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It was very late by the time Parvana and her mother returned home from the prison. Parvana was so tired she had to lean against Mother to make it up the stairs, the way Father used to lean against her. She had stopped thinking of anything but the pain that seemed to be in every part of her body, from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet.

Her feet burned and stung with every step. When she took off her sandals, she could see why. Her feet, unused to walking such long distances, were covered with blisters. Most of the blisters had broken, and her feet were bloody and raw.

Nooria and Maryam's eyes widened when they saw the mess of Parvana's feet. They grew wider still when they saw their mother's feet. They were even more torn up and bloody than Parvana's.

Parvana realized that Mother hadn't been out of the house since the Taliban had taken over Kabul a year and a half before. She could have gone out. She had a burqa, and Father would have gone with her any time she wanted. Many husbands were happy to make their wives stay home, but not Father.

"Fatana, you are a writer," he often said. "You must come out into the city and see what is happening. Otherwise, how will you know what to write about it?"

"Who would read what I write? Am I allowed to publish? No. Then what is the point of writing, and what is the point of looking? Besides, it will not be for long. The Afghan people are smart and strong. They will kick these Taliban out. When that happens, when we have a decent government in Afghanistan, then I will go out again. Until then, I will stay here."

"It takes work to make a decent government," Father said. "You are a writer. You must do your work."

"If we had left Afghanistan when we had the chance, I could be doing my work!"

"We are Afghans. This is our home. If all the educated people leave, who will rebuild the country?"

It was an argument Parvana's parents had often. When the whole family lived in one room, there were no secrets.

Mother's feet were so bad from the long walk that she could barely make it into the room. Parvana had been so preoccupied with her own pain and exhaustion, she hadn't given any thought to what her mother had been going through.

Nooria tried to help, but Mother just waved her away. She threw her burqa down on the floor. Her face was stained with tears and sweat. She collapsed onto the toshak where Father had taken his nap just yesterday.

Mother cried for a long, long time. Nooria sponged off the part of her face that wasn't buried in the pillow. She washed the dust from the wounds in her mother's feet.

Mother acted as if Nooria wasn't there at all. Finally, Nooria spread a light blanket over her. It was a long time before the sobs stopped, and Mother fell asleep.

While Nooria tried to look after Mother, Maryam looked after Parvana. Biting her tongue in concentration, she carried a basin of water over to where Parvana was sitting. She didn't spill a drop. She wiped Parvana's face with a cloth she wasn't quite able to wring out. Drips from the cloth ran down Parvana's neck. The water felt good. She soaked her feet in the basin, and that felt good, too.

She sat with her feet in the basin while Nooria got supper.

"They wouldn't tell us anything about Father," Parvana told her sister. "What are we going to do? How are we going to find him?"

Nooria started to say something, but Parvana didn't catch what it was. She began to feel heavy, her eyes started to close, and the next thing she knew, it was morning.

Parvana could hear the morning meal being prepared.

I should get up and help, she thought, but she couldn't bring herself to move.

All night long she had drifted in and out of dreams about the soldiers. They were screaming at her and hitting her. In her dream, she shouted at them to release her father, but no sound came from her lips. She had even shouted, "I am Malali! I am Malali!" but the soldiers paid no attention.

The worst part of her dream was seeing Mother beaten. It was as if Parvana was watching it happen

from far, far away, and couldn't get to her to help her up.

Parvana suddenly sat up, then relaxed again when she saw her mother on the toshak on the other side of the room. It was all right. Mother was here.

"I'll help you to the washroom," Nooria offered.

"I don't need any help," Parvana said. However, when she tried to stand, the pain in her feet was very bad. It was easier to accept Nooria's offer and lean on her across the room to the washroom.

"Everybody leans on everybody in this family," Parvana said.

"Is that right?" Nooria asked. "And who do I lean on?"

That was such a Nooria-like comment that Parvana immediately felt a bit better. Nooria being grumpy meant things were getting back to normal.

She felt better still after she'd washed her face and tidied her hair. There was cold rice and hot tea waiting when she had finished.

"Mother, would you like some breakfast?" Nooria gently shook their mother. Mother moaned a little and shrugged Nooria away.

Except for trips to the washroom, and a couple of cups of tea, which Nooria kept in a thermos by the toshak, Mother spent the day lying down. She kept her face to the wall and didn't speak to any of them.

The next day, Parvana was tired of sleeping. Her feet were still sore, but she played with Ali and Maryam. The little ones, especially Ali, couldn't understand why Mother wasn't paying attention to them.

"Mother's sleeping," Parvana kept saying.

"When will she wake up?" Maryam asked.

Parvana didn't answer.

Ali kept waddling over to the door and pointing up at it.

"I think he's asking where Father is," Nooria said.

"Come on, Ali, let's find your ball."

Parvana remembered the pieces of photograph and got them out. Her father's face was like a jigsaw puzzle. She spread the pieces out on the mat in front of her. Maryam joined her and helped her put them in order.

One piece was missing. All of Father's face was there except for a part of his chin. "When we get some tape, we'll tape it together," Parvana said. Maryam nodded. She gathered up the little pieces into a tidy pile and handed them to Parvana. Parvana tucked them away in a corner of the cupboard.

