

# **They Danced in Windowless Rooms: The Life of Najla Ayubi of Afghanistan**

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**2015 Women PeaceMakers Program**



**University  
of San Diego®**  
JOAN B. KROC  
SCHOOL OF PEACE STUDIES  
*Institute for Peace and Justice*



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## **A NOTE TO THE READER**

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

## **ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM**

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the

realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.<sup>1</sup>

### **BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER —** **NAJLA AYUBI**

Judge Najla Ayubi of Afghanistan is a firm believer that there can be no peace without justice. She first took the bench in the late 80s in her native Parwan Province, before being forced out of her profession and public life during the rule of the Taliban. Unwilling to accept her fate, Ayubi was soon organizing clandestine schools and sewing classes in bunkers, hidden from the Taliban's religious police that forbade work for women or education for girls older than 8 years old. Raised in a family that prized education for both boys and girls, Ayubi herself has two MA degrees: one in law and politics from the State University of Tajikistan and another on post-war recovery and development studies from the University of York in the United Kingdom.

With the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Ayubi returned to work as senior state attorney, but saw that more was needed in the tumultuous period of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the country's transition. Not one to sit idly by, Ayubi took increasing leadership roles promoting civic education, women's empowerment, human rights and transparency as the country sought to write a new constitution and hold its first elections after decades of conflict. She served as a legal advisor for the State Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs of Afghanistan, commissioner at the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan and commissioner of the Joint Electoral Management Body.

An outspoken proponent of women's rights frequently tasked with advising on gender mainstreaming, Judge Ayubi has not hesitated to critique post-conflict transition processes that have excluded women. This has not made her popular with the Taliban or certain tribal leaders who continue to hold positions of power. Undeterred, she continues to advocate for women's rights in Islamic contexts and a society that values education and justice for women and men, as her family did in Parwan.

Ayubi served as a board member of Open Society Afghanistan and as country director of Open Society Afghanistan. She sits on a number of boards including as a global advisory board member of Women's Regional Network, and a steering committee member of Tawanmandi. She recently served as deputy country representative of The Asia Foundation's Afghanistan office.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article "'Women Cannot Cry Anymore': Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict," by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

## **CONFLICT HISTORY — AFGHANISTAN**

### ***Brief Overview***

Afghanistan's recent conflict history can be summarized by its position as a land of proxy wars being fought by neighboring nations in a struggle for control, while simultaneously acting as a stage for the "great game" of international superpowers in a legacy of colonialism. This legacy began with the British, who continuously invaded Afghanistan in an attempt to gain control over the region, secure their interests in colonized India, and assert their dominance against the Soviet Union. It was continued by the Soviet Union with its invasion in the late 1970s, and the emergence of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan fueled a conservative Islamic movement, in a backlash that had been building for decades.

The U.S. took their cue after the Soviet invasion and began funding the resistance group the Mujahideen. Once the Soviets withdrew from the country in 1989, the people of Afghanistan were left in a mess of Islamist factions backed by different countries. Eventually one emerged as a cruel victor, the Taliban from Pakistan, who harbored the terrorist network al-Qaida, thus leading to the international intervention led by the U.S. — an intervention that has yet to see its end.

### ***19th to 21st Centuries***

In 1837 Afghanistan found itself in a very particular position that would foreshadow the next 150 years. Russia had long been interested in creating a link that would allow them to trade directly with Britain's Indian empire, and as the only neighbor with easy access to it, Afghanistan was well positioned. The British were threatened by the idea of Russia having power in this area — and so both countries sent emissaries to Kabul to try to secure their interests. Afghanistan's ruler at the time, Dost Mohammad Khan, found himself courted by both powers.

When negotiations with the British emissaries soured and they were ordered from Kabul, India's governor-general Lord Auckland used it as an excuse to invade Afghanistan. The British had long viewed Afghans themselves as a threat as well, given its proximity to Russia. This time period was part of what became widely referred to as the "Great Game" between the British and Russian empires for dominance in Central Asia, a conflict and strategic rivalry that would last well into the 20th century, and its legacy beyond.

Lord Auckland's invasion, from 1838 to 1842, would prove to be the first of unsuccessful and costly invasions known as the Anglo-Afghan wars. The final ended in 1880, and relations between the two countries remained reasonably calm for roughly the next 40 years.

Habibullah Khan, ruler from 1901 to 1919 maintained a strict neutrality during World War I. Regardless, Habibullah was excluded from the Anglo-Russian Convention

of 1907 in which British and Russian superpowers discussed the solidification of boundaries and control in Afghanistan, Persia and Tibet. He later requested a seat at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. Again, he was denied a seat.

After his assassination in 1919, he was succeeded by his son Amanullah Khan. In his coronation address, he proclaimed Afghanistan's complete independence from Great Britain. He then launched the Third Anglo-Afghan War by invading British India.

The war lasted only a month between ill-equipped Afghan soldiers and a British Indian Army exhausted from the First World War. In August a treaty was signed in which Britain acknowledged Afghanistan's complete independence as a sovereign nation.

The Anglo-Afghan Wars effectively created a deep-seated nationalism and unity particularly amongst tribesmen, who had banded together and become well-armed through the conflict — another foreshadowing into future conflicts.

In his aims of modernization, Amanullah introduced reforms that included compulsory elementary education, the opening of co-ed schools, and abolishing the veil traditionally worn by Muslim women. He pushed for a constitution that incorporated the rights of the individual, as well as equality and women's rights. The swift pace of his modernization efforts contributed to a conservative backlash that would ultimately force his abdication in 1929 by a rebel leader angered by the modernization, led by Habibullah Kalakani.

Amanullah abdicated to his brother, Inayatullah Khan, who acted as king for less than a week until Kalakani took over. Kalakani was shortly thereafter assassinated by Nadir Khan, Afghanistan's Minister of War, who took Kabul swiftly with his army. He reigned with orderliness until his assassination in 1933, attempting a slower position on modernization.

The 19-year-old successor to the throne, Zahir Shah, would reign for 40 years, from 1933 to 1973. Zahir Shah worked with his father and uncles to restore order to the lawlessness that had taken hold. Ultimately the criticism of the royal family for their attempts at reforms became too great, and crackdowns came into effect on newspapers and in the form of individual arrests.

The brother-in-law and cousin of the king, Mohammed Daoud Khan, became prime minister in 1953 in a family coup. Following Daoud's dispute with Pakistan 10 years later, Zahir Shah requested his resignation and stepped more fully into his role as king. In 1964 he implemented a constitutional reform that effectively turned Afghanistan into a constitutional monarchy and introduced civil rights, women's rights, free elections, a parliament and universal suffrage, as well as greater accountability for the monarchy.

Under Zahir Shah's administration, Afghanistan remained strategically neutral during the Second World War. During the Cold War, Afghanistan was skillfully positioned to obtain benefits from both sides. Both the Soviet Union and the U.S. built hospitals and highways in Afghanistan in their struggle for power. While slow in terms of economic development, Zahir Shah's would be a reign marking 40 years of peace in Afghan history.



Meanwhile, new movements were surfacing from both the nationalist and Islamic elites. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was founded at the beginning of 1965. While it espoused loyalty to the monarch, its goal was revolution.

In 1967, the PDPA split into two rivaling factions, the Khalq (led by Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin) and the Parcham (led by Babrak Karmal). The Parcham faction was more moderate while the Khalq called for immediate revolution and government overthrow, and would receive assistance from the Soviets. While Zahir Shah was in Italy for a medical procedure in 1973, his cousin Mohammad Daoud Khan created a coup and established Afghanistan as a republic, with himself as president and prime minister.

The democratic constitution and separation of power established by Zahir Shah was replaced by a loya jirga ("grand assembly"), and Daoud attempted reforms and progressive policies, including supporting women's rights and a five-year plan to increase the labor force by 50 percent. Ultimately, he was unsuccessful and was assassinated in 1978 during the Saur Revolution, a violent coup staged by Babrak Karmal, Amin Taha and Nur Mohammad Taraki.

Taraki was president briefly until being assassinated by Hafizullah Amin, who took his place. At first, the cabinet seemed to consist of an equal balance of Parchamis and Khalquis, but the Parchamis were gradually relieved of their duties. Amin and Taraki executed several members of the cabinet (including the general who led the Saur Revolution), stating that they had discovered a plot against them. Additionally, an agreement had been signed in December of 1978 allowing military support from the Soviets.

Under the new socialist agenda, radical measures were taken. "Land reforms" became simply the seizing of land (oftentimes arbitrary) that angered Afghan citizens and yielded little to no benefits. This repression would not go without repercussions from tribal and traditional Afghans, as well as the whole of society.

The PDPA changed the national flag to emulate that of the Soviet Union. The Islamic green was replaced by Soviet red, a grave offense to an Islamic and conservative country. The government banned usury without providing an alternative for the peasants who relied upon it, leading to an agricultural crisis. The PDPA declared equality of the sexes and women's rights, further angering the country's conservative majority. And even as the PDPA declared women's rights, it committed human rights abuses to an extensive degree — murdering, torturing or imprisoning tens of thousands religious and intellectual leaders and the traditional elite.

The Soviet Union promised hundreds of millions of dollars in aid, and built infrastructure from roads to hospitals and schools, and equipped and trained the Afghan army.

The secular government, its affronts to traditional Afghan and Islamic culture and religion, and extreme repression created extensive civil unrest. The repression united

otherwise fragmented groups of tribal and ethnic factions and gave them the common cause of restoring Islam to their country.

The PDPA attempted to form much-needed alliances with tribal leaders in hopes of creating tribal militia, even providing them with food and arms, which were ultimately used against them. The Soviet Union intervened in December of 1979 with more than 100,000 Soviet troops and an almost equal number of Afghan militia. Hafizullah Amin was murdered, and Babrak Karmal of the Parcham PDPA faction took his place. The Soviet invasion marked the end of U.S. aid into Afghanistan. The U.S. instead began funding the extreme Islamist faction the Mujahideen (the most organized and supported group fighting against Soviet rule), arming them with tens of billions of dollars in munitions, equipment and training, often through Pakistan, in hopes of a Soviet withdrawal.<sup>[1]</sup>

The war between the Soviet regime and the Mujahideen ravaged the country and resulted in the deaths of over 1 million civilians and the displacement of 6 million refugees into Pakistan and Iran. The Soviet Union replaced Babrak Karmal with Mohammad Najibullah in 1985. He attempted to change back aspects of the government to incorporate religious interests and amended items in the constitution, announcing Afghanistan as “an Islamic state.”

In 1989 Soviet troops withdrew from the country, though the USSR still provided millions in aid. Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia ended all funding to its puppet Afghan government. Najibullah’s regime fell immediately, while Afghan air force planes were grounded for lack of fuel.

Four years of civil war ensued between various Islamist parties in which lawlessness and massive human rights violations occurred. After the ousting of the Soviet-backed government, Mujahideen factions united briefly in a power-sharing and peace agreement called the Peshawar Accords, initiated by prominent Mujahideen leader Ahmad Shah Massoud.

The exception was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who wanted total control of the government. His group was funded by the Pakistani army, and maintained close affiliations with Al-Qaida. Massoud sought to unite the seven Islamist factions to create a centralized government and an Islamic state, together. His vision would not be realized, as factions continued to fight and received aid from other countries with their own vested interests in the region.

Afghan civilians found themselves caught in between these multiple proxy wars, and when it was rumored there was a group called the Taliban that would bring peace, many Afghans welcomed them. The Taliban took Kabul in 1996, and Massoud and Abdul Rashid Dostum united as former nemeses to fight against them, creating the Northern Alliance.

