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A thousand splendid suns pdf free online

After 103 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list and with four million copies of The Kite Runner sent, Hallett Hosseini returns with a beautiful, nit-nosed and haunting novel that confirms his place as one of the most important literary writers today. Driven by the same superb storytelling instinct that made The Fugitive Kite a beloved classic, a thousand magnificent Suns is both an incredible chronicle of thirty years of Afghan history and a deeply moving story about family, friendship, faith and salvation that can be found in love. Born of a generation separated by a generation and with very different ideas of love and family, Mariam and Leila are two women gathered violently together from war, from loss and destiny. As they endure the growing dangers around them - both in their home and on the streets of Kabul - they come to form a bond that makes them sisters and mother-daughters to each other, and that will ultimately change course not only from their own lives, but from the next generation. With flaming power and tension, Hosseini shows how a woman's love for her family can bring her into shocking and heroic acts of sacrifice, and that ultimately it is love, or even a memory of love, which is often the key to survival. A stunning achievement, the Thousand Flattened Suns is a awakening, heartbreaking, compelling story of unforgivable time, incredible friendship and indestructible love. Mariam was just fifteen when she was sent to Kabul to marry Rasheed. Nearly two decades later, the friendship between Mariam and local teenager Leila grew as strong as mother-daughter relationships. When the Taliban take over, life becomes a desperate struggle against hunger, brutality and fear. Yet love can move a person to act in an unexpected way, and lead them to overcome the most daunting obstacles with amazed heroism.382 printed pages English (UK) English (USA) Español (Latin American) A thousand wonderful suns also by Kitty's Khaled Hosseini runner thousand Splendid SUNs Khaled Hosseini BOOKS member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.   NEW YORK 2007 RIVERHEAD BOOKS Published by Penguin Group (U.S.) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton East Avenue, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (division of Pearson Penguin CanadaInc.) 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Library of Congress cataloguing in the publication Data Hosseini, Hald.   A thousand wonderful suns / Khalid Hosseini.   2000 cm. ISBN: 9781101010907 Families-fiction. 2. Afghanistan - fiction. I. Title.   10000000000000000 O832K58 2003 2007008679 813'.6-dc22 This is a work of fiction. Names, signs, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to real faces, living or dead, companies, companies, events or locales is completely random.   Although the author has made every effort to provide accurate phone numbers and internet addresses at the time of publication, neither the publisher nor the author shall take responsibility for errors or changes that occur after publication. Furthermore, the issuer has no control and assumes no responsibility for copyright or third parties or their content.   This book is dedicated to Harris and Farah, both to my eyes and to the women of Afghanistan.   CONTENT PART ONE PART TWO PART THREE PART FOUR CONFESSIONS PART ONE.   Mariam was five years old when she first heard the word harami.   It happened on Thursday. It's probably because Mariam remembered that she was restless and busy that day, as she was only on Thursday, the day Jaleel visited her in a flask. To pass the time to the moment she finally saw him, to cross the grass with her knee in the clearing and wave, Mariam would climb on to a chair and take off her mother's Chinese tea. Tea was the only relic Mariam's mother, Nina, had from her own mother, who died when Nina was two. Nina cherished every blue-and-white piece of porcelain, the graceful curve of the pot's throat, the hand-painted fins and chrysanthemums, the dragon of the sugar bowl to repel evil.   It was the last piece that slipped out of Mariam's fingers, fell on to the wooden planks of the kolba and shattered.   When Nina saw the bowl, her face blushed and her upper lip trembled, and her eyes, lazy and good, settled on Mariam in a flat way, untieing. Nina seemed so angry that Mariam was afraid of will enter his mother's body again. But the spirits didn't come, not then. Instead, Nina grabbed Mariam by the wrists, pulled her close and, through her bleeding teeth, said: 'You're a clumsy little haram. This is my reward for everything I've been through. It's broken this clumsy little haram.   Mariam didn't understand at the time. She didn't know what that word harami bastard meant. Nor was it old enough to appreciate injustice to see that the creators of harams were to blame, not harams, whose only sin was born. Mariam suggested that in the way Nina said the word that it was an ugly, disgusting thing, like an insect, like the cockroaches that Nana always cursed and washed from the flask.   Later, when he was older, Mariam understood. That was the way Nina uttered the word - not so much to say it as to spit it out - that made Mariam feel his complete sting. Then she realized what grandma meant, that harami was an unwanted thing; that Maryam is an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claims to the things other people have, things like love, family, home, acceptance.   Jalil never called Mariam that name. Jalil said she was his little flower. He liked to sit her on his lap and tell stories, as when he told her that Herat, the city where Mariam was born in 1959, was the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, artists and Sufis.   You can't stretch your leg without pushing a poet in, and he laughed.   Jalil told her the story of Queen Gauhar Shad, who raised the famous minarets as a loving ode to Herat in the fifteenth century. He described to her the green wheat fields of Herat, the orchards, the vines, pregnant with thick grapes, the crowded, arched bazaars of the city.   There is a tree with pistachios, Jalil said one day, and beneath it Mariam-yo, is buried no differently than the great poet Jamie. He leaned over and whispered: Jamie lived more than five hundred years ago. He did it. I took you to the tree once. You were small. You wouldn't remember.   It was true. Mariam didn't remember. And although she lived for the first fifteen years of her life in the immediate vicinity of Herat, Maryam would never have seen this tree. She would never see the famous minarets up close, and she would never choose fruit from the orchards of Herat or a walk in the wheat field. But when Jaleel spoke like that, Mariam listened with fascination. She admired Jalil for her vast and worldly knowledge. She will tremble with pride to have a father who knows such things. What wealth lies! Grandma said after Jalil left. The rich man who tells rich lies. He never took you to any tree. And don't let him fascinate you. He betrayed us, your beloved father. He kicked us out. He kicked us out of his big house like we were. for him. He made it happy. Mariam would have listened to that very well. She never dared tell Nina that she didn't like to talk about Jalil like that. The truth was, in Jalil, Mariam didn't feel like harams at all. For an hour or two every Thursday, when Jalil came to see her, all smiles and gifts and belts, Mariam felt worthy of the beauty and reward that life had to give. And that's why Mariam loved Jalil. * EVEN IF SHE HAD TO SHARE IT. Jalil had three wives and nine children, nine children, all of whom were strangers to Mariam. He was one of Herat's richest men. He owns a cinema that Mariam had never seen, but at her insistence Jalil described it to her, so she knew that the façade was made of blue and terracotta tan, that it had private balcony seats and a ceiling. The double doors opened in a tiled lobby, where posters of Hindi films were wrapped in glass displays. On Tuesday, Jalil said the children had free ice cream at the concession stand. Nina smiled with the emollis when she said that. She waited until he had left the kilo before lowering himself and saying: Strangers' children get ice cream. What do you get, Mariam? Ice cream stories. In addition to cinema, Jalil owns land in Karoch, land in Farah, three carpet shops, a clothing store, and a black Buick Roadmaster since 1956. He is one of the best-connected men to Herat, a friend of the mayor and governor of the province. He had a cook, a chauffeur and three housekeepers. Nina was one of the housekeepers. Until her belly started to swell. When that happened, grandma said, the collective extinguishment of Jalil's family sucked the air out of Herat. His in-laws swore the blood would flow. The women wanted to throw her out. A father of Nina, who was a stone carver in the nearby village of Gul Dayan, has denied it. Disgraced, packed things up and boarded a bus to Iran so they wouldn't see or hear it again. Sometimes, Baba said early one morning, while feeding the chickens outside the flask, I wish my father had a stomach to sharpen one of his knives and do the honorable thing. It could have been better for me. She threw another handful of seeds into the koopa, shut up and looked at Mariam. Maybe it's better for you, too. It would have spared you the grief of being who you are. But it was him, my father. There was no dilda for him, the heart. Jalil didn't have a dilemma either, and Nina said to do a godly thing. To stand up to his family, his wives and his in-laws and take responsibility for what he did. Instead, behind closed doors, a deal to save faces was quickly struck. The next day, he forced her to seduce her from the servants' quarters where she lived and sent her. You know what he said to his wives through That I forced him. That it's my fault. Didi? - No, no, no, no, no, that means being a woman in this world.1 Nina put the bowl of chicken. She lifted Mariam's chin with her finger. Look at me, Mariam. Reluctantly, Mariam did. Ena said: Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man accusing a finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam. 2. For Jalil and his wives, I was poker. - No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no And you haven't been born yet. What's a glass? Mariam asked. A seagull, Said Nina. Something you squeeze out and throw away. Mariam frowned internally. Jalil doesn't treat her like a grass. He never had one. But Mariam thought it wise to suppress the protest. Unlike shrubs, I had to be resa planted, you see, give food and water. Because of you. That was the deal Jalil made with his family. Nina said she refused to live in Herat. For what? Watch him drive his giggling wives all day in town? She said she would not live in her father's empty house, in the village of Gul Dayan, which sat on a steep hill two kilometres north of Herat. She said she wanted to live somewhere, detached, separated, where neighbors wouldn't stare at her in the belly, stare at her, attack her with iningeny kindness. And, believe me, Nina said, it was a relief for your father to get me out of sight. That suited him well. It was Muhsin, Jalil's eldest son from his first wife, Khadija, who proposed the purge. It was on the outskirts of Gul Dayan. To get to him, one took a curved mud that branched out from the main road between Herat and Gul Dayan. The track is suspended on both sides with knee-high grass and speculs of white and bright yellow flowers. The track curves upwards and leads to a flat field, where the topole and cotton trees grow in the bushes. From there up, it can be made from the top of the rusty blades of gul's mill, on the left, and on the right, all herat spread from below. The path ends perpendicular to a wide stream full of trout, which descends from the Safid-ko mountains surrounding Gul Daman. Two hundred meters upstream, to the mountains, there was a round grove of weeping willows. In the center, in the shadow of the willows, was the clearing. Jaleel went over there to take a look. When he returned, Nina said he sounded like he was wilting on the wall and shiny floors of the prison. So, your father built us this snitch. * NINA ALMOST GOT MARRIED ONCE when she was fifteen. The suitor was a boy from Shindand, a young parrot seller. Mariam knew the story from Baba herself, and although Grandma rejected the episode, Mariam could tell through her wise light in the eyes that she was happy. Maybe for a single time her life, in those days that presented her to her wedding, Nina was truly happy. As Nina told the story, Mariam sat on her lap and imagined that her mother had been made for a wedding dress. She pictured on horseback smiling behind a veiled green dress, her palms painted red with henna, her hair parted with silver powder, braids held together by wood juice. She saw musicians blowing on a shanay flute and banging dohol drums, street kids hooligans and giving chase. Then, a week before the wedding date, a gin entered Nina's body. That doesn't require a description of Mariam. She witnessed this enough times with her own eyes: Nina shrinks suddenly, her body tightens, she gets stiff, her eyes roll, her hands and feet tremble as if something was pressing on her from the inside, the foam in the corners of her mouth, white, sometimes pink with blood. Then drowsiness, frightening disorientation, unrelated grumbling. When the news reached Shind, the parrot seller's family called off the wedding. They were scared, grandma says it. The wedding dress was hidden. After that, there were no more suitors. * In cleansing, Jalil and two of his sons, Farhad and M withoutin, built the small flask where Maryam will live the first fifteen years of his life. They grow it with sun-dried bricks and whitewash it with mud and handfuls of straw. There were two sleeping beds, a wooden table, two chairs with a straight pad, a window and shelves nailed to the walls, where Nina placed clay pots and her favorite Chinese tea. Jalil put in a new stove for the winter and stacked logs of chopped wood behind the kolba. He added a tandoori outside to make bread and a chicken convulsion with a fence around it. He brought a few sheep, built them into a feeding trough. Farhad and Mussin dug a deep hole 100 meters from the willow circle and built a common home above it. Jalil may have hired workers to build Comba, Nina said, but he didn't. His idea of repentance. * In THE ACCOUNT OF THE DAY SHE GAVE BIRTH TO MARIAM, no one came to help. It happened on a humid, cloudy day in the spring of 1959, she says, the twenty-sixth year of King Zahir Shah's mostly unparalleled 40-year reign. She said Jalil did not call a doctor or even a midwife, even though he knew the gin could enter her body and make her anxious to have one of her seizures in the act of delivery. She lay all alone on the floor of a flask, a knife next to her, her sweat scratching her body. When the pain got sick, I would eat a pillow and scream in it until I was hoarse. And yet no one came to wipe my face or give me water. And you, Mariam Jo, were in no hurry. For almost two days, he made me lie on this cold, hard floor. I was just pushing and praying you'd come. I'm sorry, Nina. I cut the cable between us myself. That's why I had a knife. I am sorry. Nina always held a slow, burdened smile that stopped fighting for forgiveness or reluctant forgiveness, Maryam could never say. Young Maryam did not show up at the age of 12 to reflect on the injustice of apologising for the way she was born. When it happened, when she turned ten, Mariam no longer believed this story of her birth. She believed jaleel version that although he was away he'd not agreed for grandma to be taken to a hospital in Herat, where she was cared for by a doctor. It was a clean, suitable bed in a well-lit room. Jalil shook his head with sadness when Mariam told him about the knife. Mariam also doubts that she caused her mother to suffer for two whole days. I was told it was over in less than an hour, Jalil said. You were a good daughter, Mariam joe. Even at birth, you were a good daughter. He wasn't even there! Nana's saliva. He was in Tact-e-Safar, riding with his precious friends. When he was informed he had a new daughter, Baba said, Jalil was curled up, kept read his horse's mane and stayed in Tact-e-Zafar for another two weeks. The truth is, he didn't even hold you until you were a month old. And then just once you look down, comment on your long-lasting face and give me back. Mariam came to believe this part of the story. Yes, Jalil admitted to being an equestrian rider in Tact-e-Safar, but when it was announced, he hadn't shrunk. He had jumped in the saddle and rode back to Herat. He had tossed it in his hands, ran over his thumb with scaly eyebrows and put on a lullaby. Mariam couldn't imagine Jalil saying her face was long, though it's true it was long. Lina said she chose the name Mariam because it was her mother's name. Your favorite? Mariam asked. Well, one of them, he said, smiling. 3. One of Mariam's earliest memories is the sound of benching iron wheels on a trolley bouncing over the rocks. The trolley comes once a month, filled with rice, flour, tea, sugar, oil, soap, toothpaste. He was pushed by two half-brothers of Mariam, usually Muhsin and Ramin, sometimes Ramin and Farhad. On dirt, over rocks and pebbles, around holes and shrubs, the boys took turns pressing until they reached the stream. There, the trolley had to be emptied and the objects carried manually across the water. Then the boys will transfer the cart through the stream and reload it. Another 200 meters of pushing followed, this time through tall, dense grass and around thick grass. The frogs got beat up. Brothers remove mosquitoes from Persons. Page 2 He has servants, Says Mariam. He can send a servant. His idea of repentance, Nina said. The sound of the stroller pulled Mariam and Nina out. Mariam always remembered what Grandma looked like during Rationing Day: a tall, bones, barefoot woman leaning against the door, her lazy eye narrowed to a slit, crossed arms in an unruly and mocking way. Her hair will be unpased and unresolved. He was wearing a sick gray shirt, handcuffed to his throat. Pockets were full of walnut rocks. The boys settled down to the stream and waited until Mariam and Nina transferred the rations to a flask. They knew they couldn't get closer to 30 metres, although Nina's goal poorly and most of the rocks landed well below their targets. Nina screamed at the boys as she carried bags of rice inside and called them Mariam didn't understand. She cursed their mothers, and made them face. The boys never came back. Mariam felt sorry for the boys. How tired the hands and feet must be, she thought pathetically, pushing this heavy load. She wanted to be given the opportunity to offer them water. But she didn't say anything, and if they waved at her, she didn't turn away. Once, to please Nina, Mariam even shouted at Mussin, told him he had a lizard-shaped mouth and was later consumed with guilt, shame and fear that they would tell Jalil. Nina, however, laughed so hard that she roted front toothed full screen that Mariam thought she was going to embark on one of the blackouts. She looked at Mariam when she was done and said, You're a good daughter. When laurent was empty, the boys backed away and pushed him away. Mariam will wait and watch them disappear into the tall grass and the flowering weeds. Will you come? Yes, nannie. They're laughing at you. They do. I can hear them. Come. Don't you believe me? Here I am. You know I love you, Mariam joe. * IN THE MORNINGS, they woke up to the distant bleeding of sheep and the high tone of the flute as gul's shepherds Dman led their flock to graze on a grassy hilly one. Mariam and Ena milked the goats, fed the hens and collected eggs. They made bread together. Nana showed her how to knead the dough, how to light a tandoor and slap the flat dough on its inner walls. Ena taught her to sew and cook rice and all the different garnishes: stilkuam stew with turnips, spinach sabers, cauliflower with ginger. Nina didn't reveal anything about her, and in fact people in general - but she made exceptions for some of the chosen ones. So, the leader of Gul Daman, the village of Arbab, Habib Khan, a small, bearded man with a large belly, came once a month, described by a servant who carried chicken, sometimes a pot of Kikiri rice or a basket of painted eggs for Mariam. Then there an old woman, who Nina calls Bibi Joe, whose late husband was a stone carver and a friend of Baba's father. Bibi Jo was invariably accompanied by one of her six brides and one or two grandchilds. She leaned over and made her way through a reading and put on a big show of thigh rubbing and lowered herself, with a sigh of hope, to the chair That Nina picked up for her. Bibi Jo always carried Mariam something, a box of candy, a basket of quinces. For Nina, she first brought complaints about her undoubted health, then gossiped by Herat and Gul Dhamman, delivered in deep and gusto, while her daughter-in-law sat listening quietly and earnestly behind her. But Mariam's favorite, besides Jalil of course, is mullah Faizullah, the elderly village Koran teacher, his akhund. He came once or twice a week from Gul Dhamman to teach Mariam the five prayers a day and to educate her in the recital of the Koran, just as Ena taught when she was a little girl. It was Mullah Faizullah who taught Mariam to read, who patiently looked over her shoulder as her lips worked without sound, her index finger held under every word, pressing until the nail bed turned white, as if she could squeeze the meaning out of the symbols. It was Mullah Faizullah, who held his hand, who pointed the pencil at him on the rise of each alele, the curve of each bet, the three points of each of them. He was a skinny, hard-nosed old man with a toothless smile and a white beard that fell on his belly button. Usually he comes alone in a flask, albeit sometimes with his blond-haired son Hamza, who was a few years older than Mariam. When she appeared in a flask, Mariam kissed Mullah Faizula's hand - which felt like kissing twigs covered in a thin layer of skin - and kissed the tip of her eyebrows before sitting inside for a lesson of the day. Then the two sat outside the kolba, ate pine nuts and sips green tea, watching the birds of the bulbs, daring from tree to tree. Sometimes they went for a walk among the bronze fallen leaves and shrubs of alder, along the stream and towards the mountains. Mullah Faizullah swirled the beads of his magnet as they walked, and in his trembling voice, told Maryam stories of everything he saw in his youth, such as the two-headed snake he found in Iran, the thirty-three Ark Bridge of Isfahan, or the watermelon he split after being separated outside the Blue Mosque in Mazar to find the seeds forming the words of Allah at half Allah on one, Akbar on the other. Mullah Faizula admitted to Mariam that she sometimes does not understand the meaning of the Koran's words. But he said he liked the fairy-tale sounds that Arabic words make when they rolled his tongue. He said they comforted him, relieved his heart. They're going to comfort you, Mariam joe, he said. You can summon them in need, and they do not It's you. God's words will never give you away, my girl. Mullah Faizula listened to the stories, and he told them. When Mariam spoke, his attention never shook. He nodded slowly and smiled with a look of gratitude, as if he had been given the desired privilege. It was easy to tell Mullah Fausula things Mariam didn't dare say to Nina. One day, while they were walking, Mariam told him she wanted to be allowed to go to school. I mean, a real school, sahib. It's like class. Like my father's other children. Mullah Faizula stopped. This week, Bibi Jo brought news that Jaleel and Nahid's daughters are going to the Girls School in Mehri for girls in Herat. Since then, thoughts of classrooms and teachers have swayed around Mariam's head, the images of notebooks with linear pages, columns of numbers and pens that made dark, heavy scars. She imagined herself in a classroom with other girls her age. Mariam longs to put a ruler on one page and draw important lines. Is that what you want? Tula Faidula said, looking at her with her soft, watery eyes, his hands behind his bending back, the shadow of his turban falling on pieces of buttercup. Yes, yes. And you want me to ask your mother for permission. Mariam smiled. Besides Jalil, she thought there was no one in the world who understood her better than her old teacher. Then what can I do? God, with His Wisdom, has given us every weakness, and especially among my many, is that I am powerless to refuse you, Mariam yo, he said, tapping her cheek with an arthritic finger. But later, when he came to Baba, she dropped the knife with which she cut onions. For what? If the girl wants to learn, let her, honey. Let the girl have an education. Learn? Find out what, Mullah Sahib? Nina said abruptly. What's there to learn? She snawed her eyes at Mariam. Mariam looked at her hands. How does it feel to teach a girl like you? It's like pitting the spitter. And you won't learn anything of value in these schools. There's only one skill that needs a woman like you and me in life, and they don't teach it in school. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, you don't have to talk to her like that, my child, Mula Faizula said. Look at me. Mariam did it. Just one skill. And that's a thamul. You resisted that. What can you stand, nina? Oh, don't worry about it, Nina said. There will be no shortage of things. She went on to say that Jalil's wives called her an ugly, rocky daughter of a stone carver. How they made her wash the laundry outside in the cold until her face was numb and her fingers burned. This is our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We tolerate it. That's all we have. Do you understand? Besides, they'il laugh at you at school. They will. They'il call you harams. They will say the most terrible things about I won't have it. Mariam nodded. And no more talking about school. You're all I got. I'm not going to lose you to them. Look at me. No more talking about school. Be reasonable. Come on, come on. If the girl wants-- Mullah Faizula begins. And you, achen sahib, with all due respect, you should know more than to promote these unreasonable ideas about her. If you really care about her, then make her see that she belongs here at home with her mother. There's nothing for her. Just rejection and pain. I know, sahib. I know you do. 4. Mariam liked to have visitors in a flask. The village of Arbab and its gifts, Bibi Jo and her hip and endless dribb, and, of course, mullah Faizullah. But no one was that Mariam longed to see more of Jalil. The alarm, which is set on Tuesday night. Mariam's going to sleep badly, freezing that some kind of business connection is going to stop Jaleel from coming on Thursday, that she's going to have to wait a week to see him. On Wednesday, she poured out into the open air, around a flask, pulling chicken foods that feed into the basket. She went for aimless walks, picking petals of flowers and wool on mosquitoes, spouting on their hands. Finally, on Thursday, all he could do was sit against the wall, eyes glued to the stream and wait. If Jaleel was late, a terrible fear filled her up a little. Her knees are going to weaken, and she needs to go somewhere and lie down. Then Nina will call: And there he is, your father. in all His glory. Mariam was jumping at her feet when she spotted him jumping on rocks downstream, all smiles and heart waves. Mariam knew that Baba was watching her, courting her reaction, and he always tried to stand at the door, wait, watch him slowly approach her, not run to him. She abstained, patiently watching him walk through the tall grass, his jacket lowered over his shoulder, a breeze lifting his red tie. When Jalil went into the purge, he would throw his jacket on a tandur and open his hands. Mariam was going to walk, then finally run towards him, and he grabbed her under the armpits and pinned her high. Mariam's going up. Suspended in the air, Mariam will see Jalil's inverted face beneath her, his wide, meandering smile, his widow's tip, the perfect pocket for the tip of her teeth - her teeth, the most bleaching in a city with rotting molars. She liked his topped mustache, and she liked that regardless of the weather, he always wore a suit on his visits - dark brown, his favorite color, with a white triangle on a handkerchief in the chest pocket - and cufflinks and a tie, usually red, which he left to loosen. Mariam could also see herself reflected in the brown of Jalil's eyes: her hair was swirling, her face blazing with excitement, the sky behind her. Nina said that someday that she, Mariam, would sneak through his fingers, hit the ground and break a bone. But Mariam didn't believe Jaleel would miss her. She believed she would always land in her father's clean and well-held hands. They sat outside a flask, in the shade, and their grandmother served them tea. Jaleel and she confessed to each other with a restless smile and nodded. Jalil never mentioned throwing The Stone at Nina or cursing it. Although she opposed him when he was not around, Nina was also subservient to kindness when Jalil visited. Her hair was always washed. She brushed her teeth, wore her best hijab for him. She sat quietly in a chair, opposite him, arms folded into her lap. When he laughed, he covered his mouth with a fist to hide the bad tooth. Nina asked about her business. So are his wives. When she told him that through Bibi, Joe had heard that his youngest wife, Nargis, was expecting their third child, Jalil smiled politely and nodded. Well, yes. You have to be happy, Nina said. How many for you? Ten, right, Mashala? Ten? Jali said yes, ten. 11, if you count Mariam, of course. Later, after Jaleel got home, Mariam and Baba got into a fight over it. Mariam said she cheated on him. After tea with Nina, Mariam and Jalil have always gone fishing in the stream. He showed her how to tie her up, how to capture her in the trout. He taught her to eviscerate trout, clean it, lift the meat from the bone in one movement. He drew pictures of her as they waited for a strike, showed her how to paint an elephant in one stroke without even lifting the pen from the paper. He taught her rhymes. Together they sang: Lily lily birdback, Sitting on a dirt road, Min mined on the edge and drank, slipped, and in the water sank. Jalil brought clippings from Herat's newspaper, Itifak-i Islam, and read from them to her. It was Mariam's connection, the proof that there is a world beyond a flask, beyond Gul Adaman and Herat, a world of presidents with unpromising names, trains and museums, and football, and rockets that circle the earth and land on the moon, and every Thursday Jalil brought a piece of this world with him to the flask. He was the one who told her in the summer of 1973, when Mariam was 14, that King Zahir Shah, who ruled from Kabul for 40 years, had been overthrown in a bloodless coup. His cousin Dowd Khan did it while the king was in Italy receiving medical treatment. You remember Dowd Khan, don't you? I told you about him. He was prime minister in Kabul when you were born. Anyway, Afghanistan is no longer a monarchy, Mariam. Now it's a republic, and Dowd Khan is the president. There are rumors that the Socialists in Kabul helped him take power. Not that and a socialist himself, they helped him. That's the rumor. Mariam asked him what a socialist was, and Jalil began to explain, but Mariam could barely hear him. Are you listening to me? It's me. He saw her looking at his bulging side. Oh, I didn't. Of course. Well. Here, then. Very clean and clean. He pulled a small box out of his pocket and gave it to her. He did this from time to time, and he brought small gifts. Once carneole bracelet, one of which is a necklace with lapis lasules beads another. On that day, Mariam opened the box and found a leaf-shaped pendant, miniature coins engraved with moons and stars hanging from it. Try it, Mariam Jo. She did it. What do you think? Jaleel's beaming. I think you look like a queen. After she left, grandma saw the pendant around Mariam's neck. Nomad jewelry, she said. I've seen them do it. They melt the coins that people throw at them and make jewelry. Let's see how he brings you gold next time, your precious father. Let's see it. When it was time for Jalil to leave, Mariam always stood at the door and watched him emerge from the clearing, sweating at the thought of the week, which stood, like a huge, unshakable object, between her and her next visit. Mariam always held her breath as she watched him leave. She holds her breath and counts seconds in her head. She pretended that for every second she wasn't breathing, God would give her another day with Jalil. At night, Mariam would lie in his bed and wonder what his house was like in Herat. She wondered what it would be like to live with him, to see him every day. She imagined handing him a towel as he shaved, telling him when he had stabbed himself. She'il make him tea. She sewed on his missing buttons. They're going to walk around Herat together, in the vaulted market, where Jalil says you can find anything you want. Jaleel Khan with his daughter. He will show her the famous tree that has a poet buried beneath it. Soon Mariam thought she was going to tell Jali. And when he hears how much he missed him when he's gone, he'il certainly take her with him. He takes her to Herat to live in his house, just like his other children. I know what I want, Mariam told Jalil. It was spring in 1974, the year 15. The three of them sat outside a flask, in the back of the willows, on folding chairs arranged in a triangle. For my birthday... I know what I want. Yes, right? Jalil said, encouraging. Two weeks earlier, in mariam's show, Jalil tweeted that an American film was in his cinema. It was a special movie, which he called a cartoon. The whole film is a series of drawings, he said, thousands of them, so they were made into a movie and projected onto a screen that you had the illusion that the drawings were moving. Jalil said the film told the story of an old, childless toy maker who is lonely and desperately wants a son. So he's a puppet, a boy who magically came alive. Mariam asked him to tell her more, and Jalil said the old man and his doll had all kinds of adventures, that there was a place called Pleasure Island, and the bad guys who turn into donkeys. They even swallowed a whale at the end, the doll and his father. Mariam told Mullah Faidullah about this movie. I want you to take me to your movie theater, Mariam said now. I want to see the cartoon. I want to see the puppeteer. With that, Mariam felt a change in atmosphere. Her parents got excited about their seats. Mariam can feel them exchanging their eyes. That's not a good idea, Nina said. Her voice was calm, she had the controlled, polite tone she used around Jalil, but Mariam could feel her stiff, blaming glare. Jalil moved to his chair. Cough, clear your throat. You know, he said, the quality of the picture is not so good. Nor the sound. And the projector was recently damaged. Maybe your mother's right. Maybe you'il come up with another gift, Mariam Jo. Annie said. You see? Your father agrees. But later, on the stream, Mariam said, Page 3 I'll tell you what, Jalil said. I'il send someone to pick you up and pick you up. I'il make sure they bring you a good place and all the candy you want No, no, no, no, no, I don't want you to take me. And I want you to invite my brothers and sisters, too. I want to meet them. I want us all to go together. That's what I want. Jali sighed. He was looking at the mountains. Mariam recalled telling her that on the screen, the human face looked so big as a house that when a car crashed there, he felt the metal spinning in your bones. She imagined sitting on the private balconies, soaking up ice cream, along with her siblings and Jalil. That's what I want,' she said. Jaleel looked at her with an expression of l. Tomorrow. Noon. I'il meet you at this place. Well? - Tomorrow? Come here, he said. He came down, pulled her to him and held her for a long, long time. At first, Nina kicked around comba, clutching and pumping her fists. Of all the daughters I could have, why did God give me an ungrateful like you? Everything I've endured for you! How dare you! How dare you leave me like this, you treacherous little haram! Then she laughs. What a stupid girl you are! You think it matters to him that they're looking for you in his house? You think you're his daughter? That he's going to pick you up? Let me tell you something. A man's heart is a terrible, miserable thing, Mariam. It Like a mother. He won't bleed, he won't stretch to make room for you. I'm the only one who loves you. I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone, you won't have anything. You won't have anything. You're nothing! Then she tried to get into guilt. I'il die if you go. The gins are coming, and I'm going to get one of my seizures. You'il see, I'il swallow my tongue, and I'il die. Don't leave me, Mariam Jo. Please stay. I'il die if you go. Mariam didn't say anything. You know I love you, Mariam Jo. Mariam said he was going for a walk. She was afraid she would say painful things if she stayed: that she knew gins were a lie, that Jalil had told her that what Nina had a name disorder could make her better. Maybe she asked Baba why she refused to see Jalil's doctors, as he insisted, why she didn't take the pills he bought her. If she could express it, she could tell Nina that she was tired of being a tool, lying to her, making a claim to, using it. That she was sick of distorting the truths of their lives and making her, Maryam, another of her grievances against the world. You're afraid, nina, she could have said. You're afraid I might find the happiness you never had. And you don't want me to be happy. You don't want a good life for me. You're the one with the wretched heart. There was a look on the edge of the clearing where Mariam loved to walk. She was sitting there now, on dry, warm grass. From here Herat was visible, spread under it as a children's game: the Women's Garden to the north of the city, char-sook bazaar and the ruins of the old citadel of Alexander the Great to the south. She can make minarets in the distance, like the dusty fingers of giants, and the streets that she imagined were grounded with people, strollers, mules. She saw swallows spinning and circling overhead. She was jealous of these birds. They were in Herat. They flew over his mosques, his bazaars. They may have landed on the walls of Jalil's home, on the front steps of his cinema. She picked up ten pebbles and arranged them vertically, in three columns. It was a game she played privately from time to time when grandma wasn't watching. She put four pebbles in the first column, for khadija's children, three for Afson and three in the third column for the children of Nargis. Then add a fourth column. One lonely, eleventh pebble. * THE NEXT MORNING Mariam wore a cream-colored dress that fell to her knees, cotton pants and a green hijab over her hair. She agonised a little over the hijab, as green and did not match the dress, but had to be done - moths ate holes in her white. She checked the watch. It's an old watch with black-numeral wounds on a mint green face, a gift from Mullah Faidula. It was nine o'clock. She wondered where Grandma was. But he was afraid of the confrontation, the scary look. Nina was going to accuse her of treason. She'il make fun of her mistakes and ambitions. Mariam sat down. She tried to make time pass by drawing an elephant in one stroke, as Jalil shows it, over and over again. She cramped from everyone sitting, but she didn't want to lie down for fear that her dress would wrinkle. When the hands finally showed eleven and a half, Mariam intercepted the eleven pebbles and went outside. On the way to the stream, she saw Baba sitting on a chair, in the shade, under the dome roof of a weeping willow. Mariam couldn't tell if Grandma saw her or not. At the stream, Mariam was waiting at the place they had agreed to the day before. In the sky, a few gray, cauliflower-shaped clouds drifted away. Jalil taught her that gray clouds have achieved their color by being so dense that their upper parts absorb sunlight and cast their shadow on the base. That's what you see, Mariam Jo, he said, the darkness in their dungeons. It's been a while. Mariam's back in Colb. This time, she was walking around the western periphery of the clearing, so as not to pass by Baba. She checked the watch. It was almost an hour. He's a businessman, think about it. Something came up. She went back to the stream and waited a little longer. The black birds circled from above, immersed in the grass. She was looking at a caterpillar that was stepping on the leg of an immature thistle. She waited until her legs came together. This time she didn't go back to a flask. She rolled her pants to her knees, crossed the stream and, for the first time in her life, descended the hill towards Herat. NANA WAS WRONG ABOUT Herat, TOO. No one has indicated. No one was laughing. Mariam walked in noisy, crowded, cypress-like, amid a steady stream of pedestrians, cyclists and mules-towed Garris, and no one threw a rock at her. No one called her Harami. I don't think anyone even looked at her. She was unexpectedly, amazingly, an ordinary person here. For a while, Mariam stood by an oval pool in the center of a large park, where the gravel paths intersect. Astonishingly, she stretched her fingers over the beautiful marble horses, who stood on the edge of the pool and stared into the water with opaque eyes. She was spying on a group of guys sailing for paper ships. Mariam saw flowers everywhere, tulips, lilies, petunia, their petals gushing in sunlight. People walked down the aisles, sat on benches and drank tea. Mariam couldn't believe she was here. Her heart was cheeky with excitement. She wanted Mullah Faizullah to see her now. How brave he'il find her. How brave! She indulged in the new life that awaits her in this city, living with a father, with sisters and brothers, in which she would love and love, without reservation or agenda, without shame. She returned to the wide area near the park. She passed old sellers with tough faces sitting under the shade of planes, looking fearlessly behind pyramids of cherries and mounds of grapes. Bosses ized cars and buses, waving bags of quinces. Mariam sat in a corner of the street watching passers-by, unable to understand how they could be so indifferent to the wonders around them. After a while, she twitches her nerves to ask the elderly owner of a horse drawbar, Gary, if she knows where Jaleel, the owner of the cinema, lives. The old man had thick cheeks and was wearing a rainbow chapan. You're not from Herat, are you? I'm not going to do that, he said. Everyone knows where Jalil Khan lives. Can you point me? Are you alone? Yes, yes. Get in the car. I'il take you. I can't pay you. I don't have any money. He gave her the toy. He said he hadn't traveled in two hours and planned to go home. Jalil's house was on its way. Mariam went up to the stations. They rode in silence, side by side. Along the way there Mariam saw herbal shops and open houses, where buyers bought oranges and pears, books, scarves, even falcons. The children played balls in a circle composed in dust. Outdoor tea rooms, on carpet-covered wooden platforms, men drank tea and smoked hookah tobacco. The old man turned to a wide, coniferous street. He brought his horse to a stop in the middle of the road. There. Looks like you're lucky, Dokhtar Joe. That's his car. Mariam jumped in. He smiled and went up. * MARIAM never touched a car before. She was moving her fingers on the bonnet of Jalil's car, which was black, shiny, with shiny wheels in which Mariam saw a flat, enlarged version of herself. The seats are white leather. Behind the wheel, Mariam saw round glass panels with needles behind them. For a moment, Mariam heard Baba's voice in her head, mocking, pushing out the deep glow of her hopes. With trembling legs, Mariam approached the front door of the house. She put her hands on the walls. They were so tall, so hunched over Jalil's walls. I had to get on my neck to see where the peaks of the cypress trees were above them. The treetops were swayed by the breeze, and she imagined they were welcoming with them. Mariam fell against the waves of a freezing wave that runs through it. Barefoot young woman opened the door. He had a tattoo under his lower lip. I'm here to see Jalil Khan. I'm Mariam. His daughter1. The look of confusion crossed the girl's face. Then, a flash of recognition. She had a faint smile on her lips now, and an air of impatience around her, of anticipation. Wait here. the girl said quickly. She closed the door. It's been a few minutes. Then a man opened the door. He was tall and square-shouldered, with sleepy eyes and a calm face. I am the driver of Jalil Khan, he said, not rudely. What is he? His driver. Jalil Khan is not here. I can see his car, Mariam said. He's on emergency business. When's he coming back? You didn't say. Mariam said she'd wait. Close the doors. Mariam sat down and beat her knees to the chest. It was early in the evening, and she got hungry. She ate Gary's coach. Then the driver got out again. You have to go home now, he said. It'il be dark in less than an hour. I'm used to the dark. It's going to get cold. Why don't you let me drive you home? I'il tell him you were here. Mariam just looked at him. I'il take you to a hotel then. You can sleep comfortably there. We'il see what we can do in the morning. Let me in the house. I've been instructed not to. No one knows when he'il be back. It could be days. Mariam named her hands. The driver sighed and looked at her with a slight rebuke. Over the years, Mariam would have had plenty of reason to think about how things might have turned out if she had allowed the driver to return her to a flask. But you didn't. She spent the night at Jalil's house. She watched the sky darken, the shadows engulfing the neighboring houses. The tattooed girl brought her bread and a plate of rice, which Mariam doesn't want. The girl left him near Mariam. From time to time, Mariam hears footsteps down the street, doors open, muted greetings. Electric lights were on and the windows were lighting up poorly. Dogs bark. When she could no longer resist hunger, Mariam ate the plate of rice and bread. Then he listens to the crickets heard from the gardens. Above the head, the clouds flowed past a pale moon. She was shaken up this morning. Mariam saw that someone covered her with a blanket at night. The driver shakes his shoulder. That's enough. Make a scene. Ban. It's time to go. Mariam stood up and rubbed her eyes. Her back and neck were wounded. I'il wait for him. Look at me, he said. Jalil Khan says I have to bring you back now. Right now. Do you understand? Jalil Khan says so. He opened the back door of the car. It's ia. Come on, you said quietly. I want to see him, Mariam said. Her eyes were tearing. The driver sighed. Let me take you home. Come on, dokhtar joe. Mariam stood up and walked towards him. But at the last minute, she changed direction and ran to the front gates. She felt the driver's fingers flock for traction in her shoulder. In a few seconds, when you were in Jalil's garden, eyes registered, seeing a gleaming glass structure with plants inside it, grape vines clinging to wooden pearls, fish bark built with stone blocks, fruit trees and shrubs of brightly colored flowers everywhere. Her gaze stared at these things before they found a face, through the garden, in an upstairs window. The face was there only for a moment, lightning, but long enough. Long enough to see that the eyes expand, the mouth opens. Then he broke away from the view. A hand appeared and frantically pulled on a cable. The curtains are closed. Then a pair of hands buried in her armpits and she was lifted off the ground. Mariam kicked. Mariam kept kicking and crying as she was carried to the car and lowered onto the cold skin in the back seat. * The driver speaks in a muted, comforting tone while driving. Mariam didn't hear it. And all during the trip, when she was bouncing in the back seat, she cried. They were tears of sorrow, anger, disappointment. But mostly tears of deep shame about how foolishly she had given jaleel, how she had hung out in what dress, over the mismatch of the hijab, walked all the way here, refusing to leave, sleeping in the street like a stray dog. And she was ashamed of how she rejected her mother's smitten eyes, her puffy eyes. The one Who warned her, who was right all along. Mariam kept thinking about her face in the upper window. He let her sleep on the street. On the street. Mariam was crying to lie down. She didn't sit, she didn't want to be seen. She imagined how disgraced she was. She wanted Mullah Faizula to be here so she could put her head on her lap and let him comfort her. After a while, the road became more high and the nose of the car pointed. They were on the road between Herat and Gul Dman. What would you say to Baba, Mariam wondered. How's he going to apologize? How can he face Grandma now? The car stopped and the driver helped her. I'm going to throw you up, he said. She allowed him to lead her down the road and lead her down the track. Along the way, she grew up breastfeeding. The bees buzzed over rekindling wildflowers. The driver took her hand and helped her cross the stream. Then he let go and said that Herat's famous winds would soon blow the winds out of the middle of the Earth's crust, and how the sand flies feed on rage, and suddenly he stood in front of her, trying to cover it up, pushing her back, as they had come and saying go back! Not. Don't look now. Turn around! Go away! But he wasn't fast enough. Mariam saw. The gust of wind dispersed and scattered the sagging branches of the weeping willow like a curtain, and Mariam caught the grains of what was beneath the tree: chair, overturned. The rope falls from above. Nina's sna's at the end. 6. They buried Nina in the corner of the cemetery in Gul Dayan. Mariam stood next to Bibi joe, along with the women, while Mullah Faizullah recited the prayers of the grave and the men lowered Nana's wrapped body to the ground. Then Jalil went Mariam to a flask, where in front of the villagers who accompanied them, he made a great show of Maryam's care. He collected some of her stuff, put it in a suitcase. He sat by her bedside, where she lay down and divorced her face. He stroked her forehead with a woeful expression on his face, did you ask if he needed anything? everything?-- he said it that way, twice. I want Mullah Faizullah, Mariam said. Of course they're going to spin. He's outside. I'il get him for you. Then, when Mullah Faizula appeared at the door of a flask, it was the first time Mariam had cried. Oh, Mariam Jo. He sat next to her and filmed her in her arms. You're crying, Mariam joe. Keep. There's no shame in that. But remember my girl who says the Koran: Blessed is He in the Hand of the kingdom, and He who has power over all that created death and life, that he may test you. The Koran is telling the truth, my girl. Behind every trial and every sorrow for which He makes us shoulder, God has a reason.1 But Mariam could not hear the comfort in God's words. Not this day. Not then. All she could hear was grandma saying: I'm just going to die. All she could do was cry and cry and let her tears fall on a stain, thin skin on Mula Faizula's hands. On the way home, Jalil was sitting in the back seat of his car with Mariam, his hand draped over her shoulder. You can stay with me, Mariam joe, he said. I already asked them to clean a room for you. I think you're going to like it. You will have views of the garden. For the first time, Mariam could hear it with Nina's ears. She could hear so clearly the insincerity that always lurked beneath her, the hollow, false confidence. She couldn't look at him. When the car stopped before Jalil's house, the driver opened the door for them and carried Mariam's suitcase. Jalil guided her, a palm flowing around each of her shoulders, through the same gates outside which, two days earlier, Mariam had slept on the sidewalk waiting for him. Two days before, when Mariam couldn't think of anything in the world, she wanted more than to go to this garden with Jalil - I felt like another life. How could her life have turned so fast that Mariam asked for it. She stared at the ground, on her feet, stepping on the gray stone path. She knew of the presence of people in the garden, murgging, retreating as she and Jalil walked past him. She felt the weight of her eyes, from the windows above. Page 4 also in the house, Mariam kept her head down. She walks on a maroon carpet with a repeating blue-yellow octagonal pattern, seen from the corner of her eye the marble bases of statues, the lower halves of vases, frayed ends of richly colored tapestries hanging from the walls. The stairs she and Jalil took were wide and covered with a similar carpet nailed to the base of each step. At the top of the stairs, Jalil took her to the left, down another long, carpeted hallway. He stopped by one of the doors, opened it and let her go. Your sisters Nilufar and Attia sometimes play here, Jalil said, -- but mostly we use it as a drawing room. I think you'il be comfortable here. That's nice, isn't it? The room had a bed with a green colored blanket knitted in a tightly woven, honeycomb. The curtains pulled back to reveal the garden below coincide with the blanket. Next to the bed there were three drawer breasts with a flower vase on it. On the walls were shelves, with framed pictures of people that Mariam does not recognize. On one of the shelves, Mariam saw a collection of identical wooden dolls arranged in order in descending order of decreasing size. Jaleel saw her watching. Matroshka dolls. I took them to Moscow. If you want, you can play with them. No one's going to soften up. Mariam sat on the bed. Is there anything you want? Jalil said. Mariam went to bed. Close your eyes. After a while, you heard him quietly close the door. But when she had to use the bathroom at the bottom of the hall, Mariam stayed in the room. The girl with the tattoo, the one who opened the gates to her, brought her food on a platter: lamb kebabs, sabers, osh soup. Most of them didn't eat it. Jaleel comes in a couple of times a day, sat on the bed next to her, asked her if she was okay. You can eat down with us, he said, but without much conviction. He found out all too easily when Mariam said he preferred to eat alone. From the window, Mariam looked fearlessly at what she had wondered about and longed to see for most of her life: Jalil's coming and life. The servants rushed to and out of the entrances. A gardener always cut bushes, watering plants in the greenhouse. Cars with long, shiny hoods took to the streets. From them appeared men in suits, in shamanic and hats of karakula, women in hijabs, children with neatly combed hair. And while Mariam watched Jalil shake hands with these strangers, she knew Baba had told the truth. She's not here. But where should I belong? What am I going to do now? I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone, you won't have anything. You won't have anything. You're nothing! Like the wind through the willows around a flask, the gusts of the unspeasible and stored, passing through Mariam. On Mariam's second day at Jalil's house, a little girl appeared in the room. I have to get something, she said. Mariam sat on the bed and crossed her legs, pulled out the blanket on her lap. The girl rushed into the room and opened the closet door. She brought a square gray box. You know what this is? I don't know, she said. She opened the box. It's called a turntable. - No, no, no, no, no, phone. He plays records. You know, music. Turntable. You're Nilufar. You're eight. The little girl smiled. He had Jaleel's smile and his concave chin. How did you know? Mariam's cooked. You didn't tell that girl she once named a pebble after her. You want to hear a song? Mariam collapsed again. Nilofar is included in the turntable. She poured a small recording of a bag under the lid of the box. Put it down, lower the needle. The music started playing. I will use a paper flower and write you the sweetest letter: You are the sultan of my heart, the sultan of my heart. You know what? No, no, no. It's from an Iranian movie. I saw him at my father's movie theater. You want to see something? Before Mariam answered, Nilufar had put her palms and forehead on the ground. She pushed with her soles and then stood with her head, in three-point posts. Can you do that? I'm not going to do that, she said. No, no, no. Nilofar dropped his legs and pulled his shirt down. I can teach you, she said, pushing her hair out of her washed elo. How long are you staying here? I don't know. My mom says you're not my sister, like you say. I never said I was, Mariam lied. She says you did it. I don't care. I don't care if you tell me or you're my sister. I don't mind. Mariam went to bed. I am tired. My mother says gin made your mother hang herself. Now you can stop, Mariam said to address her. The music, I mean. Bibi Jo came to see her the other day. It was raining when she came. She lowered her large body to the chair next to the bed, gloomy. This rain, Mariam joe, it's a murder on my hips. It's just murder, I'm telling you. I hope... Come here, child. Come here for Bibi Joe. Don't cry. Here, now. Poor. - No, no, no, no, no, you poor, poor thing. Mariam couldn't sleep that night for a long time. She lay in bed, looking at the sky, listening to the steps below, voices muffled by walls and sheets of rain punishing the window. When she screamed, she woke up screaming. Voices down, sharp and angry. Mariam couldn't get the words up. Someone slammed the door. The next morning, Mullah Fausula visited her. When she saw her friend at the door, his white beard and his smiling, toothless, Mariam felt tears, stinging the corners of the door. Again. She swung her legs to the side of the bed and hurried. She kissed his hand, as always, and he kissed his eyebrows. She pulled him into the chair. He showed her the Koran he brought with him and opened it. I didn't think we'd miss our routine, did we? You know I don't need any more lessons, Mullah Sahib. You taught me every sura and ayat in the Koran years ago. He smiled and raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. I'il admit it then. - I get it. But I can think of worse excuses to visit you. You don't need excuses. Not you. You're good at saying that, Mariam joe. He passed her the Koran. As he taught her, she kissed him three times - touching her forehead between each kiss and returning it to him. How are you, my girl? I'il protect you, Mariam began. I keep thinking about what she told me before I left. She-- No, no. Mullah Faizula put his hand on her knee. She killed herself. To yourself, to you, and to Allah. He will forgive her because he is forgiving, but Allah is saddened by what she has done. He disapproves of taking a life, be it someone else's or someone's, because He says life is sacred. He approached his chair, took Mariam's hand in both of them. I knew your mother before you were born when you were a little girl, and I'm telling you, you were unhappy at the time. The seed for what she did was long planted. I mean, it's not your fault. It wasn't your fault, my girl. I shouldn't have left her. Stop this. These thoughts are not good, Mariam Jo. Can you hear me, child? It's not good. They'il destroy you. