

Mariam had never before worn a burqa. Rasheed had to help her put it on. The padded headpiece felt tight and heavy on her skull, and it was strange seeing the world through a mesh screen. She practiced walking around her room in it and kept stepping on the hem and stumbling. The loss of peripheral vision was unnerving, and she did not like the suffocating way the pleated cloth kept pressing against her mouth.

“You’ll get used to it,” Rasheed said. “With time, I bet you’ll even like it.”

They took a bus to a place Rasheed called the Shar-e-Nau Park, where children pushed each other on swings and slapped volleyballs over ragged nets tied to tree trunks. They strolled together and watched boys fly kites, Mariam walking beside Rasheed, tripping now and then on the burqa’s hem. For lunch, Rasheed took her to eat in a small kebab house near a mosque he called the Haji Yaghoub. The floor was sticky and the air smoky. The walls smelled faintly of raw meat and the music, which Rasheed described to her as logari, was loud. The cooks were thin boys who fanned skewers with one hand and swatted gnats with the other. Mariam, who had never been inside a restaurant, found it odd at first to sit in a crowded room with so many strangers, to lift her burqa to put morsels of food into her mouth. A hint of the same anxiety as the day at the tandoor stirred in her stomach, but Rasheed’s presence was of some comfort, and, after a while, she did not mind so much the music, the smoke, even the people. And the burqa, she learned to her surprise, was also comforting. It was like a one-way window. Inside it, she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past.

On the streets, Rasheed named various buildings with authority; this is the American Embassy, he said, that the Foreign Ministry. He pointed to cars, said their names and where they were made: Soviet Volgas, American Chevrolets, German Opels.

“Which is your favorite?” he asked.

Mariam hesitated, pointed to a Volga, and Rasheed laughed.

Kabul was far more crowded than the little that Mariam had seen of Herat. There were fewer trees and fewer garis pulled by horses, but more cars, taller buildings, more traffic lights and more paved roads. And everywhere Mariam heard the city’s peculiar dialect: “Dear” was jan instead of jo, “sister” became hamshira instead of hamshireh, and so on.

From a street vendor, Rasheed bought her ice cream. It was the first time she’d eaten ice cream and Mariam had never imagined that such tricks could be played on a palate. She devoured the entire bowl, the crushed-pistachio topping, the tiny rice noodles at the bottom. She marveled at the bewitching texture, the lapping sweetness of it.

They walked on to a place called Kocheh-Morgha, Chicken Street. It was a narrow, crowded bazaar in a neighborhood that Rasheed said was one of Kabul’s wealthier ones.

“Around here is where foreign diplomats live, rich businessmen, members of the royal family—that sort of people. Not like you and me.”

“I don’t see any chickens,” Mariam said.

“That’s the one thing you can’t find on Chicken Street.” Rasheed laughed.

The street was lined with shops and little stalls that sold lambskin hats and rainbow-colored chapans. Rasheed stopped to look at an engraved silver dagger in one shop, and, in another, at an old rifle that the shopkeeper assured Rasheed was a relic from the first war against the British.

“And I’m Moshe Dayan,” Rasheed muttered. He half smiled, and it seemed to Mariam that this was a smile meant only for her. A private, married smile. They strolled past carpet shops, handicraft shops, pastry shops, flower shops, and shops that sold suits for men and dresses for women, and, in them, behind lace curtains, Mariam saw young girls sewing buttons and ironing collars. From time to time, Rasheed greeted a shopkeeper he knew, sometimes in Farsi, other times in Pashto. As they shook hands and kissed on the cheek, Mariam stood a few feet away. Rasheed did not wave her over, did not introduce her.

He asked her to wait outside an embroidery shop. “I know the owner,” he said. “I’ll just go in for a minute, say my salaam.”

Mariam waited outside on the crowded sidewalk. She watched the cars crawling up Chicken Street, threading through the horde of hawkers and pedestrians, honking at children and donkeys who wouldn’t move. She watched the bored-looking merchants inside their tiny stalls, smoking, or spitting into brass spittoons, their faces emerging from the shadows now and then to peddle textiles and fur-collared poostin coats to passersby.

But it was the women who drew Mariam’s eyes the most.

The women in this part of Kabul were a different breed from the women in the poorer neighborhoods—like the one where she and Rasheed lived, where so many of the women covered fully. These women were—what was the word Rasheed had used?—“modern.” Yes, modern Afghan women married to modern Afghan men who did not mind that their wives walked among strangers with makeup on their faces and nothing on their heads. Mariam watched them cantering uninhibited down the street, sometimes with a man, sometimes alone, sometimes with rosy-cheeked children who wore shiny shoes and watches with leather bands, who walked bicycles with highrise handlebars and gold-colored spokes—unlike the children in Deh-Mazang, who bore sand-fly scars on their cheeks and rolled old bicycle tires with sticks.

These women were all swinging handbags and rustling skirts. Mariam even spotted one 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 perpetually urgent business. They wore dark sunglasses, and, when they breezed by, Mariam caught a whiff of their perfume. She imagined that they all had university degrees, that they worked in office buildings, behind desks of their own, where they typed and smoked and made important telephone calls to important people. These women mystified Mariam. They made her aware of her own lowliness, her plain looks, her lack of aspirations, her ignorance of so many things.

Then Rasheed was tapping her on the shoulder and handing her something.

“Here.”

It was a dark maroon silk shawl with beaded fringes and edges embroidered with gold thread.

“Do you like it?”

Mariam looked up. Rasheed did a touching thing then. He blinked and averted her gaze.

Mariam thought of Jalil, of the emphatic, jovial way in which he'd pushed his jewelry at her, the overpowering cheerfulness that left room for no response but meek gratitude. Nana had been right about Jalil's gifts. They had been halfhearted tokens of penance, insincere, corrupt gestures meant more for his own appeasement than hers. This shawl, Mariam saw, was a true gift.

"It's beautiful," she said.

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