The Taliban was comprised initially of Quranic students and Afghan refugees educated by mullahs, and at Talib training centers in Pakistan. They implemented a

strict interpretation of Sharia law, forbidding women to leave the house and prescribing punishments like public execution and the cutting off of limbs for petty crimes. They targeted Shia Muslims and the ethnic minority Hazaras, and have been described as one of the most brutal regimes in modern history, executing thousands of civilians and massacring 150,000 Iranian soldiers on the Afghanistan/Iran border.<sup>[2]</sup> The Taliban received their funding from Pakistan (which also sent tens of thousands of soldiers to fight with them), Osama bin Laden, and through the cultivation of opium in Afghanistan's poppy fields — some of the largest in the world.

When Dostum was defeated by the Taliban in 1998, Massoud was the last remaining military stand against them. Many civilians fled to areas under his control, where he implemented a human rights charter and promoted women's rights. Human Rights Watch reported no human rights violations from his forces from 1996 until his assassination in 2001.<sup>[3]</sup> The Taliban repeatedly attempted to recruit him, offering him positions of power. He was documented on record stating that he was uninterested, for he did not fight for a position of power, but for a consensus-based democracy.<sup>[4]</sup> He tried to negotiate with the Taliban to move toward democratic elections in the future, but was unsuccessful.

Massoud was assassinated by the Taliban on September 9, 2001, two days before Al-Qaida's attack on the United States. The Taliban had allowed the terrorist organization to use Afghanistan as a base, and refused to extradite its leader bin Laden, ushering in an international intervention led by the U.S. on the group's training camps and military bases. Surviving Talibs fled to Pakistan.

An interim government was established in 2002 with Hamid Karzai as president. Gains were made on restoring infrastructure, education and the economy, but over a decade of tensions ensued between the U.S. and Afghan government, Pakistan, and the Taliban. In 2009 Karzai was reelected amid accusations of fraud.

Anti-Western and anti-American sentiments increased with reports of violence toward civilians on the part of American soldiers. When bin Laden was killed by U.S. Navy Seals, the government announced a plan for troop withdrawal. In September of 2014, Ashraf Ghani was elected president, and three months later the Afghanistan combat mission was officially ended by NATO and the U.S., though troops remained.

The Taliban have continued violent attacks and suicide bombings in a back-and-forth with U.S. and Afghan forces, and in early 2015 U.S. President Barack Obama announced delaying troop withdrawal, at the request of Ghani.

## **INTEGRATED TIMELINE**

### Political Developments in Afghanistan and *Personal History of Najla Ayubi*

#### **1921**

- Afghanistan gains independence after defeating the British in the Third British-Afghan War.

#### **1926**

- Amir Amanullah Khan declares Afghanistan a monarchy.

#### **1928**

- Unrest against the king.

#### **1929**

- Amanullah leaves the country and abdicates the throne.

#### **1933**

- Zahir Shah becomes king. His reign lasts 40 years.

#### **1934**

- Afghanistan is formally recognized as a country by the U.S.

#### **1947**

- The partition of the British-controlled Indian subcontinent leads to the creation of Pakistan, and border issues with Afghanistan begin.

#### **1953**

- General Mohammed Daoud Khan becomes prime minister and introduces radical reforms including land reforms and women's rights, and begins to develop a relationship with the Soviet Union. The rapid pace of his reforms angers citizens of the conservative Islamic country.

**1956**

- The Afghan government forms an alliance with the Soviet Union.

**1957**

- Women are allowed to enter the workforce and go to school.

**1963**

- Mohammed Daoud Khan is forced to step down as prime minister.

**1965**

- Babrak Karmal and Nur Mohammad Taraki form the secret Afghan Communist Party.

**1972-80**

- ***Najla is increasingly recognized as someone who “defends the underdog,” befriending newcomers and those not socially included in school, or those children wrongly accused or treated. For example, she criticizes the religion teacher who touched her friend inappropriately, and confronts the men who wait outside her school to call them names and sexually harass them.***

**1973**

- Mohammed Zahir Shah is overthrown by Mohammed Daoud Khan in a military coup and appoints himself president of the Republic of Afghanistan.
- ***As a child, Najla is robbed by a group of older boys while walking to school.***

**1975-7**

- A new constitution is proposed, which includes women’s rights and Modernization.

**1978**

- A communist coup leads to the assassination of Daoud, and Nur Mohammed Taraki takes control.

- The Mujahideen, made up initially of conservative Islamic leaders, takes form in the countryside. They are unhappy with social changes and the allegiance with the Soviet Union.
- **May — *The Ayubi family moves from Kabul to a new house in their home province of Parwan.***

## 1979

- Taraki is killed after a power struggle with Hafizullah Amin. The U.S. stops any assistance to Afghanistan after Ambassador Adolph Dubs is killed.
- Soviet Union invades Afghanistan to support the struggling communist regime. Amin and much of his party are executed. Karmal becomes president. Opposition to Soviet and Karmal regime increases quickly and manifests in public demonstrations. Several countries supply arms to the Mujahideen, including the U.S., Pakistan, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

## 1980

- ***Najla receives detention for being outspoken and criticizing her teacher.***

## 1982

- 2.8 million Afghans flee to Pakistan and 1.5 million to Iran to escape the war.

## 1983

- ***Najla graduates from high school.***
- ***March — Najla receives a scholarship to attend the law school at Kabul University. She attends for one semester before going abroad.***
- ***Najla attends night school at Tajikistan Government University in Moscow for her law degree, while also learning philosophy, journalism and sewing.***

## 1985

- It is estimated that half the Afghan population has been displaced by the war.
- ***April — Najla's brother Rafi is kidnapped. One month later, the family is informed that he was killed by jihadists.***

## 1987

- ***Najla confronts Jawid, a leader of the Youth Council at her university, who is trying to discredit her and her family.***

**1988**

- Al-Qaida is formed.

**1988-9**

- Peace accords are signed by the U.S., Soviet Union, Pakistan and Afghanistan, which leads to Soviet withdrawal from the country. The Mujahideen still resist communist President Mohammad Najibullah.

**1989**

- ***Najla has her first day in court as a judge. She cries walking to the courthouse because she is forced to wear a headscarf.***

**1992**

- The Mujahideen remove Najibullah and take over, claiming the capital Kabul. Fighting continues amongst the factions of the Mujahideen, and a devastating civil war ensues.
- ***Najla's father is assassinated. Najla and her sister lose their jobs, and the family loses jobs, property and businesses. Their brothers are on hit lists, and Najla, her sister and brothers move to Kabul. Jihadists try to take the family's house in Parwan.***

**1993**

- ***After much harassment and accusations in official letters that she is a "prostitute" because she studied in the Soviet Union, Najla meets with Minister of Defense Ahmad Shah Massoud and obtains a job as attorney general. Najla and her sister Najiba are the family's breadwinners, and the family is still on the jihadists' radar.***

**1995-9**

- Drought causes 1 million Afghans to flee to Pakistan.

**1996**

- The Taliban comes to power, introducing extreme Islamic law, brutal punishments and the severe oppression of women. Women are prohibited from working, studying or moving about freely.
- ***Najla and her family flee their province when it becomes the frontline between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. Her brother escapes to Pakistan, and the rest of the family become internally displaced. Najla and her family lose all property and begin life again in Kabul.***

## 1997

- The Taliban executes Najibullah, and is in control of two-thirds of the country.
- ***Najla's brother Nasir is arrested and tortured in Parwan. Upon his release, Najla escapes with him to Kabul.***

## 1997-2001

- ***Najla works as a tailor and teaches underground sewing and basic education to children. The family remains under great political and economic pressure.***

## 1998

- Al-Qaida attacks U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. U.S. President Bill Clinton orders missile airstrikes against Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, believed to be hiding in Afghanistan.
- ***Najiba, Najla's eldest sister, is arrested and beaten for having her face exposed in a curtained bus. Najla falls into a depressive illness and spends eight months bedridden.***

## 1999

- ***Najiba flees Afghanistan to Iran and eventually Europe. Najla takes over Najiba's beauty parlor business.***

## 2001

- The Taliban destroy Buddhist statues — ancient and cultural treasures — in Bamiyan. The Taliban kills Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance, the main insurgent group fighting the Taliban.



- September 11 — Nearly 3,000 people are killed in attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon near Washington, D.C., and in rural Pennsylvania. The U.S. suspects that Al-Qaida is behind the attacks.
- U.S. and British forces attack the al-Qaida network in Afghanistan after they refuse to hand over bin Laden. The Northern Alliance, with U.S. backing, enters Kabul and the Taliban retreats. Hamid Karzai is chosen as interim leader.
- **November — *Najla is allowed to return to work as senior attorney general in the Attorney General's Office in Afghanistan.***

## 2001-2

- ***Najla also works as an interpreter and translator for an emergency hospital.***

## 2002

- ***Najla works for the UN Mine Action Program.***
- An emergency Loya Jirga results in an Afghan Transitional Administration and Karzai is elected interim president.

## 2004

- A new constitution is adopted and presidential elections are held, with Karzai winning 55 percent of the vote.
- ***Najla plays an instrumental role as secretariat for the drafting, reviewing and approval processes for the constitution. Alongside other women's rights group and the UN, they manage to reserve a 25 percent quota for women in parliament. She receives many attacks and threats for pushing women's rights forward.***
- ***Najla moves to the election commission, in which she promotes women's participation during the first presidential election. She is humiliated by a male colleague for not knowing English proficiently and for being the only woman in a management capacity in the election commission.***

## 2005

- ***Najla is appointed to the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan and the Joint Electoral Management Body.***
- Parliamentary elections are held for the first time in over 30 years. Warlords win most of the seats.

## 2006

- ***Najla works with the International Development Law Organization on Gender and Criminal Justice. She travels to the U.S. and speaks for the first time about her life in a conflict zone.***

## 2006-7

- ***Najla receives a scholarship to a university in the U.K. for her second master's degree, this one in post-war studies.***

## 2007

- Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah is killed by a U.S. operation in Afghanistan.
- ***Najla receives a serious personal security threat from the Taliban in the form of a "night letter" to the Ayubis' home. Her elder sister Najiba is cited as well. The Ayubis report the letter to the Intelligence Service and request assistance.***

## 2007-8

- ***Najla works as a legal advisor to the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs of Afghanistan. She finds it difficult to receive the support from the government necessary to do her job, and leaves shortly after.***

## 2008

- \$15 billion in international aid is promised to Afghanistan.
- ***Najla joins The Asia Foundation as sub-national policy development consultant, working on civil society and government entities in regard to gender mainstreaming. She develops, alongside religious scholars, women's rights booklets from a Sharia law perspective. Najla is harassed by male colleagues for her open dress and for speaking out against traditional practices.***

## 2010

- Parliamentary polls come under scrutiny of fraud and the results are delayed.
- President Karzai calls for a Peace Jirga.
- ***Najla, initially invited to the jirga, is kicked off when she questions the sovereignty of her country after U.S. President Obama visited troops in the country without a visa and without notifying or meeting with Afghan government officials. She also spoke out about the lack of women's participation in the jirga.***

**2011**

- ***Najla co-founds, together with colleagues in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, the Women's Regional Network. Najla also becomes the program director for law, human rights and women's rights at The Asia Foundation.***
- ***Shafi, Najla's brother, is called in by Afghan Intelligence Service's National Department of Security to alert him that his sister is on the hit list to be assassinated by Taliban extremists. The security department increases its presence around the Ayubis' home.***
- Osama bin Laden is killed by U.S. forces in Pakistan. Targeted assassinations of prominent individuals by the Taliban continue. Civilian casualties reach their highest since 2001.
- ***Najla becomes the Afghan representative for the Open Society Foundation.***
- At a Loya Jirga, Karzai is endorsed by tribal elders to negotiate a partnership with the U.S. military for the next 10 years.
- Attacks at a Shia shrine leave 58 people killed — the first sign of the emergence of a Shia/Sunni conflict in the country.