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't your fault. No, no.   Mariam nodded, but desperately wanted to be unable to believe him.   One afternoon, a week later, there was a knock on the door, and a tall woman walked in. She had nice skin, had reddish hair and long fingers.   I'm Afoun, she said. Nilufar's mother. Why don't you wash up, Mariam, and come downstairs?   Mariam said she'd rather stay in her room.   No, you don't understand. You have to go downstairs. We need to talk to you. That's important.   7. They sat opposite her, Jalil and his wives, on a long, dark brown table. Between them, in the center of the table, is a crystal vase of fresh candula and sweaty jugs of water. The woman with redheaded hair, who introduced herself as Nilufar's mother, Afoun, sat to Jalil's right. The other two, Khadija and Nargis, are on the left. The women each had a black scarf, which he did not wear on his head, but was tied freely around the neck. Mariam, who could not have imagined they would wear black for Baba, imagined that one of them was suggesting, or jaleil, just before she was called.   Afsoon poured water from the jug and put the glass before Mariam on a checkered fabric. It's only spring and it's already warm, she said. She made a fan with her hand.   Are you comfortable? Nargis, who had a small chin and curly black hair, asked. We hope you were comfortable. This... Trial... must be very difficult for you. It's so hard.   The other two nodded. Mariam took her eyebrows, the thin, tolerant smiles that gave her. There was an unpleasant convulsion in Mariam's head. Her throat burned. She drank some water.   Through the wide window behind Jalil, Mariam could see a number of flowering apple trees. There was a dark wooden cupboard on the wall by the window. It had a watch, a picture of footage of Jaleel and three young boys holding a fish. The sun picked up the glow in the fish's scales. Jaleel and the boys were grinning.   Well, Affson begins. We brought you here because we have a lot of good news.   Mariam looked up.   She catches a hectic exchange of glances between the women over Jaleel, who sat in her chair, looking without a visible pitcher at the table. It was Khadija, the youngest of the three, who turned her gaze to Mariam, and Mariam had the impression that this debt had also been discussed, negotiated before she was summoned.   You have a suitor, Khadija said.   Mariam's stomach dropped. What? she said suddenly numb lips.   Hastgar. It's a suitor. His name is Rashid, Khadija continued. He's a friend of a business acquaintance of your father's. He is from Kandahar but lives in Kabul, in the Deh-Mazang district, in a two-storey house he owns.   Afsson nodded. And he speaks Farsi like you. So you won't have to study Pascoe.   Mariam's chest was tightening. The room has curled up and down, the ground has shifted under her feet.   He's a shoemaker, Khadija said. But not some ordinary street mucci, no, no. He has his own shop, and is one of the most sought-after shoemakers in Kabul. He makes them for diplomats, members of the presidential family, this class of people. So you see, he won't have any trouble providing you.   Mariam set up jaleel, her heart was swirling in her chest. Is what he's saying true?   But Jaleel didn't look at her. He continued to chew the corner of his lower lip and stared at the pitcher.   - You can hear Affson. Forty. 45 at the most. Wouldn't you say, Nargis? To. But I've seen nine-year-old girls give themselves to men 20 years older than yours. - No, no, no, no, no, we've all done it. How old are you, 15? It's a good, solid age for marrying a girl. There was an enthusiastic nod. It did not escape Mariam for not mentioning her half-sisters Sayte or Sheed, both her age, both students at the Mehri school in Herat, both with plans to enroll at Kabul University. Fifteen, apparently, was not good, healthy marrying age for them.   What's more, Nargis continued, he had a big loss in his life. His wife, we heard, died during childbirth 10 years ago. And then, three years ago, his son drowned in a lake. It's very sad, yes. He's been looking for a bride for the last few years, but he hasn't found anyone better suited to him. I don't want to do it, Mariam said. She looked at Jaleel. I don't want that. Don't make me fight. She hated snorting, praying her voice, but she couldn't help him.   Now be reasonable, Mariam, said one of the wives.   Mariam doesn't follow who was saying what anymore. She went to see Jalil, waiting for him to talk, to say none of this was true.   You can't spend the rest of your life here.   Don't you want your own family?   Yes, yes. Home, your children? You have to move on. True, it would be preferable to marry a local, Tajik, but Rashied is healthy and interested in you. He has a home and a job. That's all that matters, isn't it? Kabul is a beautiful and exciting city. You may not get another chance this good one.   Mariam turned her attention to women.   I'm going to live with Mullah Faizula, she said. He'il pick me up. I know he will. That's not good, Khadija said. He's old and so... She was looking for the right word, and Mariam knew then that what she really meant was that he was so close. She knew what they wanted to do. You may not get another chance. Neither do they. They had disgraced her birth, and this was their chance to erase, once and for all, the last trace of their husband's infamous mistake. She was sent because she was a walking, breathing embodiment of their shame.   He's so old and weak, Khadija said. And what are you going to do when he's gone? You'il be a burden to his family.   So are you now. Mariam almost saw unspoken words coming out of Khadija's mouth, like misty breath on a cold day.   Mariam imagined in Kabul, a large, strange, crowded city that, Jalil once told her, was about six hundred and fifty kilometers east of Herat. 400 miles. The farthest from a flask is a two-kilometer walk that has passed to Jalil's house. She imagined living there, in Kabul, at the other end of this unimaginable distance, living in someone else's house, where she would have to give in to his sentiments and his issued demands. It should be cleaned after Man, Rashied, cook him, wash his clothes. And there would have been other duties: Grandma had told her what their wives' husbands were doing. It was the thought of these intimacy, which she imagined as painful acts of sweat that filled her with terror and caused her to slip into sweat.   She turned to Jaleel again. Tell them. Tell them you won't let them do it. In fact, your father has already given Rashi the answer, Afsson said. Rasheed is here in Herat; He came all the way from Kabul. Nikea will be tomorrow morning, and then there will be a bus leaving for Kabul at noon. Tell them! Mariam was crying.   The women have already been silenced. Mariam felt like he was watching him, too. Waiting. Silence fell over the room. Jalil continued to spin his wedding band, with a bruised, helpless look on his face. On the inside of the cupboard, the clock was ticking and it was ticking.   Jaleel joe? said one of the women at last.   Jalil's eyes rose slowly, met Mariam, for a moment they stood, then fell. He opened his mouth, but all that came out was a single, struggling grono.   Say something, Mariam said.   Then Jalil did, with a thin, carved voice. Damn it, Mariam, don't do this to me, he said, as if he were the one doing something.   And with that, Mariam felt the tension disappear from the room.   As Jalil's wives began a new and more demanding circle of demanding ones, Mariam looked down at the table. Her eyes trace the glossy shape of the legs on the table, the curvature of its corners, the shine of the reflective, dark brown surface. She noticed that every time she inhaled, the surface blurred and disappeared from her father's table.   Afsson escorted her to the room upstairs. When Af soon closed the door, Mariam heard the key shake when he turned to the lock.   8. On the morning Mariam was given a dark green long-sleeved dress to wear over white cotton trousers. Afsone gave her a green hijab and a pair of matching sandals. She was taken to the room with the long, brown table, except now there was a bowl of almond sugar in the middle of the table, a Qur'an, a green veil and a mirror. Two men Mariam had never seen before, witnesses, she assumed, and mullah, who she did not admit, had already sat at the table.   Jalil showed it to a chair. He was wearing a light brown suit and red tie. His hair was washed. When he pulled out the chair for her, he tried to smile encouragingly. This time Khadija and Afsoun sat at Mariam's table.   The mullah spun towards the curtain, and Nargis arranged it on Mariam's head before he sat down. Mariam looked at her hands.   You can call him now, he told someone, Jalil.   Mariam smelled it before she saw it. Cigarette smoke and thick, sweet cologne, not fainting like Jaleel's. The aroma of mariam floods Through the veil, from the corner of his eye, Mariam saw a tall man, thick-headed and wide shoulder, leaning on the doorstep. His size almost made her suffocate, and she had to cast her gaze, her heart split. She felt him grab the door. Then his slow movement through the room. The bowl on the table connected to his feet. With a thick grunt, he fell on a chair next to her. He breathed loudly.   Mullah welcomes them. He said it wouldn't be traditional.   I understand rashid aga has tickets for the bus to Kabul, which leaves soon. So, in the interest of time, we will bypass some of the traditional steps to speed up the process.   Mullah gave a few blessings, said a few words about the importance of marriage. He asked Jalil if he had any objections to this alliance, and Jalil shook his head. Molla then asked Rasheed if he really wanted to enter into a marriage agreement with Mariam. Rasheed said Yes. His rough, unruly voice reminds Mariam of the sound of dry autumn leaves crushed under his feet.   And do you, Mariam Yang, accept this man as your husband?   Mariam kept quiet. The throats are cleared.   Page 5 Yes, a woman's voice, said from the table.   In fact, she said, she has to answer for herself. And she has to wait until I ask three times. The point is, he's looking for her, not the other way around.   He asked the question twice more. When Mariam didn't answer, he asked him one more time, this time more convincingly. Mariam felt that Jaleel, until his seat was moved, could feel the crossing of his legs and untangle under the table. There was more throat cleansing. A small white hand reached out and pushed some dust off the table.   Mariam whispered Jalil.   Yes, she told Shakili.   Under the curtain was a mirror. In it, Mariam was the first to see her own face, endless, dishonest eyebrows, flat hair, eyes, colorless green and so close to her that it could go wrong that she was cross-eyed. Her skin was coarse and she had a dull, spot-like look. She thought her forehead was too wide, her chin was too narrow, her lips were too thin. The general impression was of a long face, a triangular face, a little hound. Yet Mariam saw that, strangely, all these unpeered parts made for a face that is not beautiful, but somehow not unpleasant to watch either.   In the mirror, Mariam has glimpsed her first look from Rashid: the large, square, rudi; hooked nose; crossed cheeks that give the impression of tenderness; watery, bloodied eyes; crowded teeth, the front two are pushed together like a twill roof; impossible low hairline, only two widths of fingers above dense eyebrows; a wall of thick, coarse, salt and pepper.   Their eyes met briefly in the glass and descended.   This is mariam thought.   They swapped the thin gold bands that Rasheed had lobed out of the coat pocket. His nails were yellow-brown, like the inside of a rotting apple, and some of the tips were curling, lifting. Mariam's hands shook as he tried to put the group on his finger, and Rasheed had to help her. Her gang was a little tight, but Rasheed didn't have a problem pushing her over her knuckles.   Here, he said.   It's a nice ring, said one of the wives. It's beautiful, Mariam.   All that remains now is the signing of the contract, Mr. Mullah said.   Mariam signed her name - Mayim, you, and mem again - realizing all eyes on her hand. The next time Mariam signs her name on a document, 27 years later, mullah will be present again.   Now you are husband and wife, Mullah said. It's a table. Congratulations.   * WAIT on the multicolored bus. Mariam couldn't see it from where he was with Jaleel, to the back bumper, just the smoke from his cigarette roll from the open window. Arms and goodbyes shook around them. The Korans were kissed, passed under. Bosses jumped between passengers, their faces invisible behind their trays of chewing gum and cigarettes.   Jalil told her that Kabul was so beautiful, the Emperor of Mogul Babul asked to be buried there. Then Mariam knew that she would walk around kabul's gardens, shops, trees and air, and, a long time ago, she would be on the bus and he would walk with him, waving cheerfully, unpunished, spared.   Mariam couldn't get close to letting that happen.   I used to worship you,' she said.   Jaleel stopped in the middle of the 19th grade. He crossed and decoded by his hands. A young Hindi couple, a woman who beloved a boy, the husband, dragging a suitcase passed between them. Jalil seemed grateful for the interruption. They apologised and he smiled politely.   On Thursday, I sat for hours waiting for you. I was worried you wouldn't show up. It's a long journey. You need to eat something. She said she could buy her bread and goat's cheese.   I've been thinking about you the whole time. I prayed you were 100 years old. I didn't know. I didn't know you were ashamed of me.   Jaleel looked down, and as an overgrown child, I dug something with the foot of my shoe.   He was ashamed of me.   I'm going to visit you, he said. I'il come to Kabul and see you. We're going to -- No. No, she said. Don't come. I'm not going to see you. Don't come. I don't want to hear you. Ever. I've never seen one.   He looked at her.   It ends here for you and me. Say goodbye to you. Don't leave like that, he said in a thin voice.   You didn't even give me time to say goodbye to Mullah Faizula.   She turned around and approached She heard him following her. When she got to the hydraulic doors, she heard it behind her.   Mariam Jo.   She climbed the stairs and although she could spot Jalil from the corner of her eye walking parallel to her, she did not look out the window. She headed to the aisle at the back, where Rashid sat with her suitcase between her legs. She didn't turn to look when Jalil's palms were pressed against the glass when his fingers grabbed and rapped. When the bus pulled forward, she didn't turn around to see him walking past him. And when the bus pulled away, she did not look back to see him retreating into the cloud of exhaust and dust.   Rashied, who stood in the window and middle seat, put his thick hand on hers.   There you go, girl. There. There, he said. He was falling out the window while he was saying this, as if something more interesting had caught his eye.   9. Early in the evening the next day, when they arrived at Rashid's house.   We're in De Mazang, he said. They were outside, on the sidewalk. He had her suitcase in one hand and unlocked the wooden front gate with the other. In the south and west of the city. 100 people in Tao, 10000, 1000000000000000 Mariam nodded. She has already learned that while she understands it, she should pay special attention when he spoke. It was groundless in kabuli's dialect of Farsi, and to the main layer of parsto accent, the language of his native Kandahar. He, on the other hand, seems to have had no problems understanding herati farsi.   Mariam quickly explores the narrow, unpaved road along which Rashed's house is located. The houses along this road are crowded together and communal walls, with small, fenced yards in front of buffered them from the street. Most of the homes have flat roofs and are made of burned bricks, some of the mud the same dusty color as the mountains that rang the city. Gutters separated the sidewalk from the road on both sides and flowed with muddy water. Mariam saw little mounds of flies digging the street here and there. Rashid's house had two floors. Mariam could see it was once blue.   When Rasheed opened the front door, Mariam found herself in a small, unusual courtyard where the yellow grass struggled with thin spots. Mariam saw on the right the attack in a side yard, and on the left, a well with a manual pump, a row of dying saplings. Near the well was also a bicycle that bent against the wall.   Your father told me you like to fish, Rasheed said as they crossed the yard to the house. Mariam didn't have a backyard. There are valleys north of here. Rivers with lots of fish. Maybe one day I'il lead you.   He unlocked the front door and let her into the house.   Rashid's house is much smaller than Jalil's, but compared to Mariam and Nina It's a mansion. There was a hallway, a living room downstairs and a kitchen where he showed off her pots and pans, a pressure cooker and kerosene and a stop. In the living room there was a pistachio green leather sofa. There was a rupture on one side that was clumsily sewn together. The walls were bare. There was a table, two cane chairs, two folding chairs, and in the corner, a black, cast iron stove.   Mariam was standing in the middle of the living room, looking around. In Flask, she could touch the ceiling with her fingers. She can lie in her bed and tell the time of day at an angle of sunlight that pours out the window. She knew how far her door would open before her hinges creaked. He knew every slit and crack in each of the 30 wooden planks. Now all these familiar things were gone. Nina was dead, and she was here in a strange city separated from life, which she knew from the valleys and chains of snow-capped mountains and entire deserts. She was in someone else's house, with all his rooms and the scent of cigarette smoke, with his unfamiliar cupboards filled with unfamiliar utensils, heavy, dark green curtains and a ceiling she knew she couldn't reach. The space of this suffocation is suffocating. For Baba, for Mullah Faizula, for her old life.   Then she cried.   What's this crying about? Rasheed said crossed. He reached into the pocket of his pants, uncovered Mariam's fingers and pressed a handkerchief in his palm. He lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall. He saw Mariam press the handkerchief to her eyes.   Finish?   Mariam nodded.   Make sure?   Yes, yes.   Then he took her to the living room window.   This window looks north, he said, knocking the glass with the twisted fingernail on his index finger. This is Mount Asmei right in front of us - look?--, on the left, is Mount Ali Abad. The university is at the foot of this. Behind us, to the east, you can not see from here is mount Shire Dzarwaza. Every day, at noon, they shoot a cannon from him. Stop crying now. I mean it.   Mariam jumped into her eyes.   It's something I can't stand, he said, weeping, the sound of a woman crying. I am sorry. I can't wait for that. I want to go home, Mariam said.   Rasheed sighed recklessly. Splashes of his fluffy breath hit Mariam. I'm not going to take this personally. This time.   He took her with his elbow again and took her upstairs.   There was a narrow, dimly lit hall and two bedrooms. The older one's door was open. Through it, Mariam could see that, like the rest of the house, it was a little furnished: a bed in the corner, with a brown blanket and a pillow, a closet, a wardrobe. The walls were bare, except for a small mirror. Rasheed closed the door.   This is my room.   He said he could take Room. I hope you don't mind. I'm used to sleeping alone.   Mariam didn't tell him how relieved she was, at least for that.   The room that was Mariam's was much smaller than the room she stayed in at Jalil's house. There was a bed, an old, gray-brown sclera, a small closet. The window looked into the yard and, beyond that, the street below. Rasheed put his suitcase in the corner.   Mariam was sitting on the bed.   You didn't notice, he said. He stood at the door, bent down a little to fit. Look on the window sill. Do you know what they are? I put them there before I left for Herat.   Only now did Mariam see a basket on the ledge. White tuberose spilled from its walls.   Do you like them? I'm asking you? Yes, yes. Then you can thank me. Thank you. I am sorry. You're shaking. Maybe I'm scaring you. Do I scare you? Are you afraid of me?   Mariam wasn't looking at him, but he could hear something cunningly playful about these issues, like need. She quickly shook her head in what she admitted was her first lie in her marriage.   No, no, no, no, no, okay then. - It's a good fact you didn't. This is your home now. You're going to love it here. You'il see. Did I tell you we have electricity? Most days and every night?   He made it look like he was leaving. At the door, he stopped, took a long time, smeared his eyes against the smoke. Mariam thought he was going to say something. But you didn't. He closed the door, left her alone with her suitcase and flowers.   10. The first few days, Mariam hardly left her room. She would wake up every sunrise for prayer from the far cry of Azan, and then return to bed. She was still in bed when she heard Rashid in the bathroom, and washed up when he walked into her room to check on her before going to her store. From her window, she watched him in the yard, delivering her lunch in a trunk of his bicycle, then walking her bicycle through the yard and into the street. She watched him walk away, seeing his wide, thick-shouldered figure disappear around the bend at the end of the street.   Most days Mariam stayed in bed feeling dead and broken. Sometimes she would go down into the kitchen, run her hands through the sticky, greasy stains, vinyl, colored curtains that smelled like burnt dishes. She looked through the untidy drawers, in the mismatched spoons and knives, the siege and the chips, wooden spades, these will be tools from her new daily life, all reminding her of the chaos that has struck her life, making her feel out, displaced, like an intruder in someone's life.   In Flask, her appetite was predictable. Here, her stomach was rarely fussed about food. Sometimes she took a plate of leftover white rice and scrap bread into the living room, by the window. From there, he sees the roofs of the houses on their street. She sees in her backyards, women working with their laundry underwear and sneering at their children, chickens pecking at the mud, shovels and shovels, cows tied to trees.   She thought longing from all the summer nights that she and Baba slept on the flat roof of the flask, looking at the moon shining over Gul Daman, the night they got stuck in their chest like a wet leaf to a window. She missed the winter afternoon reading in a flask with mullah Faizullah, a wedge of pendants falling on her roof from the trees, the crows pecking outside from snow-laden branches.   Only in the house, Mariam hurried restlessly, from the kitchen to the living room, up the stairs to her room and down. She went back to her room, did her prayers or sat on the bed, missed her mother, felt disgusting and homesick.   In the western sun-creeping, Mariam's anxieties were really disturbing. Her teeth shake when she thinks of the night Rasheed might finally decide to do to her what her husbands did to their wives. She lay in bed, clutching her nerves as he ate alone downstairs.   He always stopped by the room and stabbed his head.   You can't sleep anymore. Are you awake? Answer me. Come on, now.   I'm here.   From her bed, she could see his large-framed body, his long legs, the smoke swirling around his profile on the hook, the amber tip of his cigarette, the fading and dimming.   He told her about his day. A pair of loafers, which he made at the behest of the deputy foreign minister - who Rashied said he only bought shoes from him. An order for sandals from a Polish diplomat and his wife. He told her about the superstitions people have about shoes: that putting them on a bed invited death into the family, that a quarrel would ensue if someone put on the left shoe first.   Unless it was done inadvertently on Friday, he said. And you know it's bad to tie my shoes and hang them on a nail?   Rashit himself didn't believe that. Superstitions, he says, are largely the female conquests.   He betrayed the things he had heard on the streets, as US President Richard Nixon had given up on scandal.   Mariam, who had never heard of Nixon, or the scandal that forced him to resign, said nothing. She was looking forward to Rashid finishing the conversation, smashing his cigarette and taking a leave of absence. It was only when she heard him cross the corridor that she heard his door open and close, only then did the metal grab her by the belly.   One night, he put down his cigarette, and instead of saying good night, he leaned against the door.   Will you unpack that thing? he said, moving with He crossed his arms. I thought you might need some time. But that's ridiculous. A week's gone, and... Well, then, starting tomorrow morning, I expect you to start acting like a wife. - Yes, fahmids? Is that clear?   Mariam's teeth started spouting. r /> I need an answer.   Yes, yes.   All right, he said. What were you thinking? That this is a hotel? That I'm some kind of hotel? Well, this... A. O. Ilah yu Iila. What did I say about crying? - No, no, no, no, no, what did I tell you about crying?   * THE NEXT MORNING, after Rashied left for work, Mariam unpacked her clothes and put them in the dresser. She pulled water out of the cup and washed the windows of her room and the windows to the living room downstairs with a rag. She smet the floors, beat the cobwebs, fluttering in the corners of the ceiling. Open the windows to broadcast the house.   She set up three cups of lentils to soak in a pot, found a knife and cut a few carrots and a pair of potatoes, letting them soak. She searched for flour, found it in the back of one of the cupboards behind a row of dirty spice jars, and made fresh dough, kneaded it the way Baba had shown it, pushing the dough with the heel of her hand, folding the outer edge, turning it over and pushing it away again. After she got it wet, she wrapped it in a damp towel, put on a hijab and took up a common tandoor.   Rashid told her where she was, down the street, left, then right, but all Mariam had to do was follow the herd of women and children who headed the same way. The children Mariam saw chasing their mothers or running in front of them wore shirts, patched up and patched up again. They wore trousers that looked too big or too small, sandals with ragged straps that cried back and forth. They are discarded old bicycle tires with sticks.   Their mothers went in groups of three or four, some in burqas, others did not. Mariam could hear their stunned chatter, their spiralling funny jokes. As she walked upside down, she caught pieces of their banter that seemingly always had an affair with sick children or lazy, ungrateful husbands.   It's like food is cooking.   Walaach Klahara, never rest!   And he told me, I swear it's true, that he's actually telling me...   This endless conversation, the tone is thirsty but strangely cheerful, flying around and around in a circle. It happened on it, down the street, around the corner, on the tail of a tandur. Husbands who gambled. Husbands who spin their mothers and wouldn't spend more on them, women. Mariam wondered how many women could suffer the same unlucky luck, get married, all such terrible men. Or is this a woman's game she didn't know about, a daily ritual, like soaking rice or making dough? Does he expect her to join soon?   Page 6 In tandur Mariam caught side glances shot at her, heard a whisper. Her hands started sweating. She imagined that everyone knew that Harami was born, a source of shame for her father and family. Everyone knew she betrayed her mother and disgraced her.   With a hijab angle, she inflated the moisture over her upper lip and tried to gather her nerves.   For a few minutes, everything went well.   Then someone patted her on the shoulder. Mariam turned around and found a light-skinned, plump woman wearing a hijab, like her. He had short, residential black hair and a well-humorous, almost perfectly round face. Her lips were much fuller than Mariam's, the lower slightly sagging, as if dragged by the large, dark mole just below the lip line. She had big greenish eyes that flashed in Mariam with an eye-catching glow.   You're Rashed Jen's new wife, aren't you? - said the woman who smiles broadly. The one from Herat. You're so young! Mariam Jan, right? My name is Fariba. I live on your street, five houses on the left, the one with the green door. This is my son Noor.   The boy next to her had a smooth, happy face and a scavenger like his mother. He had black hair on his left ear. His eyes were a sinister, reckless light in them. He raised his hand. Salaam, Yala Jan.   Noor's ten. I have an older boy, Ahmed. He's thirteen, Ore.   Thirteen becomes forty. The woman Fariba laughed at. My husband's name is Hakim, she said. He's a teacher here in De Mazang. And all of a sudden, as if the embolden, the other women pushed past Fariba and clapped Mariam, forming a circle around her at an alarming rate.   How do you like Kabul?   I was in Herat. I have a cousin there. Do you want a boy or a girl first? Minarets! What a beauty! It's a beautiful city, a very nice city! It's better, Mariam Yang, they have the last name, Ba! The boys get married and run. Girls stand and take care of you when you get old. We heard you were coming. Have twins. One each! Then everyone's happy.   Mariam backed away. She was hyperventilating. Her ears were buzzing, her pulse flickering, her eyes were sweating from one face to another. She stepped back again, but had nowhere to go- she was in the center of a circle. She spotted Fanriba frowning, who saw she was in trouble.   Let her be Fariba said. Step aside, leave her alone! I'm scaring her!   Mariam squeezed the dough close to her chest and pushed the crowd around her.   Where are you going, Hampshire?   She was pushed until she was clean and then climbed the street. It wasn't until she got to the intersection that she realized she was going the wrong way. She turned around and ran. In the other direction, head down, tripping once and scraping her knee badly, then again and running, skipped over the women.   What's wrong with you?   You're bleeding, the hampshire!   Mariam turned one corner, then the other. She found the right street, but suddenly she couldn't remember what Rashid's house was. She ran up the street, gasping, close to tears, began to try the doors blindly. Some were locked up, others opened only to reveal unfamiliar yards, barking dogs and crying chickens. She imagined Rashid coming home to find her looking like this, bleeding on her knees, lost on her own street. Now she's starting to cry. She slammed the doors, panicked, her face dragged with tears until it opened, and with relief, in the house, the Welsh stick, the cannon. She slammed the door behind her and flipped the bolt. Then he was on the four, against the wall, bubbling. When she finished, she snuck in, sat against the wall, with her feet spinning in front of her. She's never felt so lonely in her life.   When Rasheed came home that night, he brought with him a brown paper bag. Mariam was disappointed that he didn't notice the clean windows, the smet floors, the missing cobwebs. But he seemed pleased that she had already placed his dinner plate, on pure soda scattered across the living room floor.   I made a give, Mariam said.   Very good place to stay. I'm hungry.   She poured water out of his breast milk to wash his hands with it. While he dried with a towel, she put in front of him a bowl of washed water and a plate of fluffy white rice. It was the first meal she prepared for him, and Mariam hoped she was in better condition when she did. She was still shaken by the incident in a tandoori while she was cooking, and had been rolling all day about the consistency of The Dalla, about the color, about thinking she was going to stir too much ginger or not enough turmeric.   He dipped his spoon into the golden color of the dalla.   Mariam swayed a little. What if he was disappointed or angry? What if he repelled his plate with embarrassment?   Careful, she was able to say. It's hot.   Rashius blew his lips and blew, then put the spoon in his mouth.   It's good, he said. A little less, but good. Maybe better than good, even.   Relieved, Mariam looked at how she ate. She did well- maybe better than good, even that surprised her, what she felt because of his little compliment. Earlier in the day, he drifted a little further.   Tomorrow is Friday, Rasheed said. How about I show you around?   Around Kabul?   No, no, no, no, no, Calcutta.   Mariam blinked.   It's a joke. Of course, Kabul. Where else? He slipped into the brown paper bag. But first, something I have to tell you.   A sky blue burqa poured out of his bag. The yard of pleat fabric spilled when I picked it up. He shrugged off the burqa, looked at Mariam.   I have clients, Mariam, men who bring their wives to my store. Women come out, talk directly to me, look me in the eye without shame. They wear makeup and skirts that show off their knees. Sometimes they even put their feet in front of me, women do, for measurements, and men stand there and watch. They're allowing it. They don't think a stranger touches his wives' bare feet! They think they're modern people, intellectuals, because of their education. They don't see that they're spoiling their own gold and perm, their honor and pride.   He shook his head.   Most of all, they live in the richer parts of Kabul. I'il take you there. You'il see. But they're here too, Mariam, in this neighborhood, these soft men. There's a teacher who lives down the street, and Hakim is his name, and I see his wife Fariba walking the streets all the time alone and with nothing on her head but a scarf. It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who has lost control of his wife.   He fixed Mariam with a hard glare.   But I'm a different breed of person, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, an inappropriate word, and blood is shed. Where I come from, a woman's face is just for her husband's business. Do you understand?   Mariam nodded. When he stretched it out, she took it.   Earlier, she evaporated from the approval of her cooking. Instead, a feeling of contraction. This man felt dishonest and unshakable as the Sapphide mountains above Gul Daman.   Rashid gave her the paper bag. Then we have an understanding. Now, let me have more of this one.   11. Mariam has never worn a burqa. Rasheed helped her put it on. The padded head felt tight and heavy on her skull and it was strange to see the world through a mesh net. She practiced walking around her room in it and continued to step on the hem and stumble. The loss of peripheral vision was loathing, and she didn't like the suffocating way the pleated towel pressed her mouth.   You'll get used to it, Rasheed said. In time, I bet you'il like it.   They took a bus to a place called Rashed Shar-e-Nau, where the children pushed each other on swings and slapped volleyball balls over torn nets tied to stumps. They walked together and watched the boys fly, Mariam walked to Rasheed, tripped from time to time and along the hem of the burqa. For lunch, Rashied took her to eat in a small kebab next to a mosque she calls Haji Yahgub. The floor was sticky and the air was dry. The walls were slightly resented by raw meat, and the music Rashud described to her as logari was noisy. The cooks were thin boys who spewed skewers with one hand and shrunk mosquitoes with the other. Mariam, who He'd never been to a restaurant, he found it strange at first to sit in a crowded room with so many strangers, to lift a burqa to put canapés of food in his mouth. But Rashed's presence was a consolation, and after a while he wasn't so worried about music, smoke, even people. And the burqa, she learned to her surprise, was also comforting. It was like a one-way window. In it, she was an observer, pre-grown from the sight of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, in a single look, all the shameful secrets of her past.   On the streets, Rashid named different buildings with power; This is the U.S. Embassy, he said, the Department of Foreign Affairs. He pointed to cars, said their names and where they were made: Soviet Volgas, American Chevrolets, German Opel.   Who's your favorite? He asked.   Mariam hesitated, the Volga pointed out, and Rashid laughed.   Kabul was much more crowded than the little Mariam had seen from Herat. There were fewer trees and fewer toppings towed by horses, but more cars, taller buildings, more traffic lights and more paved roads. And everywhere Mariam heard the strange dialect of the city: Dear it was Jan, instead of Joe, sister became the Hampshire instead of hampshire, and so on.   From the street vendor, Rashied bought his ice cream. It's the first time she's eaten ice cream, and Mariam never imagined that such tricks could spin on her palate. She ate the whole bowl, the crushed pistachio, the little rice noodles at the bottom. She marveled at the enchanted texture, her sweetness.   They approached a place called Koche-Morha, the chicken. It was a narrow, crowded bazaar in a neighborhood that Rashed said was one of the richer.   We live here foreign diplomats, wealthy businessmen, members of the royal family, such people. Not like you and me. I don't see any chickens, Mariam said.   That's the only thing you can't find on Chicken Street. Rasheed laughed.   The street was lined with shops and small stalls selling hats of lamb and rainbow shamans. Rashid stopped to look at an engraved silver dagger in one store and, in another, in an old rifle, which the seller assured Rasheed of the first war against the British.   And I'm Mose Diane, Resid spoke. He smiled, and Mariam thought it was just for her. - Married smile.   They walked past carpet shops, craft shops, pastry shops, shops selling men's suits and dresses for women, and, in them, behind lace curtains, Mariam saw young girls sew buttons and smooth collars. Every once in a while, Rashid meets a salesman he knew, sometimes in Farsi, other times in Pascoe. As shaking his hands and kissing on the cheek, Mariam stood a few feet away. Rashid didn't wave it, he didn't introduce it.   He asked her to wait outside an embroidery store. I know the owner, he said. I'il go for a minute, tell me Salaam.   Mariam was waiting outside on the crowded sidewalk. She watched as cars crawled along the chicken, swirling through the hordes of hockey players and pedestrians, choking on children and donkeys who didn't move. She watched bored traders in their small stalls, smoking or spitting in brass spitz, their faces emerging from the shadows from time to time to trade in textiles and pointed coats to passers-by.   But women painted the most.   Women in this part of Kabul are breeds different from women in poorer neighborhoods - like the one where she and Rasheed live, where so many of the women are fully covered. These women were- what was the word Rasheed used?-- modern. Yes, modern Afghan women married modern Afghans who didn't care that their wives walked among strangers with makeup on their faces and nothing on their heads. Mariam watched them wipe uninitiate themselves down the street, sometimes with a man, sometimes alone, sometimes with pink cheekbones, who wore shiny shoes and watches with leather bands that walked bicycles with high grips and gold spokes - other than the children in De-Mazang, who wore sand fly marks on their cheeks and rolled old wheels rubber with sticks.   These women were rocking bags and rustling skirts. Mariam even noticed that a man was smoking behind the wheel of a car. Their nails were long, polished pink or orange, their lips red as tulips. They walked in high heels and quickly, as if on a permanent emergency business. They wore dark sunglasses and, as they darkened, Mariam wearing her perfume. She imagined that they all had degrees at university, that they worked in office buildings, behind their desks, where they typed and smoked, and made important phone calls with important people. These women are married to Mariam. They made her understand about her own snism, her clear appearance, her lack of aspirations, her ignorance of so many things.   That's when Rashied hit her on the shoulder and handed her something.   Here.   It was a dark maroon silk scarf with beads and edges embroidered with a golden thread.   Do you like it?   Mariam looked up. Rasheed touched something. He blinked and turned her gaze.   Mariam thought of Jalil, of a more demanding way in which he had stuffed his jewels on her, the overwhelming glee that left room for no response but humble gratitude. Nina was right about Jalil's gifts. They were a half-hearted sign of repentance, iningeny, corrupt gestures meant more to his own comfort than hers. This scarf, Mariam saw, a true gift.   It's beautiful, she said.   * TONIGHT, Rasheed visited his room again. But instead of smoking at the door, he crossed the room and sat next to her, where she lay on the bed. The springs creaked until the bed tilted to the side.   There was a moment of hesitation, and his hand was around her neck, his thick fingers slowly pressing the buttons in his back. His thumb came down, and now it wet the hollow above the collarbone, then the flesh beneath it. Mariam started shaking. His hand crept down, down, his fingernails caught in her cotton blouse.   I can't, she shrugs, looking at his moonlight, his thick shoulders and wide breasts, a pike of gray hair protruding from his open collar.   His hand was on her right breast now, pressing it hard through the blouse, and she could hear him breathing deep through her nose.   He came down under the blanket next to her. She could feel his hand, working on his belt, at the cord of his pants. Her hands clenched the leaves in her fist. He rolled her up, twisted her and moved, and she let her whine. Mariam closed her eyes, patched her teeth.   The pain was sudden and astonishing. Her eyes opened. She sucked the air through her teeth and bit the fingers of her thumb. She threw her hand over Rasheed's back and her fingers dug up his shirt.   Rashid buried his face in her pillow, and Mariam stared wide-eyed at the ceiling above his shoulder, shaking, his lips emptied, feeling the warmth of his rapid breaths on his shoulder. The air between them smelled of tobacco, onions and grilled lamb, which they had previously had. From his scribble, she felt he shaved it off.   When it's over, he takes it off, solidify it. He dropped his hand over his forehead. In the dark, she saw the blue hands on his watch. They put themselves for a while, on their back, without looking at each other.   There's no shame in that, Marjam, he said, a little rushed in. That's what married people do. This is what the Prophet himself and his wives did. There's nothing to be ashamed of.   A few minutes later, he pushed away the blanket and left the room, leaving it with the impression of his head on his pillow, leaving her waiting for the pain below, looking at the frozen stars in the sky and a cloud draping the moon's face like a veil.   12. In the autumn of the year, 1974. For the first time in his life, Mariam sees how capturing the new crescent can transform an entire city, change its rhythm and mood. She noticed sleepy overtaking Kabul. Traffic is loosening, scarce, even quietly. The shops are empty. The restaurants turned off the lights, closed their doors. Mariam didn't see the smokers on the streets, no cups of steam from windows. And in Iftar, when the sun submerged to the west and the cannon fired from mount Shire Dzarwaza, the city broke quickly, and Mariam, with bread and date, trying for the first time in its fifteen years the sweetness of sharing in common experience.   Except for a few days, Rashid wasn't watching the post. He came home in a sour mood a few times. Hunger made him curly, irritable, impatient. One night Mariam was late for dinner and started eating radish bread. Even after Mariam put the rice, the lamb and the okra in front of him, he didn't touch it. He said nothing and continued to chew the bread, his temple working, the vein on his forehead, full and angry. He continued to chew and look forward, and when Mariam spoke to him, he looked at her without seeing her face and put another piece of bread in his mouth.   Mariam was released when Ramadan ended.   Back in a flask, in the first of three days of the Eid-ul-Fitr holiday that followed Ramadan, Jalil will visit Mariam and Nina. Dressed in a suit and tie, he came with Eid gifts. One year he gave Mariam a scarf. The three of them sat down for tea, and then Jaleel would apologize.   To celebrate Eid with her real family, she told grandma as she crossed the stream and waved.   Page 7 Mullah Faizullah will also come. He was carrying chocolate candy wrapped in foil, a basket of painted boiled eggs, biscuits. After he was gone, Mariam climbed one of the willows with his treats. Perched on a tall branch, she ate Mullah Faizullah chocolates and dropped foil wrappers as they lay scattered across the trunk of the tree like silver colors. When the chocolate was gone, she would start with the biscuits and draw with a pencil on the eggs he had brought her. But there was a little pleasure for her. Mariam was horrified by Ait, this time of hospitality and ceremony, when the families dressed at their best and attended. She imagined the air in Herat cracking with glee and with spirit and with her bright eyes bathing each other with enthusiasts and goodwill. Then a herald would descend on her like a bird, and it would only rise when Eid passed.   This year, for the first time, Mariam saw Eade with her eyes from her childhood.   Rasheed and she took to the streets. Mariam had never been to such a live event. Drowned by the chilly weather, families have flooded the city on their frenetic circles to visit relatives. On his own street, Mariam saw Waiba and her son Noor, who was dressed in a suit. Fariba, wearing a white scarf, walked next to a small, shy man with glasses. Her eldest son was there too - Mariam somehow remembered Fariba saying his name, Ahmad, in the tandoori this first time. He had deep, lousy eyes, and his face was more like more solemn than his younger brother, a person who assumed early maturity as much as his brother was for the younger one. Around Ahmad's neck is a glamorous MEDALyon.   They recognized her, walked in the burqa to Rasheed. She waved and called Mubarak.   From inside the burqa, Mariam gave her a ghost of a nod.   So you know the teacher's wife? Rasheed said.   Mariam said he wasn't.   The best thing that stays away. She's an tease. And the husband thinks he's some kind of educated intellectual. But he's a mouse. Look at him. Doesn't it look like a mouse?   They went to Shar-e-Nau, where children spouted in new shirts and forte, brightly colored vests and compared Eid's gifts. Women branded pastry. Mariam saw festive lanterns hanging from shopwindows, heard music bubbling from loudspeakers. Strangers called her Eid mubarak as they overflowed her.   That night they went to Chaman and stood behind Rashid, Mariam watched the fireworks light up the sky, in flashing greens, pinks and yellows. She neglected to sit with mullah Faizullah outside the kolba, watching fireworks explode over Herat in the distance, sudden bursts of colour reflected in her soft, cataract-conjected eyes. But most of all, she missed Baba. Mariam wanted her mother to see this. To see her, against the backdrop of everything. Let's finally see that contentment and beauty are not unattainable things. Even for guys like them.   * THEY HAD Eid visitors to the house. They were all men, rashed's friends. When a knock came, Mariam knew to go upstairs to her room and close the door. She stayed there while the men drained the tea downstairs with Rashid, smoked, chatted. Rasheed told Mariam he wouldn't come down until the visitors left. Mariam didn't mind. In fact, she was even flattered. Rasheed saw holiness in what they had together. Her honor, her honor, is something worth keeping for him. She felt valued by his defense. Precious and precious.   On the third and final day of Eid Rashid went to visit a few friends. Mariam, who had a stomach all night, boiled water and made himself a cup of green tea sprinkled with crushed cardamom. In the living room, she was riding as a result of Eid's previous visits: the overturned cups, the half-blooded pumpkin seeds hidden between mattresses, the plates wrapped in the outlines of last night's meal. Mariam took on cleaning up the mess, marveling at how energetically lazy men can be.   He didn't want to go into Rashid's room. But cleaning took her from the living room to the stairs, and then to the upstairs hallway and to his door, and the next thing she knew, she was in his room for the first time, sitting on his bed, feeling like an intruder.   She took the heavy, green curtains, the pairs of shoes neatly padded on the wall, the closet door, where the gray paint was cut and showed wood under. She spotted a box of cigarettes on top of the wardrobe next to her bed. She put one between her lips and stood in front of the small oval mirror on the wall. She blew the air in the mirror and made ash-tapping movements. She brought him back. She never managed to cope with the unhindered grace with which women in Kabuli smoke. She looked big, ridiculous.   She opened the top drawer of his locker.   She saw the gun first. It was black, with a wooden handle and a short muzzle. The room was quite small and quite small. She handed it over in her hands. It was a lot heavier than it looked. The grip felt smooth in her hand, and the muzzle was cold. It was also disturbing that Rashied possessed something whose sole purpose was to kill another person. But he certainly kept it for their own safety. Her safety.   Under the gun were several magazines with curling angles. Mariam opened one. Something in it has been dropped. Her mouth is jammed of her own free will.   On every page were women, beautiful women who did not wear shirts, without trousers, socks or panties. They weren't carrying anything. They lay on beds on a pot and stared at Mariam with half-hidden eyes. In most of the photos, their legs were separated, and Mariam had a full view of the dark place between them. In some women were worshipped as if - God not to give up that thought - in Sujda for prayer. They looked back over their shoulders with a look of bored contempt.   Mariam quickly put the magazine where she found it. She felt drugged. Who are these women? How can they afford to be photographed like this? Her stomach rebelled from unpleasant. Is that what he did then, those nights he didn't visit her room? Was she a disappointment to him in that regard? And what about all his tales of honor and integrity, his disapproval of female clients who ended up showing him their feet to dress up for shoes? The woman is only for her husband. I guess the women on these pages had husbands, some of them should. At least they had brothers. If so, why did Rashid insist that she cover up when he wasn't thinking of looking into the private areas of other male wives and sisters?   Mariam sat on her bed, confused and confused. She glued her face with her hands and closed her eyes. She inhaled and inhaled until she felt more at ease.   An explanation was slowly presented. He was human, after all, living alone for years before she moved in. His needs differed from hers. For her, all these months later, their bonding is still an exercise in tolerating pain. His appetite, on the other hand, was fierce, sometimes bordering on violence. The way you pressed her, it's hard to pressure her. how furiously his hips work. He was a man. All those years without a woman. Can he accuse him of being the way God created him?   