

The Children Who Became Men Overnight:

Memories of Love and Violence in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

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The three short stories in this collection present a reverse chronology of Afghanistan's recent past: the decade of democracy, the Taliban era, and the civil war period. On the surface each piece portrays the experiences of everyday Afghan men and women and their hopes and dreams at times of war and relative peace. At a deeper level, the stories attempt to unpack Afghan politics, traditions, ethnic tensions, and the diverse bonds that unite the nation and allow its citizens to live together.

My first chapter, "Namak Haram," is set against the backdrop of the Taliban regime. Mohsen, an ethnic Hazara, and his assistant Jabbar, a Pashtun, travel to a remote village in central Afghanistan on an assignment to make a documentary film on a demographic survey. The presence of Jabbar in the Hazara mainland causes ethnic tensions that lead to Mohsen's inevitable predicament. Using third-person-omniscient narration, distinct setting, and round characters, this story analyzes social issues such as forced marriage, patriarchy, honor, betrayal, and moral dilemmas that—alongside the historical animosity between the Hazaras and the Pashtuns—form the main themes of the tale.

Chapter two, "The Boy and The Dog," depicts an ordinary afternoon during the Afghan civil war. It is told from the perspective of a small boy who is sent by his mother on a quotidian errand. The boy finds himself in the middle of a full-fledged war between the Hazara militias and the Panjshiris who fight over a guard dog—the same dog that bit the boy not long ago. As he waits for the gun fight to end, he witnesses the vicissitudes of life in a war zone. The story

focuses on poverty, disrupted childhoods, and war, but it is also about something even more terrifying: the capacity for men, women, and children to adapt to the realities of war as well as the ability to become indifferent to menacing terror.

My third and final chapter, “The Children Who Became Men Overnight,” is an unconventional love story unfolding during the months leading up to the civil war. It is a tale of unimaginable beauty meeting incredible violence in which an upper-class family moves into an impoverished Kabul neighborhood that operates on nothing but relentless gossip and intense anarchy. No one understands why the Amins moved to Char Qala, but soon the whole city knows that Fatima Amin, the family’s daughter, is unearthly beautiful. All the men, old and young, fall in love with her. The three main protagonists, who are ten years Fatima Amin’s junior, have to fight their much older rivals, one of whom is a notorious gangster. To overcome the impossible, they make a decision that overnight pushes them to the precipice of manhood. This is a story about the clash of social classes, the beauty and terror of life in a country on the brink of political turmoil, and the unattainable dreams that men and women hold their entire lives and that they sometimes take with them to their graves.

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Introduction

“The fragile Afghan power-sharing arrangement brokered by the United States sustained a serious blow on Thursday, when the government’s chief executive, Abdullah Abdullah, angrily denounced his governing partner, President Ashraf Ghani, as unfit to govern.” This statement from a *New York Times* article, published on August 11, 2016, only revealed the tip of an iceberg of tensions between the Afghan president and his chief executive and especially their respective visions of the long-standing ethnic conflicts in Afghanistan. The 2014 Afghan presidential elections, from its earliest days, signaled that the ethnic divisions in the country ran deep, and the candidates, if they wanted to have any chance at winning the elections, had to be inclusive in forming their tickets. An ethnic Pashtun, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani chose Abdul Rashid Dostum and Sarwar Danish, an Uzbek and a Hazara respectively, as his vice presidents. His rival Abdullah Abdullah, who represented the Tajiks, chose Mohammad Mohaqeq, a Hazara, and Engineer Ahmad Khan, a Pashtun, as his choices for vice president. This forced ethnic incorporation signified the candidates’ desperate efforts to reap votes outside their traditional constituent territories.

After widespread electoral frauds and disputes, the election went to the second round in which Mohammad Ashraf Ghani came out on top. The Tajiks refused to accept the results. The stalemate persisted for weeks. At one point there were serious talks of partitioning the country into mainly Pashtun and Farsi-speaking regions. For the general public this was a reminder of the dark days of the civil war of the 1990s when the Soviet-backed government of Dr. Najibullah was ousted by the Mujahedeen. The Mujahedeen, who had maintained a united front in the struggle against the central government, broke down into their core ethnic elements when they took control. Disputes erupted when once comrades-in-arms could not agree on sharing power.

What they couldn't solve on paper around the discussion tables they came to settle on the streets with rifles and tanks. The civil war divided the country not into North versus South, but by neighborhoods and street corners as well. The street fighting between 1992 and 1995 took more than half a million human lives, displaced millions inside the country, and forced an even larger number over the borders into neighboring Pakistan and Iran. The country plunged into unbridled chaos and anarchy. Civilians were robbed, raped, and murdered in the open day-light.

It was this unimaginable disorder and lawlessness that paved the way for the emergence of the Taliban. The Taliban, a mainly Sunni-Pashtun movement, deepened the ethnic conflicts more than it brought social order. The Taliban's implementation of strict Sharia Laws shocked people around the world. They banned women from attending schools and working outside the home. They prohibited music and removed anything from people's sphere of social life that they assumed conflicted with religion. What got less media exposure, however, was their religious intolerance against non-Sunni Muslims. By the time they blew up the Buddha statues in 2001, they had already massacred thousands of Shiite Hazaras across the country, mainly in Bamyan and Yakawlang in central Afghanistan and in the Northern Province of Balkh. They, too, killed hundreds of Uzbiks as an act of revenge after General Dostum massacred 2,000 Taliban fighters that he had captured on the battle-grounds.

Sixteen years later, the ethnic conflict does not only surface in the political transactions within the presidential palace but also on the streets and out in the provinces. In July 2016, a suicide attack on the Hazaras who had gathered to protest against the government's decision to reroute an electricity line which was initially planned to pass through the Hazara mainland of central Afghanistan killed more than eighty civilians and injured more than one hundred others. In January 2017, unknown gunmen attacked a coal mine in the north of the country and killed

nine Hazara miners. The Hazaras might be the greatest victims of the ethnic and religious conflicts, but Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Uzbiks suffer the same from the consequences of the unending war. Most of the victims are the civilians, a helpless population who have no voice, or if they do, their voices have been drowned out by war.

With these bitter realities in mind, I have written a creative thesis about both love and violence in Afghanistan, and through these stories, I give a voice to ordinary Afghans. This project has been an opportunity for me to write about my memories as a boy growing up during the civil war and later under the Taliban. Afghanistan has been in the international spotlight for over a decade now, but the country has not been represented for its realities. Western media have always covered the Afghan story through a perspective of terror and terrorism.

When it comes to writing fiction, there are only a few contemporary writers who portray Afghanistan. Khaled Hosseini is one; as an Afghan-born American novelist, Hosseini's stories are usually set in Afghanistan. His debut novel *The Kite Runner* (2003), for instance, covers recent Afghan history before the Russian invasion up until the fall of the Taliban in 2001. His second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) deals mainly with life during the civil war and under the Taliban. Although Hosseini uses the medium of the novel to get deeper into the culture and the historical events of contemporary Afghanistan, he has not been able to capture what day-to-day life seemed during the height of the civil war, or how it felt to live under siege. His narrative cannot give adequate treatment to the deafening silence inside Kabul Stadium after a woman was publically executed in the middle of a soccer game. This is by no mean an attempt to take away from the great work that Hosseini produces and his incredible talent for storytelling.

In this collection of short stories, I write from an Afghan perspective and from a vantage point of view a person who has lived in the country and has experienced the daily atrocities of

war and violence. Unlike non-Afghan writers who perhaps feel a romantic connection with the country and see it as their obligation to write about Afghanistan, my stories portray for its dark realities. The first chapter of my thesis “*Namak Haram*” is a short story set against the backdrop of the Afghan civil war and the Taliban regime. The story takes place in a remote village in central Afghanistan. The region’s impassable, snowcapped mountains stop anything other than suffering and misfortune from entering the village. Mohsen, a documentary filmmaker, and Jabbar, his assistant, are tasked with documenting the social, demographic, and economic survey that is being conducted to determine Afghanistan’s overall population and GDP. Since Jabbar is a Pashtun and the villagers are Hazaras, the same ethnicity as Mohsen, the arrival of the film crew causes ethnic conflicts to emerge in the village. Told through third-person-omniscient narration, the narrator raises, through characters like Haji Nazim and Suraya, social issues such as forced marriages, patriarchy, honor, betrayal, and moral dilemmas that—alongside the historical animosity between the Hazaras and the Pashtuns—form the main themes of this story. Using the setting, characters, plot, and a distanced narrative voice, the short story analyzes and attempts to uncover the underlining causes of the Afghan civil war, the atrocities of the Taliban, ethnic conflicts, and the old tribal traditions that are holding the country back in the dark ages.

The second chapter, “*The Boy and The Dog*,” depicts a slice of life during the Afghan civil war. It is told from the perspective of a small boy who is sent by his mother to his aunt’s house to borrow some salt for dinner. To get to his aunt’s house, he must cross the main street, a site he always approaches with hesitation and fear. On the main street there is a checkpoint of the ethnic Hazara militias, and they have a guard dog that bit the boy not long ago. The dog has been missing for several days, but the boy still cannot cross the main street because there is a full-fledged war between the Hazaras and the Panjshiris, who are being accused of kidnapping the

dog. This story is about poverty, disrupted childhoods, and war, but it is also about something even more terrifying: people's capacity to adapt to the realities of a war zone, and their ability to become indifferent to forms of threatening terror.

The third and final chapter, "The Children Who Became Men Overnight," is as much a love story as it is a narrative of life in Afghanistan during the months leading up to the civil war. It is a tale of unimaginable beauty and incredible violence. An upper-class family moves into an impoverished Kabul neighborhood that operates on nothing but relentless gossiping and intense anarchy. No one knows why the Amins moved to Char Qala, but soon the whole city knows that Fatima Amin, the family's daughter, is unearthly beautiful. All the men, old and young, uncontrollably fall in love with her. The three main protagonists, who are ten years Fatima Amin's junior, have to fight their much older rivals, one of whom is a celebrated gangster. To overcome the impossible, they make a decision that overnight forces them into manhood.

In these stories, I have tried to make that case that even at the peak of the civil war, life continued in Afghanistan—people went on hoping and dreaming of a peaceful future, of a time that they would have enough to eat, of a time when their children could go to school and step outside the house without fearing they might get hit by a bullet. These stories are a testament to the fact that there is more that can unite Afghans as a nation than can divide them as ethnic groups.

I hope these short stories can raise the much-needed awareness both in and outside my native country and that this collection might help resolve some of the misrepresentations about Afghanistan. I also hope this collection will draw attention to the natural beauty, rich culture, and Afghans' genuine desire for peace and a normal life.

Namak Haram

“IT’S SOME FIFTEEN minutes walk from here,” the driver says, looking at them in the cracked rearview mirror. As soon as Mohsen gets out of the car the early morning air sets his nostrils aflame. Jabbar grimaces. The driver turns around. “So, pick you guys up in the evening?” he says with a silly smile.

Mohsen nods. Jabbar clears his throat.

As the old Toyota van snakes its way back across and over the hills, Mohsen feels a dreadfully sharp object snip the fiber that ties him to his little room, to Kabul, to life. He considers his surroundings: endless flat hills stretch in all directions, and in the distance, snowcapped mountains stand licking their invisible wounds. No sign of life. “Let’s see if we can beat the sun.” Mohsen adjusts the camera bag on his shoulder and starts walking on the narrow, dusty animal trail. Jabbar grabs the sound equipment clumsily and follows him. They walk in silence.

It took them only forty-eight hours to get here, yet Mohsen thinks they have been on the road for months, and now they have accidently arrived at the edge of the world. He wants to return to Kabul, to his familiar solitude, to everything that makes him feel at home: his shelves of Persian poetry books, his selection of international novels translated into Farsi, his collection of

cinéma vérité documentaries, the bucktoothed milkman in the morning, the idleness of Pul-e-Surkh at midday, and the sounds of stray dogs barking in the distance at night.