The third day barely crept along. Parvana even considered doing some housework, just to pass the time, but she was worried she might disturb her mother. At one point, all four children sat against the wall and watched their mother sleep.

"She has to get up soon," Nooria said. "She can't just lie there forever." Parvana was tired of sitting. She had lived in that room for a year and a half, but there had always been chores to do and trips to the market with Father.

Mother was still in the same place. They were taking care not to disturb her. All the same, Parvana thought

if she had to spend much more time whispering and keeping the young ones quiet, she would scream.

It would help if she could read, but the only books they had were Father's secret books. She didn't dare take them out of their hiding place. What if the Taliban burst in on them again?

They'd take the books, and maybe punish the whole family for having them.

Parvana noticed a change in Ali. "Is he sick?" she asked Nooria.

"He misses Mother." Ali sat in Nooria's lap. He didn't crawl around any more when he was put on the floor. He spent most of the time curled in a ball with his thumb in his mouth.

He didn't even cry very much any more. It was nice to have a break from his noise, but Parvana didn't like to see him like this.

The room began to smell, too. "We have to save water," Nooria said, so washing and cleaning didn't get done. Ali's dirty diapers were piled in a heap in the washroom. The little window didn't open very far. No breeze could get into the room to blow the stink away.

On the fourth day, the food ran out.

"We're out of food," Nooria told Parvana.

"Don't tell me. Tell Mother. She's the grown-up. She has to get us some."

"I don't want to bother her."

"Then I'll tell her." Parvana went over to Mother's toshak and gently shook her.

"We're out of food." There was no response. "Mother, there's no food left." Mother pulled away. Parvana started to shake her again.

"Leave her alone!" Nooria yanked her away. "Can't you see she's depressed?"

"We're all depressed," Parvana replied. "We're also hungry." She wanted to shout, but didn't want to frighten the little ones. She could glare, though, and she and Nooria glared at each other for hours.

No one ate that day.

"We're out of food," Nooria said again to Parvana the next day.

"I'm not going out there."

"You have to go. There's no one else who can go."

"My feet are still sore."

"Your feet will survive, but we won't if you don't get us food. Now, move!"

Parvana looked at Mother, still lying on the toshak. She looked at Ali, worn out from being hungry and needing his parents. She looked at Maryam, whose cheeks were already beginning to look hollow, and who hadn't been in the sunshine in such a long time. Finally, she looked at her big sister, Nooria.

Nooria looked terrified. If Parvana didn't obey her, she would have to go for food herself.

Now I've got her, Parvana thought. I can make her as miserable as she makes me. But she was surprised to find that this thought gave her no pleasure. Maybe

she was too tired and too hungry. Instead of turning her back, she took the money from her sister's hand.

"What should I buy?" she asked.

FIVE

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It was strange to be in the marketplace without Father. Parvana almost expected to see him in their usual place, sitting on the blanket, reading and writing his customer's letters.

Women were not allowed to go into the shops. Men were supposed to do all the shopping, but if women did it, they had to stand outside and call in for what they needed. Parvana had seen shopkeepers beaten for serving women inside their shops.

Parvana wasn't sure if she would be considered a woman. On the one hand, if she behaved like one and stood outside the shop and called in her order, she could get in trouble for not wearing a burqa. On the other hand, if she went into a shop, she could get in trouble for not acting like a woman!

She put off her decision by buying the nan first. The baker's stall opened onto the street. Parvana pulled her chador more tightly around her face so that only her eyes were showing. She held up ten fingers—ten loaves of nan. A pile of nan was already baked, but she had to wait a little while for four more loaves to be

flipped out of the oven. The attendant wrapped the bread in a piece of newspaper and handed it to Parvana. She paid without looking up.

The bread was still warm. It smelled so good! The wonderful smell reminded Parvana how hungry she was. She could have swallowed a whole loaf in one gulp.

The fruit and vegetable stand was next. Before she had time to make a selection, a voice behind her shouted, "What are you doing on the street dressed like that?"

Parvana whirled around to see a Talib glaring at her, anger in his eyes and a stick in his hand.

"You must be covered up! Who is your father? Who is your husband? They will be punished for letting you walk the street like that!" The soldier raised his arm and brought his stick down on Parvana's shoulder.

Parvana didn't even feel it. Punish her father, would they?

"Stop hitting me!" she yelled.

The Talib was so surprised, he held still for a moment. Parvana saw him pause, and she started to run. She knocked over a pile of turnips at the vegetable stand, and they went rolling all over the street.

Clutching the still-warm nan to her chest, Parvana kept running, her sandals slapping against the pavement. She didn't care if people were staring at her. All she wanted was to get as far away from the soldier as she could, as fast as her legs could carry her.

She was so anxious to get home, she ran right into a woman carrying a child. "Is that Parvana?"

Parvana tried to get away, but the woman had a firm grip on her arm.

"It is Parvana! What kind of a way is that to carry bread?"

The voice behind the burqa was familiar, but Parvana couldn't remember who it belonged to.

"Speak up, girl! Don't stand there with your mouth open as though you were a fish in the market! Speak up!"

"Mrs. Weera?"

"Oh, that's right, my face is covered. I keep forgetting. Now, why are you running, and why are you crushing that perfectly good bread?"