**2012**

- Thirty people are killed in protests after it comes to light that copies of the Quran were burned at a U.S. airbase in Afghanistan.
- Robert Bales, a U.S. Army Sergeant, is accused of killing 16 civilians in Kandahar.
- NATO agrees to plan on withdrawing foreign troops by the end of 2014.
- \$16 billion in nongovernmental aid to Afghanistan is pledged, supplied primarily by the U.S., Germany, Japan and the U.K.
- The U.S. gives control of the Bagram jail to the Afghan government.

**2013**

- The Afghan army takes command of all military operations from NATO.
- Karzai suspends talks with the U.S. after it says it will hold talks directly with the Taliban.
- ***Najla is interviewed by the BBC on a panel addressing the "Elimination of Violence Against Women Law." She argues with ministers of the government about whether they are following Islam when they refuse to take action against sexual violence toward young girls. After, Najla receives phone calls and death threats for "questioning Islam."***
- ***Najla rejoins The Asia Foundation as deputy of the country office, working with religious scholars, women's rights groups and the educational sector.***

**2014**

- A suicide bombing at a restaurant in Kabul kills 13 civilians, striking further fear into residents about extremist attacks.
- Inconclusive results from the presidential election lead to a second round between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. Ghani later wins and is sworn in.

## 2015

- Extremist acts continue with the lynching of Farkhunda, a woman accused of burning a Quran, and four men are sentenced to death in response.
- The Taliban and Afghan officials hold peace talks in Qatar. Taliban says they won't stop fighting until all non-Afghan troops exit the country.
- ***Najla receives a letter from the Taliban Islamic Movement stating that its leadership had issued an official order for her assassination, particularly for criticizing their terrorist attacks against women and children. Najla flees Afghanistan because of the continued death threats.***
- ***Najla is selected as a Woman PeaceMaker at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego.***

## **NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE OF NAJLA AYUBI OF AFGHANISTAN**

### **From Ghost to Zorowar**

With every clink of the tin box, little Najla's heart jumped.

She stepped into the street still muddy from yesterday's rain, the box rattling gently in time with her stride. Najla carried with her a prized new possession: a tin of colored pencils gifted by her father, [Ustad Ayubi](#). She could hardly wait to use them and show her classmates. Just holding the box was excitement enough.

Every morning that little Najla stepped outside the warm and safe corridors of the family who encouraged her, and who never indicated that being a girl was anything to be ashamed of, she stepped unknowingly into an Afghanistan loaded with social complexities and prejudices. She stepped into a country on the brink of change that would soon capture the world's attention for decades to come.

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This morning was still a childhood springtime, however, and Najla had left her mother in the kitchen that smelled of sweet green tea, and burst into the street with the exuberance of secret treasure.

After turning a corner, a group of older boys lingered ahead. The streets were small and she didn't think to cross to the other side to avoid them. As little Najla walked by the group of boys, lost in reverie, one of them stepped into her path, facing her directly. He was tall and blonde, with green eyes.

Confused, she tried to walk around him but another stepped in the way. When a third snatched her school satchel from her, fear struck her silent and still, watching them discover her beloved new pencils. They returned her pack but not the pencils. Could she speak? Did she dare? Would they hurt her if she did? A very little part of little Najla, the only part left untouched by fear, rumbled and bristled with the violation. They were older, they were bigger, and they were boys.

Somehow she knew it might have been different if she were a boy too. The big one with the green eyes stepped aside. She began walking forward automatically. It had happened so fast, that small joy of her father's gift now gone, and a tiny seed of question had been planted in the innocent idea that boys and girls might not be equal.

The fear lingered strangely even after the boys were no longer in sight. It was a foreign feeling. Najla went to school as usual and tried to forget about the pencils, but she could not forget the empty place in her bag where they'd been or the pride and excitement she had felt when her father gave them to her. On the walk home she almost forgot about being robbed, temporarily distracted by the noises of clattering horses and carts — but when she turned the same corner where the boys had been, fear and indignation struck her heart again, and again the tears came. She cried all the way home.

“Najo, Najo, what happened?” Her eldest sister Najiba asked upon seeing her.

Najla struggled to form the words, instead collapsing in her mother's comforting arms. She cried until she could speak about the pencils, but the feeling of injustice remained. What the boys had done was wrong and she felt it deeply, but she could do nothing about it. She was, after all, “little” Najla.

“Come come, little one,” her mother said as she wiped her tears. “It's OK, these things happen sometimes, and you're new to this school.”

“Guljan, what happened?” Najla's father called to his wife from his study, appearing shortly after, still dressed neatly in a suit from work.

Her mother's real name was Hafiza, but she had been renamed upon marrying Najla's father by the female in-laws at the closing wedding party, as was Afghan custom. The name they chose was Guljan. Najla hated the custom, and thought it strange, too. Why should someone else's family get to take away your name? And why did only the girl have her name taken away? She vowed she would never give up her real name.

When the tears settled, her father — her *padar* — listened while she told her story. “I just want to be bigger, padar. I just want to be a *zorowar!*” She used the word for someone very powerful, a warrior, whom people respected. Najla had been bullied and teased by the bigger kids for as long as she had been in school. They called her names, teased her, and now they had stolen from her.

Her father spoke to her very gently, very kindly. “My Najla, you may be little on the outside, but you will soon grow to be bigger. What's more important is that you can become bigger, a *zorowar*, on the inside even when you're little on the outside. Then you will feel strong and people will respect you.”

She didn't entirely understand what he meant, but she understood that maybe bigness, then, wasn't something people only saw on the outside. She understood his

encouragement and the way that he seemed to somehow see her as bigger than she saw herself.

Najla joined her sister Nadera and her brother Rafi playing in the yard, sheltered by the fruit trees and the houses of her extended family surrounding them. Only half-interested in playing, she was still thinking about what her father had said. She lay down in the grass beneath the pomegranate tree and drifted off, jarred only for a moment when Rafi accidentally kicked the ball against her shin before she fell completely asleep, the word *zorowar* repeating itself in her mind.

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In the years since the pencil incident Najla hadn't grown much bigger or taller, but on the inside she was growing at a rapid pace. One morning she walked a different route to a different school, where the Ayubis had moved. She was happy, and had no reason to feel otherwise. And the love letter ordeal had been solved.

*The love letter!* She rolled her eyes. How could someone write you a love letter when they had never even met you? The whole thing seemed silly.

Two days before, her principal, Zinat Jan — who was also Najla's cousin — had called Najla to her office. Najla felt a horrible sense of dread. You were only called to Zinat's office for very bad things. The worst things. It could certainly be nothing good, that was for sure.

"Sit down, Najla."

Najla obeyed silently. Zinat closed the door. She returned to sit behind her desk in formidable silence. She opened a drawer in her desk and slowly, with great purpose, pulled out an envelope and slid it to Najla, who felt the suspense couldn't get any worse.

"*THIS*," Zinat said. That was all she said. More silence. More suspense. Najla didn't dare touch the letter, though she could see it was addressed to her.

"*THIS!*" Zinat said again, this time with as much emphasis as was possible for a human without sounding absurd. It was nearly theatrical. Najla was enthralled, and almost forgot it was being directed at her.

"*THIS —*" Zinat was really fired up, whatever *THIS* was. Suddenly, Najla knew exactly what it was and exactly what Zinat was going to say about it. There was only one reason girls her age received an anonymous letter, and it was wrought with shame for her, and fell upon the whole family.

“— is the result of your open dress, your loud mouth, and the liberal ways your parents have raised you!” Najla felt the heat rise to her face at the insult to her parents. But she knew to choose her battles, and remained silent while Zinat continued.

“For years — *years* — I have told Ustad and Guljan, ‘You need to watch your daughters more closely! They will bring shame on your family! They dress openly, they speak loudly, they draw attention to themselves! They don’t follow our culture as they should, to be more conservative, respectful women!’ For years I have said this was no good, this would lead to no good. And now, see, Najla, see what you have done? See what’s happened as a result of you acting shamelessly.”

Najla began to cry. By now she was becoming accustomed to speaking her mind and causing people to react, though she didn’t particularly mean to. She couldn’t help that her parents had treated her the same way they did their boys, and that they’d taught her she had a choice and the ability to speak for herself. Certainly nothing about what she saw around her in Afghan society could *un-teach* that. If anything, it made it stronger.

A love letter was quite possibly one of the most shameful things that could happen to a young girl Najla’s age, socially speaking. It meant that she had drawn too much attention to herself, and that was equated with being promiscuous. Nevermind that there wasn’t a grain of truth in it. Nevermind that these letters were sent from someone the girl had never met. It was somehow still her fault, her shame. That was just what Afghan society said, and girls lived in fear of being shamed accordingly, making themselves as small and silent as possible. The last girl Najla knew of who had received a love letter had never been allowed to return to school.

Najla understood these things conceptually, but because of the unique bond of trust she shared with her father, she didn’t experience the full extent of the devastating internal shame that any other girl who sat in that chair would have. It was something she’d never seen any other girl have. Her friends’ fathers treated their daughters differently, strictly, and like they weren’t very important. They told them what to do, what to say and what to wear.

Najla’s father was the opposite. He told her she always had a choice. He laughed and talked with her, told her she could come to him with anything, and even came to her school when she acted in the theater and sang in the band. Some fathers might do this for their son, but nobody ever did this for a daughter.

When she was convinced that she wanted to become a pilot in the military, Ustad smiled and said that she could, though he advised she might not live very long and he would not want that. When she decided to become a judge — another profession she wasn’t sure a girl could do in Afghanistan — he supported her fully. When a man



approached him to request Najiba for his son, rather than negotiating with the man (as was custom), Ustad asked Najiba what she would like to do.

When Najla went home she could not hide her tear-stained face from Ustad, who quickly asked why she had been crying. She gave him the letter, though she likely would have gone straight to him with it even if he hadn't asked. Any other Afghan girl would have hidden it and covered up the incident — but she knew he would help. Sure enough, he took the cursed letter away saying, "I will solve it, Najla, not to worry. Whenever you face something like that, just come to me."

Later that evening he sat quietly at his desk, writing two letters: one to the boy who had written it, and one to the boy's school. There was no shaming of Najla, no restrictions put on her, no cruel words. In the morning he smiled and gave her the two letters to post. To the school headmaster, he had praised the students and asked that he speak to them about staying focused on their education. To the boy he had written that there would be time later for these things, but that now it was time for school.

And so the ordeal had been solved by the wise mind and kind heart of Ustad, and little Najla walked lightly to school. The sun shone warmly on her skin as she walked beneath the berry trees and the spots of shade they cast.

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Today Najla wore her favorite pair of jeans, remembering briefly Zinat Jan's comments about dressing openly — without a hijab or any kind of veiled covering. Najla and her siblings had always dressed openly. She liked the color of denim, how the material was strong and not too soft.

The day passed without event, and her best friend Jamila met her at the school gate for the walk home. The two were playful competitors for the highest rank in their grade, and giggled perhaps a bit too much at the expense of Jamila's brother. They laughed and walked, ignoring the dark-faced older men who had mysteriously appeared to line the streets near the girls' school around the time the ending bell rang.

A few of them catcalled. One called out to Jamila. "Hey, you! Let's go, you and me." He called her a name. Najla stopped, but Jamila grabbed her hand and kept her walking.

"Don't you care they insulted you? Did you hear what he said? So dirty. It's not right," Najla bristled.

Jamila was unfazed. This line of men that appeared after the ending bell rang was a daily occurrence, and common knowledge. It was nothing new. It just bothered

Najla more than other girls, Jamila knew. She continued her story until the pair came upon Karima and Laila. They joined in a circle, laughing and reliving some lunchtime gossip.