“Did he say fifteen or fifty?” Mohsen stops and asks Jabbar. No answer. Jabbar clears his throat and keeps walking, his eyes glued to the ground in front of his feet.

“Let’s go there, find Haji Nazim, get the interview, and get out,” says Mohsen and starts off again.

“Then maybe you should have asked the driver to wait for us,” mumbles Jabbar from behind.

“I have been doing this for ten years,” says Mohsen without looking at Jabbar, “when you work around other people’s schedule, it’s always better to give yourself adequate time.”

Jabbar clears his throat and takes unnecessarily heavy steps.

AFTER AN HOUR, Mohsen sees the outlines of few houses. “Look! We are here!” he calls, but his excitement soon abates. The three roofless houses lie abandoned, abject, torched; the flame marks are still apparent on the hollow door frames, windows, and crumbled walls. The implacable weeds on the windowsills and in the rooms attest the depth of the tragedy. The two men leave the houses behind and walk in silence. They don’t see the village until they are upon it: a mosque and a dozen whitewashed, two-story mud-houses backing into each other as if defending against an invisible demon.

AT THE MOSQUE they ask the custodian how to find Haji Nazim’s house. The custodian looks at Jabbar, then at Mohsen, and back at Jabbar; he is perplexed. “It’s the one with the blue windows,” he finally responds, pushing back his battered white prayer cap, his small eyes squinting against the rising sun. His answer comes with such spontaneity as if Haji Nazim, his

house, his presence are the givens, the fulcrum to which the village, the villagers, and even those who travel through, owe their actuality.

They search for the house with the blue windows. They find it. The house shares the collective characteristic of the village: high walls, cow-dung-cakes laid like brick barricades on the rooftops, troughs built against the walls, heavy wooden gates, and windows with vertical metal rods for maximum security. But there is an aura of imperviousness to Haji Nazim's house that sets it apart from the rest.

Mohsen stands back and asks Jabbar to knock on the gate. Jabbar clears his throat, goes to the door, and knocks hesitantly: the dull sound of iron beating on the hammered wood dies out quickly, and he knocks again. Still no answer. Under the clear morning sky, Jabbar stands before the gate, defeated. Mohsen wonders why Jabbar chose this work. He believes that artists, filmmakers specifically, should be shrewd; they should be able to steal the kohl from the eyes, saving people the surprise that they were robbed. But Jabbar has neither the endurance nor the passion and agility for film-work.

Mohsen walks to the gate, grabs the chain and knocks hard and long. When no one answers, he knocks again, harder and longer.

“*Sabr*, don't break the door!” says a woman's voice as though coming from the other end of the world. Then from behind the thick wood of the gate she asks “Who is this?”

“We're the film crew. Is Haji Nazim home?” says Mohsen. She doesn't respond. “We are here for the interview,” he continues.

“He isn't home,” she finally says. “*Paasa beya.*”

She speaks in a monotonous, melancholic, and rough tone, yet the way she says *come back later* makes Mohsen think. The words linger in the air as if extending an invitation to Mohsen to stay. Her sentence lacks the determination to end the conversation.

“When will he be back, do you know?” asks Mohsen. She doesn’t answer. All Mohsen can hear is Jabbar crushing the dried animal droppings under his boots and clearing his throat violently.

Mohsen turns away but stops when he hears the gate opening with a heavy grinding sound. From the narrow crack, a sweet fragrance of soap cuts through the wet smell of sheep manure and fresh milk. Mohsen can see half of her full moon face. She looks at him for what seems to be a long time, then the gate closes.

Mohsen thanks the closed door and heads toward the open field.

“Can we wait in the mosque?” asks Jabbar. “I need to lie down, I’m tired.”

“We need to wait out here, Jabbar. How else would we know if he’s back.”

They walk away from the houses, but Mohsen is sure she’s still behind the gate, standing in the darkness, waiting to open the door and break into light, come after them like a wild fire.

THEY SIT ON the yellowing grass still damp with the night air. Jabbar stretches out on the ground fixing the sound mixer bag under his head. Mohsen looks at him with contempt. Part of him says he should grab Jabbar by the collar of his shirt, pull him up, scream at him the most profane curses he knows, and fire him. Part, however, says that he should put up with him; if all goes well they would be done with each other by the end of the week.

Under the morning sun that now has found a bite, the village is overwhelmingly peaceful like a place in anticipation of a great tragedy. Mohsen imagines the rudimentary village life through seasons. Early spring, men plow the soil, while women prepare and bring them potato

and carrot stew, freshly-baked breads, and big pots of green tea. Summer-time, men leave their beds in the middle of the night to re-channel the watercourse to their rising fields of wheat, or ridding in the tail of a caravan of donkeys, they doze off uncomfortably on their way to the mountains to collect shrubs to heat the houses in the winter. In the fall, they harvest, stock the grains in *kandus*, and fill the barns to the ceilings with chaff and clover for the animals. With the first snowflakes on the ground everyone retreats into the comfort of their mud-houses and weighs their happiness against their dreams and sufferings. Then there are the things that happen regardless of the seasons. Men go to the mosque, and some nights when they are in the mood, they make love to their wives; the women yield and remain silent. They give birth to and raise the kids, manage the house, work on the fields, say their prayers at home, and at times weep inside the high walls of the houses. And there are things that everyone does: eat, sleep, and rely on each other when life turns its back on them.

Mohsen thinks about his solitude and his life in Kabul, and how despite living among millions of people he only has himself to depend on. He thinks about his life as a freelance filmmaker and producer, he thinks about all those appointments and projects lined up for him for the next year and half. Most require traveling into the mountains, deserts, crowded cities, and removed villages in the middle of nowhere. He thinks about his room and wonders whether or not he closed the windows. He hopes he did, otherwise by the time he gets back, the late summer afternoon dust storms will have ruined his rugs, and his DVDs and his books that he left sprawled all over the room. He thinks about the book he was reading the night before he left. He thinks about the characters of the book Pedro and Pablo Vicario, and how are they going to kill Santiago Nasr. He thinks about the night Bayardo San Román returns Angela Vicario, her white satin wedding dress shredded. He thinks about how defeated she must have felt. Then he thinks

about all of them at once, and how awfully, humanly vulnerable they are. Just like the girl this morning.

ALMOST BEFORE NOON, a man appears from down the village and brings with him a drowned sound of the river. He walks toward the houses, his steps calculated and determined, his head held high. When he gets closer, Mohsen gets up on his feet, dusts off his pants and his palms, and waits. In his right hand the man is carrying two sickles. Every time he takes a step the sharpened edges send quick, sharp glints into Mohsen's eyes.

“*Khaireyat Bache Qawma?*” asks the man and switches the sickles to his left hand.

“*Khaireyati*. All is good,” says Mohsen and shakes the man's hand. Given his age and small stature, the man's hands are too big and too strong. He smells of coal and fire and ash and river. “We're the TV crew. We want to interview Haji Nazim regarding the national census,” says Mohsen. The man fixes Jabbar with a stern look who is struggling to get up on his feet. He looks at Mohsen and then at Jabbar; he looks at their equipment, and behind him at the houses, resting under the mountain sun.

“Let's go home. We'll get something to eat, and you can get your interview,” says the man, adjusting his gray turban. “*Shekam e goshna jang namosha.*” They walk toward the houses. “I hope I didn't make you wait too long. *Wolswal*, the district governor had sent words about you, but he didn't say when, so I went to the blacksmith to sharpen these.” He raises the sickles. “They were very dull, so dull that they couldn't cut the nose of a donkey.”

IN THE DARK passage way, Mohsen sniffs the air for the soap fragrance, but all he gets is the smell of wet and fresh animal droppings, goats and milk. The yard is the shape of a tiny matchbox with frameless entrances and windows that lead into barns, storage rooms, *tanor*

khana, kitchen, and then into the living quarters. The second floor windows just like the ones facing outside have metal rods, and the frames are painted blue.

Haji Nazim leads them upstairs. The big rectangular guest room smells of animal skin. The floor is carpeted with hard hand-woven rugs with broad coffee and off-white stripes. Maroon velvet mattresses and pillows are carefully arranged against the walls. Mohsen sits by the barred window which looks out on to the open field where he and Jabbar were waiting the whole morning.

Soon tea arrives with a scent of soap. Over the red apple-blossom scarf, she is now wearing a big navy blue shawl that covers her entire upper body. She seems younger, taller, and slimmer. She puts down the aluminum tray and the black plastic thermos in the middle of the room and leaves. Haji Nazim is about to get to up to serve the tea, but Mohsen, out of politeness, says, "*Haji Sahib rahat bashen.*" He places the empty cups before Haji Nazim and Jabbar and one for himself, and fills each with tea that smells of smoke infused with dried mountain shrubs. He leaves the saucer of old sticky candies in the middle so everyone can reach it. Haji Nazim pops a candy in his mouth and sips on his hot, steaming cup with loud slurping sounds and says, "So what's this interview?"

"Haji Sahib, as you already know, the Central Statistics Organization of Afghanistan is currently conducting a socio-demographic and economic survey in Bamiyan. I believe they surveyed your village two days ago," says Mohsen.

"Yes, they did!" Haji Nazim says with a nod.

"We want to talk to the beneficiaries of the survey and get their reaction," says Mohsen, sipping on his tea.

“If you want to talk to the beneficiaries, you’re in the wrong place, *Bache Qawma*?” says Haji Nazim. His uncomfortable grin reveals his small, evenly-gapped, worn teeth. “We’re on the receiving end of many things from the government, but benefit has never been one of them. Never. Just look around you, what do you see? Where do we live? My grandfather’s father and his family escaped a bloodbath, and walked their way into these mountains to take refuge. Cut off from the rest of the world, enduring our pain, we built a life. Then the evil found us again. They started sending tax collectors who simply looted us. For years, they would pick the best sheep from our stables and the finest grains from our *kandus*. Still we remained silent; we complied and put up with it. When they realized that we’ll not die of giving up sheep and wheat, they sent the Taliban who killed us by thousands. They shot dead my cousin and his sons right outside our village and left their bodies for the wolves. Lately, armed *Kuchis*, the nomads, come through every year and take our grazing lands by force. When we stop them, they point their guns at us.

“You see, our miseries always have a human face!” says Haji Nazim taking a thoughtful sip of his tea. “What hurts me the most is that we get betrayed by our own people. Our own blood. The tax collectors were always accompanied by a Hazara. It was a few Hazaras who led the Taliban into our villages, and showed them house to house. Now in this survey thing too, there are Hazaras who are bringing these people to our doors. And I don’t feel good about it.”

“Sorry to interrupt, but can we please record this?” says Mohsen. He nods at Jabbar to get the sound ready, while he assembles the camera on the tripod.

“What do you think about the national demographic survey?” asks Mohsen once the camera and sound are up and rolling.

Haji Nazim fixes his turban and looks off camera at Jabbar “This survey looks like a conspiracy to me, a big, organized one. Knowing what our population is and where we are located, makes it easier for the government to target us.”

“The entrance gate was chalked, that means your house was surveyed. How did you agree to it?” Mohsen tries not to sound argumentative.

“I pretended I was telling the truth,” Haji Nazim responds.

LUNCH IS GROUND wheat served with heated-butter, and *chaka*, condensed sour curd.

When she kneels on the rug to put the bread on the *sofra*, with her back to Haji Nazim and Jabbar, she briefly looks up at Mohsen with a smile he can only trace in her eyes. She is wearing faint kohl eyeliner.

After they finish lunch, Haji Nazim clears his throat loudly, and she comes back. She clears the dishes and gathers the *sofra*. Mohsen concludes that all the time they were eating, she was waiting behind the door, a docile servant, all ears. When she returns again with more tea, her servility cuts through Mohsen’s heart.

“Haji Sahib, how far is Deh Chashti from here?” asks Mohsen as they drink their tea.

“By feet or on a donkey?” says Haji Nazim.

“Feet.”

