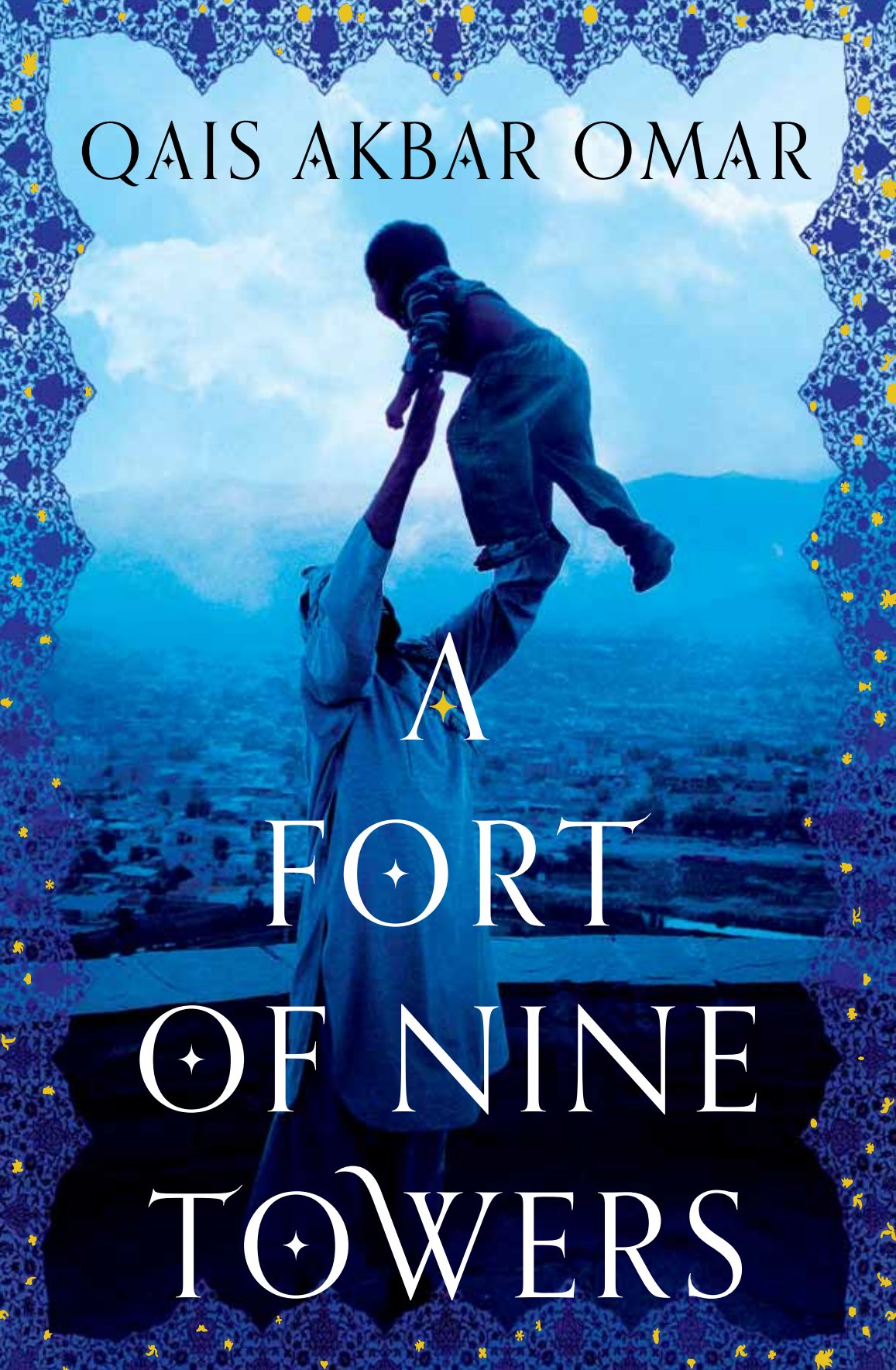
QAIS AKBAR OMAR



A FORT OF NINE TOWERS

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QAIS AKBAR OMAR

PICADOR

If sorrow settles in your heart, then where is the home of joy?
The sorrows and joys of life are all mixed together.
No one can separate them, except the One who created them.

Real men do not die of death; death finds its death in man.
Real men do not die of death; death finds its name in man.
When a man's name is respected, then death has no name.

My grandfather said

Prologue

The calls always come early in the morning. Sometimes I am still praying when I hear my mother's phone ring upstairs. I lean forward and touch my head to the carpet and make an extra effort to focus on the ancient verses streaming through my mind.

Alla-hu-Akbar. Subhanna rabbiyal A'ala . . .

Even before my mother answers it, I know who is calling.

It is my aunt, in Canada. She has just come home from a wedding party where she met a family with a daughter, a beautiful girl, very intelligent, and funny. A very good family. They are from Kabul, or Kandahar, or Mazar-e-Sharif, and our grandfather knew their uncle, or her father went to Habibia High School with the cousin of our neighbor who used to manage the Ariana Hotel before it was destroyed, or . . .

Qul Huwa Allāhu 'Aĥaðun, Allāhu Aṣ-Ṣamaðu, Lam Yalið Wa Lam Yūlað, Walam Yakun Lahu Kufūan 'Aĥaðun.

My aunt has been in Canada for thirty years. I think she knows all the other Afghans there. She helped many of them when they first arrived, even though she herself was a young widow with a small daughter in a strange land whose language she struggled to master. Afghans never forget a kindness, though. Now, everywhere she goes, she is welcomed by those she helped and respected for the kindness in

her heart. Almost every week, except during Ramazan, she is invited to a wedding.

Weddings are where my aunt tracks the young women whom she has known since they were babies. She has watched them become young women, and seen them taking full advantage of opportunities they would never have had in Kabul had their families stayed there over the past three decades. Through it all, she has kept a list of future husbands for them in her mind—nephews, neighbors, sons of former students from her days as a teacher—always waiting for the day when she can be of help.

Innā aʿṭaynāka al-kawthar, Fa-ṣalli li-Rabbika wanḥar, Innā shaani-aka huwal abtar.

I am twenty-nine years old. I have a university degree. I run my own carpet business and sometimes work with the foreigners. I have both arms and legs, which is an issue in mine-ridden Afghanistan. I come from a good family and am not yet married. I am a Pashtun with Hazara eyes thanks to a great-great-grandmother whose name no one remembers because she was a woman, and who was from some Central Asian tribe with Mongolian roots. I am the embodiment of this world-spanning mixture of peoples we call Afghan.

I give my aunt a reason to go to weddings on the nights she is tired, or when the snow is deep. I give her something to talk about, and someone to boast about. I sell carpets. She sells me. Her great hope is that I can live someplace where I can prosper and be safe.