Najla's laughter stopped abruptly when she felt the warmth of another body close behind her. Too close. Touching her where no one else should. The street was crowded, but not *that* crowded. She whirled around to see a tall, dark-faced man standing within an inch of her back, his hands out, palms facing upward to where her bottom had been. He folded his hands and took a step back, but said nothing.

The part of Najla that was touched by fear was much smaller now than it had been when the boys on the corner robbed her pencils a few years ago. The part that bristled and rumbled with violation was much bigger. Najla felt a thundering in the back of her head, and heat rising in her chest and face. How dare he touch her?

She called out loudly and turned toward the man, her small fists flinging themselves at him. Even though she was not tall enough to reach his face, she was able to hit his chest before he turned to walk away at a rapid pace. Najla called out again, searching the ground around her until she found two large stones and hurled them at the molester.

By this time all lunchtime gossip had stopped completely, and the circle of girls shrank back while onlookers frowned. If a woman threw stones at a man in Afghan society it meant that he had done something very offensive, something very bad. While the men calling dirty names and waiting for the girls after school was a common and daily practice, most women and girls said nothing. Nobody wanted to call more attention to themselves, more shame, more restrictions. Instead, they crossed the street quietly and the men laughed amongst themselves, saying that she liked it, that she liked being touched that way. The only shame Najla could throw back at them was in the form of stones.

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Jamila coaxed Najla — whose fists were still clenched — into walking again, and onlookers slowly resumed conversation.

"That was a lot of attention," she said, not disapprovingly. Jamila was a strong girl herself. She just didn't always respond the same way Najla did.

"I *want* attention. I want attention so people can see that this is happening!" Najla said. "It's like he poured fire on me! It's just not right."

Jamila was quiet for a moment. She never said anything around those men. Najla knew that, like most, her friend would be punished at home if she did. Guljan and Ustad seemed to be the only parents around who responded differently, and encouraged her to speak up for herself.

“Always concerned with right and wrong. Always speaking up to somebody. Always siding with kids who get picked on.” Jamila smiled and nudged her friend’s shoulder. Najla’s tense face relaxed slowly into a smile, too. It was true. She had become bigger inside, like her father said. Nobody picked on her anymore — not even the boys.

At the new school she’d convinced the other children that she was a *gen*: a ghost who would haunt them in their dreams if they transgressed her. She turned up her eyelids and made scary noises and chased them around the schoolyard. This was the end of being bullied.

Jamila and Najla meandered home, stopping at the canal and walking to the water where bright red berries floated. The trees overhead were filled with them. Too short to reach the berries off the trees, the girls would crouch down by the water and reach out their hands, skimming the surface to collect the sweet red dots. The water soothed Najla and soon the girls’ voices were echoing down along the canal, carrying the singsong tones of their laughter in the breeze.

### **By the Truckloads**

Laying in her warm bed, Najla stretched her legs and rolled over to peek out the window at the winter morning outside. It was the first thing she did every day. It was still dark, and snow was blowing through the bare trees in their yard. It was winter holiday and she savored staying in bed a little longer than she could on school mornings. She would spend the day helping her mother with housework and playing with her siblings. She pulled on her favorite jeans over warm leggings, recalling how it seemed that the few other girls who were allowed to wear jeans had stopped wearing them toward the end of the school year. *There must have been jihadist threats in their province*, Najla thought. Some of the girls weren't even allowed to go to school anymore.

She heard a door open down the hall and knew it was Rafi, up early and eager to finish working on some sort of electronic device he was determined to repair. He was always fixing things, as though his hands were trying to keep up with his keen mind.

Najla rolled out of bed and bumped into Nadera. The two washed their faces in silence as the rest of the house came alive. In the kitchen, Najla asked what was for breakfast.

“*Halva*,” said Nasir.

“Halva,” squeaked little Shafi, one of the youngest of the siblings, in solemn agreement. She made a face. She hated halva.

“Omelets!” proclaimed their mother as she entered the kitchen. Najla squealed at her brothers for fooling her, and made a face. The two of them! So different, standing across the table from her. Nasir so quiet, and Shafi the nonstop talker. He was too young to really understand the joke, but he was old enough to want to be just like Nasir. They always managed to present a united front in playfully teasing her.

After omelets and dish washing, Najla curled up with a book. She was knee-deep in a new crime novel. She couldn't get enough of the books. She'd stopped playing with dolls entirely and preferred reading almost to anything else. She read so many detective stories and loved the investigatory plots, the chase, the learning and the solving, the crime, the ensuing justice.

“Come on, Najla, Mother needs you to go to the store!” Her little sister Nadera prodded her to get off the couch. Nadera, who was so lazy when they walked in the street that she would cry to be carried, was prodding *her* off the couch.

“Ayy. OK, OK!” Najla sighed and layered herself in preparation for the cold outside. She took orders from her mother on what was needed: sugar and fresh naan.

Her father was still asleep. The past few days had been strange; she was aware that something was happening in the political climate of her country, but her parents were not speaking much about it in front of the children. Najla wasn't sure what to think.

After closing the gate to the house, she walked the street in pre-sunrise shadows, though the morning was already well under way. The sun was short in the winter. As she walked her senses were heightened. Her skin prickled a bit. Her ears sensed different noises mixed in with the familiar sound of the copper merchants hammering out their metal bowls and cookware. A huge truck rumbled past, but it was still too dark to see much. A plane flew overhead. Then another one. She couldn't hear the canal the way she normally could. Another huge truck rumbled past. There was too much engine noise — this was all new. The sounds of berry trees, copper merchants and the canal were lost.

The sun rose over the mountain sheltering Parwan and shed soft rays of dawn light onto Najla's street. She stopped, dumbfounded. She hadn't understood the noise at first, but now she did. Huge trucks and tanks rumbled down the street, packed with soldiers carrying foreign-looking guns and armory. Dozens of planes flew overhead, military planes and jets flying in formation. Not only was her town swarming with military, but it was swarming with someone *e/se's* military. These were not the Afghan soldiers she'd seen occasionally at special events or on the television. These were soldiers from another country, and they were arriving by the truckloads.

She stopped abruptly upon arriving at the store. Suddenly what had seemed like an eerie backdrop was close up, as near as a stranger in a uniform a few feet away. The soldiers weren't just in trucks and tanks and planes, they were filling the streets on foot, their faces ruddier than Afghan faces. They were speaking Russian.

The grown-ups at the store were solemn, speaking quietly in urgent and hushed tones. She felt the skin-prickly feeling again that she had felt in the dark street. It was a new kind of fear, much different from being afraid of the dark or afraid of the boys who had taken her pencils in first grade. It was closer to her somehow. More immediate. And nothing about this was familiar — not the faces, not the machinery, not the language, not even the weapons they carried.

She hurried home to tell what she had seen. Her mother seemed to know something she didn't. Najla put the naan and sugar in the kitchen. Najiba went to wake up their father. Najla heard her saying, “Padar, wake up, there's something going on. Maybe the government is changing, or it will change soon. Something is happening.”

“We are the closest province to Kabul. They’re on their way to Kabul,” Najla heard him reply.

She sat near the bright red and white *sandali*, the living room table that her family gathered around to eat, and could hear her parents speaking in the same hushed tones as the grown-ups at the store. Her littlest sister Mary wandered in and sat next to her, playing quietly. It was almost time for Najla to put the youngest children down for a nap. She gathered Shafi and Mary and sat in between them, getting them comfortable and wrapping them in blankets. She began singing. They always said they couldn’t sleep unless she sang to them.

Later that day she would listen to the speech from the new president with her family. Later that year, the disappearances would start happening. The threats would begin around the same time, and the kidnappings too. Later that year there would be rockets waiting, aimed at Najla’s school, aimed at her friends’ houses, and her cousins’ houses, and the copper merchants’ houses. Later that year, her mother would be worried, and her family would be threatened, and her country would be in a whirlwind spiral into civil war and unrest that would leave their close-knit family forever changed. In decades to come Najla would remember the colors of the sandali, and yearn for the sounds of her siblings’ voices.

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But that was later, and now Najla sang, her voice becoming softer as she sensed Shafi and Mary drifting off, until she stopped singing altogether. Mary mumbled a sleepy protest and Najla resumed the nursery rhyme, singing the little ones to sleep and suspending the inevitable change in the winter quiet.

## Ake Bahd Khabar

### **Summer, 1983**

“We have now crossed the border into Afghanistan,” the pilot announced on the overhead PA system. Fear squeezed in Najla’s heart. *Afghanistan*. She was back. She had known it before the pilot’s announcement, partly intuitively and partly because of the landscape: The Soviet side of the border was organized neatly into lush green squares of agriculture. The closer you got to the Afghan side, the dustier, the more rural and unkempt it became. One side was green, the other brown.

Emotions pulsed through her body as indecisive travelers: excitement to see her family and friends, relief to have finished her studies for the school year, fear for the unsafe political conditions of the country, and the relentless worry that had been a constant companion while away. Sometimes it was three weeks in between letters from her family, and the days in the middle seemed to collect their own momentum of worry as they stretched farther and farther from the last letter. She knew the bombings, the air raids, the attacks and disappearances were still happening, but she never knew if her family was safe at the end of the night until the next letter arrived.

Despite this not knowing, she studied, worked and threw herself into night school. Law during the day, and philosophy, journalism and sewing classes at night. She wanted Guljan and Ustad to be proud. Other than the constant worry, she liked her friends, her studies and her work. Everything went well. Everything except for Fawad.

She felt an internal shudder at the thought of him and refocused her eyes on the landscape below, watching the patches of green grow farther and farther in between until they yielded entirely to her brown, dusty homeland.

Fawad was the president of the Afghan Youth Council — not a voluntary council to begin with, but a Soviet organization from which new students received an “invitation” to join. Najla was attending Tajikistan Governmental University on a scholarship funded partly by the Afghan government but also partly by the Soviet government, which still carefully maintained its interests in the region after having withdrawn its troops.

She turned her eyes back to the window. *My country is so complex*, she thought, feeling herself that much closer to home. It was not so long ago that she had walked to the store from her parents’ house in Parwan to fetch sugar and naan, only to watch the sun rise over swarms of Soviet soldiers and tanks marking the coup of a puppet president and a slow decline into civil war. Everybody had their own interest in

Afghanistan, it seemed. The Soviets had just fallen in line behind the British — imposter conductors of their own political orchestras.

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Politics aside, Najla didn't mind that Fawad was trying to get her kicked off the Youth Council, or that he would most likely succeed — she needed time for other things anyway. She did mind that he wanted to date her, spreading nasty rumors when she politely declined. And she did mind that he was attacking her character. His fierce retaliation once he saw she had no intention of dating him had been a frustrating and ongoing attack at school.

Having grown up in Afghanistan and now being in the Soviet Union, Najla was accustomed to being careful with her speech under the dictatorship. Rumors spread like wildfire and people were eager to turn someone in, even with false evidence, so as to demonstrate their loyalty to the regime and ensure their own safety. This was true in both countries, and bred a very, very careful intellectual. Not even friends would share their true opinions. Now, combating the kinds of slanderous stories Fawad made up about her, being careful with her speech, and worrying about her family were stressful even for Najla, who was known for being sturdy in spirit.

She made a face instinctively. He represented everything that was wrong in the world, everything that was a corruption of power.

A week after coercing her into attending a “council dinner” — where she soon discovered he was the only one attending — he interrupted a heated discussion among several students about a man who was harassing Najla and her female colleagues. Fawad ignored the subject of the debate entirely, for he had his own agenda in mind.