“For us it’s ninety minutes. For you guys it might be a little more,” he says with a smile and pops a candy in his mouth. “Why do you ask?”

“The survey team is there. We have to go and meet with them and interview more beneficiaries,” says Mohsen. “Villagers,” he immediately corrects himself.

Jabbar clears his throat.

“Sleep the night in the mosque and leave early tomorrow. I’ll talk to Ali, the custodian,” says Haji Nazim.

“Thanks Haji Sahib,” Mohsen responds.

IN THE MOSQUE, Jabbar keeps clearing his throat. Then he stands up “I can’t stay here over night,” he says.

“It is not safe to sleep in the open,” Mohsen tries to sound rational.

“No, I mean, I want to go back to Kabul,” Jabbar mutters, his mouth dry.

“I don’t understand,” says Mohsen. “You want to leave in the middle of the project?”

“I can’t do this anymore,” says Jabbar.

“Any particular reason?” asks Mohsen, perplexed.

“I can’t handle these mountains; they fill me up. It feels as if someone is pouring concrete in my lungs. I can’t breathe.”

Mohsen gets the sound equipment from him and watches Jabbar leave and close the mosque door behind him.

IN THE EVENING Ali says the *azaan*. Half-hour later, few farmers come to the mosque for the evening *namaz*, their bodies exhausted from their day in the fields. Mohsen sits in the back and watches them as they say their prayers, their unspeakable dignity and pride in their act of supplication.

“*Bache Qawm*, what brings you here?” asks one of the men as he leans back against the wall and takes off his skull cap.

“I’m here to interview Haji Nazim for a documentary film on the national demographic survey,” replies Mohsen.

“Haji Nazim deserves some hero time,” adds another man.

“Did he tell you about the *Kuchis*? Last year?” asks the first man, combing his scanty goatee with his fingers.

Before Mohsen can respond, Haji Nazim walks in: “*Asalam-u-alaikom*,” he says under his breath and pays his respects to everyone in attendance with a slight nod of the head. From the stack of straw-woven praying mats, he picks one, unrolls it on the floor and starts saying his prayers. The only sound in the room is Haji Nazim’s whispering of the verses from the Quran and the clicking of men’s prayer beads.

When he is done, Haji Nazim joins the men, and the conversation begins with predictions of the quality of the harvest this year. They talk about the amount of rain and moisture, and the forecast for the coming winter, how cold and brutal it will be based on the signs already apparent. Then the conversation goes off on a tangent, and they talk about *Kuchis*.

“What Haji did to them, I don’t think they’ll even sleep facing this way again,” says the man with the goatee.

Haji Nazim smiles and looks out the window, pensive and proud. “Where’s your friend, *Bache Qawma*?” he asks.

“He left. He was homesick. He’s going to go to Kabul tomorrow,” replies Mohsen.

“*Bache Qawma, choch-e gork khanage namosha*. He is one of them. You should have hired a Hazara. The worst of us is better than the best of them. If it was not because of you, I wouldn’t have even allowed him to set foot in this village, let alone serve him lunch in my house.”

Before the men leave the mosque, Haji Nazim pauses at the doorway “I’ll send you some dinner,” he says, looking calm and generous, a good man. “Ali, take good care of him tonight. He’s our guest.”

AS DUSK STARTS to settle in, Ali and Mohsen sit outside in the yard. Wisps of faint white smoke swirl up from the chimneys and disappear in the crisp purplish evening sky. The smell of burning dung and wild mountain shrubs fills the air. It is chilly. Mohsen gets up to get his sweater when the door opens and the girl walks in with an aluminum tray of food.

“When you’re done bring the dishes,” she says, handing him the tray with a smile. Before she exits the door she turns around “*Rasti*, I need to talk to you. Please don’t make me wait too long. And don’t pound the door like you did this morning.”

For a long time, Mohsen sits with the tray of food next to him, trying to think what is in her that cuts him open so silently.

“I need to go get my food,” says Ali. When he leaves, the emptiness of the yard, the village, and the landscape beyond the walls becomes unbearable. Mohsen thinks about the girl. Suddenly, he feels a relentless hunger, so irresistible that it pins him in the present and sharpens his senses. With shaky hands he lifts off the lid. Leftovers from lunch. He can smell every grain of wheat in the bowl. The richness of condensing butter makes his stomach rumble. He mixes *chaka*, the butter, and the ground wheat in the bowl, and he is about to eat when he hears somebody approaching the mosque, clearing his throat.

“What happened?” asks Mohsen, “I thought you would be in the district center by now.”

“The driver ditched us. He didn’t show up,” replies Jabbar with a fixed frown on his face.

“I guess he doesn’t want the rest of his money,” says Mohsen.

“We don’t owe him anything,” says Jabbar, his eyes cast down.

“Did you pay him in full this morning?”

Jabbar nods as he makes a smothering sound, his mouth dry, his hair and his eyelids covered in a fine layer of dust.

“Go wash your hands, and let’s eat,” says Mohsen.

Ali returns with a tray of food and a thermos of tea. They all eat in silence.

WHEN THEY FINISH eating, Jabbar goes into the room; Ali and Mohsen sit outside jacketed in the bluish cold of the mountains. “Ali,” Mohsen asks, “what happened between Haji and the *Kuchis*?”

“He killed them,” says Ali with as much ease as if he were talking about the mundane chores around the mosque, not a murder.

“How did it happen?” asks Mohsen.

“For the past couple of years *Kuchis* would come to this area and use our pasturelands. In the beginning we received them with open arms. We gave them food and had tea with them. But they took our hospitality in the wrong way; they treated us as if they owned the land, and we were the nomads. One spring they came and told us what part of the land we could graze our livestock on and what parts were theirs. We didn’t like it. We don’t like people coming to our home and telling us what we can and can’t do. So the skirmishes broke out. In the beginning the kids and younger guys would get into fights, a ripped collar here, a bleeding nose there. Then we men started getting involved. Last year when they returned they were larger in number, and most of them were armed. It was evident that they were here for something evil, the enormity of which no one knew at that time. Right outside this village, there lived three families, including Haji Nazim’s younger brother, Nazar. The first thing the *Kuchis* did, one late afternoon, was to set the three houses on fire without warning. The flames reached the sky. I could hear the shrieking screams, and cries of men, women, and children who ran for their lives in the thick black smoke. It was *dozakh-e sani*, chaos everywhere. The heat and death, these will forever remain with me. Those three impoverished houses, burning, turned the open field which stretches for hundreds of

kilometers to an oven. Look at me, I'm skin and bones, but that night I thought my body was all fat and that it was melting, thick and fast. Haji Nazim's brother burned alive. It was agonizing. I saw the same agony on the face of the dying *Kuchi*, his helpless eyes still ablaze with the fire burning all around him. He was lying on his back with a sickle driven deep in his chest.

"We all owe our lives to Haji Nazim. If he had not done with he did, by now, the wind would have blown our ashes into the lakes of Band-e Amir," says Ali as he gets up to leave.

THROUGH THE CRACKED gate, Mohsen can see her face, and he feels fear rolls in his stomach like a ball of cold. He gives her the dishes one by one, passing them through the narrow crack, and then sits outside the door, leaning against the heavy mud-wall, not knowing what to say.

"I need your help," she whispers. "Can you get me out of here?"

The ball of fear turns in the bottom of Mohsen's gut. He can't think of an answer. After a long pause he asks, "Why do you do this? What will happen to your father, to his reputation in this village?"

"Bala da pas shi qad naam shi. Ate ma neya, shoye ma'ya."

Mohsen can't believe it. "Who are you then? And how did you get here?" he asks.

"I'm from the north," she says, "I'm from Mazaar."

"Why him? This guy is older than your father."

"It's a long story. I was married to his younger brother, Nazar, three years ago. We used to live outside the village. Nazar passed on last year. *Kuchis* killed him," she says.

"And that's how you ended up with Haji Nazim?"

"When Nazar passed away, Haji Nazim married me because I was their *namoos*, their honor," she answers. "Ever since, I'm in a cage."

Under the advancing moon, Mohsen feels the snowcapped mountains rise.

“If you can’t take me to Kabul, at least help me to get to Bamiyan center. I’ll find my way from there. Please...” she says. Her tears don’t allow her to finish her sentence.

Her story, her pain, her helplessness, and her tears make Mohsen feel terribly vulnerable. “Please don’t cry,” says Mohsen. “I’m going to Deh Chashti tomorrow morning; I’ll come back for you tomorrow night around this time.”

IN THE OPEN field, he takes off his boots and his socks and lies down on the dewy grass, his hands folded under his head. He watches the moon which still shines relentlessly in the clear sky, and he allows it to fill the emptiness inside him. A brisk breeze picks up; it carries the lapping sound of the river and the barking of dogs from the neighboring villages. He thinks about how he has not seen his parents and siblings for six years. He thinks about how the closest friend he has is the tall, skinny guy who delivers him milk every morning. He thinks of what the guy once told him. I always wanted to be a milkman. It’s relaxed, he’d said, it doesn’t require any education or skills, and you get free milk. Now that he had been a milkman for over thirty years, and had nothing to show for his life except that billion liters of milk delivered, he’d told Mohsen that he regretted that wish. Like the milkman, Mohsen now regrets his wish. He wanted to become a filmmaker, and he became one. But he never felt so alive as he does right now.

On his way back, he notices that the mountains have stopped rising.

At the mosque, the gate is ajar. In the prayer room, Ali is fast asleep. Jabbar is restless; he keeps shifting in his bed.

AFTER A DAY in Deh Chashti, Mohsen arrives at the intersection where the driver had dropped them two days ago. He leaves the equipment in the car that he borrowed from the survey team, and asks the driver to wait. In the late evening sky the clouds hang low over the landscape.

There is no wind, yet the evening chill is sharp. He starts off on the narrow animal trail toward the village. He walks at a steady pace, feeling free from all chains of rights and wrongs. As he goes passed the torched houses, he stops and tries to tell which of the abandoned houses belonged to the girl. Then he thinks of what Ali told him. He feels the heat, the agonized wails echo in his ears. He looks at the crumbled roofs, the empty doorways, the black walls. In the stretching nothingness that envelopes the houses, he tries to locate where the man lay dying with the excruciating grin on his face, and the sickle shoved deep into his chest.

Before walking down into the village, Mohsen pauses and looks over the mosque and the houses. The flickering kerosene lamps gleam uneasily at the windows, and the wisps of smoke from the chimneys merge into the low-hanging dark clouds.

As soon as he sets foot in the village's perimeter, Mohsen feels his soul has left his body. He gazes at the houses; they appear impossibly distant. The more Mohsen walks toward them the fainter the shimmering kerosene lamps burn in the windows.

A FIGURE EMERGES draped in a big white shawl. "*Beya bori,*" says the girl in a quivering voice. The smell of her soap, the quickness of her steps, and the prayer that she's whispering into the vastness of the night...Mohsen can't remember when he ever found innocence so frightening. He walks by her side, and he senses that this time the fear won't come in the shape of a ball of cold and it won't sit in the base of his gut: already it runs in his veins like hot lava. Beads of sweat begin to break on his back.

"If they catch us, they're going to kill us," says the girl as they get near the abandoned houses. Then she starts sobbing uncontrollably. A harsh wind picks up, and she gathers the ends of her shawl and holds them tight in her fist against her chest. The smell of wild shrubs and the

melancholic sobbing sound of the girl add to Mohsen's fear. He wipes the cold sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and quickens his stride.

They have barely passed the crumbled walls when Mohsen hears a muffled cough and then footsteps. He turns around and sees Jabbar and Ali walk on either side of Haji Nazim, carrying the kerosene lamps, their *perhan-tunban* flapping in the wind. Haji Nazim has a sickle in his hand.

The three men look much shorter than Mohsen remembers. There is something in the empty seriousness of their faces, the dullness of their eyes, and the stiffness of their backs and necks that makes Mohsen fear them even more.

Jabbar and Ali come to a halt while Haji Nazim takes a step forward.

