-ca-use he did, he was trans-for-med when his fat-her was aro-und to do-te on him. Zal-mai was qu-ick then with a de-fi-ant cack-le or an im-pu-dent grin. In his fat-her's pre-sen-ce, he was easily of-fen-ded. He held grud-ges. He per-sis-ted in misc-hi-ef in spi-te of La-ila's scol-ding, which he ne-ver did when Ras-he-ed was away.

Ras-he-ed ap-pro-ved of all of it. "A sign of in-tel-li-gen-ce," he sa-id. He sa-id the sa-me of Zal-mai's reck-les-sness-when he swal-lo-wed, then po-oped, marb-les; when he lit matc-hes; when he che-wed on Ras-he-ed's ci-ga-ret-tes.

When Zal-mai was born, Ras-he-ed had mo-ved him in-to the bed he sha-red with La-ila. He had bo-ught him a new crib and had li-ons and cro-uc-hing le-opards pa-in-ted on the si-de pa-nels. He'd pa-id for new clot-hes, new rat-tles, new bot-tles, new di-apers, even tho-ugh they co-uld not af-ford them and Azi-za's old ones we-re still ser-vi-ce-ab-le. One day, he ca-me ho-me with a bat-tery-run mo-bi-le, which he hung over Zal-mai's crib. Lit-tle yel-low-and-black bumb-le-be-es dang-led from a sunf-lo-wer, and they crink-led and squ-e-aked when squ-e-ezed. A tu-ne pla-yed when it was tur-ned on.

"I tho-ught you sa-id bu-si-ness was slow," La-ila sa-id.

"I ha-ve fri-ends I can bor-row**from," he** sa-id**dis-mis-si-vely.**

"How**will** you pay them back?"

"Things**will turn** aro-und. They al-ways do. Lo-ok,**he li-kes it. See?"**

Mostdays, La-ila was dep-ri-ved of**her son. Ras-he-ed** to-ok him to the shop, let him crawl aro-und un-der his crow-ded work-bench, play with old rub-ber so-les and

spa-re scraps of le-at-her. Ras-he-ed dro-ve in his iron na-ils and tur-ned the sand-pa-per whe-el, and kept a watch-ful eye on him. If Zal-mai top-pled a rack of sho-es, Ras-he-ed scol-ded him gently, in a calm, half-smi-ling way. If he did it aga-in, Ras-he-ed put down**his** ham-mer, sat him up on his desk, and tal-ked to him softly.

Hispa-ti-en-ce with Zal-mai**was a** well that ran de-ep and ne-ver dri-ed.

They ca-me ho-me to-get-her in the eve-ning, Zal-mai's he-ad bo-un-cing on Ras-he-ed's sho-ul-der, both of them smel-ling of glue and le-at-her. They grin-ned the way pe-op-le who sha-re a sec-ret do,**slyly, li-ke they'd** sat**in** that**dim shoe shop** all day not ma-king sho-es at all but**de-vi-sing** sec-ret plots. Zal-mai li-ked to sit be-si-de**his fat-her at din-ner,** whe-re they pla-yed pri-va-te ga-mes, as Ma-ri-am, La-ila, and Azi-za**set pla-tes on***the-so-jrah.* They to-ok turns po-king each ot-her**on** the chest, gig-gling, pel-ting each ot-her with bre-ad crumbs, whis-pe-ring things the ot-hers co-uldn't he-ar. If La-ila spo-ke to**them,** Ras-he-ed lo-oked up with disp-le-asu-re at the un-wel-co-me int-ru-si-on. If she as-ked to hold Zal-mai-**or, wor-se,**if Zal-mai re-ac-hed for her-Ras-he-ed glo-we-red at her.

La-ila wal-ked away fe-eling stung.

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Then one night, a few we-eks af-ter Zal-mai tur-ned two, Ras-he-ed ca-me ho-me with a te-le-vi-si-on and a VCR. The day had be-en warm, al-most balmy, but the eve-ning was co-oler and al-re-ady thic-ke-ning in-to a star-less, chilly night-He set it down on the li-ving-ro-om tab-le. He sa-id he'd bo-ught it on the black mar-ket. "Anot-her lo-an?" La-ila as-ked. "It'sa-Mag-na-vox."

Azi-za ca-me in-to the ro-om. When she saw the TV, she ran to it. "Ca-re-ful, Azi-za jo," sa-id-Ma-ri-am. "Don't to-uch."

Azi-za's ha-ir had be-co-me as light as La-ila's. La-ila co-uld see her own dimp-les on her che-eks. Azi-za had tur-ned in-to a calm, pen-si-ve lit-tle girl, with a de-me-anor that to La-ila se-emed be-yond her six ye-ars. La-ila mar-ve-led at her da-ugh-ter's man-ner of spe-ech, her ca-den-ce and rhythm, her tho-ught-ful pa-uses and in-to-na-ti-ons, so adult, so at odds with the im-ma-tu-re body that ho-used the vo-ice. It was Azi-za who with light-he-aded aut-ho-rity had ta-ken it upon her-self to wa-ke Zal-mai every day, to dress him, fe-ed him his bre-ak-fast, comb his ha-ir. She was the one who put him down to nap, who pla-yed even-tem-pe-red pe-ace-ma-ker to her vo-la-ti-le sib-ling. Aro-und him, Azi-za had ta-ken to gi-ving an exas-pe-ra-ted, qu-e-erly adult he-ads-ha-ke.

Azi-za pus-hed the TV's po-wer but-ton. Ras-he-ed scow-led, snatc-hed her wrist and set it on the tab-le, not gently at all.

"This is Zal-mai's TV," he sa-id.

Azi-za went over to Ma-ri-am and clim-bed in her lap. The two of them we-re in-se-pa-rab-le now. Of la-te, with La-ila's bles-sing, Ma-ri-am had star-ted te-ac-hing Azi-za ver-ses from the Ko-ran. Azi-za co-uld al-re-ady re-ci-te by he-art the su-rah

of*ik-h-las,* the su-rah of*'fa-ti-ha,*and al-re-ady knew how to per-form the fo-ur*ru-qats* of mor-ning pra-yer.

*It's oil I ha-ve to gi-ve her,*Ma-ri-am had sa-id to La-ila,*this know-led-ge, the-se pra-yers. They're the only true pos-ses-si-on I've ever had.*

Zal-mai ca-me in-to the ro-om now. As Ras-he-ed watc-hed with an-ti-ci-pa-ti-on, the way pe-op-le wa-it the simp-le tricks of stre-et ma-gi-ci-ans, Zal-mai pul-led on the TV's wi-re, pus-hed the but-tons, pres-sed his palms to the blank scre-en. When he lif-ted them, the con-den-sed lit-tle palms fa-ded from the glass. Ras-he-ed smi-led with pri-de, watc-hed as Zal-mai kept pres-sing his palms and lif-ting them, over and over.

The Ta-li-ban had ban-ned te-le-vi-si-on. Vi-de-ota-pes had be-en go-uged pub-licly, the ta-pes rip-ped out and strung on fen-ce posts. Sa-tel-li-te dis-hes had be-en hung from lamp-posts. But Ras-he-ed sa-id just be-ca-use things we-re ban-ned didn't me-an you co-uldn't find them.

"I'll start lo-oking for so-me car-to-on vi-de-os to-mor-row," he sa-id. "It won't be hard. You can buy anyt-hing in un-derg-ro-und ba-za-ars."

"Then may-be you'll buy us a new well," La-ila sa-id, and this won her a scorn-ful ga-ze from him.

It was la-ter, af-ter anot-her din-ner of pla-in whi-te ri-ce had be-en con-su-med and tea for-go-ne aga-in on ac-co-unt of the dro-ught, af-ter Ras-he-ed had smo-ked a ci-ga-ret-te, that he told La-ila abo-ut his de-ci-si-on.

"No," La-ila sa-id.

He sa-id he wasn't as-king.

"I don't ca-re if you are or not."

"You wo-uld if you knew the full story."

He sa-id he had bor-ro-wed from mo-re fri-ends than he let on, that the mo-ney from the shop alo-ne was no lon-ger eno-ugh to sus-ta-in the fi-ve of them. "I didn't tell you ear-li-er to spa-re you the wor-rying."

"Be-si-des," he sa-id, "you'd be surp-ri-sed how much they can bring in."

La-ila sa-id no aga-in. They we-re in the li-ving ro-om. Ma-ri-am and the child-ren we-re in the kitc-hen. La-ila co-uld he-ar the clat-ter of dis-hes, Zal-mai's high-pitc-hed la-ugh, Azi-za sa-ying so-met-hing to Ma-ri-am in her ste-ady, re-aso-nab-le vo-ice.

"The-re will be ot-hers li-ke her, yo-un-ger even," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "Ever-yo-ne in Ka-bul is do-ing the sa-me."

La-ila told him she didn't ca-re what ot-her pe-op-le did with the-ir child-ren.

"I'll ke-ep a clo-se eye on her," Ras-he-ed sa-id, less pa-ti-ently now. "It's a sa-fe cor-ner. The-re's a mos-que ac-ross the stre-et."

"I won't let you turn my da-ugh-ter in-to a stre-et beg-gar!" La-ila snap-ped.

The slap ma-de a lo-ud smac-king so-und, the palm of his thick-fin-ge-red hand con-nec-ting squ-arely with the me-at of La-ila's che-ek. It ma-de her he-ad whip aro-und. It si-len-ced the no-ises from the kitc-hen. For a mo-ment, the ho-use was

per-fectly qu-i-et. Then a flurry of hur-ri-ed fo-ots-teps in the hal-lway be-fo-re Ma-ri-am and the child-ren we-re in the li-ving ro-om, the-ir eyes shif-ting from her to Ras-he-ed and back.

Then La-ila punc-hed him.

It was the first ti-me she'd struck any-body, dis-co-un-ting the play-ful punc-hes she and Ta-riq used to tra-de. But tho-se had be-en open-fis-ted, mo-re pats than punc-hes, self-cons-ci-o-usly fri-endly, com-for-tab-le exp-res-si-ons of an-xi-eti-es that we-re both perp-le-xing and thril-ling. They wo-uld aim for the musc-le that Ta-riq, in a pro-fes-so-ri-al vo-ice, cal-led the*del-to-id*

La-ila watc-hed the arch of her clo-sed fist, sli-cing thro-ugh the air, felt the crink-le of Ras-he-ed's stubbly, co-ar-se skin un-der her knuck-les. It ma-de a so-und li-ke drop-ping a ri-ce bag to the flo-or. She hit him hard. The im-pact ac-tu-al-ly ma-de him stag-ger two steps back-ward.

From the ot-her si-de of the ro-om, a gasp, a yelp, and a scre-am. La-ila didn't know who had ma-de which no-ise. At the mo-ment, she was too as-to-un-ded to no-ti-ce or ca-re, wa-iting for her mind to catch up with what her hand had do-ne. When it did, she be-li-eved she might ha-ve smi-led. She might ha-ve*grin-ned* when, to her as-to-nish-ment, Ras-he-ed calmly wal-ked out of the ro-om.

Sud-denly, it se-emed to La-ila that the col-lec-ti-ve hards-hips of the-ir li-ves-hers, Azi-za's, Ma-ri-am's-simply drop-ped away, va-po-ri-zed li-ke Zal-mai's palms from the TV scre-en. It se-emed worthw-hi-le, if ab-surdly so, to ha-ve en-du-red all they'd en-du-red for this one crow-ning mo-ment, for this act of de-fi-an-ce that wo-uld end the suf-fe-ring of all in-dig-ni-ti-es.

La-ila did not no-ti-ce that Ras-he-ed was back in the ro-om. Un-til his hand was aro-und her thro-at. Un-til she was lif-ted off her fe-et and slam-med aga-inst the wall.

Up clo-se, his sne-ering fa-ce se-emed im-pos-sibly lar-ge. La-ila no-ti-ced how much puf-fi-er it was get-ting with age, how many mo-re bro-ken ves-sels char-ted tiny paths on his no-se. Ras-he-ed didn't say anyt-hing. And, re-al-ly, what co-uld be sa-id, what ne-eded sa-ying, when you'd sho-ved the bar-rel of yo-ur gun in-to yo-ur wi-fe's mo-uth?

*** * ***

It was the ra-ids, the re-ason they we-re in the yard dig-ging. So-me-ti-mes monthly ra-ids, so-me-ti-mes we-ekly. Of la-te, al-most da-ily. Mostly, the Ta-li-ban con-fis-ca-ted stuff, ga-ve a kick to so-me-one's re-ar, whac-ked the back of a he-ad or two. But so-me-ti-mes the-re we-re pub-lic be-atings, las-hings of so-les and palms.

"Gently," Ma-ri-am sa-id now, her kne-es over the ed-ge. They lo-we-red the TV in-to the ho-le by each clutc-hing one end of the plas-tic she-et in which it was wrap-ped

"That sho-uld do it," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

They pat-ted the dirt when they we-re do-ne, fil-ling the ho-le up aga-in. They tos-sed so-me of it aro-und so it wo-uldn't lo-ok cons-pi-cu-o-us.

"The-re," Ma-ri-am sa-id, wi-ping her hands on her dress.

When it was sa-fer, they'd ag-re-ed, when the Ta-li-ban cut down on the-ir ra-ids, in a month or two or six, or may-be lon-ger, they wo-uld dig the TV up.

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In La-ila'S dre-am, she and Ma-ri-am are out be-hind the to-ols-hed dig-ging aga-in. But, this ti-me, it's Azi-za they're lo-we-ring in-to the gro-und. Azi-za's bre-ath fogs the she-et of plas-tic in which they ha-ve wrap-ped her. La-ila se-es her pa-nic-ked eyes, the whi-te-ness of her palms as they slap and push aga-inst the she-et. Azi-za ple-ads. La-ila can't he-ar her scre-ams.*Only for a whi-le*, she calls down,*it's only for a whi-le. It's the ra-ids, don't you know, my lo-ve? When the ra-ids are over, Mammy and Kha-la Ma-ri-am will dig you out. I pro-mi-se, my lo-ve. Then we can play. We can play all you want.* She fills the sho-vel. La-ila wo-ke up, out of bre-ath, with a tas-te of so-il in her mo-uth, when the first gra-nu-lar lumps of dirt hit the plas-tic.

41.

Ma-dam

In the sum-mer of 2000, the dro-ught re-ac-hed its third and worst ye-ar.

In Hel-mand, Za-bol, Kan-da-har, vil-la-ges tur-ned in-to herds of no-ma-dic com-mu-ni-ti-es, al-ways mo-ving, se-arc-hing for wa-ter and gre-en pas-tu-res for the-ir li-ves-tock. When they fo-und ne-it-her, when the-ir go-ats and she-ep and cows di-ed off, they ca-me to Ka-bul They to-ok to the Ka-reh-Ari-ana hil-lsi-de, li-ving in ma-kes-hift slums, pac-ked in huts, fif-te-en or twenty at a ti-me.

That was al-so the sum-mer of*Ti-ta-nic*, the sum-mer that Ma-ri-am and Azi-za we-re a tang-le of limbs, rol-ling and gig-gling, Azi-za in-sis-ting*she* get to be Jack.

"Qu-i-et, Azi-za jo."

"Jack! Say my na-me, Kha-la Ma-ri-am. Say it. Jack!" "Yo-ur fat-her will be angry if you wa-ke him."

"Jack! And you're Ro-se."

It wo-uld end with Ma-ri-am on her back, sur-ren-de-ring, ag-re-e-ing aga-in to be Ro-se. "Fi-ne, you be Jack," she re-len-ted "You die yo-ung, and I get to li-ve to a ri-pe old age."

"Yes, but I die a he-ro," sa-id Azi-za, "whi-le you, Ro-se, you spend yo-ur en-ti-re, mi-se-rab-le li-fe lon-ging for me." Then, strad-dling Ma-ri-am's chest, she'd an-no-un-ce, "Now we must kiss!" Ma-ri-am whip-ped her he-ad si-de to si-de, and Azi-za, de-ligh-ted with her own scan-da-lo-us be-ha-vi-or, cack-led thro-ugh puc-ke-red lips.

So-me-ti-mes Zal-mai wo-uld sa-un-ter in and watch this ga-me. What did*he* get to be, he as-ked

"You can be the ice-berg," sa-id Azi-za.

That sum-mer,*Ti-ta-nic* fe-ver grip-ped Ka-bul. Pe-op-le smug-gled pi-ra-ted co-pi-es of the film from Pa-kis-tan- so-me-ti-mes in the-ir un-der-we-ar. Af-ter cur-few, ever-yo-ne loc-ked the-ir do-ors, tur-ned out the lights, tur-ned down the vo-lu-me, and re-aped te-ars for Jack and Ro-se and the pas-sen-gers of the do-omed ship. If the-re was elect-ri-cal po-wer, Ma-ri-am, La-ila, and the child-ren watc-hed it too. A do-zen ti-mes or mo-re, they une-art-hed the TV from be-hind the to-ols-hed, la-te at night, with the lights out and qu-ilts pin-ned over the win-dows.

At the Ka-bul Ri-ver, ven-dors mo-ved in-to the parc-hed ri-ver-bed. So-on, from the ri-ver's sun-ba-ked hol-lows, it was pos-sib-le to buy*Ti-ta-nic* car-pets, and*Ti-ta-nic* cloth, from bolts ar-ran-ged in whe-el-bar-rows. The-re was*Ti-ta-nic* de-odo-rant,*Ti-ta-nic* to-ot-h-pas-te,*Ti-ta-nic* per-fu-me,*Ti-ta-nic-pa-ko-ra*, even*Ti-ta-nic* bur-qas. A par-ti-cu-larly per-sis-tent beg-gar be-gan cal-ling him-self "Ti-ta-nic Beg-gar."

"Ti-ta-nic City" was born.

*It's the song,*they sa-id.

No, the sea. The lu-xury. The ship.

*It's the sex,*they whis-pe-red

*Leo,*sa-id Azi-za she-epishly.*It's all abo-ut Leo.*

"Every-body wants Jack," La-ila sa-id to Ma-ri-am. "That's what it is. Every-body wants Jack to res-cue them from di-sas-ter. But the-re is no Jack. Jack is not co-ming back. Jack is de-ad."

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Then, la-te that sum-mer, a fab-ric merc-hant fell as-le-ep and for-got to put out his ci-ga-ret-te. He sur-vi-ved the fi-re, but his sto-re did not. The fi-re to-ok the adj-acent fab-ric sto-re as well, a se-cond-hand clot-hing sto-re, a small fur-ni-tu-re shop, a ba-kery.

They told Ras-he-ed la-ter that if the winds had blown east ins-te-ad of west, his shop, which was at the cor-ner of the block, might ha-ve be-en spa-red.

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They sold ever-y-t-hing.

First to go we-re Ma-ri-am's things, then La-ila's. Azi-za's baby clot-hes, the few toys La-ila had fo-ught Ras-he-ed to buy her. Azi-za watc-hed the pro-ce-edings with a do-ci-le lo-ok. Ras-he-ed's watch too was sold, his old tran-sis-tor ra-dio, his pa-ir of neck-ti-es, his sho-es, and his wed-ding ring. The co-uch, the tab-le, the rug, and the cha-irs went too. Zal-mai threw a wic-ked tant-rum when Ras-he-ed sold the TV.

After the fi-re, Ras-he-ed was ho-me al-most every day. He slap-ped Azi-za. He kic-ked Ma-ri-am. He threw things. He fo-und fa-ult with La-ila, the way she smel-led, the way she dres-sed, the way she com-bed her ha-ir, her yel-lo-wing te-eth.

"What's hap-pe-ned to you?" he sa-id. "I mar-ri-ed*apart*, and now I'm sad-dled with a hag. You're tur-ning in-to Ma-ri-am."

He got fi-red from the ke-bab ho-use ne-ar Ha-ji Yag-ho-ub Squ-are be-ca-use he and a cus-to-mer got in-to a scuf-fle. The cus-to-mer comp-la-ined that Ras-he-ed had ru-dely tos-sed the bre-ad on his tab-le. Harsh words had pas-sed. Ras-he-ed had cal-led the cus-to-mer a mon-key-fa-ced Uz-bek. A gun had be-en bran-dis-hed. A ske-wer po-in-ted in re-turn. In Ras-he-ed's ver-si-on, he held the ske-wer. Ma-ri-am had her do-ubts.

Fi-red from the res-ta-urant in Ta-ima-ni be-ca-use cus-to-mers comp-la-ined abo-ut the long wa-its, Ras-he-ed sa-id the co-ok was slow and lazy.

"You we-re pro-bably out back nap-ping," sa-id La-ila.

"Don't pro-vo-ke him, La-ila jo," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"I'm war-ning you, wo-man," he sa-id.

"Eit-her that or smo-king."

"I swe-ar to God."

"You can't help be-ing what you are."

And then he was on La-ila, pum-me-ling her chest, her he-ad, her belly with fists, te-aring at her ha-ir, thro-wing her to the wall. Azi-za was shri-eking, pul-ling at his shirt; Zal-mai was scre-aming too, trying to get him off his mot-her. Ras-he-ed sho-ved the child-ren asi-de, pus-hed La-ila to the gro-und, and be-gan kic-king her. Ma-ri-am threw her-self on La-ila. He went on kic-king, kic-king Ma-ri-am now, spit-tle flying from his mo-uth, his eyes glit-te-ring with mur-de-ro-us in-tent, kic-king un-til he co-uldn't any-mo-re.

"I swe-ar you're go-ing to ma-ke me kill you, La-ila," he sa-id, pan-ting. Then he stor-med out of the ho-use.

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When the mo-ney ran out, hun-ger be-gan to cast a pall over the-ir li-ves. It was stun-ning to Ma-ri-am how qu-ickly al-le-vi-ating hun-ger be-ca-me the crux of the-ir exis-ten-ce.

Ri-ce, bo-iled pla-in and whi-te, with no me-at or sa-uce, was a ra-re tre-at now. They skip-ped me-als with inc-re-asing and alar-ming re-gu-la-rity. So-me-ti-mes Ras-he-ed bro-ught ho-me sar-di-nes in a can and brit-tle, dri-ed bre-ad that tas-ted li-ke saw-dust. So-me-ti-mes a sto-len bag of ap-ples, at the risk of get-ting his hand sa-wed off. In gro-cery sto-res, he ca-re-ful-ly poc-ke-ted can-ned ra-vi-oli, which they split fi-ve ways, Zal-mai get-ting the li-on's sha-re. They ate raw tur-nips sprink-led with salt. Limp le-aves of let-tu-ce and blac-ke-ned ba-na-nas for din-ner.

De-ath from star-va-ti-on sud-denly be-ca-me a dis-tinct pos-si-bi-lity. So-me cho-se not to wa-it for it. Ma-ri-am he-ard of a ne-igh-bor-ho-od wi-dow who had gro-und so-me dri-ed bre-ad, la-ced it with rat po-ison, and fed it to all se-ven of her child-ren. She had sa-ved the big-gest por-ti-on for her-self.

Azi-za's ribs be-gan to push thro-ugh the skin, and the fat from her che-eks va-nis-hed. Her cal-ves thin-ned, and her comp-le-xi-on tur-ned the co-lor of we-ak tea. When Ma-ri-am pic-ked her up, she co-uld fe-el her hip bo-ne po-king thro-ugh the ta-ut skin. Zal-mai lay aro-und the ho-use, eyes dul-led and half clo-sed, or in his fat-her's lap limp as a rag. He cri-ed him-self to sle-ep, when he co-uld mus-ter the energy, but his sle-ep was fit-ful and spo-ra-dic. Whi-te dots le-aped be-fo-re Ma-ri-am's eyes whe-ne-ver she got up. Her he-ad spun, and her ears rang all the ti-me. She re-mem-be-red so-met-hing Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah used to say abo-ut hun-ger when Ra-ma-dan star-ted:*Even the sna-ke-bi-i-i-en man finds sle-ep, but not the hungry.*

"My child-ren are go-ing to die," La-ila sa-id. "Right be-fo-re my eyes."

"They are not," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "I won't let them. It's go-ing to be all right, La-ila jo. I know what to do."

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One blis-te-ring-hot day, Ma-ri-am put on her bur-qa, and she and Ras-he-ed wal-ked to the In-ter-con-ti-nen-tal Ho-tel. Bus fa-re was an un-affor-dab-le lu-xury now, and Ma-ri-am was ex-ha-us-ted by the ti-me they re-ac-hed the top of the ste-ep hill. Clim-bing the slo-pe, she was struck by bo-uts of diz-zi-ness, and twi-ce she had to stop, wa-it for it to pass.

At the ho-tel ent-ran-ce, Ras-he-ed gre-eted and hug-ged one of the do-or-men, who was dres-sed in a bur-gundy su-it and vi-sor cap. The-re was so-me fri-endly-lo-oking talk bet-we-en them. Ras-he-ed spo-ke with his hand on the do-or-man's el-bow. He mo-ti-oned to-ward Ma-ri-am at one po-int, and they both lo-oked her way bri-efly. Ma-ri-am tho-ught the-re was so-met-hing va-gu-ely fa-mi-li-ar abo-ut the do-or-man.

When the do-or-man went in-si-de, Ma-ri-am and Ras-he-ed wa-ited. From this van-ta-ge po-int, Ma-ri-am had a vi-ew of the Poly-tech-nic Ins-ti-tu-te, and, be-yond that, the old Kha-ir kha-na dist-rict and the ro-ad to Ma-zar. To the so-uth, she co-uld

see the bre-ad fac-tory, Si-lo, long aban-do-ned, its pa-le yel-low fa9ade poc-ked with yaw-ning ho-les from all the shel-ling it had en-du-red. Fart-her so-uth, she co-uld ma-ke out the hol-low ru-ins of Da-ru-la-man Pa-la-ce, whe-re, many ye-ars back, Ras-he-ed had ta-ken her for a pic-nic. The me-mory of that day was a re-lic from a past that no lon-ger se-emed li-ke her own.

Ma-ri-am con-cent-ra-ted on the-se things, the-se land-marks. She fe-ared she might lo-se her ner-ve if she let her mind wan-der.

Every few mi-nu-tes, je-eps and ta-xis dro-ve up to the ho-tel ent-ran-ce. Do-or-men rus-hed to gre-et the pas-sen-gers, who we-re all men, ar-med, be-ar-ded, we-aring tur-bans, all of them step-ping out with the sa-me self-assu-red, ca-su-al air of me-na-ce. Ma-ri-am he-ard bits of the-ir chat-ter as they va-nis-hed thro-ugh the ho-tel's do-ors. She he-ard Pash-to and Far-si, but Ur-du and Ara-bic too.

"Me-et our*re-al* mas-ters," Ras-he-ed sa-id in a low-pitc-hed vo-ice. "Pa-kis-ta-ni and Arab Is-la-mists. The Ta-li-ban are pup-pets.*The-se* are the big pla-yers and Afg-ha-nis-tan is the-ir playg-ro-und."

Ras-he-ed sa-id he'd he-ard ru-mors that the Ta-li-ban we-re al-lo-wing the-se pe-op-le to set up sec-ret camps all over the co-untry, whe-re yo-ung men we-re be-ing tra-ined to be-co-me su-ici-de bom-bers and jiha-di figh-ters.

"What's ta-king him so long?" Ma-ri-am sa-id.

Ras-he-ed spat, and kic-ked dirt on the spit.
An ho-ur la-ter, they we-re in-si-de, Ma-ri-am and Ras-he-ed, fol-lo-wing the do-or-man. The-ir he-els clic-ked on the ti-led flo-or as they we-re led ac-ross the ple-asantly co-ol lobby. Ma-ri-am saw two men sit-ting on le-at-her cha-irs, rif-les and a cof-fee tab-le bet-we-en them, sip-ping black tea and eating from a pla-te of syrup-co-ated*jela-bi,* rings sprink-led with pow-de-red su-gar. She tho-ught of Azi-za, who lo-ved*jela-bi,* and to-re her ga-ze away.

The do-or-man led them out-si-de to a bal-cony. From his poc-ket, he pro-du-ced a small black cord-less pho-ne and a scrap of pa-per with a num-ber scrib-bled on it. He told Ras-he-ed it was his su-per-vi-sor's sa-tel-li-te pho-ne.

"I got you fi-ve mi-nu-tes," he sa-id. "No mo-re."
*"Tas-ha-kor,"*Ras-he-ed sa-id. "I won't for-get this."

The do-or-man nod-ded and wal-ked away. Ras-he-ed di-aled. He ga-ve Ma-ri-am the pho-ne.

As Ma-ri-am lis-te-ned to the scratchy rin-ging, her mind wan-de-red. It wan-de-red to the last ti-me she'd se-en Jalil, thir-te-en ye-ars ear-li-er, back in the spring of 1987. He'd sto-od on the stre-et out-si-de her ho-use, le-aning on a ca-ne, be-si-de the blue Benz with the He-rat li-cen-se pla-tes and the whi-te stri-pe bi-sec-ting the ro-of, the ho-od, and trunk. He'd sto-od the-re for ho-urs, wa-iting for her, now and then cal-ling her na-me, just as she had on-ce cal-led*his* na-me out-si-de*his* ho-use. Ma-ri-am had par-ted the cur-ta-in on-ce, just a bit, and ca-ught a glimp-se of him. Only a glimp-se, but long eno-ugh to see that his ha-ir had tur-ned fluffy whi-te, and that he'd star-ted to sto-op. He wo-re glas-ses, a red tie, as al-ways, and the usu-al whi-te hand-kerc-hi-ef tri-ang-le in his bre-ast poc-ket. Most stri-king, he was thin-ner, much thin-ner, than she re-mem-be-red, the co-at of his dark brown su-it dro-oping over his sho-ul-ders, the tro-users po-oling at his ank-les.

Jalil had se-en her too, if only for a mo-ment. The-ir eyes had met bri-efly thro-ugh a part in the cur-ta-ins, as they had met many ye-ars ear-li-er thro-ugh a part in anot-her pa-ir of cur-ta-ins. But then Ma-ri-am had qu-ickly clo-sed the cur-ta-ins. She had sat on the bed, wa-ited for him to le-ave.

She tho-ught now of the let-ter Jalil had fi-nal-ly left at her do-or. She had kept it for days, be-ne-ath her pil-low, pic-king it up now and then, tur-ning it over in her hands. In the end, she had shred-ded it uno-pe-ned.

And now he-re she was, af-ter all the-se ye-ars, cal-ling him.