Parvana started to cry. "The Taliban... one of the soldiers... he was chasing me."

"Dry your tears. Under such a circumstance, running was a very sensible thing to do. I always thought you had the makings of a sensible girl, and you've just proven me right. Good for you! You've outrun the Taliban. Where are you going with all that bread?"

"Home. I'm almost there."

"We'll go together. I've been meaning to call on your mother for some time. We need a magazine, and your mother is just the person to get it going for us."

"Mother doesn't write any more, and I don't think she'll want company."

"Nonsense. Let's go."

Mrs. Weera had been in the Afghan Women's Union with Mother. She was so sure Mother wouldn't mind her dropping in that Parvana obediently led the way.

"And stop squeezing that bread! It's not going to suddenly jump out of your arms!"

When they were almost at the top step, Parvana turned to Mrs. Weera. "About Mother. She's not been well."

"Then it's a good thing I'm stopping by to take care of her!"

Parvana gave up. They reached the apartment door and went inside.

Nooria saw only Parvana at first. She took the nan from her. "Is this all you bought? Where's the rice? Where's the tea? How are we supposed to manage with just this?"

"Don't be too hard on her. She was chased out of the market before she could complete her shopping." Mrs. Weera stepped into the room and took off her burqa.

"Mrs. Weera!" Nooria exclaimed. Relief washed over her face. Here was someone who could take charge, who could take some of the responsibility off her shoulders.

Mrs. Weera placed the child she'd been carrying down on the mat beside Ali. The two toddlers eyed each other warily.

Mrs. Weera was a tall woman. Her hair was white, but her body was strong. She had been a physical

education teacher before the Taliban made her leave her job.

"What in the world is going on here?" she asked. In a few quick strides she was in the bathroom, searching out the source of the stench. "Why aren't those diapers washed?"

"We're out of water," Nooria explained. "We've been afraid to go out."

"You're not afraid, are you, Parvana?" She didn't wait for her answer. "Fetch the bucket, girl. Do your bit for the team. Here we go!" Mrs. Weera still talked like she was out on the hockey field, urging everyone to do their best.

"Where's Fatana?" she asked, as Parvana fetched the water bucket. Nooria motioned to the figure on the toshak, buried under a blanket. Mother moaned and tried to huddle down even further.

"She's sleeping," Nooria said.

"How long has she been like this?"

"Four days."

"Where's your father?"

"Arrested."

"Ah, I see." She caught sight of Parvana holding the empty bucket. "Are you waiting for it to rain inside so your bucket will fill itself? Off you go!"

Parvana went.

She made seven trips. Mrs. Weera met her outside the apartment at the top of the steps and took the first

two full buckets from her, emptied them inside and brought back the empty bucket. "We're getting your mother cleaned up, and she doesn't need another pair of eyes on her."

After that, Parvana carried the water inside to the water tank as usual. Mrs. Weera had gotten Mother up and washed. Mother didn't seem to notice Parvana.

She kept hauling water. Her arms were sore, and the blisters on her feet started to bleed again, but she didn't think about that. She fetched water because her family needed it, because her father would have expected her to. Now that Mrs. Weera was there and her mother was up, things were going to get easier, and she would do her part.

Out the door, down the steps, down the street to the tap, then back again, stopping now and then to rest and change carrying arms.

After the seventh trip, Mrs. Weera stopped her.

"You've filled the tank and the wash basin, and there's a full bucket to spare. That's enough for now."

Parvana was dizzy from doing all that exercise with no food and nothing to drink. She wanted some water right away.

"What are you doing?" Nooria asked as Parvana filled a cup from the tank. "You know it has to be boiled first!"

Unboiled water made you sick, but Parvana was so thirsty that she didn't care. She wanted to drink, and raised the cup to her lips.

Nooria snatched it from her hands. "You are the stupidest girl! All we need now is for you to get sick! How could anyone so stupid end up as my sister!"

"That's no way to keep up team spirit," Mrs. Weera said. "Nooria, why don't you get the little ones washed for dinner. Use cold water. We'll let this first batch of boiled water be for drinking."

Parvana went out into the larger room and sat down. Mother was sitting up. She had put on clean clothes. Her hair was brushed and tied back. She looked more like Mother, although she still seemed very tired.

It felt like an eternity before Mrs. Weera handed Parvana a cup of plain boiled water.

"Be careful. It's very hot."

As soon as she could, she drank the water, got another cupful, and drank that, too.

Mrs. Weera and her granddaughter stayed the night. As Parvana drifted off to sleep, she heard her, Nooria and Mother talking quietly together. Mrs. Weera told them about Parvana's brush with the Taliban.

The last thing she heard before she fell asleep was Mrs. Weera saying, "I guess we'll have to think of something else."

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They were going to turn her into a boy. "As a boy, you'll be able to move in and out of the market, buy what we need, and no one will stop you," Mother said.

"It's a perfect solution," Mrs. Weera said.

"You'll be our cousin from Jalalabad," Nooria said, "come to stay with us while our father is away."

Parvana stared at the three of them. It was as though they were speaking a foreign language, and she didn't have a clue what they were saying.