How do I tell her, then, that though it sounds mad, I love Afghanistan? That I love being an Afghan? That I want to help rebuild what so many others destroyed? I know it will take a long time. I understand that. I am a carpet weaver. I know how, slowly, one knot follows another until a pattern appears.

Oh, God, can you not weave my destiny to keep me close to these people who mean more to me than any others in the world?

Ameen.

When I finish my prayers, I sit near the tall windows that look down over Kabul University and to the mountains beyond. The dust is so

thick even at this early hour that I can hardly make out the outlines of the jagged peaks against the dawn.

Kabul has become a very dusty place. How many million people live here now? No one knows. When I was young, there were only eighty thousand of us. A big town with big houses that had big gardens. Now we live on the side of a mountain, like goats, on land sold to us by a squatter.

The sun rises from behind the mountains and burns through the dust with a greasy glare. I lean back on a cushion that was made by nomads who travel each year across miles of arid land in search of a patch of grass for their flocks. My people were nomads until my grandfather settled in Kabul. We have no livestock now, unless you count the cat on the roof.

My youngest sister brings me a thermos of green tea and the news that our aunt has called from Canada. I do not let on that I had already guessed that. I do not want to spoil her excitement at telling me. She has a devilish glint in her eye. I know she wants to make a joke about the girl my aunt was describing. By now, of course, my mother has given all the details to my four sisters who still live at home. My older sister, who is married, will hear everything before long. Marriage discussions in Afghanistan are a family matter, and a major source of entertainment. My youngest sister is trying to decide whether I am in the mood for jokes, or whether I will just send her away.

In the end, she walks off giggling to herself. If I ever leave this place, I will miss her more than I can bear to think about.

Sometimes I wonder whether it was difficult for Grandfather to leave the open lands of his nomad days for the confining walls of the city. I think of my teacher, Maulana Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi, known to the world as Rumi. He had to flee our country when the greatest teacher of our warlords, Genghis Khan, swept across our land, destroying everything.

It is time to go upstairs for breakfast. My father has already ridden off on his bicycle to teach his high school physics classes. My mother is preparing to go to her office where they coordinate relief for natural

disasters. My two youngest sisters are leaving for school, adjusting their white headscarves over their black uniforms as they go out the door and head down the hill.

One of my other sisters has laid out some yogurt and fruit for me in the kitchen. She is studying agriculture at Kabul University and will soon go for her classes. My only brother, who is eight years younger than I am, is doing exercises in the room above me, sending down tiny clouds of dust as he skips a rope.

These are the things that happen every day. These are the rhythms of my family in the morning. These simple things will stay with me always; that is the one thing of which I am sure.

Uncertainty hangs thick like the dust in the air. I cannot see where the path of life will lead me. It is not my nature to sit and wait for something to happen. For the moment, though, unable to look forward, I have settled for gazing backward, to chronicle what I have witnessed in these few strange and turbulent years I have known.

Perhaps someday I will understand all these things better. Perhaps others will, as well. Perhaps this book will help.

Insh'allah.

PART ONE

THE HOLY WARRIORS

1

In the Time Before

In the time before the fighting, before the rockets, before the warlords and their false promises, before the sudden disappearance of so many people we knew to graves or foreign lands, before the Taliban and their madness, before the smell of death hung daily in the air and the ground was soaked in blood, we lived well.

We have no photos. It was too dangerous to keep them during the time of the Taliban, so we destroyed them. But the images of our lives before all hope fled Afghanistan remain sharp and clear.

My mother is wearing her short skirt, sitting in her office in a bank, tending to a long line of customers. She is respected for her knowledge of banking, and her ability to solve people's problems.

My father looks like a movie star in his bell-bottom trousers, speeding through the Kabul streets on his motorcycle. Sometimes he ties me to his back with a tight belt. His long hair catches the wind as we ride off. When he turns the corners sharply, the metal guards he wears on his knees shoot sparks into the air as they scrape the pavement. The next day I tell my classmates about that, and make them envious.

One of my uncles goes on business trips to other countries. The

other uncles and aunts study at universities in Kabul. All of them wear the latest styles. Grandfather, his thick white hair neatly combed, is elegantly dressed in finely tailored suits from Italy that emphasize his affluence. When he enters a room, he dominates it.

Grandfather is an impressive man, tall, with broad shoulders. Unlike many other Afghans, he keeps his well-tanned face freshly shaved. It is his wide, black eyes that you notice most. So deep. So commanding. So gentle.

The images come in a rush. Sometimes they play out in little scenes.

My father is calling me to get ready for school. I open my eyes and look at the clock above my bed. It is too early, but what can I say to him? He is my father. I am his son. Pashtun sons must obey their fathers.

But I am not ready to wake up. I rub my eyes. My father keeps calling, "Get up! Put on your gloves. I'm waiting for you in the ring." He wants me to exercise with him before breakfast. He has started training me to become a famous boxer like himself, and fight as he has in international competitions.

I hate waking up early, but I love exercising with my father. He always lets me beat him, even though I am seven years old.

I love school, too. I have perfect attendance. I am smart and popular. Sometimes the boys complain to the headmaster about me when I punch them in their faces. The headmaster covers for me, because he is Grandfather's best friend. But he never smiles at me.

My sister and I are in the same school. She is a year and a half older than I, and even smarter and more popular, but she never punches any girls, even though she is the daughter of a well-known boxer.

The heart of our world is my grandfather's house.

Grandfather had built it in the late 1960s, when he was the senior

accounting officer in the Bank-e-Millie, the National Bank of Afghanistan. The country was prosperous, and he could see that Kabul would outgrow its twisted thousand-year-old streets along the Kabul River.

He bought about five acres on the far side of the small, steep mountain with the two peaks that for centuries had protected Kabul on its south and west sides. The land beyond them was then all farms with mud-brick villages, but not for long.

Grandfather had studied the land, talked to the farmers who knew it, and carefully chose the piece that had the best well. We had always had water even in the driest months, even when our neighbors had shortages. He enclosed most of his land with a sturdy cement wall, but set part of it aside for a school for all the kids whose families he knew would transform the farmlands into a neighborhood.

My father and six of his seven brothers, along with their wives and kids, all lived comfortably within Grandfather's wall. I had more than twenty-five cousins to play with, most of them around my age. Every family had two large rooms of its own. The rooms were clustered in a single-story building on one side of the garden. Grandfather's rooms were on the other side. Between us were sixty McIntosh apple trees. Grandfather's cousin had brought them from America as little branches that he had grafted onto Afghan apple tree roots. They were very rare in Afghanistan, and Grandfather was proud of having them.