“Oh, Najla,” he said. “You really should just go home and cover your arms.” He indicated her short-sleeved t-shirt.

Her jaw dropped at the directive. In Afghan culture, if a man is interested in or is dating a woman, then he seeks to cover her as completely as possible from the eyes of others.

Najla was disgusted. Rather than engaging any intellectual discussion or intermediary role, he had pretended that they were dating and reverted to the hyper-conservative customs of their home country, in an attempt to discredit her as a woman in the debate. What was worse was that he was the head of the council. People listened to him. People did what he said.



She felt the plane begin to descend and let the remaining fear drift away. Soon she would be with Najiba, now a schoolteacher back home. They would stay the night at their uncle's house in Kabul before boarding the bus to Parwan in the morning.

"Najla, Najla!" Disembarking at the airport, she heard her sister calling her. They fell into hugs, laughter and the immediate conversation that arises between two loved ones long parted. A tired and happy dinner with their uncle, a long sleep and an early morning awaiting the bus only seemed to interrupt the amount of catching up the sisters had to do.

"Here, I brought one for you." Najiba handed Najla a full-body, blue veil.

Right, Najla thought. The burqa. Welcome home.

She hadn't worn a burqa in ages. She didn't need it in Tajikistan, or in Kabul. She didn't even need it in Parwan where they were going, but she definitely needed it in between. The highway linking the major cities of Afghanistan had gotten worse and worse over the years, a major thoroughfare for jihadist attacks and kidnappings. If you were a woman traveling on the highway, you must wear a burqa. It was the only safe thing to do.

Najla glanced nervously as Ihsan, the bus driver — a trusted family friend and the only reason Najla and her sister felt that they could travel somewhat safely — opened the luggage compartment for another passenger. She saw the layers of canvas and other baggage covering her suitcase. Was it well enough hidden? She squinted at it again. Could you see the square shape, the dead giveaway that was the mark of Soviet luggage?

The night before, the three of them had cut the tags out of Najla's luggage, sewed in replacement ones, and did the best they could to disguise its Soviet origins. The jihadists were fighting against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, and to be associated with Soviets meant kidnapping or death. Ihsan had carefully hidden Najla's luggage at the bottom, beneath everyone else's in a sea of canvas and fabric, in case they were stopped and searched.

Najla donned her burqa and boarded the bus to go home. She watched the countryside fly by, forgetting for a moment the security of her luggage and thinking instead of the gifts they carried: gifts for each family member and recipes from the Soviet Union.

They drove past her old high school, where a few years before jihadists had been shooting at participants on the volleyball court from the hills above. Nobody had played volleyball there in a long time.

When she burst through the front door of the family house, she stepped in to a flurry of aunts, uncles, sisters and brothers. And of course her parents. Ustad's brow was a touch grayer, but his smile was unmarked by time. Guljan gathered her into a warm hug, which was followed by another, and another. She scanned the room.

"Padar, where is Mary?" she asked, with a hint of worry. One sister was missing.

"Ah, Najjo, and what about me?" exclaimed Rafi as he came around the corner from the kitchen — quiet, kind Rafi, now a bit taller than before. He wrapped her in a hug.

"Mary ran down to the store to pick up groceries. She'll be back any minute," her father replied.

Najla had a moment to herself in her old room, basking in the comforting familiarity of the furniture, the house, the walls. She slid open the window to the hot summer breeze and sighed. She could smell onion leaves from the garden — her favorite summertime smell. Great mountains stood guard in the distance.

She had but a moment before being called back down to join in the jovial atmosphere of eating, laughing and storytelling. After their meal she distributed their gifts, including a black pen and silver watch she had picked out for Ustad. He examined the watch, turning the glinting object over in his hands before sliding it on his wrist. She could tell he really liked it.

"*Qashang!*" he exclaimed, before giving her yet another hug. Her mother and sisters started to giggle. Her father reserved "*qashang*" only for the most wonderful of gifts. The word came out when he thought something was the *most* super, the *most* beautiful, when it was something that struck him entirely.

"What a gift! It's truly *qashang!*" he exclaimed again. Now the girls couldn't contain their giggles, and their brothers were laughing too.

"What?" said their padar. "I've never seen a design quite like this. It's ..." He struggled for another word, and finding none, succumbed: "... just ... *qashang!*" It was now too much even for Guljan, who couldn't speak for laughter.

The moment was interrupted by a visitor at the door. Jamila had come to retrieve her best friend for a walk. Najla excused herself from the family and joined her old friend, meandering along the canal shaded by berry trees from the hot sun. There were always a hundred questions to ask and stories to tell, but sometimes too it was nice just to be quiet. They stopped for ice cream, and talked along the way. There was only ever one flavor — vanilla — and it was a relief from the heat.

They talked about friends, about school, about the jihadists, about the bombings and raids. Jamila, who was still in Parwan with her family, said that they had become adept at hiding in their basements, and in knowing when it was time to hide.

Walking back, Najla squinted into the sun at a black raven flying overhead. Afghans had a phrase for the raven: *ake bahd khabar*. It meant “one who delivers bad news,” and such was the superstition surrounding the bird. When it sang in the morning, it was customary for people to pray in an attempt to ward off whatever ill tidings it might foretell. Her gaze flickered back toward her friend. It wasn’t morning, anyhow — it was afternoon. And he wasn’t singing, he was just circling.

The girls couldn’t stop at the canal and kick off their shoes to relax under the trees, like the old days. They weren’t children anymore — they were young women. And as young women, they could not linger in public without a male family member with them.

“Do you think you’ll stay in Tajikistan after you finish school?” Jamila asked.

Najla looked toward the water.

“No,” she replied, remembering what it felt like to skim her hand across the water as a child, to linger. Had they been able to stop, she would have picked up fallen berries for old times’ sake. “I think I’ll come home to Parwan.”

## What the Letters Didn't Carry

### ***April, 1985***

Najiba felt a rising panic, as though the world were spinning around her. She closed the door to her classroom behind her two male students — her two informants. They had told her the truth, for their fathers were jihadists, and she would carry it alone in torment for many months. She could not be the one to deliver this news. She simply could not.

She stood at her desk and waited for tears to come but they did not, nor would they until the dark of night when she was in bed, alone in the haunted early hours.

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### ***July, 1985***

Najla sat upright for a moment, waiting for the announcement. She knew it would come soon, for the landscape thousands of feet below was beginning to change.

“We have now crossed the border into Afghanistan.” The pilot’s voice came over the PA crisply. Then silence. That was all he had to say.

She sat back in her seat, recounting the school year’s events and remembering the late nights in her apartment with the other Afghan girls, laughing, dancing and cooking — and the long hours spent studying. But the landscape below pulled her mind homeward.

Najla had become accustomed to returning home for summer break from law school in Tajikistan, but the underlying nervousness as conflict between the Afghan government and jihadist factions continued didn’t go away. The fighting was complicated by decades of international interlopers pursuing their own interests of politics and power.

She had friends whose brothers joined the jihad, and others who became entrenched in the philosophy of extremism. It seemed, to Najla, an abuse of Islam itself. Accusations of being a communist or having Soviet affiliation could filter through a complex social network leading to disappearances and murders. The rural areas were the worst. Civilian buses and cars were often caught in the crossfire between jihadists (who hid out in the less populated regions) and the government. When the government

wasn't looking, jihadists would raid buses in a one-part terror tactic, one-part attempt to weed out the enemy.

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Somehow life carried on as it would and as it did, though the conflict left other strange holes in daily life, like wearing a burqa to travel, or how nobody played in the schoolyards or volleyball courts in Parwan anymore.

Najiba was waiting faithfully for her at the airport. Najla felt a surge of joy at recognizing her sister in a sea of strangers, a joy tempered only for a second. *She looks tired*, Najla thought. *Young, but tired*.

"Najo, Najo!" Her sister called. They hugged for a long while, and Najla felt the timeless closeness of family.

"How are you, how is everyone?" Najla began rapidly inquiring about each of their family members.

"We're well, Najo, we're well. Everyone is good. The whole family is at home waiting for you."

Najla slept well at her uncle's house, the night passing like a long sigh from her body and mind, releasing any remaining tension from her exams. In the morning the doorbell rang and Ihsan's friendly face awaited with the bus. Najla watched him organizing the luggage so as to cleverly conceal hers. Telltale in its Soviet origins, it still made her nervous.

The warm summer air made the burqa less than comfortable. A darkly colored bird called overhead, though Najla never saw it. She and Najiba wriggled their way into the back row of the bus. This was a place usually reserved for women, for safety in case of being stopped and raided, and also to prevent those women traveling without a father, brother or male relative from sitting next to an unknown male passenger, which was prohibited by society.

The trip felt off somehow this time, though she couldn't say why. Maybe it was the heat, or maybe her uncle had been tired, like Najiba.

The bus began its long journey to Parwan, and the sisters began to fill in all of the gaps left by Najla's time away. Her sister responded a little more slowly to Najla's gleeful questions, though she still laughed at their jokes all the same.

It wasn't until Najla stepped through the front door that she knew something was definitely wrong. Everyone was still warm, still excited, still glad to see her. But she detected a weariness on their faces, the same expression she'd seen Najiba wear when she didn't have to smile anymore.

Asking questions didn't seem to uncover what was behind this strangeness. She scanned the room anxiously for signs. The curtains had been changed. They were a plain color last year when she left, and now they were brightly patterned. Some of the furniture had been moved about, but that was all she could discern. Nothing could account for the subtle shift in atmosphere she intuited.

"How is everyone? And padar, where is Rafi?" she asked, searching the room for faces. She didn't know what to do other than to keep asking how everyone was. The curtains gave no clues.

"We are well, Najo. He is well, he is coming," he said.

Ihsan deposited her luggage in her old bedroom, the only place that didn't seem to harbor the strangeness. Everything was there, still the same, the old crime novels that had captured her fascination for justice lined up neatly on the bookshelf. She used to dream about being a part of them, and soon she would be when her studies were finished.

She could hear the family beginning to gather and left her square suitcase open on the bed, upright in its Soviet pride.

The family congregated around the *dastarkhwan*, a beautiful array of savory dishes made from summer vegetables. The mood was quiet. Her mother looked lovely, hair pulled back from her face. It rarely saw a burqa anymore, not since a wedding many years earlier when Ustad observed that his wife was the only woman in the family wearing one. He had promptly and gently beckoned Guljan to him and removed the covering. For a moment she was disoriented, shy, and felt exposed, but since that day the family had not seen her wear one again in Parwan.

When the meal had finished Najla looked around the table, and again asked her father, "Padar, where is Rafi?" He began to answer that he was coming, but Najla stopped hearing his words entirely. They were drowned out by the expression on her mother's face as she caught Najla's eye.

*He has been killed*, she mouthed to Najla. *He has been killed*. She mouthed it again, which was needed because Najla wasn't sure she understood correctly the first time. In one dreadful moment everything made sense — the atmosphere, the expressions, the somber feel of her family. Even her father's empty explanations made

sense. He could not bear to say it to his daughter, but her mother — bearing all, as mothers do — had silently spoken the words that no one wanted to hear aloud.

Najla would remember nothing else from that day, and the ones after were a blur. It was as though she was living in a pastel painting and a passerby had smeared the oils into a clouded smudge. It would take many months before life began to separate itself out into colors again.

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The details Najla's family had been carrying tumbled forth. Rafi had been traveling by bus with his friend Wakil, much like the bus Najla and Najiba had taken to Parwan the day before. When passing through a rural area the bus was stopped by a group of armed jihadists, and Rafi was kidnapped. He was an Afghan soldier, though he was traveling as a civilian. Wakil arrived in person to share the news with Ustad.