Mariam knew she could never talk to him about it. It was impossible. But was it unforgivable? All she had to do was think about the other man in her life. Jalil, a husband of three and father of nine, had a relationship with Baba from a denduk. What was worse, Rasheed's magazine, or what did Jaleel do? And what's so like, sela, harami, judging?   Mariam tried the bottom drawer of the cupboard.   There, she found a picture of the boy, Yunus. It was black and white. He looked like four, maybe five. He was wearing a striped shirt and bow tie. He was a beautiful little boy, with a slender nose, brown hair and dark, slightly sunken eyes. He looked distracted, as if something had caught his eye, just as the camera had flashed. Below that, Mariam found another photo, also black and white, of this slightly grainy one. It was from a sitting woman, and behind her was a thinner, younger Rasheed, with black hair. The woman was beautiful. Not as beautiful as the women in the magazine, maybe, but beautiful. Definitely prettier than her, Mariam. She had a delicate chin and long black hair messed up in the center. High cheekbones and a gentle 6-year-old. Mariam pictured her face, slender lips and long chin and felt a flicker of jealousy. She's been looking at this picture for a long time. There was something uneasy about the way Rashid seemed to rise above the woman. His engaging, tight smile and unmiling, tearful face. The way her body tilted gently, as if trying to get away without her hands. Mariam put everything back where she found it. Later, while doing laundry, she regretted sneaking into his room. For what? What did she learn about the material? That he had a gun, that he was a man with the needs of a man? And she shouldn't have stared at the picture of him and his wife while she was. Her eyes had read meaning in what was an accidental body pose captured in a single moment of time. What Mariam felt now that the clothes-filled lines had reneed long before her was the sorrow for Rasheed. He also had a hard life, a life marked by loss and sad twists of fate. Her thoughts went back to his boy Yunus, who once built snowmen in this yard, whose feet had hit the same stairs. The lake kidnapped him from Rasheed, devoured him, just as the whale devoured his son in the Koran. The pain hurts her, but she hurts to imagine Rash being struck by panic and helpless, swirling the shores of the lake and begging him to spit out his son on land. And for the first time, she felt like a relative with her husband. She said that that they will become good companions after all. 13. On the bus home from the doctor, the strangest thing happened to Mariam. Everywhere she looked, she saw bright colors: of the dribly, gray concrete flats, on the tin shops, in the muddy waters flowing into the gutters. It was as if the rainbow had melted in her eyes. Rasheed's got a glove and he's humming a song. Every time the bus got stuck over a hole and pulled forward, his hand stuck techno on her belly. What about Reviews? He said. That's a good pascoe. What if it's a girl? Mariam said. I think it's a boy. To. A boy. There was a noise coming through the bus. Some passengers pointed to something, while others leaned over the seats to see. Look, Rashid said, patted with a knuckle on the glass. He was smiling. There. You see? On mariam streets, she saw people stop in their tracks. At traffic lights, faces coming out of car windows turned upwards to the falling softness. What was that about the first season of snowfall Mariam wondered about being so insolable? Was it a chance to see something still intact, uninpoted? To capture the fleeting grace of the new season, a wonderful beginning before it is trampled and corrupted? If it's a girl, Rasheed said, and it's not, but if it's a girl, then you can choose whatever name you want. * MARIAM AUQUI the next morning to the sounds of cutting and punching. She wrapped a scarf around her and went out into the snow cover. The heavy snow from the previous night had stopped. Now only a splash of light, swirling flakes tickled her cheeks. Kabul was silent, capitol in white, smoke, scrawny, skinny. She found Rashiv in cannons, hitting nails in a plank of wood. When he saw her, he pulled a nail out of the corner of his mouth. It would have been a surprise. He's going to need a crib. You shouldn't have seen it until it was done. Mariam wanted him not to do it, not to do it, not to do it, to hope to be a boy. As happy as she was for this pregnancy, his expectations weighed on her. Yesterday Rasheed had gone out and gone home in a suede winter coat for a boy lined inside with soft sheepskin, sleeves embroidered with fine red and yellow silk. Rasheed picked up a long, narrow board. When he started seeing him in two, he said, the stairs bothered him. Something will have to be done later, when he is old enough to climb. And the stove alarmed him, he said. Knives and forks must be intercepted somewhere far from range. You can't be too cautious. Boys are reckless creatures. Mariam dumped her in the cold. * THE NEXT MORNING Rashied said he wanted to invite his friends to dinner All morning Mariam was cleaning lentils and moistened rice. She cut aubergines for borani, and cooked leeks and beef for aushak. She smet the floor, beat the curtains, broadcast the house, despite the snow that had started again. She arranges mattresses and pillows on the walls of the living room, places bowls of candy and roasted almonds on the table. She was in her room early in the evening before the first of the men came. She lay in bed until her gypsies and laugh and banter downstairs began to mushroom. He couldn't keep his hands on his belly. She thought about what was growing there, and happiness rushed like a gust of wind that opened the door wide open. Her eyes were soaked. Mariam was thinking about his 600-mile bus journey with Rashid, from Herat in the west, near the border with Iran, to Kabul in the east. They passed through small towns and big cities, and knots of small villages that appeared one after the other. They have crossed mountains and through burned deserts, from one province to another. And here she is now, above these stones and thriving hills, with her own home, her husband, who headed to one last, covenant province: Motherhood. How delightful it was to think of the baby, the baby and the baby. How glorious it was to know that her love for her had already frozen everything she ever felt as a human being, to know that she no longer needed pebble games. Down there, someone connected a harmonium. Then the hammer on the hammer, which is tuning on the tabula. Somebody cleared his throat. And then there was playing, clapping, singing and singing. Mariam stroked the softness of her abdomen. I'm going to be a mother, she thought. I'm going to be a mother, she said. Then he laughed at himself, and he repeated it over and over again, enjoying the words. When Mariam thought of this baby, her heart swelled in her. She swelled and swelled until all the loss, all the grief, all the loneliness and self-healing of her life washed away. That's why God had brought her here, all over the country. She knew that. She remembered a verse from the Koran that Mullah Faisula taught her: And Allah is east and west, therefore, wherever he turns there, is the purpose of Allah... She left her prayer carpet and made a smear. When she was done, she stuck her hands in front of her face and asked God not to let all that happiness slip away from her. * Rasheed's idea to go to the hamam. Mariam has never been to the bathroom, but he said there is nothing like going out and taking his first breath of cold air, feeling the heat rising from the skin. In the female hammam, shapes move around Mariam, a look at the thigh here, the contour of the shoulder there. 1. of young girls, the grunt of old women, and the slug of a bath echo between the walls, while the backs scrubbed and the hair soaped. Mariam sat in the far corner alone, working on her heels with pumice stone insulated from a wall of steam from the passing shapes. Then there was blood and she was screaming. The sound of feet now hitting the wet cobblestones. Her faces are staring at the steam. Tongues are pecking. Later that night, in bed, Fariba told her husband that when she heard crying and rushed over her, she found Rashed's wife curling up on a corner, hugging her knees, a pool of blood at her feet. You could hear the poor girl's teeth shaking, Hakim, she was shaking so hard. When Mariam saw her, Fariba said she asked for a loud, fervent voice, it's normal, isn't it? Right? Isn't that normal? * ANOTHER RIDE BUS with Rasheed. It's snowing again. It thickened this time. It was clustered in piles on sidewalks, on rooftops, gathering in patches on the bark of rock trees. Mariam watched the merchants who prant the snow from their stores. A group of boys were chasing a black dog. They were waving sports on the bus. Mariam looked at Rasheed. His eyes were closed. He wasn't humming. Mariam leaned in and closed her eyes. She wanted to get out of her cold socks, from a damp sweater that was prickly to her skin. In the house, Rashid covered her with a quilt as she lay on the couch, but there was a stiff, perfunctional air for this gesture. What kind of answer is that? He said again. That's what Mullah has to say. You pay his doctor, you want a better answer than God's will. Mariam shrugged her knees under the quilt and said she needed to rest. God's will, he squeaked. He sat in his room, smoked cigarettes all day. Mariam lay on the couch, arms tucked between her knees, watching the jacuzzi snowball and spinning outside the window. He once recalled that nina used to say that every snowflake was a sigh from an offended woman somewhere in the world. That all sighs soared above the sky, gathered in clouds, then pounced on small pieces that fell silently on the people below. Reminding us of how women like us suffer, she said. How quietly we endure everything that comes upon us. 14. The tribulation continued to surprise Mariam. All she had to unfold was she thought of the unfinished manger in a cannon or suede coat in Rasheed's cupboard. The baby came alive and she could hear his hungry gnaws, his backs and his backs. She felt him sniffing her breasts. Mariam was deceived that she could miss such a non-foody creature she hadn't even seen. Then there were days when the seems inappropriate for Mariam. Days when the very thought of regaining the old patterns of her life did not seem so exhausting, when there was no great effort to get out of bed, to pray, to wash, to prepare rasheed's meal. Page 8 Mariam was terrified to go outside. She was suddenly envious of the women of the neighborhood and their wealth of children. Some had seven or eight and did not understand how happy they were, how blessed their children were in their womb, living to squirm in their hands and take the milk from their breasts. Children who were not leaked with soapy water and the body dirt of strangers in some bathing channel. Mariam grieved them when she listened to them complain about bad behavior sons and lazy daughters. A voice in her head tried to calm her down with a well-planned but delusional one. You'il have others, Islaa. You're young. You'll certainly have plenty of other chances. But Mariam's grief was not aimless or non-specific. Mariam was grieving for this baby, just that child who made her happy for a while. Some days she believed that the baby was an unjustified blessing, that she was punished for what she had done to Nina. Isn't it true that she better have slipped the noose around her mother's neck? Insidious daughters don't deserve to be mothers, and that was punishment. In those dreams, Nina dressed with admiration and defamation. Other days, Mariam was besieged with anger. Rashid is to blame for his premature celebration. For his reckless belief that she was carrying a boy. Let's name the baby the way he had. To take God's will for granted. He's guilty of making her go to the bathroom. Something, the steam, the dirty water, the soap, something that caused this to happen. Not. Not Rashed. It was her fault. She became angry that she was sleeping in the wrong position, eating food that was too spicy not to eat enough fruit to drink too much tea. It was God's fault that he mocked her the way he had. For not giving her what He gave so many other women. For hovering before her, a mystery, what He knew would give her the greatest happiness and then to distance him. But it's not good, all that mistake that lay, all those conundrums of accusations that got in her head. Allah was not mean. He wasn't a petty God. Mullah Faizula's words whispered in her head: Blessed is he in which the kingdom is in his hand, and he who has power over all that created death and life, that he may test you. Go around with guilt, Mariam kneels and prays forgiveness for these thoughts. * in the meantime, from the day in the bathroom. Most nights when he got home, he barely spoke. He ate, smoked, went to bed, sometimes returned in the middle of the night briefly and, to a rather rude session of bonding. He was more likely to pout these days, complain about her cooking, complain about the mess around the yard or point to even minor impurities in the house. Sometimes he would take her around town on Fridays, as before, but on the sidewalks he walked quickly and always a few steps in front of her without speaking without getting away from Mariam, who almost had to deal with it. He wasn't so ready to laugh at those appearances anymore. He didn't buy her cookies or gifts, stop or name her like he used to. Her interrogations seem to annoy him. One night, they sat in the living room listening to the radio. Winter was over. The stiff winds that smeared the snow on the face and caused the eyes to calm down. Silver fluffy snow melts the branches of tall trees and will be replaced in a few weeks with rattling, pale green buds. Rasheed was shaking his leg in a tabula beat of Hamahan's song, his eyes turned against cigarette smoke. Are you mad at me? Mariam asked. Rasheed didn't say anything. The song was over and the news came out. A female voice reports that President Daud Khan has sent another group of Soviet consultants back to Moscow for the Kremlin's expected discontent. I'm worried you're mad at me. Rasheed sighed. Is that you? His eyes moved to her. Why would I be angry? - Is that the man you take me for after everything I've done for you? No, no, no, no, no, of course not. Then stop harassing me! I am sorry. Bebahsh, Rasheed. I am sorry. He broke his cigarette and lit another one. He put the sound on the radio. I was thinking, Mariam said, raising her voice to hear her about the music. Rasheed sighed again, more recklessly this time, again turn the volume down. He rubbed his forehead. What now? I thought maybe we should have a proper funeral. For the baby, I mean. Just us, a few prayers, nothing more. Mariam's been thinking about this for a while. He didn't want to forget that baby. It didn't seem right not to note this loss in any way that is permanent. Why? That's idiotic. I think I'il feel better. Then he did, he said abruptly. I already buried a son. I'm not burying another one. Now, if you don't mind, I'm trying to hear. He twisted the sound again, bowed his head and closed his eyes. One sunny morning this week, Mariam chose a place in the yard and dug a hole. In the name of Allah and with Allah, and in the name of to Allah, over whom are the blessings and peace of Allah, she said breathlessly, as her shovel is thrown into the earth. She put the suede coat Rashied bought for the baby in the hole and shoveled dirt over him. You make the night pass through the day, and you make the day pass into the night, and you take the living out of the dead, and you take out the dead from the living, and you give a livelihood that you desire without measure. She patted the dirt with the back of the shovel. She hid from the mound, closed her eyes. Give me your livelihood, Allah. Give me a living. 15. APRIL 1978 On April 17, 1978, Mariam was nineteen, a man named Mir Akbar Khyber was found murdered. Two days later, a large demonstration was held in Kabul. Everyone in the neighborhood was talking about it. Through the window, Mariam saw neighbors sing, talking excitedly, transistor radios pressed to their ears. She saw Fariba leaning against the wall of her house, talking to a woman who was new to Deh-Mazang. Fariba was smiling, and her palms were pressed against her swollen belly. The other woman, whose name escaped Mariam, looked older than Fariba, and her hair had a strange purple hue. She was holding a little boy's hand. Mariam knew the boy's name was Tariq because she had heard this woman on the street looking for him by that name. Mariam and Rasheed didn't join the neighbors. They were listening on the radio as about ten thousand people poured into the streets and marched along kabul's government-held area. Rasheed said Mir Akbar Kiber was a prominent communist and that his supporters blamed the assassination of President Daud Khan. You didn't look at her when you said that. Nowadays, he never did again, and Mariam wasn't sure if she had ever spoken to her. What is a communist? She asked. Rashit snorted and raised both eyebrows. You don't know what a communist is? It's such a simple thing. Everybody knows. It's a common knowledge. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no I don't know why I'm surprised. Then he crossed his ankles on the table and was silent about being someone who believed in Karl Marxist. Who's Karl Marx? Rasheed sighed. On the radio, the woman's voice said that Taraki, the leader of the KHAL branch, the Afghan Communist Party, was in the street, talking about provoking speeches by the demonstrators. What do they want? Mariam asked. These communists, what do they believe? Rasheed shook his head and shook his head, but Mariam felt he saw uncertainty in the way he crossed his arms, the way his eyes shifted. You don't know anything, do you? You're like a child. Your brain is empty. There's no information in it. I'm asking because the Co. Shut. Mariam did it. It wasn't easy to put up with it. thus, to bear his contempt, ridicule, insults, walking past her seemed to be nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage, Mariam clearly sees how much a woman can tolerate when she is afraid. Mariam was afraid, too. She lived in fear of changing moods, her volatile temperament, his insistence on leading even secular exchanges, in the path of confrontation, which sometimes got away with punches, punches, punches, kicks and sometimes tried to shift with polluted excuses, and sometimes not. In the four years of the day in the bathroom, there were six more cycles of hope, then beat, every loss, every collapse, every trip to the doctor more crushing for Mariam than the last. With each disappointment, Rashid grew more distant and resentmental. He didn't like anything now. She cleaned the house, made sure there was always a delivery of clean shirts, cooked her favorite dishes. Once, disastrously, she even bought makeup and put it on it. But when he came home, he looked at her and rushed with such disgust that she rushed to the bathroom and washed everything, tears of shame, mixing with soapy water, blush and mascara. Now Mariam is terrified of the noise of coming home in the evening. These are sounds that made her heart swing. From her bed, she listened to the snap of his heels, next to his muted curled legs, after he spilled his shoes. With her ears, she does an inventory of what he's doing: the legs of the chair being tossed across the floor, the sliding creaking creak of the reeds as he sits down, the spoon shutter against the plate, the flickering newspapers, the squeaking water. And while her heart was swearing, her mind wondered what excuse she would use that night to invade her. There was always something, something insignificant, to infuriate him, because no matter what he did to please him, no matter how thoroughly he obeyed his desires and demands, it was not enough. He couldn't get his son back. In this most important way, she let him down seven times when she had let him down - and now she was just a burden to him. She sees it the way she looked at her when I looked at her. She was a burden to him. What's going to happen? She asked him now. Rasheed shot her at a glance. He made a sound between sighing and moaning, dropped his legs off the table and turned off the radio. He took it upstairs to his room. Close the door. * On April 27, Mariam's question was answered with screaming sounds and intense, sudden roars. She spread barefoot in the living room and found Rashid by the window, in his bottom blouse, his hair ruffled, his palms pressed against the glass. Mariam's headed for the window next to him. She could see warplanes approaching, heading north and east. In the distance, strong booms resonated and sudden plumes of smoke rose to the sky. What's up, Rasheed? I don't know, she said. What's all this? God knows, he thre. He tried the radio, and he just sat down. What are we going to do? Impatiently Rashid said: We are waiting. Later in the day, Rashied was still trying the radio, while Mariam made rice with singafer sauce in the kitchen. Mariam remembered a time when she rejoiced, even eagerly, preparing for Rasheed. Now cooking was an exercise in heightened anxiety. The quarterback has always been too salty or too bernie for his taste. The rice was judged either too greasy or too dry, the bread was too pasty or crunchy. Rashid left her in the kitchen with doubts. When he brought his plate, the national anthem played on the radio. I made sabbie, she said. Put it down and shut up. After the music faded, a man's voice appeared on the radio. He declared himself Colonel Abdul Qader. He reported that earlier in the day the 4th Armored Division took over the airport and the key intersections in the city. Kabul Radio, the ministries of communications and interior, as well as the building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have also been captured. Kabul was in the hands of the people now, he said proudly. The rebels have attacked the presidential palace. Tanks had broken into the premises, and there was a fierce battle going on there. Dowd's forces were defeated, Abdul Qader said in a reassuring tone. Days later, as the Communists began the summary execution of those associated with the Regime of Daoud Khan, when rumors began to circulate about Kabul with pierced eyes and the genitals were electric shocks in Pol-e-Charki prison, Maryam would hear about the massacre that took place at the Presidential Palace. Dowd Khan was killed, but not before communist rebels killed twenty members of his family, including women and grandchildren. It will be said that he took his own life, that he was shot in the heat of battle; rumors that he was saved last, made to watch the massacre of his family, then to be shot. Rasheed leaned to the volume and leaned closer. A revolutionary council of the armed forces was established and our van will be known as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, Abdul Qader said. The era of aristocracy, nepotism and inequality is over, fellow Hamas. We've ended decades of tyranny. Now power is in the hands of the masses and people who love freedom. A glorious new era in the history of our country is underway. A new Afghanistan was born. We assure you that there is nothing to be afraid of, fellow Afghans. The new regime will maintain the u best respect for principles, both Islamic and democratic. It's a time of joy and celebration. radio is switched off. Is that good or bad? Mariam asked. Bad for the rich, by the sound of it, Rasheed said. Maybe not bad for us. Mariam thinks they've moved away from Jaleel. Then he wondered if the Communists would pursue him. Are they going to shut him down? Lock up his sons? Take his business and his property? Is that warm? Rasheed said he was looking at the rice. I just served it from the pot. He grouched and told her to give him a plate. * DOWN THE STREET, when the night lit up in a sudden flash of red and yellow, a tired Fariba had sneered at his elbows. Her hair had a matte sweat, and droplets of moisture were girdle along the edge of the upper lip. On her bed, the elderly midwife, Ajma, watched Fariba's husband and sons walk around the child. They admired the baby's light hair, her pink cheeks and cracked, pink lips, at the slits of jade green eyes moving behind her puffy lids. They smiled at each other when they heard their voice for the first time, a cry that started like a cat and burst into a healthy, full fold. Noor said her eyes are like gems. Ahmad, who is the most religious member of the family, sang Azan in her sisters' ear and blew three times in her face. Layla, huh? Hakim asked, bouncing his daughter. It's Leila, Fariba said, smiling tiredly. Nocturnal beauty. Everything is perfect. * Rashed made a ball of rice with his fingers He put it in his mouth, chewed once, then twice, before grabbing himself and spitting it out on the soda. What's the matter? Mariam asked, hating the apologetic tone of her voice. What's the matter? What's it like that you did it again? But he boils it five minutes more than usual. It's a bold lie. I swear- He shook the rice from his fingers and pushed the plate, spilling sauce and rice on the solfa. Mariam watched as he walked out of the living room, then walked out of the house, slammed the door on his way out. Mariam knelt on the ground and tried to pick up the grains of rice and bring them back to the plate, but her hands were shaking badly and she had to wait for them to stop. She tried to take a deep breath. She caught her pale reflection in the dark window and looked away. Then she heard it was opening, and Rasheed went back to the living room. Get up, he said. Come here. Get up He grabbed her, opened her up and threw a handful of pebbles at her. Put this in your mouth. What? Put. These. In my mouth. His strong hands stuck his jaw. He put two fingers in her mouth and opened it, then forced the cold, hard pebbles Mariam fought against him, grumbled, but he kept pushing the pebbles, his upper lip curled up in a closet. Now chew, he said. Through the mouths of grit and pebbles, Mariam was silent. Tears flowed from the corners of her eyes. CHEWING has come down. The gust of his smoky breath hit her face. Mariam was chewing. Something in the back of her mouth cracked. Rasheed said. His cheeks were shaking. Now you know what your rice tastes like. Now you know what you gave me in this marriage. Very good breakfast. Then he was gone, leaving Mariam to spit out pebbles, blood and the pieces of two broken molars. PART TWO 16. KABUL, SPRING 1987 Leila spoke out of bed, as she did most mornings, hungry for the view of her friend Tariq. This morning, however, he knew there would be no Tariq. How long are you going to be gone? She asked when Tariq told her that his parents were taking him south to the town of Gaazni to visit his paternal uncle. Thirteen days. Thirteen days? It's not that long. You're making a face, Leila. I didn't. You're not going to cry, are you? I'm not going to cry! Not through you. Not for a thousand years. She had kicked him, not his artificial one, but his real one, and he had played her head. Page 9 Thirteen days. Almost two weeks. And just five days into it, Leila learned a basic truth about the time: Like the accordion on which Tariq's father sometimes played old songs, time stretches and shrinks depending on Tariq's absence or presence. Downstairs, her parents were fighting. Again. Layla knew the routine: Mammy, fierce, uncontrollable, slope and fraying; Grandmothers, sitting, looking sheepish and dazed, obediently, waiting for the storm to pass. Layla closed the door and changed. But she could still hear them. She could still hear it. Finally, the door slammed. Hitting the steps. Mamie's bed was shaken hard. Grandma, it looks like she's going to survive to see another day. Leila! call me now. I'm going to be late for work! One minute! Leila put on her shoes and quickly brushed her shoulder length, blonde curls in the mirror. Mammy always told Layla that she inherited the color of her hair - as well as her thick eyes with turquoise green eyes, her turquoise cheeks, her high cheekbones and a kiss on her lower lip, which Mammy shared - from her grandmother, Mammy's. She was cash, stunning, Mammy said. Her beauty was the valley speech. She missed two generations of women in our family, but she certainly doesn't surround you, Layla. The Mammy Valley mentioned is Panjshir, a Farsi-speaking Tajik region 100 kilometers northeast of Kabul. Both Mammi and Babi, who were the first cousins, were born and raised in Panjir; they have moved to back in 1960 as a hopeful, bright-eyed newlyweds when Babi was admitted to Kabul University. Layla's hooked up downstairs, hoping she doesn't leave her room for another round. She found Babi kneeling at the screen door. Did you see that, Leila? The screen rupture had been there for weeks. Layla leaned next to him. No, no, no, no, no, it has to be something new. That's what I told Fariba. He seemed shaken, diminished, as he always did after Mamie had finished with him. She says she let bees go. Leila's heart loved it. Babi was a small man with narrow shoulders and thin, delicate hands, almost like a woman. On the night Leila walked into Babi's room, she would always find the profile of his face digging into a book, his glasses tilting at the top of his nose. Sometimes you didn't even notice she was there. When he did, he marked his page, smiling at a flattened, accompanying smile. Babi knew by heart most of Rumi and Hafez's ghazi. He can speak at length about the struggle between Britain and tsarist Russia over Afghanistan. He knew the difference between stalactite and stalagmite and can tell you that the distance between the earth and the sun is the same as getting from Kabul to Ghazni one and a half million times. But if Layla needed the lid of a candy jar, she had to go to Mammy, which felt like a betrayal. Simple tools, stewed grandmothers. In his day, the bleeding doors didn't smash. After he hooked them up, the ceilings melted. Mold thrives defiantly in kitchen cupboards. Mammy said that before he left with Noor to join jihad against the Russians, back in 1980, it was Ahmed who was the one who was submissive and competent to these things. But if you have a book that needs urgent reading, she said, then Hakim is your man. Still, Layla couldn't shake the feeling that once, before Ahmad and Noor went to war against Soviet advisers - before Babi let them go to war - Mammy also thought that Babi's book was over, that once she too found her oblivion and unhindered charming. -What's today? Day five? Or six? What do I care? I don't count Layla lying, she's collapsing, she loves him for remembering. Mammy didn't know Tariq had left. His flashlight will explode before you know it, Babi said, referring to Leila and Tariq's evening game. They played it for so long that it became a bedtime ritual, like brushing teeth. Grandma's got his finger shut through the rupture. I'il spin this as soon as I get a chance. We'd better get going. He raised his voice and cried over his shoulder: We are leaving, Taba! I'm taking Layla to school. Don't forget to take it! Outside, as she climbed on to Babi's bicycle pack, Layla spotted a parked car across the street. a house where the shoemaker, Rashid, lived with his wife. It was a Mercedes, an unusual car in this neighborhood, a blue with a thick white stripe that was wearing the hood, roof and trunk. Layla can make two men sitting inside, one behind the wheel and the other in the back. Who are they? I don't know, she said. It's none of our business, Babi said. You're going to be an hour late. Layla remembered another game, and she cheated on Babi and said it was your job, didn't she, cousin? So you don't do anything of your own business. Even your own sons will go to war. How I begged you. But you buried your nose in those damn books and let our sons go away like a pair of harams. Babi curled up in the street, Leila on the back, her hugs swirling around his belly. As the blue Benz passed, Leila caught a fleeting glimpse of the man in the back seat: slim, white hair, dressed in a dark brown suit, with a white triangle on a handkerchief in his chest pocket. The only thing she had to notice was that the car had Herat's number. They spin along the rest of the road in silence, except at the bends, where Babi carefully pauses and says: Hang on, Leila. Retarded. Retarded. 1000000000 * In THIS CLASS that day, Leila hardly pays attention, between Tariq's absence and her parents' fight. So when the teacher called her to name the capitals of Romania and Cuba, Leila was caught off guard. The teacher's name was Shanei, but behind her back the students called her Hala Rangmaal, Aunt Painter, citing the suggestion she preferred when she slapped students, palm, then back from hand, back and forth, as a brush-working artist. Hala Rangmayal was young with sharp eyes with heavy eyebrows. On the first day of school, she proudly tells the class that she is the daughter of a poor peasant from the KKT. She stood upright and wore her jet black hair pulled back tightly and tied back in a bun, so when Khala Rangmaal turned around, Layla could see the dark bristles around her neck. She didn't cover up and banned women from doing so. She said women and men are equal in every way and there is no reason for women to cover up if men don't. She said the Soviet Union was the best nation in the world, along with Afghanistan. He was nice to the workers and his people were equal. Everyone in the Soviet Union was happy and friendly, unlike in America, where crime makes people afraid to leave their homes. And everyone in Afghanistan will be happy, she said, when anti-aggression, backward bandits, are defeated. That's why our Soviet comrades came here in 1979. To give their neighbor a hand. To help us defeat those brutalities who want our country to be backward, primitive nations. And you have to give yourself a hand, You have to report anyone who might know about the rebels. It's your duty. You have to listen to me, then report. Even if it's your parents, uncles or aunts. Because none of them love you as much as your country. Your country comes first, remember! I'il be as proud of you as your country. On the wall behind Hala Rangmaal's desk is a map of the Soviet Union, a map of Afghanistan and a framed photo of the last communist president, Najibullah, who, Babi said, was once the head of the fearsome HAAD, the Afghan secret police. There were other photos, mostly young Soviet soldiers, shaking hands with peasants, planting apple saplings, building houses, always smiling ingeniously. Well, said Yala Rangaal now, did I disturb your dream, Inakilabi? That's her nickname for Leila, the Revolutionary Girl, because she was born on the night of the April 1978 coup, except Hala Rangmaal gets angry if anyone in her class uses the word coup. What had happened, she insisted, was an insilab, a revolution, an uprising of working people against inequality. Jihad was another forbidden word. According to her, there was no war in the province, only a struggle against unrest unfolded by people she called foreign provocations. And certainly no one, no one, dared to repeat in his presence the rumors that after eight years of fighting, the Russians lost the war. Especially now that US President Reagan began sending mujahideen Shtinger missiles to lower Soviet helicopters, now that Muslims from around the world are joining the cause: Egyptians, Pakistanis, even wealthy Saudis who left their millions and came to Afghanistan to fight jihad. Bucharest. Layla did it. And these countries are our friends or not? They are, moolim sahib. They are friendly countries. Hala Rangmaal gave a bloody one. * WHEN SCHOOL DROPPED OUT, Mammy didn't show up again as she had to. Layla was coming home with two of her classmates, Giti and Hasina. Giti was tightly winded, a little girl who wore her hair in two ponytails held by elastic bands. She always frowned and walked with her books pressed against her chest like a shield. Hasina is twelve, three years older than Leila and Giti, but she has failed in third grade once and fourth grade. What she wasn't in Smart Hasina was getting ready for things and the mouth, which, Giti said, ran like a sewing machine. It was Hassana who coined Hala Rangmail's nickname. Today, Hasina gave advice on how to fend off unattractive suitors. The gluten-free method guaranteed to work. I give you my word. That's stupid. I'm too young to have a suitor! Giti said. You're not too young. No one came to ask me for my hand. This is because you have dear10. Giti's hand slammed into her chin and she looked on with alarm Leila, who smiled thirstyly on the left: Giti was the most nameless person Leila had ever met and shook with comfort. Anyway, do you want to know what to do or not, ladies? Go ahead, Leila said. Bob. No less than four boxes. In the evening, a toothless lizard comes to ask for your hand. But time, ladies, is everything. You have to suppress the fireworks until it's time to serve him tea. I'll remember that, Layla said. So is he. Leila could have said at the time that she didn't need that advice because Babi had no intention of giving it away anytime soon. Although Babi worked at Silo, a giant bakery factory in Kabul where he worked amid the heat and the mysterious tinkering machines that stood all day on the huge ovens and grinding grains, he was a university-educated man. He was a high school teacher before the Communists fired him- that was shortly after the 1978 coup, about a year and a half before the Russians invaded. Babi told Layla from an early age that the most important thing in his life, after her safety, was her school. I know you're still young, but I want you to understand and understand that now, he said. Marriage can wait, education can't. You're a very, very smart girl. Really. You can be anything you want, Layla. I know that about you. I also know that when the war is over, Afghanistan will need you as much as the people, maybe more. Because society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Leila. There's no chance. But Layla doesn't tell Hasina that Babi said these things, or how happy she is to have a father like him, or how proud she is of his attitude to her, or how determined she is to follow her education, just as he had his. For the past two years, Leila has received the aviation certificate of numra, given annually to the highest-ranked student in each degree. She said nothing about these things to Hasina, whose father was a dishonest driver who, in two or three years, will almost certainly give it away. Hasina told Layla, in one of her rare serious moments, that she was already determined to marry a first cousin who was twenty years older than her and owned an auto repair repair in Lahore. I saw him twice, Hasina said. Both times he eats with his mouth open. Bob, girls, Hasina said. You remember that. Unless she gave Layla an elbow hint, your handsome, one-legged prince is coming. Then... Layla tore her elbow off. He'd be offended if someone else had said that about Tariq. But she knew Hamina wasn't mean. She laughed at what she did - and her mockery spared no one, least of all herself. You don't have to talk about people like that! Said. What kind of people are these? People who have been wounded because of war, Jiti said earnestly, forgetting to throw up their Hassins. I think Mullah Giti has a crush on Tariq here. I knew it! Ha! But he's already talked about it, don't you know? Isn't that it, Layla? I'm not into them. For everyone! They broke up with Layla and, still arguing in this way, turned to their street. Layla walked alone three blocks away. When she was on the street, she noticed that the blue Benz was still parked there, in front of Rasheed and Mariam's House. The elderly man in the brown suit now stands by the hood, leaning on a trust, looking at the house. Then the voice behind Layla said, Hey. Yellow hair. Look here. Layla turned around and was greeted by the barrel of a gun. 17. The gun was red, the fuse bright green. Behind the gun, Kadim's face soared. Kadim was 11, like Tariq. He was fat, tall and had a heavy tede. His father was a butcher in Deh-Mazang and from time to time, Khadim was known for bits of calf intestines at passers-by. Sometimes, if Tariq wasn't around, Kadim overshadowed Layla in the schoolyard at recess, muttering, playing some noises. He once patted her on the shoulder and said: I want to marry you. Now he waved the gun. Don't worry, he said. That's not going to show up. Not your hair. Don't do it! I'm warning you. What are you going to do? He said. Chopping your on me? Tariq Jan. Oh, aren't you going to go home and save me from the bad! Layla started slipping, but Khadim has already pulled the trigger. One after the other, the thin jets of warm water hit Layla's hair, and then her palm, when she lifted it to protect her face. Now the other boys came out of their hiding place, laughing, they were making fun of each other. An offended Layla had heard in the street, which she had heard. She didn't quite understand - she couldn't imagine the logistics of it - but the words packed fierce force, and she released them now. Your mother's eating a dick! At least he's not crazy like yours, Kadim replied without stalled. At least my dad's not pussies! And by the way, why don't you smell your hands? The other guys took the song. Smell your hands! Smell your hands! Layla knew, but even before she did, what did he mean that she didn't show her hair. The boys jumped even harder. Layla turned around and, vinnie, ran home. * SHE PAINTS WATER FROM Cham, and in the bathroom, filled a washbasis, ripped off her clothes. She soaps her hair, frantically digs her fingers into her scalp, whines with disgust. She rinses with a bowl and soaps her hair again. A couple of times, she thought she might have a little more. She kept shaking me and shaking as she rubbed the soap on her face and neck until they turned red. This wouldn't have happened if Tariq was with her, she thought, while she was putting on a clean shirt and fresh pants. Kadim wouldn't dare. Of course, it wouldn't have happened if Mamie had appeared as she was supposed to. Sometimes Layla wondered why Mamie even bothered to have her. People, she believed now, should not be allowed to have new children if they had already given their love to their old ones. It wasn't fair. Anger has drained her. Layla went to her room, passed out on her bed. When the worst had passed, she walked through the hallway to Mammy's door and knocked. When she was younger, Layla sang to sit for hours at that door. She patted him and whispered Mammy's name, like magic singing, to make you break the spell: Mammy, Mammy, Mammy, Mammy, Mammy... But Mammy never opened the door. She hasn't opened it now. Layla turned the button and walked in. Sometimes CHEATS HAD good days. He jumped out of bed with a bright eye and had fun. The lower lip stretches upwards into a smile. She was taking a shower. She wore fresh clothes and wore mascara. She let Layla comb her hair, which Layla loved to do, and hung earrings through her ears. They went shopping together to Mandai. Layla made her play snakes and ladders, and they ate a slash of blocks of dark chocolate, one of the few things they shared a common taste for. The favorite part of Mamie's good days was when Babi came home, when she and Mammy looked off the board and enjoyed it with brown teeth. A gust of contentment blew into the room at the time, and Layla captured a momentous glimpse of tenderness, the romance that had once bound her parents back when this house was crowded and noisy and cheerful. Mammy is sometimes baked in her good days and invited female neighbors to tea and sweets. Layla had to lick the plates clean, as Mammy set the table with cups and napkins and good plates. Later, Leila will take her place at the living room table and try to break through the conversation as the women chat with botanies and drink tea and compliment Mammite on her baking. Although she never had much to say, Layla loved to sit and listen because at these gatherings she was treated rarely with pleasure: she could hear cheats talking softly about Babi. What a first-class teacher he was, Mammy said. His disciples loved him. And not just because he didn't beat them with the rulers, and so did the other teachers. They respected him because he respected them. He was a great 10. Mammy liked to tell how she proposed to him. I was sixteen, he was nineteen. Our families lived in a pangee. I had a crush on him, you whispers! I used to climb the wall between our houses, and we used to play in his father's house. Hakim was always afraid that we would get caught and that my father would hit him. Your father would slap me, he always said. He was so cautious, so serious, even then. What's it going to be? Are you going to ask me for my hand or are you going to make me come to you? I just said it like that. You should have seen his face! Page 10 Mammy would hit her together while the women, and Layla, laughed. Listening to cheats tell these stories, Leila knew there was a time when Mamie always talked about Babi that way. It's a time when her parents don't sleep in separate rooms. Layla wished she hadn't missed those times. Inevitably, Mamie's proposal led to matchmaking schemes. When Afghanistan was free from the Soviets and the boys returned home, they needed brides, and so, one by one, the women paraded with the girls neighborhood, which may or may not be suitable for Ahmed and Noor. Leila always felt excluded when the conversation turned to her brothers, as if the women were discussing a beloved movie she wasn't the only one who hadn't seen. It was two years old when Ahmed and Noor left Kabul for Panjir in the north to join commander Ahmad Shah Masood's forces and fight jihad. Layla barely remembered anything about them. A shining pendant of Allah around Ahmad's neck. A piece of black hair on one of Noor's ears. And that's it. What about Azita? The daughter of the rug? Mammy said he's sning his cheek with ridicule. She's got a thicker moustache than Hakim! There's an anahies. We heard he's the highest in his class in Zargoona. Did you see that girl's teeth? - Tombstones. He's hiding a cemetery behind those lips. How about the Wahidi sisters? Those two dwarves? No, no, no. - No, no, no. Not for my sons. Not for my sultans. They deserve better. As she chattered, Layla allowed her mind to drift, and as always, she found Tariq. * MAMMY pulled out yellowish curtains. In the darkness, the room had a layered smell for this: sleep, washable underwear, sweat, dirty socks, perfume, last night remained bark. Layla waited to adjust before crossing the room. Even her legs were tangled with clothes that braided the floor. Layla pulled the curtains. At the foot of the bed there was an old metal folding chair. Layla sat on her and watched the unmemored blanket mound that was her mother. The walls of Mammy's room were covered with pictures of Ahmad and Noor. Everywhere Layla looked, two strangers smiled. Here was Noor fitting a tricycle. There he is, Ahmed, who prays, posing next to a chunky grandmother, and he had built when he was twelve. And there, her brothers, sitting in the back under the old pear in the yard. Under Mammy's bed, Leila could see ahmad's shoe box. From time to time, Mammi shows her the old, crumpled newspaper clippings in it, and pamphlets that Ahmed has managed to collect from insurgent groups and resistance organizations based in Pakistan. One photo, Leila recalled, showed a man in a long white coat handing a lollipop to a legless little boy. The caption under the photo reads: Children are the intended victims of the Soviet mine campaign. The article says that Russians also like to hide explosives in brightly colored toys. If the child picked it up, the toy exploded, tore off his fingers or a whole hand. Then the father could not join the jihad; he should stay at home and take care of his child. In another article in Ahmed's box, a young mujahid says the Russians dropped gas on his village, which burned people's skin and blinded them. He said he saw his mother and sister spouting blood. - He's cheating. The mound shuffled a little. It was emitting a wall. Get up, Mammy. It's 3:00. Another stone. The hand appeared like a periscope submarine, and fell. This time, the mound moved better. Then the rustling of blankets, as layers of them shifted on top of each other. Slowly, in stages, Mammy materialized: first the hair, then the white, grimaces, eyes pressed against the light, the hand groping for the headboard, the leaves slide down until it is pulled, dirting. Mammy made an effort to look up, flinch against the light and her head bent over her chest. How was school? - she's a sucker. So it's going to start. Mandatory questions, perfunsory answers. They're both faking it. Not enthusiastic partners, both of them, in this tired old dance. The school was fine, Layla said. Did you learn anything? Usual. Is he eating? Yes, it is. All right, all right. Mammy raised his head back to the window. She kicked and her eyelids flickered. The right side of her face was red, and the hair on this side flattened. I have a headache. Can I get you some aspirin? Mammy massages his temples. Maybe later. Is your father home? There's only three of them. A. Right. You already said that. He's a yawn. I just had a dream, she said, her voice only slightly louder than the noisy nightgown on the sheets. Right now, before you go in. But now I can't remember it. Is that what's happening to you? It happens to everybody, Mammy. The weirdest thing. I have to tell you, while you were dreaming, a boy was shot by a gun with water on my hair. Shoot what? What was that? I'm sorry, but I can't keep warm. Piss. Urine. I.e... That's terrible. God. I am sorry. Poor thing. I'il talk to him in the morning. Or maybe with her mother. yes, that'd be better, I think. I didn't tell you who he was. 100000000000 O. Who was it? It doesn't matter. You're angry. You should have taken me. I was, you're up to your mother. Layla couldn't say if that was a question. Mammy started shaving her hair. It was one of the great mysteries of Leila's life that cheating didn't make her bald like an egg. Well... What's your name, your friend Tariq? yes, what's going to happen to him? He's been gone a week. Oh, that's 1,000 Mammy sighed through his nose. Did you take a shower? Yes, yes. So you're clean. Mammy turned a tired look at the window. You're clean and everything's fine. Layla stood up. Now I have homework. Of course you do. Close the curtains before you go, my love, Mamie said, her voice fading. She's already sinking under the sheets. As Layla reached the curtains, she saw a car passing by the street, surrounded by a cloud of dust. Son Bentz with Herat's number has finally left. She followed it with her eyes until it evaporated around the bend, and the back window shone in the sun. I won't forget tomorrow, Mammy said behind her. Promise. You said that yesterday. You don't know, Layla. You know what? Layla was swirling to confront her mother. What don't I know? Mamie's hand was pinned to her chest, patted there. Here. What's in here? That's when he fell. You just don't know. 18. It's been a week, but there's still no sign of Tariq. Then another week came and went. To fill the time, Layla fixed the screen door that Babi hadn't been around yet. She smashed Babi's books, sprinkled them in dust and sprinkling them alphabetically. She went to Chicken with Hasina, Giti and Giti's mother, Nilla, who was once a seamstress and once Mama's tailoring partner. This week, Layla believed that of all the difficulties, one had to face no one more punitive than the simple wait. It's been another week. Layla found herself in a web of terrible thoughts. He'd never come back. His parents had moved forever; The trip to Ghazni was caught. An adult scheme to save the two of them upset goodbye. A mine had caught him again. When he was 5, his parents took him south to Gazni. That was shortly after Leila's third birthday. He was lucky to lose only a leg; They're lucky he survived. Her head rang and she called with those thoughts. One night, Layla saw a little flashing light from the street. Sound, something between grieving and extinguishing, twisted your lips. She quickly catches her flashlight out of bed, but it's not going to work. Layla hit her with her palm, cursing the exhausted batteries. But it didn't matter. He's back. Layla sat on the edge of her bed, stunned with relief, and watched that beautiful, yellow eye wink and turn off. * ON IT outside Tariq's house the next day, Leila saw Khadim and a group of his friends across the street. Kadim was squating, painting something in the dirt with a stick. When he saw her, he dropped the stick and purred his fingers. He said something and he had a bullet. Layla dropped her head and rushed. What did you do? She exclaimed when Tariq opened the door. Then she remembered that his uncle was a barber. Tariq walked his hand over his newly shaved scalp and smiled, showing off white, slightly uneven teeth. Do you like it? You look like you're in the army. Do you want to feel? He put his head down. The little bristles scratched Leila's palm nicely. Tariq wasn't like the other boys whose cone-shaped hair and ugly lumps. Tariq's head was completely curved and without a lump. When he looked up, Layla saw his cheeks and eyebrows burn. What took you so long? I don't know, she said. My uncle was sick. Come. Get in there. He took her down the hall to the family room. Layla loved everything in this house. The rug in the family room, the sofa quilt, Tariq's usual tremor: his mother's fabric bolts, the sewing needles embedded in reels, the old magazines, the box in the corner waiting to be cracked. Who is it? His mother called from the kitchen. Layla, he replied. He pulled a chair on her. The rooms overlook the garden and offer garden views. On the ledge were empty jars, in which Tariq's mother marinated eggplant and made from carrot marmalade. You mean our daughter-in-law, our daughter-in-law, announced his father, entering the room. He was a carpenter, a weak, white-haired man in the early 1960s. There were gaps between his front teeth and the crooked eyes of a man who had spent most of his life outdoors. He opened his hands and Layla walked into them, greeted by his pleasant and familiar smell of sawdust. They kissed three times on the cheek. Keep calling her that and she'll stop coming here, Tariq's mother said, walking past them. He carried a tray with a large bowl, a serving spoon and four smaller bowls on it. She put the tray on the table. Don't worry about the old man. She hung Layla's face. Good to see you, my dear. Come on, sit down. I brought some water-soaked fruit with me. The table is bulky and is made of light, unfinished wood - Tariq's father built it, as well as the chairs. It was covered with moss green vinyl tablecloth with small crimson semis and stars on it. Most of the wall of the living room was taken with photos of Tariq of different ages. In some of the earliest, he had two legs. I heard your brother was sick, Leila told Tariq's father, dipping a spoon into his bowl of soaked raisins, pistachios and He lit a cigarette. Yes, but now it's fine, souk is koda, thanks to God. Heart attack. His second, Tariq's mother says, giving her husband a saying. Tariq's father was blowing smoke and winking at Layla. Again, it hit her that Tariq's parents could easily pass for his grandparents. His mother hadn't given birth to him until he was 40. How's your dad, honey? Tariq's mother said she was looking over the bowl. While Layla knew her, Tariq's mother wore a wig. As we got older, it got boring purple. Today, some eyebrows were leaked, and Layla could see the gray hairs on the sideburns. But for Layla, Tariq's mother never looked pathetic in her. What Layla saw was the calm, confident face under the wig, the smart eyes, the pleasant, hasty manners. He's