"If anybody asks about you, we'll say that you have gone to stay with an aunt in Kunduz," Mother said.

"But no one will ask about you."

At these words, Parvana turned her head sharply to glare at her sister. If ever there was a time to say something mean, this was it, but she couldn't think of anything. After all, what Nooria said was true. None of her friends had seen her since the Taliban closed the schools. Her relatives were scattered to different parts of the country, even to different countries. There was no one to ask about her.

"You'll wear Hossain's clothes." Mother's voice caught, and for a moment it seemed as though she would cry, but she got control of herself again. "They will be a bit big for you, but we can make some adjustments if we have to." She glanced over at Mrs. Weera. "Those clothes have been idle long enough. It's time they were put to use."

Parvana guessed Mrs. Weera and her mother had been talking long and hard while she was asleep. She was glad of that. Her mother already looked better. But that didn't mean she was ready to give in.

"It won't work," she said. "I won't look like a boy. I have long hair."

Nooria opened the cupboard door, took out the sewing kit and slowly opened it up. It looked to Parvana as if Nooria was having too much fun as she lifted out the scissors and snapped them open and shut a few times.

"You're not cutting my hair!" Parvana's hands flew up to her head.

"How else will you look like a boy?" Mother asked.

"Cut Nooria's hair! She's the oldest! It's her responsibility to look after me, not my responsibility to look after her!"

"No one would believe me to be a boy," Nooria said calmly, looking down at her body. Nooria being calm just made Parvana madder.

"I'll look like that soon," Parvana said.

"You wish."

"We'll deal with that when the time comes," Mother said quickly, heading off the fight she knew was coming. "Until then, we have no choice. Someone has to be able to go outside, and you are the one most likely to look like a boy."

Parvana thought about it. Her fingers reached up her back to see how long her hair had grown.

"It has to be your decision," Mrs. Weera said. "We can force you to cut off your hair, but you're still the one who has to go outside and act the part. We know this is a big thing we're asking, but I think you can do it. How about it?"

Parvana realized Mrs. Weera was right. They could hold her down and cut off her hair, but for anything more, they needed her cooperation. In the end, it really was her decision.

Somehow, knowing that made it easier to agree.

"All right," she said. "I'll do it."

"Well done," said Mrs. Weera. "That's the spirit."

Nooria snapped the scissors again. "I'll cut your hair," she said.

"I'll cut it," Mother said, taking the scissors away. "Let's do it now, Parvana. Thinking about it won't make it any easier."

Parvana and her mother went into the washroom where the cement floor would make it easier to clean up the cut-off hair. Mother took Hossain's clothes in with them.

"Do you want to watch?" Mother asked, nodding toward the mirror.

Parvana shook her head, then changed her mind. If this was the last she would see of her hair, then she wanted to see it for as long as she could.

Mother worked quickly. First she cut off a huge chunk in a straight line at her neck. She held it up for Parvana to see.

"I have a lovely piece of ribbon packed away," she said. "We'll tie this up with it, and you can keep it."

Parvana looked at the hair in her mother's hand. While it was on her head, it had seemed important. It didn't seem important any more.

"No, thanks," said Parvana. "Throw it away."

Her mother's lips tightened. "If you're going to sulk about it," she said, and she tossed the hair down to the floor.

As more and more hair fell away, Parvana began to feel like a different person. Her whole face showed. What was left of her hair was short and shaggy. It curled in a soft fringe around her ears. There were no long parts to fall into her eyes, to become tangled on a windy day, to take forever to dry when she got caught in the rain.

Her forehead seemed bigger. Her eyes seemed bigger, too, maybe because she was opening them so wide to be able to see everything. Her ears seemed to stick out from her head.

They look a little funny, Parvana thought, but a nice sort of funny.

I have a nice face, she decided.

Mother rubbed her hands brusquely over Parvana's head to rub away any stray hairs.

"Change your clothes," she said. Then she left the washroom.

All alone, Parvana's hand crept up to the top of her head. Touching her hair gingerly at first, she soon rubbed the palm of her hand all over her head. Her new hair felt both bristly and soft. It tickled the skin on her hand.

I like it, she thought, and she smiled.

She took off her own clothes and put on her brother's. Hossain's shalwar kameez was pale green, both the

loose shirt and the baggy trousers. The shirt hung down very low, and the trousers were too long, but by rolling them up at the waist, they were all right.

There was a pocket sewn into the left side of the shirt, near the chest. It was just big enough to hold money and maybe a few candies, if she ever had candies again. There was another pocket on the front. It was nice to have pockets. Her girl clothes didn't have any.

"Parvana, haven't you changed yet?"

Parvana stopped looking at herself in the mirror and joined her family.

The first face she saw was Maryam's. Her little sister looked as if she couldn't quite figure out who had walked into the room.

"It's me, Maryam," Parvana said.

"Parvana!" Maryam laughed as she recognized her.

"Hossain," her mother whispered.

"You look less ugly as a boy than you do as a girl," Nooria said quickly. If Mother started remembering Hossain, she'd just start crying again.

"You look fine," said Mrs. Weera.

"Put this on." Mother handed Parvana a cap. Parvana put it on her head. It was a white cap with beautiful embroidery all over it. Maybe she'd never wear her special red shalwar kameez again, but she had a new cap to take its place.