When Rafi went missing, the Ayubi family frantically reached out within the community — cousins, aunts, uncles and friends trying to use their networks to find a connection that may reveal his whereabouts. Najla's aunt had a son-in-law who had joined the jihad, and she implored him to find out what happened to Rafi. He learned that Rafi had been held captive for weeks by the jihadist group, and was shot in the back while attempting an escape. A few days before his death, he had recognized a woman who came to visit her son, one of the prisoners. "Hello, hello!" he called out to her, for they knew each other. "Is my mom coming too?" he had asked.

Not two weeks after walking in to the Ayubi home to tell of Rafi's fate, word spread about town that Wakil had left to join the jihadists. It was then that the full reality of what had happened became clear: Wakil had contacted the jihadists ahead of time, giving them the itinerary for his trip with Rafi, and informed them of just when and where they could capture him. He had betrayed his innocent friend.

Najla could not understand how someone so innocent, so completely unaffiliated with the Soviets or with any political alignment, could be targeted that way. She was horrified as she learned how jihadist recruits were brainwashed to turn in their friends, people they knew, even their family.

Najiba had borne a particular weight to this end, for when her brother had gone missing, she too reached out to anyone she could think of — even her students. She was a teacher at a boys' school in Parwan, and some of her students' fathers were jihadists.

They delivered the news of his death to her and she'd carried it alone for a long while. She couldn't bear to tell her parents, nor did she know how. Social pressure compounded her dilemma: telling bad news was looked down upon and she would ever be known as the ake bahd khabar, the dark raven who delivers bad tidings.

It was a dark summer, and the space that the bright, tall and quiet Rafi had filled in the house and family was empty. They held a second funeral ceremony before Najla left to return to school in the Soviet Union. The first had been held while she was away.

Just before she left for school again, she received a news report regarding Wakil. Not three months after having told Ustad of Rafi's death, he had been standing on the jihadist side of an armed confrontation with the government and was shot in the chest by a tank.

Najla returned to school and resumed her studies. She now lived in fear not of what the letters from her family might say, but of what might be left unsaid. It never fully abated until the first few moments of returning home, after crossing the threshold of her family's house in Parwan, and scanning the room for each one's faces.



## Theories are Beautiful ...

### ***Tajikistan, Spring, 1989***

Three black cars careened out of a roundabout, one after the other, causing a ruckus in the traffic and receiving honks, waves and a few shouts. Most were not unfriendly, for they could see that the vehicles were filled with Afghan students, windows rolled down to reveal hands, wisps of hair and flashes of colorful clothing.

In the middle car sat Najla sandwiched between Shaima and Hossai, with Seraj driving the whole operation. The girls were laughing about some silly thing, giddy with the freedom of having taken the day off of school even as exams loomed ahead. They were but weeks away from graduation. The past several months were their last before leaving, and they spent it traveling as much as they could in between thesis work. This particular day was a *shorghasht*, an Afghan practice of driving around the city in a procession of celebration, most frequently reserved for post-wedding parties.

“Go, go, go!” Hossai tapped Seraj’s shoulder from the backseat. “They’re still behind us.” The car accelerated. Najla could see a few wry expressions on the faces of bystanders, for they were familiar with the Afghan students’ antics and were generally well-humored toward them.

The good humor did not extend fully to become a generality, however. The cultural milieu was not always so benign. With the Soviet Union sending its soldiers to fight in Afghanistan, there was, at times, a sentiment of blame toward Afghans for fallen Soviet friends, colleagues and family. This, along with social factors, contributed to a polite separation between Soviet and Afghan students. Though they frequently still socialized, Afghan students tended to form groups and stay largely within them — especially the women, who were subject to the patriarchal systems of shame even while living abroad. As a result, the women’s fun was tempered in comparison with the men’s.

In spite of these ghosts from home, Najla had enjoyed herself for the past six years in these newfound freedoms of a different culture. She was able to go out, to socialize, to have male friends, and to discover that nothing horrible happened as a result. However liberally Ustad and Guljan had raised her, there was still a subconscious liberation in finding that none of the fears came true that she’d heard her whole life in Afghanistan about how dangerous it was for women to do these things. If anything, it made encounters with people like Fawad more motivating, showing her the social injustices even more clearly.

It seemed that her steadfast refusal to date Fawad had fueled something else in him. After Rafi's death he had embarked on the most slanderous campaign against her yet, telling anyone who would listen of how she was associated with jihadists, that her brother had been one, and that he had died in a jihadist battle. He called her a liar, and her innocent brother a traitor. It made Najla's blood boil. She threw herself into her work again, determined to fight for justice and to bring it back to her country that most needed it.

After Rafi's death she had become less interested in politics, and concentrated more on becoming a judge. Perhaps because she couldn't help but wonder what led people to choose the wrong path, she saw the law as more relevant. She desperately wanted to sit in court as a judge — and she was close now.

The car swerved into another roundabout and Najla bumped into Hossai on her left, who had her arm out the window and was gazing out at the street flying by. She studied her friend for a moment. She was not the only one at university who had lost to the systems that were slowly, sometimes imperceptibly collapsing in Afghanistan. Hossai's brother had been kidnapped and killed by jihadists shortly after Rafi, as had the brother of their friend Minah. Both girls were law students. Najla had not been alone in her pain.

The heaviness that had sometimes revisited her since her brother's death four years earlier stayed mostly at bay as she worked and homed in on the dreams borne of long afternoons engrossed in crime novels as a child and fueled by the need for someone to speak up for those who were not in a position to do so.

The car careened again, this time to the left out of the roundabout. No, there was no heaviness today. The playful feel of the shorghasht was contagious and she wedged her way forward in between the front seats, urging Seraj into the next roundabout with the enthusiasm of a soccer fan at a home game. One hand gripped the passenger seat in preparation for the next lurch, and the other held back her short hair from the wind. Soon, she would be a judge.

### ***Post-graduation, a few years later***

Najla got ready to receive the police officer and his prisoner into her office. She had been preparing for hours, for this had become a notoriously difficult case. And she had been the one to ask if she could have it.

She stood when they entered, and offered them both chairs. The woman, Yalda, was strikingly beautiful and wore a green dress almost exactly the color of her eyes. Several months earlier Yalda had been arrested for killing her husband, but she had help. Married as a child to a much older man, a widower 35 years her senior, she had

his five children and later fell in love with another man, a henchman for one of the jihadist warlords, who would be her accomplice. He promised her freedom and independence from the lifetime of abuse and tyranny she'd suffered. They planned the murder together and buried the body at the base of a cement wall in remote gardens outside the city.

Now, the henchman was nowhere to be found. Whether fleeing the investigation or strategically hiding out, Najla didn't know, but Yalda was left with the full brunt of the crime. Najla's colleagues, all male, seemed to disregard the fact that she had been far from alone in planning the murder. What disturbed Najla more was that it was a physical impossibility for Yalda to have carried out the actual killing or to have transported the body. She was too small and didn't have the physical strength. She was an accomplice, but she was not the one who committed the murder. Nonetheless, she was being treated by everyone — lawyers, judges, policemen and others — as though she herself was the killer and the only one responsible. This was weighing heavily on Najla's mind as she evaluated the prisoner, whose silent tears began falling almost immediately.

To her surprise, the policeman turned away from Najla to face the prisoner, and began questioning her.

"When did you know you were going to kill him?" he bellowed. "We all know you did it, there's no point in denying it. When will you confess?"

Yalda had been brought to her office so that Najla could question her. The policeman's job was only that of transporting her to and from the prison. But Najla said nothing, instead remaining observant, waiting to see what was going on.

Yalda remained silent, crying softly.

"Tell me that you killed him. Did you kill him? We know this already." The officer stood.

"I didn't do it. I did nothing," Yalda replied, as she had to all of the queries that had come in the months before.

"Get out of the chair," the officer ordered. Yalda hesitated.

"Get out of the chair!" She obeyed.

"On your knees, with your hands on the floor." She followed his orders.

Before Najla fully understood what was happening, the officer had swiftly lifted the table between them and placed its square metal leg on top of Yalda's hand. He sat

on it. Yalda didn't make a sound as her hand crumbled beneath the weight. Instead, tears fell silently from her face to the floor. Her face reddened with the pain.

"Stop this!" Najla ordered, rising to her feet. The officer stood from the table, relieving Yalda's hand. Najla had been wary of drawing attention to herself and of speaking out as of late. Her family was under personal threat from the jihadists whose power and reach within governmental systems was quickly increasing, but she could not let this go.

"Out!" she cried to the officer. "Get out!" This would not be the last time she would send a man from the justice system away in transgression from her office.

He left in crisp silence. Najla pulled Yalda to her feet. Yalda straightened her green dress with her undamaged hand, favoring the other, eyes lowered.

"Look," Najla said, "I know you weren't alone. I know it wasn't only you. Here, can you sit down OK?"

Yalda nodded. Najla called for tea, and the women settled themselves in chairs.

"I know you've been treated poorly, and I know you were treated poorly before by your husband," Najla continued. "I would have suffered if I was in your situation, too."

Yalda regarded Najla closely, then spoke.

"I wanted to be free," she said simply.

Though tentative at first, as the conversation developed Najla learned of the circumstances surrounding the murder down to every last detail. Yalda had not physically killed her husband, but she followed her henchman boyfriend every step of the way.

Najla also realized why — beyond being charged with murder — this woman was crying. She had lost the family she did have, however abusive, and her five children. No one had so much as inquired about her, let alone visited her in prison. She had lost the boyfriend she planned on starting a new life with, however criminal. She had lost the freedom she had dreamed of gaining, which she had never known before.

Najla saw so clearly how the lack of social and political justice led to crimes like these, and created more problems. The child marriage and domestic violence Yalda experienced were precursors to the crime. They also contributed to the fate of her children — whose futures Najla feared for, with their father dead and mother in prison.

Yalda spoke openly and simply, describing the oppressive slavery that was her marriage, forced on her as a child. She described the beatings from her husband, and the tyrannical behavior of her brothers-in-law once her husband became too old to run the house anymore. She had tried for a divorce, but the husband and family wouldn't allow it. She was trapped, choiceless at every step of the journey that was her life.

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Yalda indicated no regret of the crime, having tasted freedom for the first time in her life if even for a short while. Hours went by as the women conversed. Yalda withheld nothing. By the time Yalda was being escorted back to prison, Najla knew the details that her colleagues had been frustratingly trying to obtain for months through various methods, including torture, as Najla had discovered.

She returned to her desk to sip the remains of the morning's tea, and turned to face the window. Her office faced east and opened onto a beautiful garden filled with flowers of different colors. She was a judge working for the Supreme Court governing another district, but she was based here in Parwan. The district was too dangerous to have an office there, as it fringed the rural areas under primarily [jihadist control](#).

When Najla became discouraged, wondering how she was to make a difference in the district when she couldn't even physically be there, her colleague Judge Waliullah would offer words of comfort. His office was down the hall from hers, and he had worked in the Supreme Court for many years. He was a sympathetic sort, which made him the minority.

"You never know," he would say. "Things could change. One day, we might be able to work in the actual district."

Najla stood at the window and glanced back at her desk stacked with piles of papers. It had been a long morning, and she thought perhaps she would finish out the day working from home, as was her habit. She lived at her family's house, the same one that smelled of onion leaves and had old pictures of her and Jamila on the walls. To live in an apartment as a single working girl was a thing of Western television shows unheard of in Afghanistan.

She returned to her desk to make some remaining comments on documents that required her attention before she left. Her handwriting in Dari was neat and lovely, and often warranted compliments. But she was distracted: Yalda's face kept appearing in her mind's eye, morphing and blending with the faces of other women who had come through her office. *Always*, Najla thought, shaking her head, *their faces stay with me*.