fine, Leila said. He's still in Silo, of course. He's fine. And your mother? Good days. So are the bad guys. Same. Yes, tariq's mother said, coming down with a spoon in the bowl. How difficult it must be, how difficult it is for a mother to be away from her sons. You're staying for lunch? Tariq said. You have to do it, his mother said. I'm making sherva. I don't want to be a mozam. Impressive? Tariq's mother said. We're leaving for a few weeks, and you're politely addressing us? Okay, I'll stay, Leila said, smiling. Then it's decided. The truth was, Layla loved to eat at Tariq's house, as much as she didn't like to eat them in hers. In Tariq there was no eating, no eating alone; they have always been a family. Leila liked the violet plastic drinking glasses, which also used a quarter of a lemon, which always swam in the water pitcher. She liked how they started each meal with a bowl of fresh yogurt, how they pressed the yogurt on everything, even their yogurt, and how they made small, harmless jokes at everyone else's expense. During meals, the conversation always flowed. Although Tariq and his parents are ethnic pascoes, they speak Farsi when Leila is around her in favor, although Leila more or less understands their native pascoe after learning it at school. Babi said there was tension between their people - the Tajiks, who are in the minority, and the people of Tariq, the deserts that were the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. The Tajiks have always felt frivolous, Babi said. The Pustuna kings ruled this country for almost two hundred and fifty years, Leila, and Tajiks for all nine months, back in 1929. And you, Leila, asked, do you feel easy, Grandma? Babi had wiped his glasses with the hem of his shirt. To me, this is nonsense and a lot of dangerous nonsense in this- all this talk about me being Tajik, and you're Pascoe, and he's Hazara, and she's Uzbek. We're all Afghans, and that's all that matters. But when a group manages The others for so long... There's contempt. Rivalry. Has. There always has been. Maybe it is. But Layla never felt it in Tariq's house, where these things never came up. Her time with tariq's family always felt natural to Leila, effortlessly, effortlessly, unconditionally from differences in tribe or language, or from the personal skewers and malice that infect the air in their own home. How about a card game? Tariq said. Yes, go upstairs, his mother said, not endorsing her husband's cloud of smoke. I'm going to go to the sherry. They lay on their stomachs in the middle of Tariq's room and took turns turning to the pangara. Taraq told her about her trip. The peaches he helped his uncle. The snake he captured. This room is where Layla and Tariq did their homework, where they built playing cards and painted funny portraits of each other. If it rained, they leaned on the windowsill, drank warm, sparkling orange Fanta, and watched the swollen rain droplets sweeten the glass. Okay, here's one, Leila said, scrambled. What's going on around the world, but it's still in the corner? Wait a minute. Tariq pushed himself and swung with an artificial left foot. Winkling, lying sideways, leaning on his elbow. Give me the pillow. He put it under his foot. That's better. Layla remembered the first time he showed her his stump. She was 6. With one finger, she had slapped the braided, shiny skin just below her left knee. Her finger had found small hard lumps there, and Tariq told her they were from bones that sometimes grew after amputation. She asked him if his stump was hurting, and he said he was injured at the end of the day when he swelled up and did not fit the prosthesis, as supposedly, a finger in a thimble. And sometimes it rubs. Especially when it's hot. Then I get rashes and blisters, but my mother has creams that help. It's not that bad. Layla cried. Why are you crying? He had his leg tied. You asked him to see him, crybaby! If I'd known you were going to fight, I wouldn't have shown you. Seal, he said. What? Riddle. The answer is print. We have to go to the zoo after lunch. You knew that. You? Absolutely not. You're a fraud. And you're jealous. From what? My male tricks. Your male tricks? Really? Tell me, who always wins chess? I let you win. He laughed. They both knew that wasn't true. And who failed in math? Who are you coming to help with your math homework even though I'm finishing you? I'd have two grades if the math hadn't given birth to me. I guess your geography is boring. How did you know? Now shut up. Are we going to the zoo or not? Layla smiled. We're going home. All right, all right. I missed you. There was a pause. Then Tariq turned to her with a half-joking, half-gloomy look of disgust. What's wrong with you? How many times did she, Hasina and Giti say those same three words to each other, Leila wondered, said she was without hesitation, since only two or three days had not been seen? I missed you, Hasin. I missed you, too. In Tariq's grimace, Leila learned that boys are different from girls in this regard. They didn't make a show of friendship. They didn't feel the need for that kind of talk. Leila imagined it was the same for her brothers. Boys, Leila came to see, treated friendship in the way they treated the sun: its existence indisputable; his brilliance was best enjoyed, not treated directly. I was trying to annoy you, she said. He looked at her sideways. Work. But she thought his grimace had softened. And she thought maybe the sunburns on his cheeks deepened in a flash. LAYLA WOULDN'T TELL HIM. In fact, she decided that telling him it was a very bad idea. Someone's going to get hurt because Tariq couldn't get past him. But when they were later on the street, descending to the bus stop, she again saw Kadim, leaned against the wall. He was surrounded by his friends, thumbs pinned to his straps. He dared to be disrespectful. Page 11 and so she told Tariq. The story spilled out of her mouth before she could stop her. What did he do? She told him again. He pointed to Kadim. He? Is that him? Are you sure? I'm sure. Tariq froze his teeth and something in Pascoe that Leila didn't catch. You wait here, he said, currently farsi. No, Tariq-- He was already crossing the street. Khadim was the first to see it. His smile faded and he pushed himself off the wall. He turned his thumb away from the straps and stood up, taking a self-conscious air of menace. Others followed his gaze. Layla wanted nothing to say. What if they're united? How many of them were there... Eleven? Twelve? What if they hurt him? Then Tariq stopped a few meters from Kadim and his group. There was a moment of reflection, Layla thought, maybe a change of heart, and when she bent down, she thought she was going to pretend that his relationship with his shoe had been broken and she was coming back to her. Then his hands went to work, and she found out. Others also found out when Tariq stood up, standing on one leg. As he began to approach Kadim, then lift him up, his unbranched leg rose high above his shoulder like a sword. The boys were in a hurry. They gave him a clear path to Kadim. Back then, it was all dust and fists, kicks and kicks. Kadim never bothered Leila again. * TONIGHT, since most nights, Leila set the table for only two. Mammy said she wasn't hungry. On the the nights she was, she had the opportunity to take a plate to her room before Babi came home. She usually slept or lay in bed before Leila and Babi sat down to eat. Babi came out of the bathroom with white flour as she walked home clean and combed back. What are we going to have, Layla? Soup with sch'gla residue. It sounds good, he said, folding the towel with which he dried his hair. So, what are we working on tonight? Add fractions? In fact, convert fractions into mixed numbers. Ah. Right. Every night after dinner, Babi helped Layla with her homework and gave her some of her own. This was just to keep Layla one step or two ahead of her class, and not because she didn't approve of the work commissioned by the school - propaganda, regardless. In fact, Babi thought that the only thing the Communists did right, or at least it was meant to - ironically, was in the field of education, the vocation from which he was fired. In particular, the education of women. The government has sponsored literacy classes for all women. Nearly two-thirds of the students at Kabul University were women now, Babi said, women who studied law, medicine, engineering. Women have always struggled in this country, Leila, but they are probably freer now, under the Communists, and have more rights than they ever had, Babi said, always lowering their voice, realizing how intolerant mamma is even from a little positive talk about communists. But it's true, Babi said it's time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Layla. Of course, women's freedom, here, he shook his mind, is also one of the reasons people raise their guns in the first place. There, he didn't mean Kabul, which has always been relatively liberal and progressive. Here in Kabul, the women taught at the university, leak schools, held an office in the government. No, Babi was referring to tribal areas, especially in the Pascoe areas to the south or east near the Pakistani border, where women were rarely seen in the street and only then in the burqa and accompanied by men. He was referring to those regions where men living under ancient tribal laws had rebelled against the Communists and their decrees to release women to abolish forced marriage, to raise the minimum marriage age to sixteen for girls. There, men see it as an affront to their centuries-old tradition, Babi said, to be told by the government and a godless man that their daughters should leave home, attend school and work alongside men. God forbid this is going to happen! Babi liked to say sarcastically. Then he sighed and said, Leila, my love, the only enemy an Afghan can't defeat is himself. Babi sat at the table, dipping the bread in his bowl with schleps. Leila decided that she would he did what Tariq did to Kadim, for the meal, before they began to sing. But she didn't get the chance. Because, right then, there was a knock on the door, and on the other side of the door, a stranger with news. I need to talk to your parents, he said when Leila opened the door. He was a stocky man with a sharp, rough face. He was wearing a coat with a potato-colored coat and brown wool on his head. Can I tell them who's here? Then Babi's hand was on Leila's shoulder, and he gently pulled her out of the door. Why don't you go upstairs, Layla. Go. As she approached the steps, Layla heard a visitor tell Babi there was news from Panjshir. And Mammy was in the room. She had one hand fastened over her mouth and her eyes had skipped from Babi to the man in the pacola. Layla was peeking from the top of the stairs. She watched the stranger sit down with her parents. He leaned over to them. You said a few words. Then Babi's face was white, and it turned whiter, and he looked at his hands, and Mamie screamed, screamed and tore her hair. * THE NEXT MORNING, the day of the fatisha, a flock of neighborhood women descended on the house and took care of the preparation for the khat dinner, which will take place after the funeral. Mammy sat on the couch all morning, her fingers working a handkerchief, her face bulging. She was looking after a pair of snorting women who took turns shaking Mamie's hand as if she were the rarest and most fragile doll in the world. Mammy didn't seem aware of his presence. Layla knelt in front of her mother and took her hands. - He's cheating. Mammy's eyes descended. She blinked. We'il take care of her, Leila Yang, said one of the women with air of composure. Layla has been to a funeral before, where she has seen such women, women who enjoyed everything that was connected to death, official comforters who do not allow anyone to violate their duties. It's all under control. Go, girl, and do something else. Let your mother be. Layla felt useless. She bounces from one room to another. She walked around the kitchen for a while. Hasina and her mother came. When Giti saw Layla, she hurried, threw her bones and gave Layla a very long and surprisingly strong hug. When she stepped back, the tears were in her eyes. Layla thanked her. The three girls sat outside in the courtyard while one of the women tasked them with washing cups and stacking dishes on the table. Grandmothers also continued to enter and leave the house aimlessly, watching, it seems that something to do. Keep him away from me. That was the only time Mamie said anything all morning. Grannies sitting alone on a folding chair in the hallway, looking for desolate and small. Then one of the women told him he was on the road. He apologized and disappeared into his office. * ON THE AFTERNOON, the men went to a hall in Karte-Sich, which Babi had hired for the Fatih. The women came home. Layla took her place to Mammi, next to the entrance to the living room where the deceased's family was supposed to sit. Mourners removed their shoes at the door, nodded to acquaintances as they crossed the room, and sat on folding chairs stacked on the walls. Leila saw Ajma, the elderly midwife who delivered her. She also saw Tariq's mother wearing a black scarf over the wig. She nodded and a slow, sad, unbuttoned smile. From the tape recorder, the voice of a man who chanted verses from the Koran. Between them, the women sighed and moved and smelled. There was a muted cough, a noise and, periodically, someone let out a theatrical, grief-soaked wailing. Rashid's wife, Mariam, is here. He was wearing a black hijab. She sat against the wall opposite Layla. Next to Layla, Mammy kept playing rock. Layla got into Mamie's lap and wrapped her around her two, but Mamie didn't notice. You want some water, Mammy? Layla said in her ear. Are you thirsty? But Mammy didn't say anything. She did nothing but swing and stare at the carpet with a distant, breathless gaze. Now and then, sitting next to Mammy, seeing the sagging, unlit around, the magnitude of the calamity that had struck her family would have registered with Layla. The possibilities have been turned down. Hopes are dashed. But the feeling didn't last. It was hard to feel, I really feel the loss of Mammy. It is difficult to call grief, to mourn the death of those whom Leila never thought of alive. Ahmad and Noor have always been like ice to her. Like heroes in a fable. Kings in history. Tariq was the one who was real, flesh and blood. Tariq, who taught her couscous in Pascoe, who loved salted clover leaves, frowned and made a humble, moaning sound when she chewed, who had a bright pink birthmark just below her left collarbone shaped like an inverted mandolin. So she sat next to Mammy and sincerely grieved Ahmed and Noor, but in Leila's heart her real brother was alive and well. 20. They began uninceded, who pursued Mom for the rest of their days. Chest pain and headaches, joint pain and night sweats, paralyzing pain in your ears, lumps that no one else can feel. Babi took her to a doctor who took blood and urine, shot X-rays of Mamie's body, but found no physical illness. Mammy lies in bed most days. She was wearing black. When Mammy woke up, Layla woke up. she's slinging through the house. She always found herself in Layla's room, as if sooner or later she would run into the boys if she just kept going to the room where they once slept and farted and struggled with pillows. But she stumbled upon their absence. And Layla. Which, Leila believed, happened to Mamie. The only task Mammy never neglected was his five prayers every day. She finished each smear with her head hanging, hung with her hands held before her face, palms up, muttering a prayer for God to bring victory to the Mujahideen. Layla had to be respided more and more by the duties. If she was not in the care of the house, she was willing to find clothes, shoes, open rice bags, boxes of beans and dirty dishes scattered everywhere. Layla washed Mamie's dresses and changed her sheets. She moved her out of bed for bathing and eating. She's the one who ironed Babi's shirts and folded his pants. More and more, she was the cook. Sometimes, after she's done with her hosts, Leila crawls into bed next to Mammy. She wrapped her arms around her, stuck her fingers with her mother's, buried her face in her hair. Mammy would move, murgging something. Inevitably, she was starting to talk about the boys. One day, while they were lying like this, Mammy said, Ahmad would have been a leader. There was charisma about it. People have listened to him with respect, Leila. It was something to see. And, Father, isn't it? Oh, my Noor. He always did sketches of buildings and bridges. He was going to be an architect, you know. He was going to transform Kabul with his projects. They're both Charlid, my boys, both martyrs. Layla was lying there listening that Mamie would notice that she, Lila, had not become a shahid, that she was alive, here in bed with her, that she had hopes and a future. But Layla knew her future didn't match her brothers' past. They're going to take her to death. Mammy was the curator of the museum of their lives, and she, Leila, just a visitor. A vessel for their myths. The parchment that Mammy wanted to slaughter his legends. The envoy, who came with the news, said that when they brought the boys back to the camp, Ahmad Shah Masood personally oversaw the funeral. He said a prayer for them at the grave. These are the brave young men that your brothers were, Leila, that Commander Matsu himself, the Lion of Panjir, God bless him, will oversee their funeral. Leila moved and put her head on Mamie's chest. For a few days, Mammy said in a hoarse voice, I listen to the clock ticking in the hallway. Then I think of all the ticks, all the minutes, all the hours, days, weeks and months and years waiting for me. All without them. And I can't breathe like someone's on my heart, Leila. I'm so weak. So weak that I want to collapse somewhere. I wish I could do something, Layla said, which meant that. But she appeared as bold, perfunstory, like the comfort of a stranger. You're a good daughter, Mammy said after a deep sigh. And I wasn't much of a mother to you. Don't say that. I know it, and I'm sorry about it, my love. Mammy, Mammy, Mom, Mom 100000000 Leila sat down and looked at Mammy. There were gray strands in Mamie's hair. And it scares Layla how much weight Mammy, who has always been plump, has lost. Her cheeks had a swirling look. The blouse she was wearing was sagging over her shoulders and there was a huge gap between her neck and collar. More than once, Layla saw the marriage band slide off Mamie's finger. I wanted to ask you something. What is this? You wouldn't... Layla started. You were talking about it to Hasina. At Hasina's suggestion, the two emptied the bottle of aspirin in the ditch, hid the kitchen knives and sharp skewers under the carpet under the sofa. Hasina found a rope in the yard. When Babi couldn't find her razor, Layla told him about her fears. He fell to the edge of the couch, hands between his knees. Layla was waiting for some comfort from him. But she only got a misguided, hollow, hollow-eyed look. You wouldn't... I was thinking about it the night we got the news, Mamie said. I'm not going to lie to you, and I've been thinking about it ever since. But no. Don't worry, Layla. I want to see my sons' dream come true. I want to see the day the Russians come home disgraced, the day the Mujahideen come to Kabul with victory. I want to be there when it happens when Afghanistan is free, so the boys see it too. They'il see it through my eyes. Mammy soon fell asleep, leaving Layla with a duel of emotions: assured that Mammy intended to live, stung that she was not the cause. She would never leave her mark on Mammi's heart like her brothers, because Mamie's heart was like a pale beach, where Leila's footsteps would always reced beneath the waves of sadness that swelled, swelled, and crashed. 21. The driver stopped by his taxi to pass through another long convoy of Soviet SUVs and armored vehicles. Tariq leaned into the front seat, over the driver, and shouted: Pacquiao! Teatov Tariq got excited, thundered and waved cheerfully. Beautiful weapons! he cried. The staff was very friendly and helpful. Great army! Too bad you're losing to a bunch of peasants shooting a slingshot! The convoy has passed. The driver merged back into the road. How much more? Layla asked. An hour at most, the driver said. Get on with more convoys or checkpoints. They were on their way on a day trip, Leila, Babi and Tariq. Hasina also wanted to come, begging her father, but he allow it. The trip was Babi's idea. Although he could hardly afford it, he had hired a driver for the day. He would reveal nothing to Leila about their destination, other than to say that he was contributing to her education with him. They've been on the road since 5:00 a.m. Through Leila's window, the landscape shifts from snowy peaks in deserts to canyons and burned erupting rocks. Along the way, they passed muddy houses with thatched roofs and fields dotted with point wheat bundles. Washed in the dusty fields, here and there, Leila recognizes the black tents of Kuuchi nomads. And, often, the corpses of burned Soviet tanks and crashed helicopters. That, she thought, was Ahmed and Noor in Afghanistan. This, in the countryside, was where the war was fought, after all. Not in Kabul. Kabul was at peace. Back in Kabul, if not for random shots fired, if not for Soviet soldiers smoking on sidewalks and Soviet SUVs always pounding the streets, war may have been a rumor. It was too late after two more checkpoints passed when they entered the valley. Babi made Leila lean into the seat and pointed to a series of ancient walls of sun-dried in the distance. This is called Shar-en-Zoac. The red city. It used to be a fortress. It was built about nine hundred years ago to protect the valley from the invaders. Genghis Khan's grandson attacked him in the thirteenth century, but he was killed. Chings Khan was the one who destroyed him. And this, my young friends, is the story of our country, one invader after another, said the driver, as ash from cigarettes came out of the window. Macedonians. The Saans. Arabs. Mongols. Now the Russians. But we're like those walls up there. They're stuck, and nothing good, but it's still standing. Isn't that the truth, bad? It really is, Babi said. Half an hour later, the driver stopped. Come on, you two, Babi said. Go out and see. They got out of the cab. Babi pointed out. There they are. See. Tariq's in trouble. So is Layla. And then he knew he could live to be a one00 and would never see anything magnificent again. The two Buddhas were huge, rising much higher than she imagined from all the pictures she saw of them. They stared at the rocks bleached by the sun and stared at them, as they had almost two thousand years before, Leila imagined that in the caravans crossing the valley along the Silk Road. On both sides, along the overhanging niche, the rock was enchanted with countless caves. I feel so small, Tariq said. Page 12 Do you want to climb? Babi said. Up the statues? Layla asked. We can do this? Babi smiled and held his hand. Come on, come on. * The climb was DIFFICULT FOR Tariq, who was hold both Leila and Babi as they frame rolled up, narrow, dimly lit stairs. They saw shady caves along the way, and tunnels overflowing the rock in every direction. Be careful where you step, Babi said. His voice is a strong echo. The earth is treacherous. In some parts, the staircase is open to the Buddha's cavity. Don't look down, kids. Keep looking straight ahead. As they climbed, Babi told them that Bamiyan was once a thriving Buddhist center until he repented under Islamic Arab rule in the ninth century. The sandstone cliffs were home to Buddhist monks who carved caves into them to use as living quarters and as a refuge for exhausted pilgrims. The monks, Babi said, painted beautiful murals on the walls and roofs of their caves. At one point, he said, there were five thousand monks in these caves. Tariq was badly exhaled when they reached the top. Grandma's got a lot of work to do, too. But his eyes shone with excitement. We're standing on top of his head, he said, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. There's a niche where we can look around. They harnessed to a bold overhanging and standing next to each other, with Babi in the middle looking down at the valley. Look what Layla said. Babi smiled. The Bamiyan Valley below has been carpeted by lush agricultural fields. Babi said they were green winter wheat and alfalfa, potatoes. The fields were bordered by topolians and crossed with streams and irrigation ditches, on the shores of which small female figures are sworn and washed clothes. Babi pointed to rice paddies and echemi fields, draping on the slopes. It was autumn and Leila could make people in bright tunics on the roofs of muddy brick dwellings that put the harvest to dry. The main road passing through the city was also strained with the topol lining. On both sides of the street there were small shops, kettles and street barbers. Beyond the village, across the river and streams, Leila saw the mean, bare and dusty browns, and, beyond everything else in Afghanistan, the snow Hindu kush. The sky above it all was flawless, impeccably blue. It's so quiet, Layla breathes. She could see little sheep and horses, but she couldn't hear them purring and whistling. I always remember being up here, Babi said. Silence. Tranquility. I wanted you to experience it. But I also wanted you to see the legacy of your country, the children, to learn about its rich past. See, some things I can teach you. Some learn from books. But there are things you just need to see and feel. Look, Tariq said. They watched a hawk as it glided in circles over the village. Did you bring Mammy here? Layla asked. Oh, many times. Before the boys were born. After that. Your mother was an adventurer at the time. Alive. She was the liveliest, happiest person I've ever met. He smiled at the memory. She laughed. I swear that's why I married her, Leila, for that laugh. That's what's been draining you. You didn't face him. A wave of love overpowered Layla. From then on, she always remembered grandmothers like this: remembering Mammy, with his elbows on the rock, his hands clutching his chin, his hair untie by the wind, eyes crinkled by the sun. I'll look at some of the caves, Tariq said. Be careful, Babi said. Will, Kakna Zhang, Tariq's voice echoed again. Layla watched a trio of men far below, talking near a cow tied to a fence. Around them, the trees began to turn, ochre and orange, red red. I miss the boys, too, you know, Babi said. His eyes were curved. His chin is shaking. Maybe we don't... With your mother, and her joy and sadness are extreme. She can't hide either. She never could. I guess I'm different. I'm inclined to... But it crushed me too, the boys are dying. I miss them, too. Not a day goes by that... It's very difficult, Layla. It's very difficult. He squeezed the inner corners of his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. When he tried to speak, his voice broke. He pulled his lips on his teeth and waited. But I'm glad I got you. Thank God for you every day. Every day. Sometimes when your mother has one of her really dark days, I feel like you're all I have, Layla. Layla approached him and rested his cheek to his chest. He looked slightly striking - unlike Mamie, he rarely expressed his affection physically. He placed a gentle kiss on the top of her head and hugged her awkwardly. They stood for so long, looking down at the Bamiyan Valley. As much as I love this land, some days I'm thinking of leaving it, Babi said. Where can I take you? Anywhere, it's easy to forget. Pakistan comes first. In a year, maybe two. Wait for our documents to be processed. And then? And then it's a big world. Maybe America. Somewhere near the sea. Like California. Babi said the Americans were generous people. They will help them with money and food for a while until they can get back on their feet. I was going to get a job, and in a few years, when we were saved enough, we'd open a little Afghan restaurant. Nothing is fantastic, just a modest place, a few tables, rugs. Maybe I'il hang some pictures of Kabul. We're going to give the Americans a taste of Afghan food. And with your mother's cooking, they're line up in the street. And you, you're going to go to school, of course. You know how I think about it. That's going to be our top priority, to get you a good education, then college. But in your spare time, if you want, you can help, take orders, that kind of thing. Babi said they'd organize restaurant parties, engagement ceremonies, New Year's eve gatherings. This will become a gathering place for other Afghans who, like them, have fled the war. And late at night, after everyone left and the place was cleaned, they sat for tea at empty tables, the three of them, tired but grateful for their happiness. When Babi finished the conversation, he became silent. They both did. They knew Mamie wasn't going anywhere. Leaving was unthinkable while Ahmed and Noor were still alive. Now that they were chess, they packed up and engaged in even greater resentment, betrayal, denial of the sacrifice her sons made. How can you think of that? Doesn't their death mean anything to you, cousin? The only consolation I found was that I had walked the same land that had soaked their blood. Not. Never. Grandma would never have left without her, Leila knew, even though Mammy was no longer his wife than Layla's mother. For Mammy, he'll give up that staff the way he dropped flour stains from his coat when he got home from work. And so they will stay. They'il stay until the end of the war. And they'il stay for anything after the war. Leila recalled Mamie telling Babi that she had married a man who had no convictions. Mammy didn't understand. She didn't understand that if she looked in the mirror, she would find an unwavering belief about his life looking at her. * LATER, after they ate boiled eggs and potatoes with bread, Taraq sat under a tree on the shore of a swirling stream. He slept with his coat neatly folded into a pillow, his hands crossed on his chest. The driver went to the village to buy almonds. Babi sat at the foot of a thick acacidal tree, read an owl. Leila knew the book; He read it to her once. He told the story of an old fisherman named Santiago who catches a huge fish. But when he sails to safety, there is nothing left of his fish reward; sharks are torn to pieces. Layla sat on the edge of the stream, dipping her feet in the cool water. Above the head, mosquitoes laughed, and the seeds of cotton trees danced. A dragonfly whined nearby. Leila watched his wings shine from the sun as he unfolded from one blade of grass to another. They lit purple, then green, orange. Over the course, a group of local Hazara boys escaped from dried cows from the ground and clutched them in envelopes attached to their backs. Somewhere, the donkey was snly. The generator's bursting. Layla was thinking about Babi's little dream again. Somewhere near the sea. There was something she hadn't told Babi up there on buddha: that in an important way, she was happy He can't go. She'il miss Giti and her defamation, and Hasina too, with her vicious laugh and reckless clown. But most of all, Layla remembered very well the inevitable tree days without Tariq when he had gone to Gazni. She remembered very well how time dragged on without him, how he shuffled about his feelings of being unconscious. How can he cope with his constant absence? Maybe it was pointless to want to be close to a man in a country where bullets tore his brothers apart. But Layla only had to take a picture of Tariq going to Kadim with her leg, and then nothing in the world seemed more sensible to her. * SIX MONTHS LATER, in April 1988, Babi came home with big news. They signed a contract! he said. Geneva. It's official! They're leaving. After nine months in Afghanistan, there will be no more advisers! Mammy was sitting in bed. It collapsed. But the communist regime remains, she said. Najibullah was the Soviet puppeteer president. He's not going anywhere. No, the war will continue. This isn't over. Najibullah will not continue, Babi said. They're leaving, Mammy! They're actually leaving! You two celebrate if you want. But I will not rest until the Mujahideen hold a victory parade here in Kabul. And with that, she sat down and pulled the blanket. 22. JANUARY 1989 A cold, cloudy day in January 1989, three months before Layla turned 11, she, her parents and Hasina went to watch one of the last Soviet convoys leave the city. Spectators had gathered on both sides of the road outside the Military Club near Wazir Akbar Khan. They stood in muddy snow and watched the line of tanks, armored trucks and SUVs as light snow flew through the glare of passing headlights. There was a shambles and shakers. Afghans keep people off the streets. From time to time, they had to fire a warning shot. Mammy erected a picture of Ahmed and Uri high above his head. He was one of them sitting back and forth under the pear. There were others like her, women with pictures of their shaft husbands, sons, brothers, holding high. Someone patted Layla and Hasina on the shoulder. It was Tariq. Where'd you get that thing? Hasina exclaimed. I thought I'd come dressed for the occasion. Tariq said. He was wearing a huge Russian leather hat full of earbuds he had taken off. What do I look like? Ridiculous, Layla laughed. That's the idea. Your parents came with you dressed like that? They're home, actually, he said. The previous fall, Tariq's uncle in Ghazni died of a heart attack, and a few weeks later Tariq's father suffered a heart attack, leaving him in a frail and tired, anxiety-prone and bout of depression, which Weeks. Leila was happy to see Tariq like her old self again. Weeks after his father's illness, Layla watched him hang around, heavy and curled up. The three of them stole them while Mammy and Babi stood to watch the Soviets. From street vendors, Tariq bought them a plate of boiled beans, rounded with thick parsley. They ate under the awning of a closed carpet shop, and then Hazina went to find her family. On a bus ride home, Tariq and Layla sat behind their parents. Mammy was by the window, staring, clutching the picture in his chest. Besides her, Babi was hopelessly listening to a man who claimed the Russians might leave, but would send weapons to Najibullah in Kabul. He's their puppet. They will continue the war to pass through Him, you can bet on it. One of the next orderly spoke to him about his agreement. Mom muttered to herself, long-tailed prayers that rolled and rolled until she was breathless, and had to find the last few words in a small, high-squeaky squeak. * THEY WENT to The Cinema Park later, Leila and Tariq, and had to settle for a Soviet film, which was called, to an inadvertently comic effect, in Farsi. There was a merchant ship and a first aide to the captain's daughter. Her name was Aliona. Then came a ferocious storm, lightning, rain, the storm ingesting the ship. One of the tireless people was shouting something. An absurdly calm Afghan voice translated: My dear, will you hand me the rope? Tariq burst into vows. And soon they were both in the grip of a hopeless attack of laugh. Just as one was getting tired, the other was snorting and they were spinning in another round. A man sitting two rows up turned around and turned them over. There was a wedding scene to the end. The captain had yelled and let Aliona marry the first one. The newlyweds smiled at each other. Everybody drank vodka. I'm never getting married, Tariq whispered. Me too, Layla said, but not before a moment of nervousness. She was worried that her voice had betrayed her disappointment with what he said. Her heart caressed, she added, more convincingly this time Never. Weddings are stupid. All that fuss. All the money spent. For what? For clothes you'il never wear again. Ha! If I ever get married, Tariq said, they'll have to make room for three at the wedding venue. Me, the bride, and the guy who's got the gun in my head. The man in the front row gave them another kind of exhortation. On screen, Aliona and her new husband locked lips. Watching the kiss, Leila felt strangely observable at the same time. She very quickly realized about the scrubbing of her heart, the bloodsuckers in her ears, the shape of Tariq next to her, tightening, darkening to darken. He was kissing. It seemed extremely urgent to Layla, suddenly, that she did not rebel or make a noise. She felt Tariq watch the kiss with one eye and the other as she watched it. Did she listen to the air flowing from her nose and out, she wondered, waiting for a subtle deception revealing an irregularity that would betray her thoughts? And what's it like kissing him, feeling the fuzzy hair over his lips tickling his own lips? That's when Tariq moved to his seat. In a tense voice, he said, Did you know that if you get stuck in Siberia, it's a green pendant before it hits the ground? They both laughed, but briefly, nervously, this time. And when the movie was over and they went outside, Layla calmed down to see that the sky had darkened, that she would not have to meet Tariq's eyes in the bright daylight. 23. APRIL 1992 Three years passed. At the time, Tariq's father had a series of strokes. They left him with a clumsy left hand and a slightly pierced speech. When he got excited, which often happened, they blurred. Tariq got excited again and was given a new leg by the Red Cross, although he had to wait six months for it. As Hasina feared, her family took her to Lahore, where she was made to marry the cousin who owned the auto shop. The morning she was taken away, Layla and Giti went to Hasina's house to say goodbye. Hasina tells them that her husband, a wife, has already begun the process of moving them to Germany, where his brothers live. Within the year, she thought they would be in Frankfurt. Then they cried in a three-way hug. Giti was incapacitated. The last time Leila saw Hasina, she was helped by her father in the crowded back seat of a taxi. The Soviet Union fell apart with astonishing speed. Every few weeks, Leila, Babi would return home with news from the last republic to declare independence. Lithuania. Estonia. Ukraine. The Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin. Russia was born. In Kabul, Najibullah changed his tactics and tried to portray himself as a devout Muslim. Too little and too late, Babi said. You can't be the head of HAAD one day, and the next day he prays in a mosque with people whose relatives you tortured and killed. Sensing the noose that is tightening around Kabul, Najibullah tried to reach a settlement with Mujahideen, but the mujahideen spilled out. From his bed, Mammy said Bravo to them. She kept her vigil for the Mujahideen and waited for her parade. The jackal for her sons' enemies to fall out. And, in the end, they did. In April 1992, Layla turned 14. Najibullah finally surrendered and was granted asylum at the United Nations, near Daruman Palace, south of the city. Jihad was over. The different communist regimes that from the night Leila was born, they were defeated. Mamie's heroes, Ahmed and Noor's brothers, won. And now, after more than a decade of sacrificing everything, letting their families live in mountains and fighting for Afghan rule, the Mujahideen came to Kabul, flesh, blood and a weary bone. Mammy knew their names. There was Dostum, the ardent Uzbek commander, leader of the Yundish faction, who has a reputation for displacing ancestors. The intense, unconscious Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Hezb-e-Islamic faction, a Pushun who studied engineering and once killed a Maoist student. Rabbani, leader of the mosques-e-Islamic faction, who taught Islam at Kabul University in the days of the monarchy. Sayyaf, pascoe of Pishman with Arab ties, a strict Muslim and leader of the Itehad-i-Islam faction. Abdul Ali Mazari, leader of the Hizb-e-Wadat faction known as Baba Mazari, among his fellow Hazaras, with strong Shiite ties to Iran. Of course, there is the hero of Mammy, Rabbani's ally, the charismatic Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Masood, the lion of Panjir. Mamie had nailed a poster to his room. Massoud's beautiful and thoughtful face, eyebrows and trademark pacol tilt, will become ubiquitous in Kabul. His black eyes will stare back from billboards, walls, showcases, from small flags mounted on the antennae of taxi cabs. Page 13 about Mammy, that was the day she longed. This has led to this all these years of waiting. At last, she could end her vigilance and her sons rest in peace. * THE DAY AFTER Najibullah's handover, Mammy lifted a new woman out of bed. For the first time in five years since Ahmed and Noor became shahid, she wasn't wearing black. Put on a cobalt linen blue dress with white dots. She washed the windows, swept the floor, broadcast the house, took a long bathroom. Her voice was full of glee. The party is in order, she said. She sent Layla to invite neighbors. Tell them we're having lunch tomorrow at a big lunch! In the kitchen, Mammy looked around, hands on his hips, and said with a friendly rebuke: What have you done with my kitchen, Leila? - No, no, no, no, no, no, no, it's not all in a different place. She started moving with pots and pans, theatrically, as if she were showing them again, resting territory, now that she's back. Layla wasn't getting in the way. It was best. Mamma may be as unswayed in her fits of euphoria as she was in her attacks of rage. With restless energy, Mammy set for cooking: offsh soup with beans and dried dill, dill, kofta, steam hot mantu, topped with fresh yogurt and topped with mint. Pluck your eyebrows, Mamie said as he opened a large bag of rice next to the kitchen counter. Little. Mammy pours rice from the sack into a large black saucepan with water. She rolled up her sleeves and started stirring. How's Tariq? His father was sick, Layla said. How old is he now? I don't know. Sixty-sixty. I meant Tariq. A. 16. He's a good boy. Don't you think so? Layla's shrinking. He's not a boy anymore, is he? Sixteen. Almost a man. Don't you think so? What are you implying, Mammy? Nothing, Mammy said, smiled innocently. Nothing. It's just that you... Nothing. I'd rather not say that anyway. I see you want to, said Layla, annoyed by this circumcised, playful accusation. Well, Mammy folded his hands on the edge of the pot. Layla noticed an unnatural, almost rehearsed, quality of the way she said E and that hand folding. He was afraid a speech would come. It was one thing when you were little kids running around. It won't hurt that. It was fascinating. But now. Nwo. I notice you're wearing a bra, Leila. Layla was caught off guard. - And you could have told me, by the way, about the bra. I didn't know. I'm disappointed you didn't tell me. Sensing her advantage, Mammy presses. Anyway, this isn't for me or the bra. It's about you and Tariq. He's a boy, you see, and as such, what does he care about his reputation? But you? The reputation of a girl, especially a beautiful girl like you, is delicate, Leila. Like a bird in your arms. They're flying. What about all your climbing, babby's walk in the orchards? Layla said he was pleased with her speedy recovery. We were cousins. And we got married. Did that boy ask for your hand? He's a friend. Rafik. That's not the case between us, leila said, sounding defensive and not very convincing. He's like a brother to me,' she added, deluding. And she knew that even before the cloud swept over Mammy's face, and that her features darkened, she made a mistake. That's not the case, Mammy said. You're not going to like your brothers' carpenter's boy. There's no one like your brothers. I didn't say that... It's not what I meant. Mammy sighed through his nose and clenched his teeth. Anyway, she resumed, but without the carelessness of a while ago, what I'm trying to say is that if you're not careful, people will talk. Layla opened her mouth to say something. It wasn't that Mamie had no right. Leila knew that the days of innocent, unhindered discontent in the streets with Tariq had passed. For a while, Layla began to feel a new strangeness when the two were in public. The realization that Leila had never felt before. And she wouldn't feel even now, but one basic fact: she was in love with Tariq. and desperately. When he was nearby, she could not help but exhaust himself with the most outrageous thoughts, of his encircled, naked body tangled with hers. Lying at night, she imagined him kissing her belly, wondering about the softness of his lips, the sensation of her hands on her neck, chest, back and even lower. When she thought of him this way, she was overwhelmed by guilt, but also with a peculiar, warm feeling that spread upwards from her belly while her face was twinkling pink. Not. Mamie had rights. Actually, more than she knew. Leila suspected that some of the neighbors, if not most, had already asked for her and Tariq. Leila noticed a smile, was aware of whispers in the neighborhood that the two were a couple. The other day, for example, she and Tariq were walking down the street together when they passed Rashid, shoemaker, with his frightened wife, Mariam, in tow. As he passed them, Rashied played playfully, If it wasn't Laili and Meignon, referring to the crossed lovers of Nessami, the popular 12th-century romantic verse, a Farsi version of Romeo and Juliet, Babi said, though he added that Nessam had written his story about unfortunate lovers four centuries before Shakespeare. Mamie had rights. What ranked Layla was that Mamie didn't earn the right to do so. It would have been one thing if Babi had brought it up. But Mammy? All these years of alienation, to fall for it and not care where Layla went and who she saw and what she thought... It was unfair. Layla felt she was no better than those pots and pans, something that could go overlooked, then claim, at will, ever. But it was an important day for everyone. It would be petty to ruin this. In the spirit of things, Leila let him go. I understand, she said. Good Mammy said. That's decided, then. Where's Hakim? Where, oh, that's my sweet little husband? * It was a dazzling, cloudless day, perfect for a party. The men sat on folding chairs in the courtyard. They drank tea and smoked and spoke with loud jokes about Mujahideen's plan. From Babi Leila, she learned the outlines of this: Afghanistan is now called the Islamic State in Afghanistan. An Islamic jihadist council set up in Peshawar by several mujahideen factions will monitor things for two months, led by Sibgadatullah Mojadi. This will then follow a board of management led by Rabbani, who will take over four months. During those six months, a large council of leaders and elders will be held to form an interim government to hold power for two years, leading to democratic elections. One of the men was frying lamb skewers sizzling on a grill improvisation. Babi and Tariq's father was game of chess in the shadow of the old pear. Their faces were shrunk in concentration. Tariq also sat on board, alternating the game, then listening in the political chat at the next table. The women gathered in the living room, hallway and kitchen. They talked as they raised their babies and the mind absconded, with small shifts on their hips, the children cried one after the other around the house. Usad Saraang Plame is from a tape recorder. Layla was in the kitchen making Dog's scoring with Giti. Giti was no longer as shy, nor as serious as before. For several months now, the eternal heavy tear has cleared from her forehead. She laughed openly these days, more often, and - she hit Layla - flirted a little. She had removed her ponytail, let her hair grow and stuffed it with red accents. Layla eventually learned that the impetus for this transformation was an eighteen-year-old boy whose attention was drawn to Getty. He was a goalkeeper on Giti's older brother's team. Oh, he's got the best smile, and that thick, thick black hair! Ginny had told Layla. No one knew about their attraction, of course. Giti secretly met him twice for tea, fifteen minutes each time, in a small tea room on the other side of town, in Taimani. He's going to ask for my hand, Leila! Maybe as early as the summer. Can you believe it? I swear I can't stop thinking about him. What about the school? Layla asked. Giti had her head tilted and we gave her a better look. When we were 20, Hasina said, and I would have pushed four or five kids. But you, Leila, will make us two models proud. You're going to be somebody. I know one day I'm going to get a newspaper and find my picture on the front page. Giti was by Leila's side now, chopping cucumbers, with a dreamy, distant look on her face. Mammy was nearby, in her glittering summer dress, peeling boiled eggs with Vajma, the midwife and Tariq's mother. I'm going to introduce Commander Masood with a picture of Ahmed and Noor, Mammy told The Ajma, as he nodded with The Ajma and tried to look interested and sincere. He personally oversees the funeral. He said a prayer on their grave. It will be a sign of gratitude for his decency. Mammy broke another boiled egg. I hear he's a well-understood, honorable man. I think he'd appreciate it. All around them, women are fastened and from the kitchen, perform bowls of Kur, fabric of mastawa, bread, and stacked everything on sofrah spread on the living room floor. From time to time, Tariq got beat up.