"Here's some money," her mother said. "Buy what you were not able to buy yesterday." She placed a pakul

around Parvana's shoulder. It was her father's. "Hurry back."

Parvana tucked the money into her new pocket. She slipped her feet into her sandals, then reached for her chador.

"You won't be needing that," Nooria said.

Parvana had forgotten. Suddenly she was scared. Everyone would see her face! They would know she wasn't a boy!

She turned around to plead with her mother. "Don't make me do this!"

"You see?" Nooria said in her nastiest voice. "I told you she was too scared."

"It's easy to call someone else scared when you're safe inside your home all the time!" Parvana shot back. She spun around and went outside, slamming the door behind her.

Out on the street, she kept waiting for people to point at her and call her a fake. No one did. No one paid any attention to her at all. The more she was ignored, the more confident she felt.

When she had gone into the market with her father, she had kept silent and covered up her face as much as possible. She had tried her best to be invisible. Now, with her face open to the sunshine, she was invisible in another way. She was just one more boy on the street. She was nothing worth paying attention to.

When she came to the shop that sold tea, rice and other groceries, she hesitated for a slight moment, then walked boldly through the door.

I'm a boy, she kept saying to herself. It gave her courage.

"What do you want?" the grocer asked.

"Some... some tea," Parvana stammered out.

"How much? What kind?" The grocer was gruff, but it was ordinary bad-mood gruff, not gruff out of anger that there was a girl in his shop.

Parvana pointed to the brand of tea they usually had at home. "Is that the cheapest?"

"This one is the cheapest." He showed her another one.

"I'll take the cheapest one. I also need five pounds of rice."

"Don't tell me. You want the cheapest kind. Big spender."

Parvana left the shop with rice and tea, feeling very proud of herself. "I can do this!" she whispered.

Onions were cheap at the vegetable stand. She bought a few.

"Look what I got!" Parvana exclaimed, as she burst through the door of her home. "I did it! I did the shopping, and nobody bothered me."

"Parvana!" Maryam ran to her and gave her a hug. Parvana hugged her back as best she could with her arms full of groceries.

Mother was back on the toshak, facing the wall, her back to the room. Ali sat beside her, patting her and saying, "Ma-ma-ma," trying to get her attention.

Nooria took the groceries from Parvana and handed her the water bucket.

"As long as you've got your sandals on," she said.

"What's wrong with Mother now?"

"Shhh! Not so loud! Do you want her to hear you? She got upset after seeing you in Hossain's clothes. Can you blame her? Also, Mrs. Weera went home, and that's made her sad. Now, please go and get water."

"I got water yesterday!"

"I had a lot of cleaning to do. Ali was almost out of diapers. Would you rather wash diapers than fetch the water?"

Parvana fetched the water.

"Keep those clothes on," Nooria said when Parvana returned. "I've been thinking about this. If you're going to be a boy outside, you should be a boy inside, too. What if someone comes by?"

That made sense to Parvana. "What about Mother? Won't it upset her to see me in Hossain's clothes all the time?"

"She'll have to get used to it."

For the first time, Parvana noticed the tired lines on Nooria's face. She looked much older than seventeen.

"I'll help you with supper," she offered.

"You? Help? All you'd do is get in my way."

Parvana fumed. It was impossible to be nice to Nooria!

Mother got up for supper and made an effort to be cheerful. She complimented Parvana on her shopping success, but seemed to have a hard time looking at her.

Later that night, when they were all stretched out for sleep, Ali fussed a little.

"Go to sleep, Hossain," Parvana heard her mother say. "Go to sleep, my son."

SEVEN

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The next morning, after breakfast, Parvana was back on the street. "Take your father's writing things and his blanket, and go to the market," Mother told her. "Maybe you can earn some money. You've been watching your father all this time. Just do what he did."

Parvana liked the idea. Yesterday's shopping had gone well. If she could earn money, she might never have to do housework again. The boy disguise had worked once. Why shouldn't it work again?

As she walked to the marketplace, her head felt light without the weight of her hair or chador. She could feel the sun on her face, and a light breeze floating down from the mountain made the air fresh and fine.

Her father's shoulder bag was slung across her chest. It bumped against her legs. Inside were Father's pens and writing paper, and a few items she would try to sell, including her fancy shalwar kameez. Under her arm, Parvana carried the blanket she would sit on.

She chose the same spot where she had gone with her father. It was next to a wall. On the other side of the wall was a house. The wall hid most of it from view. There was a window above the wall, but it had been painted black, in obedience to the Taliban decree.

"If we're at the same place every day, people will get to know we are here, and they will remember us when they need something read or written," Father used to say. Parvana liked that he said "we," as if she was part of his business. The spot was close to home, too. There were busier places in the market, but they took longer to get to, and Parvana wasn't sure she knew the way.

"If anyone asks who you are, say you are Father's nephew Kaseem," Mother said. They had gone over and over the story until Parvana knew it cold. "Say Father is ill, and you have come to stay with the family until he is well again."

It was safer to say Father was ill than to tell people he'd been arrested. No one wanted to look like an enemy of the government.

"Will anyone hire me to read for them?" Parvana asked. "I'm only eleven."