The images and memories settled on one, crystallizing into a small face with dark, sad eyes. *Safa*. She remembered her arriving at the office asking for help with a divorce, arms covered in scars and bruises from the pliers her husband used to cut her with. Najla had followed the Afghan justice system and done everything she could, first arranging *hakams* — traditional resolution groups with a designated representative from each side. The hakams had failed, always ending in the husband shouting at Safa to shut up and calling her a liar as she described the dehumanizing ways he abused her. Safa still came to the courthouse regularly with her mother to plead her case. Najla helped her file for divorce, which required the approval of an all-male jury.

The women who came to Najla for help did not seek out divorce lightly.

As one of the worst things one could do in Afghan society, divorce befalls shame to both the man and woman — though the majority falls on the woman for having failed to be a good wife, to please her husband, and to keep the family together. It meant that she was a morally bad woman. To become divorced as a woman in Afghanistan meant to enter a different caste system entirely.

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Even if she did seek it out, she would face a system composed almost entirely of men and designed to defend the marriage, however abusive or oppressive. It was to this system that Safa arrived like clockwork to Najla's office over a period of a year with the hope of obtaining a divorce. Najla discovered that Safa was pregnant, and had moved back to her parents' home. When she had her baby girl, she brought her to Najla's office, a bright, blue-eyed, chubby thing. Safa named her *Montezura* — "waiting."

For as long as Safa and Montezura visited Najla's office and appealed, Najla could not get so much as a hearing for the case. She was baffled, until the day Safa's husband walked into her office grinning with charm that put Najla on guard. He was a lawyer himself, and had worked every possible angle to prevent the divorce.

He had not come to see her about the divorce, however. He was visiting about a case that had been handed to her by Mirza Khan, a senior colleague who always tried to offload his work to his younger female colleague, while he napped in his office.

Safa's husband sat down and deposited a case-related document on her desk for her to sign, smiling widely.

“Ah, Qazi Sahib,” he said, addressing her in the most formal and respectful way possible. “I hope you have been well. Here, I would love for you to sign with my own pen.”

“Thank you,” she replied, confused by the pen gesture but accepting it anyway. It held strangely heavy in her hand as she hovered over the documents, and when she tried to correct an error in her neat Dari script she found it would not write. In any case, the document had been corrupted and was inaccurate, and she would not be signing it.

Still, she shook the pen, confused. With one more shake the plastic casing cracked open and a tightly wadded roll of bills unraveled themselves.

“What is this?” She looked to him for explanation.

“Oh, just keep it!” he said, still grinning. “It is for you, Qazi Sahib, for working so hard. I know you have been working so much, and you deserve this. Just keep it!”

It was the first time anyone had tried to bribe her. He had altered the documents and brought them to her to sign, banking on being able to bribe her to overlook the gross inaccuracies.

“No,” she said. “I’m afraid you are insulting my position.” Najla felt anger creeping into her brow.

His smile waned. “Qazi Sahib, I know your father, I know your family! I know you’re young and new to this, and new at this job. I don’t think you understand.”

“I understand completely,” Najla replied. “And as long as I am here, you will never, *never* obtain my signature on these documents. Now get out. OUT!” she yelled.

It was a small victory in an overwhelmingly large and outnumbered battle. She knew he would not be able to proceed without her signature. She also knew that her signature was impossible to replicate, for her Dari script was distinct.

It was then that she realized why Safa’s case would not be heard and why it had been stalled for over a year in the courts. Her husband was bribing anyone and everyone in the justice system with an open palm to his money. Furthermore, she realized that Mirza Khan was in on it too, as this was about the case he had given her. His faults were not restricted to lazy sexism, but included fraud as well.

Unbeknownst to Najla, Safa’s husband had walked out of her office and straight to visit Najla’s father in complaint of his daughter’s decision.

"I know she is young and she is new at this, but she should know better. And even if she didn't take my offer, she should not speak so harshly to others. Telling me to get out of her office! Really! You're a reasonable man, Ustad Ayubi," he said. Surely this man would get a hold on his daughter.

Ustad listened, then responded firmly and calmly.

"You know," he said, "I'm glad to hear she declined your 'offer.' Your bribe. This is how I raised her. I wanted my children to be honest. I'm quite proud of her for her decision, and I stand behind her for it." He had raised a zorowar.

When Najla came home, her father asked if she had a fight at work that day.

"No, padar, but I did get very angry," she replied with a smile. Together they discussed what happened.

"I was very glad to hear what you did today," Ustad praised her. "I'm so glad you are working like this, cleanly." He advised, too, to stand by her decisions but also to be careful how she spoke even when upset, because he didn't want harm to befall her for speaking too abrasively. Najla's heart swelled with love for him.

Safa's case would be stalled indefinitely. For as long as Najla worked in the Supreme Court office the case was "waiting for a hearing" — the realities of society and its justice system were setting in. Najla recalled the days at university in Tajikistan and the visions she had of working for positive change in her home country. Now her college aspirations seemed too idealistic. She remembered joking to herself as a student: "*I will solve the Afghanistan problem!*" though it carried a hint of hopeful truth.

*Theories are beautiful, she thought now. And then you get a big slap from the system.* Safa's slavery was kept neatly in place by a system backed by a hundred years of the oppression of women. For as long as her husband continued to bribe the court, she didn't stand a chance of obtaining a divorce and retaining the shred of dignity that it would allow her — to no longer be an outcast wife, forever destined to live in social purgatory.

*Theories are beautiful, and then you get a big slap from the system.*

Najla never knew the fate of Safa and her blue-eyed Montezura. And a year or so later, she would bump into an old coworker who told her that Yalda had passed away in prison. Alarmed, Najla investigated further and was informed by the police that Yalda had caught the flu in prison and died. She knew it was a lie. Yalda was far too young and healthy to die of the flu, which claimed only babies and the elderly. She



remembered the straight-faced police officer who had placed the desk on Yalda's hand in her office, and she knew her death was no accident.

Safa's face merged with Yalda's, and countless others. So many faces, and so many cases hopelessly stalled. Najla was tired. The fight was an invitation that she had accepted the day her pencils were stolen as a child. While it would never cease to invite her and she would never cease to accept it, it was time to go home for lunch.

## Chapter Two

Cooking was an act of valor for Najla. She wouldn't grow into her cooking until her late 30s, and even after that her legacy as a calamitous chef followed her still. Her father in particular was a long-suffering recipient of her attempts at the savory Afghan dishes that her mother and sisters seemed to pull off so smoothly.

For being a judge, Najla's cooking was a lawless affair. It seemed to happen too quickly, with too many factors — ingredients and things to put here and then there, and then together, but these others separate. And she always seemed to confuse the amount of ingredients, erring on the side of using less than recipes called for, which left the food not only ill-prepared but also bland.

She remembered trying her hand at cooking a rice dish called *sholah* the last time she'd been at home in Parwan. Having survived the disorganization of assembling the ingredients and cooking the green beans and rice to the best of her ability, she served the meal and stood to retrieve something from the kitchen when her father started shouting.

“Ah, my God!” he yelled. “What happened here? Who cooked this?”

The usually even-tempered, benevolent Ustad had one Achilles' heel: *sholah*. He hated it. Everyone in the family liked *sholah* except him. It was rare that he was upset or raised his voice. However, Najla had not only delivered the worst of the offenders, but also in a way that made even her siblings wince at the taste.

She felt the laughter bubbling up in her chest and stood straight in an attempt to contain it, putting her hand over her mouth.

“And you, even you're laughing!” he exclaimed. She could see her siblings trying to hold in their laughter. They all knew it was her cooking. She ended up running out of the room, collapsing in a pile of laughter in a corner of the backyard.

Then, there was the time she embarked on a new style of preparing eggplant. Excited for her invention, she cut it longways into flat, oblong waves, rather than the short, round way it was usually cut. She undercooked it.

She watched her father pick up the eggplant from his plate directly with his fingers.

“What ... what is this?” he asked sincerely, the misshapen vegetable hanging midair above his plate.

Then, for the first time when someone else’s cooking went south, she was the wrongly accused. Her little sister Nadera had prepared a dish with yellow turmeric that turned mysteriously green after cooking. The family speculated around the table, regarding the strange color with great apprehension, and for days afterward joked that Najla had cooked it and Nadera was taking the blame.

In the time since, she believed her cooking had progressed. She had taken to frying things more than her mother and sisters, and it seemed to help. Najla didn’t mind her own meals as much as she used to. She even sometimes liked them.

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### ***Kabul, Winter, 1991***

Najla could feel the tiniest hint of freezing air seeping in through the walls from outside. The women-only hostel where she stayed was warm, and she stood in front of the mirror to assess her outfit and dress. Flipping her short hair over, she parted it differently than usual, in a way she thought looked bold. Her friends and colleagues were always commenting on how stylish she was these days. Years later she’d giggle at how silly it actually looked.

She pulled on a huge, warm coat over her many layers, and glanced once more in the mirror before heading out to the courthouse for class.

The bus deposited her in front of the courthouse. She and her colleagues were enrolled in a year-long training program for judges requiring further specialization in Sharia law, a system of laws based on Islam that the Afghan government now used. Since she had been educated in the secular Soviet Union, she was required to complete the additional training. It took her six months to gain enrollment, for the government had initially denied entry to women.

“Chapter Two!” Sediq cried, upon seeing her. “But we’re still missing a chapter!”

Najla laughed. Since arriving in Kabul for the training, she and three other women judges — Farida, Maliha and Shahnaz — had become inseparable friends. The class was studying four chapters of civil law procedures, and the women had learned that their colleagues were teasingly referring to them as “The Four Chapters.”

“We’re missing Chapter Four,” Najla replied after a quick glance around the circle. Maliha and Shahnaz were there, along with their male colleagues Sediq and Kamran, but Farida was not.

“Her husband will be disappointed,” Maliha quipped.

The women had taken the antics a step further and assigned each other the professors corresponding with the civil law chapters they were teaching. Now, they joked that each chapter had to marry the corresponding professor, no matter how old, how stodgy, or how many hairs stuck out of his ears.

“I would do no such thing!” Farida’s voice exclaimed from behind as she approached, upon hearing herself being paired with Professor Adeeb. “And he is not my husband. He is far too short!” she said with a shake of her hand.

“Ah, but I am afraid he will still be disappointed. We’ve decided to skip class to go to lunch today, so if you come you won’t be seeing him,” Kamran said as he and Sediq turned to lead the way down the street.

“And he is still your husband!” Shahnaz chimed in. “Short, smelly, dreamy Professor Adeeb ...”

Najla started laughing at the look on Farida’s face, who made a tsk-tsk noise, and explained to her that the majority of The Chapters had decided *mantu* was a much better option than class that afternoon. There was one restaurant in Kabul famous for the spiced meat dumpling dish.

Surveying the waist-high snowdrifts lining the sidewalk as they shuffled along the icy street, Najla called ahead to Sediq.

“And we couldn’t leave Farida’s husband by bus, rather than by foot?”

“Mantu tastes better when you walk to it, my chili-eating friend!” he replied, waving his arms to demonstrate the glory of walking in the cold air.

She shook her head at him, but smiled inwardly. People from her province were known for eating chilies of an extraordinary heat, and this, too, was a nickname that stuck.

Later that week in the hostel, she would stay up one evening carefully unwrapping chocolates from their packaging and stuffing them with red peppers. She neatly re-wrapped them in their original packaging, and would wait until halfway through a particularly boring lecture before silently offering them to her friends.

Sediq, among others, would accept a chocolate excitedly, and Najla could barely contain her laughter as she watched his face grow redder and redder, trying to contain his reaction in the midst of the otherwise dull lecture. Her friends stopped accepting chocolates from her, and she seemed to hear the chili-eater nickname less often.