Ma-ri-am reg-ret-ted her fo-olish, yo-uth-ful pri-de now. She wis-hed now that she had let him in. What wo-uld ha-ve be-en the harm to let him in, sit with him, let him say what he'd co-me to say? He was her fat-her. He'd not be-en a go-od fat-her, it was true, but how or-di-nary his fa-ults se-emed now, how for-gi-vab-le, when com-pa-red to Ras-he-ed's ma-li-ce, or to the bru-ta-lity and vi-olen-ce that she had se-en men inf-lict on one anot-her.

She wis-hed she hadn't dest-ro-yed his let-ter.

A man's de-ep vo-ice spo-ke in her ear and in-for-med her that she'd re-ac-hed the ma-yor's of-fi-ce in He-rat.

Ma-ri-am cle-ared her thro-at.*"Sa-la-am,* brot-her, I am lo-oking for so-me-one who li-ves in He-rat. Or he did, many ye-ars ago. His na-me is Jalil Khan. He li-ved in Shar-e-Nau and ow-ned the ci-ne-ma. Do you ha-ve any in-for-ma-ti-on as to his whe-re-abo-uts?"

The ir-ri-ta-ti-on was audib-le in the man's vo-ice. "This is whyyou call the ma-yor's of-fi-ce?"

Ma-ri-am sa-id she didn't know who el-se to call. "For-gi-ve me, brot-her. I know you ha-ve im-por-tant things to tend to, but it is li-fe and de-ath, a qu-es-ti-on of li-fe and de-ath I am cal-ling abo-ut."

"I don't know him. The ci-ne-ma's be-en clo-sed for many ye-ars."
"May-be the-re's so-me-one the-re who might know him, so-me-one-"
"The-re is no one."

Ma-ri-am clo-sed her eyes. "Ple-ase, brot-her. The-re are child-ren in-vol-ved. Small child-ren."

A long sigh.

"May-be so-me-one the-re-"

"The-re's a gro-unds-ke-eper he-re. I think he's li-ved he-re all of his li-fe."

"Yes, ask him, ple-ase."

"Call back to-mor-row."

Ma-ri-am sa-id she co-uldn't. "I ha-ve this pho-ne for fi-ve mi-nu-tes only. I don't-"
The-re was a click at the ot-her end, and Ma-ri-am tho-ught he had hung up. But she co-uld he-ar fo-ots-teps, and vo-ices, a dis-tant car horn, and so-me mec-ha-ni-cal hum-ming punc-tu-ated by clicks, may-be an elect-ric fan. She switc-hed the pho-ne to her ot-her ear, clo-sed her eyes.

She pic-tu-red Jalil smi-ling, re-ac-hing in-to his poc-ket.

Ah. Of co-ur-se. Well He-re then. Wit-ho-ut Juri-her ado…

A le-af-sha-ped pen-dant, tiny co-ins etc-hed with mo-ons and stars han-ging from it.

Try it on, Ma-ri-am jo.

What do you think?

Ithink you lo-ok li-ke a qu-e-en.

A few mi-nu-tes pas-sed. Then fo-ots-teps, a cre-aking so-und, and a click. "He do-es know him."

"He do-es?"

"It's what he says."

"Whe-re is he?" Ma-ri-am sa-id. "Do-es this man know whe-re Jalil Khan is?"

The-re was a pa-use. "He says he di-ed ye-ars ago, back in 1987."

Ma-ri-am's sto-mach fell. She'd con-si-de-red the pos-si-bi-lity, of co-ur-se. Jalil wo-uld ha-ve be-en in his mid-to la-te se-ven-ti-es by now, but…

1987.

He was dying then. He had dri-ven all the way from He-rat to say go-od-bye.

She mo-ved to the ed-ge of the bal-cony. From up he-re, she co-uld see the ho-tel's on-ce-fa-mo-us swim-ming po-ol, empty and grubby now, scar-red by bul-let ho-les and de-ca-ying ti-les. And the-re was the bat-te-red ten-nis co-urt, the rag-ged net lying limply in the mid-dle of it li-ke de-ad skin shed by a sna-ke.

"I ha-ve to go now," the vo-ice at the ot-her end sa-id

"I'm sorry to ha-ve bot-he-red you," Ma-ri-am sa-id, we-eping so-und-les-sly in-to the pho-ne. She saw Jalil wa-ving to her, skip-ping from sto-ne to sto-ne as he cros-sed the stre-am, his poc-kets swol-len with gifts. All the ti-mes she had held her bre-ath for him, for God to grant her mo-re ti-me with him. "Thank you," Ma-ri-am be-gan to say, but the man at the ot-her end had al-re-ady hung up.

Ras-he-ed was lo-oking at her. Ma-ri-am sho-ok her he-ad.

"Use-less," he sa-id, snatc-hing the pho-ne from her. "Li-ke da-ugh-ter, li-ke fat-her."

On the-ir way out of the lobby, Ras-he-ed wal-ked briskly to the cof-fee tab-le, which was now aban-do-ned, and poc-ke-ted the last ring*of jela-bi.* He to-ok it ho-me and ga-ve it to Zal-mai.

42.

La-ila

In a pa-per bag, Azi-za pac-ked the-se things: her flo-we-red shirt and her lo-ne pa-ir of socks, her mis-matc-hed wo-ol glo-ves, an old, pump-kin-co-lo-red blan-ket dot-ted with stars and co-mets, a splin-te-red plas-tic cup, a ba-na-na, her set of di-ce-It was a co-ol mor-ning in Ap-ril 2001, shortly be-fo-re La-ila's twenty-third birth-day. The sky was a trans-lu-cent gray, and gusts of a clammy, cold wind kept rat-tling the scre-en do-or.

This was a few days af-ter La-ila he-ard that Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud had go-ne to Fran-ce and spo-ken to the Euro-pe-an Par-li-ament. Mas-so-ud was now in his na-ti-ve North, and le-ading the Nort-hern Al-li-an-ce, the so-le op-po-si-ti-on gro-up still figh-ting the Ta-li-ban. In Euro-pe, Mas-so-ud had war-ned the West abo-ut ter-ro-rist camps in Afg-ha-nis-tan, and ple-aded with the U.S. to help him fight the Ta-li-ban.

"If Pre-si-dent Bush do-esn't help us," he had sa-id, "the-se ter-ro-rists will da-ma-ge the U.S. and Euro-pe very so-on."

A month be-fo-re that, La-ila had le-ar-ned that the Ta-li-ban had plan-ted TNT in the cre-vi-ces of the gi-ant Bud-dhas in Ba-mi-yan and blown them apart, cal-ling them obj-ects of ido-latry and sin. The-re was an outcry aro-und the world, from the U.S. to Chi-na. Go-vern-ments, his-to-ri-ans, and arc-ha-e-olo-gists from all over the glo-be had writ-ten let-ters, ple-aded with the Ta-li-ban not to de-mo-lish the two gre-atest his-to-ri-cal ar-ti-facts in Afg-ha-nis-tan. But the Ta-li-ban had go-ne ahe-ad and de-to-na-ted the-ir exp-lo-si-ves in-si-de the two-tho-usand-ye-ar-old Bud-dhas. They had chan-ted*Al-lah-u-akbar* with each blast, che-ered each ti-me the sta-tu-es lost an arm or a leg in a crumb-ling clo-ud of dust. La-ila re-mem-be-red stan-ding atop the big-ger of the two Bud-dhas with Ba-bi and Ta-riq, back in 1987, a bre-eze blo-wing in the-ir sun-lit fa-ces, watc-hing a hawk gli-ding in circ-les over the spraw-ling val-ley be-low. But when she he-ard the news of the sta-tu-es' de-mi-se, La-ila was numb to it. It hardly se-emed to mat-ter. How co-uld she ca-re abo-ut sta-tu-es when her own li-fe was crumb-ling dust?

Until Ras-he-ed told her it was ti-me to go, La-ila sat on the flo-or in a co-mer of the li-ving ro-om, not spe-aking and sto-ne-fa-ced, her ha-ir han-ging aro-und her fa-ce in straggly curls. No mat-ter how much she bre-at-hed in and out, it se-emed to La-ila that she co-uldn't fill her lungs with eno-ugh air.

* * *

On the way to Kar-teh-Seh, Zal-mai bo-un-ced in Ras-he-ed's arms, and Azi-za held Ma-ri-am's hand as she wal-ked qu-ickly be-si-de her. The wind blew the dirty scarf ti-ed un-der Azi-za's chin and rip-pled the hem of her dress. Azi-za was mo-re grim now, as tho-ugh she'd be-gun to sen-se, with each step, that she was be-ing du-ped. La-ila had not fo-und the strength to tell Azi-za the truth. She had told her that she was go-ing to a scho-ol, a spe-ci-al scho-ol whe-re the child-ren ate and slept and didn't co-me ho-me af-ter class. Now Azi-za kept pel-ting La-ila with the sa-me qu-es-ti-ons she had be-en as-king for days. Did the stu-dents sle-ep in dif-fe-rent ro-oms or all in one gre-at big ro-om? Wo-uld she ma-ke fri-ends? Was she, La-ila, su-re that the te-ac-hers wo-uld be ni-ce?

And, mo-re than on-ce,*How long do I ha-ve to stay?*

They stop-ped two blocks from the squ-at, bar-racks-style bu-il-ding.

"Zal-mai and I will wa-it he-re," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "Oh, be-fo-re I for-get…"

He fis-hed a stick of gum from his poc-ket, a par-ting gift, and held it out to Azi-za with a stiff, mag-na-ni-mo-us air. Azi-za to-ok it and mut-te-red a thank-you. La-ila mar-ve-led at Azi-za's gra-ce, Azi-za's vast ca-pa-city for for-gi-ve-ness, and her eyes

fil-led. Her he-art squ-e-ezed, and she was fa-int with sor-row at the tho-ught that this af-ter-no-on Azi-za wo-uld not nap be-si-de her, that she wo-uld not fe-el the flimsy we-ight of Azi-za's arm on her chest, the cur-ve of Azi-za's he-ad pres-sing in-to her ribs, Azi-za's bre-ath war-ming her neck, Azi-za's he-els po-king her belly.

When Azi-za was led away, Zal-mai be-gan wa-iling, crying, Zi-za! Zi-za! He squ-ir-med and kic-ked in his fat-her's arms, cal-led for his sis-ter, un-til his at-ten-ti-on was di-ver-ted by an or-gan-grin-der's mon-key ac-ross the stre-et.

They wal-ked the last two blocks alo-ne, Ma-ri-am, La-ila, and Azi-za. As they ap-pro-ac-hed the bu-il-ding, La-ila co-uld see its splin-te-red fa9ade, the sag-ging ro-of, the planks of wo-od na-iled ac-ross fra-mes with mis-sing win-dows, the top of a swing set over a de-ca-ying wall.

They stop-ped by the do-or, and La-ila re-pe-ated to Azi-za what she had told her ear-li-er.

"And if they ask abo-ut yo-ur fat-her, what do you say?"
"The Mu-j-ahi-de-en kil-led him," Azi-za sa-id, her mo-uth set with wa-ri-ness.

"That's go-od. Azi-za, do you un-ders-tand?"

"Be-ca-use this is a spe-ci-al scho-ol," Azi-za sa-id Now that they we-re he-re, and the bu-il-ding was a re-ality, she lo-oked sha-ken. Her lo-wer lip was qu-ive-ring and her eyes thre-ate-ned to well up, and La-ila saw how hard she was strug-gling to be bra-ve. "If we tell the truth," Azi-za sa-id in a thin, bre-ath-less vo-ice, "they won't ta-ke me. It's a spe-ci-al scho-ol. I want to go ho-me."

"I'll vi-sit all the ti-me," La-ila ma-na-ged to say. "I pro-mi-se."

"Me too," sa-id Ma-ri-am. "We'll co-me to see you, Azi-za jo, and we'll play to-get-her, just li-ke al-ways. It's only for a whi-le, un-til yo-ur fat-her finds work."

"They ha-ve fo-od he-re," La-ila sa-id sha-kily. She was glad for the bur-qa, glad that Azi-za co-uldn't see how she was fal-ling apart in-si-de it. "He-re, you won't go hungry. They ha-ve ri-ce and bre-ad and wa-ter, and may-be even fru-it."

*"But-you*won't be he-re. And Kha-la Ma-ri-am won't be with me."

"I'll co-me and see you," La-ila sa-id. "All the ti-me. Lo-ok at me, Azi-za. I'll co-me and see you. I'm yo-ur mot-her. If it kills me, I'll co-me and see you."

*** * ***

The orp-ha-na-ge di-rec-tor was a sto-oping, nar-row-ches-ted man with a ple-asantly li-ned fa-ce. He was bal-ding, had a shaggy be-ard, eyes li-ke pe-as. His na-me was Za-man. He wo-re a skul-lcap. The left lens of his eyeg-las-ses was chip-ped.

As he led them to his of-fi-ce, he as-ked La-ila and Ma-ri-am the-ir na-mes, as-ked for Azi-za's na-me too, her age. They pas-sed thro-ugh po-orly lit hal-lways whe-re ba-re-fo-ot child-ren step-ped asi-de and watc-hed They had dis-he-ve-led ha-ir or sha-ved scalps. They wo-re swe-aters with fra-yed sle-eves, rag-ged je-ans who-se kne-es had worn down to strings, co-ats patc-hed with duct ta-pe. La-ila smel-led so-ap and tal-cum, am-mo-nia and uri-ne, and ri-sing ap-pre-hen-si-on in Azi-za, who had be-gun whim-pe-ring.

La-ila had a glimp-se of the yard: we-edy lot, ric-kety swing set, old ti-res, a def-la-ted bas-ket-ball. The ro-oms they pas-sed we-re ba-re, the win-dows co-ve-red with she-ets of plas-tic. A boy dar-ted from one of the ro-oms and grab-bed La-ila's el-bow, and tri-ed to climb up in-to her arms. An at-ten-dant, who was cle-aning up what lo-oked li-ke a pud-dle of uri-ne, put down his mop and pri-ed the boy off.

Za-man se-emed gently prop-ri-etary with the orp-hans. He pat-ted the he-ads of so-me, as he pas-sed by, sa-id a cor-di-al word or two to them, to-us-led the-ir ha-ir, wit-ho-ut con-des-cen-si-on. The child-ren wel-co-med his to-uch. They all lo-oked at him, La-ila tho-ught, in ho-pe of ap-pro-val.

He sho-wed them in-to his of-fi-ce, a ro-om with only three fol-ding cha-irs, and a di-sor-derly desk with pi-les of pa-per scat-te-red atop it.

"You're from He-rat," Za-man sa-id to Ma-ri-am. "I can tell from yo-ur ac-cent."

He le-aned back in his cha-ir and la-ced his hands over his belly, and sa-id he had a brot-her-in-law who used to li-ve the-re. Even in the-se or-di-nary ges-tu-res, La-ila no-ted a la-bo-ri-o-us qu-ality to his mo-ve-ments. And tho-ugh he was smi-ling fa-intly, La-ila sen-sed so-met-hing tro-ub-led and wo-un-ded be-ne-ath, di-sap-po-int-ment and de-fe-at glos-sed over with a ve-ne-er of go-od hu-mor.

"He was a glas-sma-ker," Za-man sa-id. "He ma-de the-se be-a-uti-ful, jade gre-en swans. You held them up to sun-light and they glit-te-red in-si-de, li-ke the glass was fil-led with tiny jewels. Ha-ve you be-en back?"

Ma-ri-am sa-id she hadn't.

"I'm from Kan-da-har myself. Ha-ve you ever be-en to Kan-da-har,*ham-s-hi-ra1?* No? It's lo-vely. What gar-dens! And the gra-pes! Oh, the gra-pes. They be-witch the pa-la-te."

A few child-ren had gat-he-red by the do-or and we-re pe-eking in. Za-man gently sho-o-ed them away, in Pash-to.

"Of co-ur-se I lo-ve He-rat too. City of ar-tists and wri-ters, Su-fis and mystics. You know the old joke, that you can't stretch a leg in He-rat wit-ho-ut po-king a po-et in the re-ar."

Next to La-ila, Azi-za snor-ted.

Za-man fe-ig-ned a gasp. "Ah, the-re. I've ma-de you la-ugh, lit-tle*ham-s-hi-ra.* That's usu-al-ly the hard part. I was wor-ri-ed, the-re, for a whi-le. I tho-ught I'd ha-ve to cluck li-ke a chic-ken or bray li-ke a don-key. But, the-re you are. And so lo-vely you are."

He cal-led in an at-ten-dant to lo-ok af-ter Azi-za for a few mo-ments. Azi-za le-aped on-to Ma-ri-am's lap and clung to her.

"We're just go-ing to talk, my lo-ve**,"**La-ila sa-id. "I'll be right he-re. All right? Right he-re."

"Why don't we go out-si-de for a mi-nu-te, Azi-za jo?" Ma-ri-am sa-id. "Yo-ur mot-her ne-eds to talk to Ka-ka Za-man he-re.**Just** for a mi-nu-te. Now, co-me on."

When they we-re alo-ne, Za-man as-ked for Azi-za's da-te of birth, his-tory of il-lnes-ses, al-ler-gi-es. He as-ked abo-ut Azi-za's fat-her, and La-ila had the stran-ge ex-pe-ri-en-ce of tel-ling a lie that was re-al-ly the truth. Za-man lis-te-ned, his exp-res-si-on re-ve-aling ne-it-her be-li-ef nor skep-ti-cism. He ran the orp-ha-na-ge on the ho-nor system, he sa-id. If a*ham-s-hi-ra* sa-id her hus-band was de-ad and she co-uldn't ca-re for her child-ren, he didn't qu-es-ti-on it.

La-ila be-gan to cry.

Za-man put down his pen.

"I'm as-ha-med," La-ila cro-aked, her palm pres-sed to her mo-uth.

"Lo-ok at me,*ham-s-hi-ra* "

"What kind of mot-her aban-dons her own child?"

"Lo-ok at me."

La-ila ra-ised her ga-ze.

"It isn't yo-ur fa-ult. Do you he-ar me? Not you. It's tho-se*a-va-ges,* tho-se*wah-s-his,* who are to bla-me. They bring sha-me on me as a Pash-tun. They've disg-ra-ced the na-me of my pe-op-le. And you're not alo-ne,*ham-s-hi-ra* We get mot-hers li-ke you all the ti-me-all the ti-me-mot-hers who co-me he-re who can't fe-ed the-ir child-ren be-ca-use the Ta-li-ban won't let them go out and ma-ke a li-ving. So you don't bla-me

yo-ur-self. No one he-re bla-mes you. I un-ders-tand." He le-aned for-ward.*"Ham-s-hi-ra* I un-ders-tand."

La-ila wi-ped her eyes with the cloth of her bur-qa.

"As for this pla-ce," Za-man sig-hed, mo-ti-oning with his hand, "you can see that it's in di-re sta-te. We're al-ways un-der-fun-ded, al-ways scramb-ling, imp-ro-vi-sing. We get lit-tle or no sup-port from the Ta-li-ban. But we ma-na-ge. Li-ke you, we do what we ha-ve to do. Al-lah is go-od and kind, and Al-lah pro-vi-des, and, as long He pro-vi-des, I will see to it that Azi-za is fed and clot-hed. That much I pro-mi-se you."
La-ila nod-ded.

"All right?"

He was smi-ling com-pa-ni-onably. "But don't cry,*ham-s-hi-ra* Don't let her see you cry."
La-ila wi-ped her eyes aga-in. "God bless you," she sa-id thickly. "God bless you, brot-her."

***

But "when the ti-me for go-od-byes ca-me, the sce-ne erup-ted pre-ci-sely as La-ila had dre-aded.

Azi-za pa-nic-ked.
All the way ho-me, le-aning on Ma-ri-am, La-ila he-ard Azi-za's shrill cri-es. In her he-ad, she saw Za-man's thick, cal-lo-used hands clo-se aro-und Azi-za's arms; she saw them pull, gently at first, then har-der, then with for-ce to pry Azi-za lo-ose from her. She saw Azi-za kic-king in Za-man's arms as he hur-ri-edly tur-ned the cor-ner, he-ard Azi-za scre-aming as tho-ugh she we-re abo-ut to va-nish from the fa-ce of the earth. And La-ila saw her-self run-ning down the hal-lway, he-ad down, a howl ri-sing up her thro-at.
"I smell her," she told Ma-ri-am at ho-me. Her eyes swam un-se-e-ingly past Ma-ri-am's sho-ul-der, past the yard, the walls, to the mo-un-ta-ins, brown as smo-ker's spit. "I smell her sle-ep smell. Do you? Do you smell it?"

"Oh, La-ila jo," sa-id Ma-ri-am. "Don't. What go-od is this? What go-od?"

* * *

At first, Ras-he-ed hu-mo-red La-ila, and ac-com-pa-ni-ed them-her, Ma-ri-am, and Zal-mai-to the orp-ha-na-ge, tho-ugh he ma-de su-re, as they wal-ked, that she had an eye-ful of his gri-evo-us lo-oks, an ear-ful of his rants over what a hards-hip she was

put-ting him thro-ugh, how badly his legs and back and fe-et ac-hed wal-king to and from the orp-ha-na-ge. He ma-de su-re she knew how aw-ful-ly put out he was.

"I'm not a yo-ung man any-mo-re," he sa-id. "Not that you ca-re. You'd run me to the gro-und, if you had yo-ur way. But you don't, La-ila. You don't ha-ve yo-ur way."

They par-ted ways two blocks from the orp-ha-na-ge, and he ne-ver spa-red them mo-re than fif-te-en mi-nu-tes. "A mi-nu-te la-te," he sa-id, "and I start wal-king. I me-an it."

La-ila had to pes-ter him, ple-ad with him, in or-der to spin out the al-lot-ted mi-nu-tes with Azi-za a bit lon-ger. For her-self, and for Ma-ri-am, who was dis-con-so-la-te over Azi-za's ab-sen-ce, tho-ugh, as al-ways, Ma-ri-am cho-se to crad-le her own suf-fe-ring pri-va-tely and qu-i-etly. And for Zal-mai too, who as-ked for his sis-ter every day, and threw tant-rums that so-me-ti-mes dis-sol-ved in-to in-con-so-lab-le fits of crying.

So-me-ti-mes, on the way to the orp-ha-na-ge, Ras-he-ed stop-ped and comp-la-ined that his leg was so-re. Then he tur-ned aro-und and star-ted wal-king ho-me in long, ste-ady stri-des, wit-ho-ut so much as a limp. Or he cluc-ked his ton-gue and sa-id, "It's my lungs, La-ila. I'm short of bre-ath. May-be to-mor-row I'll fe-el bet-ter, or the day af-ter. We'll see." He ne-ver bot-he-red to fe-ign a sing-le raspy bre-ath. Of-ten, as he tur-ned back and marc-hed ho-me, he lit a ci-ga-ret-te. La-ila wo-uld ha-ve to ta-il him ho-me, help-less, tremb-ling with re-sent-ment and im-po-tent ra-ge.

Then one day he told La-ila he wo-uldn't ta-ke her any-mo-re. "I'm too ti-red from wal-king the stre-ets all day," he sa-id, "lo-oking for work."

"Then I'll go by myself," La-ila sa-id. "You can't stop me, Ras-he-ed. Do you he-ar me? You can hit me all you want, but I'll ke-ep go-ing the-re."

"Do as you wish. But you won't get past the Ta-li-ban. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I'm co-ming with you," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

La-ila wo-uldn't al-low it. "You ha-ve to stay ho-me with Zal-mai. If we get stop-ped…Idon't want him to see."

And so La-ila's li-fe sud-denly re-vol-ved aro-und fin-ding ways to see Azi-za. Half the ti-me, she ne-ver ma-de it to the orp-ha-na-ge. Cros-sing the stre-et, she was spot-ted by the Ta-li-ban and rid-dled with qu-es-ti-ons-*What is yo-ur na-me? Whe-re are you go-ing? Why are you alo-ne? Whe-re is yo-ur*mah-ram*?* -be-fo-re she was sent ho-me. If she was lucky, she was gi-ven a ton-gue-las-hing or a sing-le kick to the re-ar, a sho-ve in the back. Ot-her ti-mes, she met with as-sort-ments of wo-oden clubs, fresh tree branc-hes, short whips, slaps, of-ten fists.

One day, a yo-ung Ta-lib be-at La-ila with a ra-dio an-ten-na. When he was do-ne, he ga-ve a fi-nal whack to the back of her neck and sa-id, "I see you aga-in, I'll be-at you un-til yo-ur mot-her's milk le-aks out of yo-ur bo-nes."

That ti-me, La-ila went ho-me. She lay on her sto-mach, fe-eling li-ke a stu-pid, pi-ti-ab-le ani-mal, and his-sed as Ma-ri-am ar-ran-ged damp cloths ac-ross her blo-odi-ed back and thighs. But, usu-al-ly, La-ila re-fu-sed to ca-ve in. She ma-de as if she we-re go-ing ho-me, then to-ok a dif-fe-rent ro-ute down si-de stre-ets. So-me-ti-mes she was ca-ught, qu-es-ti-oned, scol-ded-two, three, even fo-ur ti-mes in a sing-le day. Then the whips ca-me down and the an-ten-nas sli-ced thro-ugh the air, and she trud-ged ho-me, blo-odi-ed, wit-ho-ut so much as a glimp-se of Azi-za. So-on La-ila to-ok to we-aring ext-ra la-yers, even in the he-at, two, three swe-aters be-ne-ath the bur-qa, for pad-ding aga-inst the be-atings.

But for La-ila, the re-ward, if she ma-de it past the Ta-li-ban, was worth it. She co-uld spend as much ti-me as she li-ked then-*ho-urs,*even-with Azi-za. They sat in the co-urt-yard, ne-ar the swing set, among ot-her child-ren and vi-si-ting mot-hers, and tal-ked abo-ut what Azi-za had le-ar-ned that we-ek.

Azi-za sa-id Ka-ka Za-man ma-de it a po-int to te-ach them so-met-hing every day, re-ading and wri-ting most days, so-me-ti-mes ge-og-raphy, a bit of his-tory or sci-en-ce, so-met-hing abo-ut plants, ani-mals.

"But we ha-ve to pull the cur-ta-ins," Azi-za sa-id, "so the Ta-li-ban don't see us." Ka-ka Za-man had knit-ting ne-ed-les and balls of yarn re-ady, she sa-id, in ca-se of a Ta-li-ban ins-pec-ti-on. "We put the bo-oks away and pre-tend to knit."

One day, du-ring a vi-sit with Azi-za, La-ila saw a mid-dle-aged wo-man, her bur-qa pus-hed back, vi-si-ting with three boys and a girl. La-ila re-cog-ni-zed the sharp fa-ce, the he-avy eyeb-rows, if not the sun-ken mo-uth and gray ha-ir. She re-mem-be-red the shawls, the black skirts, the curt vo-ice, how she used to we-ar her jet-black ha-ir ti-ed in a bun so that you co-uld see the dark brist-les on the back of her neck. La-ila re-mem-be-red this wo-man on-ce for-bid-ding the fe-ma-le stu-dents from co-ve-ring, sa-ying wo-men and men we-re equ-al, that the-re was no re-ason wo-men sho-uld co-ver if men didn't.

At one po-int, Kha-la Rang-ma-al lo-oked up and ca-ught her ga-ze, but La-ila saw no lin-ge-ring, no light of re-cog-ni-ti-on, in her old te-ac-her's eyes.

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"They're frac-tu-res along the earth's crust," sa-id Azi-za. 'They're cal-led fa-ults."

It was a warm af-ter-no-on, a Fri-day, in June of 2001. They we-re sit-ting in the orp-ha-na-ge's back lot, the fo-ur of them, La-ila, Zal-mai, Ma-ri-am, and Azi-za.

Ras-he-ed had re-len-ted this ti-me-as he inf-re-qu-ently did-and ac-com-pa-ni-ed the fo-ur of them. He was wa-iting down the stre-et, by the bus stop.

Ba-re-fo-ot kids scam-pe-red abo-ut aro-und them. A flat soc-cer ball was kic-ked aro-und, cha-sed af-ter list-les-sly.

"And, on eit-her si-de of the fa-ults, the-re are the-se she-ets of rock that ma-ke up the earth's crust," Azi-za was sa-ying.

So-me-one had pul-led the ha-ir back from Azi-za's fa-ce, bra-ided it, and pin-ned it ne-atly on top of her he-ad. La-ila beg-rud-ged who-ever had got-ten to sit be-hind her da-ugh-ter, to flip sec-ti-ons of her ha-ir one over the ot-her, had as-ked her to sit still.

Azi-za was de-monst-ra-ting by ope-ning her hands, palms up, and rub-bing them aga-inst each ot-her. Zal-mai watc-hed this with in-ten-se in-te-rest.

"Kec-to-nic pla-tes, they're cal-led?"

"Tec-to-nic,"La-ila sa-id. It hurt to talk. Her jaw was still so-re, her back and neck ac-hed. Her lip was swol-len, and her ton-gue kept po-king the empty poc-ket of the lo-wer in-ci-sor Ras-he-ed had knoc-ked lo-ose two days be-fo-re. Be-fo-re Mammy and Ba-bi had di-ed and her li-fe tur-ned up-si-de down, La-ila ne-ver wo-uld ha-ve be-li-eved that a hu-man body co-uld withs-tand this much be-ating, this vi-ci-o-usly, this re-gu-larly, and ke-ep func-ti-oning.

"Right. And when they sli-de past each ot-her, they catch and slip-see, Mam-my?-and it re-le-ases energy, which

tra-vels to the earth's sur-fa-ce and ma-kes it sha-ke."

"You're get-ting so smart," Ma-ri-am sa-id "So much smar-ter than yo-ur dumb*kha-la"*

Azi-za's fa-ce glo-wed, bro-ade-ned. "You're not dumb, Kha-la Ma-ri-am. And Ka-ka Za-man says that, so-me-ti-mes, the shif-ting of rocks is de-ep, de-ep be-low, and it's po-wer-ful and scary down the-re, but all we fe-el on the sur-fa-ce is a slight tre-mor. Only a slight tre-mor."

The vi-sit be-fo-re this one, it was oxy-gen atoms in the at-mosp-he-re scat-te-ring the blue light from the sun.*If the earth had no at-mosp-he-re,* Azi-za had sa-id a lit-tle bre-ath-les-sly,*the sky wo-uldn 't be blue at all but a pitch-black sea and the sun a big bright star in the dark*

"Is Azi-za co-ming ho-me with us this ti-me?" Zal-mai sa-id.

"So-on, my lo-ve," La-ila sa-id. "So-on."