At one end of the property was a block-long building with two floors of apartments above the shops on the street level. Grandfather rented out the apartments to people who were not relatives. All the windows in the apartments faced the street. No Afghan allows strangers to look into his family's garden.

My father set up a gym in one of the shops. Every day after school, dozens of young men would come there to train as boxers. My cousin Wakeel and I would watch them from the sidewalk pounding the punching bag, or doing push-ups, or skipping rope, while my father sparred with one or sometimes two at a time inside the ring he had built.

Wakeel was seven years older than I was. He was the older

brother I never had. I was the younger brother he always wanted. He let me use him as a punching bag when I imitated the boxers. Every time I hit him, he laughed.

Grandfather, by then retired from the bank, used one of the larger shops as a warehouse for his carpets. It had a thick door with a strong lock and was filled with the sweet, lanolin-rich smell of wool. He had thousands of carpets in there. My boy cousins and I liked to jump from one high pile of folded carpets to another.

All of my uncles had their own businesses, except Wakeel's father. He was a major in the National Army of Afghanistan. He always said, "Business is too risky. Most of these businessmen have heart attacks, or die at an early age." He was my grandfather's oldest son, and thus had a special place in the family. He and his wife enjoyed a relaxed life on his army salary with Wakeel, my favorite cousin, and their two daughters.

One day he went to his office and never came back. We still do not know whether he is alive or dead. It was in the time when I first heard the word "Communists," but I did not know what it meant then. For more than twenty-five years, his wife has been waiting for him to come home. Even now, she runs to the door whenever someone knocks.

My father was the third son. Like all my uncles, he had only one wife. It was not our family's custom to have more than one.

Our neighbors respected my father like a holy man. They came to see him and talked with him about their businesses and their problems. They called him *Lala*, "older brother," even though some of them were older than he was. They told him, "Your thoughts are older than your age." He was a man willing to try everything. He had no use for the word "no."

He was also the only one of his father's sons who was involved in carpets. His five younger brothers saw carpets as something from the past. They were looking to the future, making money in new ways.

One was importing goods from Russia. Two others were still in university but looking into importing medicine to sell to pharmacies all over Afghanistan.

Often, we all ate dinner together, more than fifty of us sitting on cushions around one cloth spread on the well-trimmed lawn that Grandfather had sown at one corner of our courtyard. Colorful little lightbulbs hung above us. After dinner, my grandfather and his sons sat in a circle talking about their businesses, or to which universities in Europe or America they should send my boy cousins and me.

The women made a separate circle to talk about their own things. It was the responsibility of the older women to find good husbands for the younger ones, such as my father's two unmarried sisters, who lived with us. His two older sisters were already married, and had moved away to the homes of their husbands' families in other parts of Kabul. Discussions on suitors could go on for months and involve the whole family until a choice was made.

My cousins and I sat in another circle, boys and girls together, telling one another scary tales, and staring at Kabul's clear night sky with the moon and stars scattered across it. When we got tired of stories, we shaped animals from the stars and laughed.

Sometimes after we had finished eating, my father or one of my uncles would take the kids around the mountain to buy us ice cream at Shahr-e-Naw Park, or to one of the Kabul movie theaters for an Indian or American film.

Kabul was like a huge garden then. Trees lined the wide streets and touched each other overhead in tall, leafy arches. The city was full of well-tended parks, in which tall pink hollyhocks competed for attention with bright orange marigolds and hundreds of shades of roses. Every house had a garden with pomegranate, almond, or apricot trees. Even the mountain with the two peaks was covered in low-growing weeds and grasses that came to life with the spring rains. In both spring and fall, the sky filled with the brightly colored

water birds that rested in the wetlands around the city as they flew between the Russian steppes and India. Ancient underground channels brought water from the mountains, and kept our gardens green.

Every Friday, the Muslim holy day when schools and businesses closed, we carried a large lunch to one of the gardens of our neighbors, or to picnic spots nearby at Qargha Lake or in the Paghman Valley, or sometimes even as far as the Salang Pass, high in the mountains of the Hindu Kush an hour's drive north of Kabul. This was a day for extended families to spend together, visiting and joking and gossiping.

My cousins and I climbed hills, while the elders reclined against huge pillows in the shade of willow trees or under the broad leafy branches of a *panj chinar* tree. My unmarried aunts were kept busy boiling water for the others who drank one cup of tea after another. In these long afternoons they took turns spinning some small event into a big story that made everybody laugh. They all tried to outdo one another, of course. They are Afghans. Of them all, my mother was the best.

My uncles were *tabla* drummers, and my father played the wooden flute, though he had never had lessons. We stayed until late into the evenings, singing, dancing, and cooking over an open fire.

Sometimes on these outings, the cousins held a school lessons competition. Whoever got the highest score could demand that the other cousins buy whatever he or she liked, no matter the cost. We, too, were very competitive. Our parents were the judges, and cheered loudly every time one of us got a correct answer. Sometimes the competition ended in a tie. We hated that.

Occasionally, some of the cousins fought and did not talk to each other for a day or two. But we could not maintain that for very long. Our games were more important, and never ended, whether we were playing hide-and-seek in the garden, or shooting marbles, or racing our bicycles in the park near our house, or especially when we were flying kites from the roof.

Every afternoon in the spring and autumn, when the weather

brought a gentle breeze, hundreds of kites would fill the sky above Kabul and stay there until dark. Kite flying was more than a game; it was a matter of the greatest personal pride to cut the string of your rival's kite. The trick was to draw your kite string against your opponent's with speed and force, and slice through his string.

Wakeel was the kite master, the kite-flying teacher to us all. The kids on the street had given him the title of "Wakeel, the Cruel Cutter," because he had cut so many of their kites.

One afternoon, Wakeel looked at me as we were heading to the roof with our kites and said, "Let's have a fight!" As usual, his long, dark hair fell over his forehead, brushing his thick eyebrows. And below them were his deep-set, dark eyes that sparkled, always.

I said okay, though I knew he would cut me right away. But from the earliest age we are taught never to run away from a fight, even if we think we cannot win.

The roof of Grandfather's apartment block was ideal for kite flying. Rising high above the trees that grew along the street, it was like a stage. People below—adults as well as kids—would see the kites going into the air, and stop everything that they were doing to watch the outcome. A good fight would be talked about for days after.

After we had had our kites in the air for half an hour, taunting and feinting, Wakeel called from the far end of the roof in amazement, "You have learned a lot! It used to take me only five minutes to cut you. Now it has been more than half an hour, and you are still in the sky."

Suddenly, he used a trick that he had not yet shown me. He let his kite loop around mine as if he were trying to choke it. I felt the string in my hand go slack, and there was my kite, flat on its back, wafting back and forth like a leaf in autumn, drifting off across the sky away from me.