"*Bacha Qawma,*" says Haji Nazim in a drowned voice, "I didn't expect this from you. You ate my salt and my bread, and you still betrayed me! *Ay Namak Haram!*"

The first strike shocks Mohsen. When the sickle cuts through his stomach, the unwritten codes of the country life become unmistakably clear to him. Haji Nazim pulls the sickle out, takes a step back, and stares at Mohsen, his breathing rapid and heavy, his nostrils flaring. He clenches his small, evenly-gapped teeth, raises the sickle high over his head and brings it down with his whole force behind it. The sickle catches Mohsen above the collarbone. He falls on his back, the blade stuck deep into his neck, blood gushing out. His nostrils are aflame. Jabbar, Ali, and Haji Nazim stand over him in a circle. In the light of the kerosene lamps, there is nothing that he can read as an expression in their faces: no fear, no sense of pride, no excitement, no mercy, no terror, no regret.

For awhile the agonizing sobbing and pleading of a woman blows with the wind. Then it drowns and becomes one with the endless landscape.

The Boy and The Dog

THE BOY'S RIGHT leg quivered and he had to lean against the mud-wall of Sarkanda's house to assess his wounds. He pulled up his pants and looked at the two deep holes, slightly below his skinny calf, where the dog's canines sunk. With the tips of his fingers, he carefully pressed around the wounds and then limped off towards Khala's house to borrow some salt for dinner. As he walked, he hoped that the rumors were true and that Qatel had been kidnapped and killed. But he worried how he could avoid Shah Wali Sarkanda, his friends, and Qatel too, if the rumors were not correct.

He had not yet turned the corner when the first shot went off. He slowed and looked up at the two startled turtledoves as they hastily flew away from the dead electric lines over head. In the stale summer afternoon air, the shot sounded like a heavy hammer colliding against a thick sheet of corrugated rusty, metal: lonely, removed, yet lethal. By the time he approached the main street, the shooting had begun to intensify.

He looked around for Qatel; he tried to sneak a peek inside the checkpoint, a small primitive square structure of assembled plastic sandbags with a scanty roof of flattened oil barrel steel. The dog was not there. He glanced under the window of the bakery across the street where

Qatel sometimes sought refuge when the heat of the day became unbearable, his tongue sticking out, panting. To his relief the dog had disappeared. “They’ve indeed taken the bastard,” he thought to himself, and felt the beginning of an unmanageable delight.

THE BOY WAS the youngest of his four siblings, and as the rules of the house dictated, he had to run all the errands. Mother sent him around to the neighbors and relatives to borrow a loaf of bread, the coal-fired pressing iron, a mortar and pestle, a painkiller, a cough syrup bottle, or a big shawl when she needed to step outside the house to attend a funeral or visit her sick and dying acquaintances. When unexpected guests showed up at their door, he had to find and carry plates and silverware and pillows and blankets. He usually brought most of these items from Khala’s, which meant he had to cross the checkpoint and the narrow, unpaved main street. Last week, when Mother needed to go to the funeral of Uncle Khanjan, who was killed by a stray bullet in front of his house, she sent him to borrow Khala’s black leather shoes, and the two militia guys, Sarkanda and Habib Charsi, had urged Qatel to chase him. Under the midday sun, they were sitting against the big whitewashed wall across from the checkpoint, high on *Chars*, their Kalashnikovs lying by their sides. When the dog charged after him and knocked him to the dirt, they had rolled on the ground, laughing.

NOW QATEL WAS missing. Habib, Nasro Puchuq, and Zaman Dashka huddled in the freshly dug trench near the bakery, the dark, wet soil still piled against the bare electricity pole. Zaman manned a long-range Soviet DShK machine gun. He was planting his left knee into the fresh soil of the trench and using his right leg as a support for his right hand that pulled the trigger. He was the only one who made an effort to aim before he shot, while Habib and Nasro, crouching on either side, fired their Kalashnikovs aimlessly in the general direction of the enemy’s position, a few hundred meters away at the end of the street. Sarkanda didn’t aim either.

He was lying flat on his stomach right outside the trench in the middle of the street, his feet bare, the front of his long and loose navy blue *perhan-tunban* covered in dust. He fired with a maniacal passion, and the hot empty brass casings thrust out and fell by his side, bouncing and clinking.

The boy watched Sarkanda with disbelief. He had always seen him with a foolish smile on his face, but now he looked serious and determined. The boy tried to think why Sarkanda and his friends were fighting and how long the skirmish would last before he could go get the salt. He knew that Mother would straighten him out with the end of the broom if he took longer than usual.

Inside the bakery above the trench three men went about their work. One of them, a dirty off-white piece of cloth wrapped around his head covering his mouth and nose, bent down and came back up with a practiced efficiency and rhythm. With his back to the street, he fixed the flattened dough on his *rafeda* and put it into the oven, not caring the least what was going on outside. Across from him the fat owner of the bakery leaned against the soot-darkened wall, drinking his afternoon tea.

The shopkeepers whose shops were in reach of bullets had stepped outside and stood in the safety of the whitewashed two-story building. They talked and laughed, and the pedestrians who were blocked because of the gun-fighting joined them. The porter rested in his wheelbarrow, his hands folded under his head and shyly laughed at the vegetable seller's silly jokes. The only people who did not participate were the two women covered in big dark shawls who came out of the same alley as the boy. When they saw the shooting, they sat against the wall, a few meters away from the men, in absolute silence.

THE FIGHTING WENT on. The boy cupped his ears with the palm of his hands and the shooting was drowned as if in a wind tunnel. As soon as he lifted his hands the sound of gunshots came back, loud and ludicrous. He closed his ears with the tips of his fingers this time and pressed them hard. The sound of war seemed as distant, as unbelievable as a dream.

It looked as if people had stepped outside of their houses and shops at the first sign of a shallow earthquake, and now that they were out they thought why not catch up with their neighbors. Baba, a shopkeeper in his late fifties, didn't even bother to leave his shop, an old, red shipping container insulated with thick layer of mud and straw, right behind where Sarkanda and his friends had dug out the trench. In his impoverished, half-empty shop, he sat deep in thought, perhaps believing there was no way a stray bullet could find his way to him because the door of his shop opened perpendicular to the direction of the bullets of the Panjshiris. Still, he had to leave some room for his ignorance of the laws of physics, the intricacies of geometry, and above all some room for chance, and it made him worry that a bullet might take an inappropriate swerve and enter his shop. Now in the heat of the cross fire there was no way he could get out, so he sat there taking thoughtful sips of his steaming green tea and silently wishing a quick end to the reckless shooting.

The rain-filled clouds hung low, and it had become very hot. The boy leaned against the edge of the big whitewashed wall and looked past Sarkanda and Zaman. At the mouth of Khala's narrow alley a group of people waited patiently for the shooting to cease. The boy folded his hands behind his back, balanced his weight on both heels, and started to wriggle. Then he stopped and looked down at his big toe that stuck out the tip of his right shoe, dirty and unwashed, exposed to dust and humidity. He tried to work it back into his shoe, but the hole was too generous. So he wiggled his toes and thought when and where he had lost the lace on the left

shoe. He felt a shudder of grief that his only pair of shoes were disintegrating faster than he'd expected. That meant he would have to switch back into hard plastic galoshes that cut the back of his heels and smelled terrible. To fight off the disturbing thought, with the tips of his fingers he took hold of the scanty sleeves of his old, discolored yellow sweater that he was outgrowing fast and pulled them down. The collar of the sweater overstretched revealing his scrawny neck and his fragile collarbones.

Then, he fixed his gaze on Sarkanda who still rested on his stomach on the ground, his whole body, particularly his shoulders, a constant tremor. A bullet whizzed past Sarkanda's ear and hit the dry mud wall behind him. The boy, and few others, who saw it, let out a cry of bewilderment mixed with a chill thrill. "*Da kos khowar shomo* to that vagina of your sisters!" Sarkanda gurgled aloud in a raspy voice and jolted forward as if the smell of heated copper and burned sulfur nitrate and the proximity of death fired up his determination. The two women that had been sitting against the wall became uncomfortable, hearing their most private part spoken of openly. The older woman made a failed attempt to swallow her laughter, but her lips puckered. The younger woman maintained a serious look and stared at the ground in front of her feet. The shopkeepers gave out a lighthearted laughter at Sarkanda's effortless way of saying *Kos*, but also at the fact that the bullet could have easily smashed his face had it been an inch to the right. "*Kam bod Sarkanda ra wardar kadod!*" said one man. "Nah, I guess even death avoids that mother fucker. I bet even in hell he would rob people in the open daylight and extort money," responded another.

"Or a pack of cigarettes," said the porter adjusting in his wheelbarrow.

The bakery owner shifted his weight on his left hip and glanced out the window to see what had happened. The baker put the *rafeda* down and turned for a quick peek at the street below. As soon as he realized that the moment was gone, he went back to his work.

“They’re wasting ammunition on such useless matters,” said the vegetable seller.

“How did all this begin?” said a bystander, a skinny man, constantly moving his jaws to adjust his dentures.

The boy moved closer to the men to hear what they were talking about.

The vegetable seller paused longer than necessary trying to look important. “I heard that the Panjshiris kidnapped Qatel,” he finally said.

“Who is Qatel?” asked the man.

“The dog,” the vegetable seller responded.

“Oh, they are out to kill each other over a dog?” said the man grinding his jaws, his plastic teeth making an empty sound.

“Yeah, these guys sent someone to bring the dog back, but the Panjshiris slapped the messenger in the face and sent him empty handed,” said the vegetable seller, raising his eyebrows and maintaining a faint smile. He was proud to know something that the others didn’t know. Although he had said everything there was to be said about the shooting, he couldn’t stop himself, so he continued. “Did you know that Sarkanda had stolen that dog from a house?” He looked at the man with dentures for a reaction, but the man was busy looking at Sarkanda and his friends who were still shooting relentlessly. The vegetable seller turned towards the boy hoping he was listening to him. The boy too was watching the shooting. So the vegetable seller with a servile look on his face helplessly turned his attention to the fighting.

They all were looking at Sarkanda admitting that he had earned his nickname “the headless,” and they secretly admired his inexorable fearlessness in the face of death, a quality they well knew they didn’t possess. All of a sudden Sarkanda ducked his head. The bullet hit the hard steel in the corner of Baba’s shipping container that stuck out of a thick layer of mud, then rebounded and caught the skinny man above his right knee. “Akhhhh!” was the only sound the man made, and sat on the ground holding his wounded thigh. The two women looked in the man’s direction, their faces warm with pity. Baba put down his glass of tea on a cooking oil box next to him and stood in his place to assess the situation. That was the maximum movement he allowed himself to make. The fear of getting hit by a stray bullet was tangible now that the man’s thigh started bleeding.

The porter ran with his wheelbarrow to help. The vegetable seller lifted the wounded man and placed him in the wheelbarrow.

The boy’s toes felt numb, especially the one that stuck out of his shoe. He saw the agony on the man’s face, and he noticed that for once the man was not adjusting his dentures, but clenching his jaws and shaking his small head from side to side as he lay on his back, his face pale, his legs dangling off the edges of the wheelbarrow.

“Would the *compoder* compounder be in his shop?” the porter asked, not particularly directing the question to anyone, but thinking out loud. He hurriedly pushed the wheelbarrow towards the pharmacy negotiating the bumps and disappeared into the alley.

NASRO AND HABIB had stopped shooting, their cartridge magazines lay empty, but they stayed low in the trench amidst piles of spent shell casings. The shooting from the other side too died down. Zaman was disassembling his DShK. Every now and then a bullet rang in the air, and

Sarkanda fired back. This went on for a couple of minutes as if no one wanted to bear the burden of being the first to accept defeat.

Eventually the shooting ended just as it had begun.

The crowd started crossing the street as soon as they thought it was safe enough. The two women got up. The vegetable seller went back to his shop and started sprinkling water over the fresh vegetables: basil, scallions, spinach, lettuce, radishes, cucumbers, and carrots, neatly organized on big inclined tables.