La-ila watc-hed him wan-der away, wal-king li-ke his fat-her, sto-oping for-ward, to-es tur-ned in. He wal-ked to the swing set, pus-hed an empty se-at, en-ded up sit-ting on the conc-re-te, rip-ping we-eds from a crack.

Wa-ter eva-po-ra-tes from the le-aves-Mam-my, did you know?-the way it do-es from la-undry han-ging from a li-ne. And that dri-ves the flow of wa-ter up the tree. From the gro-und and thro-ugh the ro-ots, then all the way up the tree trunk, thro-ugh the branc-hes and in-to the le-aves. It's cal-led tran-s-pi-ra-ti-on.

Mo-re than on-ce, La-ila had won-de-red what the Ta-li-ban wo-uld do abo-ut Ka-ka Za-man's clan-des-ti-ne les-sons if they fo-und out.

Du-ring vi-sits, Azi-za didn't al-low for much si-len-ce. She fil-led all the spa-ces with ef-fu-si-ve spe-ech, de-li-ve-red in a high, rin-ging vo-ice. She was tan-gen-ti-al with her to-pics, and her hands ges-ti-cu-la-ted wildly, flying up with a ner-vo-us-ness that wasn't li-ke her at all. She had a new la-ugh, Azi-za did. Not so much a la-ugh, re-al-ly, as ner-vo-us punc-tu-ati-on, me-ant, La-ila sus-pec-ted, to re-as-su-re.

And the-re we-re ot-her chan-ges. La-ila wo-uld no-ti-ce the dirt un-der Azi-za's fin-ger-na-ils, and Azi-za wo-uld no-ti-ce her no-ti-cing and bury her hands un-der her thighs. Whe-ne-ver a kid cri-ed in the-ir vi-ci-nity, snot oozing from his no-se, or if a kid wal-ked by ba-re-assed, ha-ir clum-ped with dirt, Azi-za's eye-lids flut-te-red and she was qu-ick to exp-la-in it away. She was li-ke a hos-tess em-bar-ras-sed in front of her gu-ests by the squ-alor of her ho-me, the un-ti-di-ness of her child-ren.

Qu-es-ti-ons of how she was co-ping we-re met with va-gue but che-er-ful rep-li-es.

Do-ing Jim, Kha-la I'm fi-ne.

Do kids pick on you?

They dont Mammy. Ever-yo-ne is ni-ce.

Are you eating? Sle-eping all right?

Eating. Sle-eping too. Yes. We had lamb last night May-be it was last we-ek.

When Azi-za spo-ke li-ke this, La-ila saw mo-re than a lit-tle of Ma-ri-am in her.

Azi-za stam-me-red now. Ma-ri-am no-ti-ced it first. It was subt-le but per-cep-tib-le, and mo-re pro-no-un-ced with words that be-gan with /. La-ila as-ked Za-man abo-ut it. He frow-ned and sa-id, "I tho-ught she'd al-ways do-ne that."

They left the orp-ha-na-ge with Azi-za that Fri-day af-ter-no-on for a short outing and met Ras-he-ed, who was wa-iting for them by the bus stop. When Zal-mai

spot-ted his fat-her, he ut-te-red an ex-ci-ted squ-e-ak and im-pa-ti-ently wrig-gled from La-ila's arms. Azi-za's gre-eting to Ras-he-ed was ri-gid but not hos-ti-le.

Ras-he-ed sa-id they sho-uld hurry, he had only two ho-urs be-fo-re he had to re-port back to work. This was his first we-ek as a do-or-man for the In-ter-con-ti-nen-tal. From no-on to eight, six days a we-ek, Ras-he-ed ope-ned car do-ors, car-ri-ed lug-ga-ge, mop-ped up the oc-ca-si-onal spill. So-me-ti-mes, at day's end, the co-ok at the buf-fet-style res-ta-urant let Ras-he-ed bring ho-me a few lef-to-vers-as long as he was disc-re-et abo-ut it-cold me-at-bal-ls slos-hing in oil; fri-ed chic-ken wings, the crust go-ne hard and dry; stuf-fed pas-ta shells tur-ned chewy; stiff, gra-vel-ly ri-ce. Ras-he-ed had pro-mi-sed La-ila that on-ce he had so-me mo-ney sa-ved up, Azi-za co-uld mo-ve back ho-me.

Ras-he-ed was we-aring his uni-form, a bur-gundy red pol-yes-ter su-it, whi-te shirt, clip-on tie, vi-sor cap pres-sing down on his whi-te ha-ir. In this uni-form, Ras-he-ed was trans-for-med. He lo-oked vul-ne-rab-le, pi-ti-ably be-wil-de-red, al-most harm-less. Li-ke so-me-one who had ac-cep-ted wit-ho-ut a sigh of pro-test the in-dig-ni-ti-es li-fe had do-led out to him. So-me-one both pat-he-tic and ad-mi-rab-le in his do-ci-lity.

They ro-de the bus to Ti-ta-nic City. They wal-ked in-to the ri-ver-bed, flan-ked on eit-her si-de by ma-kes-hift stalls clin-ging to the dry banks. Ne-ar the brid-ge, as they we-re des-cen-ding the steps, a ba-re-fo-ot man dang-led de-ad from a cra-ne, his ears cut off, his neck bent at the end of a ro-pe. In the ri-ver, they mel-ted in-to the hor-de of shop-pers mil-ling abo-ut, the mo-ney chan-gers and bo-red-lo-oking NGO wor-kers, the ci-ga-ret-te ven-dors, the co-ve-red wo-men who thrust fa-ke an-ti-bi-otic presc-rip-ti-ons at pe-op-le and beg-ged for mo-ney to fill them. Whip-to-ting,*nas-war-chew'mg* Ta-libs pat-rol-led Ti-ta-nic City on the lo-oko-ut for the in-disc-re-et la-ugh, the un-ve-iled fa-ce.

From a toy ki-osk, bet-we-en*apo-osi-e-en* co-at ven-dor and a fa-ke-flo-wer stand, Zal-mai pic-ked out a rub-ber bas-ket-ball with yel-low and blue swirls.

"Pick so-met-hing," Ras-he-ed sa-id to Azi-za.

Azi-za hed-ged, stif-fe-ned with em-bar-ras-sment.

"Hurry. I ha-ve to be at work in an ho-ur."

Azi-za cho-se a gum-ball mac-hi-ne-the sa-me co-in co-uld be in-ser-ted to get candy, then ret-ri-eved from the flap-do-or co-in re-turn be-low.

Ras-he-ed's eyeb-rows shot up when the sel-ler qu-oted him the pri-ce. A ro-und of hag-gling en-su-ed, at the end of which Ras-he-ed sa-id to Azi-za con-ten-ti-o-usly, as if it*we-re she* who'd hag-gled him, "Gi-ve it back. I can't af-ford both."

On the way back, Azi-za's high-spi-ri-ted fa9ade wa-ned the clo-ser they got to the orp-ha-na-ge. The hands stop-ped flying

up. Her fa-ce tur-ned he-avy. It hap-pe-ned every ti-me. It was La-ila's turn now, with Ma-ri-am pitc-hing in, to ta-ke up the chat-te-ring, to la-ugh ner-vo-usly, to fill the me-lanc-holy qu-i-et with bre-ath-less, aim-less ban-ter-La-ter, af-ter Ras-he-ed had drop-ped them off and ta-ken a bus to work, La-ila watc-hed Azi-za wa-ve go-od-bye and scuff along the wall in the orp-ha-na-ge back lot. She tho-ught of Azi-za's stut-ter, and of what Azi-za had sa-id ear-li-er abo-ut frac-tu-res and po-wer-ful col-li-si-ons de-ep down and how so-me-ti-mes all we see on the sur-fa-ce is a slight tre-mor.

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"Ge-ta-way, you!" Zal-mai cri-ed.

"Hush," Ma-ri-am sa-id "Who are you yel-ling at?"

He po-in-ted. "The-re. That man."

La-ila fol-lo-wed his fin-ger. The-re*was* a man at the front do-or of the ho-use, le-aning aga-inst it. His he-ad tur-ned when he saw them ap-pro-ac-hing. He unc-ros-sed his arms. Lim-ped a few steps to-ward them.

La-ila stop-ped.

A cho-king no-ise ca-me up her thro-at. Her kne-es we-ake-ned. La-ila sud-denly wan-ted,*ne-eded,* to gro-pe for Ma-ri-am's arm, her sho-ul-der, her wrist, so-met-hing, anyt-hing, to le-an on. But she didn't. She didn't da-re. She didn't da-re mo-ve a musc-le. She didn't da-re bre-at-he, or blink even, for fe-ar that he was not-hing but a mi-ra-ge shim-me-ring in the dis-tan-ce, a brit-tle il-lu-si-on that wo-uld va-nish at the sligh-test pro-vo-ca-ti-on. La-ila sto-od per-fectly still and lo-oked at Ta-riq un-til her chest scre-amed for air and her eyes bur-ned to blink. And, so-me-how, mi-ra-cu-lo-usly, af-ter she to-ok a bre-ath, clo-sed and ope-ned her eyes, he was still stan-ding the-re. Ta-riq was still stan-ding the-re.

La-ila al-lo-wed her-self to ta-ke a step to-ward him. Then anot-her. And anot-her. And then she was run-ning.

43.

Ma-dam

Upsta-irs, in Ma-ri-am's ro-om, Zal-mai was wo-und up. He bo-un-ced his new rub-ber bas-ket-ball aro-und for a whi-le, on the flo-or, aga-inst the walls. Ma-ri-am as-ked him not to, but he knew that she had no aut-ho-rity to exert over him and so he

went on bo-un-cing his ball, his eyes hol-ding hers de-fi-antly. For a whi-le, they pus-hed his toy car, an am-bu-lan-ce with bold red let-te-ring on the si-des, sen-ding it back and forth bet-we-en them ac-ross the ro-om.

Ear-li-er, when they had met Ta-riq at the do-or, Zal-mai had clutc-hed the bas-ket-ball clo-se to his chest and stuck a thumb in his mo-uth-so-met-hing he didn't do any-mo-re ex-cept when he was ap-pre-hen-si-ve. He had eyed Ta-riq with sus-pi-ci-on.

"Who is that man?" he sa-id now. "I don't li-ke him."

Ma-ri-am was go-ing to exp-la-in, say so-met-hing abo-ut him and La-ila gro-wing up to-get-her, but Zal-mai cut her off and sa-id to turn the am-bu-lan-ce aro-und, so the front gril-le fa-ced him, and, when she did, he sa-id he wan-ted his bas-ket-ball aga-in.

"Whe-re is it?" he sa-id. "Whe-re is the ball Ba-ba jan got me? Whe-re is it? I want it! I want it!" his vo-ice ri-sing and

be-co-ming mo-re shrill with each word.

"It was just he-re," Ma-ri-am sa-id, and he cri-ed, "No, it's lost, I know it. I just know it's lost! Whe-re is it? Whe-re is it?"

"He-re," she sa-id, fetc-hing the ball from the clo-set whe-re it had rol-led to. But Zal-mai was baw-ling now and po-un-ding his fists, crying that it wasn't the sa-me ball, it co-uldn't be, be-ca-use his ball was lost, and this was a fa-ke one, whe-re had his re-al ball go-ne? Whe-re? Whe-re whe-re whe-re?

He scre-amed un-til La-ila had to co-me ups-ta-irs to hold him, to rock him and run her fin-gers thro-ugh his tight, dark curls, to dry his mo-ist che-eks and cluck her ton-gue in his ear.

Ma-ri-am wa-ited out-si-de the ro-om. From atop the sta-ir-ca-se, all she co-uld see of Ta-riq we-re his long legs, the re-al one and the ar-ti-fi-ci-al one, in kha-ki pants, stretc-hed out on the un-car-pe-ted li-ving-ro-om flo-or. It was then that she re-ali-zed why the do-or-man at the Con-ti-nen-tal had lo-oked fa-mi-li-ar the day she and Ras-he-ed had go-ne the-re to pla-ce the call to Jalil. He'd be-en we-aring a cap and sung-las-ses, that was why it hadn't co-me to her ear-li-er. But Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red now, from ni-ne ye-ars be-fo-re, re-mem-be-red him sit-ting downs-ta-irs, pat-ting his brow with a hand-kerc-hi-ef and as-king for wa-ter. Now all man-ner of qu-es-ti-ons ra-ced thro-ugh her mind: Had the sul-fa pills too be-en part of the ru-se? Which one of them had plot-ted the lie, pro-vi-ded the con-vin-cing de-ta-ils? And how much had Ras-he-ed pa-id Ab-dul Sha-rif-if that was even his na-me-to co-me and crush La-ila with the story of Ta-riq's de-ath?

44.

La-ila

Iariq sa-id that one of the men who sha-red his cell had a co-usin who'd be-en pub-licly flog-ged on-ce for pa-in-ting fla-min-gos. He, the co-usin, had a se-emingly in-cu-rab-le thing for them.

"Enti-re sketch-bo-oks," Ta-riq sa-id. "Do-zens of oil pa-in-tings of them, wa-ding in la-go-ons, sun-bat-hing in marsh-lands. Flying in-to sun-sets too, I'm af-ra-id."
"Fla-min-gos," La-ila sa-id. She lo-oked at him sit-ting aga-inst the wall, his go-od leg bent at the knee. She had an ur-ge to to-uch him aga-in, as she had ear-li-er by the front ga-te when she'd run to him. It em-bar-ras-sed her now to think of how she'd thrown her arms aro-und his neck and wept in-to his chest, how she'd sa-id his na-me over and over in a slur-ring, thick vo-ice. Had she ac-ted too eagerly, she won-de-red, too des-pe-ra-tely? May-be so. But she hadn't be-en ab-le to help it. And now she lon-ged to to-uch him aga-in, to pro-ve to her-self aga-in that he was re-al-ly he-re, that he was not a dre-am, an ap-pa-ri-ti-on.

"Inde-ed," he sa-id. "Fla-min-gos."

When the Ta-li-ban had fo-und the pa-in-tings, Ta-riq sa-id, they'd ta-ken of-fen-se at the birds' long, ba-re legs. Af-ter they'd ti-ed the co-usin's fe-et and flog-ged his so-les blo-ody, they had pre-sen-ted him with a cho-ice: Eit-her dest-roy the pa-in-tings or ma-ke the fla-min-gos de-cent. So the co-usin had pic-ked up his brush and pa-in-ted tro-users on every last bird

"And the-re you ha-ve it. Is-la-mic fla-min-gos," Ta-riq sa-id-La-ugh-ter ca-me up, but La-ila pus-hed it back down. She was as-ha-med of her yel-lo-wing te-eth, the mis-sing in-ci-sor-Asha-med of her wit-he-red lo-oks and swol-len lip. She wis-hed she'd had the chan-ce to wash her fa-ce, at le-ast comb her ha-ir.
"But he'll ha-ve the last la-ugh, the co-usin," Ta-riq sa-id- "He pa-in-ted tho-se tro-users with wa-ter-co-lor. When the Ta-li-ban are go-ne, he'll just wash them off" He smi-led-La-ila no-ti-ced that he had a mis-sing to-oth of his own-and lo-oked down at his hands. "Inde-ed"

He was we-aring*apa-kol* on his he-ad, hi-king bo-ots, and a black wo-ol swe-ater tuc-ked in-to the**wa-ist** of kha-ki pants. He was half smi-ling, nod-ding slowly. La-ila didn't re-mem-ber him sa-ying this be-fo-re, this word*in-de-ed,* and this pen-si-ve ges-tu-re,**the** fin-gers ma-king a tent in his lap, the nod-ding, it was new too. Such an adult word, such an adult ges-tu-re, and why sho-uld it be so start-ling? He*was* an adult now, Ta-riq, a twenty-fi-ve-ye-ar-old man with slow mo-ve-ments and a ti-red-ness to his smi-le. Tall, be-ar-ded, slim-mer than in her dre-ams of him, but with strong-lo-oking hands, work-man's hands, with tor-tu-o-us, full ve-ins. His fa-ce was still le-an and hand-so-me but not fa-ir-skin-ned any lon-ger; his brow had a

we-at-he-red lo-ok to it, sun-bur-ned, li-ke his neck, the brow of a tra-ve-ler at the end of a long and we-ar-ying jo-ur-ney. His*pa-kol* was pus-hed back on his he-ad, and she co-uld see that he'd star-ted to lo-se his ha-ir. The ha-zel of his eyes was dul-ler than she re-mem-be-red, pa-ler, or per-haps it was me-rely the light in the ro-om.

La-ila tho-ught of Ta-riq's mot-her, her un-hur-ri-ed man-ners, the cle-ver smi-les, the dull purp-le wig. And his fat-her, with his squ-inty ga-ze, his wry hu-mor. Ear-li-er, at the do-or, with a vo-ice full of te-ars, trip-ping over her own words, she'd told Ta-riq what she tho-ught had hap-pe-ned to him and his pa-rents, and he had sha-ken his he-ad. So now she as-ked him how they we-re do-ing, his pa-rents. But she reg-ret-ted the qu-es-ti-on when Ta-riq lo-oked down and sa-id, a bit dist-rac-tedly, "Pas-sed on."

"I'm so sorry."

"Well. Yes. Me too. He-re." He fis-hed a small pa-per bag from his poc-ket and pas-sed it to her. "Comp-li-ments of Al-yo-na." In-si-de was a block of che-ese in plas-tic wrap.

"Alyo-na. It's a pretty na-me." La-ila tri-ed to say this next wit-ho-ut wa-ve-ring. "Yo-ur wi-fe?"

"My go-at." He was smi-ling at her ex-pec-tantly, as tho-ugh wa-iting for her to ret-ri-eve a me-mory.

Then La-ila re-mem-be-red. The So-vi-et film. Al-yo-na had be-en the cap-ta-in's da-ugh-ter, the girl in lo-ve with the first ma-te. That was the day that she, Ta-riq, and Ha-si-na had watc-hed So-vi-et tanks and je-eps le-ave Ka-bul, the day Ta-riq had worn that ri-di-cu-lo-us Rus-si-an fur hat.

"I had to tie her to a sta-ke in the gro-und," Ta-riq was sa-ying. "And bu-ild a fen-ce. Be-ca-use of the wol-ves. In the fo-ot-hil-ls whe-re I li-ve, the-re's a wo-oded area ne-arby, may-be a qu-ar-ter of a mi-le away, pi-ne tre-es mostly, so-me fir, de-odars. They mostly stick to the wo-ods, the wol-ves do, but a ble-ating go-at, one that li-kes to go wan-de-ring, that can draw them out. So the fen-ce. The sta-ke."

La-ila as-ked him which fo-ot-hil-ls.

"Pir Pa-nj-aL Pa-kis-tan," he sa-id "Whe-re I li-ve is cal-led Mur-ree; it's a sum-mer ret-re-at, an ho-ur from Is-la-ma-bad. It's hilly and gre-en, lots of tre-es, high abo-ve sea le-vel So it's co-ol in the sum-mer. Per-fect for to-urists."

The Bri-tish had bu-ilt it as a hill sta-ti-on ne-ar the-ir mi-li-tary he-ad-qu-ar-ters in Ra-wal-pin-di, he sa-id, for the Vic-to-ri-ans to es-ca-pe the he-at. You co-uld still spot a few re-lics of the co-lo-ni-al ti-mes, Ta-riq sa-id, the oc-ca-si-onal te-aro-om,

tin-ro-ofed bun-ga-lows, cal-led cot-ta-ges, that sort of thing. The town it-self was small and ple-asant. The ma-in stre-et was cal-led the Mall, whe-re the-re was a post of-fi-ce, a ba-za-ar, a few res-ta-urants, shops that overc-har-ged to-urists for pa-in-ted glass and handk-not-ted car-pets. Cu-ri-o-usly, the Mall's one-way traf-fic flo-wed in one di-rec-ti-on one we-ek, the op-po-si-te di-rec-ti-on the next we-ek.

"The lo-cals say that Ire-land's traf-fic is li-ke that too in pla-ces," Ta-riq sa-id. "I wo-uldn't know. Any-way, it's ni-ce. It's a
pla-in li-fe, but I li-ke it. I li-ke li-ving the-re."

"With yo-ur go-at. With Al-yo-na."

La-ila me-ant this less as a joke than as a sur-rep-ti-ti-o-us entry in-to anot-her li-ne of talk, such as who el-se was the-re with him wor-rying abo-ut wol-ves eating go-ats. But Ta-riq only went on nod-ding.

"I'm sorry abo-ut yo-ur pa-rents too," he sa-id.

"You he-ard."

"I spo-ke to so-me ne-igh-bors ear-li-er," he sa-id. A pa-use, du-ring which La-ila won-de-red what el-se the ne-igh-bors had told him. "I don't re-cog-ni-ze any-body. From the old days, I me-an."
"They're all go-ne. The-re's no one left you'd know."

"I don't re-cog-ni-ze Ka-bul."

"Ne-it-her do I," La-ila sa-id. "And I ne-ver left."

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"Mammy has a new fri-end," Zal-mai sa-id af-ter din-ner la-ter that sa-me night, af-ter Ta-riq had left. "A man."

Ras-he-ed lo-oked up.*"Do-es* she, now?"

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Ta-riqas-ked ifheco-uld smo-ke.

They had sta-yed aw-hi-le at the-Na-sir Bagh re-fu-gee camp ne-ar Pes-ha-war, Ta-riq sa-id, tap-ping ash in-to a sa-ucer. The-re we-re sixty tho-usand Afg-hans li-ving the-re al-re-ady when he and his pa-rents ar-ri-ved.

"It wasn't as bad as so-me of the ot-her camps li-ke, God for-bid, Jalo-zai," he sa-id. "I gu-ess at one po-int it was even

so-me kind of mo-del camp, back du-ring the Cold War, a pla-ce the West co-uld po-int to and pro-ve to the world they we-ren't just fun-nel ing arms in-to Afg-ha-nis-tan."

But that had be-en du-ring the So-vi-et war, Ta-riq sa-id, the days of jihad and world-wi-de in-te-rest and ge-ne-ro-us fun-ding and vi-sits from Mar-ga-ret Thatc-her.

"You know the rest, La-ila. Af-ter the war, the So-vi-ets fell apart, and the West mo-ved on. The-re was not-hing at sta-ke for them in Afg-ha-nis-tan any-mo-re and the mo-ney dri-ed up. Now Na-sir Bagh is tents, dust, and open se-wers. When we got the-re, they han-ded us a stick and a she-et of can-vas and told us to bu-ild our-sel-ves a tent."

Ta-riq sa-id what he re-mem-be-red most abo-ut Na-sir Bagh, whe-re they had sta-yed for a ye-ar, was the co-lor brown. "Brown tents. Brown pe-op-le. Brown dogs. Brown por-rid-ge."

The-re was a le-af-less tree he clim-bed every day, whe-re he strad-dled a branch and watc-hed the re-fu-ge-es lying abo-ut in the sun, the-ir so-res and stumps in pla-in vi-ew. He watc-hed lit-tle ema-ci-ated boys car-rying wa-ter in the-ir jer-ry cans, gat-he-ring dog drop-pings to ma-ke fi-re, car-ving toy AK-47s out of wo-od with dull kni-ves, lug-ging the sacks of whe-at flo-ur that no one co-uld ma-ke bre-ad from that held to-get-her. All aro-und the re-fu-gee town, the wind ma-de the tents flap. It hur-led stub-bles of we-ed everyw-he-re, lif-ted ki-tes flown from the ro-ofs of mud ho-vels.

"A lot of kids di-ed. Dysen-tery, TB, hun-ger-you na-me it. Mostly, that damn dysen-tery. God, La-ila. I saw so many kids bu-ri-ed. The-re's not-hing wor-se a per-son can see."

He cros-sed his legs. It grew qu-i-et aga-in bet-we-en them for a whi-le.

"My fat-her didn't sur-vi-ve that first win-ter," he sa-id. "He di-ed in his sle-ep. I don't think the-re was any pa-in."

That sa-me win-ter, he sa-id, his mot-her ca-ught pne-umo-nia and al-most di-ed, wo-uld ha-ve di-ed, if not for a camp doc-tor who wor-ked out of a sta-ti-on wa-gon ma-de in-to a mo-bi-le cli-nic. She wo-uld wa-ke up all night long, fe-ve-rish, co-ug-hing out thick, rust-co-lo-red phlegm. The qu-e-u-es we-re long to see the doc-tor, Ta-riq sa-id. Ever-yo-ne was shi-ve-ring in li-ne, mo-aning, co-ug-hing, so-me with shit run-ning down the-ir legs, ot-hers too ti-red or hungry or sick to ma-ke words.

"But he was a de-cent man, the doc-tor. He tre-ated my mot-her, ga-ve her so-me pills, sa-ved her li-fe that win-ter."

That sa-me win-ter, Ta-riq had cor-ne-red a kid.

"Twel-ve, may-be thir-te-en ye-ars old," he sa-id evenly. "I held a shard of glass to his thro-at and to-ok his blan-ket from him. I ga-ve it to my mot-her."

He ma-de a vow to him-self, Ta-riq sa-id, af-ter his mot-her's il-lness, that they wo-uld not spend anot-her win-ter in camp. He'd work, sa-ve, mo-ve them to an apart-ment in Pes-ha-war with he-ating and cle-an wa-ter. When spring ca-me, he lo-oked for work. From ti-me to ti-me, a truck ca-me to camp early in the mor-ning and ro-un-ded up a co-up-le of do-zen boys, to-ok them to a fi-eld to mo-ve sto-nes or an orc-hard to pick ap-ples in exc-han-ge for a lit-tle mo-ney, so-me-ti-mes a blan-ket, a pa-ir of sho-es. But they ne-ver wan-ted him, Ta-riq sa-id.

"One lo-ok at my leg and it was over."

The-re we-re ot-her jobs. Ditc-hes to dig, ho-vels to bu-ild, wa-ter to carry, fe-ces to sho-vel from out-ho-uses. But yo-ung men fo-ught over the-se jobs, and Ta-riq ne-ver sto-od a chan-ce-Then he met a shop-ke-eper one day, that fall of 1993.

"He of-fe-red me mo-ney to ta-ke a le-at-her co-at to La-ho-re. Not a lot but eno-ugh, eno-ugh for one or may-be two months' apart-ment rent."

The shop-ke-eper ga-ve him a bus tic-ket, Ta-riq sa-id, and the ad-dress of a stre-et cor-ner ne-ar the La-ho-re Ra-il Sta-ti-on whe-re he was to de-li-ver the co-at to a fri-end of the shop-ke-eper's.

"I knew al-re-ady. Of co-ur-se I knew," Ta-riq sa-id. "He sa-id that if I got ca-ught, I was on my own, that I sho-uld re-mem-ber that he knew whe-re my mot-her li-ved. But the mo-ney was too go-od to pass up. And win-ter was co-ming aga-in."

"How far did you get?" La-ila as-ked.

"Not far," he sa-id and la-ug-hed, so-un-ding apo-lo-ge-tic, as-ha-med. "Ne-ver even got on the bus. But I tho-ught I was im-mu-ne, you know, sa-fe. As tho-ugh the-re was so-me ac-co-un-tant up the-re so-mew-he-re, a guy with a pen-cil tuc-ked be-hind his ear who kept track of the-se things, who tal-li-ed things up, and he'd lo-ok down and say, 'Yes, yes, he can ha-ve this, we'll let it go. He's pa-id so-me du-es al-re-ady, this one.'"

It was in the se-ams, the has-hish, and it spil-led all over the stre-et when the po-li-ce to-ok a kni-fe to the co-at.

Ta-riq la-ug-hed aga-in when he sa-id this, a clim-bing, shaky kind of la-ugh, and La-ila re-mem-be-red how he used to la-ugh li-ke this when they we-re lit-tle, to clo-ak em-bar-ras-sment, to ma-ke light of things he'd do-ne that we-re fo-ol-hardy or scan-da-lo-us.

* * *

"He has A limp," Zal-mai sa-id. "Is this who I*think* it is?"

"He was only vi-si-ting," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"Shut up, you," Ras-he-ed snap-ped, ra-ising a fin-ger. He tur-ned back to La-ila. "Well, what do you know? La-ili and Ma-jno-on re-uni-ted. Just li-ke old ti-mes." His fa-ce tur-ned stony. "So you let him in. He-re. In my ho-use. You let him in. He was in he-re with my son."

"You du-ped me. You li-ed to me," La-ila sa-id, grit-ting her te-eth. "You had that man sit ac-ross from me and… You knew I wo-uld le-ave if I tho-ught he was ali-ve."

"AND YOU DIDN'T LIE TO ME?" Ras-he-ed ro-ared. "You think I didn't fi-gu-re it out? Abo-ut yo-ur*ha-ra-mil* You ta-ke me for a fo-ol, you who-re?"

* * *

The mo-re Ta-riq tal-ked, the mo-re La-ila dre-aded the mo-ment when he wo-uld stop. The si-len-ce that wo-uld fol-low, the sig-nal that it was her turn to gi-ve ac-co-unt, to pro-vi-de the why and how and when, to ma-ke of-fi-ci-al what he su-rely al-re-ady knew. She felt a fa-int na-usea whe-ne-ver he pa-used. She aver-ted his eyes. She lo-oked down at his hands, at the co-ar-se, dark ha-irs that had spro-uted on the back of them in the in-ter-ve-ning ye-ars.

Ta-riq wo-uldn't say much abo-ut his ye-ars in pri-son sa-ve that he'd le-ar-ned to spe-ak Ur-du the-re. When La-ila as-ked, he ga-ve an im-pa-ti-ent sha-ke of his he-ad. In this ges-tu-re, La-ila saw rusty bars and un-was-hed bo-di-es, vi-olent men and crow-ded halls, and ce-ilings rot-ting with moldy de-po-sits. She re-ad in his fa-ce that it had be-en a pla-ce of aba-se-ment, of deg-ra-da-ti-on and des-pa-ir.

Ta-riq sa-id his mot-her tri-ed to vi-sit him af-ter his ar-rest.

"Three ti-mes she ca-me. But I ne-ver got to see her," he sa-id.

He wro-te her a let-ter, and a few mo-re af-ter that, even tho-ugh he do-ub-ted that she wo-uld re-ce-ive them.

"And I wro-te you."

"You did?"

"Oh,*vo-lu-mes,"* he sa-id. "Yo-ur fri-end Ru-mi wo-uld ha-ve en-vi-ed my pro-duc-ti-on." Then he la-ug-hed aga-in, up-ro-ari-o-usly this ti-me, as tho-ugh he was both start-led at his own bold-ness and em-bar-ras-sed by what he had let on.