Wakeel laughed and made a big show of letting his kite fly higher so everybody in the street could see he had yet again been the victor. I ran downstairs to get another kite.

Berar, a Hazara teenager who worked with our gardener, loved kite fighting. All the time I had been battling Wakeel, he had been carefully following every dive, envious.

Berar was a few years older than Wakeel, tall, handsome, and

hardworking. His family lived in Bamyan, where the big statues of Buddha were carved into the mountains. Berar was not his real name. Berar in Hazaragi dialect means "brother." We did not know what his real name was, and he did not mind us calling him Berar.

As the suspense had built between Wakeel and me, Berar could not stop watching us. The old gardener spoke to him impatiently several times: "The weeds are in the ground, not in the sky. Look down." The gardener was always harsh to Berar.

"Give the boy a break," Grandfather told the gardener. They were working together on Grandfather's beloved rosebushes. I had just sent a second kite into the air. Grandfather nodded at Berar. "Go on," he said.

Berar ran up to the rooftop, where I was struggling to gain altitude while avoiding Wakeel's torpedoing attacks. Berar took the string from me and told me to hold the reel.

I had never seen Berar fly a kite before. I kept shouting at him, "*Kaɬhko! Kaɬhko!* Pull it in!" But Berar did not need my instructions; he knew exactly what to do. Wakeel shouted at me that I could have a hundred helpers and he would still cut me. Though he was tall and skinny, he was very strong and he was furiously pulling in his kite to circle it around mine.

Berar was getting our kite very high very fast, until in no time at all it was higher than Wakeel's. Then he made it dive so quickly that it dropped like a stone through the air. Suddenly, there was Wakeel's kite, drifting back and forth from left to right, floating off to Kandahar, separated from the now limp string in Wakeel's hand.

I climbed on Berar's shoulders, screaming for joy. I had the string of my kite in my hands. My kite was so high in the sky, it looked like a tiny bird. The neighbor kids on the street were shouting, too. They had not seen Berar doing it, only me on Berar's strong shoulders, cheering and shouting: "Wakeel, the Cruel Cutter, has been cut!" I kissed Berar many times. He was my hero. He gave me the title of "Cutter of the Cruel Cutter," even though it was he who had made it happen.

Wakeel sulked, and did not talk to me for two days.

We had another cousin who was a few months younger than I. He never really got along with any of the others. Wakeel used to call him a jerk. All the other cousins, everyone, started to call him "Jerk" as well.

If he bought new clothes, he would walk in front of us to show them off and say something stupid. "We went to a shop in Shahr-e-Naw that opened a few weeks ago. They bring everything they sell from London and Paris. The owner told my parents that I have a good taste for clothes. I don't think you guys can afford a suit like this." When I asked how much he paid, he would triple the price.

Wakeel would ask, "Hey, Jerk, do your clothes do any magic for such a price?"

Jerk could never see a joke coming, and would ask something witless like, "What kind of magic?"

"Can they make you look less ugly?" Wakeel replied, his voice cracking into shrieking guffaws.

We'd all laugh, and Jerk would run toward his house and complain to his parents. We would run to the roof, or outside the courtyard, or hide in the garage inside my father's car to escape punishment.

Once when Jerk had on his good clothes and was showing off, Wakeel filled his mouth with water, and I punched him in his stomach. That forced Wakeel to spit it all on Jerk. Poor Jerk looked at us in disbelief and asked with outrage in his voice why we had done that.

Wakeel told him, "We are practicing to be tough. We punch each other unexpectedly, so we will be prepared if we get into a fight with someone. You should be tough, too." Then we punched him in his stomach, but avoided his face so we would not leave any bruises, because we knew that would get us spanked by his parents.

Jerk had one unexpected strength: he was always a reader. For his age, he had more information than he needed. He had a good mind for memorizing, too. That turned us even more against him.

Wakeel teased Jerk all the time when we were at home playing with our cousins. Outside, though, Wakeel would not let anybody bother him. Wakeel was like an older brother to all of us. When Jerk got into fights with the neighbor boys, which happened a lot, Wakeel defended

him. When we were playing football in the park, Wakeel always made sure that Jerk and I were on his team, so he could protect us.

Our neighbors were like us, quiet and educated people. When there was a wedding or engagement party in one of their houses, everyone in the neighborhood was invited, along with their kids and servants.

Every week my grandfather talked for ten minutes in the mosque after Friday prayers about how to keep our neighborhood clean, or how to solve water and electricity problems, or how to take care of the public park and create more facilities where the kids could play together. He had never been elected to any position, but people listened to him.

When a family was having financial problems, one of its older men would quietly speak to Grandfather and ask for the community's help. Then, after Friday prayers, Grandfather would explain to the other men in the mosque that some money was needed without ever saying by whom. It was important to protect the dignity of the family in need.

One Friday after the others had left the mosque, I saw my grandfather giving the money he had collected to a neighbor whose wife had been sick for many months. The man kissed Grandfather's hands, and said, "You always live up to our expectations. May God grant you long life, health, and strength." When Grandfather noticed that I was watching him, he scowled at me, and I quickly turned away. This was something I was not meant to see.

Grandfather's house was his great pride, and the McIntosh apple trees were his great joy. He was in his late sixties when I was born, and soon after became a widower. By then he had retired from the bank, and busied himself in the courtyard, planting roses, geraniums, and hollyhocks or watering his McIntosh apple trees, always singing in a whispery voice under his teeth, or quietly reciting the ninety-nine names of God.

And for hours he would sit reading, surrounded by his books. His favorite, in two beautiful leather-bound volumes, was *Afghanistan in*

the Path of History by Mir Ghulam Mohammad Ghobar. The title was embossed on the cover in gold. Sometimes he read to me from it.

He also had the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, which had beautiful covers as well; but he did not read those to me. When I asked about them, he said he would give them to me when I was old enough.

In winter, he studied the poets Rumi, Shams Tabrizi, Hafiz, Sa'adi, and Omar-e-Khayyam. Sometimes he invited his friends to discuss the political affairs of Afghanistan and the world. But before long, the talk would turn to poetry. He always wanted me and my boy cousins to listen to what was being said, and to ask questions.

My sisters and girl cousins were never part of those discussions. Their lives moved on a different path from those of the boys, but they were always allowed to read Grandfather's books. Indeed, Grandfather always encouraged them to do so. "Education," he would say, stressing the word, "is the key to the future." They read lots of poetry, as well as novels by Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, and some Afghan and Iranian novelists whose names no one knows in the rest of the world. All these books were in Dari.