He chose this, jumped on it. It's forbidden for men, Giti said. Out, out, shouted Ajma. Tariq smiled at the female smooch. He seemed to be enjoying welcome here, infecting this female atmosphere with its semi-funny, masculine dishonesty. Layla did her best not to look at it, not to give these women more gossip fodder than they already had. So she kept her eyes and said nothing to him, but she remembered a dream she had for several nights, from his face and hers, together in a mirror, under a soft, green veil. And rice grains falling out of his hair, bouncing off the glass of thini. Tariq came up with a sample of veal and potatoes. Ho bacha Giti hit his hand. Tariq stole it and laughed. He was standing almost legs taller than Layla now. He shaves. His face was less english, more angular. His shoulders widened. Tariq liked to wear pleats, black shiny loafers and short-sleeved shirts that show off his new muscular arms - compliments from old, rusty shoes he picked up daily in his yard. His face was recently adopted for banter. He had taken to his self-conscious singing on the head when he spoke, slightly to the side, and to twist an eyebrow as he laughed. He let his hair grow and got into the habit of throwing floppy locks often and needlessly. And the corrupt half-pub was something new. The last time Tariq left the kitchen, his mother caught Layla stealing him. Layla's heart jumped and her eyes lit up. She quickly took up throwing the sliced cucumber into the jug of salted, yoghurt-soaked. But she felt Tariq's mother, who observes, knows, approves of half-smile. The men filled their plates and glasses and ate in the yard. After they took their share, the women and children settled on the floor around the sloof and ate. After the sooffa was cleared and the plates were arranged in the kitchen, when the frenzy of tea making and remembering who took green and who started moving, Tariq moved with his head and got out of the door. Layla waited five minutes and then followed him. She found him three houses down the street, leaning against the wall at the entrance to a narrow street between two neighboring houses. He was humming an old pascoe song, by Ustad Avel Peace: To Jia ziduan, to Mama Dada Uvan. This is our beautiful land, this is our favorite land. And he was smoking, another new habit he picked up from the guys Leila spotted him hanging around these days. Layla couldn't stand them, Tariq's new friends. They all dressed the same way, pleated trousers and tight shirts that accentuated their arms and chest. They all wore too much cologne and everyone was smoking. They jumped into the neighborhood in groups, joking, laughing, sometimes even calling after girls, with the same stupidity, They're limping on their faces. One of Tariq's friends, based on the most similarities of Sylvester Stallone, insists that he be called Rambo. Your mother would have killed you if she knew about smoking, Leila told you, looking at each other and then the other before sneaking into the alley. But she doesn't know, he said. He moved to make room. That could change. Who's going to say? Is that you? Layla knocked on the foot. Tell your secret to the wind, but don't blame yourself for telling the trees. Tariq smiled, one eyebrow twisted. Who said that? Khalil Jibran. You're a smoothie. Give me a cigarette. He shook his head, and crossed his arms. It's a new entry into his repertoire of poses: back to the wall, crossed hands, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, his good leg casually tilted. Why not? Bad for you, he said. And not bad for you? I'm doing this for the girls. What girls? He snorted. They think she's hot. It's not. - No, no, no, no, I assure you. Not sexy? You look like a khila, like half a tycoon. That hurts, he said. What girls? You're jealous. I'm indifferently curious. You can't be both. He took another break-in and slipped into the smoke. I bet they're talking about us now. In Leila's head, Mammy's voice rang. Like a bird in your arms. Squeeze and fly. Her guilt has te. That's when Layla turned off Mamie's voice. Instead, she enjoyed the way Tariq told us. How exciting, how conspiratory it sounded that it was coming from him. And how reassuring to hear him say it like that - casually, naturally. Us. He confessed to their relationship, crystallized it. And what do they say? That we paddle along the river of sin, he said. He's eating a piece of cake. Riding Rickshaw of Evil? Layla intervened. Let's make Sacrilege Kurma. They both laughed. Then Tariq noted that her hair is getting longer. It's nice, he said. Layla hoped she didn't blush. You've changed the subject. From what? The empty girls who think you're hot. Know. You know what? That I only have eyes for you. Layla swore at her. She tried to read his face, but was greeted with an indecisive look: the cheerful, cretin smile at odds with the narrow, half-desperate gaze in his eyes. A cunning look calculated to fall right in the middle between ridicule and sincerity. Tariq smashed his cigarette with the heel of his good foot. What do you think of all this? Party? Who's half-witty now? I meant the Mujahideen, Lila. Coming to Kabul Oh, that's 1000 She started telling him something Babi was saying about the disturbing wedding of guns and egos when she heard a disturbance from the house. Loud voices. Screaming. Laila be switched off. Tariq's behind her. There was a melee in the yard. In the middle of this were two people rolling on the ground, a knife between them. Layla took one of them as a man from the table who had discussed politics before. The other was the guy who spun the kebab skewers. Several people were trying to dismantle them. Grandma's not one of them. He stood against the wall, a safe distance from the battle, with Tariq's father crying. From the excited voices around her, Leila captures fragments she gathered: The comrade at the political table, pishtun, called Ahmad Shah Masood for a deal with the Soviet council in the 1980s. Tajik, the kebab man, had insulted and demanded the drop-off. Pascoe refused. Tajik said that if not for Masood, the other man's sister would still give it to soviet soldiers. They had come to blow up. One of them was brandished by a knife; there were disagreements about who. With horror, Leila saw Tariq throw himself into the scribble. She also saw that some of the peacekeepers were already throwing punches at theirs. She thought she'd noticed a second knife. Later that night, Leila thought about how the melee had spilled, with men falling on top of each other, amid screams and screams, screams and flying blows, and in the middle of that a gloomy Tariq, his hair rocking, his leg crumbling, trying to crawl. It was dizzying how quickly everything unraveled. The Council of Leaders was formed prematurely. He's electing a rabani president. Other factions wept for nepotism. Masood called for peace and patience. Hekmatyar, who was expelled, was agitated. Hazaras, with their long history of being oppressed and neglected, beggars. The insults were blinding. Fingers pointed. The accusations flew. The meetings were un intervened and the doors slammed. The city took its breath away. In the mountains, loaded magazines snapped at Kalashnikov. The mujahideen, armed to the teeth but now lacking a common enemy, have found the enemy in each other. Kabul's day of weeping had finally come. And when the missiles started raining on Kabul, people ran for cover. And Mamie did, literally. She changed back into black, went to her room, closed the curtains and pulled the blanket over her head. 24. Page 14 It's whistling, leila told Tariq, the damn whistle, I hate more than anything. Tariq nodded knowingly. It wasn't so self-sensitive, Leila thought later, but the seconds between the start and the kick-off. The short and infinite time of feeling denied. Ignorance. Wait. Like a defendant who's going to hear the verdict. It used to happen at dinner when she and Babi were at the table. When it started, their heads cracked. They listened, in the air, impervious foods in your mouth. Leila saw the reflection of her half-holy faces in their dark side, their shadows shifting across the wall. - Yes, a. Then the blast, blissful everywhere, followed by the expulsion of breath and the knowledge that they had been spared while somewhere else, amid shouting and choking clouds of smoke, there was a stirrer, a relentless rage from digging, of pulling out of the debris, which remained of sister, brother, grandson. After each rocket, Leila descended into the street, stuttering a prayer, sure that this time, this time, Tariq, they would find buried under the rubble and smoke. At night, Layla lay in bed and watched the sudden white flashes reflected in her window. Some nights, when the light of the rocket is so bright a person can read a book on it, a dream never came. And if that happens, Leila's dreams were suffocated by fire and severed limbs and moaning to the wounded. The morning brought no relief. The Muse called namaz and the Mujahideen lowered their weapons, standing in the west and praying. The carpets were then folded, loaded with weapons, and the mountains fired on Kabul, and Kabul fired back into the mountains, as Leila and the rest of the city watched as old Santiago watched the sharks pick up bites of their prey from the fish. Everywhere Lila goes, she saw Matud's men. She saw them roaming the streets and every few hundred metres stopped cars for questioning. They sat and smoked on top of tanks, dressed in their tired and ubiquitous mischields. They peeked at passers-by from behind, stacked sandbags at intersections. Not that Leila wasn't going out anymore. And when she did, she was always accompanied by Tariq, who seemed to enjoy this knighthood. I bought a gun, he said one day. They sat outside, on the ground under the pear in Leila's yard. He showed her. She said it was semi-automatic, beret. For Layla, it looked black and deadly. I don't like it, she said. Guns scare me. Tariq put the magazine in his hand. Last week, they found three bodies in a house in Karte-Sich. You hear that? Sisters. All three were raped. Their throats are slit. Someone bit the rings off their fingers. I don't want to hear that. I don't want to upset you, Tariq said. But I just... I'd better wear this. Now he was her life. He heard her mouth and handed it to her. Tariq is the one who told her, for example, that the militia places in the mountains They threatened to do so by shooting civilians below, men, women, children randomly selected. He told her they were shooting at the cars, but for some reason they left taxis alone - which explained to Layla that the recent troubles of their cars. Tariq explained to her the treacherous, bordering Kabul. Leila learned from him, for example, that this time, next to the second acacia, the tree on the left belonged to a warlord; that the next four blocks, ending with the bakery next to the destroyed pharmacy, is another warlord sector; and that if she crosses this street and walks half a mile to the west, she will find himself in the territory of another warlord and, therefore, a fair game for sniper fire. And that's what mammy's heroes were called. Warlords. Layla heard them call a dafandar, too. - Yes, shooters. Others still called them Mujahideen, but when they did, they made a face - a scrawny, disgusting face - the word reeks of deep disgust and deep contempt. It's like an insult. Tariq put the magazine back in his gun. Do you have it in you? Leila said. For what? Use that thing. Killing with him. Tariq tucked the gun into the waist of his denim. Then he said something wonderful and horrible. For you, he said. I'd kill with you, Leila. He came down closer to her and their hands were washing, once, and again. When Tariq's fingers inadvertently began to slide into hers, Layla let them. And when she suddenly leaned over and pressed her lips against hers, she let him go again. At that point, all of Mama's talk of reputation and passed the birds sounded intangible to Layla. Even ridiculous. In the midst of all the murder and looting, all the ugliness, it was harmless to sit here under the tree and kiss Tariq. It's a little something. It is easy to predict a:100 p.m. So she let him kiss her, and when he stepped away, she leaned over and kissed him, her heart hit her throat, her face numb, a fire burning in the pit of her belly. * In June of this year, 1992, there was a heavy fighting in West Kabul between the forces of warlord Sayyaf and the Hazaras of the Wahdat Faction. The shelling knocked down power lines, pulverizing entire blocks of shops and homes. Leila heard that Pishtun militiamen attacked Hazara households, smashed and shot at entire families, execution style and Hazara retaliated by kidnapping Pascoe civilians, raping Hazhun girls, smashing into Hazhun neighborhoods and killing indiscriminately. Every day, the bodies were tied to trees, sometimes burned beyond recognition. Often, they were shot in the head, their eyes were torn off, their tongues cut off. Babi tried again to persuade Mamie to leave Kabul. They're going to deal with it, Mammy said. This fight is temporary. They'il sit down and come up with something. all these people know it's war, Babi said. They learned to walk with a bottle of milk in one hand and a gun in the other. Who are you to say? Mamie shoots. Is he fighting jihad? Did you abandon everything you had and risk your life? If it weren't for the Mujahideen, we'd be the servants of the Soviet Union. And now you're going to betray us! We're not the ones who's going to betray us, Taba. Then go. Take your daughter and run. Send me a card. But peace comes, and I, I, I, I, I will wait for it. The streets became so dangerous that Babi did an unthinkable thing: he made Layla drop by school. He took on his own teaching duties. Leila enters her office every day after sunset and, as Hekmatyar fires her missiles into Massoud on the southern outskirts of the city, Babi discusses Hafez's ghazi and the works of the beloved Afghan poet Stadt Halilhali. Babi taught her to extract the square, showed her how to determine polynomical and parametric curves. When he was teaching, Babi was transforming. In his element, among his books, he looked taller than Layla. His voice seemed to rise from a calmer, deeper place, and he didn't blink nearly as much. Leila presented it, as he must have once been, erasing his board with graceful punches, looking over a student's shoulder, paternal and attentive. But it wasn't easy to pay attention. Layla was distracted. What is the area of the pyramid? Babi asked, and all layla thought about the fullness of Tariq's lips, the warmth of his breath in his mouth, her reflection in his hazel eyes. She kissed him twice as much as time under the tree, longer, more passionate and, she thought, less clumsy. Both times, he met him in secret in the alley where he smoked a cigarette on the day of Mamie's lunch. The second time, she let him touch her breasts. Leila? Yes, Babi. Pyramid. Area. Where are you? - T, Grandma. I... Let's see. Pyramid. Pyramid. A third of the area of the base multiplied the height. Babi nodded precariously, his gaze hardened on her, and Layla thought of Tariq's hands pushing her breasts, sliding down her back, both of them kissing and kissing. * ONE DAY THE SAME MONTH OF JUNE, Giti was coming home from school with two classmates. Just three blocks from Giti's house, a delusion hit the girls. Later in the terrible day, Layla learned that Layla, Giti's mother, was moving up and down the street, where he was killing them, collecting pieces of his daughter's flesh in an apron, creaking hysterically. Giti's decaying right leg, still in a nylon sock and violet sneakers, will be found on the roof two weeks later. In Getty Faty, the day after the murders, Layla was singling out a room full of crying women. This is the first that someone Leila knew, loved, loved, died. He couldn't get to the unachievable reality that Giti was no longer alive. Getty, with whom Layla exchanged secret notes in a class whose nails she polished, whose chin she had ripped out with tweezers. Getty, who was about to marry Sabir's goalkeeper. Giti was dead. Dead. They dispersed to pieces. At last, Layla started crying for her friend. And all the tears she failed to shed at her brothers' funeral came to be shed. 25. Layla could hardly move, as if the cement had hardened in each of her joints. We continued a conversation and Layla knew she was at one end, but she felt removed from him as if she were just listening. As Tariq spoke, Layla imagined her life as a receding rope, snapping, fraying, fibers tearing off, moving away. It was a hot, mysterious afternoon in August 1992 and they were in Leila's living room. Mammi had been suffering from stomach pains all day, and, minutes before that, despite the missiles hekmatyar fired from the south, Babi took her to the doctor. And there's Tariq, sitting next to Layla on the couch, looking at the ground, hands between his knees. He said he was leaving. Not in the neighborhood. Not Kabul. But Afghanistan as a whole. Check. Layla was blind. Where? Where are you going to go? Pakistan first. Peshawar. Then I don't know. Maybe Hindustan. Iran. How long? I don't know. How long have you known? A few days. I was going to tell you, Layla, I swear, but I couldn't get close to that. I knew how upset you'd be. When? Tomorrow. - Tomorrow? Layla, look at me. Tomorrow. That's my dad. His heart can't take it anymore, all these battles and murders. Layla buried her face in her hands, a bubble of fear filling her chest. She should have seen it coming, think about it. Almost everyone he knew had packed their bags and left. The neighborhood was drained of familiar faces, and now just four months after fighting between mujahideen factions, Leila barely recognized anyone on the streets. Hasina's family fled in May to Tehran. Ajma and her clan had gone to Islamabad that same month. Giti's parents and siblings left in June, shortly after Giti's death. Leila didn't know where they went - she heard a rumor that they were headed to Mahhad in Iran. After the people left, their homes settled homeless for several days, after which either the militias took them away or strangers moved in. Everyone was leaving. And now Tariq too. And my mother is no longer a young woman, he said. They're so scared all the time. Layla, look at me. You should have told me. Please look at me. There was a grooning from Layla. Then it weighs on you. And she cried, and when he went to wipe her cheek with her thumb, she took his hand. It was selfish and irrational, but she was furious with him for abandoning her, Tariq, who was like an extension of her, whose shadow darkened to hers in every memory. How can he leave her? She hit him. Then slapped him again and stuck his hair, and he dragged her off his wrists, and he said something that could not come out, said it quietly, wisely, and somehow they found themselves eyebrows, nose to nose, and she again felt the warmth of his breath on his lips. And when she suddenly bent down, so did she. In the days and weeks to come, Layla would scramble frantically to do it all as a souvenir of what happened next. As a lover who had thrown herself into a burning museum, she took what she could - a look, a whisper, a mother-in-law - to save the perishing to preserve it. But the weather was the most unforgiving of fires, and in the end it could not save everything. After all, she had these: the first, a huge smold of pain underneath. The slope of sunlight on the carpet. Her heel grazes his cold leg, lying next to them, imperceptibly branched out. Her hands, like elbows. The inverted, mandolin-shaped birthmark under the clavicre, glowing red. His face was swirling around hers. His black curls dangling, tickling her lips, her chin, the terror that will be revealed. The disbelief of his own courage, his courage. The strange and indescribable pleasure, overflowing with pain. And the look, the countless appearance, of Tariq: for retention, tenderness, apology, shame, but mostly, mostly from hunger. AFTER THAT, THERE WAS MADNESS. Shirts hurried fastened, belts buckled, combed hair. They sat, then sat next to each other, they looked at each other, their faces turned pink, and they both became snless, both speechless before the astonishment of what had just happened. What did they do? Layla saw three drops of blood on the carpet, her blood, and imagined her parents sitting on this couch, forgetting about the sin she had committed. And now the shame is ticking, the guilt, and upstairs, the clock was ticking, impossible high for Leila's ears. It's like the judge burdened her. Tariq said at the time: 'For a moment Layla almost believed this could be done. She, Tariq and his parents are coming together. And whatever it was, they're going to face them. It doesn't have to be. He can go. Maybe they're together. They'il have more afternoons like this. I want to marry you, Leila. For the first time since they were on the floor, she raised her eyes. to meet him. She searched his face. There was no playfulness this time. His gaze was convinced that it was dishonest, but also an iron conviction. Tariq-- Let me marry you, Leila. Today. We can get married today. He started saying more about going to a mosque, finding a mullah, a pair of witnesses, a quick nika... But Leila thought of Mammy, stubborn and uncompromising as the Mujahideen, the air around her choked with runk and despair, and she thought of Babi, who had long surrendered, who made such a sad, pathetic opponent of Mammy. Sometimes... I feel like everything I have, Leila. These were the circumstances of her life, the inevitable truths in it. I'm going to ask Kaka Hakim for your hand. He will give us His blessing, Leila, I know her. He was right. Grandma would. But it'il upset him. Tariq was still talking, his voice sinking, then tall, pleading, then cheering; his face, hoping, and then struck. I can't, Leila said. Don't say that. I love you. I'm sorry to love you. How long has she waited to hear those words from him? How many times did she dream about them? They were there, finally, and the irony crushed her. My dad can't leave, Layla said. I'm all he's got left. His heart couldn't accept it either. Tariq knew that. He knew that she could not erase the duties of his life as he could, but this continued, his pleas and her rebuts, his suggestions and her apologies, his tears and hers. In the end, Layla had to make him leave. At the door, she made him promise he'd leave without saying goodbye. She closed the door. Layla leaned against him, shaking his fist, one hand, his belly and his hand on her mouth as he spoke through the door and promised he would come back for her. She stood there until he was tired until he gave up, and then she listened to uneven steps until they faded, until everyone was quiet, except for the shooting crammed into the hills, and her heart broke in her belly, her eyes, her bones. 26. It was, by far, the hottest day of the year. The mountains suppressed the heat, suffocating the city like smoke. The power hasn't been in effect for days. Everywhere in Kabul, electric fans sat idle, almost like that. Layla still lies on the couch in the living room, sweating through her blouse. She knew about her parents talking in Mamie's room. Two nights ago and again last night, she woke up and thought she heard their voices down there. They've been talking every day since the bullet was in the hole. From the outside, the distant boom of artillery, more precisely, stuttering a long series of shots, followed by another. Leila is also fighting a battle: on the one hand, in partnership with shame and, on the other hand, the belief that what she and Tariq have done is not sinful; that she was natural, good, beautiful, even inevitable, prompted by the knowledge that they would never be able to meet again. Layla rolled sideways on the couch and tried to remember something: At one point, when they were on the floor, Tariq lowered her forehead to hers. Then he solidified something, and I'm hurting you? Or does that hurt? Layla couldn't decide what he said. Is I hurting you? Does that hurt you? It's only been two weeks since you left, and that's already happened. Time blunting the edges of these sharp memories. Layla's been mentally exhausted. What did he say? It seemed vital, suddenly, that she knew. Layla closed her eyes. Concentrated. Over time, she slowly tired of this exercise. She will find it increasingly exhausting to call, to be sent away, to resuscitate what was long dead. There will come a day, in fact, years later, when Layla would no longer be lost. Or not so ruthless; not almost. When you heard a mother on the street after her child in Tariq's name wouldn't cut her. She wouldn't miss it, as she did now, when the pain of his absence was her non-reflective companion - like the phantom pain of the amputation. Page 15 Except occasionally, when Leila was a grown woman, ironing a shirt or pushing her children on a swing, something trivial, perhaps the warmth of a carpet under her feet on a hot day or the curve of an unknown ilo, will mute the memory of that afternoon together. And it'il all come back. The spontaneity of it. Their astonishing recklessness. Their clumsiness. The pain of the action, the pleasure of it, the sadness. The warmth of their tangled bodies. He's going to flood her, steal her breath. But then it'il pass. The moment will pass. Let her pump, feeling only vague anxiety. She thought he said I was hurting you? To. That's it. Layla was happy to remember. Then Babi was in the hallway, calling her from the top of the stairs and asking her to get up quickly. She said yes! he said, his voice trembled with repressed excitement. We're leaving, Layla. All three of them. We're leaving Kabul. * In mammy's room, the three of them sat on the bed. From the outside, the missiles rotated in the sky as Hekmatyar and Mahmoud fought and fought. Leila knew that somewhere in town someone had just died, and that a spider of black smoke was over a building that had collapsed into a lush mass of dust. There will be corpses to step on in the morning. Some will be collected. Others don't. Kabul's dogs, which have developed a taste for human meat, will feast. After all, Layla was willing to walk through these streets. She could barely hold her happiness. It took me an effort to sit down, not to wrinkly with joy. Babi said they would go to Pakistan first to apply for visas. Pakistan, where Tariq was! Tariq's only been missing for 17 days, Leila calculates excitedly. If only Mamie had decided seventeen days earlier, they could have left together. She'd be with Tariq right now! But it didn't matter anymore. And that's where they'il find Tariq and his parents. Certainly. They will process their documents together. Then who knows? Who knew? Europe? America? Maybe, as Babi always used to say, somewhere near the sea... Mammy was half lying down, half sitting next to the tray. Her eyes were puffy. She was shaving her hair. Three days before, Layla had gone outside for air. After Giti's death, and the thousands of gunshots and thousands of rockets that fell on Kabul, it was the sight of this single round hole in the gate, less than three fingers, from where Layla's head was. , this one shook Mammy. It made her see that a war had already cost her two children; this could cost her the rest. From the walls of the room, Ahmad and Noor smiled. Leila watched Mamie's eyes bounce now, with guilt, from one photo to the other. It's like if they're looking for their consent. Their blessing. It's like you want forgiveness. We don't have anything left here, Babi said. Our sons are missing, but we still have Leila. We're still each other, Fariba. We can make a new life. Grandma got close through the bed. When he bent down to take her hands, Mamie let him. On her face, like a discount. - No, no, no, no, no, no, they behaved lightly with their hands, and then they swayed quietly in the embrace. Mammy buried his face in his neck. He grabbed a handful of his shirt. For hours that night, the excitement robbed Layla of sleep. She lay in bed and looked at the horizon glows in shiny shades of orange and yellow. At one point, despite the excitement inside and the cracking of artillery fire, she fell asleep. And he was dreaming. They are on a strip of beach, sitting on a quilt. It's a cool, cloudy day, but it's warm to Tariq under the blanket draped over his shoulders. She can be seen cars parked behind a low fence of severed white paint under a row of palm trees winds. The wind makes his eyes water and burys his shoes in sand, shearing knots of dead grass from the curved ridges of one dune to another. Watch the boats in Around them, seagulls tremble and tremble in the wind. The wind pours another spray of sand from the shallow, windy slopes. There's a noise then as a cohesive one, and she tells him something Babi taught her years before about singing sand. He rubs on her eyebrows, wipes grains of sand from it. She catches a flicker of the group on his finger. It's identical to hers - gold with a kind of labyrinth engraved everywhere. It's true, she's telling him. This is the friction of the nipple against the nipple. Listen. He knows. He frowned. They're waiting. They can hear it again. Noise when the wind is soft, when it blows loudly, a meth, a high-sodied choir. * GRANDMOTHERS SAID you need to take only what is absolutely necessary. They'il sell the rest. That'il keep us in Peshawar until I get a job. For the next two days, they collected items for sale. They put them in big piles. In her room, Leila set aside old blouses, old shoes, books, toys. Looking under her bed, she found a small glass cow that Hasina handed her during class in fifth grade. A miniature football keychain, a gift from Getty. A little wooden zebra on wheels. A ceramic astronaut she and Tariq had found one day in a ditch. She was six and he was eight. Layla remembered which one of them had been found. Mammy's got her stuff, too. There was a reluctance in her movements, and her eyes were lethargic, distant glances at them. She moved away from her good plates, napkins, all her jewelry, save herself for her wedding - and most of her old clothes. You're not selling this, are you? Leila said she picked up Mamie's wedding dress. She touched lace and a ribbon on the neckline, hand-sewn seminal beads on the sleeves. He cheated and took it from her. She tossed it into a pile of clothes. It's like tearing a band-aid with one punch, Leila thought. Babi was the one who had the most painful task. Layla found him in his office, a rueful expression on his face as he examined his shelves. He was wearing a second T-shirt with a picture of san francisco's red bridge. Thick fog rose from the white cover of water and engulfed the towers of the bridge. You know the old piece, he said. You're on a deserted island. You can have five books. Which one do you want? I never thought I'd have to do this. We're going to have to start a new collection, Grandma. 100000000 He smiled unfortunately. I can't believe I'm leaving Kabul. This is where I graduated from school, got my first job here, and became a father in this town. It's strange to think that I'm going to sleep under the sky of another city soon. It's weird for me, too. All day, this poem about Kabul has been floating in my head. Sab-e-Tabrisi wrote it in the 17th century, I think. I used to know the whole poem, but now All I remember is that I can't remember. Lines: One can not count the moons that shine on its roofs, Or the thousands of wonderful suns hiding behind its walls. Layla looked up, saw she was crying. She put her hand on his waist. Oh, Grandma. We'il be back. When the war is over. We'il go back to Kabul, inasla. You'il see. On the third morning, Layla began moving the piles of things to the yard and depositing them at the front door. Then they'il take a cab and take him to a pawn shop. Leila continued to shuffle between the house and the yard, back and forth, carrying piles of clothes and plates and box after box of Babi's books. She had to be exhausted by lunch, when the mound of belongings next to the front door had grown high. But with each trip, she knew she was so much closer to Tariq again, and with each trip her legs became more frightening, her hands more ineed. We're going to need a big cab. Layla looked up. She leaned out the window and hid her elbows on the ledge. The sun, bright and rm, caught in her gray hair, shines on her painted, thin face. Mamie was wearing the same cobalt blue dress she had worn on lunch day four months earlier, a young dress designed for a young woman, but for a moment Mammy looked like Layla as an old woman. An old woman with sloping hands and sunken temples and slow eyes, wrapped in dark circles of fatigue, a completely different being from the plump, enveloping woman radiating a glow from these grainy wedding photos. Two big taxis, Leila said. She could also see Babi in the living room squeezing boxes of books. Come when you're done with these, Mammy said. We'il sit down for lunch. Boiled eggs and bean residues. My favorite, Leila said. All of a sudden, you thought about your dream. She and Tariq are on a blanket. Ocean. Wind. Dunes. How did it happen that you sang sand? Layla stopped. She saw a gray lizard crawling from a crack in the ground. - His head's been fired. - It blinked. Wood-toothed under a stone. Leila is imagining the beach again. Except the singing was everywhere. And it's growing. Louder and stronger than the moment, higher and higher. Drown everything else. Seagulls were feathered mimi now, opening and closing beaks silently, and the waves crashing with foam and spray, but not roaring. The sands sing. He was screaming now. Sounds like... tins? I'm not kidding. Not. Layla put the books at her feet. She looked up at the sky. With one hand, shield her eyes. Then a giant roar. Behind her is a flash of white. The ground is under her feet. Something hot and hard stuck in her back. And now she's been kicked out of her sandals. swirling in the air, seeing the sky, then the earth, then the sky, then the earth. A large burning piece of wood smashed by. So they made thousands of pieces of glass, and Layla looked so that she could see each one flying around her, slowly scrolling over the end, the sunlight caught in each. Small, beautiful rainbows. That's when Layla hit the wall. I crashed to the ground. On her face and hands, a shower of dirt, pebbles and glass. The last thing she knew was that she saw something close to the ground. A piece of something. On it, the tip of a red bridge that pierced through thick fog. * SHAPES MOVING AROUND. Fluorescent light shines from the ceiling above. The woman's face appears, pushes over hers. Layla fades into the dark. ANOTHER PERSON. This time it's a man. Its features look wide and sagging. His lips move, but they don't sound. Everybody hears it's ringing. The guy's waving it. Frowns. His lips are moving again. It hurts. It hurts to breathe. It hurts everywhere. A glass of water. Pink pill. Back in the dark. * AGAIN THE WOMAN. Long face, narrow eyes. She's saying something. Layla can't hear anything but the ringing. But she sees the words, like thick black syrup spilling out of a woman's mouth. Her breasts hurt. Her hands and feet hurt. Everywhere, the figures move. Where's Tariq? Why isn't he here? Darkness. A flock of stars. Grandma and her perched somewhere high. He points to the field of echem. The generator's alive. The long-looking one is above her, looking down. It hurts to breathe. Somewhere, accordion plays. With the sweet, the pink pill again. Then shut up deeply. It runs deep on everything. PART 3 27. Mariam, do you know who I am? The girl's eyes are twinking. You know what happened? The girl's mouth is sweating. Close your eyes. Swallowed. Her hand scratched her left cheek. She's got something. Mariam leaned closer. That ear that inhaled the girl. I can't hear. * FOR THE FIRST WEEK the girl a little, but sleeping, using the pink pills Rasheed paid in the hospital. She grumbles in her sleep. Sometimes she spoke nonsense, cried, called names that Mariam did not recognize. She cried in her sleep, got excited, chased out the blankets, and then Mariam held her. Sometimes she soared and vomited, threw up everything Mariam fed her. When she wasn't excited, the girl was a vague pair of eyes staring under the blanket, breathing brief little answers to Mariam and Rasheed's questions. For a few days she was like a child, beaten sideways when Mariam, then Rashid, tried to feed her. She got numb when Mariam hit her with a spoon. But she got tired easily and eventually obeyed her stubborn counters. Long bouts of crying Transmission. Rashied caused Mariam to rub antibiotic ointment on the cuts to the girl's face and neck, and to the sewn-in gashi on her shoulder, on her forearms and lower legs. Mariam dressed them with bandages, which she washed and recycled. She was holding the girl's hair back, from her face, when it had to be combed. How long will he stay? I'm not going to do that, Rashid asked. Until he gets better. Look at her. She's out of shape. 100000000000 * It was RASHIED who found the girl who dug her from under the rubble. I'm lucky to be home, he told the girl. He was sitting in a folding chair next to Mariam's bed, where the girl lay. Happy for you, I mean. I dug you up with my own hands. There was a scrap of metal so big: Here he scattered his thumb and forefinger to show her, at least doubling, at Mariam's discretion, the actual size of it. So big. It's sticking out of your shoulder. She was really stuck there. I thought I was going to have to use pliers. But you're fine. In no time, you'il be on the point. Good place to stay. Rasheed saved hakim's books. Most of them were ashes. The rest was robbed, I'm afraid. You helped Mariam keep an eye on the girl in the first week. One day, he came home from work with a new blanket and pillow. Another day, a bottle of pills. Vitamins, he said. Rashid told Layla that Tariq's house was occupied. A gift, he said. From one of Sayyaf's commanders to three of his men. Gift. 100,000 The three men were actually boys with thin, young faces. Mariam saw them as she passed, always dressed in fatigues, squatting by the front door of Tariq's house, playing cards and smoking, their Kalashnikovs leaning against the wall. The bold one, the one with the smug, the laughable, the ruthless, was the leader. The youngest was also the quietest, who seemed reluctant to embrace the impunity of his friends. He was smiling and tilting Salaam on his head when Mariam passed. When he did, some of his complacency on the surface broke away, and Mariam caught a count of humility, still uncorrethed. One morning, they got stuck in the house. They were later fired by Wadat's Hazara. For some time, neighbors kept finding pieces and pieces of the boys. They had it, Rashid said. Mariam thought she was running away with relatively minor injuries, given that the rocket had turned her house into smoke. So, slowly, the girl got better. She started eating more, started combing her own hair. She's taking a bath on her own. He started eating downstairs with Mariam and Rasheed. But then some memories will rise, uninceded, and there will be stone silences or spells of a flea. Withdrawals and meltdowns. Looks. Nightmares and sudden attacks of grief. - yes, that's it. Sometimes he's sorry. I shouldn't even be here, she said one day. Mariam was changing the sheets. The girl was watching from the floor, her bruised knees stuck against her chest. My father wanted to take out the boxes. Books. You said they were too heavy for me. But I wouldn't let him. I was so impatient. I should have been in the house when it happened. Mariam broke the clean sheet and let him calm down on the bed. She looked at the girl, her blonde curls, her slender neck and green eyes, her high cheekbones and her thick lips. Mariam recalled seeing her on the street when she was little, covered by her mother on her way to tandur, riding on her brother's shoulder, the younger one, with ear hair. Shooting marbles with the carpenter's boy. The girl looked back, as if waiting for Mariam to pass on wisely, to say something encouraging. But what wisdom does Mariam offer? What encouragement? Mariam recalled the day they buried Baba and how little comfort she found when Mullah Faizula quoted the Koran for her. Blessed is He in the Hand of which is the kingdom, and He who has authority over all that created death and life, that he may test you. Or when he said his own guilt, those thoughts weren't good, Mariam Jo. They'il destroy you. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't your fault. What could she say to that girl who would ease her burden? As it turned out, Mariam didn't have to say anything. Because the girl's face twisted, and she was four, then she said she was going to get sick. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, Wait. I'il get a frying pan. Not on the floor. I just cleaned up... A. O. - No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no One day, about a month after the blast that killed the girl's parents, a man came knocking. Mariam opened the door. He's got his business in business. There's someone here who wants to see you, Mariam said. The girl lifted her head off the pillow. He says his name is Abdul Sharif. I don't know Abdul Sharif. Page 16 Well, he's here asking about you. You need to come down and talk to him. 28. Leila Leila sat opposite Abdul Sharif, who was a thin, small-headed man with a buccaneered nose, sprayed with the same crater scars that stuck on his cheeks. His hair, short and brown, stood on his scalp like needles in a needle. You're going to have to forgive me, hampshire, he said, adjusting his loose collar and patting his forehead with a handkerchief. I haven't fully recovered yet, I'm afraid. Five more days of these, what's their names... sulfa pills. Layla's in her seat, so her right ear, the good one, is closest to him. Was he a friend of my parents? No, no, Abdul Sharif said quickly. Forgive me. He lifted his finger, it took a long time from the water that Mariam in front of it. I have to start from the beginning, I guess. He rises on his lips, again on his forehead. I'm a businessman. I have clothing stores, mostly men's clothes. Chapan, hats, tumbans, suits, ties... Two stores here in Kabul, in Taimani and Shar-e-Nau, though I sold them. And two in Pakistan, in Peshawar. There's my warehouse. So I travel a lot, back and forth. Let's just say it's an adventure. Recently, I was in Peshawar, on business, as orders, doing inventory, that kind of thing. Also to visit my family. We have three daughters, Alhamdulla. I moved them and my wife to Peshawar after the Mujahideen started spinning towards each other. Their names will not be added to Shahid's list. Not mine, to be honest. I'il join them very soon, dragging. Anyway, I had to go back to Kabul last Wednesday. But luckily, I went down with illness. It's enough to say that when I went to do my business, simpler for both of them, I felt like a piece of broken glass. I wouldn't want to do it to Hekmatyar. My wife Nadia Jan, Allah blessed her, she asked me to see a doctor. But I decided to beat him with aspirin and a lot of water. Nadia Yang insisted, and I said no, we were walking. You know, this stubborn guy needs stubbornness. This time, I'm afraid you won. That'il be me. He drank the rest of the water and expanded Mariam's glass. If it's not too much of a smear. Mariam took the glass and went to fill it. Needless to say, I should have listened to her. She has always been more intelligent, God gives her a long life. When I came to the hospital, I was high with a fever and shaking like a tree in the wind. I could barely stand. The doctor said I had blood poisoning. She said two or three more days and my wife would become a widow. They put me in a special unit reserved for really sick people, I guess. Tashakor. He took the glass from Mariam and produced a big white pill out of his coat pocket. The size of these things. Layla saw him swallow his pill. She knew her breathing had come alive. Her legs felt heavy, as if the weights had been tied to them. He said he didn't do anything he hadn't told her yet. But he relaxed for a second and she resisted a desire to get up and leave before telling her things she didn't want to hear. Abdul Sharif put his glass on the table. That's where I met your friend Mohammed Tariq Wallizai. Leila's heart is broken. Tariq in the hospital? SWAT team? For really sick people? She's had a dry spit. Move to the chair. It had to melt. If it she was afraid that she would come unfolding. She diverted her thoughts from hospitals and special units and thought about the fact that she had not heard Tariq by his full name since the two had enrolled in a winter farsi course years back. The teacher will call after the bell and say his name as Mohammed Tariq Wallizai. Then she had hit her like a comic, and then she could hear his full name. What happened to him, I heard from one of the sisters , turned Abdul Sharif, knocking on his chest with a fist, as if to ease the passage of the pill. With all my time spent in Peshawar, I became quite experienced in Urdu. Anyway, I understand your friend was in a truck full of refugees, 23 of whom were on their way to Peshawar. Near the border, they were set on fire in the crossfire. A missile hit the truck. It's probably a hint, but you never know with these people, you never know. There were only six survivors, all admitted to the same unit. Three died within 24 hours. Two of them lived- sisters, as I understand it - and were discharged. Your friend Mr. Wallizai was the last. He was there for almost three weeks when I arrived. So he was alive. But how much did they hurt him? Layla wondered about it. How bad? Enough to be placed in a special unit, apparently. Layla knew she was starting to sweat, that her face felt hot. She tried to come up with something else, something nice, like a trip to Bamiyan to see the Buddhas with Tariq and Babi. But instead, an image of Tariq's parents presented herself: Tariq's mother presented herself in the trap of the truck, upside down, screaming for Tariq through the smoke, her hands and chest set on fire, the wig melting into her scalp... Layla had to take a series of quick breaths. He was in bed next to mine. There were no walls, just a curtain between us. To see it pretty good. Abdul Sharif suddenly discovered the need for a toy with a pint. Now speak slowly. Your friend, he was badly wounded, you know. There were rubber pipes coming out of him everywhere. First of all-- He cleared his throat. At first I thought he lost both legs in the attack, but one nurse said no, only the right, left one was because of an old injury. There were also internal injuries. They've operated three times already. I don't remember what else. And he was burned. Pretty bad. That's all I'm going to say about it. I'm sure you have your nightmares, Hampshire. There's no point in adding them. Tariq was legless. It was a torso with two stumps. - No, no, no, no, no, Layla thought she might collapse. With a smart effort, she washed the stings of her mind out of this room, out the window, away from this man, off the street, over the city now, and flat houses and a maze of narrow streets turned into sandcastles. -He was drugged most of the time. About pain, you understand. But there were times when drugs were exhausted when he was clean. In pain, but reckless. I'd talk to him from my bed. I told him who I was from, where I was from. He was glad there was a hammock next to him. I talk most of the time. It was hard for him. His voice was hoarse, and I think it hurts him to move his lips. I told him about my daughters, our house in Peshawar and the porch I'm building with my son-in-law. I told him I sold the stores in Kabul and that I'd come back to finish the paperwork. It wasn't much. But he bought it. At least I'd like to think so. Sometimes he's talking, too. Half the time, I couldn't figure out what he was saying, but I've caught enough. He described where he lived. He was talking about his uncle in Ghazni. And his mother cooks and his father's carpentry, he plays the accordion. But most of all, he was talking about you, the Hampshire. He said you were - how he put it- the earliest memory. I think it's the right thing to do. I can tell he's very interested in you. Balai, that was clear. But he said he was glad you weren't there. He said he didn't want you to see him like that. Layla's legs felt heavy again, anchored to the floor, as if all her blood had suddenly snitched down there. But her mind was far, far away, and the fleet, slobbering like a projectile rocket outside Kabul, over brown hills and over deserts, dangerous with piles of sages, past canyons on jagged red rock and over the snow mountains... When I told him I was going back to Kabul, he asked me to find you. Let me tell you, he was thinking about you. That he missed you. I promised him I'd do it. I really liked him. He was a nice guy, I might say. Abdul Sharif wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. One night I woke up, he continued, his interest in the wedding band being renewed, I think it was a night, it's hard to say in these places. There are no windows. Sunrise, sunset, you just don't know. But I woke up and there was some kind of laughter around the bed next to mine. You have to understand that I myself was full of drugs, always sneaking in and slipping to the point where it was hard to say what was real and what you dreamed. All I remember is the doctors curling up around the bed shouting about it, and the alarms are twinkling, the syringes on the ground. In the morning, the bed was empty. I asked a nurse. She said he fought bravely. Layla was so brave that she nodded. She knew. Of course she knew. She knew she was sitting on the other side, why she was here, what news he was bringing. At first, you see, at first I didn't think that even you existed, he said. I thought it was morphine talking. Maybe I even hoped you didn't exist; I've always been afraid to bring bad news. But I promised him. And like I said, I'd get very attached to him. I came here a few days ago. I talked to some neighbors. They pointed to this house. They told me what happened to your parents. When I heard about it, I turned around and left. I wasn't going to tell you. I thought it would be too much for you. For everyone. Abdul Sharif stumbled across the table and put his hand on his knee. But I'm back. Because, at the end of the day, I think he'd like you to know. I believe that. - I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'd like to... Layla didn't listen anymore. She remembered the day the man from Panjir came to deliver the news of Ahmed and Noor's death. She remembered grandmothers, her white, sanding on the couch, and Mammy, her hand flying to her mouth when she heard. Layla had seen Mammy get angry that day, and it scared her, but she hadn't experienced any real grief. She hadn't understood the terrible thing about losing her mother. Now another stranger is bringing news of another death. Now she was the one sitting in the chair. Was that her punishment for being a alternator for her own mother's suffering? Layla recalled how Mamie fell to the ground, screaming, tearing her hair. But Layla couldn't handle it. She could barely move. She could barely move. Instead, she sat in the chair, her hands limping on her lap, looking into no where and letting her fly. She let her fly until she found the place, the good and safe place where the echemic fields were green, where the water flowed clearly, and the seeds of cotton timber danced from the thousands in the air; Where Babi read a book under acacia, and Tariq chanted with his hands stuck in his chest, and where she could dip her feet in the stream and dream good dreams under the watchful gaze of the gods of the ancient sun-bleached rock. Mariam, I'm sorry, Rasheed told the girl, taking his bowl of masts and meatballs from Mariam without looking at her. I know it was very close... Friends... both of them. Always together since you were kids. It's a terrible thing that happened. Too many young Afghan men die like this. He moved impatiently with his hand, still looking at the girl, and Mariam handed him a napkin. For years, Mariam watched as he ate, the muscles of his temples pecked, one hand made compact rice balls, and the other wiped fat, wiping stray grains, from the corners of his mouth. For years he ate without looking, without speaking, his silence condemned, as if some punishment had been condemned, then violated only by slander, disapproval of his tongue, order for more bread, more bread, Now he eats with a spoon. I used a napkin. He told Lotfan when he asked for water. And he was talking. Witty and immortal. If you ask me, the Americans armed the wrong man in Hekmatiar. All the weapons the CIA gave him in the 1980s to fight the Soviet

Union. The Russians are gone, but he still has guns, and now he's handing them over to innocent people like your parents. And he calls this jihad. What a farce! What does Jihad have to do with killing women and children? The CIA better be armed Commander Mahmoud. Mariam's eyebrows have raised their own will. Commander Masood? In her head, she could hear some mammooth wounds, how he was a traitor and a communist. But then, Masood was Tajik, of course. Like Layla. Now there's a reasonable man. An honorable Afghan. A man who is genuinely interested in a peaceful solution. Rasheed shrugged and sighed. Not that they care about America, look at you. What do they care that the Hazunas, Hazaras and Tajik and Uzbekistan kill each other? How many Americans can say one of the other? Don't expect help from them, I'm telling you. Now that the Russians have passed out, they don't need us. We served our purpose. For them, Afghanistan is a kenarab, a hole. Excuse my language, but it's true. What do you think, Leila Jan? The girl was mumbling something incomprehensible and pushing a meatball into her bowl. Rasheed nodded thoughtfully, as if she had said the smartest thing he'd ever heard. Mariam had to look away. You know, your father, God gave him peace, your father and I had similar discussions. That was before you were born, of course. And we were into politics. For the books, too. Right, Mariam? Remember that? Mariam got drunk for drinking water. Anyway, I hope you're not bored with all this talk about politics. Mariam was later in the kitchen soaking dishes in soapy water, a tightly rolled knot in her belly. It wasn't so much what he said, blatant lies, stunned empathy, or even the fact that he hadn't raised his hand to her, Mariam, since he dug the girl under those bricks. It was staged. It's like a performance. It's an attempt to impress. To be tossed. And suddenly Mariam realized her doubts were right. She understood with horror, which was like a blinding blow to her head, that what she saw was nothing less than courtship. When he finally got hard, Mariam went to his room. Rasheed lit a cigarette and said: That's when Mariam knew he was defeated. She was very much expecting that he would deny everything, fan surprise, perhaps even outrage, in what she suggested. Then she may have had an advantage. Maybe he'il be able to throw it away. But she stole her grit, his peace of mind its tone of facts. Sit down, he said. He was lying on his bed, back against the wall, his thick long legs running down the mattress. Sit down before you pass out and cut off your head. Mariam felt like she was falling on to the folding chair next to her bed. Give me the ashtray, will you? He said. Obediently, she did it. Rasheed should have been sixty or more now - although Mariam, and in fact Rasheed himself, did not know his exact age. His hair was white, but he was as thick and rough as ever. Now there was one curled up on his eyelids and the skin on his neck that was wrinkled and skinned. His cheeks hung more than before. In the morning, he bent down. But he still had shielded shoulders, his thick torres, his strong hands, the swollen belly that entered the room before any other part of him did. In general, Mariam thinks she has asked for the years considerably better than she did. We have to legitimize this situation, he said now, balancing the ashtray on his belly. His lips were stabbed in playful shallow. People will talk. She seems a baseless, unmarried young woman who lives here. That's bad for my reputation. And hers. And yours, I'd add. Eighteen years, Mariam said. And I never asked you for anything. - Nothing. Now I'm asking. He inhaled smoke and dropped it slowly. He can't just stay here, if that's what you're suggesting. I can't feed her, dress her up and give her a place to sleep. I'm not from the Red Cross, Mariam. But this? What about him? What? Do you think she's too young? She's 14. He's hardly a kid. You were 15, remember? My mother was 14 when I was there. Thirteen when she got married. I... I don't want that, Mariam said, numb with contempt and helplessness. It's not your decision. She's mine, too. - I'm too old. She's too young, you're too old. That's. I'm too old. Too old to do this to me, Mariam said, by drening her fist out of her dress so that her hands would shake firmly. Don't be so dramatic. It's common, and you know it. I have friends who have two, three, four women. Your father had three. Besides, what I'm doing now, most of the men I know would have done a long time ago. You know it's true. I'm not going to let that happen. Rasheed smiled sadly. There's another option, he said, scratching the foot of one leg with the shoddy heel of the other. She can leave. I'm not going to get in her way. But I suspect he won't get far. There's no food, no water, no rupee in the pockets, bullets and missiles that fly everywhere. How many days before she's kidnapped, raped or dumped in a roadside ditch with her throat slit? Or all three? He coughed and adjusted the pillow behind his back. The roads outside are unforgivable, Mariam, Me. Hounds and bandits at all costs. I wouldn't want him to have a chance at all. But let's just say that by some miracle she gets to Peshawar. Then what? Do you have any idea what these camps are? He looked at her behind a smoker. People living under pieces of cardboard. TB, dysentery, hunger, crime. And that's before winter. Then it's freezing season. Pneumonia. People turn to the icy one. These camps become frozen cemeteries. Of course - he made a playful, swirling motion with his hand, - she could have warmed up in one of those peshevar brothels. Business is booming there, I heard. Beauty like her should bring a little wealth, don't you think? He put the ashtray on the bedside table and swung his feet over the bed. Page 17 Look, he said, sounded more conciliatory now, as a winner can afford. I knew you wouldn't take it well. I don't blame you. But that's for the best. You'il see. Think this way, Mariam. I'il help you with the house, and she'il be a refuge. Home and husband. Nowadays, when it's who they are, a woman needs a husband. Didn't you notice all the widows sleeping on the street? They'd kill for that chance. Actually, it's... I'd say that's just merciful of me. He smiled. The way I see it, I deserve a medal. Later, in the dark, Mariam told the girl. For a long time, the girl didn't say anything. He wants an answer this morning, Mariam said. Now he can get it, the girl said. My answer is yes. 30. Leila the next day, Layla stayed in bed. This morning, under the blanket, he was under the blanket when Rashied stuck his head in and said he was going to the razor. She was still in bed when she got home late in the afternoon, when he showed her his new haircut, his new suit, a son with cream and the wedding band he had bought her. Rasheed sat on the bed next to her, made a big show of slowly unbuttoning the tape, opening the box and plucking the ring delicately. He said he swapped Mariam's old ring for this. She doesn't care. Trust me. She won't even notice. Layla moved away from the end of the bed. She could hear Mariam downstairs, her flock of iron. She never wore it, Rasheed said. I don't want it, leila said weakly. It's not like that. You have to get it back. Take it back? An impatient look that pierced his face and disappeared. He smiled. I had to add some money - quite a lot, actually. It's a better ring, 22 carat gold. Are you feeling heavy? Come on, feel it. Not? He closed the box. How about flowers? It's going to be nice. Do you like flowers? Do you have a favorite? Daisies? Tulips? Lilacs? No flowers? Well! I don't see the point, even. I just thought... I know a tailor here in De Mazang. I thought we could pick you up. I'il get you a proper dress tomorrow. Layla's got her head down. Rasheed raised his eyebrows. I just wanted to-- Leila started. Leila couldn't help turning away and turning away. His touch seemed to be wearing a prickly wet wool sweater with no sole. To. I'd do it as soon as we did. Rashid's mouth opened, then spread into a yellow, toothy smile. Impatient, he said. * Before ABDUL SHARIF's visit, Leila decided to go to Pakistan. Even after Abdul Sharif came with her news, Leila decided she might have left now. Get away from here. She's cut off from the city, where every corner of the street is a trap, where every alley hid a ghost that popped up like a jack. Maybe she took the risk. But suddenly, leaving was no longer an option. Not with that daily crying. That new fullness in her chest. And consciousness, somehow, against the background of all these concussions, that she missed a cycle. Leila posed in a refugee camp, a sharp field with thousands of sheets of plastic snubed to makeshift rods, slipping in the cold, stinging wind. Under one of these makeshift tents, she saw Tariq's baby, his blindness, his jaws cooling, his skin tucked in, radiant gray. She imagined her tiny body, washed away by strangers, wrapped in a small pub, descending into a hole dug in a nasal winding ground under the frustrated gaze of the vultures. How could she escape now? Leila has described the people in her life. Ahmad and Noor are dead. Prisho, he's disappearing. Giti, dead. Cheat, dead. Grandma, dead. Now Tariq... But miraculously, something from her previous life remains, her last relationship with the man she was before she became so alone. Part of Tariq is still alive in it, with small hands growing translucent hands. How can he jeopardize the only thing left of him from his old life? She quickly decided. Six weeks have passed since Tariq' time. A little more, and Rashid will become suspicious. She knew what she was doing was dishonest. Disturbing, baseless and shameful. And unfair to Mariam. But even though the baby in it was no bigger than a mulberry, Layla has already seen the sacrifices her mother had to make. Virtue was only the first. She put her hand on her belly. Close your eyes. * LEILA WOULD REMEMBER THE CEREMONY IN BITS AND FRAGMENTS. Cream on the stripes of Rashid's suit. The sharp smell of hair spray. Little shaving nick right above his Adam's apple. The rough pads on his fingers when he slid it with the ring. The pen. It's not working. Search for a new pen. Treaty. The signing, his sure hand, her tremors. Prayers. It's like in the mirror that Rashied cut his eyebrows. And somewhere in the Mariam's watching. Suffocating the air with disapproval. Layla couldn't get caught in the older woman's eyes. * Lying under his cold sheets that night, she watches him pull the curtains closed. He was shaking even before his fingers processed the buttons on his shirt stuck in the cord of his pants. He was worried. His fingers were smashed endlessly with his own shirt, with his belt unbuttoned. Leila had a full look at his sagging breasts, his bulging belly button, the little blue vein in the centre, the tufts of thick white hair on his chest, shoulders and upper arms. She felt his eyes crawl everywhere. God help me, I think I love you, he said. Through wiping teeth, she asked him to turn off the lights. Later, when she was sure he was asleep, Layla quietly got under the mattress because of the knife she had previously hidden. With it, she pierced the pad on her index finger. Then she lifted the blanket and let her finger bleed on the sheets where they merged. 