Zal-mai be-gan baw-ling ups-ta-irs.

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"Just li-ke old ti-mes, then," Ras-he-ed sa-id. "The two of you. I sup-po-se you let him see yo-ur fa-ce."

"She did," sa-id Zal-mai. Then, to La-ila, "You did, Mammy. I saw you."

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"Yo-ur son do-esn't ca-re for me much," Ta-riq sa-id when La-ila re-tur-ned downs-ta-irs.

"I'm sorry," she sa-id. "It's not that. He just…Don't mind him." Then qu-ickly she chan-ged the su-bj-ect be-ca-use it ma-de her fe-el per-ver-se and gu-ilty to fe-el that abo-ut Zal-mai, who was a child, a lit-tle boy who lo-ved his fat-her, who-se ins-tinc-ti-ve aver-si-on to this stran-ger was un-ders-tan-dab-le and le-gi-ti-ma-te.

And I wro-te you.
Vo-lu-mes. Vo-lu-mes.

"How long ha-ve you be-en in Mur-ree?"

"Less than a ye-ar," Ta-riq sa-id-He bef-ri-en-ded an ol-der man in pri-son, he sa-id, a fel-low na-med Sa-lim, a Pa-kis-ta-ni, a for-mer fi-eld hoc-key pla-yer who had be-en in and out of pri-son for ye-ars and who was ser-ving ten ye-ars for stab-bing an un-der-co-ver po-li-ce-man. Every pri-son has a man li-ke Sa-lim, Ta-riq sa-id. The-re was al-ways so-me-one who was cun-ning and con-nec-ted, who wor-ked the system and fo-und you things, so-me-one aro-und whom the air buz-zed with both op-por-tu-nity and dan-ger-It was Sa-lim who had sent out Ta-riq's qu-eri-es abo-ut his mot-her, Sa-lim who had sat him down and told him, in a soft, fat-herly vo-ice, that she had di-ed of ex-po-su-re.

Ta-riq spent se-ven ye-ars in the Pa-kis-ta-ni pri-son. "I got off easy," he sa-id. "I was lucky. The jud-ge sit-ting on my ca-se, it tur-ned out, had a brot-her who'd mar-ri-ed an Afg-han wo-man. May-be he sho-wed mercy. I don't know."

When Ta-riq's sen-ten-ce was up, early in the win-ter of 2000, Sa-lim ga-ve him his brot-her's ad-dress and pho-ne num-ber. The brot-her's na-me was Sa-ye-ed.

"He sa-id Sa-ye-ed ow-ned a small ho-tel in Mur-ree," Ta-riq sa-id. "Twenty ro-oms and a lo-un-ge, a lit-tle pla-ce to ca-ter to to-urists. He sa-id tell him I sent you."

Ta-riq had li-ked Mur-ree as so-on as he'd step-ped off the bus: the snow-la-den pi-nes; the cold, crisp air; the shut-te-red wo-oden cot-ta-ges, smo-ke cur-ling up from chim-neys.

He-re was a pla-ce, Ta-riq had tho-ught, knoc-king on Sa-ye-ed's do-or, a pla-ce not only worlds re-mo-ved from the wretc-hed-ness he'd known but one that ma-de even the no-ti-on of hards-hip and sor-row so-me-how obs-ce-ne, uni-ma-gi-nab-le.

"I sa-id to myself, he-re is a pla-ce whe-re a man can get on."

Ta-riq was hi-red as a jani-tor and handy-man. He did well, he sa-id, du-ring the one-month tri-al pe-ri-od, at half pay, that Sa-ye-ed gran-ted him. As Ta-riq spo-ke, La-ila saw Sa-ye-ed, whom she ima-gi-ned nar-row-eyed and rud-dy-fa-ced, stan-ding at the re-cep-ti-on of-fi-ce win-dow watc-hing Ta-riq chop wo-od and sho-vel snow off the dri-ve-way. She saw him sto-oping over Ta-riq's legs, ob-ser-ving, as Ta-riq lay be-ne-ath the sink fi-xing a le-aky pi-pe. She pic-tu-red him chec-king the re-gis-ter for mis-sing cash.

Ta-riq's shack was be-si-de the co-ok's lit-tle bun-ga-low, he sa-id. The co-ok was a mat-ronly old wi-dow na-med Adi-ba. Both shacks we-re de-tac-hed from the ho-tel it-self, se-pa-ra-ted from the ma-in bu-il-ding by a scat-te-ring of al-mond tre-es, a park bench, and a pyra-mid-sha-ped sto-ne fo-un-ta-in that, in the sum-mer, gurg-led wa-ter all day. La-ila pic-tu-red Ta-riq in his shack, sit-ting up in bed, watc-hing the le-afy world out-si-de his win-dow.

At the end of the gra-ce pe-ri-od, Sa-ye-ed ra-ised Ta-riq's pay to full, told him his lunc-hes we-re free, ga-ve him a wo-ol co-at, and fit-ted him for a new leg. Ta-riq sa-id he'd wept at the man's kind-ness.

With his first month's full sa-lary in his poc-ket, Ta-riq had go-ne to town and bo-ught Al-yo-na.

"Her fur is per-fectly whi-te," Ta-riq sa-id, smi-ling. "So-me mor-nings, when it's sno-wed all night, you lo-ok out the win-dow and all you see of her is two eyes and a muz-zle."

La-ila nod-ded Anot-her si-len-ce en-su-ed Ups-ta-irs, Zal-mai had be-gun bo-un-cing his ball aga-in aga-inst the wall.

"I tho-ught you we-re de-ad," La-ila sa-id.

"I know. You told me."

La-ila's vo-ice bro-ke. She had to cle-ar her thro-at, col-lect her-self. "The man who ca-me to gi-ve the news, he was so ear-nest…Ibe-li-eved him, Ta-riq. I wish I hadn't, but I did. And then I felt so alo-ne and sca-red. Ot-her-wi-se, I wo-uldn't ha-ve ag-re-ed to marry Ras-he-ed. I wo-uldn't ha-ve…"

"You don't ha-ve to do this," he sa-id softly, avo-iding her eyes. The-re was no hid-den rep-ro-ach, no rec-ri-mi-na-ti-on, in the way he had sa-id this. No sug-ges-ti-on of bla-me.

"But I do. Be-ca-use the-re was a big-ger re-ason why I mar-ri-ed him. The-re's so-met-hing you don't know, Ta-riq.*So-me-one.* I ha-ve to tell you."

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"Did you srr and talk with him too?" Ras-he-ed as-ked Zal-mai.
Zal-mai sa-id not-hing. La-ila saw he-si-ta-ti-on and un-cer-ta-inty in his eyes now, as if he had just re-ali-zed that what he'd disc-lo-sed had tur-ned out to be far big-ger than he'd tho-ught.

"I as-ked you a qu-es-ti-on, boy."

Zal-mai swal-lo-wed. His ga-ze kept shif-ting. "I was ups-ta-irs, pla-ying with Ma-ri-am."
"And yo-ur mot-her?"

Zal-mai lo-oked at La-ila apo-lo-ge-ti-cal-ly, on the ver-ge of te-ars.

"It's all right, Zal-mai," La-ila sa-id. "Tell the truth."

"She was…She was downs-ta-irs, tal-king to that man," he sa-id in a thin vo-ice hardly lo-uder than a whis-per.

"I see," sa-id Ras-he-ed. "Te-am-work."

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As he was le-aving, Ta-riq sa-id, "I want to me-et her. I want to see her."

"I'll ar-ran-ge it," La-ila sa-id.

"Azi-za. Azi-za." He smi-led, tas-ting the word. Whe-ne-ver Ras-he-ed ut-te-red her da-ugh-ter's na-me, it ca-me out so-un-ding unw-ho-le-so-me to La-ila, al-most vul-gar.

"Azi-za. It's lo-vely."

"So is she. You'll see."

"I'll co-unt the mi-nu-tes."

Almost ten ye-ars had pas-sed sin-ce they had last se-en each ot-her. La-ila's mind flas-hed to all the ti-mes they'd met in the al-ley, kis-sing in sec-ret. She won-de-red how she must se-em to him now. Did he still find her pretty? Or did she se-em wit-he-red to him, re-du-ced, pi-ti-ab-le, li-ke a fe-ar-ful, shuf-fling old wo-man? Al-most ten ye-ars. But, for a mo-ment, stan-ding the-re with Ta-riq in the sun-light, it was as tho-ugh tho-se ye-ars had ne-ver hap-pe-ned. Her pa-rents' de-aths, her mar-ri-age to Ras-he-ed, the kil-lings, the roc-kets, the Ta-li-ban, the be-atings, the hun-ger, even her child-ren, all of it se-emed li-ke a dre-am, a bi-zar-re de-to-ur, a me-re in-ter-lu-de bet-we-en that last af-ter-no-on to-get-her and this mo-ment.

Then Ta-riq's fa-ce chan-ged, tur-ned gra-ve. She knew this exp-res-si-on. It was the sa-me lo-ok he'd had on his fa-ce that day, all tho-se ye-ars ago when they'd both be-en child-ren, when he'd unst-rap-ped his leg and go-ne af-ter Kha-dim. He re-ac-hed with one hand now and to-uc-hed the co-mer of her lo-wer lip.

"He did this to you," he sa-id coldly.

At his to-uch, La-ila re-mem-be-red the frenzy of that af-ter-no-on aga-in when they'd con-ce-ived Azi-za. His bre-ath on her neck, the musc-les of his hips fle-xing, his chest pres-sing aga-inst her bre-asts, the-ir hands in-ter-loc-ked.

"I wish I'd ta-ken you with me," Ta-riq ne-arly whis-pe-red.

La-ila had to lo-wer her ga-ze, try not to cry.

"I know you're a mar-ri-ed wo-man and a mot-her now. And he-re I am, af-ter all the-se ye-ars, af-ter all that's hap-pe-ned, sho-wing up at yo-ur do-ors-tep. Pro-bably, it isn't pro-per, or fa-ir, but I've co-me such a long way to see you, and… Oh, La-ila, I wish I'd ne-ver left you."

"Don't," she cro-aked.

"I sho-uld ha-ve tri-ed har-der. I sho-uld ha-ve mar-ri-ed you when I had the chan-ce. Everyt-hing wo-uld ha-ve be-en dif-fe-rent, then."

"Don't talk this way. Ple-ase. It hurts."

He nod-ded, star-ted to ta-ke a step to-ward her, then stop-ped him-self. "I don't want to as-su-me anyt-hing. And I don't me-an to turn yo-ur li-fe up-si-de down, ap-pe-aring li-ke this out of now-he-re. If you want me to le-ave, if you want me to go back to Pa-kis-tan, say the word, La-ila. I me-an it. Say it and I'll go. I'll ne-ver tro-ub-le you aga-in. I'll-"

"No!" La-ila sa-id mo-re sharply than she'd in-ten-ded to. She saw that she'd re-ac-hed for his arm, that she was clutc-hing**it.** She drop-ped her hand. "No. Don't le-ave, Ta-riq. No. Ple-ase stay."

Ta-riq nod-ded.

"He works from no-on to eight. Co-me back to-mor-row af-ter-no-on. I'll ta-ke you to Azi-za."

"I'm not af-ra-id of him, you know."

"I know. Co-me back to-mor-row af-ter-no-on."

"And then?"

"And then…Idon't know. I ha-ve to think. This is…"

"I know it is," he sa-id. "I un-ders-tand. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for a lot of things."

"Don't be. You pro-mi-sed you'd co-me back. And you did."

His eyes wa-te-red. "It's go-od to see you, La-ila."
She watc-hed him walk away, shi-ve-ring whe-re she sto-od. She tho-ught,*Vo-lu-mes,* and anot-her shud-der pas-sed thro-ugh her, a cur-rent of so-met-hing sad and for-lorn, but al-so so-met-hing eager and reck-les-sly ho-pe-ful.

45.

Ma-dam

I was ups-ta-irs, pla-ying with Ma-ri-am," Zal-mai sa-id.

"And yo-ur mot-her?"
"She was…She was downs-ta-irs, tal-king to that man."

"I see," sa-id Ras-he-ed. "Te-am-work."

Ma-ri-am watc-hed his fa-ce re-lax, lo-osen. She watc-hed the folds cle-ar from his brow. Sus-pi-ci-on and mis-gi-ving win-ked out of his eyes. He sat up stra-ight, and, for a few bri-ef mo-ments, he ap-pe-ared me-rely tho-ught-ful, li-ke a cap-ta-in in-for-med of im-mi-nent mu-tiny ta-king his ti-me to pon-der his next mo-ve.

He lo-oked up.

Ma-ri-am be-gan to say so-met-hing, but he ra-ised a hand, and, wit-ho-ut lo-oking at her, sa-id, "It's too la-te, Ma-ri-am."

To Zal-mai he sa-id coldly, "You're go-ing ups-ta-irs, boy."

On Zal-mai's fa-ce, Ma-ri-am saw alarm. Ner-vo-usly, he lo-oked aro-und at the three of them. He sen-sed now that his tat-tle-ta-le ga-me had let so-met-hing se-ri-o-us-adult se-ri-o-us-into the ro-om. He cast a des-pon-dent, cont-ri-te glan-ce to-ward Ma-ri-am, then his mot-her.

In a chal-len-ging vo-ice, Ras-he-ed sa-id,*"Now!"*

He to-ok Zal-mai by the el-bow. Zal-mai me-ekly let him-self be led ups-ta-irs.

They sto-od fro-zen, Ma-ri-am and La-ila, eyes to the gro-und, as tho-ugh lo-oking at each ot-her wo-uld gi-ve cre-den-ce to the way Ras-he-ed saw things, that whi-le he was ope-ning do-ors and lug-ging bag-ga-ge for pe-op-le who wo-uldn't spa-re him a glan-ce a lewd cons-pi-racy was sha-ping be-hind his back, in his ho-me, in his be-lo-ved son's pre-sen-ce. Ne-it-her one of them sa-id a word. They lis-te-ned to the fo-ots-teps in the hal-lway abo-ve, one he-avy and fo-re-bo-ding, the ot-her the pat-te-ring of a skit-tish lit-tle ani-mal. They lis-te-ned to mu-ted words pas-sed, a squ-e-aky plea, a curt re-tort, a do-or shut, the rat-tle of a key as it tur-ned. Then one set of fo-ots-teps re-tur-ning, mo-re im-pa-ti-ently now.

Ma-ri-am saw his fe-et po-un-ding the steps as he ca-me down. She saw him poc-ke-ting the key, saw his belt, the per-fo-ra-ted end wrap-ped tightly aro-und his knuck-les. The fa-ke brass buck-le drag-ged be-hind him, bo-un-cing on the steps.

She went to stop him, but he sho-ved her back and blew by her. Wit-ho-ut sa-ying a word, he swung the belt at La-ila. He did it with such spe-ed that she had no ti-me to ret-re-at or duck, or even ra-ise a pro-tec-ti-ve arm. La-ila to-uc-hed her fin-gers to her temp-le, lo-oked at the blo-od, lo-oked at Ras-he-ed, with as-to-nish-ment. It las-ted only a mo-ment or two, this lo-ok of dis-be-li-ef, be-fo-re it was rep-la-ced by so-met-hing ha-te-ful.

Ras-he-ed swung the belt aga-in.

This ti-me, La-ila shi-el-ded her-self with a fo-re-arm and ma-de a grab at the belt. She mis-sed, and Ras-he-ed bro-ught the belt down aga-in. La-ila ca-ught it bri-efly be-fo-re Ras-he-ed yan-ked it free and las-hed at her aga-in. Then La-ila was das-hing

aro-und the ro-om, and Ma-ri-am was scre-aming words that ran to-get-her and imp-lo-ring Ras-he-ed, as he cha-sed La-ila, as he bloc-ked her way and crac-ked his belt at her. At one po-int, La-ila duc-ked and ma-na-ged to land a punch ac-ross his ear, which ma-de him spit a cur-se and pur-sue her even mo-re re-lent-les-sly. He ca-ught her, threw her up aga-inst the wall, and struck her with the belt aga-in and aga-in, the buck-le slam-ming aga-inst her chest, her sho-ul-der, her ra-ised arms, her fin-gers, dra-wing blo-od whe-re-ver it struck.

Ma-ri-am lost co-unt of how many ti-mes the belt crac-ked, how many ple-ading words she cri-ed out to Ras-he-ed, how many ti-mes she circ-led aro-und the in-co-he-rent tang-le of te-eth and fists and belt, be-fo-re she saw fin-gers cla-wing at Ras-he-ed's fa-ce, chip-ped na-ils dig-ging in-to his jowls and pul-ling at his ha-ir and scratc-hing his fo-re-he-ad. How long be-fo-re she re-ali-zed, with both shock and re-lish, that the fin-gers we-re hers.

He let go of La-ila and tur-ned on her. At first, he lo-oked at her wit-ho-ut se-e-ing her, then his eyes nar-ro-wed, ap-pra-ised Ma-ri-am with in-te-rest. The lo-ok in them shif-ted from puz-zle-ment to shock, then di-sap-pro-val, di-sap-po-int-ment even, lin-ge-ring the-re a mo-ment.

Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red the first ti-me she had se-en his eyes, un-der the wed-ding ve-il, in the mir-ror, with Jalil lo-oking on, how the-ir ga-zes had slid ac-ross the glass and met, his in-dif-fe-rent, hers do-ci-le, con-ce-ding, al-most apo-lo-ge-tic.

Apo-lo-ge-tic.

Ma-ri-am saw now in tho-se sa-me eyes what a fo-ol she had be-en.

Had she be-en a de-ce-it-ful wi-fe? she as-ked her-self. A comp-la-cent wi-fe? A dis-ho-no-rab-le wo-man? Disc-re-di-tab-le? Vul-gar? What harm-ful thing had she wil-lful-ly do-ne to this man to war-rant his ma-li-ce, his con-ti-nu-al as-sa-ults, the re-lish with which he tor-men-ted her? Had she not lo-oked af-ter him when he was ill? Fed him, and his fri-ends, cle-aned up af-ter him du-ti-ful-ly?

Had she not gi-ven this man her yo-uth?

Had she ever justly de-ser-ved his me-an-ness?

The belt ma-de a thump when Ras-he-ed drop-ped it to the gro-und and ca-me for her. So-me jobs, that*thump* sa-id, we-re me-ant to be do-ne with ba-re hands.

But just as he was be-aring down on her, Ma-ri-am saw La-ila be-hind him pick so-met-hing up from the gro-und. She watc-hed La-ila's hand ri-se over-he-ad, hold, then co-me swo-oping down aga-inst the si-de of his fa-ce. Glass shat-te-red. The jag-ged re-ma-ins of the drin-king glass ra-ined down to the gro-und. The-re was blo-od on La-ila's hands, blo-od flo-wing from the open gash on Ras-he-ed's che-ek,

blo-od down his neck, on his shirt. He tur-ned aro-und, all snar-ling te-eth and bla-zing eyes.

They cras-hed to the gro-und, Ras-he-ed and La-ila, thras-hing abo-ut. He en-ded up on top, his hands al-re-ady wrap-ped aro-und La-ila's neck.

Ma-ri-am cla-wed at him. She be-at at his chest. She hur-led her-self aga-inst him. She strug-gled to un-curl his fin-gers from La-ila's neck. She bit them. But they re-ma-ined tightly clam-ped aro-und La-ila's wind-pi-pe, and Ma-ri-am saw that he me-ant to carry this thro-ugh.

He me-ant to suf-fo-ca-te her, and the-re was not-hing eit-her of them co-uld do abo-ut it.

Ma-ri-am bac-ked away and left the ro-om. She was awa-re of a thum-ping so-und from ups-ta-irs, awa-re that tiny palms we-re slap-ping aga-inst a loc-ked do-or. She ran down the hal-lway. She burst thro-ugh the front do-or. Cros-sed the yard.

In the to-ols-hed, Ma-ri-am grab-bed the sho-vel.

Ras-he-ed didn't no-ti-ce her co-ming back in-to the ro-om. He was still on top of La-ila, his eyes wi-de and crazy, his hands wrap-ped aro-und her neck. La-ila's fa-ce was tur-ning blue now, and her eyes had rol-led back. Ma-ri-am saw that she was no lon-ger strug-gling.*He's go-ing to kill her,* she tho-ught.*He re-al-ly me-ans to.* And Ma-ri-am co-uld not, wo-uld not, al-low that to hap-pen. He'd ta-ken so much from her in twenty-se-ven ye-ars of mar-ri-age. She wo-uld not watch him ta-ke La-ila too.

Ma-ri-am ste-adi-ed her fe-et and tigh-te-ned her grip aro-und the sho-vel's hand-le. She ra-ised it. She sa-id his na-me. She wan-ted him to see.

"Ras-he-ed."

He lo-oked up.

Ma-ri-am swung.

She hit him ac-ross the temp-le. The blow knoc-ked him off La-ila.

Ras-he-ed to-uc-hed his he-ad with the palm of his hand. He lo-oked at the blo-od on his fin-ger-tips, then at Ma-ri-am. She tho-ught she saw his fa-ce sof-ten. She ima-gi-ned that so-met-hing had pas-sed bet-we-en them, that may-be she had qu-ite li-te-ral-ly knoc-ked so-me un-ders-tan-ding in-to his he-ad. May-be he saw so-met-hing in her fa-ce too, Ma-ri-am tho-ught, so-met-hing that ma-de him hed-ge. May-be he saw so-me tra-ce of all the self-de-ni-al, all the sac-ri-fi-ce, all the she-er exer-ti-on it had ta-ken her to li-ve with him for all the-se ye-ars, li-ve with his con-ti-nu-al con-des-cen-si-on and vi-olen-ce, his fa-ult-fin-ding and me-an-ness. Was that res-pect she saw in his eyes? Reg-ret?

But then his up-per lip cur-led back in-to a spi-te-ful sne-er, and Ma-ri-am knew then the fu-ti-lity, may-be even the ir-res-pon-si-bi-lity, of not fi-nis-hing this. If she let him walk now, how long be-fo-re he fetc-hed the key from his poc-ket and went for that gun of his ups-ta-irs in the ro-om whe-re he'd loc-ked Zal-mai? Had Ma-ri-am be-en cer-ta-in that he wo-uld be sa-tis-fi-ed with sho-oting only her, that the-re was a chan-ce he wo-uld spa-re La-ila, she might ha-ve drop-ped the sho-vel. But in Ras-he-ed's eyes she saw mur-der for them both.

And so Ma-ri-am ra-ised the sho-vel high, ra-ised it as high as she co-uld, arc-hing it so it to-uc-hed the small of her back. She tur-ned it so the sharp ed-ge was ver-ti-cal, and, as she did, it oc-cur-red to her that this was the first ti-me that*s she* was de-ci-ding the co-ur-se of her own li-fe.

And, with that, Ma-ri-am bro-ught down the sho-vel This ti-me, she ga-ve it everyt-hing she had.

46.

La-ila

La-ila was awa-re of the fa-ce over her, all te-eth and to-bac-co and fo-re-bo-ding eyes. She was dimly awa-re, too, of Ma-ri-am, a pre-sen-ce be-yond the fa-ce, of her fists ra-ining down. Abo-ve them was the ce-iling, and it was the ce-iling La-ila was drawn to, the dark mar-kings of mold spre-ading ac-ross it li-ke ink on a dress, the crack in the plas-ter that was a sto-lid smi-le or a frown, de-pen-ding on which end of the ro-om you lo-oked at it from. La-ila tho-ught of all the ti-mes she had ti-ed a rag aro-und the end of a bro-om and cle-aned cob-webs from this ce-iling. The three ti-mes she and Ma-ri-am had put co-ats of whi-te pa-int on it. The crack wasn't a smi-le any lon-ger now but a moc-king le-er. And it was re-ce-ding. The ce-iling was shrin-king, lif-ting, ri-sing away from her and to-ward so-me hazy dim-ness be-yond. It ro-se un-til it shrank to the si-ze of a pos-ta-ge stamp, whi-te and bright, everyt-hing aro-und it blot-ted out by the shut-te-red dark-ness. In the dark, Ras-he-ed's fa-ce was li-ke a suns-pot.

Bri-ef lit-tle bursts of blin-ding light be-fo-re her eyes now, li-ke sil-ver stars exp-lo-ding. Bi-zar-re ge-omet-ric forms in the light, worms, egg-sha-ped things, mo-ving up and down, si-de-ways, mel-ting in-to each ot-her, bre-aking apart, morp-hing in-to so-met-hing el-se, then fa-ding, gi-ving way to black-ness.

Vo-ices muf-fled and dis-tant.

Be-hind the lids of her eyes, her child-ren's fa-ces fla-red and fiz-zled. Azi-za, alert and bur-de-ned, kno-wing, sec-re-ti-ve. Zal-mai, lo-oking up at his fat-her with qu-ive-ring eager-ness.

It wo-uld end li-ke this, then, La-ila tho-ught. What a pi-ti-ab-le end-But then the dark-ness be-gan to lift. She had a sen-sa-ti-on of ri-sing up, of be-ing ho-is-ted up. The ce-iling slowly ca-me back, ex-pan-ded, and now La-ila co-uld ma-ke out the crack aga-in, and it was the sa-me old dull smi-le.

She was be-ing sha-ken.*Are you all right? Ans-wer me, are you all right?* Ma-ri-am's fa-ce, eng-ra-ved with scratc-hes, he-avy with worry, ho-ve-red over La-ila.

La-ila tri-ed a bre-ath. It bur-ned her thro-at. She tri-ed anot-her. It bur-ned even mo-re this ti-me, and not just her thro-at but her chest too. And then she was co-ug-hing, and whe-ezing. Gas-ping. But bre-at-hing. Her go-od ear rang.

* * *

The first thing she saw when she sat up was Ras-he-ed. He was lying on his back, sta-ring at not-hing with an unb-lin-king, fish-mo-ut-hed exp-res-si-on. A bit of fo-am, lightly pink, had drib-bled from his mo-uth down his che-ek. The front of his pants was wet. She saw his fo-re-he-ad.

Then she saw the sho-vel.

A gro-an ca-me out of her. "Oh," she sa-id, tre-mu-lo-usly, ba-rely ab-le to ma-ke a vo-ice, "Oh, Ma-ri-am."

* * *

La-ila pa-ced, mo-aning and ban-ging her hands to-get-her, as Ma-ri-am sat ne-ar Ras-he-ed, her hands in her lap, calm and mo-ti-on-less. Ma-ri-am didn't say anyt-hing for a long ti-me.

La-ila's mo-uth was dry, and she was stam-me-ring her words, tremb-ling all over. She wil-led her-self not to lo-ok at Ras-he-ed, at the ric-tus of his mo-uth, his open eyes, at the blo-od con-ge-aling in the hol-low of his col-lar-bo-ne.

Out-si-de, the light was fa-ding, the sha-dows de-epe-ning. Ma-ri-am's fa-ce lo-oked thin and drawn in this light, but she did not ap-pe-ar agi-ta-ted or frigh-te-ned, me-rely pre-oc-cu-pi-ed, tho-ught-ful, so self-pos-ses-sed that when a fly lan-ded on her chin she pa-id it no at-ten-ti-on. She just sat the-re with her bot-tom lip stuck out, the way she did when she was ab-sor-bed in tho-ught.

At last, she sa-id, "Sit down, La-ila jo."
La-ila did, obe-di-ently.

"We ha-ve to mo-ve him. Zal-mai can't see this."

* * *

Ma-ri-am fis-hed the bed-ro-om key from Ras-he-ed's poc-ket be-fo-re they wrap-ped him in a beds-he-et. La-ila to-ok him by the legs, be-hind the kne-es, and Ma-ri-am grab-bed him un-der the arms. They tri-ed lif-ting him, but he was too he-avy, and they en-ded up drag-ging him. As they we-re pas-sing thro-ugh the front do-or and in-to the yard, Ras-he-ed's fo-ot ca-ught aga-inst the do-orf-ra-me and his leg bent si-de-ways. They had to back up and try aga-in, and then so-met-hing thum-ped ups-ta-irs and La-ila's legs ga-ve out. She drop-ped Ras-he-ed. She slum-ped to the gro-und, sob-bing and sha-king, and Ma-ri-am had to stand over her, hands on hips, and say that she had to get her-self to-get-her. That what was do-ne was do-ne-After a ti-me, La-ila got up and wi-ped her fa-ce, and they car-ri-ed Ras-he-ed to the yard wit-ho-ut furt-her in-ci-dent. They to-ok him in-to the to-ols-hed. They left him be-hind the work-bench, on which sat his saw, so-me na-ils, a chi-sel, a ham-mer, and a cylind-ri-cal block of wo-od that Ras-he-ed had be-en me-aning to car-ve in-to so-met-hing for Zal-mai but had ne-ver got-ten aro-und to do-ing-Then they went back in-si-de. Ma-ri-am was-hed her hands, ran them thro-ugh her ha-ir, to-ok a de-ep bre-ath and let it out. "Let me tend to yo-ur wo-unds now. You're all cut up, La-ila jo."

* * *

Ma-hi-am sa-id she ne-eded the night to think things over. To get her tho-ughts to-get-her and de-vi-se a plan.

"The-re is a way," she sa-id, "and I just ha-ve to find it."

"We ha-ve to le-ave! We can't stay he-re," La-ila sa-id in a bro-ken, husky vo-ice. She tho-ught sud-denly of the so-und the sho-vel must ha-ve ma-de stri-king Ras-he-ed's he-ad, and her body pitc-hed for-ward. Bi-le sur-ged up her chest.

Ma-ri-am wa-ited pa-ti-ently un-til La-ila felt bet-ter. Then she had La-ila lie down, and, as she stro-ked La-ila's ha-ir in her lap, Ma-ri-am sa-id not to worry, that everyt-hing wo-uld be fi-ne. She sa-id that they wo-uld le-ave-she, La-ila, the child-ren, and Ta-riq too. They wo-uld le-ave this ho-use, and this un-for-gi-ving city. They wo-uld le-ave this des-pon-dent co-untry al-to-get-her, Ma-ri-am sa-id, run-ning her hands thro-ugh La-ila's ha-ir, and go so-mep-la-ce re-mo-te and sa-fe whe-re no one wo-uld find them, whe-re they co-uld di-sown the-ir past and find shel-ter.
"So-mew-he-re with tre-es," she sa-id. "Yes. Lots of tre-es."