Some of the older girls, including Wakeel's sisters, read Grandfather's books by Sigmund Freud long before I did. We could hear them whispering about something called "the Oedipus complex," and then laughing. As soon as any of the younger cousins got too close to them, though, they stopped talking and looked at us in a way to make us understand that we were not welcome.

One day during one of Grandfather's discussions, Wakeel raised his hand and asked what politics was all about.

One of Grandfather's friends answered, "In fact, politics is really just a bunch of lies, and politicians are very gifted liars who use their skill to control power and money and land."

"They must be devious people, then," Wakeel said.

"That's true."

"Which country has the most devious politicians?" Wakeel asked.

"Let me tell you a story, my son," Grandfather's friend said, clearing his throat. "Someone asked Shaitan, the devil, 'Since there is such

a large number of countries in the world, how do you manage to keep so many of them in turmoil all the time, like Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and Palestine? You must be very busy.'"

"Shaitan laughed and said, 'That is no problem. Not for me.' He leaned back on his cushion and raised the mouthpiece of his *chillum* to his scaly lips. He drew in a sour-smelling smoke that made the water in the pipe turn black with oily bubbles, then let the smoke drain out of the corners of his mouth. 'There is one country on the earth that does a better job than me in creating problems everywhere.'"

"Really?" Wakeel asked. "Which country is more devious than Shaitan?"

"'It is called England,' Shaitan said."

My grandfather and his friends all laughed, and then they talked about poetry again.

It would be years before I understood the bad feelings that many Afghans have for England, which three times invaded Afghanistan and three times was driven out. For nearly three centuries, the English used Afghanistan like a playing field to challenge the Russians in a very ugly game. Neither side won, and neither side cared how many Afghans they killed or how much suffering they inflicted on Afghan people.

Those days were long in the past, like the battles between the ancient kings who had fought to rule our country. Life was smooth, and easy, and full of joy, except maybe for Jerk when we played tricks on him. Time moved graciously with the pace of the seasons, and nudged us gently through the stages of life. But then one night the air was filled with the unexpected cries of "*Allah-hu-Akbar*," and nothing has ever been the same since.

2

Allah-hu-Akbar

Chill winds from the high mountains around Kabul had begun to blow down on the city. Autumn was coming. It had been especially cold the past two nights. Now my parents and my aunts and uncles were using this Friday afternoon to set up the wood-burning tin stoves called *bokhari* in every room. When flakes of last winter's soot fell out of the pipes, some of the uncles said bad words. The cousins laughed and raced to tell one another what they had heard.

Just as night fell, the electricity suddenly went out. I looked outside. It was not just our house. The whole city was completely dark. I had never seen that before. Kabul always had electricity.

My mother said, "Oh, it's as dark as a grave."

I thought for a moment. How did my mother know how dark a grave is?

"Have you ever been in a grave?" I asked her.

"Stop being silly," she chided as she went to find candles.

My older sister had been doing her homework. "There is no electricity in a grave, idiot," she said. "Of course it is dark." She went to help my mother.

I looked out the window again into the darkness. No one was in the street. Could a grave be as big as a whole city?

I could hear voices in the distance. It was like the murmurings of a thousand people from the far side of Kabul. At first, I thought that it must be *muezzins* calling people to prayer. But the prayer time had been twenty minutes ago, and the voices were not familiar like the *muezzins'*. Nor were they coming over a loudspeaker, nor from the direction of the nearby mosques. The voices kept getting louder. Now I could hear them shouting *"Allah-hu-Akbar, Allah-hu-Akbar."* God is great.

I ran to find my mother to ask her why they were saying that. She was searching through all the drawers for candles; my older sister was looking for matches.

"I don't know," she said.

"You're even more than four times older than I am," I told her insistently, "but still you don't know more than me." She finally located a candle and lit it. She held it in her right hand and cupped her left palm around it. The soft light made her look very beautiful.

She kissed me on my cheek, which made me smile, and said, "Go and ask your father. Then you will know more than I know." The wax dripped on her thin, delicate fingers. She flinched and put the candle on the table. The wind blew in through the windows, making the curtains dance and the candle flutter; the voices outside grew louder.

I found my father in the courtyard, up on a ledge of the thick mud-brick wall that separated us from the street. He was leaning over, hoping someone would pass who could tell him what was going on.

The sound grew, like a wind rising. Now we could hear people in many places yelling. They were not organized. Everybody seemed to be saying their own *"Allah-hu-Akbar,"* some louder and some softer.

Suddenly, the man across the street who owned the shop at the corner started calling *"Allah-hu-Akbar"* inside his courtyard. Then I heard his two brothers join him. A couple of more courtyards down the street began having their own voices.

My father jumped down from the ledge. He landed on one of the low wooden platforms where we sometimes spread carpets and ate dinner. He, too, started shouting, *"Allah-hu-Akbar!"*

I was very surprised. I wanted to shout, too. But I did not hear

any kids' voices. It was all men, and I was a little bit frightened. I hugged my father's leg.

I put my head against his leg and heard a different voice coming from inside it. Then I pulled my head away and heard his usual voice. I did this several times, then called my older sister and told her to do the same. She grabbed his other leg and put her ear to it. We were fascinated by our new discovery. My father paid no attention to us. He was shouting louder now, and that made it more exciting for us. We were putting our ears to his legs and pulling away, giggling.

I heard some more familiar voices joining in, and even some women. I pulled my head away from my father's leg. All my uncles and my aunts were standing behind my father and shouting, *"Allah-hu-Akbar."*

"Why are they all saying that?" I asked no one in particular.

"It is doomsday," my sister said. "The sun will rise from the west during the night, and the moon and stars will disappear. The mountains will become smooth, and the whole earth will become flat." I was now eight years old and almost as tall as she, but she was frightening me. She was very good at scaring us younger kids whenever she told stories.

"From the east to the west, and from the north to the south, there'll be no mountains at all. You'll be able to see an egg from one corner of the world to the other. All the dead bodies from the beginning of time, which goes back centuries, will come back alive, and God will put the sinners in hell and the honest in paradise." I wanted her to stop, but she kept on, making grotesque faces to emphasize her words.

"Hell is full of fire and wild and dangerous animals. The sinners will die, and be reborn, and die and be reborn, and will always suffer. And that is where you are going, because yesterday you stole my pencil, and lied to Father that the pencil was yours, and then you blamed me for using your pencil. You will go straight to hell, because you committed three big sins. And you will have to stay there for a very long time." I was starting to cry.

"But I didn't mean it, and I gave it back to you. I was just joking and teasing you," I wailed.

"It doesn't matter; you made me suffer. If I don't forgive you, you will go to hell," she said, and she was very firm.

"What do you want me to do for you to forgive me?" I begged.

"You have to kiss my hands and my feet, then buy me a package of candy in school tomorrow. Then I will think about forgiving you," she said.