The boy crossed the street and stood at the mouth of Khala's alley, his eyes set on the empty casings that lay in and around the trench.

Zaman stood up, and asked Nasro and Habib to help him carry the DShK back to the checkpoint. They carelessly flung their Kalashnikovs on their shoulders, and each man held and carried one stand of the heavy machine gun. Sarkanda was the last to get up. He held his old, Russian PK by the muzzle and dragged it across the street into the post, and then came back for his sandals that lay face down on the ground.

As soon as Sarkanda went into the checkpoint, the boy rushed to the trench. He took fistfuls of the spent shell casings and fitted them in his pockets hurriedly, his heart racing as if he had struck a gold deposit, but others could come and loot him any minute. Two kids he had not noticed before jumped into the trench beside him. One of them knelt on the wet soil and held the plastic sack, while his friend shoved the empty brass casings with both hands into the bag. Although the boy's pockets and palms were full, he wanted to pick more. Then he stood there in the middle of the trench calculating how much money he would make from selling the casings in his pockets. The amount seemed insignificant compared to what the two kids would get. He envied them and their bags.

Silently but bitterly he walked out of the trench holding his waist-band and headed to Khala's house. He knew that he had taken way longer than he should have, and that Mother was waiting for him with the broom in hand, but the jingling sound of the shells in his pockets comforted him.

BY THE TIME he returned with the salt, life on the main street was back to normal. People stood in the line in front of the bakery to buy fresh bread for dinner. Zaman, Sarkanda, Nasro and Habib sat in the checkpoint, exhausted yet at peace. They leaned their heads against the sandbags. The dog issue was not settled and the fight would go on, but for now they could enjoy the two joints that went around in the circle.

Across from the checkpoint, the porter scrubbed the blood from his wheelbarrow, and the vegetable seller was pouring water on his hands from a green plastic pitcher. Baba stood next to them holding his cup of tea. They talked, and every now and then they all laughed and shook their heads.

THE BOY TURNED the corner towards home. He felt the first drop of rain on his bare collarbone. He looked up at the dark clouds and knew it was about to rain hard. He started to run, but his leg felt numb, just where dog had bit him and where the man had bled. He stumbled, then found his footing, and ran again, limping. The shell casings jingled in his pockets with the sound of empty brass.

The Children Who Became Men Overnight

AFTER THEY returned from the graveyard and brought back with them the unbearable stench of the corpse which they had just buried, the Mullah decided to push back the evening prayer for as long as it took the men to clean themselves and put on fresh clothes. The odor was so offensive that even after an hour of scrubbing their bodies with soap and water, they smelt even more disgusting. Out of utter desperation, they resorted to the unlikely solution of frantically spraying themselves with perfume as their wives and daughters watched them with contempt. When at last they came to the mosque, all the scents mixed and soon the air in the prayer room became so suffocating that the custodian had to unroll a rug out on the patio so the men can say the prayer outside in the yard. That day Hussein, Noor, and Feroz sat in the back row solemnly praying to God to forgive Sohrab Seya's sin of murdering the man so mercilessly and to protect him against anyone who wanted to hurt him, especially those who had to avenge their dead. They also prayed for his return.

NOW A MONTH and half later they prayed from the bottom of their hearts for the absolute opposite. They had heard that the news of Fatima Amin's beauty had reached Sohrab Seya, and that he was ready to end his exile to come see if she was actually as beautiful as people said she

was. Despite the fact that they had grown up worshiping him, Hussein, Noor and Feroz knew that Sohrab Seya was an invincible storm, devastatingly pernicious, and they did not want his arrival to destroy their delicate seed of love for Fatima Amin.

As the other kids, anticipating Sohrab Seya's return, narrated his brutality with an unmistakable pride in their voices, the three young lovers found themselves silently wishing that Fatima Amin was not as beautiful as she was. A slightly less attractive Fatima Amin, they thought, would not have caused such a stir across the city, and she would not have forced Sohrab Seya to return which meant the end of their secret, unrequited affair with her. They knew too well they had no chance in winning against a celebrated-murderer, if he decided to fall in love with Fatima Amin. As if saying their farewell to her, they involuntarily began to rehash how it all had begun.

THEY REMEMBERED HOW suddenly the entire neighborhood had dropped Sohrab Seya's story and started talking about Fatima Amin, and what made her so unearthly beautiful. Some said that it was the piercing gaze in her honey-colored eyes, others said that it was her magnificent height, her slim figure, and her majestic gait that resembled that of a young Arabian horse; a few linked her exquisite charms to her flawless olive skin and her meticulous choice of fine clothes and elegantly colored headscarves. The elderly men and women said that her grace had nothing to do with her physical attractiveness, and that it was all because of her piety and her impeccable virtue. Disagreements led to more debates, and it was due to these unbridled rumors that less than two weeks after moving to Char Qala, Fatima Amin's virtue and the glamour of her exceptional good looks pervaded the imagination of boys and men alike and incited the resentment of the girls in the neighborhood who knew that she outshone them both in distinction and class. Soon Fatima Amin replaced even the most beautiful of them as the main kernel of

discussion in the small steaming bakeries where women spent their days gossiping, in the huddles of distracted school-going girls, in the congested one-room *Video-Khanas* where jobless men—some of them from the notorious gangs who knifed people in the open day light—watched Bollywood dramas and Chinese martial arts movies, and smoked *chars* and cheap cigarettes; she was even talked about in the boastful circles of young teens who relentlessly mixed fact and fiction while watching the adults play soccer on the outskirts of the town. It was in such a circle that Hussein, Noor, and Feroz came to hear about Fatima Amin. By the time they had fallen in love with her in the instant when they had seen her for the first time one morning in a saffron-red silk jacket leaving the house with her father Dr. Amin, Fatima Amin was more popular than Char Qala's soccer team, its *Video-Khanas* and gangs all combined.

Most people in the adjacent neighborhoods of Qala-e Mossa, Wazir Abad, and Khowaja Boghra despite not seeing it themselves knew that a family had recently moved into the famous residence of Kaka Aslam Masala, a well-off man, who had made his fortunes in trading spices in downtown Kabul. With its flourishing pomegranate and *Senjed* trees that perfumed its surroundings every spring, the house was a symbol of wealth, and like its owner it had gained the respect of the entire neighborhood. Thanks to Kaka Aslam Masala's tireless efforts and the ample profits made from selling cardamom, black pepper, cinnamon, turmeric, *qors kamar*, and coriander seeds, the residence with its red baked bricks, and hand-crafted wooden door was well preserved, and over the years it had become known as the Red House. In the absence of postcodes and street addresses, the Red House was used as a landmark. Even after Kaka Aslam Masala and his family left Kabul for America for good, the house although vacant remained in the center of people's lives. Kaka Aslam Masala had often proudly mentioned with a shy smile that the name Red House would be still rolling off the tip of people's tongues for decades long

after *qarghana* thorns had sprouted from the earth on his tomb. But the name that had excited people for almost half a century proved trivial compared with Fatima Amin's beauty, and it only took three weeks for it to vanish in the edge of people's memories. Families in the locality adjusted their addresses accordingly. When visitors stumbled through the neighborhood, their initial objective was to find Fatima Amin's house and then based on its coordinates locate their relatives' residences. Soon people as far as Taimani, Shahr-e Naw, Qala-e Fatullah, Wazir Akhbar Khan, Khairkhana, even Pul-e-Surkh in Kart-e Seh in the western part of Kabul had heard the rumors about Fatima Amin and that she was as beautiful as a fairy.

It was not often that the rumors traveled outside of the boundaries of Char Qala, since they were manufactured for local consumption, the ones that did, became part of the collective memory of the Kabulis. Unlike the hearsays that circulated around the city and predicted the horrors of an imminent civil war, the rumors from Char Qala, even the unpleasant ones, always had an element of beauty and romantic love. Through these rumors people knew that Char Qala was a place of girls of sublime beauty, of love affairs, violence, and gossip. Before Fatima Amin's there were only two other occasions when rumors originating in Char Qala wildly circulated to the other parts of the city.

The first one had happened in the middle of one summer night three years prior to Fatima's arrival in the neighborhood when Hussein, Noor and Feroz were just eleven. The rumor had woken them up from their sleep. No one knew how exactly it started, but the assumption was that it was one of the rooftop-sleepers who spoke the first word. No house in Char Qala, including the Red House, had air conditioners, so when the weather became unbearably hot, the women moved their beds near the open windows, and the men and the kids walked with their mattresses and pillows under their arms outside into the yards and some went to sleep on the

roofs. Most nights the rooftop-sleepers lay down on the still warm clay under the indigo blue sky as they stared at the canopy of stars hanging over the one-story mud houses. On one such night, someone had glared at the sky as he tried to fall sleep, and in a state of sweet drowsiness he had thought that he had seen the face of Prophet Mohammad on the full moon. He prodded his brother sleeping next to him and told him if he could see what *he* saw. Sitting on their mattresses he worked with him, pointing at the sky trying to construct the image on the moon. The neighbors who had trouble falling asleep on the adjacent roofs began to follow the directions; soon everyone on the rooftops were sitting up and diligently looking at the moon. Those who couldn't make sense of the instructions stood up in frustration as if getting a few inches closer would make all the difference. As the murmurs of the moon-watchers turned into overexcited, loud conversations, the news began to ripple across the city. Brimming with religious devotion and pure curiosity, men, women, children, even the elderly were helped out of the rooms into the yards. For kilometers people stood in their yards, in the alleyways, on the rooftops, and some even hung from the tree branches, their heads tilted back gaping at the moon. Hussein, Noor, and Feroz had found each other in the alley among the crowd of the moon-watchers, and regardless of how hard they had stared at the moon, none could see what others believed they saw.

The boys had witnessed the result of the second rumor: the mutilated man fastened to the electricity pole, his body decomposing quickly under the sweltering summer sun. They reminded each other how the rumor had broken out when one early morning women who were going to the bakeries with the risen dough on their heads had heard that Laili, the girl with hazel-green eyes and dirty blond hair, the curves of whose body inspired intense earthly desires in even the most pious men in the neighborhood, had eloped with an outsider. It was a tragic moment for the whole community: parents were devastated at hearing the news because they worried that Laili

may have set a bad precedent, one that their daughters might follow. Most teenage boys including Hussein, Noor and Feroz felt bitterly betrayed as they mournfully negated their secret love for her. The girls were confused. Although they praised Laili's courage and her readiness to sacrifice her life and the honor of her family for her love, they were not sure if they could ever assemble the audacity for such an indulgence. The worst affected people, however, were the young guys, the local gangsters who believed that it was their duty to protect their neighborhood against the intruders. It was difficult for them to even believe what had happened under their watch because they always took pride in the peace and safety that their frequent surveillance of the streets and back-alleys had brought to Char Qala. They retreated into the darkness of tobacco filled *Video-Khanas*, hating themselves that they had failed in one thing they thought they were good at. The one person whose wounds were larger and deeper than anyone else and who didn't have time to grieve was Sohrab Seya, Laili's brother. He was the chief of the local gang, and he had a reputation for being heartless when he had to face his enemy. His inexorable violence sent shivers down the spine of even the most fearless gangsters in the city. What people couldn't understand was how on earth didn't the man know Sohrab Seya? Where did he find the courage to mess with such a notorious gangster and run away with his sister? Who was he?

While others gnawed on their lack of understanding of the mystery and spun rumors with wounded hearts, Sohrab Seya disappeared. When he returned three days later, his face was blotted with blood; there was blood on his hands, and from the front hem of his beige *perahan* blood dripped on the dirt floor as he walked through the neighborhood towards his house, his head held high. Men and women, young and old, stood astounded in their doorframes and watched him. It was a little past noon and the sun was high up in the sky and the heat was oppressive, but Hussein, Noor, and Feroz remembered that Sohrab Seya's appearance had made

them shiver with a strange chill that ascended from deep inside their bones. They also remembered that the neighborhood had sunk into such a terrifying silence that they could hear fear sprouting in their hearts like thorns.