They wo-uld li-ve in a small ho-use on the ed-ge of so-me town they'd ne-ver he-ard of, Ma-ri-am sa-id, or in a re-mo-te vil-la-ge whe-re the ro-ad was nar-row and

un-pa-ved but li-ned with all man-ner of plants and shrubs. May-be the-re wo-uld be a path to ta-ke, a path that led to a grass fi-eld whe-re the child-ren co-uld play, or may-be a gra-ve-led ro-ad that wo-uld ta-ke them to a cle-ar blue la-ke whe-re tro-ut swam and re-eds po-ked thro-ugh the sur-fa-ce. They wo-uld ra-ise she-ep and chic-kens, and they wo-uld ma-ke bre-ad to-get-her and te-ach the child-ren to re-ad. They wo-uld ma-ke new li-ves for them-sel-ves-pe-ace-ful, so-li-tary li-ves-and the-re the we-ight of all that they'd en-du-red wo-uld lift from them, and they wo-uld be de-ser-ving of all the hap-pi-ness and simp-le pros-pe-rity they wo-uld find.

La-ila mur-mu-red en-co-ura-gingly. It wo-uld be an exis-ten-ce ri-fe with dif-fi-cul-ti-es, she saw, but of a ple-asu-rab-le kind, dif-fi-cul-ti-es they co-uld ta-ke pri-de in, pos-sess, va-lue, as one wo-uld a fa-mily he-ir-lo-om. Ma-ri-am's soft ma-ter-nal vo-ice went on, bro-ught a deg-ree of com-fort to her.*The-re is a way,* she'd sa-id, and, in the mor-ning, Ma-ri-am wo-uld tell her what ne-eded to be do-ne and they wo-uld do it, and may-be by to-mor-row this ti-me they wo-uld be on the-ir way to this new li-fe, a li-fe lu-xu-ri-ant with pos-si-bi-lity and joy and wel-co-med dif-fi-cul-ti-es. La-ila was gra-te-ful that Ma-ri-am was in char-ge, unc-lo-uded and so-ber, ab-le to think this thro-ugh for both of them. Her own mind was a jit-tery, mud-dled mess.

Ma-ri-am got up. "You sho-uld tend to yo-ur son now." On her was the most stric-ken exp-res-si-on La-ila had ever se-en on a hu-man fa-ce.

*** * ***

La-ila fo-und him in the dark, cur-led up on Ras-he-ed's**si-de of the mat-tress.** She slip-ped be-ne-ath the co-vers be-si-de him and pul-led the blan-ket over them.

"Are you as-le-ep?"

Wit-ho-ut tur-ning aro-und to fa-ce her, he sa-id, "Can't sle-ep yet. Ba-ba jan hasn't sa-id the*Ba-ba-loo* pra-yers with me."

"May-be I can say them with you to-night."

"You can't say them li-ke he can."

She squ-e-ezed his lit-tle sho-ul-der. Kis-sed the na-pe of his neck. "I can try."
"Whe-re is Ba-ba jan?"

"Ba-ba jan has go-ne away," La-ila sa-id, her thro-at clo-sing up aga-in.

And the-re it was, spo-ken for the first ti-me, the gre-at, dam-ning lie.How many mo-re ti-mes wo-uld this lie ha-ve to be told? La-ila won-de-red mi-se-rably. How

many mo-re ti-mes wo-uld Zal-mai ha-ve to be de-ce-ived? She pic-tu-red Zal-mai, his jubi-lant, run-ning wel-co-mes when Ras-he-ed ca-me ho-me and Ras-he-ed pic-king him up by the el-bows and swin-ging him ro-und and ro-und un-til Zal-mai's legs flew stra-ight out, the two of them gig-gling af-ter-ward when Zal-mai stumb-led aro-und li-ke a drunk. She tho-ught of the-ir di-sor-derly ga-mes and the-ir bo-is-te-ro-us la-ughs, the-ir sec-re-ti-ve glan-ces.

A pall of sha-me and gri-ef for her son fell over La-ila.

"Whe-re did he go?"

"I don't know, my lo-ve."

When was he co-ming back? Wo-uld Ba-ba jan bring a pre-sent with him when he re-tur-ned?

She did the pra-yers with Zal-mai. Twenty-one*Bis-mal-lah-e-rah-man-era-hims* -one for each knuck-le of se-ven fin-gers. She watc-hed him cup his hands be-fo-re his fa-ce and blow in-to them, then pla-ce the back of both hands on his fo-re-he-ad and ma-ke a cas-ting-away mo-ti-on, whis-pe-ring, Ba-ba-loo,*be go-ne, do not co-me to Zal-mai, he has no bu-si-ness with you.* Ba-ba-loo,*be go-ne.* Then, to fi-nish off, they sa-id*Ailah-u-akbar* three ti-mes. And la-ter, much la-ter that night, La-ila was start-led by a mu-ted vo-ice:*Did Ba-ba-j-an le-ave be-ca-use of me? Be-ca-use of what I sa-id, abo-ut you and the man dow-n-s-ta-irs?*

She le-aned over him, me-aning to re-as-su-re, me-aning to say*It had not-hing to do with you, Zal-mai. No. Not-hing is yo-ur fa-ult.* But he was as-le-ep, his small chest ri-sing and sin-king.

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When La-ila "went to bed, her mind was muf-fled up, clo-uded, in-ca-pab-le of sus-ta-ined ra-ti-onal tho-ught. But when she wo-ke up, to the mu-ez-zin's call for mor-ning pra-yer, much of the dul-lness had lif-ted.

She sat up and watc-hed Zal-mai sle-ep for a whi-le, the ball of his fist un-der his chin. La-ila pic-tu-red Ma-ri-am sne-aking in-to the ro-om in the mid-dle of the night as she and Zal-mai had slept, watc-hing them, ma-king plans in her he-ad.

La-ila slip-ped out of bed. It to-ok ef-fort to stand. She ac-hed everyw-he-re. Her neck, her sho-ul-ders, her back, her arms, her thighs, all eng-ra-ved with the cuts of Ras-he-ed's belt buck-le. Win-cing, she qu-i-etly left the bed-ro-om.

In Ma-ri-am's ro-om, the light was a sha-de dar-ker than gray, the kind of light La-ila had al-ways as-so-ci-ated with cro-wing ro-os-ters and dew rol-ling off bla-des of

grass. Ma-ri-am was sit-ting in a cor-ner, on a pra-yer rug fa-cing the win-dow. Slowly, La-ila lo-we-red her-self to the gro-und, sit-ting down ac-ross from her.

"You sho-uld go and vi-sit Azi-za this mor-ning," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"I know what you me-an to do."
"Don't walk. Ta-ke the bus, you'll blend in. Ta-xis are too cons-pi-cu-o-us. You're su-re to get stop-ped for ri-ding alo-ne."

"What you pro-mi-sed last night…"

La-ila co-uld not fi-nish. The tre-es, the la-ke, the na-me-less vil-la-ge. A de-lu-si-on, she saw. A lo-vely lie me-ant to so-ot-he. Li-ke co-o-ing to a dist-res-sed child.

"I me-ant it," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "I me-ant it for*you*, La-ila jo."

"I don't want any of it wit-ho-ut you," La-ila cro-aked.

Ma-ri-am smi-led wanly.

"I want it to be just li-ke you sa-id, Ma-ri-am, all of us go-ing to-get-her, you, me, the child-ren. Ta-riq has a pla-ce in Pa-kis-tan. We can hi-de out the-re for a whi-le, wa-it for things to calm down-"

"That's not pos-sib-le," Ma-ri-am sa-id pa-ti-ently, li-ke a pa-rent to a well-me-aning but mis-gu-ided child.

"We'll ta-ke ca-re of each ot-her," La-ila sa-id, cho-king on the words, her eyes wet with te-ars. "Li-ke you sa-id. No. I'll ta-ke ca-re*of you* for a chan-ge."

"Oh, La-ila jo."

La-ila went on a stam-me-ring rant. She bar-ga-ined. She pro-mi-sed. She wo-uld do all the cle-aning, she sa-id, and all the co-oking. "You won't ha-ve to do a thing. Ever aga-in. You rest, sle-ep in, plant a gar-den. Wha-te-ver you want, you ask and I'll get it for you. Don't do this, Ma-ri-am. Don't le-ave me. Don't bre-ak Azi-za's he-art."

"They chop off hands for ste-aling bre-ad," Ma-ri-am sa-id "What do you think they'll do when they find a de-ad hus-band and two mis-sing wi-ves?"

"No one will know," La-ila bre-at-hed. "No one will find us."

"They will. So-oner or la-ter. They're blo-od-ho-unds." Ma-ri-am's vo-ice was low, ca-uti-oning; it ma-de La-ila's pro-mi-ses so-und fan-tas-ti-cal, trum-ped-up, fo-olish.

"Ma-ri-am, ple-ase-"

"When they do, they'll find you as gu-ilty as me. Ta-riq too. I won't ha-ve the two of you li-ving on the run, li-ke fu-gi-ti-ves. What will hap-pen to yo-ur child-ren if you're ca-ught?"

La-ila's eyes brim-ming, stin-ging.

"Who will ta-ke ca-re of them then? The Ta-li-ban? Think li-ke a mot-her, La-ila jo. Think li-ke a mot-her. I am."

"I can't."

"You ha-ve to."

"It isn't fa-ir," La-ila cro-aked.

"But it*is.* Co-me he-re. Co-me lie he-re."

La-ila craw-led to her and aga-in put her he-ad on Ma-ri-am's lap. She re-mem-be-red all the af-ter-no-ons they'd spent to-get-her, bra-iding each ot-her's ha-ir, Ma-ri-am lis-te-ning pa-ti-ently to her ran-dom tho-ughts and or-di-nary sto-ri-es with an air of gra-ti-tu-de, with the exp-res-si-on of a per-son to whom a uni-que and co-ve-ted pri-vi-le-ge had be-en ex-ten-ded "It*is* fa-ir," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "I've kil-led our hus-band. I've dep-ri-ved yo-ur son of his fat-her. It isn't right that I run. I*can't.* Even if they ne-ver catch us, I'll ne-ver…" Her lips tremb-led. "I'll ne-ver es-ca-pe yo-ur son's gri-ef How do I lo-ok at him? How do I ever bring myself to lo-ok at him, La-ila jo?"

Ma-ri-am twid-dled a strand of La-ila's ha-ir, un-tang-led a stub-born curl.

"For me, it ends he-re. The-re's not-hing mo-re I want. Everyt-hing I'd ever wis-hed for as a lit-tle girl you've al-re-ady gi-ven me. You and yo-ur child-ren ha-ve ma-de me so very happy. It's all right, La-ila jo. This is all right. Don't be sad."

La-ila co-uld find no re-aso-nab-le ans-wer for anyt-hing Ma-ri-am sa-id. But she ramb-led on any-way, in-co-he-rently, chil-dishly, abo-ut fru-it tre-es that awa-ited plan-ting and chic-kens that awa-ited ra-ising. She went on abo-ut small ho-uses in un-na-med towns, and walks to tro-ut-fil-led la-kes. And, in the end, when the words dri-ed up, the te-ars did not, and all La-ila co-uld do was sur-ren-der and sob li-ke a child over-whel-med by an adult's unas-sa-ilab-le lo-gic. All she co-uld do was roll her-self up and bury her fa-ce one last ti-me in the wel-co-ming warmth of Ma-ri-am's lap.

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La-ter that mor-ning, Ma-ri-am pac-ked Zal-mai a small lunch of bre-ad and dri-ed figs. For Azi-za too she pac-ked so-me figs, and a few co-oki-es sha-ped li-ke ani-mals. She put it all in a pa-per bag and ga-ve it to La-ila.

"Kiss Azi-za for me," she sa-id. "Tell her she is the*no-or* of my eyes and the sul-tan of my he-art. Will you do that for me?"

La-ila nod-ded, her lips pur-sed to-get-her.

"Ta-ke the bus, li-ke I sa-id, and ke-ep yo-ur he-ad low."

"When will I see you, Ma-ri-am? I want to see you be-fo-re I tes-tify. I'll tell them how it hap-pe-ned. I'll exp-la-in that it wasn't yo-ur fa-ult. That you had to do it. They'll un-ders-tand, won't they, Ma-ri-am? They'll un-ders-tand."

Ma-ri-am ga-ve her a soft lo-ok.

She hun-ke-red down to eye le-vel with Zal-mai. He was we-aring a red T-shirt, rag-ged kha-kis, and a used pa-ir of cow-boy bo-ots Ras-he-ed had bo-ught him from Man-da-ii. He was hol-ding his new bas-ket-ball with both hands. Ma-ri-am plan-ted a kiss on his che-ek.

"You be a go-od, strong boy, now," she sa-id. "You tre-at yo-ur mot-her well." She cup-ped his fa-ce. He pul-led back but she held on. "I am so sorry, Zal-mai jo. Be-li-eve me that I'm so very sorry for all yo-ur pa-in and sad-ness."

La-ila held Zal-mai's hand as they wal-ked down the ro-ad to-get-her. Just be-fo-re they tur-ned the cor-ner, La-ila lo-oked

back and saw Ma-ri-am at the do-or. Ma-ri-am was we-aring a whi-te scarf over her he-ad, a dark blue swe-ater but-to-ned in the front, and whi-te cot-ton tro-users. A crest of gray ha-ir had fal-len lo-ose over her brow. Bars of sun-light slas-hed ac-ross her fa-ce and sho-ul-ders. Ma-ri-am wa-ved ami-ably.

They tur-ned the cor-ner, and La-ila ne-ver saw Ma-ri-am aga-in.

47.

Ma-dam

Back in a*kol-ba*, it se-emed, af-ter all the-se ye-ars.

The Wa-la-yat wo-men's pri-son was a drab, squ-are-sha-ped bu-il-ding in Shar-e-Nau ne-ar Chic-ken Stre-et. It sat in the cen-ter of a lar-ger comp-lex that ho-used ma-le in-ma-tes. A pad-loc-ked do-or se-pa-ra-ted Ma-ri-am and the ot-her

wo-men from the sur-ro-un-ding men. Ma-ri-am co-un-ted fi-ve wor-king cells. They we-re un-fur-nis-hed ro-oms, with dirty, pe-eling walls, and small win-dows that lo-oked in-to the co-urt-yard. The win-dows we-re bar-red, even tho-ugh the do-ors to the cells we-re un-loc-ked and the wo-men we-re free to co-me and go to the co-urt-yard as they ple-ased. The win-dows had no glass. The-re we-re no cur-ta-ins eit-her, which me-ant the Ta-lib gu-ards who ro-amed the co-urt-yard had an eye-ful of the in-te-ri-or of the cells. So-me of the wo-men comp-la-ined that the gu-ards smo-ked out-si-de the win-dow and le-ered in, with the-ir inf-la-med eyes and wol-fish smi-les, that they mut-te-red in-de-cent jokes to each ot-her abo-ut them. Be-ca-use of this, most of the wo-men wo-re bur-qas all day and lif-ted them only af-ter sun-down, af-ter the ma-in ga-te was loc-ked and the gu-ards had go-ne to the-ir posts.

At night, the cell Ma-ri-am sha-red with fi-ve wo-men and fo-ur child-ren was dark. On tho-se nights when the-re was elect-ri-cal po-wer, they ho-is-ted Nagh-ma, a short, flat-ches-ted girl with black frizzy ha-ir, up to the ce-iling. The-re was a wi-re the-re from which the co-ating had be-en strip-ped. Nagh-ma wo-uld hand-wrap the li-ve wi-re aro-und the ba-se of the light-bulb then to ma-ke a cir-cu-it.

The to-ilets we-re clo-set-si-zed, the ce-ment flo-or crac-ked The-re was a small, rec-tan-gu-lar ho-le in the gro-und, at the bot-tom of which was a he-ap of fe-ces. Fli-es buz-zed in and out of the ho-le-In the mid-dle of the pri-son was an open, rec-tan-gu-lar co-urt-yard, and, in the mid-dle of that, a well The well had no dra-ina-ge, me-aning the co-urt-yard was of-ten a swamp and the wa-ter tas-ted rot-ten. La-undry li-nes, lo-aded with hand-was-hed socks and di-apers, slas-hed ac-ross each ot-her in the co-urt-yard. This was whe-re in-ma-tes met vi-si-tors, whe-re they bo-iled the ri-ce the-ir fa-mi-li-es bro-ught them-the pri-son pro-vi-ded no fo-od The co-urt-yard was al-so the child-ren's playg-ro-und-Ma-ri-am had le-ar-ned that many of the child-ren had be-en born in Wa-la-yat, had ne-ver se-en the world out-si-de the-se walls. Ma-ri-am watc-hed them cha-se each ot-her aro-und, watc-hed the-ir sho-eless fe-et sling mud. All day, they ran aro-und, ma-king up li-vely ga-mes, una-wa-re of the stench of fe-ces and uri-ne that per-me-ated Wa-la-yat and the-ir own bo-di-es, un-mind-ful of the Ta-lib gu-ards un-til one smac-ked them.

Ma-ri-am had no vi-si-tors. That was the first and only thing she had as-ked the Ta-lib of-fi-ci-als he-re. No vi-si-tors.

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No-ne of the wo-men in Ma-ri-am's cell we-re ser-ving ti-me for vi-olent cri-me-they we-re all the-re for the com-mon of-fen-se of "run-ning away from ho-me." As a re-sult, Ma-ri-am ga-ined so-me no-to-ri-ety among them, be-ca-me a kind of ce-leb-rity. The wo-men eyed her with a re-ve-rent, al-most awest-ruck, exp-res-si-on. They of-fe-red her the-ir blan-kets. They com-pe-ted to sha-re the-ir fo-od with her.

The most avid was Nagh-ma, who was al-ways hug-ging her el-bows and fol-lo-wing Ma-ri-am everyw-he-re she went. Nagh-ma was the sort of per-son who fo-und it en-ter-ta-ining to dis-pen-se news of mis-for-tu-ne, whet-her ot-hers' or her own. She sa-id her fat-her had pro-mi-sed her to a ta-ilor so-me thirty ye-ars ol-der than her.

"He smells*li-ke goh,* and has fe-wer te-eth than fin-gers," Nagh-ma sa-id of the ta-ilor.

She'd tri-ed to elo-pe to Gar-dez with a yo-ung man she'd fal-len in lo-ve with, the son of a lo-cal mul-lah. They'd ba-rely ma-de it out of Ka-bul. When they we-re ca-ught and sent back, the mul-lah's son was flog-ged be-fo-re he re-pen-ted and sa-id that Nagh-ma had se-du-ced him with her fe-mi-ni-ne charms. She'd cast a spell on him, he sa-id. He pro-mi-sed he wo-uld re-de-di-ca-te him-self to the study of the Ko-ran. The mul-lah's son was fre-ed. Nagh-ma was sen-ten-ced to fi-ve ye-ars.

It was just as well, she sa-id, her be-ing he-re in pri-son. Her fat-her had sworn that the day she was re-le-ased he wo-uld ta-ke a kni-fe to her thro-at.

Lis-te-ning to Nagh-ma, Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red the dim glim-mer of cold stars and the stringy pink clo-uds stre-aking over the Sa-fid-koh mo-un-ta-ins that long-ago mor-ning when Na-na had sa-id to her,*Li-ke a com-pass ne-ed-le that po-ints north, a man's ac-cu-sing fin-ger al-ways finds a wo-man. Al-ways. You re-mem-ber that, Ma-ri-am.*

*** * ***

Ma-mam'S tri-al had ta-ken pla-ce the we-ek be-fo-re. The-re was no le-gal co-un-cil, no pub-lic he-aring, no cross-exa-mi-ning of evi-den-ce, no ap-pe-als. Ma-ri-am dec-li-ned her right to wit-nes-ses. The en-ti-re thing las-ted less than fif-te-en mi-nu-tes.

The mid-dle jud-ge, a brit-tle-lo-oking Ta-lib, was the le-ader. He was stri-kingly ga-unt, with yel-low, le-at-hery skin and a curly red be-ard. He wo-re eyeg-las-ses that mag-ni-fi-ed his eyes and re-ve-aled how yel-low the whi-tes we-re. His neck lo-oked too thin to sup-port the int-ri-ca-tely wrap-ped tur-ban on his he-ad.

"You ad-mit to this,*ham-s-hi-ra?I* he as-ked aga-in in a ti-red vo-ice.

"I do," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

The man nod-ded. Or may-be he didn't. It was hard to tell; he had a pro-no-un-ced sha-king of his hands and he-ad that re-min-ded Ma-ri-am of Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah's tre-mor. When he sip-ped tea, he did not re-ach for his cup. He mo-ti-oned to the squ-are-sho-ul-de-red man to his left, who res-pect-ful-ly bro-ught it to his lips. Af-ter, the Ta-lib clo-sed his eyes gently, a mu-ted and ele-gant ges-tu-re of gra-ti-tu-de.

Ma-ri-am fo-und a di-sar-ming qu-ality abo-ut him. When he spo-ke, it was with a tin-ge of gu-ile and ten-der-ness. His smi-le was pa-ti-ent. He did not lo-ok at Ma-ri-am des-pi-singly. He did not ad-dress her with spi-te or ac-cu-sa-ti-on but with a soft to-ne of apo-logy.

"Do you fully un-ders-tand what you're sa-ying?" the bony-fa-ced Ta-lib to the jud-ge's right, not the tea gi-ver, sa-id. This one was the yo-un-gest of the three. He spo-ke qu-ickly and with emp-ha-tic, ar-ro-gant con-fi-den-ce. He'd be-en ir-ri-ta-ted that Ma-ri-am co-uld not spe-ak Pash-to. He struck Ma-ri-am as the sort of qu-ar-rel-so-me yo-ung man who re-lis-hed his aut-ho-rity, who saw of-fen-ses everyw-he-re, tho-ught it his birth-right to pass judg-ment.

"I do un-ders-tand," Ma-ri-am sa-id.

"I won-der," the yo-ung Ta-lib sa-id. "God has ma-de us dif-fe-rently, you wo-men and us men. Our bra-ins are dif-fe-rent. You are not ab-le to think li-ke we can. Wes-tern doc-tors and the-ir sci-en-ce ha-ve pro-ven this. This is why we re-qu-ire only one ma-le wit-ness but two fe-ma-le ones."

"I ad-mit to what I did, brot-her," Ma-ri-am sa-id. "But, if I hadn't, he wo-uld ha-ve kil-led her. He was strang-ling her."

"So you say. But, then, wo-men swe-ar to all sorts of things all the ti-me."

"It's the truth."

"Do you ha-ve wit-nes-ses? Ot-her than yo-ur*am-bagh?''*

"I do not," sa-id Ma-ri-am.

"Well, then." He threw up his hands and snic-ke-red.

It was the sickly Ta-lib who spo-ke next.

"I ha-ve a doc-tor in Pes-ha-war," he sa-id. "A fi-ne, yo-ung Pa-kis-ta-ni fel-low. I saw him a month ago, and then aga-in last we-ek. I sa-id, tell me the truth, fri-end, and he sa-id to me, three months, Mul-lah sa-hib, may-be six at most-all God's will, of co-ur-se."

He nod-ded disc-re-etly at the squ-are-sho-ul-de-red man on his left and to-ok anot-her sip of the tea he was of-fe-red. He wi-ped his mo-uth with the back of his tre-mu-lo-us hand. "It do-es not frigh-ten me to le-ave this li-fe that my only son left fi-ve ye-ars ago, this li-fe that in-sists we be-ar sor-row upon sor-row long af-ter we can be-ar no mo-re. No, I be-li-eve I shall gladly ta-ke my le-ave when the ti-me co-mes.

"What frigh-tens me,*ham-s-hi-ra,* is the day God sum-mons me be-fo-re Him and asks,*Why did you not do as I sa-id, Mul-lah? Why did you not obey my laws?* How shall I exp-la-in myself to Him,*ham-s-hi-ra1?* What will be my de-fen-se for not he-eding His com-mands? All I can do, all any of us can do, in the ti-me we are gran-ted, is to go on abi-ding by the laws He has set for us. The cle-arer I see my end,*ham-s-hi-ra,* the ne-arer I am to my day of rec-ko-ning, the mo-re de-ter-mi-ned I grow to carry out His word. Ho-we-ver pa-in-ful it may pro-ve."

He shif-ted on his cus-hi-on and win-ced.

"I be-li-eve you when you say that yo-ur hus-band was a man of di-sag-re-e-ab-le tem-pe-ra-ment," he re-su-med, fi-xing Ma-ri-am with his bes-pec-tac-led eyes, his ga-ze both stern and com-pas-si-ona-te. "But I can-not help but be dis-tur-bed by the bru-ta-lity of yo-ur ac-ti-on,*ham-s-hi-ra* I am tro-ub-led by what you ha-ve do-ne; I am tro-ub-led that his lit-tle boy was crying for him ups-ta-irs when you did it.

"I am ti-red and dying, and I want to be mer-ci-ful. I want to for-gi-ve you. But when God sum-mons me and says,*But it wasn't for you to for-gi-ve, Mul-lah,* what shall I say?"

His com-pa-ni-ons nod-ded and lo-oked at him with ad-mi-ra-ti-on.

"So-met-hing tells me you are not a wic-ked wo-man,*ham-s-hi-ra* But you ha-ve do-ne a wic-ked thing. And you must pay for this thing you ha-ve do-ne.*Sha-ri'a* is not va-gue on this mat-ter. It says I must send you whe-re I will so-on jo-in you myself.

"Do you un-ders-tand,*ham-s-hi-ra?"*

Ma-ri-am lo-oked down at her hands. She sa-id she did.

"May Al-lah for-gi-ve you."

Be-fo-re they led her out, Ma-ri-am was gi-ven a do-cu-ment, told to sign be-ne-ath her sta-te-ment and the mul-lah's sen-ten-ce. As the three Ta-li-ban watc-hed, Ma-ri-am wro-te it out, her na-me-the*me-em,* ther*eh, the-yah,* and the*me-em* -re-mem-be-ring the last ti-me she'd sig-ned her na-me to a do-cu-ment, twenty-se-ven ye-ars be-fo-re, at Jalil's tab-le, be-ne-ath the watch-ful ga-ze of anot-her mul-lah.

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Ma-hi-am spent ten days in pri-son. She sat by the win-dow of the cell, watc-hed the pri-son li-fe in the co-urt-yard. When the sum-mer winds blew, she watc-hed bits of scrap pa-per ri-de the cur-rents in a fren-zi-ed, corksc-rew mo-ti-on, as they we-re hur-led this way and that, high abo-ve the pri-son walls. She watc-hed the winds stir

mu-tiny in the dust, whip-ping it in-to vi-olent spi-rals that rip-ped thro-ugh the co-urt-yard. Ever-yo-ne-the gu-ards, the in-ma-tes, the child-ren, Ma-ri-am-bur-ro-wed the-ir fa-ces in the ho-ok of the-ir el-bows, but the dust wo-uld not be de-ni-ed. It ma-de ho-mes of ear ca-nals and nost-rils, of eye-las-hes and skin folds, of the spa-ce bet-we-en mo-lars. Only at dusk did the winds die down. And then if a night bre-eze blew, it did so ti-midly, as if to ato-ne for the ex-ces-ses of its day-ti-me sib-ling.

On Ma-ri-am's last day at Wa-la-yat, Nagh-ma ga-ve her a tan-ge-ri-ne. She put it in Ma-ri-am's palm and clo-sed her fin-gers aro-und it. Then she burst in-to te-ars.

"You're the best fri-end I ever had," she sa-id.

Ma-ri-am spent the rest of the day by the bar-red win-dow watc-hing the in-ma-tes be-low. So-me-one was co-oking a me-al, and a stre-am of cu-min-scen-ted smo-ke and warm air waf-ted thro-ugh the win-dow. Ma-ri-am co-uld see the child-ren pla-ying a blind-fol-ded ga-me. Two lit-tle girls we-re sin-ging a rhyme, and Ma-ri-am re-mem-be-red it from her child-ho-od, re-mem-be-red Jalil sin-ging it to her as they'd sat on a rock, fis-hing in the stre-am:

Li-li Mi bird-bath, Sit-ting on a dirt path, Min-now sat on the rim and drank, Slip-ped, and in the wa-ter she sank

Ma-ri-am had di-sj-o-in-ted dre-ams that last night. She dre-amed of peb-bles, ele-ven of them, ar-ran-ged ver-ti-cal-ly. Jalil, yo-ung aga-in, all win-ning smi-les and dimp-led chins and swe-at patc-hes, co-at flung over his sho-ul-der, co-me at last to ta-ke his da-ugh-ter away for a ri-de in his shiny black Bu-ick Ro-ad-mas-ter. Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah twir-ling his ro-sary be-ads, wal-king with her along the stre-am, the-ir twin sha-dows gli-ding on the wa-ter and on the grassy banks sprink-led with a blue-la-ven-der wild iris that, in this dre-am, smel-led li-ke clo-ves. She dre-amed of Na-na in the do-or-way of the*kol-ba*, her vo-ice dim and dis-tant, cal-ling her to din-ner, as Ma-ri-am pla-yed in co-ol, tang-led grass whe-re ants craw-led and be-et-les scur-ri-ed and gras-shop-pers skip-ped amid all the dif-fe-rent sha-des of gre-en. The squ-e-ak of a whe-el-bar-row la-bo-ring up a dusty path. Cow-bel-ls clan-ging. She-ep ba-a-ing on a hill.

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On the way to Gha-zi Sta-di-um, Ma-ri-am bo-un-ced in the bed of the truck as it skid-ded aro-und pot-ho-les and**its** whe-els spat peb-bles. The bo-un-cing hurt her ta-il-bo-ne. A yo-ung, ar-med Ta-lib sat ac-ross from her lo-oking at her.

Ma-ri-am won-de-red if he wo-uld be the one, this ami-ab-le-lo-oking yo-ung man with the de-ep-set bright eyes and slightly po-in-ted fa-ce, with the black-na-iled in-dex fin-ger drum-ming the si-de of the truck.

"Are you hungry, mot-her?" he sa-id.

Ma-ri-am sho-ok her he-ad.

"I ha-ve a bis-cu-it. It's go-od. You can ha-ve it if you're hungry. I don't mind."

"No.*Tas-ha-kor*, brot-her."

He nod-ded, lo-oked at her be-nignly. "Are you af-ra-id, mot-her?"

A lump clo-sed off her thro-at. In a qu-ive-ring vo-ice, Ma-ri-am told him the truth.

"Yes. I'm very af-ra-id."