31. Mariam During the day the girl was no more than a squeak with a bed, a flea flowing in the footsteps of a director. She was sprayed with water in the bathroom or a teaspoon that was hung in glass in the upstairs bedroom. Sometimes there were traces: smearing the dress on the periphery of Mariam's vision, sinking up the steps, folded arms in the chest, sandals splashing on the heels. But they inevitably collided. Mariam walked the girl down the stairs, into the narrow hallway, into the kitchen or to the door as she walked from the yard. When they met like this, awkward tension rushed into the space between them. The girl gathered her skirt and laughed one or two words of apology, and when she rushed, Mariam could look at the side and capture blush. Sometimes he smelled Rashid. She could feel his sweat on the girl's skin, his tobacco, his appetite. Sex, mercifully, was a closed chapter in his own life. It was for some time, and now even the thought of these difficult sessions of lying under Rasheed made Mariam thing in the intestines. At night, however, this mutually organized dance of avoiding her and the girl is not possible. Rasheed said they were family. He insisted they were and families should eat together, he said. What is this? he said his fingers, working with the meat of a bone scoop and fork, were abandoned a week after he married the girl. Am I married to a pair of statues? Come on, Mariam, the Bezan gap, tell her something. Where are your manners? Sucking a bone marrow, he told the girl: 'But you don't have to let her down. She's quiet. A blessing, for Vala, if one has nothing to say, she may be stingy with words. We're the people of the city, you and me, but she's a dehati. One village Not even a girl from the village. Not. She grew up in a flask made of mud outside the village. Her father put it there. Did you tell her, Mariam, that you're harami? Well, she is. You'il take care of it yourself, Leila Jan. She's healthy, like one thing, a good worker, and without a pretext. I'll say this this way: If it was a car, it would be a Volga. Mariam was a 33-year-old woman, but that word, Harami, still had a sting. When they heard her, she still made her feel like a pest, a cockroach. She remembered Baba pulling her wrists. You're clumsy harams. This is my reward for everything I've been through. It's clumsy, clumsy a little haram. You, Rasheed told the girl, you, on the other hand, will be Benz. Brand new, premium shiny Mercedes. - No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, but. But. He raised a wrong index finger. One has to accept... Care... with benz. As a respect for beauty and craftsmanship, you see. You must think I'm crazy, the couch, with all this car talk. I'm not saying you're cars. I'm just making a point. Rasheed threw the ball with rice he had placed on the plate. His hands rubbed fruitlessly on his food as he looked down with a sober, thoughtful expression. You don't have to talk badly about the dead, much less a shaft. And I don't mean to offend you, but I have certainty... Reservations... For the way your parents - Allah, forgive them and give them a place in paradise - for their leniency towards you. I am sorry. The cold, looking girl flashed Rasheed in this did not escape Mariam, but he looked down and did not notice. It doesn't matter. The point is, I'm your husband now, and I fall for me to protect not only your honor, but ours, ours and ours. That's the husband's burden. Let me worry about that. You're welcome. And you're the queen, Malika, and this house is yours. If you want to say something, ask Mariam and she'il do it for you. Right, Mariam? And if you can imagine it, I'il get it for you. See, that's who I am. All I want in return is, it's just something. I'm asking you not to leave the house without my company. That's all. It's simple, isn't it? If I am far away and you need something urgent, I mean I absolutely need it and it can not wait for me, then you can send Mariam and she will come out and get it for you. You've noticed a discrepancy, for sure. Well, a man doesn't drive a Volga and a Benz the same way. That would be stupid, wouldn't it? And I want to ask you when we go out together to wear a burqa. For your own protection, of course. It's best. So many gentle people in this town now. Such disgraces, so eager to disgrace even a married woman. That's all. He's coughing. I have to say, Mariam will be my eyes and ears when I'm away. Here he shot Mariam, who was as hard as a kick in the temple. Not that I'm not spinning. Contrary. Frankly, you seem wiser than your age. But you're still a young woman, Leila Yang, a doc and young women can make unhappy choices. They can be prone to evil. Anyway, Mariam will be in charge. And if there's a slip... And he continued. Mariam sat looking at the girl from the corner of her eye as Rashid's demands and verdicts poured on them like Kabul's missiles. One day Mariam was in the living room, folding Rashid's shirts that she had plucked from the garment in the yard. She did not know how long the girl stood there, but when she took a shirt and turned around, she found standing by the door, hands bathing around a cup of tea. I didn't want to cry, the girl said. I am sorry. Mariam looked at her. The sun fell on the girl's face, on her large green eyes and smooth eyebrows, on her high cheekbones and attractive, bushy eyebrows, which did not look like mariam, nor mariam himself, thin and without peculiarity. Her yellow hair, which wasn't combed this morning, was in the middle of a breakup. Mariam could see in a firm way that the girl had squeezed the glass, the tightened shoulders, that she was nervous. She imagined she was sitting on the bed when she was struck. The leaves are turning, the girl said companion. Have you seen it? Autumn is my favorite. I like the smell when people burn leaves in their gardens. My mother loved spring best. You knew my mother? It's not accurate. The girl was chopping her hand behind her ear. I am sorry? Mariam raised her voice. I said no, I didn't know your mother. Oh, that's it. Is there anything you want? Mariam Yang, I want to... I wanted to talk to you about it. Mariam broke in. Yes, please, he said earnestly, almost impatiently. She took a step forward. She seemed relieved. Outside, an oriole was spouting. Someone was pulling the cart, and that was it. Mariam could hear his hinges creaking, bouncing and breaking the iron wheels. The sound of shooting is not so far away, one shot followed by three more, and then nothing. I'm not going to be your servant, Mariam said. I'm not going to do that. The girl cried. No, no, no, no, no, of course not! You may be Malika and me, but I won't take orders from you. You can complain to him, and he can slit my throat, but I won't. - No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, I'm not going to be your servant. Not! And if you think you can use your appearance to get rid of me, you're wrong. I was here first. They're not going to throw me out. I'm not going to let you kick me out. It's not what I want, girl. Poorly. I see your wounds are healed now. So you can start doing your share of work in this house--The girl nods quickly. Some of her tea spilled, but she didn't notice. Yes, that's the other reason I came here to thank you for taking care of me- Well, I wouldn't be, it broke. I wouldn't have fed you and washed you and breastfed you if I knew you'd turn around and steal my husband. I'm stealing-- I'm still going to cook and wash the dishes. You're going to do the laundry and you're going to move. The rest will take turns every day. And one more thing. I have no use for your company. I don't want it. I want to be alone. You're going to let me return the favor. That's how we're going to get on. These are the rules. When she finished talking, her heart was stuck and her mouth felt more sifted. Mariam had never spoken like this before, she had never declared her will so forcefully. I should have felt invigorating, but the girl's eyes had ruptured and her face was sagging, and what satisfaction Mariam found from this outburst felt more scarce, somehow illegal. She picked up the shirts on the girl. Put them in the almanac, not in the closet. He likes the whites in the top drawer, the rest in the middle, with the socks. The girl put the glass on the floor and put her hands on her shirts, palms up. I'm sorry about all this, she's out. You should be, Mariam said. You should be sorry. 32. Leila Leila remembered once, years before in the house, on one of Mammy's good days. The women sat in the garden, eating from a plate of fresh mulberry trees that Vajma had chosen from the tree in her yard. The thick mulberry was white and pink, and some were the same dark purple as the cracked small veins on Vajma's nose. Did you hear how his son died? Vajma said, vigorously shoveling a handful of mulberry in her sunken mouth. You drowned, didn't you? Nilla, Giti's mother, said. On Lake Gharga, right? But did you know that Rashid... Ajma raised his finger, put on a nod and chew show and made them wait for him to take it. Did you know that he was drinking charla, that he was crying drunk the other day? Cry drunk, I heard. And that was average lunchtime. By noon, he had passed out on a sun lounger. You could have fired the lunch cannon to his ear, and he wouldn't have stuck an eyelash. Leila recalled how Ajma had covered her mouth, peeled; how her tongue was examined between her few remaining teeth. You can imagine the rest. The boy went into the water unnoticed. They spotted him a little later, with smooth eyes. People rushed to help, half tried to wake the boy and the other half tried to wake the father. Someone leaned over the boy, and... mouth of the mouth you are to be done. It was pointless. Everyone saw it. The boy was missing. Leila recalled that Ajma lifted her finger and her voice trembled with godliness. That is why the Holy Qur'an forbids carp. Because he always falls sober to pay for the drunk's sins. That's right. It was this story that went around in Leila's head after he gave Rashid the news of the baby. He immediately got on his bicycle, rode in a mosque and prayed for a boy. That evening, all the while, Layla was watching Mariam push a cube of meat around her plate. Mariam's eyelashes were waving when she heard. She's sulking, she looks deserted. Rashid then went upstairs to listen to his radio, and Layla helped Mariam clear the soph. I can't imagine what you are now, Mariam said, picking rice and crumbs, if it used to be Benz. Layla tried a more heartless tactician. Train? Maybe a big jumbo jet. Mariam stood up. I hope you don't think that justifies you from housework. Layla opened her mouth, and she'd better think about it. She recalled that Mariam was the only innocent party in this arrangement. Mariam and the baby. Later, in bed, Layla burst into tears. What's the matter? Rasheed wanted to know, lifted his chin. Was she sick? Was it the baby, something wrong with the baby? Not? Did Mariam abuse her? That's it, isn't it? No, no, no. Valaya o Vala, I'il come down and teach her a lesson. Who does she think she is, that Harami treating you- No! He already stood up, and she had to grab him by the forearm, pull him out. Don't! Not! She was honorable to me. I need a minute, that's all. I'il be fine. He sat next to her, stroked her neck and murgged. His hand slowly crept up to her back, then stood up again. He leaned over and showed off his stuffed teeth. Page 18 Let's see, then, he farts if I can't help you feel better. First, the trees - those that weren't cut for firewood - spilled their cakes yellow and copper leaves. Then the winds came, cold and harsh, all over town. They tore up the last leaves and let the trees look at ghosts against the muted brown in the hills. The first season is snowfall, and the scales no earlier than molten. Then the roads froze, and snow gathered in piles on the roofs, accumulated in half on the windows of the lath. With snow came the kites after the rulers of Kabul's winter skies, now the timid intruders of the territory claimed by the rammed missiles and fighter jets. Rasheed continues to bring home news of the war, and Leila is confused by the fidelity Rashid is trying to explain to her. Sayyaf had been in fight with Hazaras, he said. Hazara is fighting Masood. And he is fighting Hekmatyar, of course, who has the support of the Pakistanis. Mortal enemies, these two, Masood and Hekmatyar. Sayyaf, he's on Masood's side. And Hekmatyar supports Hazara for the moment. As for the unpredictable Uzbek commander Dosham, Rashid said no one knows where he will stand. In the 1980s, along with the Mujahideen, Dostum fought the Russians, but joined Najibullah's communist puppet regime after the Russians left. He even won a medal presented by Najibulh himself before defecting again and returning to mujahideen's side. For now, Rashid said, Dostum supported Masood. In Kabul, especially in western Kabul, fires, and black thumbs of smoke mushrooms over snow-filled buildings. Embassies are closed. Schools have collapsed. In the waiting room, Rasheed said the wounded were bleeding. In the operating rooms, the limbs are amputated without anesthesia. But don't worry, he said. You're safe with me, my flower, my cannonball. Anyone who tries to harm you will rip out his liver and make him eat it. In winter, wherever Layla turned, her walls blocked the road. She thought of the wide-open heavens of her childhood, the days of going to tournaments with Babi and shopping in Mandai with Mammy, about her days on the streets and the sing-along of boys with Giti and Hasina. Her days of sitting with Tariq in a clover bed on the banks of the stream somewhere, trading mysteries and candy, watching the sun fall. But thinking of Tariq was insidious, because before she could stop, she saw him lying on a bed, away from home, pipes piercing a burnt body. Like the bile that burned her throat these days, deep, paralyzing grief rose in Layla's chest. Her legs were turning into water. He's got to hold on to something. Leila went through that winter of 1992, cleaning the walls with a pumpkin in the bedroom she shared with Rasheed, racy, racy, laundry outside in a large copper lagana. Sometimes she could see herself rising above her own body, seeing herself squatting over the edge of the lacana, sleeves rolled up to her elbows, pink hands curled soapy water from one of Rashid's underwear. Then she feels lost, throwing around like a surviving shipwreck, with no shore, just miles and miles of water. When it was too cold to go outside, Layla was shaking around the house. She walked, dragging a nail down the wall, down the hallway, then back, down the steps, then up, her face not washed, unkeined. She walked until she came across Mariam, who shot her without joy and returned to rip the stem off the pepper and cut meat fat. Leila could almost see the hostility radiating without words. Mariam like waves of heat rising from asphalt. She retreated to her room, sat on the bed and watched the snow fall. Rashish took her to his shoe store one day. When they were together, he walked up to her, with one hand grabbing her by the elbow. For Layla, being on the street has become an exercise in avoiding injury. Her eyes were still adjusting to the limited, with visibility of the burqa, her legs still stumbling along the hem. She went into constant fear of tripping and falling, of breaking her ankle, stepping into a hole. Still, she found some solace in the anonymity the burqa provides. They won't recognize her that way if she encounters acquaintances of hers. She didn't have to look the surprise in their eyes, or the regret or glee, how far she had fallen, how her lofty aspirations had been shattered. Rasheed's shop was bigger and brighter than Leila imagined. He made her sit behind her crowded worktable, the top of which was snagged with old soles and remnants of leather residue. He showed her hammers, demonstrated how the sandpaper wheel works, his voice rings loud and proud. He felt her belly, not through the shirt, but beneath her, his fingers cold and rough as bark on her s unfolded skin. Leila remembered Tariq's hands, tender but strong, the excruciating, full streaks on their backs that she had always found so attractive male. Swelling so quickly, Rasheed said. He's going to be a big boy. My son's going to be a jerk! Like your father. Layla took off her shirt. She filled her with fear when she spoke like that. How are things with Mariam? She said they were fine. Very good place to stay. Good place to stay. She didn't tell him it was the first time they had a fight. It happened a few days earlier. Layla had gone to the kitchen and found Mariam swabbing drawers and slamming them. She was looking, Mariam said, for the long wooden spoon she used to stir the rice. Where did you put it? She said, facing Leila face-to-face. Me? Leila said. I didn't take it. I can't get in here. Noticed. Is that an accusation? That's what you wanted, remember? You said you were going to make food. So she grew up and left. - No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, that's what happened, degech? Say... Leila says she's trying to keep control. Usually she can kill herself to take her earthly tremor and point her finger. But her ankles were swollen, her head hurt, and the heartburn that day. I'm saying you may have lost it. Mess it up? Mariam pulled out a drawer. The spatulus and knives inside it were fastened. How long have you been here, a few months? I've lived in this house for 19 years, Dokhtar Joe. I've kept the spoon in this drawer since it was cut. 100000000000000000 You might put it somewhere and forget. And it's possible you hid it somewhere to make me worse. You're a sad, unhappy woman, Layla said. Mariam flickered, then recovered, blew her lips. You're a whore, too. Whore and dog. You thieving whore, it's you! Then they yelled. Pots that weren't grown. They were called names that made Lila blush. They haven't spoken since. Layla was still shocked at how easy it unfolded, but the truth was that part of her liked him, she liked how it felt to yell at Mariam, curse her, have a target to focus all your flames on, her grief. Layla wondered if it was the same for Mariam. Then he went upstairs and threw himself on Rasheed's bed. Downstairs, Mariam was still screaming: Dirt on your head! Dirt on your head! Layla leaned over on the bed, moaned on the pillow, suddenly missed her parents and with tremendous strength, who did not feel from those terrible days, right after the attack. She lay there clutching a handful of the sheet until suddenly her breath became infected. She sat down and her hands were writhing. The baby had just kicked for the first time. 33. Mariam, early one morning the following spring, in 1993, Mariam stood by the living room window and watched Rashed escort the girl out of the house. The girl leaned forward, tilted at the waist, one hand draped in front of the taut drum of the abdomen, the shape of which was seen through the burqa. Rashit, anxious and too careful, held her elbow, pointing it through the yard like a police officer. He made a gesture Waiting here, rushed to the front door, then moved the girl to appear forward, one leg prop props the door open. When she reached him, he grabbed her arm, helped her through the gate. Mariam could almost hear him say: Watch your step, my flower, my gul. They came back early the next night. Mariam saw Rashid enter the yard. He let the door go early, and almost hit the girl in the face. Cross the yard in a few quick steps. Mariam picked up a shadow on his face, a darkness that is at the heart of twilight. In the house, he took off his coat and threw it on the couch. We're walking past Mariam, he said in a rude voice: I'm hungry. Prepare dinner. The front door of the house opened. From the hallway, Mariam saw the girl, a bundle in the hook of her left hand. She had one leg outside and the other inside, against the door, so she wouldn't shake. She was bent over and collapsed, trying to reach the paper bag of belongings she had dropped to open the door. Her face was moving with effort. She looked up I saw Mariam. Mariam turned around and went to the kitchen to warm Rasheed's food. It's like someone has a screwdriver in my ear, Rasheed said, rubbing his eyes. He was standing at Mariam's door, puffy, wearing only a tumba tied with a knot. His white hair was untenable, pointing in every direction. That crying. I can't take it. Downstairs, the girl was walking the baby on the floor, trying to sing to her. I haven't slept with a decent sleep in two months, Rasheed said. - And the room smells like sewage. There's shit everywhere. I stepped on one night. Mariam jumped in with perverse pleasure. Get her out! Rashid was screaming on his shoulder. Can't you take her outside? The singing was stopped briefly. He's going to get pneumonia! It's daylight saving time! What? Rashied stuck his teeth and raised his voice. I said it's warm! I'm not taking her outside! Singing resumes. Sometimes, I swear, sometimes I want to put this thing in a box and let it go down the Kabul River. Like baby Moses. Mariam has never heard him call his daughter after the name the girl gave her, Adza, covenant. It was always the baby, or when he was really torn, that thing. Some nights, Maryam overheard them arguing. She banged on their door, listened to him complaining about the baby - always the baby - the stubborn crying, the smells, the toys that made it a trip, the way the baby had distracted Lila with the constant demands to be fed, peeled, changed, held. The girl, in turn, made him smoke in the room for not allowing the baby to sleep with them. There were other arguments that swirled in the voices. The doctor said six weeks. Not yet, Rasheed. Not. - No, let me go. Come. Don't do it. It's been two months. Over there. Wake up the baby. Then sharper, Kush-sdy? Are you happy now? Mariam was sneaking back into her room. Can't you help? Rasheed said now. There must be something you can do. What do I know about babies? Mariam said. Rashiv! Can you get the bottle? He's standing on the almanacs. She doesn't want to eat. I want to try the bottle again. The baby is rising pink and fell like a meat cleaver. Rasheed closed his eyes. This thing is a warlord. - No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, I'm not telling you, Layla's giving birth to Gulbudin Hekmatyar. * MARIAM WATCHED as the girl's days are consumed with cycles of eating, rocking, bouncing, walking. Even when the baby was napping, there were contaminated diapers to rub and soak in the bucket of a disinfectant that the girl had insisted rashied buy for her. There were nails to cut with sandpaper, fur coats and pajamas to wash and hang to dry. These clothes, like other things about the baby, have become a moment of irritation. What's wrong with them? Rasheed said. They're men's clothes. For bacha. Do you think she knows the difference? I paid good money for these clothes. And one more thing, I don't care about that tone. Think of it as a warning. Every week, without fail, the girl heated black metal in the fire, threw in it a pinch of wild ryu seeds and swirled smoke in the direction of her baby to repel evil. Mariam found it exhausting to watch the girl's lolly and had to admit, albeit personally, to some extent admiration. She marveled at how the girl's eyes shone with worship, even in the morning, when her face sagging and her complexion was waxed by the baby's night walk. The girl had fits of laughter when the baby passed gas. The smallest changes to the baby enchanted her, and everything she did was declared spectacular. See! She reaches for a rattle. She's so smart. I'm going to call the papers, Rashid said. Every night there were demonstrations. When the girl insisted that he witnessed something, Rashid drained his chin up and threw an impatient, side-view down the blue vein hook on his nose. Watch. Look how he laughs when I snap my fingers. There. See? Did you see that? Rashid will kick himself and return to his plate. Mariam recalled how the girl had self-deposed. Everything he said pleased him, intrigued him, made him look from his plate and nod with approval. The strange thing was that the girl's fall from grace should have pleased Mariam, brought her a sense of justification. To her own surprise, Mariam turned out to be sorry for the girl. During dinner, the girl released a steady stream of worries. Topping is pneumonia, which is suspected in any small cough. Then there was dysentery, the specter of which was raised with each loose chair. Each rash was either measles or measles. You don't have to get so attached, Rasheed said one night. What do you mean? I listened to the radio the other night. The voice of America. I heard some interesting statistics. They said one in four children would die in Afghanistan before the age of five. That's what they said. Now, they... What? Where are you going? Come back here. Get back here now! He looked at Maria. What's wrong with her? That night, Mariam was going to bed when we were fighting again. It was a hot, dry summer night, typical of a saratan in Kabul. Mariam opened her window, then closed it when no breeze came to freeze the heat, only mosquitoes. She could feel the heat rising from the outside, through wheat brown, split planks of the arranged house in the courtyard, through the walls and into her room. Driving is usually after a few minutes, but half an hour passed and not only was it still happening, but escalated. Mariam could hear Rashi shouting now. The girl's voice, under his, was erratic and snubed. Soon the baby was crying. That's when Mariam heard their door open forcibly. In the morning, she found the circular drag on the door in the hallway wall. She was sitting in bed when her door opened and Rasheed came. He was wearing white underpants and a matching sole, coloured yellow in his armpits with sweat. He was wearing flip-flops on his feet. He held the belt in his hand, the brown skin you bought for Nika with the girl, and wrapped the perforated end around his fist. This is your work. I know it is, he threw it and rose. Mariam got out of bed and started coming back. Her hands instinctively passed through her chest, where he often hit her first. What are you talking about? - stuttering. She denies me. You're teaching her to do it. Over the years, Mariam had learned to harden against his contempt and rebuke, ridicule and rebuke. But that fear that she didn't have control over. All these years, and she was still trembling with fear when he was like this, sneezing, tightening the belt around his fist, the creaking of the skin, the glow in his eyes. It was the fear of the goat released into the tiger cage when the tiger first looked up from its paws, began to growl. Now the girl was in the room, her eyes wide, her face melted. Rashied spits at Mariam. He swung on the strap, testing it in his own thigh. The buckle's buckled. Stop it, bash! said the girl. Rasheed, you can't do this. Go back to the room. Mariam's back. No, no, no, no, no, don't do it! Now! Rasheedi lifted the belt again, and this time he came to Mariam. Then something amazing happened: The girl jumped on him. She grabbed his hand with both hands and tried to drag him down, but there was nothing more he could do than suck it off him. She was able to slow Rashid's progress towards Mariam. Let go of me! Rasheed cried. You win. You win. Don't do it. Please, Rashid, don't fight! Please don't do this. They struggled like this, the girl hanging, begging, Rashid trying to shake her off, watching Mariam, who was too stunned to do anything. In the end, Mariam knew there would be no fight, not tonight. He had told everyone. He stayed so a few minutes longer, his hand raised, his chest bubbling, a fine of sweat, filming his forehead. Rasheed lowered his hand. The girl's legs touched the ground and she didn't want to go away as if she didn't trust him. He had to pull his hand out without catching it. I'm on you, he said, scrolling the belt over his shoulder. I'm after you both. I'm not going to be made. , fool, in your own home. He threw Mariam the last, killer look, and on the way out the girl pushed him. When she heard their door closing, Mariam climbed into bed, buried her head under the pillow and waited for the shaking to stop. Three times at night, Mariam was awakened to sleep. The first time, it was the thundering of the missiles to the west, coming from the direction of Karteh charm. The second time, the baby was crying downstairs, the girl szly, the spoon against the milk bottle. Finally, the thirst got her out of bed. Page 19 Downstairs, the living room was dark, except for a moonlight bar spilled out the window. Mariam can hear the buzzing of a muche somewhere, you can make the outline of the cast iron stove in the corner, its tube rose, then makes an acute angle just below the ceiling. On the way to the kitchen, Mariam almost tripped over something. When her eyes were open, she made the girl and her baby lie on the floor on top of a quilt. The girl was sleeping on her side, snoring. The baby was awake. Mariam lit the kerosene lamp on the table and got stuck. In the light, she had her first real close-up look at the baby, a tuff of dark hair, thick-looking hazel eyes, pink cheeks, and lips the color of a mature pomegranate. Mariam had the impression that the baby was examining her, too. She lay on her back, her head tilted sideways, watching Mariam with a combination of fun, confusion and suspicion. Mariam wondered if her face could scare her, but the baby was happily crucified and Mariam knew that favorable judgment had been overcome in her favor. Shsh whispered Mariam. You're going to wake your mother, half as deaf as she is. The baby's hand split into a fist. She rose, fell, found a spastic path to her mouth. Around a handful of her own hand, the baby gave Mariam a smile, tiny spitting bubbles shining on her lips. Look at you. What a pathetic sight you are, dressed like a boy. And everyone in this heat. No wonder you're still awake. Mariam pulled the blanket out of the baby, was terrified to find a second one under him, popping his tongue and pulling this out. The baby giggled with relief. She's running away from my hands. Are you feeling better? While Mariam was pulling back, the baby grabbed her pinky. The little fingers curled firmly around him. They felt warm and soft, moist with droing. Gunu said. All right, ba, let go. The baby was hanging, kicking her legs again. Mariam pulled it out. The baby smiled and made a series of bubbling sounds. The knuckles are back in the mouth. What are you so happy about? Right? What are you smiling at? You're not as smart as your mother says. You have a rough one for a father. a fool for a mother. You wouldn't smile so much if you knew. No, i won't. Go to sleep. Go. Mariam rose to his feet and walked a few feet before the baby started doing ah, ah, it sounds like Mariam signaled the appearance of a heart cry. She's given up. What is this? What do you want from me? The baby laughs toothlessly. Mariam sighed. She sat down and let her finger be grabbed, I looked as the baby creaked as she curled her thick legs into her thighs and kicked the air. Mariam sat there, watching until the baby stopped moving and started snoring slightly. Outside, the mockingbirds sing swampyly and, from time to time, when the songs fly, Mariam saw their wings capture the phosphorescent son in moonlight, which was due through the clouds. And although her throat was dry of thirst and her legs were burned with pins and needles, it was long before Mariam gently freed herself from the baby's grip and stood up. 34. Layla of all earthly pleasures, Layla's beloved lies next to Aziza, the face of her baby so close that she could watch her great disciples expand and shrink. Sometimes she dropped acesis on her chest and whispered in the soft crown of her head about Tariq, the father who was always unknown to Aziza, whose face Azaza would never know. Layla told her about his tendency to solve mysteries, mysteries and misfortunes, laughed easily. He had the most beautiful eyelashes, as thick as yours. Nice chin, fine nose and round illo. Your father was beautiful, Adziza. He was perfect. Perfect, like you. But she was careful never to mention it by name. Sometimes she catches Rasheed watching Achiza in the most peculiar way. The other night, sitting on the floor of the bedroom, where he shaved corn from his leg, he said quite by chance, What was it like between you two? Layla had given him a puzzled look as if she didn't understand. Laili and mainwon. You and the yakling, the sakatia. What was he got, him and you? He was my friend, she said, careful that her voice didn't shift too much into the key. She got drunk making a bottle. You know that. I don't know what I know. Rashius found the balls on the ledge and got on the bed. The springs protested with thunder and electricity. He was toying his legs, and he chose from his crotch. And like... friends, have you two done anything overtime? I'm not okay? Rashius smiled with care, but Layla could feel his gaze, cold and watchy. Let me see now. So, has he ever kissed you? Maybe he put his hand where it wasn't? Leila contacted, hoped, with resentful air. She could feel her heart beating down her throat. He was like Me. So he was a friend or a brother? Both of them. What was it? He was like the two of them. But siblings are creatures of curiosity. To. Sometimes a brother lets her sister see her dick, and a sister will- You make me sick, Lila said. So it's okay. I don't want to talk about it anymore. Rashit tilted his head, winded lips, nodded. People are hooked up. Remember. They said a lot about you two. But you say it's okay. She was trying to look at him. He held her eyes for an excruciatingly long time in a way that made her knuckles pale around the milk bottle and took away everything Leila could muster to keep her from succumbing. She shuddered at what he would do if he found out she was stealing from him. Every week, after Aziza was born, she would open his wallet while he was asleep or in the house and took an account. A few weeks, if the wallet was bright, she took only five Afghan bills, or nothing to fear that he would notice. When the wallet was rounded, she helped her to ten or twenty, once even risking two 20s. She hid the money in a bag she had sewn into the cladding of her winter coat. She wondered what she would do if she knew she was planning to run next spring. By next summer at the latest. Leila hoped there would be a thousand afghanis or better possession, half of which would go to the bus from Kabul to Peshawar. She will stake her wedding ring when the time approaches, as will the other jewels Rasheed had given her a year before, when she was still the malika of his palace. Anyway, he said, finally, his fingers splattered belly, I can't be blamed. I'm a husband. These are the things the husband wonders. But he's lucky he died the way he died. Because if he was here now, if I caught him... He sucked his teeth and cut his head off. What happened to the unkeding of the dead? I guess some people can't be dead enough, he said. Two days later, Layla woke up in the morning and found a pile of baby clothes, neatly folded, in front of the bedroom door. There was a carousel dress with little pink fish sewn around the bodice, a blue floral wool dress with matching socks and sleeveless gloves, yellow pajamas with carrot-colored polka dots, and green cotton trousers with a scoring cuff. There's a rumor, Rasheed said at the dinner that night, hitting his lips without noticing the acid or leila pyjamas had dressed her, that Dostum would change sides and join Hekmatyar. Then Masood will keep his hands full, fighting these two. And we must not forget Hazaras. He took a pinch of the pickled eggplant Mariam had made this summer. Let's hope that's all it is, rumor. Because if that happens, this war - he waved a greasy hand, it would look Friday's picnic in Pagman. Later, he mounted it and relieved himself with a wordless rush, fully clothed, except for his tumba, not removed, but lowered down to the ankles. When the fire was over, he threw her and fell asleep for minutes. Layla got out of the bedroom and found Mariam in the kitchen squatting, cleaning trout. There was already rice next to it. The kitchen smelled like cumin and smoke, baked onions and fish. Layla sat in the corner and draped the hem of her dress. Thank you, she said. Mariam didn't notice it. She finished cutting the first trout and took the second. With a serrated knife, she threw away the fins, then turned the fish, her prop facing her, and cut her from the tail of the gills. Layla watched her thumb stick into her mouth, just above her lower jaw, inserting it and, with one punch down, to remove gills and entrails. The clothes are beautiful. I didn't use them, they washed Mariam. She left the fish on a newspaper, seded with sliven gray juice, and cut off his head. It was either your daughter or moths. Where did you learn to clean fish like that? When I was a little girl, I lived downstream. I used to fish. I've never fished. It's not much. Mostly he's waiting. Leila watched her cut the gutted trout to third. Are you sewing your own clothes? Mariam nodded. When? Mariam rinsed sections of fish in a bowl of water. When I was pregnant the first time. Or maybe a second time. 18, 19 years ago. Anyway, it's been a long time. Like I said, I never used them. You're a really good haath. Maybe you can teach me. Mariam put the paid trout in a clean bowl. Drops of water dripping from her fingers, she raised her head and looked at Layla, looked at her for the first time. The other night, when he... No one has ever stood up for me before, she said. Leila examines Mariam's sagging cheeks, eyelids that beat into tired folds, the deep lines that shaped her - she saw these things as if she were looking at someone for the first time. And for the first time it was not the face of the adversary, Leila saw, but a face of discontent, disobedience, the ordinance of the indefaible, fate succumbed and endured. If she stays, will that be her face, Leila, in 20 years? I couldn't leave him, Layla said. I wasn't raised in a household where people did things like that. This is your family now. You have to get used to it. Not for that. I'm not going to do that. He's going to turn on you, too, you know, Mariam said, wiping her hands with a rag. Soon enough. And you gave him a daughter. So, you see, your sin is less clear than mine. Layla stood up to her feet. I know that cold outside, but how about we sinners have a cup of tea in the yard? Mariam seemed surprised. I can't. I still have to cut out and wash the beans. I'il help you do it in the morning, and I have to clean up here. We'il do it together. If I'm not mistaken, there's a halva left. Very good with tea. Mariam put the rag on the counter. Leila felt anxiety at the way she was pulling on her sleeves, adjusting her hijab, pushing back her hair curl. The Chinese say it is better to be deprived of food for three days from tea for one. Mariam smiled in half. That's a good saying. Yes, it is. But I can't stay long. One glass. They sat on folding chairs outside and ate halva with their fingers from a simple bowl. They had a second glass and when Leila asked her if she wanted a third Mariam said she did. As the shooting cracked in the hills, they watched as clouds glided over the moon and the last fireflies mapped in the dark bright yellow arcs. And when Aziza wakes up crying and Rashid calls Leila to wake up and shut her up, the gaze diverges between Layla and Mariam. Unguarded, knowing gaze. And in this fleeting, silent exchange with Mariam, Leila knew that they were no longer enemies. 35. Mariam from that night onwards, Mariam and Layla did their job together. They sat in the kitchen and winded dough, chopped green onions, minced garlic, offered pieces of Aziza's cucumber, which hit nearby spoons and played with carrots. In the yard, Aziza lay in wicker clothes, a winter exhaust wrapped tightly around her neck. Mariam slowly got used to this erratic but enjoyable communication. She strives to tolerate the three cups of tea she and Layla share in the courtyard, an evening ritual now. In the morning, Mariam looked eagerly at the sound of Leila's cracked slippers clapping her feet as she went down for breakfast and to the tin of Aziza's grinding laughter, to the sight of her eight small teeth, the milky scent of her skin. She was washing dishes that didn't need washing. She rearranges the pillows in the living room. She squandered clean skirting boards. She was doing it until Leila walked into the kitchen and Aziza rose to her hip. When Aziza first noticed Mariam, her eyes always opened, and she began to thunder and squirm in her mother's grasp. She sticks her hands to Mariam, insisting on being held, her little hands open and closing urgently, on her face a look of both adoration and trembling anxiety. What a scene you make, says Leila, freeing her to crawl towards Mariam. What - Calm down. Hala Mariam's not going anywhere. There's your aunt. See? Come on, now. As soon as it was in Mariam's hands, Aziza's thumb was filmed in her mouth and buried her face in Mariam's neck. Mariam was bouncing her hard, half-embarrassed, half-grateful smile on her lips. Mariam was never wanted like this. She's never been told such indifferent love. Aziza made Mariam cry. Why did you get your little heart stuck to an old, ugly witch like me? Mariam was going to grumble in Aziza's hair. Ah? I'm nobody, don't you see? It's Dehati. What do I have to give you? But aziza was just looking content and sneaky. And when he did, Mariam got stuck. Her eyes were soaked. Her heart's draining. And she marveled at how, after all these years of loosening, she discovered in this little creature the first real relationship in her life of fake, unsuccessful relationships. * EARLY THE FOLLOWING YEAR, in January 1994, Dostum changed sides. He joined Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and took up a position near Bala Hisar, the old walls of the citadel that tower over the city from the Koh-e-Shirdavaza mountains. Together, they fired on Masood and Rabbani at the Ministry of Defense and the presidential palace. On both sides of the Kabul River, they drop artillery circles into each other. The streets merged with bodies, glass and crushing pieces of metal. There has been looting, murder and, increasingly, rape, which has been used to intimidate civilians and reward militias. Mariam has heard of women who commit suicide for fear of being raped, and men who, in the name of honor, would have killed their wives or daughters if they had been raped by the militia. Aziza hid in the tremors of mortars. To distract her, Mariam arranged grains of rice on the floor, in the form of a house or a rooster or a star, and let Aziza scatter them. She painted elephants for Atisa, as Jaleel had shown her, with one punch without even lifting the tip of the pen. Rasheed said civilians were killed daily by dozens. Hospitals and shops holding medical supplies were under fire. Cars carrying emergency supplies were prevented from entering the city, he said, attacked. Mariam wondered if he was fighting like that in Herat, too, and if so, how Mullah Faizula was coping, whether he was still alive, and Bibi Jo, along with all her sons, brides and grandchildren. And of course, Jalil. Did he hide, Maryam wondered, like she did? Or did he take his wives and children and flee the country? He hoped Jaleel would be safe, that he would get away with the murders. For a week, the struggle forced even Rashid to stay home. He locked the door to the yard, set traps, locked the front door and barricaded her with the sofa. He rushed the house, Yes, yes, to roll him out the window, clean his gun, charge it and charge it again. He shot twice in the street, claiming to have seen someone climbing the wall. They are forcing young boys to join, he said. It's the Mujahideen. In broad daylight, with a gun. They're draging boys straight off the street. And when soldiers from a rival militia capture these guys, they torture them. I heard they got electrocuted - that's what I heard - that they break their balls with pliers. The boys take them to their homes. Then they assault, kill their fathers, rape their sisters and mothers. He waved his gun over his head. Let them see how they try to get into my house. I'm going to crush their balls! I'm going to blow their heads off! Do you know how lucky you are that you have a man who is not afraid of Shaitan himself? He looked at the ground, noticed the Azzurra at his feet. Get off my shoes! he snapped when he put his gun on it. Stop following me! And you can stop twisting your wrists like that. I'm not taking you. Keep! Go before you set foot. Aziza cried. She went back to Mariam, looking bruised and confused. On Mariam's lap, she sucked her thumb without joy and looked at Rashid in a thoughtful, thoughtful way. Sometimes she looked up, they imagined, looking to calm down. But when it came to fathers, Mariam had no assurances. Mariam was relieved when the fight subsided again, mostly because they no longer had to be flattened with Rasheed, with his sour tempera infecting the household. And he scared her badly to wave the loaded gun near Aziza. One day this winter, Leila asked to knit Mariam's hair. Mariam sat and watched Layla's thin fingers in the mirror tighten the braids, Leila's face shrinking in concentration. Aziza was curled asleep on the floor. At hand was the doll, mariam, which was sewn on her. Mariam had stuffed it with beans, made it a dress with tea-painted fabric and a necklace with small blank threads, through which it was a winding string. Page 20 Then Assyza passed gas in his sleep. Layla started laughing, and Mariam joined in. They laughed like that, at each other's reflection in the mirror, their eyes tearing, and the moment was so natural, so frantic, that suddenly Mariam started telling her about Jalil, Ena and gins. Layla stood with idle hands on Mariam's shoulders, eyes locked on Mariam's face in the mirror. The words came out, like blood gushing from an artery. Mariam told her about Bibi Jo, Mullah Faisula, the humiliating trek to Jalil's house, Nana's suicide. She told of Jalil's wives and the rush with Rashid, the trip to Kabul, her pregnancy, the endless cycles of hope and disappointment, Rasheed turned to her. Then Layla sat at the foot of Mariam's chair. She was absent from the of moss tangled in Aziza's hair. There was silence. I have something to tell you, Layla said. MARIAM DIDN'T SLEEP THAT NIGHT. She sat in bed, watching the snow fall without sound. The seasons had come and gone; in Kabul was found and killed; empire was defeated; the wars are over and new ones are being rebeln. But Mariam barely noticed, he barely cared. She's been through these years in a distant corner of her mind. A dry, barren field, without desire and grieving, beyond sleep and disappointment. The future didn't matter there. And the past possessed only this wisdom: this love was a vicious mistake, and her accomplice, the hope, the treacherous illusion. And when these twin poisonous flowers began pecking in the crossed land of the field, Mariam uprooted them. She uprooted them and dumped them before she grabbed hold of them. But somehow in recent months Layla and Aziza- harami like her, as it turned out, had become an extension of her, and now, without them, the life That Maryam tolerated for so long suddenly seemed unbearable. Come with us, Mariam. The years weren't good for Mariam. But maybe she thought she was still waiting for better years. A new life in which she will find the blessings that grandma said harams like her will never see. Two new flowers unexpectedly germbled in her life, and as Mariam watched the snow come down, she imagined Mullah Faizullah swirling his tassas, beads, leaning over and whispering about her in her soft, trembling voice, But god is the one who planted them, Mariam jo. And His will is to take care of them. That's his will, my girl. 36. Leila As daylight constantly poured darkness from the sky on the spring morning of 1994, Leila became confident that Rasheed knew. He's about to get her out of bed and ask if she really took him as such a coeur, such a donkey that he wouldn't know. But Azan came out, and then the morning sun fell on the roofs, and the roosters crows, and nothing happened in the ordinary. She could hear him now in the bathroom, tapping his razor on the edge of the pool. Then down to heat the tea. The keys have merged. Now he was crossing the yard, riding his bike. Layla was staring at a crack in the curtains. She watched him walk away, a big man on a small bicycle, the morning sun, dictating himself from the handlebars. Leila? Mariam was at the door. Leila could say she didn't sleep. She wonders if Mariam has also been impounded all night by bouts of euphoria and attacks of mouth-drying anxiety. We'll leave in half an hour, Layla said. * In the back seat of the cab, they don't talk. Aziza sat on Mariam's lap, clutching her doll, looking with puzzling the city with speeding. Oh, my Ass! she shouted, pointing at a group of little girls jumping off a rope. Mayum! 