"But you said it was doomsday. There is no tomorrow!" I said.

"Oh, yes! I forgot. But you must kiss my hands and my feet. Hurry, or you won't have enough time!" she warned.

I hesitated for a minute and did not know what to do.

"Hurry up, if the sun rises now, then your apology won't be acceptable," she said. "Start by kissing the sole of my foot."

I looked at the starry sky and was doubtful that the sun would rise at 8:00 p.m. But when I looked at my sister, she was grimly serious. She was holding up her right foot.

I bent down to kiss her sole. That distracted my father. He looked at me kneeling on the ground getting my clothes dirty and asked, "Hey, hey, what are you doing?"

My sister shrieked and ran away. If I had been sure that this was just one of her stupid jokes, I would have run after her. But I wanted to be certain about doomsday first.

I asked my father, "Is it true that it is doomsday?"

He laughed as he ran his hand through my long hair, which was thick, wavy, and brown in those days and made me look like a foreigner.

"Why is everyone shouting?" I asked him impatiently.

"Because they want the Mujahedin to come to Kabul and make the Russians leave Afghanistan," he replied, grinning with joy at the idea, and then started yelling again.

Sometimes we had seen Russian soldiers when I was very small. The Russians had blue eyes, red hair, and white skin. They threw candy to us when they rumbled by in their huge tanks. We always yelled "*Спасиба*," though we did not know what it meant, and they smiled.

For other Afghans, the Russians brought bombs, not candy. Whole villages and large neighborhoods in cities were wiped out by the

Russians dropping one bomb after another from their planes, which seemed to fly only a few meters above the houses. They did this if they thought there was even one person living there who was opposing them. Everyone was slaughtered, the guilty and the innocent. But how can a man be guilty when all he wants is to protect his family and his land from invaders?

Afghans had only their old hunting guns and their determination to defend themselves against the Russians. Every village in Afghanistan, however, has a council of elders called a *shura*. Once the elders have decided that the village will do something, every family in the village must do it. The *shuras* decided that all the men should form fighting groups and join with others all over Afghanistan. They did, and they called themselves Mujahedin, the Holy Warriors.

My grandfather, father, uncles, and Grandfather's guests had often talked about the Mujahedin long before they came to Kabul. In fact, people had been talking about them from the time they were formed in Pakistan and Iran. When anyone spoke of them, they often referred to them proudly as "our Mujahedin brothers, who will come and liberate this country from these religionless and Communist Russians."

As kids, we heard the Mujahedin spoken of with such respect that we could not wait to see them.

For ten years, they had fought relentlessly against the Russians. The Americans had sent more powerful weapons, and that had helped. Finally, the Russian soldiers were driven out of Afghanistan. Their defeat was so devastating that it helped end Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe. But the new Russian government still tried to control Afghanistan. They put Afghans in charge who had been educated in Russia, and sent them lots of money, as well as food and fuel. But even with all the Russians' help, everyone knew that the Afghan government could not last for long.

My grandfather and his sons talked about it whenever we ate together. One of my uncles imported things from Russia. Like all Afghans, they wanted the Russians to stop interfering with our country, but they did not know what this would mean for their business.

Now the Mujahedin were coming to Kabul to drive away even these Afghans who were running the government for the Russians.

After twelve years of turmoil, Afghanistan would become a place of peace again.

I could not hold back any longer. I started saying *"Allah-hu-Akbar, Allah-hu-Akbar,"* first in a shy voice, then louder and louder.

In the first weeks of the year 1371 by the Afghan calendar (April 1992), the Mujahedin finally took control of Kabul and the rest of the country. A few months before, the Russian government had decided to stop sending money and supplies to the Afghans they had put in charge of our government. Without the Russians' support, the prices for food and everything else, such as flour, cooking oil, rice, beans, chickpeas, sugar, soap, and clothes, quickly started going up and up.

Until the Russians had left Afghanistan three years before, everybody who worked for the government received coupons for these items, which they could buy at the end of each month for a very low price from the government stores. When there were several people in one family working for the government, they often had so much that they could sell what they did not need in the black market, and at a price higher than they paid, but still much cheaper than the market price. Also, the quality of the Russian goods was much better than most of the other things in the market. But once the Russians had left, the coupons stopped.

Food became hard to find in the markets. Even the large food supply in our house began to shrink. We no longer had five things at each meal but only beans with bread, or boiled potato and bread, or rice and slices of tomato and onion. When we asked our mother where all the vegetables were that she usually served along with chicken or lamb, she would make a joke: "The seeds for the vegetables have not been planted yet, the lamb is still a baby, and the chicken is still an egg."

There were times when my two younger sisters would not eat breakfast, because they wanted to have jam and butter to put on their *naan*. But when my mother put two extra spoonfuls of sugar in their milk, they drank it happily with a piece of *naan*. Somehow our mother managed to keep us fed.

One day, even though there was very little food, we had a big party after my mother had given birth to my little brother.

My father was overjoyed to have a second son. To celebrate, he went out to buy a big cake. A couple of hours later he came back with a cake no bigger than a brick. As soon as we saw it, we all laughed, thinking that he was making a joke. He laughed with us as he handed the cake to my mother. Then he told us that he had gone to about twenty shops and could not find even one other cake.

My parents and sisters, with some of my aunts and cousins, stuck a few small candles on the small cake, lit them, and after a few moments everybody blew them out. Then my father cut the cake into very, very small pieces. As he handed everyone a piece, he joked, "At least it is enough to fill the cracks between your teeth." We all laughed.

I was so hungry, though, that I swallowed my piece half-chewed. I asked for another. My father looked at me and said, "Sorry, son, nothing left. Wait for next year, when you will have another brother, *Insh'allah*, then you can have your second piece." Everybody laughed. I never did have any more brothers, but in the years that followed God granted me two more sisters.

As the shortages became more severe, the government became more desperate, and the anger of ordinary Afghans increased. The government tried many things to calm the situation, but they did not know what to do. They tried to work out a deal with the Mujahedin, but it was too late. The president, Dr. Najibullah, fled to the United Nations compound in Kabul to seek asylum. The time of the Communists had ended, and the time of the Mujahedin had begun.

When I heard that the Mujahedin were coming, I had expected to see heroes in uniforms and shiny boots. But they were dressed like villagers with big turbans, the traditional baggy pants called *shalwar*, and the long, tunic-like shirts called *kamiz*. Their waistcoats were filled with grenades and bullets. They all had beards, mustaches, and smelly shoes that wrapped up stinky feet; not one was without a gun.