The silence didn't break until later that afternoon when people found the man behind the soccer ground standing over a pool of his own blood, tied to the cement electricity pole with a jute rope, both his ears, the tip of his nose, and all his fingers on his right hand missing. The collar of his *perahan* was ripped, and there were innumerable knife slits on his shirt on his chest, his stomach, and especially around his crotch area. Had they taken him to *Teb-e Adli* the forensic results would have revealed that his lower legs and his toes were crushed to pieces, that he was stabbed twenty one times, and that his male organs were cruelly removed. No one dared to take him down, so he stood there for two days with his head hanging down on his chest, waiting for someone to come and claim his body. When no one came, the elders decided to cut his ropes and bury the corpse because the stench had become unendurable, and parents complained that their kids skipped school and went on scavenger hunts to retrieve the dead man's missing parts.

The day after the burial no one could find any trace of Sohrab Seya. Some said that he was still in the neighborhood; he would not leave the house because he couldn't show his face to the public after the shame that Laili had brought to the family. A few people unsuccessfully suggested that he had left Char Qala and was hiding somewhere on the outskirts of the city to avoid possible retaliation from the dead man's family. Those claims were immediately dismissed: Sohrab Seya feared no one and his recent vindictive ruthlessness was a testament to that.

Out on the soccer field and in the *Video-Khanas*, men—those who were Sohrab Seya's friends and those who secretly despised him—felt the inevitable void he had left behind. The

women too felt his absence. Both inside the bakeries and during their downtime in the late afternoons as they sat in circles outside their houses, they prayed that wherever he was, he was out of the hands of harm. They praised Sohrab Seya for his exemplary bravery and the security that he had brought to Char Qala. They all agreed that when he was present they felt safer than ever before, and that they and their daughters could step outside the house at anytime without having to worry about the thugs and stranger men who pestered women. Within the girls' groups the admiration for Sohrab Seya even had a sentimental tint to it. Most girls who were fast approaching adulthood were surprised at the realization that they were showing signs of developing emotions for him. What terrified them was the fact that it was out of their control. They had spent countless idle hours envisioning the infinite number of ways that a girl could fall for a man, but they had never thought that the delicate flower of love could sprout from the dark soil of violence.

IT WAS NOT until after one sizzling afternoon when the Amins moved into the Red House unannounced that Sohrab Seya receded into people's distant memory. Without intending to and without evening knowing it, Fatima Amin so wholly placed herself in the middle of people's lives and conversations that except his entourage and few girls who simmered in his love, no one had the time to think about him. Even when, after three weeks of Fatima Amin's arrival in Char Qala that the news of Sohrab Seya's return began to circulate, people only talked about him in relation to Fatima Amin. Was he going to fall in love with the Doctor's daughter—as Fatima Amin came to be called? Would he, who only knew how to shed blood and instigate fear, be able to court the Doctor's daughter, a soon-to-be medical doctor herself? Did he have that fineness of feeling and the tenderness of heart to nurture affection? The more seriously they thought about it the less capable they found him in the matter of love. Even in their wildest imaginations they

could not invent a future in which Sohrab Seya married Fatima Amin and lived happily. Yet they knew if Sohrab Seya wanted something he would cross any boundaries and sacrifice anything to achieve it. They could already sense the coming calamity.

Most days as they sat under the Judas-tree impatiently waiting to steal a glimpse of Fatima Amin, Hussein, Noor, and Feroz thought how they could face Sohrab Seya if he decided to take her away from them. They thought they could kneel before him and beg him to not ruin their lives. They could blackmail him about how savagely he had killed his sister's lover. They even thought of disclosing the fact that he could no longer get high on *chars* and that he smoked mountain scorpions which he bought dried and crushed from a herb shop downtown. They could not see how any of their scenarios could succeed. When they would find themselves back where they had begun, they would recall how they had become friends on a Friday morning out on the soccer field four years ago. After the adults were done playing, they had left the field to an army of kids to play pick up soccer. The three of them were teamed up out of necessity on the same side. They found it surprising that they went to the same school all along, but they never talked. Ever since, they became friends they did everything together as if to make up for all those lost times. A year after they met, they all transferred to the same 7th grade class—*sonf haftom Alef*—which Noor was in. They were the same age, went to the same school, and now sat next to each other in the same classroom. They hang out together, they went places together, and when the time came, they fell in love together with the same girl: Fatima Amin.

They had skipped three full weeks of classes just to get their daily dose of her. Every morning at 6:30 when most kids showed up at school and responded to the teachers' attendance call, the three of them waited under the Judas-tree in the open space in front of Fatima Amin's house. At a little before 7:00 when Dr. Amin with his black, shiny leather briefcase would open

the door, they would hold their breath and wait for Fatima Amin, and then they would experience the same numbing sensation that they had felt when they saw her the very first time. Infatuated with love, they had no doubt that Fatima Amin's elegance could not be called just beauty; it had to be something highly chaste, more significant and magical than mere physical glamour. And every day when she walked out of the house behind her father, their belief was reaffirmed for she in the split of a second metamorphosed their souls into immortal substances and allowed them to meander in a trance state as if they were waking up from a long sedated sleep. Until the next day they would rehash the brief moments with such lucid specificity that would remember her euphoric smile and her occasional glance at the morning sky as she talked to her father, holding her handbag on her left elbow, her *chador* slightly slipped back revealing her hair that to them looked moist. They had no doubt that if they had the audacity to walk closely behind her, they would pick the intoxicating fragrance emanating from the dark coils under her chocolate-brown headscarf.

They had also noticed that she didn't have the whitest teeth as they would see on the Chinese toothpaste tubes, but hers was a natural milk-white and that they sparkled whenever she laughed. They noticed that she didn't wear nail polish, and that the only foreign thing on her long, slim fingers was a silver thumb ring on her left hand. They noticed that her pants matched her scarf, and that her kitten heels shoes were eggplant-purple a shade or two darker than her handbag. It was the more obvious things that they could not remember. They had a hard time recalling if her long-coat was honey-yellow or camel-brown. They found consolation however in knowing how many steps she took from her door until she turned the corner into the long alley towards the main street where Dr. Amin's driver waited for them. When she walked at her usual leisurely pace, it took her precisely fifty-three stride to reach the turn; on the occasions that she

had to rush, although the number of her steps climbed to sixty-nine, she covered the same distance in much shorter time, almost under a minute, as she half-jogged her way like a youthful doe.

With Sohrab Seya's return looming nearer and nearer—as much as they liked to see her hurriedly hop on her beautiful feet—they prayed that she never be late so that she might walk gracefully like she normally did. They spent twenty-three hours and fifty-eight minutes and forty seconds of the day not living but waiting for their full minute and twenty seconds of Fatima Amin time, and they thought it was unfair if she rushed, but this was one of the many things so out of their control that they turned to prayer asking for God's intervention. They also prayed that Sohrab Seya's return was just a rumor, yet the more they prayed, the more they got concerned.

Long after the rest of the worshipers left the mosque, they would still be sitting on the praying floor their legs folded underneath them. Before the rumors of Sohrab Seya's return spread, they only had been to the mosque on a couple of occasions. The first time was when they became aware that there were so many other guys in the neighborhood who secretly confessed to their closest friends that they had uncontrollably fallen in love with Fatima Amin. All the men were older than them, Fatima Amin's age, some even older; there was one man who was married and had two kids. So they went to the mosque to pray to God to show them the way. It was on the praying mats in the mosque that they realized they knew almost everyone's secrets in Char Qala—their reward for always being outdoor and aimlessly prowling the alleys—which they could use to their advantage to humiliate and defeat their competitors.

They began a ruthless sabotaging campaign. Their first target was the married man. They knew that his son, Kiamarz, went to the same school and was a year below them. In the school

they engineered the rumor that Kiamarz's father was so badly in love with the Doctor's daughter that he was not only ready to divorce his wife but also abandon all his other three secret lovers. That day when Kiamarz went home after school, while they were having lunch, he asked his father if the rumors were true that he was leaving their mother for the Doctor's daughter. As soon as the question had left his mouth, Kiamarz could see that both his parents were equally shocked. His father was stunned at how his most guarded secret had leaked out; his mother was appalled that she didn't know her husband cheated on her. Embarrassed and uncomfortable, he didn't know how to respond to his son's question. His only escape was to keep his mouth busy; so he put his head down and kept taking spoonfuls of rice while a cold sweat broke out on his back and through his pores on his head. When he took too long to answer, his wife assumed that not only were the rumors true that he was cheating on her, but also that his silence was an admission that he was going to divorce her. The stern face which she had maintained since the beginning of the conversation finally crumbled, her lips puckered, and tears streamed down her checks. What terrified Kiamarz was that his mother didn't make a sound, and that his little brother had started wailing when he had seen their mother cry. Then she picked up the crying baby, and left the house, her plate of white rice and potato qorma still untouched. She went to her mother's house, and she didn't talk to her husband, neither did she return home until Kiamarz's father went to his in-laws, knelt before her pulling down his earlobes admitting that he had mingled with the thought of marrying the Doctor's daughter, and that it was just Fatima Amin; he didn't have any other secret lover.

Until then Hussein, Noor, and Feroz had not realized that they had such power. With their first rival demoted to an obedient family man, they went after the rest. Some men who simmered in Fatima Amin's love and saw no opportunity to make it known to her personally, out of sheer

desperation, had released the paper-boats of their love in the uncertain waves hoping that in the favorable breezes of gossip they might safely drift to Fatima Amin's shores. While the gossips went around, the hopeless lovers, in order to back up the rumors, engaged in endeavors that at normal times they would have dismissed as illogical or even inappropriate. Those who didn't know how to read and write made frequent visits to the retired clerks downtown, who sat at their melancholic portable chairs and desks on the sidewalk across from the Ministry of Education. The clerks' main expertise was writing official documents: solicitations, suits, and applications; so when they were paid to write love letters, despite their sincere efforts, they couldn't give up their austere language and style. At the end the clients' profoundly heartfelt confessions would sound as if they were making a legal claim against Fatima Amin, rather coaxing her love. Those who had studied a few classes and had a basic skill in reading and writing bought the pocket version of *The Hundred Most Sentimental Love Letters*. They would shuffle through the book and find the letter that best described their situation, preferably the one with the most flowery language and cheapest metaphors in which Fatima Amin was the sun and they were the sunflower or her eyebrows were the bow and her eyelashes the arrow which never failed to pierce the heart of the lover. Then they would copy the letter word by word on pieces of special paper with little hearts faintly printed on them.

After following one of the unfortunate lovers for two days, Hussein, Noor, and Feroz found a love letter carefully folded and tucked in the crack of the red baked brick wall near Fatima Amin's door. The letter was heavily scented with rose water, and in an impeccably controlled handwriting disclosed that Fatima Amin's beautiful eyes resembled an ocean of wine in which the sender of the letter had been drowning ever since he had seen her. The letter also mentioned that the sender had been so madly in love with her that he had lost sleep, and that he

has been counting stars at night as he sits thinking about her. The letter ended with the fact that he worshiped her like God and that he was ready to sacrifice his life for her.

Hussein, Noor, and Feroz held on to the letter like a rare prize. In the days that followed, they read it out loud to the other kids at school and also out on the soccer field. They even gave the letter to select few to smell the fading scent of the rose water. Soon most of the kids in the neighborhood knew the letter by heart. As they would walk pass the lanky author in the alleyways, they would start reciting the letter as if they were reading a poem out loud. They usually stressed on one line in particular “I want to drown in the ocean of your beautiful eyes.” In the chaos of his borrowed words, and the pestering chuckles of the kids, the guy would keep walking as if he were deaf and absolutely unaware of his surroundings. But this public humiliation became so frequent and so overwhelming that the guy only came out of his house after dark when no one else was around. He would go on the top of *Bibi-Mahro* hill with his bamboo flute and play the tragic love songs hoping that the wind would carry it to Fatima Amin. Once an audacious lover who copied poetic love letters and actively pursued Fatima Amin, he had become a harmless musician on the edge of madness who lived and cried in the dead of the night.