20000000000 Everywhere she looked at her, Leila saw Rasheed. She spotted him emerging from a barbershop with windows the color of coal dust, from small booths that sold partridges, from battered, open-air shops packed with old tires accumulated from the ceiling floor. It sank into place. Besides her, Mariam prayed. Leila wanted to see her face, but Mariam was in a burqa, and they were both - and all she could see was the glow of her eyes through the grille. For the first time since Leila's house, in weeks, at a discount on a trip to the pawn shop the day before - where she pushed her ring on glass, where she got excited about the finale of it, knowing there was no going back. Now around her, Layla saw the aftermath of the recent struggle, the sounds of which she had heard from the house. Homes that lay in roofless ruins of brick and jagged stone, pierced buildings with fallen beams pierced through the holes, charred, car shells wrapped, sometimes stacked on top of each other, walls stretched by every possible caliber, shattered glass everywhere. She saw a funeral procession approaching a mosque, a black-clad old woman in the back, who burst into tears on her hair. Layla stumbled across the suitcase, wrapping her fingers around the softness of her daughter's hand. * At taihor bus station, near Paul Mahmoud Khan in eastern Kabul, a number of buses were idling on the pavement. The men in turbans were busy with ropes and spikes, providing suitcases with ropes. In the precinct, the men stood on a long line in the ticket booth. Confused, the dressed women stood in groups and talked, their belongings stuffed at their feet. The babies were jumped, the children chanted for diversion away. The mujahideen were patrolling the precinct and curb, and the orders here and there. They were wearing boots, paced, dusty green tired. They all carry Kalashnikovs. Layla felt observant. She didn't look anyone in the face, but she felt that every person in this place knew she was watching with disapproval what they were doing to Mariam. Do you see anyone? Layla asked. Mariam put Aziza in his arms. Search. That, Leila, knew it would be the first risky part, finding someone suitable to pose with them as a family member. The freedom and opportunities women had between 1978 and 1992 were a thing of the past now-Leila still remembers Babi saying about those years of communist rule that it was time to be a woman in Afghanistan, Leila. Since the mujahideen was captured in April 1992, Afghanistan's name has been Islamic State in Afghanistan. The Supreme Court under Rabbani is now filled with the hard-liner molls that passed the Communist-era decrees that empowered women and instead passed Sharia-based decisions, strict Islamic laws that ordered women to cover up, close their journey without relative men, punish adultery with stones. Even if these laws are enforced, it is sporadic at best. But they're going to impose more on us, Leila told Mariam, if they weren't so busy killing each other. So are we. The second risky part of this trip will come when they actually arrived in Pakistan. Already burdened with nearly two million Afghan refugees, Pakistan had closed its borders to Afghans in January of that year. Leila heard that only those with visas would be allowed in. But the border has always been porous, and Leila knew that thousands of Afghans were still crossing into Pakistan either on bribes or humanitarian grounds - and there were always smugglers who could be hired. We'il find a way when we get there, she told Mariam. How about him? Mariam said, moving with his chin. He doesn't seem reliable. What about him? Too old. And he's traveling with two other men. Eventually, Layla found him sitting outside on a park bench, with a woman slaughtered on his side and a little boy in his pelvis, roughly acys, bouncing to his knees. He was tall and slender, bearded, wearing an open-collared shirt and a modest grey coat with missing buttons. Wait here, she told Mariam. She walks away, again hearing Mariam say a prayer. As Layla approached the young man, he looked up, shielding the sun from his eyes with his hand. &quot;t&quot; Forgive me, brother, but are you going to Peshawar? Yes, he said, smiring. I wonder if you can help us. Can you do us a favor? He handed the boy over to his wife. He and Layla have moved away. What is it, Hamshira? She was encouraged to see that he had tender eyes, a good face. She told him the story that she and Mariam agreed. She was good, she said, a widow. She, her mother and her daughter were left with no one left in Kabul. They were going to Peshawar to stay with their uncle. You want to come with my family, the young man said. I know it's for you. Don't worry, hampshire. I understand. It's not a problem. Let me go and buy my tickets. Thank you, brother. It's a narrow-minded case. God will remember. She pulled the envelope out of her pocket under the burqa and handed it to him. It was worth $1,100,000,000, or half the money she hid in the last year plus the sale of the ring. He slipped the envelope in his pants pocket. Wait here. She was watching him enter the station. He came back half an hour later. It is best to adhere to the he said. The bus leaves in an hour, at 11:00. We'il all go up together. My name is Waville. If they ask you - and they shouldn't---I'll tell them you're my cousin. Layla gave him their names and said she'd remember. Stay close, he said. They were sitting on a bench next door to Weil and his family. It was a sunny, warm morning, the sky sprayed by just a few thrusting clouds that swirl in the distance above the hills. Mariam started feeding Acida a few of the biscuits she remembered to bring them rushed to pack. She proposed to Layla. I'm going to throw up, laugh at Layla. I'm too excited. Me too. Thank you, Mariam. For what? That's why. Because he came with us, Leila said. I don't think I can do this alone. You won't have to. We're going to be okay, aren't we, Mariam, where are we going? Mariam's hand came down the bench and closed over hers. The Qur'an says Allah is east and west, and therefore wherever you turn, there is the purpose of Allah. Bow! Mayum, bow! I see it, Achiza yo, Mariam said. That's right, bow. Soon we'il all be riding on a bump. The things you're going to see. Layla smiled. She was looking at a carpenter in his shop across the street who was looking for wood, sending chips. She watched the cars smash, their windows covered in soot and gloomy. She watched as buses were nursing on the pavement, with peacocks, lions, rising suns and gleaming swords painted on both sides. In the warmth of the morning sun, Layla felt stunned and brave. She had another of those little sparks of euphoria, and when a stray dog with yellow eyes limped from, Layla leaned forward and stroked his back. A few minutes before 11 a.m., a man with a bullhorn urged all passengers to board. The bus doors opened with lush hydraulics. A parade of commuters rushed towards him, murmuring past another to sneak in. Wakil's on his way to Leila until he intercepts his son. We're going home, Leila said. Waql led the way. As they approached the bus, Layla saw faces appearing in windows, noses and palms pressed against the glass. All around them, goodbyes were called out. A young militia soldier was checking tickets at the bus door. Bow! Aziza was crying. Wakil gave tickets to the soldier who tore them in half and returned them. Wakil put his wife on board. Leila saw how it was seen between Kyle and the militia. Wakil, perched on the first step of the bus, leaned over and said something in his ear. The militia nodded. Leila's heart collapsed. You two, with the child, step aside, the soldier said. Layla pretended she couldn't hear. She went up the steps, but he grabbed her by the shoulder and rudely pulled her off the line. You too, he called Mariam. Hurry up, quick! You're holding the line. What's the problem, Leila said through numb lips. We have tickets. My cousin didn't give it to you? He made the finger and spoke in a low voice to another security guard. The second security guard, a bad man with a scar on his right cheek, nodded. Follow me, you told Layla. We have to get on that bus, called Layla, who realized her voice was shaking. We have tickets. Why are you doing this? You're not getting on the bus. You'd better take it. You'il follow me. Unless you want your little girl to see you dragged. As they were led to a truck, Layla looked over her shoulder and spotted Waki's boy in the back of the bus. The boy also saw her and waved happily at her. * At the POLICE station in Torabaz Khan, they are made to sit in one place, at opposite ends of a long, crowded corridor, behind which a man smokes one cigarette after another and gets stuck on a typewriter. It's been three hours. Aziza dispersed from Lila to Mariam, then back. She was playing with a paper clip that the man at the desk gave her. She finished the cookies. He ended up sleeping on Mariam's lap. About three hours later, Layla was taken to the interview room. Mariam was made to wait with Achiza in the hallway. The man sitting on the other side of the desk in the interrogation room was in his 30s and was wearing civilian clothes - a black suit, tie, black loafers. He had a neatly trimmed beard, short hair and eyebrows that met. He stared at Layla, bouncing a pencil to the mat on the desk. We know, he began, clearing his throat and with a fist, with a fist, that you had already told a lie today, the Hampshire. The young man at the station wasn't your cousin. He told us so much. The question is whether you're going to tell more lies today. Personally, I advise you not to. We were going to stay with my uncle, Layla said. That's the truth. The officer nodded. Hamshire in the hallway, she's your mother? Yes, yes. She has a Herati accent. You're not doing this. She grew up in Herat, I was born here in Kabul Of course. And you're widowed? You said you were. My condolences. Where does he live? Peshawar. yes, that's what you said. He licked the index finger on his pencil and framed it on a blank piece of paper. - But where in Peshawar? Which neighborhood, please? Street name, sector number. She gave him the name of the only street she knew in Peshawar, she had heard him mention it once, at the party he cheated on when the Mujahideen first appeared on Kabul - Jamrud Road. Oh, yes. Same street as Pearl Continental Hotel. Maybe he mentioned it. Leila took this opportunity and said he had. Same street, yes. Besides The hotel is on Khiber Road. Lila could hear Aziza crying in the hallway. My daughter's afraid. Can I have it, brother? I prefer a cop. And soon you'il be with her. Do you have a phone number for this uncle? I did it. Very clean and clean. Even with the burqa between them, Layla wasn't buffered by his penetrating eyes. I'm so upset, I seem to have forgotten it. He sighed through his nose. He asked for his uncle's name, his wife's name. How many kids were there? What were their names? Where did he work? How old were you? His questions left Layla shaking. He put on his pencil, shrugged his fingers and leaned forward, as parents do when they want to pass something on to a child. It's a crime for a woman to escape. We see a lot. Women who travel alone claim that their husbands have died. Sometimes they tell the truth, and most of the time they don't. Maybe you'il be locked up for escaping, I guess, no? Let's go, officer... She read the name on his lapel. Officer Rahman. Honor the meaning of your name and show compassion. What difference does it make to you to let two women go? What's wrong with freeing us? We're not criminals. I can't. Please, please. It's a matter of kingon, the Hampshire, a matter of law, Rahman said, injecting his voice with a grave, a self-depless tone. I'm responsible, you see, to maintain order. Despite her frantic state, Layla almost laughed. She was shocked that he had used this word in the face of all the mujahideen factions had committed - the murders, looters, rapes, torture, executions, bombings, tens of thousands of missiles that fired at each other without aduraging the innocent people who would die in the crossfire. Order. But she bit her tongue. If you bring us back, she said, slowly, she won't say what she's going to do to us. She saw the effort it took him not to give in to his eyes. What a man does in his home is his business. What about the law, then, Officer Rahman? Will you be there to maintain order? In terms of politics, we don't interfere in family matters, the Hampshire. Of course not. When it's good for the man. Isn't that a private family matter, as you say? Right? He pushed back from his desk and stood up, straightened his jacket. I believe this interview is over. I have to say, hampshire, you made a very bad case for yourself. Really poor. Now, if you wait outside, I'il have a few words with your... any one of them. Layla started protesting, then shouting, and he had to call for help from two other men to get her out of his office. Mariam's interview lasted only a few minutes. When she came out, she looked He asked so many questions, she said. I'm sorry, Layla joe. I'm not as smart as you. He asked so many questions, I didn't know the answers. I'm sorry, but I can't keep warm. It's not your fault, Mariam said weakly, Layla. That's mine. It's all my fault. It's all my fault. 21, it was six hours before the police car got into front of the house. Lila and Mariam are made to wait in the back seat, guarded by a mujahideen soldier in the passenger seat. The driver is the one who got out of the car, knocked on the door, who spoke to Rashid. He asked them to come. Welcome home, the man said in the front seat, lighting a cigarette. YOU, he told Mariam. You wait here. Mariam quietly sat on the couch. You two, upstairs. Rasheed grabbed Layla on the elbow and pushed her up the stairs. He was still wearing the shoes he was wearing at work, he hadn't changed into his flip-flops yet, he took off his watch, he didn't even shed his coat. Leila imagined him, as it must have been an hour, or perhaps minutes earlier, rushing from one room to another, banging on doors, furious and cursing under his breath. At the top of the stairs, Leila turned to him. She didn't want to do it, she said. I made her do it. Layla didn't see the impact coming. One minute she was talking, and the next she was on the four, wide-eyed and red-faced, trying to catch her breath. It was as if the car had hit her at full speed, in the gentle place between the lower end of the sternum and the navel. She realized that she had missed the Ati, that the Ats were screaming. She tried to breathe again and could make a husky, suffocating sound. Dribble hung from her mouth. Then they drag her from her hair. She saw Aziza lift up, she saw her sandals slip away, her little legs kicking. Her hair was ripped off Lila's scalp, and her eyes were soaked in pain. She saw his leg open the door to Mariam's room, and she saw Eliza throw herself on the bed. He let Leila's hair go, and she felt his shoe connect to her left buttocks. She screamed in pain as he slammed the door. The key was in the lock. Aziza was still screaming. Layla curled up on the floor to get drunk. She pushed on her hands, crawled to where Achiza lay on the bed. She contacted her daughter. Downstairs, the beating began. For Layla, the sounds she hears are those of a methodical, familiar procedure. There were no cursing, screaming, no pleas, surprised those, just the systematic work of being beaten, kicking, hitting something hard, repeatedly hitting the flesh, something, someone hitting a wall with a smolding, tearing fabric. And then Lila heard running, wordless pursuit, furniture, change, shaking glass, and tremors again. Lila took Aziza in her arms. A She dispersed at the front of her dress as Aziza's bladder let go. Downstairs, the run and chase finally stopped. Now there was a sound like a wooden club repeatedly hitting meat. Lila shook her head as the sounds stopped, and when she heard the screen door squeaking and slammed, she lowered Ajiza to the ground and peeked out the window. She saw Rashid lead Mariam through the yard to her neck. Mariam was barefoot and doubled. There was blood on his hands, blood on Mariam's face, her hair, on her neck and back. Her shirt was torn at the front. I'm sorry, Mariam, you called Layla in the glass. She watched him push Mariam into the teddies. He walked in, came out with a hammer and a couple of long planks of wood. He closed the double doors of the shed, took a key out of his pocket, worked the padlock. He tested the doors, then went to the back of the shed and brought a ladder. A few minutes later, his face was on Layla's window, tucked into the corner of his mouth. His hair was shaken. There was blood on his forehead. At his sight, Aziza shrugged and buried his face in Lila's armpit. Rasheed started nailing boards out the window. * THE DARK WAS TOTAL, impenetrable and permanent, without layer or texture. Rashid filled the cracks between the boards with something, put a large and unshakeable object at the foot of the door, so there is no light under it. Something was stuffed in the lock. Layla found it impossible to say that time with her eyes, so she did it with her good ear. Azan and the crows signaled the morning. The sounds of plaques bowing in the kitchen downstairs, the radio, meant the evening. The first day they touched and burst for each other in the darkness. Lila couldn't see Ajiza when she cried when she crawled. Aisi, Aziza's being snudged. It's Aisi. Soon. Layla kissed her daughter, aiming for the forehead, instead finding the crown on her head. We'il have milk soon. Just be patient. Be a good, patient little girl for Mammy, and I'il bring you some ashier. Layla sang her a few songs. Azan came out for the second time and Rashid had not given them any food, let's worse, without water. That day, they had thick, suffocating heat. The room turned into a pressure cooker. Layla dragged dry tongue over her lips, thinking of the tea outside, the water cold and fresh. Aziza kept crying, and Layla noticed with alarm that when she wiped her cheeks, her hands warmed. She took off Aziza's clothes, tried to find something to cheer her up so she could blow her away until I got too excited. Soon Aziza stopped crawling around. She slipped and came out of her sleep. Several times that day, Layla punches fists into the walls, uses her energy screaming for help, hoping that you will hear. But no one came, and she wept only a frightened Achiza, who began to cry again, weak, the sly sound. Layla's down on the ground. She thought it was Mariam's fault, beaten and bleeding, locked in this heat in cannons. Layla fell asleep at some point, her body baked in the heat. She dreamed she and Adziza ran into Tariq. He was across the street from them, under the awning of the seamstress. He was sitting on his buns and trying from a crate of figs. That's your dad, Leila said. That man over there, you see him? He's your real grandmother. She called his name, but the street noise drowned out her voice, and Tariq didn't hear. He woke up while the missile was stretching. Somewhere the sky he could not see erupted from blasts and with the long, unheralded hammer of the machine fire. Layla closed her eyes. She woke up again in Rasheed's heavy footsteps in the hallway. She dragged herself to the door, slapping her palms against him. Just one glass, Rasheed. Not for me. You did it for her. You don't want her blood to get dirty on your hands. He walked past him. She started begging him. She begged for forgiveness, she cursed him. His door's closed. The radio's on. Muezina called Azan a third time. The heat again. Aziza became even more helpless. She stopped crying, stopped moving completely. Layla has her ear over Aziza's mouth every time she doesn't hear his shallow spiritualization. Even this simple act of lifting made her swim. She fell asleep, had dreams she couldn't remember. When she woke up, she checked on Aziza, felt the cracks in her lips, a weak pulse on her neck, went to bed again. They were going to die here, for Layla she was sure now, but what she was really afraid of was that she was going to blow up Atza, who was young and frail. How much longer can aziz take? Aziza was going to die in this heat, and Layla would have to lie next to her hardened little body and wait for her own death. He's asleep again. I woke up. Asleep. The line between sleep and wakefulness is blurred. It wasn't the Roosters and Azan who woke her up again, but the sound of something heavy was being dragged. She heard how it happened. Suddenly, the room was flooded with light. Her eyes screamed in protest. Layla raised her head, burst out and closed her eyes. Through the cracks between her fingers, she saw a large, blurry silhouette that stood in a rectangle of light. The silhouette has moved. There was a shape that leaned be side by her, hanging over her and a voice to her ear. Try again, and I'il find you. I swear in the name of the Prophet, I will find you. And when I do, there is no judgment in this godforsaken country that holds me accountable for what I will do. Mariam first, then for her, and you're the last. I'il watch you. - No, no, no, no, no, no, I'm not going to make you watch. And with He left the room. But not until I kick in the hip that's going to make Layla pee for days of blood. 37. Mariam SEPTEMBER 1996 Two and a half years later, Mariam woke up on the morning of September 27 to the sounds of shouting and whistling, firemen and music. She ran into the living room, found Layla already on the window, Aziza mounted on her shoulders. Layla turned around and smiled. The Taliban are here, she said. Mariam had first heard of the Taliban two years earlier, in October 1994, when Rasheed brought home news that they had overthrown the militants in Kandahar and taken over the city. They were a guerrilla force, he said, made up of young Pascoe men whose families fled to Pakistan during the war against the Russians. Most of them were raised, some even born refugee camps along the Pakistani border, and in Pakistani madrassas, where they studied in Sharia from molly. Their leader was a mysterious, illiterate, one-eyed hermit named Mullah Omar, who, Rasheed said with a little amusement, was called Ameer-ul-Mumineen, Leader of the Faithful. It's true that these guys don't have risa, they don't have roots, Rasheed said, addressing neither Mariam nor Leila. Ever since the failure of the escape, two and a half years ago, Mariam knew that she and Layla had become the same being with him, just as miserable, deserving of his distrust, his contempt and disregard. When she spoke, Mariam felt like she was having a conversation with herself or with some invisible presence in the room, which, unlike her and Layla, was worthy of his opinions. Maybe they don't have a past, he said, smoking and looking at the ceiling. They may know nothing about the world or the history of this country. To. And, by comparison, Mariam can be a university professor. Ha! It's all true. But look around you. What do you see? Corrupt, greedy mujahideen, armed to the teeth, rich heroines, declaring jihad to each other and killing everyone between... At least the Taliban are pure and rebellious. At least they're good Muslims. Vala, when they come, they'il clean this place up. They will bring peace and order. People won't shoot themselves anymore, going for milk. No more missiles! Think about it. For two years, the Taliban have been heading to Kabul, taking over the towns from the Mujahideen, ending the international war wherever they settle. They captured Hazara commander Abdul Ali Mazari and executed him. For months, they settled on the southern outskirts of Kabul, firing on the city, exchanging missiles with Ahmad Shah Mahmoud. Earlier in September 1996, they overran the cities of Jalalabad and Sarobi. The Taliban had one thing the Mujahideen did not do, Rasheed said. They were united. Let them come, he said. I, for one, will bathe them with rose petals. * They came out that day, the four of them, Rashid led them from one bus to another to congratulate their new world, their new leaders. In every hit neighborhood, Mariam finds people materializing from the rubble and moving through the streets. She saw an old woman wasting a handful of rice, throwing it at passers-by, a saggy, toothless smile on her face. Two men hugged from the wreckage of a gutted building, in the sky above them the whistle, a score and several fiery throats lit by boys perched on rooftops. The national anthem plays on the cassette decks, competing with the Honda of cars. Look, Mayem! Aziza pointed to a group of guys who were running on Nedh Masond. They pounded their fists in the air and tossed rusty cans tied with threads. They shouted that Masood and Rabbani had withdrawn from Kabul. There were cries everywhere: Allah-woo-akbar! Mariam saw a bed hanging from Jade Meivlad's window. On it someone drew three words in large black letters: ZENDA BAAD TALIBAN! Long live the Taliban! As they walked through the streets, Mariam noticed more signs - painted on windows, nailed to doors, nailed by car antennas - proclaiming the same. Mariam SAW her for the first time by the Taliban later that day, in Pashtunistan Square, with Rashid, Lila and Aziza. That's where people had gathered. Mariam saw people writhing on their necks, people crowded around the blue wash in the center of the square, people landed on his dry bed. They were trying to see the end of the square, near the old Hiber restaurant. Rashied uses his size to push and drive them past the eyes and take them to the place where someone speaks through a loudspeaker. When Aziza saw, she dropped a shrek and buried her face in Mariam's mess. The voice of the speaker belonged to a slender, bearded boy wearing a black turban. He was standing on some improv, scaffolding. In his free hand, he holds a rocket launcher. In addition to him, two men with blood hung from ropes tied to traffic lights. Their clothes were torn. Their swollen faces turned purple-blue. I know him, said Mariam, the one on the left. A young woman in front of Mariam turned around and said she was Najibullah. The other man was his brother. Mariam recalled Najibullah's plump face beaming from billboards and showcases during the Soviet years. She later heard that the Taliban had kidnapped Najibullah from his shrine at UN headquarters near Daruman Palace. That they tortured him for hours, tied his legs to a truck and dragged his lifeless body through the streets. He killed many, many Muslims! the young Talib was shouting through the loudspeaker. He speaks Farsi with an accent, then he fell in love with Pascoe. He rewrones his words by pointing out the corpses with His crimes are familiar to everyone. He was a communist and a kafir. This is what we do with infidels who commit crimes against Islam! Rasheed has been slaughtered. In Mariam's hands, Achiza began to cry. * The next day Kabul was conquered by trucks. In Qair kana, in Shar-e-Nau, in Karte-Parwan, in Wazir Akbar Khan and Taimani, Toyota's red trucks intertwine in the streets. Armed bearded men in black turbans sat on their beds. From every truck, loudspeaker, climbed messages, first in Farsi, then Pushu. The same message is broadcast from the speakers perched on top of mosques and on the radio, which is now known as Sherry's Voice. The message was also written on leaflets caught on the street. Mariam found one in the yard. Our vacancy is now known as the Islamic emirate of Afghanistan. These are the laws we will enforce, and you will obey: All citizens must pray five times a day. If it's time to pray and you're caught doing something else, you'll be beaten. All men will grow beards. The correct length is at least one curled fist under the chin. If you don't stick to it, you'il be defeated. All the boys will wear turbans. Boys in grades 1 through 6 will wear black turbans, the higher classes will wear white. All the boys will wear Islamic clothes. Collars with the collar will be fastened. Singing is forbidden. Dancing is forbidden. Cards for playing, playing chess, gambling and kite are prohibited. Writing books, watching movies and drawing pictures are prohibited. If you keep parrots, you'il be defeated. Your birds will be killed. If you steal, your hand will be cut off on the wrist. If you steal again, your leg will be cut off. If you are not Muslim, do not worship, where you can see from Muslims. If you do, you'il be beaten and imprisoned. If you are caught trying to turn a Muslim into your faith, you will be executed. Attention, women: You will stay in your homes at all times. It's not right for women to wander the streets aimlessly. If you go outside, you should be accompanied by a maham, a male relative. If you get caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home. Under no circumstances will you show up. You'il cover with a burqa when you get out. If you don't, you'il be badly beaten. Cosmetics are forbidden. &quot;t&quot; Jewellery is forbidden. You won't be wearing charming clothes. You won't talk unless you talk. You're not going to make contact with men. You're not going to laugh in public. If you do, you'il be defeated. You're not going to nail your nails. If you do, you'il lose your finger. Girls are forbidden to go to school. All girls' schools will be closed immediately. Women are forbidden to work. If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death. Listen. Listen carefully. Respect. - I'm Alhbar. Rashius Rashius from the radio. They sat on the living room floor, having dinner less than a week after seeing Najibullah's body hanging on a rope. Leila said they can't get half the population to stay home and do nothing. Why not? Rasheed said. For once, Mariam agreed with him. He did the same to her and Layla, actually, didn't he? I'm sure Leila saw that. This isn't some village. This is Kabul. Women here practice law and medicine; They held a position in the government- Rashid was treasonous. You speak like the arrogant daughter of a university poet you are. How wheat, how Tajik, to you. Do you think this is a new, radical idea that the Taliban will bring? Have you ever lived outside your little shell in Kabul, my gula? Have you ever been interested in visiting the real Afghanistan, the south, the east, along the border with the Tribal Border with Pakistan? Not? It's me. And I can tell you that there are many places in this country that have always lived this way, or close enough. Not that you'il know. I refuse to believe it, Layla said. They're not serious. What the Taliban did to Najibullah seemed serious to me, Rasheed said. Don't you agree? He was a communist! He was the head of the secret police. Rasheed laughed. Mariam heard the answer in his laughter: that in the eyes of the Taliban, as a communist and leader of the fearsome HAD, he made Najibullah only a little more resentful than a woman. 38. Leila Leila is glad that the Taliban were going to work, that Babi was not here to see this. He was going to cripple it. Page 22 The people who dug with pickaxes, snide from the ruined Kabul museum and smashed pre-Islamic statues to rubble, that is, those who had not already been looted by the Mujahideen. The university was closed and its students sent home. Paintings are plucked from walls, cut with blades. Tv screens were kicked. Books, with the exception of the Koran, were burned in piles, the shops that sell them. The poems Khalili, Pajak, Ansari, Haji Dehkan, Ashrachi, Beitab, Hafez, Jami, Nizami, Rumi, Khayam, Beidel and others climbed into smoke. Leila heard that men were dragged from the streets, accused of fleeing from smears and shoved into mosques. She learned that marco polo restaurant near Chicken Street had been turned into an interrogation centre. Sometimes you could hear yourself screaming behind your black windows. Everywhere, the Beard patrol roams the streets in Toyota trucks on the lookout for clean-shaven faces of bloodied. And the cinema is closed. Cinema park. Ariana. It's Ariab. Projectors have been overturned and reels of films are being fired. Leila remembered all the times she and Tariq had sat in these theaters watching Hindi movies, all these melodramatic stories of lovers, separated by some tragic twist, once in some distant country, the other in marriage, weeping, singing in the fields of the wee, the yearning for gathering. She recalled Tariq laughing at her for crying in those movies. I wonder what they did to father's cinema, Mariam said one day. If he's still there, that's it. Harabat, Kabul's ancient musical ghetto, is silenced. Musicians have been beaten and current, their rubies, tambours and harmonies trampled. The Taliban went to the grave of Tariq's favorite singer, Ahmad Zahir, and fired bullets. He's been dead for almost twenty years, Layla told Mariam. Isn't that enough to die? Rasheed was not disturbed by the Taliban. All he had to do was grow a beard, which he did, and visit the mosque, which he also did. Rasheed regarded the Taliban with forgiveness, an affectionate kind of remorse, as one could be considered an unpredictable cousin, prone to unpredictable acts of glee and scandal. On Wednesday, Rasheed listened to Shari's voice as the Taliban announced the names of those who would be punished. Then, on Friday, he went to Ghazy Stadium, bought pepsi, and watched the spectacle. In bed, he made Leila listen, as he described with a kind of excitement the hands he had seen, weeping, hanging, beheading. I saw a man slit his brother's killer's throat today, he said one night, blowing haloes of smoke. They're savages, Leila said. Do you think so? He said. Compared to what? The Russians killed a million people. Do you know how many people have killed Mujahideen in Kabul alone in the last four years? Fifty thousand. Fifty thousand! Can't we cut off the hands of a couple of thieves? Eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. Besides, tell me this: if someone killed Aziza, wouldn't you want to have a chance to avenge her? Layla shot him disgustingly. I'm doing something, he said. You're just like them. Interesting eye color he has, Aziza. Don't you think so? This is neither yours nor mine. Rasheed turned to her, slightly scratching her thigh with the twisted fingernail on her index finger. Let me explain, he said. If my fantasy hits - and I'm not saying it will- but maybe it will be that I will be within my rights to give to Aziza. How are you going to like it? Or go to the Taliban one day, just come in and say I have my suspicions about you. That's all it's going to cost us. Who do you think they're going to believe? What do you think they'il do to you? Layla pulled her thigh out of him. Not that I would, he said. I wouldn't. No, no, no, no, no- Probably not. You know me. You're pathetic, Leila said. That's a big word, Rasheed said. I've always liked that about you. Even when you were a kid, when you were running around in this cripple, you were at 7:00. He was so smart, with the books and the poems. What's good in your mind now? What keeps you off the streets, your minds or me? I'm pathetic? Half the women in this town would kill to have a husband like me. They'd kill for him. He turned away and blew smoke to the ceiling. Do you like big words? I'il give you one: perspective. That's what I'm doing here, Leila. Let's make sure you don't lose perspective. What Layla's stomach did for the rest of the night was that every word Rasheed uttered was true. But in the morning, and a few mornings later, the care in her intestines continued, after which it deteriorated, something terribly familiar became. * One cold, cloudy afternoon soon after, Layla lay on her back on the bedroom floor. Mariam was falling out with Aziza in her room. In Leila's hands is a metal needle that she snapped with pliers from an abandoned wheel. She had found him in the same alley where she kissed Tariq years ago. For a long time, Layla lay on the floor, sucking air through her teeth, her legs parted. She adored Achiza from the moment she first suspected her existence. There was no doubt about that self-confidence, that uncertainty. What a terrible thing it was, Leila thought now, of a mother afraid she couldn't summon love for her own child. What an unnatural thing. Yet she marvels as she lay on the floor, sweaty hands to direct talk, if she really could love Rashid's child as she had Tariq. In the end, Layla couldn't do it. It wasn't the fear of bleeding that caused her to give up talking, or even the idea that the act was damned, which she suspected. Her war was against Rasheed. The baby was innocent. And there's already been enough murders. Leila has seen enough killings of innocents lit in the crossfire of enemies. 39. Mariam SEPTEMBER 1997 This hospital no longer treats women, supervises security. He stood at the top of the stairs, looking down on the ice of the crowd gathered outside Malalai Hospital. A loud stone rose from the crowd. But this is a women's hospital! a woman yelling at Mariam. Then he swore. Mariam shifted Aziza from one hand to the other. With her free hand, she supported Leila, who was dripping and had a hand waving around Rasheed's neck. Not anymore, Talbot said. My wife's having a baby! a man was shouting. Will you give birth to her on the street, brother? In January of that year, Mariam heard the announcement that men and women would be spotted in various hospitals, that all women's staff would be discharged from Kabul hospitals and sent from the hospital work in one central facility. No one believed it, and the Taliban didn't implement the policy. - See you now. What about Ali Abad Hospital? - another man cried. The guard shook his head. Wazir Akbar Khan? Only men, he said. What do we do? Go to Rabia Balki, the guard said. A young woman moved forward, said she was already there. They didn't have clean water, she said, no oxygen, no medicine, no electricity. There's nothing there. That's where you're going, the guard said. There were more moans and screams, an insult or two. Someone threw a rock. The Talib raises his Kalashnikov and shoots into the air. Another Talib behind him was defending a whip. The crowd quickly dispersed. * The waiting room in Ravia Balki was rubbing with women in burqas and their children. The air soaked sweat and non-washable bodies, on the legs, urine, cigarette smoke, and antiseptic agent. Under the ceiling fan, the children chased, jumping at the feet of the clogged fathers. Mariam helped Layla face a wall from which sections of stucco were stopped as foreign countries. Layla shook her head, her hands pressed against her abdomen. I'il see you, Leila joe. Promise. Be quick, rasheed says. Before the registration window is a horde of women banging and pushing each other. Some were still holding their babies. Some fell off the table and loaded the double doors that led to the treatment rooms. An armed guard blocked them and returned them. Mariam jumped in. She dug in her heels and leaned on the elbows, hips and shoulders of strangers. Someone put it in the ribs and it folded backwards. The hand grabbed her. She took it away. To push forward, Mariam stabbed himself in the necks, on his arms and elbows, on his hair, and when a woman nearby hissed, Mariam was stabbed back. Mariam now saw the sacrifices mother made. Decency was only one thing. She thought with exonerated of the victims, which she had also made. A nina who could give it away, or throw it somewhere in a ditch and run away. Instead, Nina had experienced the shame of carrying harams, had shaped her life around the thankless task of raising Mariam and loving her in her own way. And in the end, Mariam had chosen Jalil over her. As she struggled with the pere of determination in front of the melee, Mariam hoped to be Baba's better daughter. She wanted to know what she knew about motherhood now. She finds herself face to face with a sister who was covered head-to-toe in a dirty grey burqa. The nurse was talking to a young woman whose masterpiece was soaked in a piece of matte blood. My daughter's water has expired and the baby is not coming, Mariam said. I'm talking to her! a young woman was crying. Wait your turn! The whole mass of them was swinging sideways, like the tall grass around the flask, when the breeze shifted. The woman behind Mariam screams that the girl broke her elbow falling from a tree. Another woman wept as she passed bloody stools. Is there a fever? the nurse asked. It took Mariam a while to realize she was talking to her. No, Mariam said. I'm bleeding? No, no, no. Where is she? Above his heads, Mariam pointed to where Leila was sitting with Rasheed. We're going to get to her, the nurse said. How long? Mariam was crying. Someone grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her back. I don't know, the nurse said. She said they only have two doctors and both have had surgery at the moment. She is suffering, Mariam said. Me too, the woman with the blood on her head. Wait your turn! Mariam was dragged back. The view of the nurse was blocked by the shoulders and backs of the heads. She smelled a baby's milk burp. Take her for a walk, call the nurse. And wait. It was dark outside when a nurse finally called them. In the delivery room there are eight beds on which women have been looking and twisted with a tendency to be by fully covered nurses. Two of the women were on the run. There are no curtains between the beds. Layla got a bed at the end, under a window that someone painted in black. There was a sink nearby, cracked and dry, and a rope above the sink from which stained surgical gloves hung. In the middle of the room, Mariam saw an aluminum table. On the upper shelf there were soot of soot color; the bottom shelf was empty. One of the women saw Mariam watching. They put the living on top, she said tiredly. The doctor, in a dark blue burqa, was a small, hard-nosed woman with bird's movements. Everything you said sounded impatient and urgent. First baby. She said it that way, not as a question, but as a statement. Second, Mariam said. Layla let out a scream and rolled on her side. Her fingers are closed against Mariam. Any problems with the first delivery? No, no, no. You're the mother? Mariam said. The doctor picked up the lower half of the burqa and produced a metal conical tool. She raised Leila's burqa and placed the wide end of the instrument on her belly, the narrow end of her own ear. She listened for almost a minute, changed spots, listened again, changed seats again. Now I have to feel the baby, Hampshire. She put one of the gloves hung from a stick over the sink. She pushed Layla's belly with one hand and slid the other inside. Layla whines. When the doctor is ready, she gave the glove to a nurse who rinsed it and fastened it back to the string. Your daughter needs a caesarean section. You know what this is? Have open your womb and pull the baby out because she's in a messy position. I don't understand, Mariam said. The doctor said the baby was in place so he wouldn't come out on his own. We have to go to the operating room right away. Layla gave a grim nod and her head bent to one side. There's something I need to tell you, the doctor said. She approached Mariam, leaned over and spoke in a lower, more confidential tone. At the moment, there was a hint of shame in her voice. What does she say? Layla moaned. Something wrong with the baby? But how will it last? Mariam said. The doctor must have heard the accusations on this subject, judging by the defensive shift in her tone. Do you think I want it that way? I don't know, she said. What do you want me to do? They're not going to give me what I need. I don't have an X-ray, no oxygen, no antibiotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away. Или текат пари до местата, Но, доктор сахиб, няма ли нещо, което да й дадеш? Mariam asked. What's going on? Layla moaned. You can buy the drug, but--Write the name, Mariam said. Write it down and I'il take it. Under the burqa, the doctor shook his head. There's no time, she said. On one thing, none of the nearby pharmacies have it. So you'll have to fight through traffic from one place to another, perhaps throughout the city, with little chance of finding it. It's almost 8:30, so you'il probably be arrested for violating the curfew. Even if you find the cure, you probably can't afford it. Or you'il find yourself at war with someone just as desperate. There's no time. This baby has to come out now. Tell me what's going on! Leila said. She had thrown on her elbows. The doctor took a breath, then told Layla that the hospital did not have anesthesia. But if we postpone, you'il lose your baby. Then open me up, Layla said. She went back to bed and drew her knees. Cut me and give me the baby. * In the OLD one, Leila Layla lay on a bed on a stretcher while the doctor rubbed her hands in a pool. Layla's shaking. She dragged through her teeth every time her sister wiped her tummy with a towel soaked in yellow-brown liquid. Another sister was standing at the door. She kept opening it to look outside. The doctor was already out of the burqa and Mariam saw that he had a comb of silver hair, heavily closed eyes and small bags of fatigue in the corners of his mouth. They want us to operate on the burqa, the doctor explained, turning his head to the nurse at the door. She keeps watching. She sees them coming; I'm covering. She said this in a pragmatic, almost indifferent way, and Mariam understood that this was a woman who was far past the immortal. She thought she was lucky to be at work, that there was always something to take away. On both sides of Leila's shoulders were two vertical metal rods. With pins, the nurse who cleaned Leila's belly hung a piece of paper for them. She forms a curtain between Layla and the doctor. Mariam positioned herself behind the crown of Leila's head and lowered her face so their cheeks touched. She could feel Layla shake you. Their hands are locked together. Through the curtain, Mariam saw the doctor's shadow move to the left of Layla, the nurse to the right. Layla's lips were stretched all the way up here. Spit bubbles formed and popped to the surface of her clenched teeth. She made quick, little room sounds. The doctor said, Take the heart, sis. She leaned over Layla. Leila's eyes opened. Then her mouth opened. She held like this, held, held, trembled, the ropes in her neck stretched out, her sweat dripping from her face, her fingers crushing Mariam. Mariam would always admire Leila for how long it was before she screamed. 40. Leila EU 1999 It was Mariam's idea to dig the hole. One morning, she headed for a piece of dirt behind the narrow-minded thesis. We can do it here, she said. This is a good place. They took turns hitting the ground with a shovel, then pouring the unruly to the ground. They didn't plan a big hole, or a deep hole, so digging work shouldn't be as difficult as it turned out. The drought began in 1998, in its second year, which struck everywhere. Barely snow in winter and it did not rain all spring. All over the country, farmers abandoned their withered lands, selling their goods, roaming from village to village, looking for water. They moved to Pakistan or Iran. They settled in Kabul. But there were also low tables in the city, and the shallow well dried up. The lines in the deep wells were so long that Layla and Mariam spent hours waiting their turn. The Kabul River, without its annual spring floods, turned dry. It was a public toilet, nothing in it but human waste and rubble. So they continued to swing the shovel and striking, but the sun-bubbled ground hardened like a rock, the dirt tireless, crossed, almost petrified. Mariam was 40 now. Her hair, winded over her face, had a few stripes of grey in it. The bags curled under her eyes, brown and crescent. She lost two teeth in front. One fell, the other Rashid was knocked out when she accidentally missed Talmi. Her skin was crushed by the time they spent in the yard under the cheeky sun. They sat and watched Izale may have pursued Aziza. Page 23 when the hole was dug, they stood over it and looked down. It has to happen, Mariam said. THERE WERE TWO OF THEM NOW. He was a plump little boy with curly hair. He had small brownish eyes and a pink tint on his cheeks, like Rashid, regardless of the weather. He also had his father's hairline, thick and crescent, standing on his forehead. When Leila was alone with him, Llałmay was sweet, well messy and playful. He liked to climb on Lila's shoulders, play hide-and-seek in the yard with her and Aziza. Sometimes, in his quieter moments, he liked to sit on Layla's lap and make her sing for him. His favorite song is Mullah Mohammed Zhang. He swung with his meaty feet as he sang in curly hair and joined the choirs, singing what words he could do with his beaded voice: Let's go to Mazar, Mullah Mohammed Yan, to see the fields of tulips, o beloved companion. Leila loved the damp kisses Llaldmai planted on her cheeks, loved his udders and tough little legs. She liked to tickle him, build tunnels with pillows and pillows to crawl through, watch him fall asleep in his hands with one of his hands, which always presses her ear. How close he was to coming. It was inconceivable to her that she could even get a word. Her son was a blessing, and Layla calmed down to find out that her fears proved helpless, that she loved Zalmay with the bone marrow of her bones, just as Aziz did. But Salma worshipped his father, and because he did, he transformed himself when his father was around to frame him. Lazmay was quick back then with an unwavering gypsy or blatantly slaughtered. In the presence of his father, he was easily offended. He had the anger. He persisted in evil despite Leila's snitch, which he never did when Rasheed was away. Rasheed approved everything. A sign of intelligence, he said. He said the same thing as Nalmei's recklessness: when he took over, then izaka, marble; when he is lit with matches; when you chewed Rashid's cigarettes. When Reviews was born, Rasheed moved him to the bed he shared with Leila. He bought him a new crib and had lions and shrink leopards painted on the side panels. He had paid for new clothes, new rattles, new bottles, new diapers, although they could not afford them, and Aziza's old ones were still served. One day, he came home with a cell phone hanging over Reviews's crib. Small yellow and black bees scattered by sunflowers, and they invaded and creaked when squeezing. When it was turned on, a song was played. I thought you said business was slow, Layla said. I have friends I can borrow from, he said unfazedly. How are you going to pay them back? Things are going to turn around. always does. Look, he likes it. You see? Most days, Layla is deprived of her son. Rasheed took him to the store, crawling him under his crowded worktable, playing with old rubber soles and spare pieces of leather. Rasheed drove in his iron claws and turned the wheel of the sandpaper and watched him. If Halmay was too trunked, Rashid swore it gently, in a calm, semi-smiling way. If he did it again, Rashid put his hammer on, sat at his desk and spoke quietly to him. His patience with Zam was a well he had started and never dried up. They came home in the evening, Reviews's head bouncing on Rasheed's shoulder, and they both smelled of glue and skin. They grined at the way people who share a secret do plums, as if they were sitting in this blurred shoe store, not making shoes, but creating secret plots. Zalamaj liked to sit next to his father for dinner, where they played private games, with Mariam, Lila and Aziza placing records on sofrah. They line up to beat each other on the chest, giggle, get drunk with crumbs, whisper things that others can't hear. If Leila spoke to them, Rashid looked on with displeasure at the unwanted intrusion. If she wants to keep Llalma-- or worse, if Lazmai's got a shone for her- Rashed shone on her. Layla's gone stung. * ONE NIGHT, a few weeks after Reviews turned two, Rashied came home with a TV and video. The day was warm, almost balmy, but the evening was cooler and already thickens on a starless, cold night. He put it on the living room table. He said he bought it on the black market. Another loan? Layla asked. It's Magnavox. Aziza walked into the room. When I see the TV, it runs. Watch out, Aziza yo, Mariam said. Don't touch it. Aziza's hair became as bright as Layla's. Layla could see her own lint on her cheeks. Aziza has become a calm, thoughtful little girl, with a humiliation that Layla looked beyond her six years. Leila admired her daughter's way of speech, rhythm and rhythm, her thoughtful pauses and elations so adult, so at odds with an immature body that set the voice. Aziza was the one who, with carefree authority, had pushed to wake Zalmay every day, dress him, feed him, have breakfast with his hair. She made him sleep, who played his erratic siblings. Around him, Aziza had embarked on a cranky, shamelessly old shake. Aziza pressed the POWER TV button. Rasheed frowned, snatched his wrist and put it on the table, not at all. It's Reviews's TV, he said. Aziza went to Mariam and got on her lap. They were both inseparable. Later, with Leila's blessing, Mariam began to study verses from the Qur'an from Aziza. Aziza could recite to heart the sura of the class, the surah of the Fatih, and I already knew how to perform the four rubies of morning prayer. That's all I have to give her, Mariam had told Layla, this knowledge, these prayers. They're the only real possession I've ever had. Reviews came to the room. As Rashid watched with anticipation, the way people waited for the simple tricks of street wizards, Stallmi pulled out the tv wire, pressed the buttons, pressed his palms on a blank screen. When I picked them up, small palms faded from the glass. Rasheed smiled with pride, watching Reviews continue to press his palms and lift them over and over again. The Taliban have banned television. The videos were ripped out in public, the strips were ripped out and leveled at the fence posts. Satellite dishes were hung from the lamp posts. But Rasheed said that just because things are forbidden doesn't mean you can't find them. I'm going to start looking for cartoons tomorrow, he said. It's not going to be hard. You can buy everything in underground bazaars. Then maybe you could buy us a new well, Leila said, and that earned her a gentle look from Leila. Later, after eating a dinner of plain white rice, and tea was taken away again because of the drought after Rasheed smoked a cigarette, he told Layla of his decision. No, Leila said. He said he didn't ask. I don't care if you are or not. You would be if you knew the whole story. He said he borrowed from more friends than he left, that the money from the store was no longer enough to support them. I didn't tell you to spare you sooner. Besides, he said, you'd be surprised how much they can bring. Layla refused again. They were in the living room. Mariam and the kids were in the kitchen. Leila could hear the dish wiping, Izale's laugh terribly, and Ajiza said something to Mariam in her steady and sensible voice. There will be others like her, even younger ones, Rasheed said. Everyone in Kabul is doing the same thing. Layla told him she didn't care what others did to their children. I'll keep a close eye on her, rasheed said, now less patiently. It's a safe angle. There's a mosque across the street. I'm not going to let you turn my daughter into a beggar on the street! Layla broke down. The impact made a loud noise, his palm and his hand with a thick finger connecting to the meat on Leila's cheek. He made her head spin. The noise from the kitchen. For a moment, the house was completely quiet. Then there were hectic steps in the hallway in front of Mariam and the children were in the living room, their eyes moving from her to Rasheed and back. That's when Layla hit him. It was the first time she'd hit anyone, freaking out about the playful punches she and Tariq traded. those who were open, more pats than punches, self-consciously friendly, comfortable expressions of anxieties that were both confusing and exciting. They will aim for the muscle that Tariq, in the professional voice called the deltoid. Leila watched the vault of her closed fist, slit in the air, felt wrinkled, rough skin under her fingers. She hit him hard. The impact caused him to sing two steps back. On the other side of the room, from a wound, a knife and a scream. Layla didn't know who made the noise. At the time, she was too amazed to notice or care, waiting to face her mind to catch up on what her hand had done. Maybe she was slaughtered when Rashid calmly left. Suddenly, Layla seemed to have the collective difficulties of their lives - hers, of Aziza, of Mariam- simply relaxed, evaporated like Zalmay's palms from the TV screen. It was worth it, if absurd, to have endured all that they endured for this crowned moment, because this act of disobedience that will end the suffering of all humiliation. Leila didn't notice Rasheed was in the room. Until they took her from her feet and hit the wall. Up close, his sun lounger looked incredibly large. Layla noticed how much stronger it got with age, how many more broken ships had mapped small paths on their noses. Rashid didn't say anything. And really, what can you say, what should be said when you put the gun in your wife's mouth? It was rais, the reason they're in the yard digging. Sometimes monthly raids, sometimes weekly. Late, almost every day. The Taliban confiscated things, kicked someone's, hit the head in half. But sometimes there were public beatings, slyings of feet and palms. Gentle, Mariam said now, her knees over the edge. They lowered the TV into the hole, with each clutch one end of a plastic sheet in which it is wrapped. That has to happen, Mariam said. They dug the dirt when they were ready, and filled the hole again. They threw some of it so it didn't look suspicious. There, Mariam said, wiping her hands on the dress. When it was safer, they agreed when the Taliban cut off their attacks, in a month or two or six, or maybe more, they would dig up the TV. In LEILA's dream, she and Mariam are behind guns digging again. But this time, az, they descend to the ground. Aziza's breath clouded the plastic leaves in which they wrapped it. Leila sees her panicked eyes, the whiteness of her palms, as they hit and press against the sheet. Aziza prays. Laila Just for a while, she's only been calling for a while. These are the attacks, you know, my love? When they attack, Mammy and Hala Mariam will dig you up. I promise, my love. Then we can play. We can play whatever you want. It fills the shovel. Layla woke up, breathless, with a taste of soil in her mouth, when the first granular lumps of dirt hit the plastic. 