On TV, the female announcers now covered their heads with scarves. Women singers were no longer seen. Instead, we saw men with big turbans and long beards sitting on the floor, reciting the

Holy Koran. The male TV announcers started wearing *shalwar kamiz* instead of a pressed suit and tie. The TV programs were now filled with interviews with the men we would come to know as commanders. They were talking about their factions, and what they wanted to do for Afghanistan.

They all sounded like professors of the Holy Koran in the way they talked about Islam, and its importance for Muslims and Afghans. They all connected themselves to the Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, and claimed to be descendants of Arabs to make themselves sound like they were linked closely to the Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, even though we all know that Afghans are descendants of Zoroastrians, Jews, Greeks, Mongols, Aryans, and many other people, as well as of the Arabs who entered our history much later.

Two months before the arrival of the Mujahedin, we had been taught in school that we are related to monkeys. The teacher told us that little by little some of the monkeys changed and became more like humans. Some of them did not want to be human and civilized, because there are many problems in civilizations. We had a series of pictures in our textbooks showing how monkeys became human.

Our teacher said, "Humans are a kind of animal, and animals were created by nature."

"Who created nature?" I asked.

"Nature was self-created," our teacher said.

He took us to the Kabul Zoo to see the monkeys and to compare their faces with ours. None of the monkeys looked like anyone I knew, until I saw a cage with some new monkeys that had just arrived from India. One of them looked exactly like our teacher.

Excitedly, I raced to tell him, "There is a monkey that looks exactly like you."

My teacher was with my classmates and two other teachers. All of them laughed. He came close to me and squeezed my left ear very hard and whispered, "Students don't talk to their teacher like this."

"Maybe he was one of your ancestors," I persisted.

By then, my classmates were confirming my observation. Our teacher shouted at the other students that it was time to leave, though we were supposed to have spent the rest of the day in the zoo.

After the Mujahedin came to Kabul, our same teacher now taught us from a new textbook called *The Creation of Adam*. It did not say anything about monkeys.

We learned that we all came from Adam and Eve. Our teacher started saying things like, "The history of humans started from Adam and Eve, and the earth existed long before them. Do not let Shaitan be your guide; he misled Eve and Adam and drove them out of paradise."

I was confused. "What happened to the monkeys?" I asked our teacher, "And nature?"

The teacher sat on the edge of the desk, and for a minute he did not say anything. "The monkeys and nature are Communist perceptions." His voice was very calm, and he looked straight into my eyes as if there were no one else in the class. "The Islamic perception is: God is the creator of nature and all creatures." Now he was looking at everyone. "Adam is the father of all humans," he said.

I was still confused. I came home and asked Grandfather what all these things meant.

He told me, "Time will show you the truth. You are too young now. Wait and be patient, you will find answers to your questions."

I did not know why grown-ups always said that I was too young now. I wanted to grow up, be tall, and have a mustache and some wrinkles on my forehead, and snore when I slept and know everything.

Once the Mujahedin were in control, everything was cheap, and food became plentiful for a few months after they had opened the government food stores. For the first time in years, people could travel anywhere in Afghanistan without worrying about being caught in a crossfire if some group of fighters suddenly started attacking government cars or Russian military vehicles from their hiding places.

Grandfather was very optimistic. It was springtime, and it felt like the whole world was making a new beginning. Several times, he

invited some of the Mujahedin to our house, served them good food, and treated them like his best friends. My father shared Grandfather's feelings at the beginning. But after a while, he began to have doubts. He did not like how they were running the country.

Within weeks, fighting between some of the Mujahedin factions broke out in certain areas of Kabul, small incidents at first. People said, "There must be some misunderstandings. In a family, there are always squabbles. They will solve it."

But those small fights became big fights. Chaos started spreading all over Afghanistan. Afghans who had a little money or relatives in other countries quickly left. Others who stayed were beaten up, or had their property stolen. We heard about women who were raped by the soldiers of the same commanders who had talked about Islam and its importance to Muslims and Afghans only a few months before.

My father wanted to leave Afghanistan for Turkey or Russia, where he had many friends from his days as a boxer, but my grandfather would not give him permission to go. "The borders are still open," my father said. "We should go while we can. We will come back when things quiet down."

"Afghanistan is in good hands now. We are with our own now, and we can decide what we want. Give them time," Grandfather urged. Besides, he needed my father's help. My father was the son on whom my grandfather most depended.

Slowly, one Mujahedin faction took over a part of Kabul City, and another faction took another part. They started by seizing control of a neighborhood where many people of their tribe lived, then tried to take other areas around them. Soon, each faction had its own territory. As spring turned into summer, we started hearing about "checkpoints" and the "front lines." The factions started firing rockets at each other. Now innocent people were being killed, especially in our neighborhood, which by sad chance was about as far as the rockets from each side could fly before they fell.

First it was a dozen people who were killed. Then it was a hun-

dred. Then a thousand. It was like when a forest catches fire, both the dry and the wet burn.

One faction overran Pul-e-Charkhi prison and freed not just the political prisoners, but even those who had committed inhumane deeds against common ordinary people.

One day while two factions were firing rockets at each other over our heads, there was loud knocking on our courtyard door. I had just come out of Grandfather's room, where he was starting his prayers, and I ran to the door.

When I opened it, I saw some guys with guns, grenades, and bullets tucked into special belts and in their waistcoat pockets. The hooks of the grenades were hanging out.

One of them walked through the door without being invited and pushed me against the wall. He had an ugly scar on his face. Two others followed.

"Where is the owner of this house?" he asked loudly.

"He is inside praying," I told him.

"Where?" he asked gruffly. I pointed to Grandfather's room. He kicked open the door. Grandfather was on his prayer rug, with his head touching the ground.

"Give me the key to your carpet warehouse!" the man with the scar shouted at Grandfather, but Grandfather ignored him, and kept on praying. The man shouted again and pointed his gun at Grandfather's head. I started to cry.

My grandfather ignored him until he had finished his prayers. He quietly rose to his feet and folded his prayer rug as if he were the only person in the room. Finally, he looked at the gunman, who had been shouting the whole time.

"If you think I will be scared by your loud voice, you are stupid." Grandfather spoke calmly, like he was talking to one of his clients at the bank.

The shouting had attracted the attention of my father and my uncles. I could hear them running toward Grandfather's room. They

were shouting, too, asking what was happening. The thieves took positions in the corners of the room. As my father and his brothers came rushing in, the thieves put their guns to the backs of their necks. Everyone froze where he stood.

My cousins had come running down the long corridor that led to my grandfather's room, their mothers behind them. When they saw the thieves and the guns, there was a moment of horrified silence.

Then Grandfather spoke softly. "Go ahead, kill me, and then you will get the key. Whatever I have earned in life came from the calluses of my hands. I will not give it to a bunch of cowardly thieves."