"You still have more education than most people in Afghanistan," Mother said. "However, if they don't hire you, we'll think of something else."

Parvana spread her blanket on the hard clay of the market, arranged her goods for sale to one side, as Father had done, and spread her pens and writing paper out in front of her. Then she sat down and waited for customers.

The first hour went by with no one stopping. Men would walk by, look down at her and keep walking. She wished she had her chador to hide behind. She was certain that at any moment someone would stop, point at her and yell, "Girl!" The word would ring out through the market like a curse, and everyone would stop what they were doing. Staying put that first hour was one of the hardest things she had ever done.

She was looking the other way when someone stopped. She felt the shadow before she saw it, as the man moved between her and the sun. Turning her head, she saw the dark turban that was the uniform of the Taliban. A rifle was slung across his chest as casually as her father's shoulder bag had been slung across hers.

Parvana began to tremble.

"You are a letter reader?" he asked in Pashtu.

Parvana tried to answer, but she couldn't find her voice. Instead, she nodded.

"Speak up, boy! A letter reader who has no voice is no good to me."

Parvana took a deep breath. "I am a letter reader," she said in Pashtu, in a voice that she hoped was

loud enough. "I can read and write in Dari and Pashtu." If this was a customer, she hoped her Pashtu would be good enough.

The Talib kept looking down at her. Then he put his hand inside his vest. Keeping his eyes on Parvana, he drew something out of his vest pocket.

Parvana was about to squish her eyes shut and wait to be shot when she saw that the Talib had taken out a letter.

He sat down beside her on the blanket.

"Read this," he said.

Parvana took the envelope from him. The stamp was from Germany. She read the outside.

"This is addressed to Fatima Azima,"

"That was my wife," the Talib said. The letter was very old. Parvana took it out of the envelope and unfolded it. The creases were embedded in the paper.

"Dear Niece," Parvana read. "I am sorry I am not able to be with you at the time of your wedding, but I hope this letter will get to you in time. It is good to be in Germany, away from all the fighting. In my mind, though, I never really leave Afghanistan. My thoughts are always turned to our country, to the family and friends I will probably never see again.

"On this day of your marriage, I send you my very best wishes for your future. Your father, my brother, is a good man, and he will have chosen a good man to be your

husband. You may find it hard at first, to be away from your family, but you will have a new family. Soon you will begin to feel you belong there. I hope you will be happy, that you will be blessed with many children, and that you will live to see your son have sons.

"Once you leave Pakistan and return to Afghanistan with your new husband, I will likely lose track of you. Please keep my letter with you, and do not forget me, for I will not forget you.

"Your loving aunt, Sohila."

Parvana stopped reading. The Talib was silent beside her. "Would you like me to read it again?"

He shook his head and held out his hand for the letter. Parvana folded it and gave it back to him. His hands trembled as he put the letter back in the envelope. She saw a tear fall from his eye. It rolled down his cheek until it landed in his beard.

"My wife is dead," he said. "This was among her belongings. I wanted to know what it said." He sat quietly for a few minutes, holding the letter.

"Would you like me to write a reply?" Parvana asked, as she had heard her father do.

The Talib sighed, then shook his head. "How much do I owe you?"

"Pay whatever you like," Parvana said. Her father had also said that.

The Talib took some money out of his pocket and gave it to her. Without another word, he got up off the blanket and went away.

Parvana took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Up until then, she had seen Talibs only as men who beat women and arrested her father. Could they have feelings of sorrow, like other human beings?

Parvana found it all very confusing. Soon she had another customer, someone who wanted to buy something rather than have something read. All day long, though, her thoughts kept floating back to the Talib who missed his wife. She had only one other customer before she went home for lunch. A man who had been walking back and forth in front of her blanket finally stopped to talk to her.

"How much do you want for that?" he asked, pointing at her beautiful shalwar kameez.

Mother hadn't told her what price to ask. Parvana tried to remember how her mother used to bargain with vendors in the market when she was able to do the shopping. She would argue the vendor down from whatever price he named first. "They expect you to bargain," she explained, "so they begin with a price so high only a fool would pay it."

Parvana thought quickly. She pictured her aunt in Mazar working hard to do all the embroidery on the dress and around the cuffs of the trousers. She thought of how pretty she'd felt when she wore it, and how much she hated giving it up.

She named a price. The customer shook his head and made a counter-offer, a much lower price. Parvana pointed out the detailed designs of the needlework, then named a price slightly lower than

her first one. The customer hesitated, but didn't leave. After a few more prices back and forth, they agreed on an amount.

It was good to make a sale, to have more money to stuff away in the little pocket in the side of her shirt. It felt so good that she almost felt no regret as she watched the vibrant red cloth flutter in the breeze as it was carried away into the crowded labyrinth of the market, never to be seen again.

Parvana stayed on the blanket for another couple of hours, until she realized she had to go to the bathroom. There was nowhere for her to go in the market, so she had to pack up and go home. She went through many of the same motions she went through when she was with her father—packing up the supplies in the shoulder bag, shaking the dust out of the blanket. It made her miss Father.

"Father, come back to us!" she whispered, looking up at the sky. The sun was shining. How could the sun be shining when her father was in jail?