41. In the summer of 2000, Mariam reached the third and worst year. In Helmand, Abol, Kandahar, villages become herds of nomadic communities, always moving, seeking water and green pastures for their livestock. When they found neither their goats, sheep and cows, they came to Kabul. They took to the Carech-Ariana hillside, living in makeshift slums packed in huts, fifteen or twenty at a time. It was also the summer of the Titanic, the summer when Mariam and Aziza were entangled in limbs rolling and giggling, Aziz insisting that she would be Jack. Quiet, aziza yo. Jack, I don't want you to say my name, Yala Mariam. Say it. Jack! Your father would be mad if you woke him up. Jack! And you're Rose. He's going to end up with Mariam to turn himself in, agree to be Rose again. Okay, you're going to be Jack, she's back. You're going to die young, and I'm going to live to adulthood. Yes, but I'm dying like a hero, Aziza said, while you, Rose, spent their entire, miserable lives yearning for me. Then, as she strayed from Mariam's chest, she would say, Now we have to kiss! Mariam smashed her head, and Aziza, delighted by her outrageous behavior, spilled through her lips. Sometimes Salma suffocates and watches this game. What did he do, he asked. You can be the iceberg, Aziza said. This summer, titanic fever has dumped Kabul. People are smuggling pirated copies of the film from Pakistan - sometimes in their underwear. After the curfew, everyone locked their doors, turned off the lights, turned down the sound and reaped tears for Jack and Rose and the passengers of the doomed ship. If there was electricity, Mariam, Leila, and the kids watched it. A dozen times, they dug up the TV behind the tools at night, with lights out and quilts hanging over the windows. In the Kabul River, the sellers moved into the rivers. Soon from the sunken cavities of the river it is possible to buy Titanic carpets and titanic fabric from bolts arranged in trolleys. There was titanic deodorant, Titanic toothpaste, Titanic perfume, Titanic pakora, even Titanic burqas. A particularly stubborn beggar began to call himself Titanic Beggar. Titanic City was born. That's the song, they said. No, the sea. Luxury. Ship. That's the sex, they whispered. Leo, you said azaza sheep. It's all about Lio. Everyone wants Jack, Leila told Mariam. That's what it is. jack wants to save them from disaster. But there's no Jack. Jack's not coming back. Jack's dead. * Then, at the end of this summer, a fabric trader fell asleep and forgot to put out his cigarette. He survived the fire, but his shop didn't. The fire also took the neighboring fabric store, secondhand clothes, a small furniture store, a bakery. They later told Rashid that if the wind blew east instead of west, his shop, which is on the corner of the block, could be spared. * THEY SOLD EVERYTHING First he went to Mariam, then to Layla. Aziza's baby clothes, the few toys Lila had fought rashi to buy. Aziza watched the production. The sofa, table, carpet and chairs also went. Reviews threw a bad blow when Rasheed sold the TV. After the fire, Rashid was home almost every day. He slapped Aziza. He kicked Mariam. He was throwing things. He found a mistake with Layla, the way she smelled, the way she dressed, the way she combed her hair, her yellowing teeth. What happened to you? He said. I married money, and now I'm saddled with a witch. You're turning into Mariam. He was fired from a kebab near Haji Yagab Square because he and the client had kicked each other. The customer complained that Rashied had roughly thrown the bread on his table. Rude words have been leaked. Rashid called the client an Uzbek monkey. The gun was defended. In return, point to a skewer. In Rashed's version, he's got the skewer. Mariam had doubts. Fired from the restaurant in Taimani because customers complained about the long waits, Rasheed said the chef was slow and lazy. You probably rattled from behind, Layla said. Don't provoke him, Leila joe, Mariam said. I'm warning you, woman, he said. It's either that or smoking. I swear to God. You can't act like who you are. And then he was Layla's, slid her breasts, her head, her belly with fists, tore her hair, threw her against the wall. Aziza got so y'all out of the way, pulling on his shirt, and Aziza was getting a little y'all. Reviews was also screaming, trying to get him off his mother. Rasheed threw the children, pushed Layla to the ground and started kicking her. Mariam threw herself at Layla. He kept kicking, kicking Mariam now, spitting out of his mouth, his eyes gleaming with a killer goal, kicking until he could no longer. I swear you're going to make me kill you, Leila, he said, to stay. Then he left the house. When the money ran out, the hunger began to silence on his life. For Maria, it was a stunner how quickly hunger relief became the crux of their existence. Rice, cooked, white and white, without meat or sauce, was a rare pleasure now. They missed the meal with and alarming regularity. Sometimes Rashied brings homemade sardines in boxes and tender, dried bread, which tastes like sawdust. Sometimes a stolen bag of apples, at the risk of his hand being ripped off. In grocery stores, he carefully pressed canned ravioli, which they separated five ways, Reviews gets the lion's share. They ate raw turnips sprinkled with salt. He limps lettuce leaves and blackened bananas for dinner. Starvation has suddenly become a clear possibility. Some chose not to wait. Mariam heard about a neighboring widow who had ground the stomach bread, stuck it with rat poison and fed it to all seven of her children. She had saved the most for herself. Aziza's ribs began to push through the skin, and the fat from her cheeks disappeared. Her calves were diluted, and her complexion turned into the color of weak tea. When Mariam caught her, she felt the femur stretched out in stretched skin. Reviews walked around the house, eyes stuck and closed in half, or on his father's lap like a rag. He cried to fall asleep when he could gather the energy, but his sleep was capable and sporadic. The white dots jumped in front of Mariam's eyes when he woke up. Her head spun, and her ears kept ringing. She remembered something Mullah Faizullah was saying about hunger when Ramadan began: even the snake man finds sleep, but not the hungry. Page 24 My children will die, says Leila. Right in front of my eyes. They're not, Mariam said. I'm not going to let them. It's going to be okay, Leila Jo. I know what to do. Mariam put on a burqa, and she and Rashied went to the Intercontinental Hotel. The bus was an inaccessible luxury and Mariam was exhausted by the time they reached the top of the steep hill. Climbing the slope, she was hit by bouts of dizziness and twice had to stop waiting to pass. At the entrance to the hotel, Rasheed greeted and hugged one of the doormen, who was dressed in a Burgundy suit and visor. There was some friendly conversation between them. Rasheed speaks with his hand on the elbow of the gate. He turned to Mariam at one point and the two looked on her way briefly. Mariam thought there was something familiar about the porter. When the porter went inside, Mariam and Rasheed waited. From this point of view, Mariam had a view of the Polytechnic Institute, and, beyond that, the old Kayrkaka district and the road to Mazar. To the south, she could see the Silo bread factory, a long-abandoned, pale yellow façade shaped with yawning holes from all its shelling. To the south, she could make the hollow ruins of Darulaman Palace, where, many years ago, Rashied took her for a picnic. The memory of that day is a relic of a past that no longer resembled her own. Mariam concentrates on these landmarks. He was afraid he might lose his temper if he could afford to wander. Every few minutes, SUVs and taxis stopped by the hotel entrance. Porters rushed to greet the passengers, who were all men, armed, bearded, wearing turbans, all of them coming out with the same confident, random air of menace. Mariam heard from them as they disappeared through the hotel door. She heard Pushu and Farsi, but also Urdu and Arabic. Meet our true masters, Rasheed said in a low-s voice. Pakistani and Arab Islamists. The Taliban are puppets. These are the big players and Afghanistan is their playground. Rasheed said he had heard rumors that the Taliban were allowing these people to set up secret camps across the country where young men were trained to kill themselves and fight with jihadist fighters. What's taking so long? Mariam said. Rasheed spat and kicked his finger at the spit. An hour later, they were inside, Mariam and Rasheed, after the porter. Their heels were pushed to the floor as they were translated through the pleasantly cool lobby. Mariam saw two men sitting on leather chairs, rifles and a coffee table between them, sipping black tea and eating from a plate of syrup-coated gelabi, rings sprinkled with powdered sugar. She thought of Aziza, who loved Gelabi and took her out of her sight. The porter took them to a balcony. From his pocket, he produced a small black wireless phone and a piece of paper with a number scratched on it. He told Rashi it was his boss's satellite phone. I picked you up in five minutes, he said. That's enough. Rashid said: I won't forget that. The porter nodded and left. Rasheed dialed. He gave Mariam the phone. While Mariam listened to the scratching, her mind wandered. She was wandering until the last time she saw Jalil, thirteen years earlier, in the spring of 1987. He stood in the street in front of her house, leaning on a reed, next to the blue Benz with Herat's license plates and the white stripe, eating the roof, lid and trunk. He stood there for hours, waited for her, now he called her her name, just as she had once called his name in front of his house. Mariam had separated the veil once, just a little, and saw it. Just a glance, but long enough to see that his hair had turned fluffy white, and that he had begun to bend. He wore glasses, a red tie, as always, and the usual white triangle of a handkerchief in his chest pocket. Most astonishingly, he was thinner, much thinner than she remembers, the coat of a dark brown suit hanging over his shoulders, the trousers wearing his ankles. Jalil had only seen her for a moment. Their eyes had briefly met through some of the curtains, as they had met many years earlier through part of another pair of curtains. But then Mariam quickly She was sitting on the bed waiting for him to leave. Now he thought the letter Jaleel left at his door. She had kept him under her pillow for days, picking him up from time to time, turning it into her hands. In the end, she had torn him open. And now she, after all these years, called him. Mariam regretted stupid and youthful pride. Now she wanted to let him go. What would be wrong with letting him go, sitting down with him, telling him what he's going to say? He was her father. He wasn't a good father, but it was true, but how ordinary his mistakes were now, how much can be forgiven compared to Rashid's malice, or the cruelty and violence she has seen happen to each other. She wished you hadn't destroyed his letter. One man spoke deep in her ear and told her she had made it to the mayor's office in Herat. Mariam cleared her throat. Salaam, brother, I'm looking for someone who lives in Herat. Or it was, many years ago. His name is Jalil Khan. He lived in Shar-e-Nau and owns the cinema. Do you have any information on his whereabouts? The irritation could be heard in the man's voice. Is that why you're calling city hall? Mariam said she didn't know who to call. Forgive me, brother. I know you have important things to take care of, but it's life and death, it's a matter of life and death that I'm asking you to do. I don't know him. The cinema has been closed for many years. Maybe there's someone who might know him, someone... Mariam closed her eyes. Please, brother. There are kids involved. Little kids. It's a long sigh. Maybe someone over there... There's a guard in the garden. I think he's lived here his whole life. Yes, ask him, please. Call me tomorrow. Mariam said she couldn't. I only have this phone for five minutes. No-- There was a click at the other end, and Mariam thought he hung up. But she could hear the footsteps, the voices, the car's distant horn, and some mechanical humming, rewritten by snaps, perhaps an electric fan. She changed the phone to her other ear, closed her eyes. She imagined Jaleel smiling, reaching into his pocket. Ah. Of course. Well. Right here. No more noise... Pendant in the shape of leaves, miniature coins engraved with moons and stars hanging from it. Try it, Mariam Jo. Do you think so? I think you look like a queen. It's been a few minutes. Then steps, creaking sound and clicking. He really knows him. Yes, him? That's what he says. Where is he? Mariam said. Does this man know where Jaleel Khan is? There was a pause. He said he died years ago, in 1987. Mariam's stomach dropped. Of course, she's considered the possibility. Jaleel would have been in his mid-70s by now, but... 1987. He died then. He I drove from Herat to say goodbye. Move to the edge of the balcony. From here up, she could see the hotel's once famous pool, empty and gutted now, marked by bullet holes and decaying tiles. And there was a battered tennis court, a rag web lying in the middle of it like dead skin spilled by a snake. Now I have to go, said the voice from the other end. I'm sorry to bother you, Mariam said, without sounding on the phone. She saw Jalil wave at her, jumping from stone to stone as she crossed the stream, his pockets swollen with gifts. All the while, she held her breath for him so that God could give her more time with him. Thanks, Mariam said, but the man at the other end had already hung up. Rasheed's looking at her. Mariam shook her head. Useless, he said, stealing her phone. Like a daughter, like a father. On his way out of the lobby, Rasheed quickly approached the coffee table, which has now been abandoned, and picked up Gelabi's last ring. He took it home and gave it to Reviews. 42. Lila In a paper bag, Aziza packs these things: her colorful shirt and lonely socks, her mismatched wool gloves, an old pumpkin-colored blanket dotted with stars and a comet, a crushed plastic cup, a banana, a set of zara. It was a great morning in April 2001, shortly before Layla was on her 23rd birthday. The sky was transluene gray, and gusts of cede, cold wind kept knocking the door on the screen. This was a few days after Leila found out that Ahmad Shah Masood had gone to France and spoke to the European Parliament. Masood is now in his native north and leads the Northern Alliance, the only opposition group still fighting the Taliban. In Europe, Massoud warned the West about terrorist camps in Afghanistan and pleaded with the United States to help it fight the Taliban. If President Bush doesn't help us, he said, these terrorists will harm the United States and Europe very soon. A month earlier, Leila learned that the Taliban had planted TNT in the cracks of the giant Buddhas in Bamiyan and dispersed them, calling them objects of idolatry and sin. There have been twists around the world, from the US to China. Governments, historians and archaeologists from around the world have written letters pleading with the Taliban not to destroy Afghanistan's two largest historical artefacts. But the Taliban had blown up and detonated their explosives in the two-thousand-year-old Buddhas. They had chanted with every blast Allah-woo-bur, and each time statues lost an arm or leg in a ruinous cloud of dust. Layla recalled standing on top of the two Buddhas with Babi and Tariq, in 1987, a breeze blown into their sunny faces, watching a hawk glide in circles over the sprawling valley. But she heard the news of the statues' death, Layla numb. It doesn't seem to matter. How can she be interested in statues when her own life has been dust-up? While Rasheed told her it was time to go, Leila sat on the floor in the corner of the living room without talking and a stone face, her hair hanging around her face in pitchless curls. No matter how much she inhaled and inhaled, Layla couldn't fill her lungs with enough air. * On the way to Karte-Szh, Zalamaj jumps into Rashid's hands, and Aziza holds Mariam's hand as she quickly walks be side by her side. Aziza was darker now, as if she were beginning to feel, with every step, that she had been lied to. Layla hadn't found the power to tell Ajiza the truth. She was told she was going to a special school where the children had been eating and sleeping and not coming home after class. Now Aziza continues to ask Layla the same questions she's been asking for days. Did the students sleep in different rooms or all in one big room? Is he going to make friends? Is she, Leila, sure the teachers are going to be good? And, more than once, how long do I have to stay? They stopped two blocks from the barracks building. Reviews and I will wait here, Rasheed said. Oh, before I forget... He pulled gum out of his pocket with gum, a parting gift, and took it to Adziza with a hard, generous air. Aziza picked him up and hinted at gratitude. Lila admired Aziza's grace, Aziza's tremendous capacity for forgiveness, and her eyes filled. Her heart was clenched, and she had fainted with anguish at the thought that this afternoon Aziza would not nap next to her, that she would not feel the fragile weight of Aziza's hand on her chest, the curve of Aziza's head pressing into her ribs, Aziza's breath warming her neck, Aziza's heels sticking her. When Aziza was taken away, Zami started crying, Zisa! Ziza, Zisa! He swered and kicked into his father's arms, called his sister until his attention was diverted by a monkey to an organ mill across the street. They only walk the last two blocks, Mariam, Lila and Aziza. As they approach the building, Leila can see her split façade, sagging tablecloth, wood boards nailed to frames with missing windows, the top of the cradle on a crumbling wall. They stopped by the door and Layla told Aziz what she had told her earlier. And if they ask about your father, what do you say? The mujahideen killed him, Aziza said, her mouth warring. That's good. Aziza, you understand? Because it's a special school, Aziza said. Now that they were here, the building was a reality, it seemed shaken. Her lower lip flickered and her eyes threatened to rise, and Layla saw It's hard for her to be brave. If we tell the truth, Azaza said in a thin, smokeless voice, they won't take me. It's a special school. I want to go home. I'm going to visit all the time, Layla said. Promise. Me too, Mariam said. We're going to come see you, Joe, and we're going to play together like we always do. Just for a while, until your father got a job. They have food here, Leila said. She was happy for the burqa, glad Achiza couldn't see it falling apart. You're not going to starve here. They have rice, bread and water, maybe even fruit. But you won't be here. And Hala Mariam won't be with me. I'm coming to see you, Layla said. All the time. Look at me, Aziza. I'il come see you. I'm your mother. If he kills me, I'il come and see you. * THE DIRECTOR OF THE ORPHANAGE was a hard-chested man with nicely lined faces. He was bald, he had a shaggy beard, eyes like peas. His name was Seman. He was carrying a skull. The left lens of his glasses was cut. As he takes them to his office, he asks Lila and Mariam their names, also asks for Aziza's name, her age. They passed through dimly lit corridors, where barefoot children stepped back and watched. They had dismembered hair or shaved scalps. They wore sweaters with frayed sleeves, ragged jeans, whose knees were worn to the strings, coats patched with duct tape. Layla smelled soap and talcum powder, ammonia and urine, and rose in Atisa, who began to whine. Leila had a look at the yard: a wood lot, a swing of castes, old tires, a deflated basketball. The rooms they passed were bare, the windows covered with plastic sheets. An employee who was cleaning what looked like a puddle of urine left a rag and threw it. Forman seemed tenderly owned by the orphans. He patted some people's heads as he walked past them, told them one or two tearful words that twitched at them without lowering them. The children welcomed his touch. Everyone looked at him, Leila, hoping to approve it. He showed them in his office, a room with only three folding chairs and disorder with piles of paper scattered on top. You're from Herat, Seman told Mariam. I can tell from your accent. He leaned into his chair and tied his hands above his belly and said he had a son-in-law who lived there. Even in these simple gestures, Layla noted the industrious quality of her movements. And while she smiled faintly, Layla felt something disturbing and hurt underneath, disappointment and defeat being erased with a nder with good humour. He was a glass machine, Seman said. He made these beautiful jade green swans. You kept them in the sunlight and they shone. It was like the glass was full of little jewelry. Are you back? Mariam said he wasn't. I'm from Kandahar myself. Have you ever been to Kandahar, Hamshira? Not? What gardens! And the grapes! Grapes. They're choking your palate. Several children had gathered by the door and peeked. Seman carefully drove them to Pascoe. Of course I love Herat, too. A city of artists and writers, sufis and mystics. You know the old joke that you can't stretch your leg in Herat without pushing a poet in the back of the head. To Leila, Aziza snorted. About a gas canister came out. Oh, there you go. I made you laugh, little hampshire. That's usually the hard part. I was worried for a while. I thought I should chop like a chicken or fry like a donkey. But there you are. And you're so beautiful. He called an employee to take care of Atsis for a few minutes. Aziza jumped on Mariam's lap and clings to her. We're just going to talk, my love, Layla said. I'il be right here. Well? - Right here. Why don't we go outside for a second, Aziza yo? Mariam said. Your mother needs to talk to Kakna Forman here. Just for a minute. Now, come on. When they were alone, Saman asked for an Aziza date of birth, a history of diseases, allergies. He asked about Aziza's father, and Layla had the strange experience of telling a lie, which is actually the truth. For man listened, his expression revealing neither faith nor skepticism. He said he ran the orphanage in the honor system. If the Hampshire man said her husband was dead and didn't care about his children, he didn't care. Layla started crying. Forman, put down his pen. I'm ashamed, she's got Layla, her palm pressed against her mouth. Look at me, Hampshire. What kind of mother abandons her child? Look at me. Layla took a look. It's not your fault. - No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, These savages, these wahings, are to blame. They bring me shame like a pascoe. They disgraced the name of my people. And you're not alone, Hampshire. Mothers like you all the time, mothers who come here who can't feed their children because the Taliban won't let them make a living. So don't blame yourself. No one here blames you. I get it. Lean forward. The Hampshire. I get it. Layla wiped her eyes with the burqa towel. As for this place, Forman sighed, moving with his hand, you can see that it's in a rare state. We're always underfunded, we always fall, we improvise. We're getting little or no support from the Taliban. But we're doing fine. Like you, we're doing what we have to do. Allah is good and good, and Allah gives and, as long as he provides, I will take care of aziz to feed and dress. That's what I promise you. Page 25 Leila nodded. Are you okay? He was smiling with company. But don't cry, hampshire. let him see you cry. Layla wiped her eyes again. God bless you, she said thickened. God bless you, brother. But when the time came to say goodbye, the scene erupted just as Layla was terrified. Aziza panicked. All the way home, leaning on Mariam, Lila heard Aziza's snub. In her head, she saw The Stunned Hands of Forman, near the hands of Atisa; she saw them pulling, gently at first, then firmer, then with strength to untie Aziza from her. She saw Aziza kicking into Seman's arms as he hurried around the corner, heard Asiza screaming as if he were going to disappear from the face of the earth. Layla saw her running down the hall, on my head, and they went up my throat. I smell it, she told Mariam at home. Her eyes swam unprecedentedly over Mariam's shoulder, past the yard, the walls, the mountains, the brown as a smoker. I made peace with her. - And you? Can you feel it? I don't know, Mariam said. Don't take it. What's so good about it? What good? Rasheed joked and accompanied them - mariam and Álmay - to the orphanage, though he made sure that as they walked, she had a glimpse of his tiny gaze, an ear of his vices about how badly he had searched him, how badly his legs and back and on foot to and from the orphanage. He made sure he knew how awful he was. I'm not a young man anymore, he said. Not that you care. If there was a way, you'd push me to the ground. But it's not like that, Leila. You don't have your way. They separated two blocks from the orphanage, and he never spared them more than fifteen minutes. A minute later, he said, and I started walking. I mean it. Leila had to attack him, begging him to go the right minutes with Ajiza a little longer. For her and for Mariam, who was inconsolable about Aziza's absence, though, as always, Mariam decided to sway her own suffering in private and quietly. And for Halls, who asked about his sister every day and threw outbursts that sometimes dissolved into inconsolable fits of crying. Sometimes, on the way to the orphanage, Rashied stopped and complained that his leg had wounded. Then he turned around and started coming home with long, spare strides without limping. Or he clapped his tongue and said, My lungs are mine, Leila. I don't have my breath. Maybe tomorrow I'il feel better, or the day after tomorrow. We'il see. He didn't bother to erupt a single restless breath. Often, when he turned around and marched home, he lit a cigarette. Layla will have to follow him home, helpless, shivering with resentment and impotent anger. One day, he told Layla he couldn't take her anymore. I'm too tired to walk the streets all day, he said, looking for work. Then I'll go alone, Layla said. You can't stop me, Rasheed. - No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, you can hit me but I'm going to keep going there. Do what you want. But you're not going to go through the Taliban. Don't say I didn't warn you. I'm coming with you, Mariam said. Layla wouldn't let that happen. You should stay home with Reviews. If they stop us... I don't want him to see. And so Layla's life suddenly revolves around finding ways to see Aziza. Half the time, she never made it to the orphanage. Crossing the street, she was spotted by the Taliban and captivated by questions- What's her name? Where are you going? Why are you alone? Where'?-- your son before she's sent home. If she was lucky, she got a kick or one kick from behind, a lump in the back. Other times, she met with assortments of wooden clubs, fresh tree branches, short whips, slaps, often fists. One day, a young Talib defeated Leila with a radio antenna. When it was over, he gave one last blow to the neck and said: I see you again, I will defeat you until your mother's milk runs out of your bones. This time, Layla's home. She was lying on her belly, feeling like a stupid, pathetic animal, and sty arranged as Mariam arranged damp clothes on her bloody back and thighs. But, usually, Layla refused to collapse. She came home as if she were going home, then took another route down the side streets. Sometimes she was caught, interrogated, stabbed, three, even four times in one day. Then the whips came down and the antennae were cut in the air, and she sned at home, bleeding without seeing the acid. Soon Layla took on extra layers, even in the heat, two, three sweaters under the burqa, for a pad against beatings. But for Layla, the reward, if she went through the Taliban, was worth it. She can spend as much time as she loved -- and then even with Aziza. They sat in the yard, near the cradle, among other children and mothers, and talked about what Aziza had learned this week. Aziza said that Kaka Zaman made sense to teach them something every day, reading and writing most days, sometimes geography, a little history or science, something about plants, animals. But we have to pull the curtains, Aziza said, so the Taliban wouldn't see us. Kaka Zaman had knitting needles and balls of yarn ready, she said, in the event of a Taliban check. We left the books and pretended to knit. One day, during a visit with Atsis, Lila saw a middle-aged woman, her burqa smet, visiting with three boys and a girl. Leila admitted the sharp faces, the heavy eyebrows, if not the sunken mouth and gray hair. She recalled scarves, black skirts, a neckless voice, how she wore her jet-black hair tied up in a bun so you could see the dark bristles on the back of her neck. women should cover up if men didn't. At one point, Hala Rangmaal looked up and looked at her in her eyes, but Layla saw no stopping, nor a light of recognition, in the eyes of her old teacher. * THEY ARE FRACTURES ON THE EARTH'S CRUST, Aziza said. They are called mistakes. It was a warm afternoon, Friday, in June 2001. They were sitting in the backyard, the four of them - Lila, Zalmay, Mariam and Aziza. Rasheed had licked this time - as he rarely did - and accompanied the four of them. He was waiting down the street at the bus stop. Barefoot children got around them. A flat football is kicked, chased after pointlessly. On both sides of the flaws are these sheets of rock that make up the Earth's crust, Aziza said. Leila prayed for the one who had to sit behind her daughter, turn the sections of her hair, make her sit. Aziza demonstrated himself by opening his hands, palms and looking at each other. Reviews sees this with intense interest. The kerton plates, they're called? Tectonic, Leila said. It hurts to talk. Her jaw was still cheeky, her back and neck creaking. Her lips were swollen, and her tongue tucked into the empty pocket of the lower rashed, which he had knocked on two days before. Before she cheated and Babi died and her life turned around, Layla would never have believed that the human body could withstand so much fighting, that viciousness, that it would regularly and continue to function. Yes, that's right. And when they slide past each other, they capture and slip, Mammy?-- and it releases energy that moves to the earth's surface and shakes it. You're getting very smart, Mariam said. So much smarter than your stupid robe. Aziza's face lit up, widened. - You're not stupid, Yala Mariam. And Kakna Forman says that sometimes, the displacement of the rocks is deep, deep beneath it, and it is strong and scary down there, but all we feel on the surface is a slight tremor. Just a slight tremor. Visiting before, these were atoms of oxygen in the atmosphere, dispersing the blue light from the sun. If the earth had not been in the atmosphere, Asiza had said a little breathless, the sky would not be blue, except for the tar-black sea, and the sun a great bright hold in the dark. Is Eliza coming home with us this time? Reviews said. Soon, my love, Leila said. Soon. Leila watched him walk away, walk like his father, lean forward, turn around. He went to the swing, pressed an empty seat, ended up sitting on the concrete, tearing a slice of crack. The water evaporates from the leaves - Mammy, you know?-- and that drives the flow of water up the tree. the earth and through the roots, and then all the way to the tree, through the branches and into the leaves. It's called transpiration. More than once, Leila wondered what the Taliban would do for Kakna's unalloyed lessons if they found out. During the visits, Aziza did not allow much silence. She filled all the spaces with an effective speech, delivered with a loud, ringing voice. She was tangenent to her subjects, and her hands resisted wildly, flying with nervousness that was not at all like her. She laughed, and the Azzurra laughed. Not so much laugh, really, as nerve punctuation means Leila suspects, to calm down. And there were other changes. Leila would have noticed the dirt under Aziza's fingernails, and Aziza would notice that she was spotting her and burying her hands under her hips. When a child cried near them, sneezed from his nose, or if a kid was walking past naked, the hair was sticking with his finger, Aziza's eyelids were waving, and she was quick to explain it. She was like a housewife, embarrassed in front of her guests by the rock of her home, the unwaveringness of her children. Questions about how she was doing were met with vague but cheerful answers. You're doing good, Chal. - I'm fine. The kids are foreing you? It's not like that, Mammy. They're all nice. Are you going to eat? Do I sleep well? Eating. And he fell asleep. To. We had a lamb last night. Maybe it was last week. When Aziza talked like that, Layla saw more than a little mariam in her. Aziza the rabbit now. Mariam noticed it first. It was barely noticeable and more pronounced with words that began with T. Leila asking Forman. I thought she always did. That Friday afternoon, they left the orphanage with Aziza for their short outing and met Rasheed, who was waiting for them at the bus stop. When Llałmay noticed his father, he uttered an excited scream and eagerly descended from Leila's hands. Aziza's greeting to Rasheed was firm but not hostile. Rasheed said they had to hurry, he only had two hours before he showed up for work. It was his first week as a porter for the Intercontinental. From noon to eight, six days a week, Rashid opened the car doors, carried the luggage, shuffled the accidental spills. Sometimes, at the end of the day, the chef at a buffet restaurant allowed Rasheed to bring home a few leftovers - as long as he was discreet about it - cold meatballs that merge with butter; fried chicken wings, the crust is hardened and dry; stuffed pasta shells, turned chewable; hard, gravel rice. Rasheed promised Leila that after saving money, Aziza could return home. Rashi was wearing his uniform, a red polyester suit, a white shirt, a tie, a visor pressing on his white hair. In this uniform, Rashid transforms. He seemed vulnerable, pathetic, almost harmless. As someone who sigh of protest, the outrage of his life was tearful. Someone pathetic and admirable in his beneering. They took the bus to Titanic City. They entered the river bed, surrounded on both sides of the makeshift stalls clinging to the arid shores. Next to the bridge, as they lowered the steps, a barefoot man crept dead from a crane, his ears cut off, his neck sprained at the end of a rope. In the river, they melted into the horde of shoppers, the change of money and the boredom of NGOs, cigarette sellers, the women covered, who threw people's fake antibiotic prescriptions and begged for money to fill them. Ted, chewing talibi patrolled Titanic City to laugh at the indiscreet laugh, the revealed face. From a toy pavilion, between a coat seller and a fake flower stand, Nalmi chose a rubber basketball with yellow and blue swirls. Pick something, Rasheed told Achiza. Aziza is crocheted, hardened with shame. Hurry up, quick. I have to be at work in an hour. Aziza chose a gum-ball machine - the same coin can be placed to get candy, then extracted from the return of the coin to the lid below. Rashid's eyebrows rose when the seller told him the price. A round of wheels, at the end of which Rashed told Azosa frighteningly, as if she had pushed him: Give it back. I can't afford both. On the way back, Aziza's high-spirited facade descended so much closer to the orphanage. Hands stopped flying. Her face weighed down. It happened every time. Layla was now in line when Mariam swered, laughing, laughing nervously, filling the melancholy quietly with breathless, no banter. Later, after Rasheed left them and took them by bus to work, Lila watched Asiza say goodbye and scratched the wall at the orphanage. She thought about the stuttering of Atsis, and what Atsis had said before about fractures and powerful collisions seen on the surface was a slight tremor. GET OUT OF HERE, YOU! Salmai cried. Shut up, Mariam said. Who are you yelling at? He pointed out. There. This man. Leila followed him. There was a man at the front door of the house leaning on her. His head turned when he saw them approaching. He rolled his arms. A few steps towards them. Layla stopped. I'm suffocating a noise in her throat. Her knees have weakened. Layla suddenly wanted to touch Mariam's arm, her shoulder, her wrist, something to lean on. But you didn't. She didn't dare. He didn't dare move a muscle. She did not dare to breathe, even if she blinked, even for fear that he was nothing but a mirage shining in the distance, a fragile illusion that would disappear at the slightest provocation. Layla stands completely still and looks at Tariq as she her breasts screamed for air and her eyes burned to blink. And somehow, miraculously, after she breathes, closes and opens her eyes, he still stands there. Tariq's still standing there. Layla allowed her to take a step towards him. - Then another one. And another one. And then she ran. 43. Mariam upstairs, in Mariam's room, Reviews was rolled up. He was bouncing his new rubber basketball for a while, on the floor, against the walls. Mariam asked him not to, but he knew she didn't have the authority to practice it, so he kept bouncing the ball, his eyes behaving defiantly. For a while, they pushed their toy, an ambulance with a pronounced red letter on the side, sending it between them through the room. Earlier, when they met Tariq at the door, Halmi had squeezed the basketball close to his chest and stuck a thumb in his mouth, something he didn't do except when he was intolerable. He watched Tariq with suspicion. Who is this man? he said now. I don't like him. Mariam would explain, say something about him and Layla while they were together, but Salma cut her off and told her to turn the ambulance around so the front grille confronted him, and when she did, he said he wanted his basketball again. Where is he? He said. Where's the ball Baba Yan gave me? Where is he? I want it! I want him to rise up and get along with every word. It was here, Mariam said, and he shouted, No, it's lost, I know it. I know it's lost! Where is he? Where is he? Right here, she said, bringing the ball out of the closet where it rolled. But Reviews was crying and punching fists, crying that it wasn't the same ball, it couldn't be because his ball got lost, and that was fake, where did his real ball go? Where? Where to? He screamed until Layla went upstairs to hold him, shake him and push his fingers through his narrow, dark curls, dry his damp cheeks and stick his tongue in his ear.   Mariam was waiting outside the room. From the top of the staircase, all he could see on Tariq were his long legs, real and artificial, in the kaki pants stretched on the uncoded floor of the living room. Then she realized why continental's porter seemed familiar the day she and Rashied went there to call Jalil. She was wearing a hat and sunglasses, so she hadn't shown up sooner. But Mariam recalled, nine years earlier, she remembered sitting downstairs, patted her forehead with a handkerchief and asked for water. Now all the questions competed in her mind: Was Sulfa pills too part of the ruse? Which one of them drew the lie that provided convincing details? And how much Rashid had paid Abdul Sharif, if that's his name, to come and crush Leila. the story of Tariq's death?   Leila Tariq says one of the people who shared her cell had a cousin who had been publicly beaten for painting flamingos. The cousin had a seemingly incurable thing about them.   Whole sketch bookies, Tariq said. Dozens of oil paintings, braided in lagoons, sunbathing in swamps. And I was flying to the sunsets, I'm afraid. Flamingos, Leila said. She looked at him, sat against the wall, his pretty leg bent on the knee. She was willing to touch him again, as it was before at the entrance when she ran towards him. Now she was embarrassed to remember how she threw her hands around his neck and cried in his chest as she said his name in a sloppy, thick voice. Was it too impatient that you wondered, too desperate? Maybe it is. But she couldn't help. And now she longed to touch him again to prove again that he really is here, that he is not a dream, but a vision.   Really, he said. Flamingos.   When the Taliban found the paintings, Tariq said they were an insult to the long and bare legs of the birds. After tying the cousin's legs and scaring his feet, they gave him a choice: either destroy the paintings or make the flamingo decent. The cousin picked up her brush and painted pants on every last bird.   Page 26 And there you have. Islamic flamingos, Tariq said.   Laughter appeared, but Layla pushed him back. He was ashamed of his yellowing teeth, the missing herald. She's ashamed of her sweaty looks and swollen lip. She wished she could wash her face, at least comb her hair.   But he'll have the last laugh, cousin, Taraq said. He paints these pants with watercolor. When the Taliban are gone, he'il just wash them. He smiled- Layla noticed she had a missing tooth on her own ... Really.   He was wearing a lan on his head, hiking shoes and a black wool sweater tucked into the kady pants. He smiled halfway, slowly nodded. Leila didn't remember saying that before, that word, and that thoughtful gesture, the fingers making a tent on his lap, the nod, was also new. Such a word for adults, such a gesture for adults, and why should it be so much more frightening? Now he was an adult, Tariq, a 25-year-old man with slow movements and fatigue of his smile. Tall, bearded, thinner than in his dreams of him, but with strong-looking hands, the hands of a rabman, with excruciating, full veins. His face was still slender and beautiful, but it was no longer robbed; His eyebrows were snouted, burned by the sun, like his neck, the eyebrows of a traveler at the end of a long and snout trip. Pacola pushed him away and saw he was starting to lose his hair. They're scarer than she is. or maybe it was just the light in the room.   Layla was thinking about Tariq's mother, don't rush, the smart smiles, the stupid purple wig. And his father with a sloppy look, his slob. Earlier, at the door, with a voice full of tears stumbling over her words, she told Tariq what she thought had happened to him and his parents, and he had shaken his head. And now she asked him how they were, his parents. But she regretted the question when Tariq looked down and said, a little distracted, Betrayed.   I'm so sorry.   Well, yes. To. So am I. Here. He pulled a small paper bag out of his pocket and handed it over to her. Compliments from Aliona. There was a block of cheese in plastic inside.   Ariona, 10000 00:2 That's a nice name. Layla tried to say that without hesitation. Your wife?   My goat. He smiled at her with anticipation, as if waiting for her to remember.   That's when Layla remembered. The Soviet film. Aliona was the captain's daughter, the girl in love with the first assistant. That day, she, Tariq and Hasina had watched Soviet tanks and SUVs leave Kabul, the day Tariq wore this ridiculous Russian leather hat.   I had to tie her to a stake in the ground, Tariq says. And build a fence. It's the wolves. At the foot of me, where I live, there is a wooded area nearby, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, pine trees, trees, deodars. They stick mostly to the forest, wolves do it, but a twinkling goat that likes to wander, which can get them out. So the fence. The stake.   Leila asked him who the best were.   Pir Pangal. Pakistan, he said. Where I live is called Murray; It's a summer holiday, an hour from Islamabad. It's hilly and green, lots of trees, high above sea level. So it's cool in the summer. Very good location, very good location.   The British built it as a hilly stretch near their headquarters in Rawalpindi, he says, to escape the heat of the Victorians. You may still notice a few relics of colonial times, Tariq said, sometimes the tea room, bungalows with tin roofs called houses, such things. The city itself is small and pleasant. The main street was called Mall, where there was a post office, a bazaar, several restaurants, shops that turned tourists for painted glass and handmade carpets. Strangely, the mall's one-way traffic has gone in one direction a week, in the opposite direction next week.   Locals say the trafficking of Ireland is also the same in places, Tariq said. I wouldn't know. It's a simple life, but I like it. I like living there. With your goat. With Aliona.   Leila meant this less as a joke than as an unreal entry into another line of fairy tales, such as who else was there with him, worrying about wolves eating goats. But Tariq just nodded.   I'm sorry about your parents, he said. You heard.   I spoke to some neighbors earlier, he said. A pause during which Layla wondered what else the neighbors were telling him. I don't recognize anyone. From the old days, I mean. They're all gone. There's no one you know. I don't recognize Kabul. Me too, leila said. And I never left.   MAMMY has a new boyfriend, Reviews said after dinner later that night after Tariq left. Husband.   Rasheed looked up. Now she?   TarIQ asked if he could smoke.   They stayed for a while at the Nasir Bagh refugee camp near Peshawar, Tariq said, knocking ash on a plate. There were 60,000 Afghans living there when he and his parents arrived.   It wasn't as bad as some of the other camps like, God forbid, Yalozai, he said. I guess at one point it was even some kind of camp model, back during the Cold War, a place the West could prove to the world to which not only weapons were being brought into Afghanistan.   But it was during the Soviet war, Tariq said, the days of jihad and global interest and generous funding and visits by Margaret Thatcher.   - You know the rest, Layla. After the war, the Russians fell apart and the West moved on. There was nothing imposed in Afghanistan anymore, and the money dried up. Now Nasir Bagh is tents, dust and open sewers. When we got there, they gave us a stick and a canvas and told us to build a tent.   Tariq said what he remembers most about Nasir Bagh, where they stayed for a year, was the color of brown. Brown tents. Brown people. Brown dogs. Brown porridge.   There was a leafless tree, which he climbed every day, where he strayed from a branch and watched the refugees lying in the sun, their wounds and stumps from a clear view. He watched as little boys moved, carrying water in their tubes, collected dog feces to make fire, carved an AK-47 toy out of a tree with blunt knives, polishing the sacks of wheat flour that no one could make bread from what was held together. All over the city of refugees, the wind has made the tents. It stuck weeds everywhere, lifted kites from the roof of muddy streets.   A lot of kids died. Dysentery, tube, hunger, just say so. Most of all, the damn dysentery. Oh, my God, Leila. I saw so many children buried. There's nothing worse a man can see.   He crossed his legs. For a while, it melted again.   My father didn't survive the first winter, he says. He died in his sleep. I don't think there was any pain.   That winter, he said, his mother caught pneumonia and nearly died, if not for a camp doctor who worked from a station wagon turned into a mobile clinic. She'd wake up all night, feverish, coughing up fat, rusty sputum. The queues were long to see the doctor, Tariq said. Everyone was shaking. moaning, coughing, some with shit running on your feet, others too tired or hungry or sick to make words.   But he was a good man, the doctor. He treated my mother, gave her some pills, saved her life in the winter.   That same winter, Tariq had pinned down a child.   Twelve, maybe thirteen years, he said evenly. I held a piece of glass by his throat and took his blanket. I gave it to my mother.   He swore to himself, Taraq said, after his mother's illness, that they would not spend another winter in the camp. He would work, save them, move them to an apartment in Peshawar with heating and clean water. When spring came, he was looking for a job. From time to time, a truck would come to camp early in the morning and round up a few boys, take them to the field to move stones or an orchard to pick up apples in exchange for some money, sometimes a blanket, a pair of shoes. But they never wanted it, Tariq said.   One look at my leg and it's over.   There were other things. Ditches for digging, building, water to carry, feces to shovel from home. But young men fought for these things, and Tariq was never a chance.   One day, he met a shopkeeper who fell in 1993.   He offered me money to bring a fur coat to Lahore. Not much, but enough, enough for one or maybe two months of renting an apartment.   The vendor gave him a bus ticket, Tariq said, and the address of a street corner near Lahore train station, where he had to deliver the coat to a friend of the vendor.   I already knew. Of course I knew, Tariq said. He said if I got caught, I was alone, that I had to remember that he knew where my mother lived. But the money was too good to give up. And winter was coming again. How far have you come? Layla asked.   Not far away, he said, laughing, sounding like an apologist, a shame. He didn't even get on the bus. But I thought I was immune, you know, safe. It was like there was some accountant up there, a guy with a pencil tucked behind his ear, who was following these things, who was spinning and looking down and saying, Yes, we can have it, we'll leave it. He's already paid some fees, this one.   She was in stitches, her hashish spilled into the streets when police took a knife to the fur.   Tariq laughed again when he said that, climbing, shaking kind of laughter, and Layla recalled laughing like that when they were young to disguise the shame, to make light of the things he did that were reckless or outrageous.   HE'S GOT A LICHEL, Reviews SAID.   Is that what I think it is?   He was just visiting, Mariam says.   Shut up, you-- you broke up with Rasheed, he raised one finger. He turned to Layla. So, what do you know? Lily and Megan got back together. Just like old times. His face climbed. So you let him go. Here. In my house. You let him go. He here with my son. You seduced me. You lied to me, Leila said, gnashing her teeth. You made that guy sit across from me and... He knew I'd leave if I thought he was alive. AND YOU DIDN'T LIE TO ME? Rashid roars. You think I misunderstood? Harami? You think I'm a fool, you whore?   The more TARIQ spoke, the more Leila was terrified of the moment he would stop. The silence that will follow, the signal that it was her turn to give an account, to ensure why and how and when, to make officially what he certainly already knew. She felt a little cheeky when he thought about it. She turned his eyes. She looked at his hands, at the rough, dark hairs that had sprouted on their backs during the middle years.   Tariq wouldn't say much about his years in prison, except that he learned to talk there. When Layla asked, he shook an impatient handshake. In this gesture, Lila saw rusted bars and unneeded bodies, abusers and crowded halls, ceilings, molded deposits. She read in his face that it was a place of ageing, of degradation and despair.   Tariq said his mother tried to visit him after his arrest.   She came three times. But I never got to see her,' he said.   He wrote her a letter and a few more afterwards, although he doubted she would get them.   I wrote to you, too.   It's you?   Oh, volumes, he said. Your friend Rumi would have been jealous of my production. Then he laughed again, exailingly this time, as if he were both in the tinge of his own courage and embarrassed by what he had left behind. Salmai started crying upstairs.   Just like the old days, then, Rasheed said. You two. I guess you let him see your face. She did, Reviews said. Then, for Layla, you did, Mammy. I saw you.   Your son doesn't take much care of me, Tariq said when Layla went back downstairs.   I'm sorry, she said. That's not it. He just... Don't pay attention to him. Then she quickly changed the subject because she felt perverted and guilty that she felt that for Reviews, who was a child, a little boy who loved his father, whose intuitive aversion to this stranger was understandable and legitimate.   I wrote to you, too.   Volumes.   Volumes.   How long have you been in Murray?   Less than a year, Tariq said.   He befriended an older man in prison, he said, a man named Salim, a Pakistani, a former hockey player who had been in prison and out of prison for years and who had served years for stabbing an undercover police officer. Every prison has a man like Salim, Taraq said. There was always someone who was cunning and connected, who worked in the system and found you things, someone around which the air buzzed with possibility and danger. It was Salim who had sent Tariq's inquiries about his mother, Salim, who had accommodated him and told him, softly, that she died of exposure.   Tariq spent seven years in a Pakistani prison. It was easy to get rid of, he said. I was lucky. The judge who sat on my case turned out to have a brother who married an Afghan woman. Maybe he showed mercy. I don't know.   When Tariq delivered his verdict, early in the winter of 2000, Salim gave him his brother's address and phone number. The brother's name was Saeed.   He said Said owns a small hotel in Murray, Taraq said. We are working hard to update the description of this property on site. He said I sent you.   Tariq liked Murray as soon as he got off the bus: the snow pines; cold, fresh air; on blinds wooden cottages, smoke winding from chimneys.   Tariq thought he had knocked on Saeed's door, a place not only of unwavering worlds he knew, but also that made even the concept of hardship and sadness somehow unappromanable, unimaginable.   I told myself there was a place here where a man could go up.   Tariq was hired as a janitor and craftsman. He did well, he said, during the one-month trial, at half-time that Saeed had given him. As Tariq spoke, Layla saw Said, whom she imagined with a narrow eye and with a rusty face, standing at the front desk window, watching Tariq cut the tree and shovel of snow from the driveway. She saw him leaning over Tariq's legs, watching as Tariq lay under the sink to put a flowing pipe. She imagined him checking the cash register for missing money.   He said Tariq's cabin was next to the chef's little bungalow. The chef was a maestro widow named Adiba. The two shacks are separated from the hotel itself, separated from the main building with a scattering of almond trees, a park bench and a stone tank in the shape of a pyramid, which in the summer spews water throughout the day. Leila pictured Tariq in her shed, sitting in bed looking at the world of leaves.   At the end of the grace period, Saeed raised Tariq's salary, told him his lunches were free, gave him a woolcoat and put him on for a new leg. Tariq said he'd cry for the kindness of the man.   With Tariq's full salary for the first month in his pocket, Tariq went to town and bought Alyona.   Her fur is completely white, Tariq said, smiling. When it snows, you look out the window and all you see from it are two eyes and a muzzle.   Layla nodded. Another silence pierced. Upstairs, Reviews started hitting the ball back against the wall.   I thought you were dead, Layla said.   Know. You told me.   Leila's voice broke. He had to clear his throat, collect. The man who came to report the news was so serious... I believed him, Tariq. I wish I hadn't, but I did. And then I felt so lonely and scared. Otherwise, I wouldn't have married Rashid. You don't have to do this, he said quietly. your eyes. There was no hidden rebuke, without reproach, in the way he had said it. We're not going to be tossed.   But I do. Because there was a bigger reason I married him. There's something you don't know, Tariq. Someone. I have to tell you.   Are you sitting down and talking to him? Rasheed asked Reviews.   Reviews didn't say anything. Lama saw hesitation and uncertainty in his eyes now, as if he had just realized that what he had revealed turned out to be much greater than he thought.   I asked you a question, boy.   She swallowed me. His gaze was changing. I was upstairs playing with Mariam.   What about your mother?   Reviews looks at Layla with an apology, on the verge of tears.   It's okay, Salma, Leila said. Tell the truth.   She was... She was downstairs talking to this man, he said in a thin voice barely stronger than a whisper.   I see, Rashid said. Teamwork.   As she was leaving, Tariq said: 'I want to meet her. I want to see her. I'm going to set it up, Layla said.   Aziza. Aziza. He smiled, tried the word. When Rashid uttered his daughter's name, it sounded awkward to Layla, almost vulgar. Aziza. It's beautiful. I'il count the minutes.   It's been almost ten years since they last saw each other. Leila is the mind of Leila, who met in the alley, kissing in secret. She wondered what she looked like to him now. Did he still find her? Or did she seem corrupt, diminished, pathetic, like a cowardly, scrambled old woman? Almost ten years. But for a moment, standing there with Tariq in the sunlight, as if those years had never happened. The death of her parents, her marriage to Rashid, the murders, the rockets, the Taliban, the beatings, the hunger, even her children, all of this looks like a dream, a strange circumstillation, just an interaction between the last afternoon and that moment.   Then Tariq's face changed, a grave turned. She knew that expression. Same look he had on his face the other day, years ago, when they were both kids, when he didn't get his leg stuck and went after Kadim. He reached out with one hand now and touched the corner of her lower lip.   He did this to you, he said coldly.   With his touch, Leila recalled the frantic afternoon when she conceived Aziza. His breath on her neck, the muscles of his thighs contracted, his chest pressed against her chest and his arms shrunk.   I wish I could take you with me, Tariq almost whispered. Layla had to lower her eyes so she wouldn't cry.   I know you're a married woman and a mother now. And here I am, after all these years, after everything that's happened, I show up at your door. It's probably not fair, but I've come all this way to see you... Oh, Layla, I wish I'd never left you.