"I ha-ve a pic-tu-re of my fat-her," he sa-id. "I don't re-mem-ber him. He was a bicyc-le re-pa-ir-man on-ce, I know that much. But I don't re-mem-ber how he mo-ved, you know, how he la-ug-hed or the so-und of his vo-ice." He lo-oked away, then back at Ma-ri-am. "My mot-her used to say that he was the bra-vest man she knew. Li-ke a li-on, she'd say.

But she told me he was crying li-ke a child the mor-ning the com-mu-nists to-ok him. I'm tel-ling you so you know that it's nor-mal to be sca-red. It's not-hing to be as-ha-med of, mot-her."

For the first ti-me that day, Ma-ri-am cri-ed a lit-tle.

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Tho-usands of eyes bo-re down on her. In the crow-ded ble-ac-hers, necks we-re cra-ned for the be-ne-fit of a bet-ter vi-ew. Ton-gu-es cluc-ked. A mur-mu-ring so-und rip-pled thro-ugh the sta-di-um when Ma-ri-am was hel-ped down from the truck. Ma-ri-am ima-gi-ned he-ads sha-king when the lo-uds-pe-aker an-no-un-ced her cri-me. But she did not lo-ok up to see whet-her they we-re sha-king with di-sap-pro-val or cha-rity, with rep-ro-ach or pity. Ma-ri-am blin-ded her-self to them all.

Ear-li-er that mor-ning, she had be-en af-ra-id that she wo-uld ma-ke a fo-ol of her-self, that she wo-uld turn in-to a ple-ading, we-eping spec-tac-le. She had fe-ared that she might scre-am or vo-mit or even wet her-self, that, in her last mo-ments, she wo-uld be bet-ra-yed by ani-mal ins-tinct or bo-dily disg-ra-ce. But when she was ma-de to des-cend from the truck, Ma-ri-am's legs did not buck-le. Her arms did not fla-il. She did not ha-ve to be drag-ged. And when she did fe-el her-self fal-te-ring, she tho-ught of Zal-mai, from whom she had ta-ken the lo-ve of his li-fe, who-se days

now wo-uld be sha-ped by the sor-row of his fat-her's di-sap-pe-aran-ce. And then Ma-ri-am's stri-de ste-adi-ed and she co-uld walk wit-ho-ut pro-test.

An ar-med man ap-pro-ac-hed her and told her to walk to-ward the so-ut-hern go-al-post. Ma-ri-am co-uld sen-se the crowd tigh-te-ning up with an-ti-ci-pa-ti-on. She did not lo-ok up. She kept her eyes to the gro-und, on her sha-dow, on her exe-cu-ti-oner's sha-dow tra-iling hers.

Tho-ugh the-re had be-en mo-ments of be-a-uty in it, Ma-ri-am knew that li-fe for the most part had be-en un-kind to her. But as she wal-ked the fi-nal twenty pa-ces, she co-uld not help but wish for mo-re of it. She wis-hed she co-uld see La-ila aga-in, wis-hed to he-ar the clan-gor of her la-ugh, to sit with her on-ce mo-re for a pot of*chai* and lef-to-ver*hal-wa* un-der a star-lit sky. She mo-ur-ned that she wo-uld ne-ver see Azi-za grow up, wo-uld not see the be-a-uti-ful yo-ung wo-man that she wo-uld one day be-co-me, wo-uld not get to pa-int her hands with hen-na and toss*no-qul* candy at her wed-ding. She wo-uld ne-ver play with Azi-za's child-ren. She wo-uld ha-ve li-ked that very much, to be old and play with Azi-za's child-ren.

Ne-ar the go-al-post, the man be-hind her as-ked her to stop. Ma-ri-am did. Thro-ugh the cris-scros-sing grid of the bur-qa, she saw his sha-dow arms lift his sha-dow Ka-lash-ni-kov.

Ma-ri-am wis-hed for so much in tho-se fi-nal mo-ments. Yet as she clo-sed her eyes, it was not reg-ret any lon-ger but a sen-sa-ti-on of abun-dant pe-ace that was-hed over her. She tho-ught of her entry in-to this world, the*ha-ra-mi* child of a lowly vil-la-ger, an unin-ten-ded thing, a pi-ti-ab-le, reg-ret-tab-le ac-ci-dent. A we-ed. And yet she was le-aving the world as a wo-man who had lo-ved and be-en lo-ved back. She was le-aving it as a fri-end, a com-pa-ni-on, a gu-ar-di-an. A mot-her. A per-son of con-se-qu-en-ce at last. No. It was not so bad, Ma-ri-am tho-ught, that she sho-uld die this way. Not so bad. This was a le-gi-ti-ma-te end to a li-fe of il-le-gi-ti-ma-te be-gin-nings.

Ma-ri-am's fi-nal tho-ughts we-re a few words from the Ko-ran, which she mut-te-red un-der her bre-ath.

He has cre-ated the he-avens and the earth with the truth; He ma-kes the night co-ver the day and ma-kes the day over-ta-ke the night, and He has ma-de the sun and the mo-on sub-ser-vi-ent; each one runs on to an as-sig-ned term; now su-rely He is the Mighty, the Gre-at For-gi-ver.

"Kne-el," the Ta-lib sa-id

O my Lord! For-gi-ve and ha-ve mercy, for you are the best of the mer-ci-ful ones.

"Kne-el he-re,*ham-s-hi-ra* And lo-ok down."

One last ti-me, Ma-ri-am did as she was told.

PART FOUR

48.

Ta-riq has he-adac-hes now.

So-me nights, La-ila awa-kens and finds him on the ed-ge of the-ir bed, roc-king, his un-ders-hirt pul-led over his he-ad The he-adac-hes be-gan in Na-sir Bagh, he says, then wor-se-ned in pri-son. So-me-ti-mes they ma-ke him vo-mit, blind him in one eye. He says it fe-els li-ke a butc-her's kni-fe bur-ro-wing in one temp-le, twis-ting slowly thro-ugh his bra-in, then po-king out the ot-her si-de.

"I can tas-te the me-tal, even, when they be-gin."

So-me-ti-mes La-ila wets a cloth and lays it on his fo-re-he-ad and that helps a lit-tle. The lit-tle ro-und whi-te pills Sa-ye-ed's doc-tor ga-ve Ta-riq help too. But so-me nights, all Ta-riq can do is hold his he-ad and mo-an, his eyes blo-ods-hot, his no-se drip-ping. La-ila sits with him when he's in the grip of it li-ke that, rubs the back of his neck, ta-kes his hand in hers, the me-tal of his wed-ding band cold aga-inst her palm.

They mar-ri-ed the day that they ar-ri-ved in Mur-ree. Sa-ye-ed lo-oked re-li-eved when Ta-riq told him they wo-uld. He wo-uld not ha-ve to bro-ach with Ta-riq the de-li-ca-te mat-ter of an un-mar-ri-ed co-up-le li-ving in his ho-tel. Sa-ye-ed is not at all as La-ila had pic-tu-red him, rud-dy-fa-ced and pea-eyed. He has a salt-and-pep-per mus-tac-he who-se ends he rolls to a sharp tip, and a shock of long gray ha-ir com-bed back from the brow. He is a soft-spo-ken, man-nerly man, with me-asu-red spe-ech and gra-ce-ful mo-ve-ments.

It was Sa-ye-ecl who sum-mo-ned a fri-end and a mul-lah for the*nik-ka* that day, Sa-ye-ed who pul-led Ta-riq asi-de and ga-ve him mo-ney. Ta-riq wo-uldn't ta-ke it, but Sa-ye-ed in-sis-ted. Ta-riq went to the Mall then and ca-me back with two simp-le, thin wed-ding bands. They mar-ri-ed la-ter that night, af-ter the child-ren had go-ne to bed.

In the mir-ror, be-ne-ath the gre-en ve-il that the mul-lah dra-ped over the-ir he-ads, La-ila's eyes met Ta-riq's. The-re we-re no te-ars, no wed-ding-day smi-les, no whis-pe-red oaths of long-las-ting lo-ve. In si-len-ce, La-ila lo-oked at the-ir ref-lec-ti-on, at fa-ces that had aged be-yond the-ir ye-ars, at the po-uc-hes and li-nes and sags that now mar-ked the-ir on-ce-scrub-bed, yo-uth-ful fa-ces. Ta-riq ope-ned his mo-uth and be-gan to say so-met-hing, but, just as he did, so-me-one pul-led the ve-il, and La-ila mis-sed what it was that he was go-ing to say.

That night, they lay in bed as hus-band and wi-fe, as the child-ren sno-red be-low them on sle-eping cots. La-ila re-mem-be-red the ease with which they wo-uld crowd the air bet-we-en them with words, she and Ta-riq, when they we-re yo-un-ger, the hay-wi-re, brisk flow of the-ir spe-ech, al-ways in-ter-rup-ting each ot-her, tug-ging each ot-her's col-lar to emp-ha-si-ze a po-int, the qu-ick-ness to la-ugh, the eager-ness to de-light. So much had hap-pe-ned sin-ce tho-se child-ho-od days, so much that ne-eded to be sa-id. But that first night the enor-mity of it all sto-le the words from her. That night, it was bles-sing eno-ugh to be be-si-de him. It was bles-sing eno-ugh to know that he was he-re, to fe-el the warmth of him next to her, to lie with him, the-ir he-ads to-uc-hing, his right hand la-ced in her left.

In the mid-dle of the night, when La-ila wo-ke up thirsty, she fo-und the-ir hands still clam-ped to-get-her, in the whi-te-knuck-le, an-xi-o-us way of child-ren clutc-hing bal-lo-on strings.

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La-ila li-kes Muk-ree'S co-ol, foggy mor-nings and its daz-zling twi-lights, the dark bril-li-an-ce of the sky at night; the gre-en of the pi-nes and the soft brown of the squ-ir-rels dar-ting up and down the sturdy tree trunks; the sud-den down-po-urs that send shop-pers in the Mall scramb-ling for aw-ning co-ver. She li-kes the so-uve-nir shops, and the va-ri-o-us ho-tels that ho-use to-urists, even as the lo-cals be-mo-an the cons-tant const-ruc-ti-on, the ex-pan-si-on of inf-rast-ruc-tu-re that they say is eating away at Mur-ree's na-tu-ral be-a-uty. La-ila finds it odd that pe-op-le sho-uld la-ment the*bu-il-ding* of bu-il-dings. In Ka-bul, they wo-uld ce-leb-ra-te it.

She li-kes that they ha-ve a bath-ro-om, not an out-ho-use but an ac-tu-al bath-ro-om, with a to-ilet that flus-hes, a sho-wer, and a sink too, with twin fa-ucets from which she can draw, with a flick of her wrist, wa-ter, eit-her hot or cold. She li-kes wa-king up to the so-und of Al-yo-na ble-ating in the mor-ning, and the harm-les-sly can-tan-ke-ro-us co-ok, Adi-ba, who works mar-vels in the kitc-hen.

So-me-ti-mes, as La-ila watc-hes Ta-riq sle-ep, as her child-ren mut-ter and stir in the-ir own sle-ep, a gre-at big lump of gra-ti-tu-de catc-hes in her thro-at, ma-kes her eyes wa-ter.

In the mor-nings, La-ila fol-lows Ta-riq from ro-om to ro-om. Keys jing-le from a ring clip-ped to his wa-ist and a spray bot-tle of win-dow cle-aner dang-les from the belt lo-ops of his je-ans. La-ila brings a pa-il fil-led with rags, di-sin-fec-tant, a to-ilet brush, and spray wax for the dres-sers. Azi-za tags along, a mop in one hand, the be-an-stuf-fed doll Ma-ri-am had ma-de for her in the ot-her. Zal-mai tra-ils them re-luc-tantly, sul-kily, al-ways a few steps be-hind.

La-ila va-cu-ums, ma-kes the bed, and dusts. Ta-riq was-hes the bath-ro-om sink and tub, scrubs the to-ilet and mops the li-no-le-um flo-or. He stocks the shel-ves with cle-an to-wels, mi-ni-atu-re sham-poo bot-tles, and bars of al-mond-scen-ted so-ap. Azi-za has la-id cla-im to the task of spra-ying and wi-ping the win-dows. The doll is ne-ver far from whe-re she works.

La-ila told Azi-za abo-ut Ta-riq a few days af-ter the*nik-ka*

It is stran-ge, La-ila thinks, al-most un-set-tling, the thing bet-we-en Azi-za and Ta-riq. Al-re-ady, Azi-za is fi-nis-hing his sen-ten-ces and he hers. She hands him things be-fo-re he asks for them. Pri-va-te smi-les sho-ot bet-we-en them ac-ross the din-ner tab-le as if they are not stran-gers at all but com-pa-ni-ons re-uni-ted af-ter a lengthy se-pa-ra-ti-on.

Azi-za lo-oked down tho-ught-ful-ly at her hands when La-ila told her.

"I li-ke him," she sa-id, af-ter a long pa-use.

"He lo-ves*you."*

"He sa-id that?"

"He do-esn't ha-ve to, Azi-za."

"Tell me the rest, Mammy. Tell me so I know."

And La-ila did.

"Yo-ur fat-her is a go-od man. He is the best man I've ever known."

"What if he le-aves?" Azi-za sa-id

"He will ne-ver le-ave. Lo-ok at me, Azi-za. Yo-ur fat-her will ne-ver hurt you, and he will ne-ver le-ave."

The re-li-ef on Azi-za's fa-ce bro-ke La-ila's he-art.

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Ta-riq has bo-ught Zal-mai a roc-king hor-se, bu-ilt him a wa-gon. From a pri-son in-ma-te, he le-ar-ned to ma-ke pa-per ani-mals, and so he has fol-ded, cut, and tuc-ked co-unt-less she-ets of pa-per in-to li-ons and kan-ga-ro-os for Zal-mai, in-to hor-ses and brightly plu-med birds. But the-se over-tu-res are dis-mis-sed by Zal-mai un-ce-re-mo-ni-o-usly, so-me-ti-mes ve-no-mo-usly.

"You're a don-key!" he cri-es. "I don't want yo-ur toys!"

"Zal-mai!" La-ila gasps.

"It's all right," Ta-riq says. "La-ila, it's all right. Let him."

"You're not my Ba-ba jan! My re-al Ba-ba jan is away on a trip, and when he gets back he's go-ing to be-at you up! And you won't be ab-le to run away, be-ca-use he has two legs and you only ha-ve one!"

At night, La-ila holds Zal-mai aga-inst her chest and re-ci-tesBa-ba-loo pra-yers with him. When he asks, she tells him the lie aga-in, tells him his Ba-ba jan has go-ne away and she do-esn't know when he wo-uld co-me back. She ab-hors this task, ab-hors her-self for lying li-ke this to a child

La-ila knows that this sha-me-ful lie will ha-ve to be told aga-in and aga-in. It will ha-ve to be-ca-use Zal-mai will ask, hop-ping down from a swing, wa-king from an af-ter-no-on nap, and, la-ter, when he's old eno-ugh to tie his own sho-es, to walk to scho-ol by him-self, the lie will ha-ve to be de-li-ve-red aga-in.

At so-me po-int, La-ila knows, the qu-es-ti-ons will dry up. Slowly, Zal-mai will ce-ase won-de-ring why his fat-her has aban-do-ned him. He will not spot his fat-her any lon-ger at traf-fic lights, in sto-oping old men shuf-fling down the stre-et or sip-ping tea in open-fron-ted sa-mo-var ho-uses. And one day it will hit him, wal-king along so-me me-an-de-ring ri-ver, or ga-zing out at an unt-rac-ked snow-fi-eld, that his fat-her's di-sap-pe-aran-ce is no lon-ger an open, raw wo-und. That it has be-co-me so-met-hing el-se al-to-get-her, so-met-hing mo-re soft-edged and in-do-lent. Li-ke a lo-re. So-met-hing to be re-ve-red, mysti-fi-ed by.

La-ila is happy he-re in Mur-ree. But it is not an easy hap-pi-ness. It is not a hap-pi-ness wit-ho-ut cost.

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On his days off, Ta-riq ta-kes La-ila and the child-ren to the Mall, along which are shops that sell trin-kets and next to which is an Ang-li-can church bu-ilt in the mid-ni-ne-te-enth cen-tury. Ta-riq buys them spicy*chap-li* ke-babs from stre-et ven-dors. They stroll amid the crowds of lo-cals, the Euro-pe-ans and the-ir cel-lu-lar pho-nes and di-gi-tal ca-me-ras, the Pu-nj-abis who co-me he-re to es-ca-pe the he-at of the pla-ins.

Occa-si-onal-ly, they bo-ard a bus to Kash-mir Po-int. From the-re, Ta-riq shows them the val-ley of the Jhe-lum Ri-ver, the pi-ne-car-pe-ted slo-pes, and the lush, den-sely wo-oded hills, whe-re he says mon-keys can still be spot-ted hop-ping from branch to branch. They go to the map-lec-lad Nat-hia Ga-li too, so-me thirty ki-lo-me-ters from Mur-ree, whe-re Ta-riq holds La-ila's hand as they walk the tree-sha-ded ro-ad to the Go-ver-nor's Ho-use. They stop by the old Bri-tish

ce-me-tery, or ta-ke a ta-xi up a mo-un-ta-in pe-ak for a vi-ew of the ver-dant, fog-shro-uded val-ley be-low.

So-me-ti-mes on the-se outings, when they pass by a sto-re win-dow, La-ila catc-hes the-ir ref-lec-ti-ons in it. Man, wi-fe, da-ugh-ter, son. To stran-gers, she knows, they must ap-pe-ar li-ke the most or-di-nary of fa-mi-li-es, free of sec-rets, li-es, and reg-rets.

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Azi-za-has night-ma-res from which she wa-kes up shri-eking. La-ila has to lie be-si-de her on the cot, dry her che-eks with her sle-eve, so-ot-he her back to sle-ep.

La-ila has her own dre-ams. In them, she's al-ways back at the ho-use in Ka-bul, wal-king the hall, clim-bing the sta-irs.

She is alo-ne, but be-hind the do-ors she he-ars the rhythmic hiss of an iron, beds-he-ets snap-ped, then fol-ded. So-me-ti-mes she he-ars a wo-man's low-pitc-hed hum-ming of an old He-ra-ti song. But when she walks in, the ro-om is empty. The-re is no one the-re.

The dre-ams le-ave La-ila sha-ken. She wa-kes from them co-ated in swe-at, her eyes prick-ling with te-ars. It is de-vas-ta-ting. Every ti-me, it is de-vas-ta-ting.

49.

One Sun-day that Sep-tem-ber, La-ila is put-ting Zal-mai, who has a cold, down for a nap when Ta-riq bursts in-to the-ir bun-ga-low.

"Did you he-ar?" he says, pan-ting a lit-tle. "They kil-led him. Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud. He's de-ad."

"What?"

From the do-or-way, Ta-riq tells her what he knows.

"They say he ga-ve an in-ter-vi-ew to a pa-ir of jo-ur-na-lists who cla-imed they we-re Bel-gi-ans ori-gi-nal-ly from Mo-roc-co. As they're tal-king, a bomb hid-den in the vi-deo ca-me-ra go-es off. Kills Mas-so-ud and one of the jo-ur-na-lists. They sho-ot the ot-her one as he tri-es to run. They're sa-ying now the jo-ur-na-lists we-re pro-bably Al-Qa-eda men."

La-ila re-mem-bers the pos-ter of Ah-mad Shah Mas-so-ud that Mammy had na-iled to the wall of her bed-ro-om. Mas-so-ud le-aning for-ward, one eyeb-row coc-ked, his fa-ce fur-ro-wed in con-cent-ra-ti-on, as tho-ugh he was res-pect-ful-ly lis-te-ning to

so-me-one. La-ila re-mem-bers how gra-te-ful Mammy was that Mas-so-ud had sa-id a gra-ve-si-de pra-yer at her sons' bu-ri-al, how she told ever-yo-ne abo-ut it. Even af-ter war bro-ke out bet-we-en his fac-ti-on and the ot-hers, Mammy had re-fu-sed to bla-me him.*He's a go-od man,* she used to say.

*He wants pe-ace. He wants to re-bu-ild Afg-ha-nis-tan. But they won 't let him. They just won 't let him.*For Mammy, even in the end, even af-ter everyt-hing went so ter-ribly wrong and Ka-bul lay in ru-ins, Mas-so-ud was still the Li-on of Pa-njs-hir.

La-ila is not as for-gi-ving- Mas-so-ud's vi-olent end brings her no joy, but she re-mem-bers too well the ne-igh-bor-ho-ods ra-zed un-der his watch, the bo-di-es drag-ged from the rub-ble, the hands and fe-et of child-ren dis-co-ve-red on ro-of-tops or the high branch of so-me tree days af-ter the-ir fu-ne-ral She re-mem-bers too cle-arly the lo-ok on Mammy's own fa-ce mo-ments be-fo-re the roc-ket slam-med in and, much as she has tri-ed to for-get, Ba-bi's he-ad-less tor-so lan-ding ne-arby, the brid-ge to-wer prin-ted on his T-shirt po-king thro-ugh thick fog and blo-od.
"The-re is go-ing to be a fu-ne-ral," Ta-riq is sa-ying. "I'm su-re of it. Pro-bably in Ra-wal-pin-di. It'll be hu-ge."

Zal-mai, who was al-most as-le-ep, is sit-ting up now, rub-bing his eyes with bal-led fists.

Two days la-ter, they are cle-aning a ro-om when they he-ar a com-mo-ti-on. Ta-riq drops the mop and hur-ri-es out. La-ila ta-ils him.

The**no-ise is** co-ming from the ho-tel lobby. The-re is a lo-un-ge area to the right of the re-cep-ti-on desk, with se-ve-ral cha-irs and two co-uc-hes up-hols-te-red in be-ige su-ede. In the cor-ner, fa-cing the co-uc-hes, is a te-le-vi-si-on, and Sa-ye-ed, the con-ci-er-ge, and se-ve-ral gu-ests are gat-he-red in front of.

La-ila and Ta-riq work the-ir way in.

The TV is tu-ned to BBC. On the scre-en is a bu-il-ding, a to-wer, black smo-ke bil-lo-wing from its top flo-ors. Ta-riq says so-met-hing to Sa-ye-ed and Sa-ye-ed is in mid-reply when a pla-ne ap-pe-ars from the cor-ner of the scre-en. It cras-hes in-to the adj-acent to-wer, exp-lo-ding in-to a fi-re-ball that dwarfs any ball of fi-re that La-ila has ever se-en. A col-lec-ti-ve yelp ri-ses from ever-yo-ne in the lobby.

In less than two ho-urs, both to-wers ha-ve col-lap-sed
So-on all the TV sta-ti-ons are tal-king abo-ut Afg-ha-nis-tan and the Ta-li-ban and Osa-ma bin La-den.

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"Did you he-ar what the Ta-li-ban sa-id?" Ta-riq asks. "Abo-ut bin La-den?"

Azi-za is sit-ting ac-ross from him on the bed, con-si-de-ring the bo-ard. Ta-riq has ta-ught her to play chess. She is frow-ning and tap-ping her lo-wer lip now, mi-mic-king the body lan-gu-age her fat-her as-su-mes when he's de-ci-ding on a mo-ve.

Zal-mai's cold is a lit-tle bet-ter. He is as-le-ep, and La-ila is rub-bing Vicks on his chest.
"I he-ard," she says.

The Ta-li-ban ha-ve an-no-un-ced that they won't re-lin-qu-ish bin La-den be-ca-use he is a*meh-man,* a gu-est, who has fo-und sanc-tu-ary in Afg-ha-nis-tan and it is aga-inst the*Pas-hi-un-wa-li* co-de of et-hics to turn over a gu-est. Ta-riq chuck-les bit-terly, and La-ila he-ars in his chuck-le that he is re-vol-ted by this dis-tor-ti-on of an ho-no-rab-le Pash-tun cus-tom, this mis-rep-re-sen-ta-ti-on of his pe-op-le's ways.

A few days af-ter the at-tacks, La-ila and Ta-riq are in the ho-tel lobby aga-in. On the TV scre-en, Ge-or-ge W. Bush is spe-aking. The-re is a big Ame-ri-can flag be-hind him. At one po-int, his vo-ice wa-vers, and La-ila thinks he is go-ing to we-ep.
Sa-ye-ed, who spe-aks Eng-lish, exp-la-ins to them that Bush has just dec-la-red war.
"On whom?" says Ta-riq.
"On yo-ur co-untry, to be-gin with."

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"It may not be such a bad thing," Ta-riq says.

They ha-ve fi-nis-hed ma-king lo-ve. He's lying be-si-de her, his he-ad on her chest, his arm dra-ped over her belly. The first few ti-mes they tri-ed, the-re was dif-fi-culty. Ta-riq was all apo-lo-gi-es, La-ila all re-as-su-ran-ces. The-re are still dif-fi-cul-ti-es, not physi-cal now but lo-gis-ti-cal. The shack they sha-re with the child-ren is small. The child-ren sle-ep on cots be-low them and so the-re is lit-tle pri-vacy. Most ti-mes, La-ila and Ta-riq ma-ke lo-ve in si-len-ce, with cont-rol-led, mu-ted pas-si-on, fully clot-hed be-ne-ath the blan-ket as a pre-ca-uti-on aga-inst in-ter-rup-ti-ons by the child-ren. They are fo-re-ver wary of the rust-ling she-ets, the cre-aking bedsp-rings. But for La-ila, be-ing with Ta-riq is worth we-at-he-ring the-se ap-pre-hen-si-ons. When they ma-ke lo-ve, La-ila fe-els anc-ho-red, she fe-els shel-te-red. Her an-xi-eti-es, that the-ir li-fe to-get-her is a tem-po-rary bles-sing, that so-on it will co-me lo-ose aga-in in strips and tat-ters, are al-la-yed. Her fe-ars of se-pa-ra-ti-on va-nish.

"What do you me-an?" she says now.

"What's go-ing on back ho-me. It may not be so bad in the end."

Back ho-me, bombs are fal-ling on-ce aga-in, this ti-me Ame-ri-can bombs-La-ila has be-en watc-hing ima-ges of the war every day on the te-le-vi-si-on as she chan-ges she-ets and va-cu-ums. The Ame-ri-cans ha-ve ar-med the war-lords on-ce mo-re, and en-lis-ted the help of the Nort-hern Al-li-an-ce to dri-ve out the Ta-li-ban and find bin La-den.

But it rank-les La-ila, what Ta-riq is sa-ying. She**pus-hes his** he-ad ro-ughly off her chest.

"Not so bad? Pe-op-le dying? Wo-men, child-ren, old pe-op-le? Ho-mes dest-ro-yed aga-in? Not so bad?"

*"Shh.*You'll wa-ke the child-ren."

"How can you say that, Ta-riq?" she snaps. "After the so-cal-led blun-der in Ka-ram? A hund-red in-no-cent pe-op-le! You saw the bo-di-es for yo-ur-self!"

"No," Ta-riq says. He props him-self up on his el-bow, lo-oks down at La-ila. "You mi-sun-ders-tand. What I me-ant was-"

"You wo-uldn't know," La-ila says. She is awa-re that her vo-ice is ri-sing, that they are ha-ving the-ir first fight as hus-band and wi-fe. "You left when the Mu-j-ahi-de-en be-gan figh-ting, re-mem-ber? I'm the one who sta-yed be-hind. Me. I*know* war.**I lost** my pa-rents to war. My*pa-rents*, Ta-riq. And now to he-ar you say that war is not so bad?"

"I'm sorry, La-ila. I'm sorry." He cups her fa-ce in his hands. "You're right. I'm sorry. For-gi-ve me. What I me-ant was

that may-be the-re will be ho-pe at the ot-her end of this war, that may-be for the first ti-me in a long ti-me-"

"I don't want to talk abo-ut this any-mo-re," La-ila says, surp-ri-sed at how she has las-hed out at him. It's un-fa-ir, she knows, what she sa-id to him-hadn't war ta-ken his pa-rents too?-and wha-te-ver fla-red in her is sof-te-ning al-re-ady. Ta-riq con-ti-nu-es to spe-ak gently, and, when he pulls her to him, she lets him. When he kis-ses her hand, then her brow, she lets him. She knows that he is pro-bably right. She knows how his com-ment was in-ten-ded. May-be this*is* ne-ces-sary. May-be the-re*mil* be ho-pe when Bush's bombs stop fal-ling. But she can-not bring her-self to say it, not when what hap-pe-ned to Ba-bi and Mammy is hap-pe-ning to so-me-one now in Afg-ha-nis-tan, not when so-me un-sus-pec-ting girl or boy back ho-me has just be-en orp-ha-ned by a roc-ket as she was. La-ila can-not bring her-self to say it. It's hard to re-j-o-ice. It se-ems hypoc-ri-ti-cal, per-ver-se.

That night, Zal-mai wa-kes up co-ug-hing. Be-fo-re La-ila can mo-ve, Ta-riq swings his legs over the si-de of the bed. He straps on his prost-he-sis and walks over to Zal-mai, lifts him up in-to his arms. From the bed, La-ila watc-hes Ta-riq's sha-pe mo-ving back and forth in the dark-ness. She se-es the out-li-ne of Zal-mai's he-ad on his sho-ul-der, the knot of his hands at Ta-riq's neck, his small fe-et bo-un-cing by Ta-riq's hip.

When Ta-riq co-mes back to bed, ne-it-her of them says anyt-hing. La-ila re-ac-hes over and to-uc-hes his fa-ce. Ta-riq's che-eks are wet.

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For La-ila, li-fe in Mur-ree is one of com-fort and tran-qu-il-lity. The work is not cum-ber-so-me, and, on the-ir days off, she and Ta-riq ta-ke the child-ren to ri-de the cha-ir-lift to Pat-ri-ata hill, or go to Pin-di Po-int, whe-re, on a cle-ar day, you can see as far as Is-la-ma-bad and down-town Ra-wal-pin-di. The-re, they spre-ad a blan-ket on the grass and eat me-at-ball sand-wic-hes with cu-cum-bers and drink cold gin-ger ale.

It is a go-od li-fe, La-ila tells her-self, a li-fe to be thank-ful for. It is, in fact, pre-ci-sely the sort of li-fe she used to dre-am for her-self in her dar-kest days with Ras-he-ed. Every day, La-ila re-minds her-self of this.

Then one warm night in July 2002, she and Ta-riq are lying in bed tal-king in hus-hed vo-ices abo-ut all the chan-ges back ho-me. The-re ha-ve be-en so many. The co-ali-ti-on for-ces ha-ve dri-ven the Ta-li-ban out of every ma-j-or city, pus-hed them ac-ross the bor-der to Pa-kis-tan and to the mo-un-ta-ins in the so-uth and east of Afg-ha-nis-tan. ISAF, an in-ter-na-ti-onal pe-ace-ke-eping for-ce, has be-en sent to Ka-bul. The co-untry has an in-te-rim pre-si-dent now, Ha-mid Kar-zai.