Something caught her eye, a flicker of movement. She thought it came from the blacked-out window, but how could it? Parvana decided she was imagining things. She folded up the blanket and tucked it under her arm. She felt the money she'd earned, tucked safely in her pocket.

Feeling very proud of herself, she ran all the way home.

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Mrs. Weera was back. "I'll be moving in this afternoon, Parvana," she said. "You can help me."

Parvana wanted to get back to her blanket, but helping Mrs. Weera would be another change in routine, so that was fine with her. Besides, as long as Mrs. Weera was around, Mother seemed like her old self.

"Mrs. Weera and I are going to work together," Mother announced. "We're going to start a magazine."

"So we'll all have our jobs to do. Nooria will look after the little ones, your mother and I will work on our project, and you will go out to work," Mrs. Weera declared, as though she were assigning positions on the hockey field. "We'll all pull together."

Parvana showed them the money she'd earned.

"Wonderful!" Mother said. "I knew you could do it."

"Father would have made much more," Nooria said, then bit her lip, as if she were attempting to bite back her words.

Parvana was in too good a mood to be bothered.

After tea and nan for lunch, Parvana headed out with Mrs. Weera to get her belongings. Mrs. Weera wore the burqa, of course, but she had such a distinctive way of walking that Parvana was sure she could pick her out of a whole marketplace of women wearing burqas. She walked as though she were rounding up children who were dawdling after class. She walked

swiftly, head up and shoulders back. Just to be safe, though, Parvana stayed close to her.

"The Taliban don't usually bother women out alone with small children," Mrs. Weera was saying, "although you can't be certain of that. Fortunately, I can probably outrun any of these soldiers. Outfight them, too, if they tangle with me. I've handled many a teenage boy in my teaching years. There wasn't one I couldn't reduce to tears with a good lecture!"

"I saw a Talib cry this morning," Parvana said, but her words were lost in the whoosh of air as they moved quickly through the streets.

Mrs. Weera had been living with her grandchild in a room even smaller than Parvana's. It was in the basement of a ruined building.

"We are the last of the Weeras," she said. "The bombs took some, the war took others, and pneumonia took the rest."

Parvana didn't know what to say. Mrs. Weera did not sound as though she was looking for sympathy.

"We have the loan of a karachi for the afternoon," Mrs. Weera said. "The owner needs it back this evening to go to work. But we'll manage it all splendidly in one trip, won't we?"

Mrs. Weera had lost a lot of things, too, in bombing raids. "What the bombs didn't get, the bandits did. Makes it easier to move, though, doesn't it?"

Parvana loaded a few quilts and cooking things onto the karachi. Mrs. Weera had everything packed and ready.

"Here's something they didn't get." She took a medal on a bright ribbon out of a box. "I won this in an athletics competition. It means I was the fastest woman runner in all of Afghanistan!"

The sun caught the gleaming gold on the medal. "I have other medals, too," Mrs. Weera said. "Some have been lost, but some I still have." She sighed a little, then caught herself. "Enough recess! Back to work!"

By the end of the afternoon, Mrs. Weera had been moved in and the karachi had been returned. Parvana was too wound up from the day's activities to sit still.

"I'll get some water," she offered.

"You, offering to do something?" Nooria asked. "Are you feeling well?"

Parvana ignored her. "Mother, can I take Maryam to the tap with me?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Maryam jumped up and down. "I want to go with Parvana!"

Mother hesitated.

"Let her go," Mrs. Weera advised. "Parvana's a boy now. Maryam will be safe."

Mother relented, but first she spoke to Maryam. "What do you call Parvana when you're outside?"

"Kaseem."

"Good. And who is Kaseem?"

"My cousin."

"Very good. Remember that, and do what Parvana says. Stay right with her, do you promise?"

Maryam promised. She ran to put on her sandals. "They're too tight!" She started to cry.

"She hasn't been outside in over a year," Mother explained to Mrs. Weera. "Of course, her feet have grown."

"Bring them to me and dry your tears," Mrs. Weera told Maryam. The sandals were plastic, all in one piece. "These will do for Ali soon, so I won't cut them. For today, we'll wrap your feet in cloth. Parvana will buy you proper sandals tomorrow. She should be out in the sunshine every day," she said to Mother. "But never mind. Now that I'm here, we'll soon have this family whipped into shape!" She tied several layers of cloth around the child's feet.

"The skin will be tender if she hasn't been outside in such a long time," she told Parvana. "Mind how you go."

"I'm not sure about this," Mother began, but Parvana and her sister hurried out before she could stop them.

Fetching water took a very long time. Maryam had seen nothing but the four walls of their room for almost a year and a half. Everything outside the door was new to her. Her muscles were not used to the most basic exercise. Parvana had to help her up and down the steps as carefully as she'd had to help Father. "This is the tap," she said to her sister, as soon as they arrived. Parvana had walked a little ahead, to smooth a pathway free of stones. She turned on the tap so that water gushed out. Maryam laughed. She stuck a hand in the flow, then snatched it back as the cool water touched her skin. She looked

at Parvana, eyes wide open. Parvana helped her to do it again. This time, she let the water flow over her.

"Don't swallow any," Parvana warned, then showed her how to splash her face with water. Maryam copied her, getting more water on her clothes than on her face, but at least she had a good time.