Weary of becoming the talk of the town, the men who secretly nurtured love for Fatima Amin began to suppress their feelings. Although they all loved Fatima Amin in their own unique ways, they all had one thing in common: when the pain would become unbearable they drowned themselves in homemade alcohol, and they smelled of fermented red raisins, a scent so pungent that when they passed out on the dirt floors in the alleys, or stumbled in to the smelly gutters, no one approached to help them back on their feet. So devastated by Fatima Amin’s love and the

potency of the homebrewed liquor, these men, on occasions, would lie for hours until a relative or a family member would find them in their pool of vomit and help them home.

It was in the peak of their success as little saboteurs, and when Hussein, Noor, and Feroz thought that they had no rivals, that a much more terrifying danger emerged in the rumors that circulated around the neighborhood. People had started scrutinizing the reasons behind the Amins' decision to move into the Red House. Char Qala was among the poorest neighborhoods in Kabul, and the Amins belonged to the rich, educated circles, the upper class. Some rumors, mainly steamed out of the women bakeries, suggested that Dr. Amin moved into the Red House because after Sohrab Seiya's horrific act Char Qala had become the safest place in the city. The rumors also had it that the son of a powerful *Qomandan*, a Jihadi commander, who lived in Wazir Akbar Khan, in the same well-off neighborhood as the Amins, had been pursuing Fatima Amin. He pestered her and followed her around. One late afternoon, when the streets were the busiest, Fatima Amin was walking to the neighborhood's grocery market when *Qomandan's* son caught up with her. He stopped his Soviet Jeep by the sidewalk on which Fatima Amin walked with a hard, cold face and eyes that just looked ahead. Through the open window of the car, as his four friends examined her with lecherous looks and snickered in the back seat, *Qomandan's* son declared his unconditional love to Fatima Amin. He offered her a ride and said that he would make her his wife.

"Get lost, ahmaq-e Beshuor," Fatima Amin uttered without looking at him. And when he refused to leave, Fatima Amin abruptly stopped her confident gait, and with piercing eyes, and a commanding posture that *Qomandan's* son had never seen before in a girl, told him to learn how to respect a woman first before he tendered the idea of marriage. "Also, don't forget to look at yourself in the mirror," she added. For days he thought about the concept of respecting women

but nothing came to his mind. He also spent time in front of the mirror, and didn't see anything but himself: the long straight hair with scanty bangs, bloated face, sagging eyelids that made his small eyes ceaselessly drowsy, the inappropriately thick languid lips, and the patchy beard completed the big incongruous man he had grown into. When he did not find any notable flaws with himself, he resumed his pursuit and sprouted like thorns along her way everywhere she went. He repeatedly showed up at Kabul Medical University where she was completing her second year. When she changed her usual routines to avoid him, he pulled up in front of Amin's house one night with his four friends all armed with Kalashnikovs. He said to the doorkeeper, who had just returned from the bakery with fresh breads for dinner, that he wanted to see Fatima Amin. After many minutes of deliberation, the doorkeeper returned to tell him that Fatima Amin had traveled abroad and that she would be back in a week.

A week later when *Qomandan's* son returned, he asked one of his men to knock on the door. After knocking four times when no one responded, *Qomandan's* son got out of the car himself, raging with anger, and started pounding on the door with the butt of his Kalashnikov. A giant of man, a southerner who smelled of hardwood and mountains, opened the door. When *Qomandan's* son inquired about Fatima Amin, the man responded that he had bought the house and no Fatima Amin had been part of the deal. He turned around to go back into the house but he paused and over his shoulder he told *Qomandan's* son, "if you ever show up here again, I'll shove your rifle up into your ass." While *Qomandan's* son stood quivering with despair and rankling humiliation before the shut door, on the other side of *Bibi Mahro* Hill in Char Qala, Fatima Amin and her parents, beyond the safety of the Red House's walls, were attending to a family friend and their son who had just returned from America.

If *Qomandan's* son ever resumed his interest in Fatima Amin—knowing that Sohrab Seya had disappeared—Hussein, Noor and Feroz, knew they must take the matter in their own hands. In the idle hours which they spent in the *Video-Khanas* watching long movies in languages that they didn't understand, intoxicated with Fatima Amin's love, they thought of ways to counter the potential threat of *Qomandan's* son. One afternoon, they went to watch a Bollywood drama in which the main protagonist turns into a serial killer after the bad guys rape his girlfriend and leave her body in a garbage bag under a bridge. As usual when the movie began, people started smoking, and as the plot progressed, the smoke got thicker and thicker, until it was hard to breathe. The small black and white TV set that sat on an empty oil barrel in front of the room floated in a fog of tobacco and *chars* fume. It was perhaps because of the actor's unbridled anger and the merciless violence that he inflicted upon his enemies, or because of the *chars* in the air which they had inhaled, that Hussein stumbled over the dark idea that they, too, could kill for love.

When he disclosed the idea to Noor and Feroz after they had left the *Video-Khana*, Noor thought of his father's collection of butcher knives, all honed and neatly placed in their leather sheaths in the trunk in the storage room. He told Feroz and Hussein in a determined tone that if it ever came to that, he would bring three of those knives out so they each could have one to teach *Qomandan's* son a lesson. Feroz remained silent. He didn't know how they would go about it if they did, but the ability to produce such a thought, and more importantly the fact that they felt comfortable thinking it, gave him the ease and the assurance that they could handle it.

They waited for *Qomandan's* son but he never came; what came instead was a new rumor dismissing the news that *Qomandan's* son pursued Fatima Amin, and proposing another reason for the Amins unexpected arrival in Char Qala. The rumor suggested that Dr. Amin,

despite his PhD in pediatric medicine, was an outrageous gambler. Every weekend, Dr Amin, three of his doctor friends—who had been working alongside him in Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital since the year of the Soviet invasion—and two colleagues who taught at Kabul Medical University met and gambled for endless hours. There were temporary members of the circle: the two diplomats from the Ministry Foreign Affairs, Haji Qasim, a sheepskin merchant, and Haji Hassan the owner of the most popular pastry factory in Kabul. They usually alternated venues, and that weekend it was Dr. Amin's turn. They sat at the long dining table in the guest room. Dr. Amin removed the table cloth and with the tip of his fingers gently tapped on the bare walnut wood. "*Ya takht as ya taabot*, it's either the crown or the coffin," he said. When the game started, they turned into such serious men and they played in such silence that Fatima Amin and her mother forgot about them, until Dr. Amin called for Murad and told the servant that they wanted steamed rice, and lamb qourma for lunch. That afternoon after Murad had removed the empty dishes, made another big pot of fresh tea and replaced their glasses with fresh ones, Dr. Amin sent him for a second time to the convenience store across the street to get them more cigarettes. Murad was kept running around catering fresh bread, vegetables, red label Marlboro cigarettes, and the American bourbon whisky that he had to purchase by making discreet trips to Char Rah-e Tora Baz Khan to the liquor store disguised as a flower shop. By the time they were done the next day, Murad had to clean the thick line of cigarette ash that drew the outline of the table on the red *Marzari* carpet. He brought out trays full of empty plates, and tea cups some still full of green tea that had gone cold and dark. After he had cleaned the guest room, he waited for Dr. Amin's call that usually sent him after a house or a car key, or a bag of cash that were to be picked up from a house or a store that by now Murad had become familiar with all. Dr. Amin never called.

The rumor had it that the last time they played Dr. Amin had lost the keys to their house to one of his colleagues in Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital. Although the friend insisted that Dr. Amin should stay in the house as long as he wished, Dr. Amin, out of his own discipline and respect for the rules of the game, decided to hand over the house within twenty four hours. The story was too dramatic and well-organized even for a rumor, so most people rejected it. They preferred the initial rumor that there had been a *Qomandan's* son in the story. It made sense. People said that *Qomandan's* son had a reputation for kidnapping girls and women, and in some cases young boys that he liked, and that he and his friends brutally violated the victims before they returned them. In some instances the victims never came back, and their families couldn't find the corpses for weeks. Dr. Amin knew about *Qomandan's* son's history, and to be safe, he had moved the family to Char Qala. No one would guess that the Amins lived in such a neighborhood, and if they did, no one would dare to follow them into Sohrab Seya's realm.

THE RUMOR OF Sohrab Seya's return broke out around the soccer field one evening like a contagious applause following a goal, but with much greater fervor and excitement. One kid said that he had heard from another kid who had seen him in Rostam's Convenience Store sitting on a chair, while his friends sat before him on the floor enchanted by his return and mesmerized by his stories of exile. While the rumor of Sohrab Seya's return delighted the cheerful crowd around them, it had crushed Hussein, Noor, and Feroz. Everything whirled around them: the shouts and cries of the guys who ran after the ball sweating and tense, the cheering and whistling of the kids on the touchline, and the sun that was sitting behind them. That night the three of them had different versions of the same nightmare: not knowing when and how they had arrived at a place where the sun had not risen from the beginning of time, and there was no other sound but the deafening hissing of sand. With the clarity that can only be real in dreams, they could see

themselves in the total darkness. They were sinking frantically in a field of black moving sand. As they were drowning, they did not regret death but dying without Fatima Amin.

The next day although they knew Fatima Amin was not going out of the house on the weekends, they met under the Judas-tree. They sat in silence enjoying the warmth of the morning sun, the stability of solid earth beneath their feet, the shuffling and clinking of pans and pots mixed with the gossiping of women from the nearby houses, the monotonous cries of peddlers who brought fresh carrots, potatoes, and spinaches on the back of their servile donkeys, the distant chanting and whistling of kids and adults cheering the local soccer team in their usual Friday morning match. For a brief while the unbearable pain that had come with Sohrab Seya's return abated in the face of the serenity of being alive, and the satisfaction that Fatima Amin existed so close to them that only a wall of red baked bricks separated them. The urge to see her intensified, but they knew they had to wait for the day to end, the night to fall, and another day to begin.

That afternoon to kill time they went to Haji's *Video-Khana*. They paid at the door and groped their way towards the empty seats in the back row. The saloon was cool; there in the air hang a vague smell of wet tobacco and the nostalgic remnants of tales and memories that hundreds of movie goers had left behind in the dark corners of the little room. For some time the only thing they could see in the dark was the small black and white television suspended mid-air. When their eyes got used to the dark, they saw that the room was full of grown up men who, in the glare of the screen, seemed serious and important. That day they were showing *Mard*, a 1985 Bollywood classic, with Amitabh Bachan and Amrita Singh in the lead roles. Hussein, Noor, and Feroz could not make sense of the subplots of the Indians' struggle against the colonial rule, neither could they understand the protagonist's continuous battle to break the social class

barriers; for them it was the romantic plot of the film which mattered more than the historical narrative. It allowed them to imagine themselves as the hero and Fatima Amin as the heroine and see their lives unfold in the view of the public. The pleasure of such imaginary projection was in the fact that it completely removed the element of surprise and uncertainty from their lives. They could relax and watch the plot develop knowing that by the film's end the hero and the heroine will unite and be madly in love. They envied Amitabh Bachan for his horse, and his dog, and more importantly for his fictional world in which a blue collar worker could marry a princess. Then they wished they, too, lived in a fictional world where there were no Sohrab Seya, and even if he existed, the director knew when and how to get rid of him.

A lighter flickered to life and for a brief moment, they saw Sohrab Seya's haggard face, sucking his cheeks as he inhaled for the tobacco to catch fire; then the flame died and they were left astounded in the darkness. The reality of Sohrab Seya's presence was so intense that they could feel it like a pain in the base of their skull, in the beads of sweat on their backs, and a deafening silence that ringed in their ears. As they walked to the door to leave the saloon, they could see him lying on his back on the long-bench, his cigarette glowing in the dark.