La-ila de-ci-des that now is the ti-me to tell Ta-riq.

A ye-ar ago, she wo-uld ha-ve gladly gi-ven an arm to get out of Ka-bul. But in the last few months, she has fo-und her-self mis-sing the city of her child-ho-od. She mis-ses the bust-le of Shor Ba-za-ar, the Gar-dens of Ba-bur, the call of the wa-ter car-ri-ers lug-ging the-ir go-ats-kin bags. She mis-ses the gar-ment hag-glers at Chic-ken Stre-et and the me-lon haw-kers in Kar-teh-Par-wan.

But it isn't me-re ho-me-sick-ness or nos-tal-gia that has La-ila thin-king of Ka-bul so much the-se days. She has be-co-me pla-gu-ed by rest-les-sness. She he-ars of scho-ols bu-ilt in Ka-bul, ro-ads re-pa-ved, wo-men re-tur-ning to work, and her li-fe he-re, ple-asant as it is, gra-te-ful as she is for it, se-ems… in-suf-fi-ci-ent to her. In-con-se-qu-en-ti-al Wor-se yet, was-te-ful. Of la-te, she has star-ted he-aring Ba-bi's vo-ice in her he-ad.*You can be anyt-hing you want, La-ila*, he says.*I know this abo-ut*

you. And Ial-so know that when this war is over, Afg-ha-nis-tan is go-ing to ne-ed you.

La-ila he-ars Mammy's vo-ice too. She re-mem-bers Mammy's res-pon-se to Ba-bi when he wo-uld sug-gest that they le-ave Afg-ha-nis-tan.*Iwant to see my sons' dre-am co-me true. I want to be the-re when it hap-pens, when Afg-ha-nis-tan is free, so the boys see it too. They'll see it thro-ugh my eyes.* The-re is a part of La-ila now that wants to re-turn to Ka-bul, for Mammy and Ba-bi, for them to see it thro-ugh*her* eyes.

And then, most com-pel-lingly for La-ila, the-re is Ma-ri-am. Did Ma-ri-am die for this? La-ila asks her-self. Did she sac-ri-fi-ce her-self so she, La-ila, co-uld be a ma-id in a fo-re-ign land? May-be it wo-uldn't mat-ter to Ma-ri-am what La-ila did as long as she and the child-ren we-re sa-fe and happy. But it mat-ters to La-ila. Sud-denly, it mat-ters very much.

"I want to go back," she says.

Ta-riq sits up in bed and lo-oks down at her.

La-ila is struck aga-in by how be-a-uti-ful he is, the per-fect cur-ve of his fo-re-he-ad, the slen-der musc-les of his arms, his bro-oding, in-tel-li-gent eyes. A ye-ar has pas-sed, and still the-re are ti-mes, at mo-ments li-ke this, when La-ila can-not be-li-eve that they ha-ve fo-und each ot-her aga-in, that he is re-al-ly he-re, with her, that he is her hus-band.

"Back? To Ka-bul?" he asks.

"Only**if** you want it too."

"Are you un-hap-py he-re? You se-em happy. The child-ren too."

La-ila sits up. Ta-riq shifts on the bed, ma-kes ro-om for her.

"I*am* happy," La-ila says. "Of co-ur-se I am. But…whe-re do we go from he-re, Ta-riq? How long do we stay? This isn't ho-me. Ka-bul is, and back the-re so much is hap-pe-ning, a lot of it go-od. I want to be a part of it all. I want to*do* so-met-hing. I want to cont-ri-bu-te. Do you un-ders-tand?"

Ta-riq nods slowly. "This is what you want, then? You're su-re?"

"I want it, yes, I'm su-re. But it's mo-re than that. I fe-el li-ke I*ha-ve* to go back. Sta-ying he-re, it do-esn't fe-el right any-mo-re."

Ta-riq lo-oks at his hands, then back up at her.

"But only-only-if you want to go too."

Ta-riq smi-les. The fur-rows from his brow cle-ar, and for a bri-ef mo-ment he is the old Ta-riq aga-in, the Ta-riq who did not get he-adac-hes, who had on-ce sa-id that in Si-be-ria snot tur-ned to ice be-fo-re it hit the gro-und. It may be her ima-gi-na-ti-on, but La-ila be-li-eves the-re are mo-re fre-qu-ent sigh-tings of this old Ta-riq the-se clays.

"Me?" he says. "I'll fol-low you to the end of the world, La-ila."

She pulls him clo-se and kis-ses his lips. She be-li-eves she has ne-ver lo-ved him mo-re than at this mo-ment. "Thank you," she says, her fo-re-he-ad res-ting aga-inst his.

"Let's go ho-me."

"But first, I want to go to He-rat," she says.

"He-rat?"

La-ila exp-la-ins.

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The child-ren ne-ed re-as-su-ring, each in the-ir own way. La-ila has to sit down with an agi-ta-ted Azi-za, who still has night-ma-res, who'd be-en start-led to te-ars the we-ek be-fo-re when so-me-one had shot ro-unds in-to the sky at a wed-ding ne-arby. La-ila has to exp-la-in to Azi-za that when they re-turn to Ka-bul the Ta-li-ban won't be the-re, that the-re will not be any figh-ting, and that she will not be sent back to the orp-ha-na-ge. "We'll all li-ve to-get-her. Yo-ur fat-her, me, Zal-mai. And you, Azi-za. You'll ne-ver, ever, ha-ve to be apart from me aga-in. I pro-mi-se." She smi-les at her da-ugh-ter. "Until the day*you* want to, that is. When you fall in lo-ve with so-me yo-ung man and want to marry him."

On the day they le-ave Mur-ree, Zal-mai is in-con-so-lab-le. He has wrap-ped his arms aro-und Al-yo-na's neck and will not let go.

"I can't pry him off of her, Mammy," says Azi-za.

"Zal-mai. We can't ta-ke a go-at on the bus," La-ila exp-la-ins aga-in.

It isn't un-til Ta-riq kne-els down be-si-de him, un-til he pro-mi-ses Zal-mai that he will buy him a go-at just li-ke Al-yo-na in Ka-bul, that Zal-mai re-luc-tantly lets go.

The-re are te-ar-ful fa-re-wel-ls with Sa-ye-ed as well For go-od luck, he holds a Ko-ran by the do-or-way for Ta-riq, La-ila, and the child-ren to kiss three ti-mes, then

holds it high so they can pass un-der it. He helps Ta-riq lo-ad the two su-it-ca-ses in-to the trunk of his car. It is Sa-ye-ed who dri-ves them to the sta-ti-on, who stands on the curb wa-ving go-od-bye as the bus sput-ters and pulls away.

As she le-ans back and watc-hes Sa-ye-ed re-ce-ding in the re-ar win-dow of the bus, La-ila he-ars the vo-ice of do-ubt whis-pe-ring in her he-ad. Are they be-ing fo-olish, she won-ders, le-aving be-hind the sa-fety of Mur-ree? Go-ing back to the land whe-re her pa-rents and brot-hers pe-ris-hed, whe-re the smo-ke of bombs is only now set-tling?

And then, from the dar-ke-ned spi-rals of her me-mory, ri-se two li-nes of po-etry, Ba-bi's fa-re-well ode to Ka-bul:

One co-uld not co-unt the mo-ons that shim-mer on her ro-ofs, Or the tho-usand splen-did suns that hi-de be-hind her -walls.

La-ila set-tles back in her se-at, blin-king the wet-ness from her eyes. Ka-bul is wa-iting. Ne-eding. This jo-ur-ney ho-me is the right thing to do.

But first the-re is one last fa-re-well to be sa-id.

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The wars in Afg-ha-nis-tan ha-ve ra-va-ged the ro-ads con-nec-ting Ka-bul, He-rat, and Kan-da-har. The easi-est way to He-rat now is thro-ugh Mas-had, in Iran. La-ila and her fa-mily are the-re only over-night. They spend the night at a ho-tel, and, the next mor-ning, they bo-ard anot-her bus.

Mas-had is a crow-ded, bust-ling city. La-ila watc-hes as parks, mos-qu-es, and*che-lo ke-bab* res-ta-urants pass by. When the bus pas-ses the shri-ne to Imam Re-za, the eighth Shi'a imam, La-ila cra-nes her neck to get a bet-ter vi-ew of its glis-te-ning ti-les, the mi-na-rets, the mag-ni-fi-cent gol-den do-me, all of it im-ma-cu-la-tely and lo-vingly pre-ser-ved. She thinks of the Bud-dhas in her own co-untry. They are gra-ins of dust now, blo-wing abo-ut the Ba-mi-yan Val-ley in the wind.

The bus ri-de to the Ira-ni-an-Afghan bor-der ta-kes al-most ten ho-urs. The ter-ra-in grows mo-re de-so-la-te, mo-re bar-ren, as they ne-ar Afg-ha-nis-tan. Shortly be-fo-re they cross the bor-der in-to He-rat, they pass an Afg-han re-fu-gee camp. To La-ila, it is a blur of yel-low dust and black tents and scanty struc-tu-res ma-de of cor-ru-ga-ted-ste-el she-ets. She re-ac-hes ac-ross the se-at and ta-kes Ta-riq's hand.

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In He-rat, most of the stre-ets are pa-ved, li-ned with frag-rant pi-nes. The-re are mu-ni-ci-pal parks and lib-ra-ri-es in re-const-ruc-ti-on, ma-ni-cu-red co-urt-yards,

freshly pa-in-ted bu-il-dings. The traf-fic lights work, and, most surp-ri-singly to La-ila, elect-ri-city is ste-ady. La-ila has he-ard that He-rat's fe-udal-style war-lord, Is-ma-il Khan, has hel-ped re-bu-ild the city with the con-si-de-rab-le cus-toms re-ve-nue that he col-lects at the Afg-han-Ira-ni-an bor-der, mo-ney that Ka-bul says be-longs not to him but to the cent-ral go-vern-ment. The-re is both a re-ve-ren-ti-al and fe-ar-ful to-ne when the ta-xi dri-ver who ta-kes them to Mu-waf-faq Ho-tel men-ti-ons Is-ma-il Khan's na-me.

The two-night stay at the Mu-waf-faq will cost them ne-arly a fifth of the-ir sa-vings, but the trip from Mas-had has be-en long and we-ar-ying, and the child-ren are ex-ha-us-ted. The el-derly clerk at the desk tells Ta-riq, as he fetc-hes the ro-om key, that the Mu-waf-faq is po-pu-lar with jo-ur-na-lists and NGO wor-kers.

"Bin La-den slept he-re on-ce," he bo-asts.

The ro-om has two beds, and a bath-ro-om with run-ning cold wa-ter. The-re is a pa-in-ting of the po-et Kha-ja Ab-dul-lah An-sary on the wall bet-we-en the beds. From the win-dow, La-ila has a vi-ew of the busy stre-et be-low, and of a park ac-ross the stre-et with pas-tel-co-lo-red-brick paths cut-ting thro-ugh thick clus-ters of flo-wers. The child-ren, who ha-ve grown ac-cus-to-med to te-le-vi-si-on, are di-sap-po-in-ted that the-re isn't one in the ro-om. So-on eno-ugh, tho-ugh, they are as-le-ep. So-on eno-ugh, Ta-riq and La-ila too ha-ve col-lap-sed. La-ila sle-eps so-undly in Ta-riq's arms, ex-cept for on-ce in the mid-dle of the night when she wa-kes from a dre-am she can-not re-mem-ber.

* * *

The next mor-ning, af-ter a bre-ak-fast of tea with fresh bre-ad, qu-in-ce mar-ma-la-de, and bo-iled eggs, Ta-riq finds her a ta-xi.

"Are you su-re you don't want me to co-me along?" Ta-riq says. Azi-za is hol-ding his hand Zal-mai isn't, but he is stan-ding clo-se to Ta-riq, le-aning one sho-ul-der on Ta-riq's hip.

"I'm su-re."

"I worry."

"I'll be fi-ne," La-ila says. "I pro-mi-se. Ta-ke the child-ren to a mar-ket. Buy them so-met-hing."

Zal-mai be-gins to cry when the ta-xi pulls away, and, when La-ila lo-oks back, she se-es that he is re-ac-hing for Ta-riq. That he is be-gin-ning to ac-cept Ta-riq both eases and bre-aks La-ila's he-art.

* * *

"You're not from he-rat," the dri-ver says.

He has dark, sho-ul-der-length ha-ir-a com-mon thum-bing of the no-se at the de-par-ted Ta-li-ban, La-ila has dis-co-ve-red-and so-me kind of scar in-ter-rup-ting his mus-tac-he on the left si-de. The-re is a pho-to ta-ped to the winds-hi-eld, on his si-de. It's of a yo-ung girl with pink che-eks and ha-ir par-ted down the mid-dle in-to twin bra-ids.

La-ila tells him that she has be-en in Pa-kis-tan for the last ye-ar, that she is re-tur-ning to Ka-bul. "Deh-Ma-zang."

Thro-ugh the winds-hi-eld, she se-es cop-pers-miths wel-ding brass hand-les to jugs, sad-dle-ma-kers la-ying out cuts of raw-hi-de to dry in the sun.

"Ha-ve you li-ved he-re long, brot-her?" she asks.

"Oh, my who-le li-fe. I was born he-re. I've se-en everyt-hing. You re-mem-ber the up-ri-sing?"

La-ila says she do-es, but he go-es on.

"This was back in March 1979, abo-ut ni-ne months be-fo-re the So-vi-ets in-va-ded. So-me angry He-ra-tis kil-led a few So-vi-et ad-vi-sers, so the So-vi-ets sent in tanks and he-li-cop-ters and po-un-ded this pla-ce. For three days,*ham-s-hi-ra*, they fi-red on the city. They col-lap-sed bu-il-dings, dest-ro-yed one of the mi-na-rets, kil-led tho-usands of pe-op-le.*Tho-usands*. I lost two sis-ters in tho-se three days. One of them was twel-ve ye-ars old." He taps the pho-to on his winds-hi-eld. "That's her."

"I'm sorry," La-ila says, mar-ve-ling at how every Afg-han story is mar-ked by de-ath and loss and uni-ma-gi-nab-le gri-ef. And yet, she se-es, pe-op-le find a way to sur-vi-ve, to go on. La-ila thinks of her own li-fe and all that has hap-pe-ned to her, and she is as-to-nis-hed that she too has sur-vi-ved, that she is ali-ve and sit-ting in this ta-xi lis-te-ning to this man's
story.

* * *

Gul Da-man is a vil-la-ge of a few wal-led ho-uses ri-sing among flat*kol-bas* bu-ilt with mud and straw. Out-si-de the*kol-bas,* La-ila se-es sun-bur-ned wo-men co-oking, the-ir fa-ces swe-ating in ste-am ri-sing from big blac-ke-ned pots set on ma-kes-hift fi-re-wo-od grills. Mu-les eat from tro-ughs. Child-ren gi-ving cha-se to chic-kens be-gin cha-sing the ta-xi. La-ila se-es men pus-hing whe-el-bar-rows fil-led with sto-nes. They stop and watch the car pass by. The dri-ver ta-kes a turn, and they pass a ce-me-tery with a we-at-her-worn ma-uso-le-um in the cen-ter of it. The dri-ver tells her that a vil-la-ge Su-fi is bu-ri-ed the-re.

The-re is a wind-mill too. In the sha-dow of its id-le, rust-co-lo-red va-nes, three lit-tle boys are squ-at-ting, pla-ying with mud. The dri-ver pulls over and le-ans out of the win-dow. The ol-dest-lo-oking of the three boys is the one to ans-wer. He po-ints to a ho-use fart-her up the ro-ad. The dri-ver thanks him, puts the car back in ge-ar.

He parks out-si-de the wal-led, one-story ho-use. La-ila se-es the tops of fig tre-es abo-ve the walls, so-me of the branc-hes spil-ling over the si-de.

"I won't be long," she says to the dri-ver.

* * *

The mid-dle-aged man who opens the do-or is short, thin, rus-set-ha-ired. His be-ard is stre-aked with pa-ral-lel stri-pes of gray. He is we-aring a*cha-pan* over his*pir-han-tum-ban.*

They exc-han-ges*a-la-am alay-kums.*

"Is this Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah's ho-use?" La-ila asks.

"Yes. I am his son, Ham-za. Is the-re so-met-hing I can do for you,*ham-s-hi-reh? ”*

"I've co-me he-re abo-ut an old fri-end of yo-ur fat-her's, Ma-ri-am."

Ham-za blinks. A puz-zled lo-ok pas-ses ac-ross his fa-ce. "Ma-ri-am…"

"Jalil Khan's da-ugh-ter."

He blinks aga-in. Then he puts a palm to his che-ek and his fa-ce lights up with a smi-le that re-ve-als mis-sing and rot-ting te-eth. "Oh!" he says. It co-mes out so-un-ding li-ke*Ohhhhhh,* li-ke an ex-pel-led bre-ath. "Oh! Ma-ri-am! Are you her da-ugh-ter? Is she-" He is twis-ting his neck now, lo-oking be-hind her eagerly, se-arc-hing. "Is she he-re? It's be-en so long! Is Ma-ri-am he-re?"

"She has pas-sed on, I'm af-ra-id."

The smi-le fa-des from Ham-za's fa-ce.

For a mo-ment, they stand the-re, at the do-or-way, Ham-za lo-oking at the gro-und. A don-key brays so-mew-he-re.

"Co-me in," Ham-za says. He swings the do-or open. "Ple-ase co-me in."

* * *

They srr on the flo-or in a spar-sely fur-nis-hed ro-om. The-re is a He-ra-ti rug on the flo-or, be-aded cus-hi-ons to sit on, and a fra-med pho-to of Mec-ca on the wall They sit by the open win-dow, on eit-her si-de of an ob-long patch of sun-light- La-ila he-ars wo-men's vo-ices whis-pe-ring from anot-her ro-om. A lit-tle ba-re-fo-ot boy pla-ces be-fo-re them a plat-ter of gre-en tea and pis-tac-hio*ga-az* no-ugats. Ham-za nods at him.

"My son."

The boy le-aves so-und-les-sly.

"So tell me," Ham-za says ti-redly.

La-ila do-es. She tells him everyt-hing. It ta-kes lon-ger than she'd ima-gi-ned. To-ward the end, she strug-gles to ma-in-ta-in com-po-su-re. It still isn't easy, one ye-ar la-ter, tal-king abo-ut Ma-ri-am.

When she's do-ne, Ham-za do-esn't say anyt-hing for a long ti-me. He slowly turns his te-acup on its sa-ucer, one way, then the ot-her.

"My fat-her, may he rest in pe-ace, was so very fond of her," he says at last. "He was the one who sang*azan* in her ear when she was born, you know. He vi-si-ted her every we-ek, ne-ver mis-sed. So-me-ti-mes he to-ok me with him. He was her tu-tor, yes, but he was a fri-end too. He was a cha-ri-tab-le man, my fat-her. It ne-arly bro-ke him when Jalil Khan ga-ve her away."

"I'm sorry to he-ar abo-ut yo-ur fat-her. May God for-gi-ve him."

Ham-za nods his thanks. "He li-ved to be a very old man. He out-li-ved Jalil Khan, in fact. We bu-ri-ed him in the vil-la-ge ce-me-tery, not far from whe-re Ma-ri-am's mot-her is bu-ri-ed. My fat-her was a de-ar, de-ar man, su-rely he-aven-bo-und."

La-ila lo-wers her cup.

"May I ask you so-met-hing?"

"Of co-ur-se."

"Can you show me?" she says. "Whe-re Ma-ri-am li-ved. Can you ta-ke me the-re?"

*** * ***

The dri-ver ag-re-es to wa-it aw-hi-le lon-ger.

Ham-za and La-ila exit the vil-la-ge and walk down-hill on the ro-ad that con-nects Gul Da-man to He-rat. Af-ter fif-te-en mi-nu-tes or so, he po-ints to a nar-row gap in the tall grass that flanks the ro-ad on both si-des.

"That's how you get the-re," he says. "The-re is a path the-re."

The path is ro-ugh, win-ding, and dim, be-ne-ath the ve-ge-ta-ti-on and un-derg-rowth. The wind ma-kes the tall grass slam aga-inst La-ila's cal-ves as she and Ham-za climb the path, ta-ke the turns. On eit-her si-de of them is a ka-le-idos-co-pe of wil-cif-lo-wers swa-ying in the wind, so-me tall with cur-ved pe-tals, ot-hers low, fan-le-afed. He-re and the-re a few rag-ged but-ter-cups pe-ep thro-ugh the low bus-hes. La-ila he-ars the twit-ter of swal-lows over-he-ad and the busy chat-ter of gras-shop-pers un-der-fo-ot.

They walk up-hill this way for two hund-red yards or mo-re. Then the path le-vels, and opens in-to a flat-ter patch of land. They stop, catch the-ir bre-ath. La-ila dabs at her brow with her sle-eve and bats at a swarm of mos-qu-ito-es ho-ve-ring in front of her fa-ce. He-re she se-es the low-slung mo-un-ta-ins in the ho-ri-zon, a few cot-ton-wo-ods, so-me pop-lars, va-ri-o-us wild bus-hes that she can-not na-me.

"The-re used to be a stre-am he-re," Ham-za says, a lit-tle out of bre-ath. "But it's long dri-ed up now."

He says he will wa-it he-re. He tells her to cross the dry stre-am-bed, walk to-ward the mo-un-ta-ins.

"I'll wa-it he-re," he says, sit-ting on a rock be-ne-ath a pop-lar. "You go on."

"I won't-"

"Don't worry. Ta-ke yo-ur ti-me. Go on,*ham-s-hi-reh.* "

La-ila thanks him. She cros-ses the stre-am-bed, step-ping from one sto-ne to anot-her. She spots bro-ken so-da bot-tles amid the rocks, rus-ted cans, and a mold-co-ated me-tal-lic con-ta-iner with a zinc lid half bu-ri-ed in the gro-und.

She he-ads to-ward the mo-un-ta-ins, to-ward the we-eping wil-lows, which she can see now, the long dro-oping branc-hes sha-king with each gust of wind. In her chest, her he-art is drum-ming. She se-es that the wil-lows are ar-ran-ged as Ma-ri-am had sa-id, in a cir-cu-lar gro-ve with a cle-aring in the mid-dle. La-ila walks fas-ter, al-most run-ning now. She lo-oks back over her sho-ul-der and se-es that Ham-za is a tiny fi-gu-re, his*cha-pan* a burst of co-lor aga-inst the brown of the tre-es' bark. She trips over a sto-ne and al-most falls, then re-ga-ins her fo-oting. She hur-ri-es the rest of the way with the legs of her tro-users pul-led up. She is pan-ting by the ti-me she re-ac-hes the wil-lows.

Ma-ri-am's*kol-ba* is still he-re.

When she ap-pro-ac-hes it, La-ila se-es that the lo-ne win-dow-pa-ne is empty and that the do-or is go-ne. Ma-ri-am had desc-ri-bed a chic-ken co-op and a tan-do-or, a wo-oden out-ho-use too, but La-ila se-es no sign of them. She pa-uses at the ent-ran-ce to the*kol-ba* She can he-ar fli-es buz-zing in-si-de.

To get in, she has to si-des-tep a lar-ge flut-te-ring spi-der-web. It's dim in-si-de. La-ila has to gi-ve her eyes a few mo-ments to adj-ust. When they do, she se-es that the in-te-ri-or is even smal-ler than she'd ima-gi-ned. Only half of a sing-le rot-ting, splin-te-red bo-ard re-ma-ins of the flo-or-bo-ards. The rest, she ima-gi-nes, ha-ve be-en rip-ped up for bur-ning as fi-re-wo-od. The flo-or is car-pe-ted now with dry-edged le-aves, bro-ken bot-tles, dis-car-ded che-wing gum wrap-pers, wild mush-ro-oms, old yel-lo-wed ci-ga-ret-te butts. But mostly with we-eds, so-me stun-ted, so-me sprin-ging im-pu-dently half-way up the walls.

Fif-te-en ye-ars, La-ila thinks. Fif-te-en ye-ars in this pla-ce.

La-ila sits down, her back to the wall. She lis-tens to the wind fil-te-ring thro-ugh the wil-lows. The-re are mo-re spi-der-webs stretc-hed ac-ross the ce-iling. So-me-one has spray-pa-in-ted so-met-hing on one of the walls, but much of it has slo-ug-hed off, and La-ila can-not de-cip-her what it says. Then she re-ali-zes the let-ters are Rus-si-an. The-re is a de-ser-ted bird's nest in one cor-ner and a bat han-ging up-si-de down in anot-her cor-ner, whe-re the wall me-ets the low ce-iling.

La-ila clo-ses her eyes and sits the-re aw-hi-le.

In Pa-kis-tan, it was dif-fi-cult so-me-ti-mes to re-mem-ber the de-ta-ils of Ma-ri-am's fa-ce. The-re we-re ti-mes when, li-ke a word on the tip of her ton-gue, Ma-ri-am's fa-ce elu-ded her. But now, he-re in this pla-ce, it's easy to sum-mon Ma-ri-am be-hind the lids of her eyes: the soft ra-di-an-ce of her ga-ze, the long chin, the co-ar-se-ned skin of her neck, the tight-lip-ped smi-le. He-re, La-ila can lay her che-ek on the soft-ness of Ma-ri-am's lap aga-in, can fe-el Ma-ri-am swa-ying back and forth, re-ci-ting ver-ses from the Ko-ran, can fe-el the words vib-ra-ting down Ma-ri-am's body, to her kne-es, and in-to her own ears.

Then, sud-denly, the we-eds be-gin to re-ce-de, as if so-met-hing is pul-ling them by the ro-ots from be-ne-ath the gro-und. They sink lo-wer and lo-wer un-til the earth in the*kol-ba* has swal-lo-wed the last of the-ir spiny le-aves. The spi-der-webs ma-gi-cal-ly uns-pin them-sel-ves. The bird's nest self-di-sas-semb-les, the twigs snap-ping lo-ose one by one, flying out of the*kol-ba* end over end. An in-vi-sib-le era-ser wi-pes the Rus-si-an graf-fi-ti off the wall.

The flo-or-bo-ards are back. La-ila se-es a pa-ir of sle-eping cots now, a wo-oden tab-le, two cha-irs, a cast-iron sto-ve in the cor-ner, shel-ves along the walls, on which sit clay pots and pans, a blac-ke-ned te-aket-tle, cups and spo-ons. She he-ars chic-kens cluc-king out-si-de, the dis-tant gurg-ling of the stre-am.

A yo-ung Ma-ri-am is sit-ting at the tab-le ma-king a doll by the glow of an oil lamp. She's hum-ming so-met-hing. Her fa-ce is smo-oth and yo-uth-ful, her ha-ir was-hed, com-bed back. She has all her te-eth.

La-ila watc-hes Ma-ri-am glue strands of yam on-to her doll's he-ad. In a few ye-ars, this lit-tle girl will be a wo-man who will ma-ke small de-mands on li-fe, who will ne-ver bur-den ot-hers, who will ne-ver let on that she too has had sor-rows, di-sap-po-int-ments, dre-ams that ha-ve be-en ri-di-cu-led. A wo-man who will be li-ke a rock in a ri-ver-bed, en-du-ring wit-ho-ut comp-la-int, her gra-ce not sul-li-ed but*sha-ped* by the tur-bu-len-ce that was-hes over her. Al-re-ady La-ila se-es so-met-hing be-hind this yo-ung girl's eyes, so-met-hing de-ep in her co-re, that ne-it-her Ras-he-ed nor the Ta-li-ban will be ab-le to bre-ak. So-met-hing as hard and un-yi-el-ding as a block of li-mes-to-ne. So-met-hing that, in the end, will be*her* un-do-ing and La-ila's sal-va-ti-on.

The lit-tle girl lo-oks up. Puts down the doll. Smi-les.

La-ila jo?

La-ila's eyes snap open. She gasps, and her body pitc-hes for-ward. She start-les the bat, which zips from one end of the*kol-ba* to the ot-her, its be-ating wings li-ke the flut-te-ring pa-ges of a bo-ok, be-fo-re it fli-es out the win-dow.

La-ila gets to her fe-et, be-ats the de-ad le-aves from the se-at of her tro-users. She steps out of the*kol-ba* Out-si-de, the light has shif-ted slightly. A wind is blo-wing, ma-king the grass rip-ple and the wil-low branc-hes click.

Be-fo-re she le-aves the cle-aring, La-ila ta-kes one last lo-ok at the*kol-ba* whe-re Ma-ri-am had slept, eaten, dre-amed, held her bre-ath for Jalil. On sag-ging walls, the wil-lows cast cro-oked pat-terns that shift with each gust of wind. A crow has lan-ded on the flat ro-of. It pecks at so-met-hing, squ-awks, fli-es off.

"Go-od-bye, Ma-ri-am."

And, with that, una-wa-re that she is we-eping, La-ila be-gins to run thro-ugh the grass.

She finds Ham-za still sit-ting on the rock. When he spots her, he stands up.

"Let's go back," he says. Then, "I ha-ve so-met-hing to gi-ve you."

*** * ***

La-ila watts for Ham-za in the gar-den by the front do-or. The boy who had ser-ved them tea ear-li-er is stan-ding be-ne-ath one of the fig tre-es hol-ding a chic-ken, watc-hing her im-pas-si-vely. La-ila spi-es two fa-ces, an old wo-man and a yo-ung girl in*hi-j-ab* ob-ser-ving her de-mu-rely from a win-dow.

The do-or to the ho-use opens and Ham-za emer-ges. He is car-rying a box.

He gi-ves it to La-ila.
"Jalil Khan ga-ve this to my fat-her a month or so be-fo-re he di-ed/' Ham-za says. "He as-ked my fat-her to sa-fe-gu-ard it for Ma-ri-am un-til she ca-me to cla-im it. My fat-her kept it for two ye-ars. Then, just be-fo-re he pas-sed away, he ga-ve it to me, and as-ked me to sa-ve it for Ma-ri-am. But she…you know, she ne-ver ca-me."

La-ila lo-oks down at the oval-sha-ped tin box. It lo-oks li-ke an old cho-co-la-te box. It's oli-ve gre-en, with fa-ding gilt scrolls all aro-und the hin-ged lid The-re is a lit-tle rust on the si-des, and two tiny dents on the front rim of the lid. La-ila tri-es to open the box, but the latch is loc-ked.
"What's in it?" she asks.
Ham-za puts a key in her palm. "My fat-her ne-ver un-loc-ked it. Ne-it-her did 1.Isup-po-se it was God's will that it be you."