One trip was enough for Maryam that first time. The next day, Parvana took Maryam's sandals to the market and used them as a guide to get a bigger pair. She found some used ones that a man was selling along the street. Every day after that, Maryam went to the water tap with Parvana, and bit by bit she started to get stronger.

The days began to fall into a pattern. Parvana went out to the market early every morning, returned home for lunch, then went back to the market in the afternoon.

"I could stay out there if there was a latrine I could use in the market," she said.

"I would want you to come home at mid-day anyway," Mother said. "I want to know that you are all right."

One day, after she had been working for a week, Parvana had an idea. "Mother, I'm seen as a boy, right?"

"That's the idea," Mother said.

"Then I could be your escort," Parvana said. "I could be Nooria's escort, too, and you could both get outside sometimes." Parvana was excited about this. If Nooria got some exercise, maybe she wouldn't be so grumpy. Of course, she wouldn't get much fresh air under the burqa, but at least it would be a change.

"Excellent idea," Mrs. Weera said.

"I don't want you as my escort," Nooria said, but Mother stopped her from saying any more.

"Nooria, Ali should go outside. Parvana is able to manage fine with Maryam, but Ali squirms so much. You will have to hold onto him."

"You should get out sometimes, too, Fatana," Mrs. Weera said to Mother. Mother didn't answer.

For Ali's sake, Nooria went along with the idea. Every day after lunch, Parvana, Nooria, Ali and Maryam went outside for an hour. Ali had been only a few months old when the Taliban came. All he really knew was the little room they had been shut up in for a year and a half. Nooria had not been outside, either, in all that time.

They would walk around the neighborhood until their legs got tired, then they would sit in the sunshine. When there was no one around, Parvana would keep watch, and Nooria would flip up her burqa to let the sun pour down on her face.

"I'd forgotten how good this feels," she said.

When there was no line-up at the water tap, Nooria would wash the little ones right there and save Parvana having to carry that water. Sometimes Mrs. Weera was with them with her grandchild, and all three children were washed at the same time.

Business had good days and bad days. Sometimes Parvana would sit for hours without a customer. She made less money than her father had, but the family was eating, even though most days they ate just nan and tea. The children seemed livelier than they had in

a long time. The daily sun and fresh air were doing them a lot of good, although Nooria said they were harder to look after now in the room. They had more energy and always wanted to go outside, which they couldn't do when Parvana was out at work.

At the end of each day, Parvana handed over all the money she'd made. Sometimes Mother asked her to buy nan or something else on the way home. Sometimes, the times Parvana liked best, Mother would come with, her to the market to shop for the family—Mrs. Weera's arguments had finally worn her down. Parvana liked having her mother all to herself, even though they didn't talk about anything other than how much cooking oil to buy, or whether they could afford soap that week.

Parvana loved being in the market. She loved watching people move along the streets, loved hearing snatches of conversation that reached her ears, loved reading the letters people brought her.

She still missed her father, but as the weeks went by, she began to get used to him being gone. It helped that she was so busy now. The family didn't talk about him, but she heard Mother and Nooria crying sometimes. Once, Maryam had a nightmare and woke up calling for Father. It took Mother a long time to get her back to sleep.

Then, one afternoon, Parvana saw her father in the market!

He was walking away from her, but Parvana was sure it was him.

"Father!" she called out, springing off her blanket and rushing after him. "Father, I'm here!"

She ran into the crowd, pushing people out of her way, until she finally reached her father and threw her arms around him.

"Father, you're safe! They let you out of prison!"

"Who are you, boy?"

Parvana looked up into a strange face. She backed away.

"I thought you were my father," she said, tears falling down her face.

The man put his hand on her shoulder. "You seem like a fine boy. I'm sorry I am not your father." He paused, then said in a lower voice, "Your father is in prison?" Parvana nodded. "People are released from prison sometimes. Don't give up hope." The man went on his way into the market, and Parvana went back to her blanket.

One afternoon, Parvana was about to shake out her blanket before going home when she noticed a spot of color on the gray wool. She bent down to pick it up.

It was a small square of embroidered cloth, no more than two inches long and an inch wide. Parvana had never seen it before. As she wondered where it had come from, her eyes went up to the blacked-out window where she thought she had seen a flicker of movement a few weeks before. There was no movement now.

The wind must have carried the little piece of embroidery to her blanket, although it hadn't been a very windy day.

She couldn't blame the wind a few days later, though, when she found a beaded bracelet on her blanket after work. She looked up at the window.

It was open. It swung out over the wall of the house.

Parvana walked closer to get a better look. In the narrow open space, Parvana saw a woman's face. The woman gave Parvana a quick smile, then pulled the window shut.

A few days later, Parvana was sitting watching the tea boys run back and forth between the customers and the tea shop. One of the boys almost collided with a donkey. Parvana was laughing and looking the other way when a tea boy tripped on something near her and spilled a tray of empty tea cups all over her blanket.

The boy sprawled in the dust in front of Parvana. She helped him gather the cups that had rolled away. She handed him the tray and saw his face for the first time. She let out a gasp and slapped a hand across her mouth. The tea boy was a girl from her class.