Outside the heat was intense. They walked with no definite direction, and they ended up under the Judas-tree. They sat in silence, looking at the pomegranate tree and the ripe red *senjids* that glistened in the sun. Three years later, at the peak of the civil war, when Noor would lie dying, his body full of hot, rocket shrapnel, he would think of this moment when he felt the first bud of loss open in his gut, and the blooming would continue so out of control that in no time it would become a dense forest still relentlessly growing in every direction.

That evening when they went to the soccer field, the rumors had it that Sohrab Seya had seen Fatima Amin and had immediately found her beauty indescribable. Some kids said that he

liked her so much that he said he wanted to marry her. Hussein, Noor, and Feroz couldn't believe their ears. Helpless and desperate, when the night fell, they sat under the Judas-tree smoking cigarettes from the same pack. They three of them had occasionally smoked for pleasure, now, however they smoked to lessen the pain. Late that night when they were going through the last of the pack, they saw three people coming out of the Amins: two women and a man who in the silvery moon light looked rich and honorable. The next day, when at 7:00 Dr. Amin and Fatima Amin left the house, they looked at her with disbelief. Something within them whispered in their ears that it was the last time they would see her, and that they watched her so carefully as to remember her forever. They had never seen her so happy. She was wearing a thin garlic-pink long coat, underneath a crisp button down white shirt, cream-colored pants, and a pair of green suede loafers. Her green scarf had fallen around her neck, and her hair shone in the morning sun. She seemed taller and they could not tell if it were because of her outfit, or the extreme happiness that uplifted her posture from within. And it was this unusual happiness which put an ineluctable distance between them. For the first time they conceded that she belonged to a different world, a much bigger and more elegant world in which happiness was an attainable reality not a wistful dream. As Fatima Amin and her father turned the corner, they started to follow them. They felt she was slipping away from their lives and their imaginations, and that chasing her was part of the desperate attempt to save their lives.

At the main street, the driver, a middle-aged man who wore an immaculate white prayer cap, was waiting for Dr. Amin and Fatima Amin in a white Moscovitch Sedan. Fatima Amin was still talking when they got into the back seat, her hand gestures animated, her smile irresistible, and her presence so relentless that Hussein, Noor, and Feroz had no doubt that everyone on the busy street had stopped whatever they were doing to watch her. Among the fascinated public,

they spotted Sohrab Seya and two of his friends watching Fatima Amin from behind the window of a convenient store by the street, tea cups steaming in their palms. Fatima Amin had stopped talking, and she was looking out the window at two little girls dressed in their school uniforms of scanty white scarves knotted under their delicate chins, and their black dresses. The two little girls were walking holding each other's hands, and as they passed by Fatima Amin's side, separated by a glass window, Fatima Amin's face flashed with delight and waved at them as if she wanted to rub their cheeks with the tip of her long slim fingers.

THAT EVENING HUSSEIN, Noor, and Feroz were walking to the soccer field when the news spread that Sohrab Seya had stabbed a man. The old and young, men and kids rushed towards where the fight was reported; some of the soccer players too were running in their sport shorts and jerseys. Hussein, Noor, and Feroz followed the crowd. The closer they got to the brawl, the greater the fear became in their chests. From every alley and every corner people poured in the direction of Fatima Amin's house, and when the last of the boys' doubts had abated that Fatima Amin was in the core of it all, they started running. The entire empty space around the Judas-tree brimmed with startled spectators. Some kids had climbed the tree for a better view. A few women were sitting at the edge of their rooftops, hugging their legs, observing the tragedy that had unfolded so rapidly that some of them barely had the time to grab their chadors.

Hussein, Noor, and Feroz pushed their way through toward the center of the circle. From between the hundreds of elbows and arms, they got a glimpse of Fatima Amin and her mother looking through the half open door. Hussein felt his ribs crashing, lungs collapsing, and he gasped for air. Seven years later in 1999, when the Taliban would capture him on the battle field in Bamiyan and put him in a shipping container to transport him to their mobile headquarters, his lungs would burn for air, he would remember this evening and how Fatima Amin seemed so

pale, like a terrified bird, and how she was shivering and crying without tears. They kept pushing forward through the dead silent crowd. In the middle of the circle they saw Sohrab Seya with a bloody dagger in his hand, his right sleeve of his gray *perahan* rolled up above his elbow and his left sleeve slipped around his skinny but veined forearm. Dr. Amin was embarrassed and was speaking to him in a low, hardly audible voice, his gesture at times serious and other times apologetic. The humiliation on his face was beyond words. Sohrab Seya was barely looking at him. He stared at the women on the rooftops who sat there covering their heads with their hands as if they were mourning.

Hussein, Noor, and Feroz couldn't sleep the whole night. While the stars were still up in the sky, they went to sit under the Judas-tree. An hour later with the women going to the bakeries the rumors broke out revealing the details of what had happened. Haji Hassan, the pastry factory owner, his wife and his son had come to Dr. Amin's house for the fourth evening in a row to finalize the formalities of the engagement ceremony. Sohrab Seya found out about it, and he went directly to Fatima Amin's house; he knocked on the door and while his friends stood back. "Get your fucking asses out here you fucking sons of whores," he shouted aiming at the suitors. When Dr. Amin came out to calm him down he said "bring those fuckers out," and when Dr. Amin tried to reason with him, Sohrab Seya said, "This bastard is crazy, he doesn't understand the language of logic," tapping with the end of the dagger on his own temple. Some said that Haji Hassan and his son were standing in the middle of the yard not knowing what to do, and that Sohrab Seya had pushed Dr. Amin out of the way, gone in and had dragged the son forward. He had buried the dagger in the son's stomach and had told Haji Hassan to collect the corpse. Then raging with anger he had said to Dr. Amin, "*Dokhtar Doctor* only and only belongs to Sohrab."

Hussein, Noor, and Feroz sat under the tree feeling the humiliation that Fatima Amin and her family had suffered. It gave them pain. They waited and waited, but Fatima Amin and her father did not leave the house at their usual time. When the door finally opened, Dr. Amin walked out alone, not carrying his briefcase and not dressed in his suit and tie; he wore a grey *perahan tunban* and a dark vest. His hair didn't have the everyday shine and sleekness, and his mind seemed to be elsewhere as he walked towards the main street. They were restless. Feroz started pacing back and forth; Hussein plucked and ate mouthfuls of the Judas-trees leaves. Noor lit a cigarette; it was the first time he smoked in the open day light, and did not care if people or anyone from his family caught him in the middle of the indecent act of smoking.

Later that evening, Noor lit his fifth cigarette of the night with the dying ember of his previous one, and held out the pack to Hussein and Feroz. Dusk had fully settled, and they knew that he could pass by any minute and that they had to do the impossible. They didn't talk, only their cigarettes glowed in the dark as they took deep drags, filling their lungs with the strong Marlboro tobacco. They had followed him around the whole day; they walked behind him when he went downtown Char Qala in the morning to buy his potion of dried mountain scorpions. They waited for him in front of the herb shop conscious of the butcher knives that they carried on them tucked under the strings of their *tunbans*. Now that they sat in the dark, on the edge of the soccer field, waiting for him, Noor thought they had been out of their minds that they thought they could take him out in the open day light in full view of the public. They had followed him to Rostam's Convenience Store where Sohrab Seya went to get a glass of slushy homemade yogurt for lunch. Hussein, Noor, and Feroz had never seen him so quiet except the day that he had returned after killing the man behind the soccer field. Now he sat among his entourage trying to decipher the unimaginable. He was still dead silent when he and his friends left for Haji's *Video-*

Khana to watch *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar*. The whole afternoon, as Sohrab Seya and his entourage smoked and watched the three hour long movie, Noor, Hussein, and Feroz waited outside, leaning against the decaying wall. They followed the movie through the cracks and holes of the cardboard door. They had seen the movie twice, and every time they had shed tears when in the end Sikandar died as Meme Sahab, the woman he loved his whole life, married someone else. That evening, however, despite hearing the tragic ending of the film they did not cry. Instead they squeezed the leather sheathes of the butchering knives.

When men started trickling out of the *Video-Khana* bringing with them the wet smell of tobacco and darkness, Hussein, Noor, and Feroz went to Rostam's Convenience Store. Noor as always pretended he was buying the cigarettes for his uncle, and purchased a pack of red Marlboro, while Hussein and Feroz kept an eye on Sohrab Seya. Although they knew his routine, that he would go from *Video-Khana* directly to the soccer field, then after watching soccer he and his friends would walk behind the soccer ground into the fields of wheat and corns and smoke *chars* until late evening, Hussein, Noor, and Feroz still followed him. Sohrab Seya's silence added to their concern. They thought that his body was aware of what was about to come and that the grave silence rose from deep within his bones. As dusk began to turn the sky gunmetal, Sohrab Seya and two of his friends left for the mulberry trees in the middle of the wheat fields to smoke their evening hash, and Sohrab Seya his crushed scorpions. They boys followed them and sat at the mouth of the narrow footpath that lead to the trees, making sure that they didn't miss him when he came back.

When Sohrab Seya and his friends returned still smelling of *chars* and something more pungent, Hussein, Noor, and Feroz sat there smoking their cigarettes pretending they hadn't seen the men coming. After Sohrab Seya and his friends were far enough, they crushed the buds of

their cigarettes under their heels and followed them. Sohrab Seya and his friends usually went to Rostam's Convenience Store for tea, but tonight Sohrab Seya walked straight home. Noor stayed with him, Hussein and Feroz ran in the different direction to cut him from the front. A few feet away from the mosque, Noor, Hussein, and Feroz caught up with him. That night the moon was late. The alley was dark. Hussein who had already taken his knife out walked past him and tried to stab him but missed; Sohrab Seya slowed down to see what was happening, and Feroz buried the knife in his stomach. Noor stabbed him from behind on his left side. They stepped back not knowing if it was enough or if they had to go at him again. Sohrab Seya, still high on the mountain scorpions stood in disbelief, trying to confirm whether he was hallucinating or he was dying for real. When he didn't move or fall, Hussein went forward and stabbed him four more times with quick sharp movements, then watched Sohrab Seya collapse against the wall. Noor walked over him and tried to locate his heart with the tip of his fingers, then started thrusting the butcher knife madly until the wingless bird inside Sohrab Seya's chest stopped fighting.

Exhausted they sat down around the lifeless body of their idol. Noor lit a cigarette and passed the pack to Hussein and Feroz. The smell of blood in their nostrils and on the back of their mouths made the strong tobacco weak. Feroz got up and searched Sohrab Seya's pockets and brought out his pack of cigarettes. He went through the pack and found two cigarettes with ends rolled. He sniffed them, and they smelled strange almost like dust but acutely stinging. He lit both and sent them around. Later when they walked towards the mosque, they could not feel their skins and the world around them had begun to disintegrate, but the smell of blood was becoming more and more intense. They went directly to the water well in the middle of the mosque; they dropped their knives into the well one by one. Feroz drew water from the well and gave the rubber bucket to Noor and watched him pour it over himself. If the mosque custodian

had not gone to bed, he could have seen from behind the window in the prayer room, Hussein and Feroz take turns and drain buckets of cold water. He could have also seen the heaviness in their movements, and the abrupt transformation of their features. The custodian would have also been the last person to see them in the neighborhood ever again.

THAT NIGHT, KILOMETERS away, on a flight to New Delhi, Fatima Amin had a strange dream in which three little men walked out of a mosque in silence, their hair all gone gray, their faces wrinkled. They walk with their hearts in their hands, and they plant them under the Judas-tree in front of the Red House. Then she sees the three young boys on a sunny morning in their finest outfits impatiently waiting for her under the same tree to ask her if she could marry them. Half a century later, when his memory would struggle against forgetting, Feroz would have the same dream. He would see three nervous boys, shaking with excitement, sitting on their haunches around three tall roses under a Judas-tree. He would not recognize them because they are too young, neither would he recognize the young lady whom the boys are waiting for, but at the sight of her magical beauty as soon as she leaves the house, Feroz would feel a familiar numbness.

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