*** * ***

Back at the ho-tel, Ta-riq and the child-ren are not back yet.
La-ila sits on the bed, the box on her lap. Part of her wants to le-ave it uno-pe-ned, let wha-te-ver Jalil had in-ten-ded re-ma-in a sec-ret. But, in the end, the cu-ri-osity pro-ves too strong. She sli-des in the key. It ta-kes so-me rat-tling and sha-king, but she opens the box.

In it, she finds three things: an en-ve-lo-pe, a bur-lap sack, and a vi-de-ocas-set-te.
La-ila ta-kes the ta-pe and go-es down to the re-cep-ti-on desk. She le-arns from the el-derly clerk who had gre-eted them the day be-fo-re that the ho-tel has only one VCR, in its big-gest su-ite. The su-ite is va-cant at the mo-ment, and he ag-re-es to ta-ke her. He le-aves the desk to a mus-tac-hi-o-ed yo-ung man in a su-it who is tal-king on a cel-lu-lar pho-ne.

The old clerk le-ads La-ila to the se-cond flo-or, to a do-or at the end of a long hal-lway. He works the lock, lets her in.

La-ila's eyes find the TV in the cor-ner. They re-gis-ter not-hing el-se abo-ut the su-ite-She turns on the TV, turns on the VCR. Puts the ta-pe in and pus-hes the play but-ton. The scre-en is blank for a few mo-ments, and La-ila be-gins to won-der why Jalil had go-ne to the tro-ub-le of pas-sing a blank ta-pe to Ma-ri-am. But then the-re is mu-sic, and ima-ges be-gin to play on the scre-en.

La-ila frowns. She ke-eps watc-hing for a mi-nu-te or two. Then she pus-hes stop, fast-for-wards the ta-pe, and pus-hes play aga-in. It's the sa-me film.

The old man is lo-oking at her qu-iz-zi-cal-ly.

The film pla-ying on the scre-en is Walt Dis-ney's*Pi-noc-chio.* La-ila do-es not un-ders-tand.

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Ta-riq and the child-ren co-me back to the ho-tel just af-ter six o'clock. Azi-za runs to La-ila and shows her the
ear-rings Ta-riq has bo-ught for her, sil-ver with an ena-mel but-terfly on each. Zal-mai is clutc-hing an inf-la-tab-le dolp-hin that squ-e-aks when its sno-ut is squ-e-ezed.

"How are you?" Ta-riq asks, put-ting his arm aro-und her sho-ul-der.

"I'm fi-ne," La-ila says. "I'll tell you la-ter."

They walk to a ne-arby ke-bab ho-use to eat. It's a small pla-ce, with sticky, vinyl tab-lec-loths, smoky and lo-ud But the lamb is ten-der and mo-ist and the bre-ad hot. They walk the stre-ets for a whi-le af-ter. Ta-riq buys the child-ren ro-se-wa-ter ice cre-am from a stre-et-si-de ki-osk. They eat, sit-ting on a bench, the mo-un-ta-ins be-hind them sil-ho-u-et-ted aga-inst the scar-let red of dusk. The air is warm, rich with the frag-ran-ce of ce-dar.

La-ila had ope-ned the en-ve-lo-pe ear-li-er when she'd co-me back to the ro-om af-ter vi-ewing the vi-de-ota-pe. In it was a let-ter, handw-rit-ten in blue ink on a yel-low, li-ned she-et of pa-per.
It re-ad:

May 13, 1987
My de-ar Ma-ri-am:
I pray that this let-ter finds you in go-od he-alth
As you kno w, I ca-me to Ka-bul a month ago to spe-ak with you. Bui you wo-uld not see me. Iwas di-sap-po-in-ted but co-uld not bla-me you. In yo-ur pla-ce, Imight ha-ve do-ne the sa-me. Ilost the pri-vi-le-ge of yo-ur go-od gra-ces a long ti-me ago and for that I only ha-ve myself to bla-me. Bui if you are re-ading this let-ter, then you ha-ve re-ad the let-ter that Ile-fi at yo-ur do-or. You ha-ve re-ad it and you ha-ve co-me to see Mul-lah Fa-izul-lah, as I had as-ked that you do. Iam gra-te-ful that you did, Ma-ri-am jo. Iam gra-te-ful for this chan-ce to say a few words to you.
Whe-re do I be-gin?

Yo-ur fat-her has known so much sor-row sin-ce we last spo-ke, Ma-ri-amjo. Yo-ur step-mot-her Af-so-on was kil-led on the first day of the 1979 up-ri-sing. A stray bul-let kil-led yo-ur sis-ter Ni-lo-ufar that sa-me day. Ican still see her, my Uti-le Ni-lo-ufar, do-ing he-ad-si-ands to imp-ress gu-ests. Yo-ur brot-her Far-had jo-ined

the jihad in J 980. The So-vi-ets kil-led him in J 982, just out-si-de of-Hel-mand. I ne-ver got to see his body. I don 'i know if you ha-ve child-ren of yo-ur own, Ma-ri-amjo, but if you do I pray that God lo-ok af-ter them and spa-re you the gri-ef that Iha-ve known. I still dre-am of them. I still dre-am of my de-ad chil-d-ren.

I ha-ve dre-ams of you too, Ma-ri-am jo. Imiss you. Imiss the so-und of yo-ur vo-ice, yo-ur la-ugh-ter. I miss re-ading to you, and all tho-se ti-mes we fis-hed to-get-her. Do you re-mem-ber all tho-se ti-mes we fis-hed to-get-her? You we-re a go-od da-ugh-ter, Ma-ri-am jo, and I can-not ever think of you wit-ho-ut fe-eling sha-me and reg-ret. Reg-ret… When it co-mes to you, Ma-ri-amjo, I ha-ve oce-ans of it. I reg-ret that I did not see you the day you ca-me to He-rat. I reg-ret that I did not open the do-or and ta-ke you in. I reg-ret that I did not ma-ke you a da-ugh-ter to me, ihatl le-iyou li-ve in that pla-ce for all tho-se ye-ars. And-for what? Fe-ar of lo-sing fa-ce? Of sta-ining my so-cal-led go-od na-me? How Uti-le tho-se things mat-ter to me now af-ter all the loss, all the ter-rib-le things Iha-ve se-en in this cur-sed war. Bui now, of co-ur-se, it is too la-te. Per-haps this is just pu-nish-ment for tho-se who ha-ve be-en he-art-less, to un-ders-tand only when not-hing can be un-do-ne. Now all Ican do is say that you we-re a go-od da-ugh-ter, Ma-ri-amjo, and that Ine-ver de-ser-ved you. Now all I can do is ask for yo-ur for-gi-ve-ness. So for-gi-ve me, Ma-ri-amjo. For-gi-ve me. For-gi-ve me. For-gi-ve me.

I am not the we-althy man you on-ce knew. The com-mu-nists con-fis-ca-ted so much of my land, and all of my sto-res as well. But it is petty to comp-la-in, for God-for re-asons that I do not un-der-s-tand-has still bles-sed me with far mo-re than most pe-op-le. Sin-ce my re-turn from Ka-bul, Iha-ve ma-na-ged to sell what Uti-le re-ma-ined of my land. I ha-ve enc-lo-sed for you yo-ur sha-re of the in-he-ri-tan-ce. You can see that it is far from afor-tu-ne, but it is so-met-hing. It is so-met-hing. (You will al-so no-ti-ce that I ha-ve ta-ken the li-berty of exc-han-ging the mo-ney in-to dol-lars. I think it is for the best God alo-ne knows the fa-te of our own be-le-agu-ered cur-rency.)

I ho-pe you do not think that I am trying to buy yo-ur for-gi-ve-ness. I ho-pe you will cre-dit me with kno-wing that yo-ur for-gi-ve-ness is not for sa-le. It ne-ver was. I am me-rely gi-ving you, if be-la-tedly, what was right-ful-ly yo-urs all along. I was not a du-ti-ful fat-her to you in li-fe. Per-haps in de-ath I can be.

Ah, de-ath. I won't bur-den you with de-ta-ils, but de-ath is wit-hin sight for me now. We-ak he-art, the doc-tors say. It is a fit-ting man-ner of de-ath, I think, for a we-ak man.

Ma-ri-amjo,

I da-re, I da-re al-low myself the ho-pe that, af-ter you re-ad this, you will be mo-re cha-ri-tab-le to me than I ever was to you. That you might find it in yo-ur he-art to co-me and see yo-ur fat-her. That you will knock on my do-or one mo-re ti-me and gi-ve me the chan-ce to open it this ti-me, to wel-co-me you, to ta-ke you in my arms, my da-ugh-ter, as I sho-uld ha-ve all tho-se ye-ars ago. It is a ho-pe as we-ak as my he-art. This I know. But I will be wa-iting. I will be lis-te-ning for yo-ur knock I will be ho-ping.

May God grant you a long and pros-pe-ro-us li-fe, my da-ugh-ter. May God gi-ve you many he-althy and be-a-uti-ful child-ren. May you find the hap-pi-ness, pe-ace, and ac-cep-tan-ce that I did not gi-ve you. Be well. I le-ave you in the lo-ving hands of God.

Yo-ur un-de-ser-ving fat-her, Jalil

That night, af-ter they re-turn to the ho-tel, af-ter the child-ren ha-ve pla-yed and go-ne to bed, La-ila tells Ta-riq abo-ut the let-ter. She shows him the mo-ney in the bur-lap sack. When she be-gins to cry, he kis-ses her fa-ce and holds her in his arms.

51.

April 2003

Thedro-ught has en-ded. It sno-wed at last this past win-ter, kne-ede-ep, and now it has be-en ra-ining for days.**The** Ka-bul Ri-ver is flo-wing on-ce aga-in. Its spring flo-ods ha-ve was-hed away Ti-ta-nic City.

The-re is mud on the stre-ets now. Sho-es squ-ish. Cars get trap-ped. Don-keys lo-aded with ap-ples slog he-avily, the-ir ho-oves splat-te-ring muck from ra-in pud-dles. But no one is comp-la-ining abo-ut the mud, no one is mo-ur-ning Ti-ta-nic City.*We ne-ed Ka-bul to be gre-en aga-in,* pe-op-le say.

Yes-ter-day, La-ila watc-hed her child-ren play in the down-po-ur, hop-ping from one pud-dle to anot-her in the-ir back-yard be-ne-ath a le-ad-co-lo-red sky. She was watc-hing from the kitc-hen win-dow of the small two-bed-ro-om ho-use that they are ren-ting in Deh-Ma-zang. The-re is a po-meg-ra-na-te tree in the yard and a thic-ket of swe-etb-ri-ar bus-hes. Ta-riq has patc-hed the walls and bu-ilt the child-ren a sli-de, a swing set, a lit-tle fen-ced area for Zal-mai's new go-at. La-ila watc-hed the ra-in sli-de off Zal-mai's scalp-he has as-ked that he be sha-ved, li-ke Ta-riq, who is in char-ge now of sa-ying the*Ba-ba-loo* pra-yers. The ra-in flat-te-ned Azi-za's long ha-ir, tur-ned it in-to sod-den tend-rils that spra-yed Zal-mai when she snap-ped her he-ad.

Zal-mai is al-most six. Azi-za is ten. They ce-leb-ra-ted her birth-day last we-ek, to-ok her to Ci-ne-ma Park, whe-re, at last,*Ti-ta-nic* was openly scre-ened for the pe-op-le of Ka-bul.

*** * ***

"Co-me on, child-ren, we're go-ing to be la-te," La-ila calls, put-ting the-ir lunc-hes in a pa-per bag-It's eight o'clock in the mor-ning. La-ila was up at fi-ve. As al-ways, it was Azi-za who sho-ok her awa-ke for mor-ning*na-maz.* The pra-yers, La-ila knows, are Azi-za's way of clin-ging to Ma-ri-am, her way of ke-eping Ma-ri-am clo-se

aw-hi-le yet be-fo-re ti-me has its way, be-fo-re it snatc-hes Ma-ri-am from the gar-den of her me-mory li-ke a we-ed pul-led by its ro-ots.

After*na-maz,* La-ila had go-ne back to bed, and was still as-le-ep when Ta-riq left the ho-use. She va-gu-ely re-mem-bers him kis-sing her che-ek. Ta-riq has fo-und work with a French NGO that fits land mi-ne sur-vi-vors and am-pu-te-es with prost-he-tic limbs.

Zal-mai co-mes cha-sing Azi-za in-to the kitc-hen.

"You ha-ve yo-ur no-te-bo-oks, you two? Pen-cils? Text-bo-oks?"

"Right he-re," Azi-za says, lif-ting her back-pack. Aga-in, La-ila no-ti-ces how her stut-ter is les-se-ning.

"Let's go, then."

La-ila lets the child-ren out of the ho-use, locks the do-or. They step out in-to the co-ol mor-ning. It isn't ra-ining to-day. The sky is blue, and La-ila se-es no clumps of clo-uds in the ho-ri-zon. Hol-ding hands, the three of them ma-ke the-ir way to the bus stop. The stre-ets are busy al-re-ady, te-eming with a ste-ady stre-am of ricks-haws, ta-xi-cabs, UN trucks, bu-ses, ISAF je-eps. Sle-epy-eyed merc-hants are un-loc-king sto-re ga-tes that had be-en rol-led down for the night-Ven-dors sit be-hind to-wers of che-wing gum and ci-ga-ret-te packs. Al-re-ady the wi-dows ha-ve cla-imed the-ir spots at stre-et cor-ners, as-king the pas-sersby for co-ins.

La-ila finds it stran-ge to be back in Ka-bul The city has chan-ged Every day now she se-es pe-op-le plan-ting sap-lings, pa-in-ting old ho-uses, car-rying bricks for new ones. They dig gut-ters and wells. On win-dow-sil-ls, La-ila spots flo-wers pot-ted in the empty shells of old Mu-j-ahi-de-en roc-kets-roc-ket flo-wers, Ka-bu-lis call them. Re-cently, Ta-riq to-ok La-ila and the child-ren to the Gar-dens of Ba-bur, which are be-ing re-no-va-ted. For the first ti-me in ye-ars, La-ila he-ars mu-sic at Ka-bul's stre-et cor-ners,*ru-bab* and tab-la,*do-o-i-ar,* har-mo-ni-um and tam-bo-ura, old Ah-mad Za-hir songs.

La-ila wis-hes Mammy and Ba-bi we-re ali-ve to see the-se chan-ges. But, li-ke Mil's let-ter, Ka-bul's pe-nan-ce has ar-ri-ved too la-te.

La-ila and the child-ren are abo-ut to cross the stre-et to the bus stop when sud-denly a black Land Cru-iser with tin-ted win-dows blows by. It swer-ves at the last ins-tant and mis-ses La-ila by less than an arm's length. It splat-ters tea-co-lo-red ra-in-wa-ter all over the child-ren's shirts.

La-ila yanks her child-ren back on-to the si-de-walk, he-art so-mer-sa-ul-ting in her thro-at.

The Land Cru-iser spe-eds down the stre-et, honks twi-ce, and ma-kes a sharp left.
La-ila stands the-re, trying to catch her bre-ath, her fin-gers grip-ped tightly aro-und her child-ren's wrists.

It slays La-ila. It slays her that the war-lords ha-ve be-en al-lo-wed back to Ka-bul That her pa-rents' mur-de-rers li-ve in posh ho-mes with wal-led gar-dens, that they ha-ve be-en ap-po-in-ted mi-nis-ter of this and de-puty mi-nis-ter of that, that they ri-de with im-pu-nity in shiny, bul-letp-ro-of SUVs thro-ugh ne-igh-bor-ho-ods that they de-mo-lis-hed. It slays her.

But La-ila has de-ci-ded that she will not be crip-pled by re-sent-ment. Ma-ri-am wo-uldn't want it that way.*What's the sen-se?* she wo-uld say with a smi-le both in-no-cent and wi-se.*What go-od is it, La-ila jo?* And so La-ila has re-sig-ned her-self to mo-ving on. For her own sa-ke, for Ta-riq's, for her child-ren's. And for Ma-ri-am, who still vi-sits La-ila in her dre-ams, who is ne-ver mo-re than a bre-ath or two be-low her cons-ci-o-us-ness. La-ila has mo-ved on. Be-ca-use in the end she knows that's all she can do. That and ho-pe.

*** * ***

Za-ma-nis stan-ding at the free throw li-ne, his kne-es bent, bo-un-cing a bas-ket-ball. He is inst-ruc-ting a gro-up of boys in matc-hing jer-seys sit-ting in a se-mi-circ-le on the co-urt. Za-man spots La-ila, tucks the ball un-der his arm, and wa-ves. He says so-met-hing to the boys, who then wa-ve and cry out,*"Sa-la-am, mo-alim sa-hib!"*
La-ila wa-ves back.

The orp-ha-na-ge playg-ro-und has a row of ap-ple sap-lings now along the east-fa-cing wall. La-ila is plan-ning to plant so-me on the so-uth wall as well as so-on as it is re-bu-ilt. The-re is a new swing set, new mon-key bars, and a jung-le gym.
La-ila walks back in-si-de thro-ugh the scre-en do-or.

They ha-ve re-pa-in-ted both the ex-te-ri-or and the in-te-ri-or of the orp-ha-na-ge. Ta-riq and Za-man ha-ve re-pa-ired all the ro-of le-aks, patc-hed the walls, rep-la-ced the win-dows, car-pe-ted the ro-oms whe-re the child-ren sle-ep and play. This past win-ter, La-ila bo-ught a few beds for the child-ren's sle-eping qu-ar-ters, pil-lows too, and pro-per wo-ol blan-kets. She had cast-iron sto-ves ins-tal-led for the win-ter.

*Anis,*one of Ka-bul's news-pa-pers, had run a story the month be-fo-re on the re-no-va-ti-on of the orp-ha-na-ge. They'd ta-ken a pho-to too, of Za-man, Ta-riq, La-ila, and one of the at-ten-dants, stan-ding in a row be-hind the child-ren. When La-ila saw the ar-tic-le, she'd tho-ught of her child-ho-od fri-ends Gi-ti and Ha-si-na, and Ha-si-na sa-ying,*By the ti-me we're twenty, Gi-ti and I, we'll ha-ve pus-hed out fo-ur, fi-ve kids each Bui you, La-ila, you'll ma-ke us two dum-mi-es pro-ud. You 're go-ing to be so-me-body. I know one day I'll pick up a news-pa-per and find yo-ur*

pic-tu-re on the front-pa-ge. The pho-to hadn't ma-de the front pa-ge, but the-re it was ne-vert-he-less, as Ha-si-na had pre-dic-ted.

La-ila ta-kes a turn and ma-kes her way down the sa-me hal-lway whe-re, two ye-ars be-fo-re, she and Ma-ri-am had de-li-ve-red Azi-za to Za-man. La-ila still re-mem-bers how they had to pry Azi-za's fin-gers from her wrist. She re-mem-bers run-ning down this hal-lway, hol-ding back a howl, Ma-ri-am cal-ling af-ter her, Azi-za scre-aming with pa-nic. The hal-lway's walls are co-ve-red now with pos-ters, of di-no-sa-urs, car-to-on cha-rac-ters, the Bud-dhas of Ba-mi-yan, and disp-lays of art-work by the orp-hans. Many of the dra-wings de-pict tanks run-ning over huts, men bran-dis-hing AK-47s, re-fu-gee camp tents, sce-nes of jihad.

La-ila turns a cor-ner in the hal-lway and se-es the child-ren now, wa-iting out-si-de the clas-sro-om. She is gre-eted by the-ir scar-ves, the-ir sha-ved scalps co-ve-red by skul-lcaps, the-ir small, le-an fi-gu-res, the be-a-uty of the-ir drab-ness.

When the child-ren spot La-ila, they co-me run-ning. They co-me run-ning at full tilt. La-ila is swar-med. The-re is a flurry of high-pitc-hed gre-etings, of shrill vo-ices, of pat-ting, clutc-hing, tug-ging, gro-ping, of jost-ling with one anot-her to climb in-to her arms. The-re are outst-retc-hed lit-tle hands and ap-pe-als for at-ten-ti-on. So-me of them call her*Mot-her*. La-ila do-es not cor-rect them.

It ta-kes La-ila so-me work this mor-ning to calm the child-ren down, to get them to form a pro-per qu-e-ue, to us-her them in-to the clas-sro-om.

It was Ta-riq and Za-man who bu-ilt the clas-sro-om by knoc-king down the wall bet-we-en two adj-acent ro-oms. The flo-or is still badly crac-ked and has mis-sing ti-les. For the ti-me be-ing, it is co-ve-red with tar-pa-ulin, but Ta-riq has pro-mi-sed to ce-ment so-me new ti-les and lay down car-pe-ting so-on.

Na-iled abo-ve the clas-sro-om do-or-way is a rec-tan-gu-lar bo-ard, which Za-man has san-ded and pa-in-ted in gle-aming whi-te. On it, with a brush, Za-man has writ-ten fo-ur li-nes of po-etry, his ans-wer, La-ila knows, to tho-se who grumb-le that the pro-mi-sed aid mo-ney to Afg-ha-nis-tan isn't co-ming, that the re-bu-il-ding is go-ing too slowly, that the-re is cor-rup-ti-on, that the Ta-li-ban are reg-ro-uping al-re-ady and will co-me back with a ven-ge-an-ce, that the world will for-get on-ce aga-in abo-ut Afg-ha-nis-tan. The li-nes are from his fa-vo-ri-te of Ha-fez's*gha-zals:*

Joseph shall re-turn to Ca-na-an, gri-eve not, Ho-vels shall turn to ro-se gar-dens, gri-eve not. If a flo-od sho-uld ar-ri-ve, to drown all that's ali-ve, No-ah is yo-ur gu-ide in the typho-on's eye, gri-eve not

La-ila pas-ses be-ne-ath the sign and en-ters the clas-sro-om. The child-ren are ta-king the-ir se-ats, flip-ping no-te-bo-oks open, chat-te-ring- Azi-za is tal-king to a girl in the adj-acent row. A pa-per airp-la-ne flo-ats ac-ross the ro-om in a high arc. So-me-one tos-ses it back.

"Open yo-ur Far-si bo-oks, child-ren," La-ila says, drop-ping her own bo-oks on her desk.

To a cho-rus of flip-ping pa-ges, La-ila ma-kes her way to the cur-ta-in-less win-dow. Thro-ugh the glass, she can see the boys in the playg-ro-und li-ning up to prac-ti-ce the-ir free throws. Abo-ve them, over the mo-un-ta-ins, the mor-ning sun is ri-sing. It catc-hes the me-tal-lic rim of the bas-ket-ball ho-op, the cha-in link of the ti-re swings, the whist-le han-ging aro-und Za-man's neck, his new, unc-hip-ped spec-tac-les. La-ila flat-tens her palms aga-inst the warm glass pa-nes. Clo-ses her eyes. She lets the sun-light fall on her che-eks, her eye-lids, her brow.

When they first ca-me back to Ka-bul, it dist-res-sed La-ila that she didn't know whe-re the Ta-li-ban had bu-ri-ed Ma-ri-am. She wis-hed she co-uld vi-sit Ma-ri-am's gra-ve, to sit with her aw-hi-le, le-ave a flo-wer or two. But La-ila se-es now that it do-esn't mat-ter. Ma-ri-am is ne-ver very far. She is he-re, in the-se walls they've re-pa-in-ted, in the tre-es they've plan-ted, in the blan-kets that ke-ep the child-ren warm, in the-se pil-lows and bo-oks and pen-cils. She is in the child-ren's la-ugh-ter. She is in the ver-ses Azi-za re-ci-tes and in the pra-yers she mut-ters when she bows west-ward. But, mostly, Ma-ri-am is in La-ila's own he-art, whe-re she shi-nes with the burs-ting ra-di-an-ce of a tho-usand suns.

So-me-one has be-en cal-ling her na-me, La-ila re-ali-zes. She turns aro-und, ins-tinc-ti-vely tilts her he-ad, lif-ting her go-od ear just a tad. It's Azi-za.
"Mammy? Are you all right?"

The ro-om has be-co-me qu-i-et. The child-ren are watc-hing her.

La-ila is abo-ut to ans-wer when her bre-ath sud-denly catc-hes. Her hands sho-ot down. They pat the spot whe-re, a mo-ment be-fo-re, she'd felt a wa-ve go thro-ugh her. She wa-its. But the-re is no mo-re mo-ve-ment.

"Mammy?"

"Yes, my lo-ve." La-ila smi-les. "I'm all right. Yes. Very much."

As she walks to her desk at the front of the class, La-ila thinks of the na-ming ga-me they'd pla-yed aga-in over din-ner the night be-fo-re. It has be-co-me a nightly ri-tu-al ever sin-ce La-ila ga-ve Ta-riq and the child-ren the news. Back and forth they go, ma-king a ca-se for the-ir own cho-ice. Ta-riq li-kes Mo-ham-mad. Zal-mai, who has re-cently watc-hed*Su-per-man* on ta-pe, is puz-zled as to why an Afg-han boy can-not be na-med Clark. Azi-za is cam-pa-ig-ning hard for Aman. La-ila li-kes Omar.

But the ga-me in-vol-ves only ma-le na-mes. Be-ca-use, if it's a girl, La-ila has al-re-ady na-med her.

Afterword

For al-most three de-ca-des now, the Afg-han re-fu-gee cri-sis has be-en one of the most se-ve-re aro-und the glo-be. War, hun-ger, anarchy, and op-pres-si-on for-ced mil-li-ons of pe-op-le-li-ke Ta-riq and his fa-mily in this ta-le-to aban-don the-ir ho-mes and flee Afg-ha-nis-tan to set-tle in ne-igh-bo-ring Pa-kis-tan and Iran. At the he-ight of the exo-dus, as many as eight mil-li-on Afg-hans we-re li-ving ab-ro-ad as re-fu-ge-es. To-day, mo-re than two mil-li-on Afg-han re-fu-ge-es re-ma-in in Pa-kis-tan.

Over the past ye-ar, I ha-ve had the pri-vi-le-ge of wor-king as a U.S. en-voy for UNHCR, the UN re-fu-gee agency, one of the world's fo-re-most hu-ma-ni-ta-ri-an agen-ci-es. UNHCR's man-da-te is to pro-tect the ba-sic hu-man rights of re-fu-ge-es, pro-vi-de emer-gency re-li-ef, and to help re-fu-ge-es res-tart the-ir li-ves in a sa-fe en-vi-ron-ment. UNHCR pro-vi-des as-sis-tan-ce to mo-re than twenty mil-li-on disp-la-ced pe-op-le aro-und the world, not only in Afg-ha-nis-tan but al-so in pla-ces such as Co-lom-bia, Bu-run-di, the Con-go, Chad, and the Dat-fur re-gi-on of Su-dan. Wor-king with UNHCR to help re-fu-ge-es has be-en one of the most re-war-ding and me-aning-ful ex-pe-ri-en-ces of my li-fe.

To help, or simply to le-arn mo-re abo-ut UNHCR, its work, or the plight of re-fu-ge-es in ge-ne-ral, ple-ase vi-sit:www.UNre-fu-ge-es.org .

Thank you.
Kha-led Hos-se-ini Janu-ary 31, 2007

Acknowledgments

A few cla-ri-fi-ca-ti-ons be-fo-re I gi-ve thanks. The vil-la-ge of Gul Da-man is a fic-ti-onal pla-ce-as far as I know. Tho-se who are fa-mi-li-ar with the city of He-rat will no-ti-ce that I ha-ve ta-ken mi-nor li-ber-ti-es desc-ri-bing the ge-og-raphy aro-und it. Last, the tit-le of this no-vel co-mes from a po-em com-po-sed by Sa-eb-e-Tab-ri-zi, a se-ven-te-enth-cen-tury Per-si-an po-et. Tho-se who know the ori-gi-nal Far-si po-em will do-ubt-less no-te that the Eng-lish trans-la-ti-on of the li-ne con-ta-ining the tit-le of this no-vel is not a li-te-ral one. But it is the ge-ne-ral-ly ac-cep-ted trans-la-ti-on, by Dr. Josep-hi-ne Da-vis, and I fo-und it lo-vely. I am gra-te-ful to her.

I wo-uld li-ke to thank Qa-yo-um Sar-war, Hek-mat Sa-dat, Ely-se Hat-ha-way, Ro-se-mary Sta-sek, Law-ren-ce Qu-ill, and Ha-le-ema Jaz-min Qu-ill for the-ir as-sis-tan-ce and sup-port.

Very spe-ci-al thanks to my fat-her, Ba-ba, for re-ading this ma-nusc-ript, for his fe-ed-back, and, as ever, for his lo-ve and sup-port. And to my mot-her, who-se self-less, gent-le spi-rit per-me-ates this ta-le. You are my re-ason, Mot-her jo. My thanks go to my in-laws for the-ir ge-ne-ro-sity and many kind-nes-ses. To the rest of my won-der-ful fa-mily, I re-ma-in in-deb-ted and gra-te-ful to each and every one of you.

I wish to thank my agent, Ela-ine Kos-ter, for al-ways, al-ways be-li-eving, Jody Hotch-kiss (Onward!), Da-vid Gros-sman, He-len Hel-ler, and the ti-re-less Chand-ler Craw-ford. I am gra-te-ful and in-deb-ted to every sing-le per-son at Ri-ver-he-ad Bo-oks. In par-ti-cu-lar, I want to thank Su-san Pe-ter-sen Ken-nedy and Ge-of-frey Klos-ke for the-ir fa-ith in this story. My he-art-felt thanks al-so go to Ma-rilyn Ducks-worth, Mih-Ho Cha, Cat-ha-ri-ne Lynch, Cra-ig D. Bur-ke, Les-lie Schwartz, Ho-ni Wer-ner, and Wendy Pe-arl. Spe-ci-al thanks to my sharp-eyed copy edi-tor, Tony Da-vis, who mis-ses

not-hing, and, lastly, to my ta-len-ted edi-tor, Sa-rah McGrath, for her pa-ti-en-ce, fo-re-sight, and gu-idan-ce.

Fi-nal-ly, thank you, Ro-ya. For re-ading this story, aga-in and aga-in, for we-at-he-ring my mi-nor cri-ses of con-fi-den-ce (and a co-up-le of ma-j-or ones), for ne-ver do-ub-ting. This bo-ok wo-uld not be wit-ho-ut you. I lo-ve you.

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