The one in charge, with the scar, grinned at my grandfather and said, "You stupid old man, I won't even waste a bullet on you." Then he shouted at my uncles, cousins, and their mothers to move back. Everyone did. The thieves braced the butts of their Kalashnikovs against their stomachs, pointed the barrels toward us, and walked backward out the courtyard gate.

When they had gone, my father locked the door after them. My father and my uncles went to Grandfather's room. Their wives were whispering to one another in the courtyard.

My cousins came to me to ask me what had happened. I stood with them all around me and told what I had seen. They paid close attention to everything I said, even the ones who did not get along with me. Now that I had become so important, I told them, "You have to wait until I finish my explanations, then I will answer your questions."

A moment later, we heard three gunshots in the street. My father and two of my uncles ran from Grandfather's room toward the courtyard door. My mother and my uncles' wives cried to them not to go out. But they did not listen.

Grandfather came out of his room and ran after them. Nobody dared to tell him what to do. As he hurried toward the courtyard gate, he nodded at me to follow him. Grandfather always wanted me to see life as it is and not hide from it. I followed him, and my cousins followed me. Outside our courtyard gate, we found my father and my two uncles handcuffed in front of Grandfather's warehouse. Several more robbers were in the street. Two of them were again pointing

guns at the backs of their necks. One of the locks to the warehouse had been shot open. One of the thieves was positioned as a lookout at one end of our short street; another one was at the far end. One more was standing in the middle of the road in front of our warehouse.

Two others were still trying to break the second lock. Sweat was dropping from their chins, though it was cold and a light cover of snow had whitened the ground. One of them wanted to blow the lock open with a grenade, but his friend did not let him.

"No!" he said. "They'll hear it. We'll have to share the carpets with the commander." Suddenly, I understood that these guys were ordinary thieves who had joined one of the factions. They were not true Mujahedin who defend their country and faith against the invaders and heretics.

The one who had suggested using the grenade stepped back and shot three bullets at the lock. On the third shot, it shattered and the door opened. The one who was standing in the middle of the road called the two others at the ends of the road to join them. They all went inside.

The warehouse was dark. The carpets were piled one on top of another, all the way to the ceiling. Over the past sixteen years, since my grandfather had retired from the bank, he and my father had gathered more than six thousand carpets. One of the thieves drew the curtains, and sunlight rushed in.

The warehouse was a treasury. Every carpet spoke through its colors and its designs. Many were very old. Each one had been selected carefully by Grandfather and my father, but we could do nothing to stop the thieves from taking them away from us.

Working quickly, three of them loaded as many carpets as they could into their old Russian jeep. Three others stood guard outside with their fingers on the triggers, ready to shoot anyone who bothered them. I saw the carpet that I had helped wash in the courtyard with the washers we hired once a month. They cleaned the old carpets that my father brought back from the villages. That was my favorite carpet, but I could not tell these thieves to not take that one because I liked it.

It took them two days to steal all the carpets. The war had now come to us, as it had to so many.

We were not the only ones who were robbed. Our part of Kabul was almost empty. Most of our neighbors had fled, some in such a hurry they took nothing with them. Soon their houses were stripped bare.

The women were no longer at their windows with their elbows on the ledges, chatting. Now, instead, unfed cats leapt from the ledges and hissed at each other.

Every time the wind blew, the doors of the empty houses started banging, windows slammed, curtains blew in and out. When there were no sounds of rockets exploding or guns being fired, the neighborhood was filled with the howling of the hungry dogs who had been abandoned.

Only a madman would try to go out in the street. Snipers had taken up positions on the small mountain behind us and might take a shot, just for fun. The twin peaks had lost their old names of Koh-e-Asmai and Koh-e-Aliabad and had become known as Sniper Mountain.

As spring brought warm days back to Kabul, it became too dangerous to move around in our courtyard. Some snipers even used Grandfather's high roof where we flew kites to shoot at those on the mountain; the snipers on the mountain shot back. Sometimes they fired rockets. A few landed in our courtyard. The rest fell in the streets around us, on our neighbors' houses, in our park, where they destroyed the trees, and on our small neighborhood school, which had been our joy until it was blasted into dust.

The grass in the courtyard began to die as the weather grew warmer, because no one dared to go outside to water it. In the end, it became too dangerous even to stay in our rooms. We had to move to a large room in the basement under the apartments, where we hoped we would be safer.

It had never been wired for electricity, and both day and night we lit oil lamps and candles. We slept on the cement floor.

We ate together, more than fifty of us sitting on the floor around

one tablecloth. Each day's meal was like a little party, but a sad one. Nobody talked, nobody laughed. In fact, we were waiting for a rocket to land on us and kill us all.

All the uncles had radios with tiny earphones. They spent all day listening to news from the Dari-language broadcasts on the BBC World Service and other stations. I wanted to listen to Indian songs. Worry will not change my destiny, I thought; worry brings more worries.

One Sunday night around nine o'clock, the uncles all started telling everyone to be quiet. The BBC announced that the next day there would be a ceasefire in our Kot-e-Sangi neighborhood. It would last for ten hours starting from eight in the morning. This meant we could leave our house. Everyone began to talk at once. What should we do? Where should we go? Who would help us?

As I was falling asleep that night, I could hear rockets whining in flight; when they landed, they made the ground rock like a cradle.

Around three or four in the morning, I woke up needing to use the bathroom. We did not have one in the basement. I walked to the courtyard to pee under a tree as I had done on other nights since we had been forced from our rooms. It was very quiet, but I heard the sound of shoveling. I rubbed my eyes and looked around. In different parts of the garden, all of my uncles were digging narrow, deep holes. They dug in the dark. No one dared light a lantern. It would have been a target for the snipers.

I went to one of my uncles and asked him why he was digging a hole at this time of the night. He did not answer me. I went to another uncle and asked him the same question. He did not answer either.

I went back to the basement to ask my father. He was not there next to my mother. My mother, sisters, and little brother were all sound asleep. I quietly rushed to the corner of the courtyard where our part of the house stood. There was my father digging a hole beneath the mulberry tree we liked to climb.

"Dad, what are you doing?" I asked.

He stopped and looked at me. "Go and sleep," he said. He sounded harsh.

"Why is everybody digging holes?" I asked determinedly.

"I said, go and sleep," he almost shouted at me, but very softly as if he did not want anyone to hear. His voice made me frightened. I did not ask any more questions. But I was angry.

Instead of going back down to the safety of the basement, I went to our own rooms, and I slept in my own bed. It was so good to sleep in my own bed after so many weeks on the hard cement floor of the basement. I did not care if a rocket fell on me. A few minutes later, I was sound asleep, and had no idea of the strange new life that would start for my family and me in the morning.