The snow began to fall heavily, and Najla pulled her bag tightly under her arm to protect it from the moisture. Today, like all days, it contained a black burqa. Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah's government was beginning to flail in the fight with the jihadist [mujahideen](#), whose conservative Islamist practices required the black burqa for all women. Just in case, Najla and her female colleagues kept one in their bags.

It was a long, cold walk to the restaurant, navigating snowdrifts and wind, and Najla wasn't sure how her hairstyle had fared by the time they arrived. The respite from the cold was a short one: she heard the men making exclamations upon arrival, for the mantu had been sold out.

The Four Chapters, plus two men, and four burqas in four bags, made their way back out into the chilled afternoon in search of a longer respite, and something warm to eat.

## The Keeper of Spades

**April 22, 1992**

When Ustad Ayubi called his daughter to tell her to flee Kabul, she was ready. *Any day now*, she had been thinking.

She and the other women had been carrying burqas, trousers and scarves in their bags for months while UN-mediated negotiations carried on between jihadists and the Afghan government. The government had found itself defenseless upon the collapse of the Soviet Union in December of the previous year. Soviet funding, supplies and resources that had supported the Afghan government for decades were gone. Without them, the Afghan army was unable to strike back against the Mujahideen's advances.

Reliable media sources were limited, but she listened carefully to the reports from BBC and Voice of America. A handover had become imminent, but the date and time were uncertain.

The ideology of the Mujahideen was well-known publicly. The jihadist extremist perspective of Islam meant that women would bear a large weight of the change in government, in an already deeply patriarchal society. Najla knew of the jihadists — she knew what they had done to her brother — and their treatment of women.

A few weeks before, she received a letter from the training program, entreating her to return to Parwan from Kabul. She would be safer there with her family, as the security of the capital city was uncertain. She was also the only woman from her province in the program.

“Come home,” Ustad said quietly and urgently over the phone. “Just leave, now. Don't think about your studies or your things. Leave everything, just get in a car and come home.”

He informed her that Parwan had been taken over in the night and was now under Mujahideen control. They were slowly moving across the country, taking provinces as they went, moving closer to Kabul by the day. He estimated they would arrive where Najla was as soon as tomorrow, and that there would be fighting in the city.

“They're very organized,” Ustad said.

She prepared, though nothing could dispel the feeling of uncertainty. She recalled a speech in which one jihadist leader declared they had to “destroy Kabul to scratch” and “make it clean, start building, because what is happening in the city is not Islamic.”

Najla said hurried and heartfelt goodbyes to friends, many of whom had made plans to leave the country. The winds of war brought disorganization to the most basic constituents of life — routines interrupted, the scattering of friends and structure. Nobody knew if they would be back in a week, or if they would ever see each other again. Nobody was certain what province or city or town would be safest, if at all. And nobody knew what life would be like under the new regime.

She fled Kabul and stayed in Parwan for about two months, waiting out the fighting between two factions of jihadists, each vying for power and control of the government. Ahmad Shah Massoud’s military forces had united major groups of anti-communist fighters in the Peshawar Accords, a power-sharing and peace agreement signed by all except the most extremist Islamic groups. Massoud was appointed Minister of Defense for the new government, and fighting between his soldiers and the other factions would continue for several months.

It was the second time Najla had gone to sleep under one government, with its sets of rules, ideologies and beliefs, and woken up to another — and it wouldn’t be the last. Three years before, the Soviet troops that had swarmed her hometown when she was a child had exited the country. This ended nearly a decade of occupation by the Soviet Union which had led to over 5 million refugees outside the country, 2 million displaced internally, and upwards of 1 million civilian casualties. The Republic of Afghanistan was now the Islamic State of Afghanistan, and nationalist, Islamic, anti-communist movements had been years in the making, taking the form of [17 different jihadist factions](#).

Each group had been funded by a different foreign government seeking to maintain their interests in the region: Pakistan, Iran, the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Turkey all funded and trained [various factions](#).

Najla saw that no faction was representative of the majority of the Afghan people, and that atrocities occurred from all sides. It was clear that the rhetoric of Islam being used by each group to win over support of citizens was empty propaganda. *They don’t care about Islam*, she thought. *They only care about the power. Islam doesn’t say to loot and kill.*

When summertime came, it was safe enough for Najla to return to Kabul for her exams and to finish the judiciary training program with The Four Chapters. She stayed at the same women-only hostel.

She was able to resume the life she had left, but it was altered.

The city was empty in all the wrong places, empty where people usually gathered for community, for food, for entertainment. The city contained ghosts, and warnings. Under the new religious regime, men and women were separated. This posed a particular unnaturalness for The Four Chapters and their two companions, Sediq and Kamran, who had been a close posse until the strangeness of war and new regimes. In public and in the presence of jihadist soldiers they remained separate, but even when standing carefully on opposite sides of the street, they would sneak the subtlest of jokes to each other. It was a subtlety hard-learned.

The city was empty in all the wrong places, empty where people usually gathered for community, for food, for entertainment. The city contained ghosts, and warnings.

Najla and Sediq had been exiting the courthouse one day, still deep in conversation about the civil procedures they discussed in class, when they were confronted by a soldier shouldering a massive machine gun.

“Why are you talking?” he asked. Then, more aggressively: “What is your relationship with him?” The soldier waved his gun.

The two were struck silent, afraid.

“We are colleagues,” Sediq began, but was interrupted.

“Don’t talk like this to each other!” He waved the gun again. “Why are you speaking with her?” The soldier demanded, this time shouting.

“We are colleagues,” Sediq managed. “We work in the same office.”

“Don’t do it again! Don’t talk to the woman! Don’t talk!” The soldier maintained a full shout. Now the gun was pointing directly at the two of them.

They stood perfectly still.

“Go! Now go!” His face was red.

Najla and Sediq rejoined the wave of people leaving the courthouse. Men and women were both exiting, but Najla realized later that she and Sediq had been the only opposite-sex pair conversing, which made them a target. Their liberal backgrounds had left them partly confused, partly shocked.



**Kabul, June, 1992**

The street was too empty.

Najla felt the familiar prickle of a specific kind of fear. It wasn't worry, and it wasn't panic. It was a creeping, primal fear that arises when something in a very familiar place is added or taken away.

The air was oppressively hot. She and Zahra were both sweating beneath their burqas. Zahra spotted a spigot a few feet ahead, and stopped to soak the covering in cool water. The streets were empty, after all.

Najla waited, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, eager to get home. Zahra replaced her burqa, relieved with its coolness, and the women walked on.

*Why did we choose this street to walk down? Najla wondered. Why did we even go to work today?*

They had been at the courthouse, but meanwhile, everyone had vanished. Not a car, not a bus, not another human moved. Only the wind made noise, shuffling stray scraps of paper across the sidewalk.

Both women were enrolled in the judiciary training course and were staying at the hostel. Today, they walked home together. The Afghan public didn't know when the government handover would happen, but they knew it would be soon.

A hot wind blew across their faces as they crossed the street, walking quickly to the next block. Najla glimpsed two young men ahead on the opposite side of the street, their presence a relief from the stark emptiness of the usually busy avenue. The women walked quietly behind at a distance. The young men crossed the next street far ahead. Najla wondered how many kilometers they had gone — usually they took a bus, and she didn't remember it being this long.

A few minutes later, she and Zahra followed in the young men's direction, crossing to the other side of the street — a silent pedestrian dance on an eerily empty stage.

A hundred feet ahead she caught sight of a soldier sitting in a chair. The young men must have walked past him. He wore a large turban and a military patch on his coat sleeve, and had a long rifle in hand.

They continued walking in the silence and heat of the deserted road. They passed the soldier when they heard him call from behind.

“*Chadareta!*” He shouted, lifting his rifle. “*Cover yourself!*” Najla turned to look at Zahra, whose wet headscarf had blown back in the hot wind to reveal a part of her face. Zahra pulled the scarf in tightly, and Najla lifted her hand in a gesture of submission to the soldier, though her heart still beat rapidly. The women kept walking.

Ahead, the two young men had heard the shouting and stopped, waiting for the women on the desolate street of the capital city. They walked with them in the same direction, together, to give them confidence.

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At dawn the women heard gunfire. No one dared venture outside.

As the day progressed, the fighting between the [Shura-e Nazar](#) and the Hazara/Shia faction Hizb-e Wahdat worsened. Bombs shook the hostel, falling in close proximity, and the women sat in the hallway corridors to avoid flying shards of glass. The airstrikes were unrelenting. They hid in the hostel for three days, rationing food. Najla counted the numbers of rockets that fell, giving her mind solace in the duty of numbers while sitting in the corridor. She lost track after 300 on the second day, and tried not to wonder about her family.

Someone had a pack of cards, and Najla and Zahra played spades against two other women. They were hungry, and it passed the time. Najla looked at her cards. With her queen, she couldn't win. She made calculations in her head of what the remaining cards would be, based on those that had been played. *Where are all the spades?* she thought, first to herself and then aloud as she and Zahra lost.

“I had the spades!” Zahra waved her cards.

“You had? Why didn't you play?” Najla asked.

“*Bare roze mabada negah kardem!* I was keeping them just in case we needed them, you know, for the future!” she said.

Najla couldn't help but laugh at Zahra's sincerity. It was strange to find herself laughing, strange to find themselves having fun while their city was under siege and bombs exploded around them.

Card games continued for the third day as the rockets kept falling. Medhi, a boy of 17, worked as gatekeeper for the hostel and reported news and updates from outside. On one of his ventures toward the front gate, he was hit by shrapnel and severely injured, the whole right side of his thigh and leg blown open. One of the women, a medical student, applied first aid while the others urgently discussed what to

do. The hospital was only a block away. It didn't make sense not to make the dangerous and exposed walk to transport him.

Medhi heard this suggested, and called out to them from where he lay.

“Sister, sister, no!” He pleaded. “The hospital is in the power of the Shura-e Nazar now — they are not my ethnicity. Maybe by bleeding here I will not die, but if you take me to the hospital they will surely kill me.”

Medhi was right, and the women knew it. In the afternoon the rocket fire slowed, fewer and fewer in between, until finally there was silence — eerie after days of incessant explosions. One of Medhi's friends came to the door to let them know that a ceasefire had been reached, and was now in effect to allow civilians to leave the area.

Najla never knew Medhi's fate. She left him in the care of the medical student, who had chosen to stay in the city, and found a taxi to take her home to Parwan. The driver navigated the rubble. She had no idea what to expect from this life that was now war.

## Soft Water

***October 22, 1992, Parwan***

In the early morning Ustad Ayubi awoke before the rest of his family. He pulled on a pair of light olive perahan-tunban, traditional Afghan loose pants and long-sleeved shirt, and a warm gray coat to cover him from the chilled morning. He began preparing breakfast and making tea, sending a neighbor boy on an errand for fresh milk, so that all would be ready by the time they woke up. Even his wife Guljan was still sleeping.

It was often his habit, this quiet care of his family, and Najla loved that he would come through the house around 7, calling softly into their bedrooms that breakfast was ready. She was not a morning person, and it made dragging herself out of her cozy bed easier. Making a valiant effort, she roused herself from slumber upon hearing his voice.

“Tea’s ready, Najjo,” he called lightly through her door.

“Thank you, padar,” she replied, rolling out of bed.

It would be a long morning going over caseloads from the Provincial Court, and she had planned to work from home. The rest of her siblings were off to work and school. After breakfast her father kissed his family goodbye — Najla wrinkling her nose and smiling at his scruffy beard — and left for the school to teach. He would return home for lunch just before noon, then walk back to the school to teach his afternoon classes.

She sat on the terrace all morning scrupulously reviewing documents, a tornado of papers around her. Her glasses sat atop an intimidating criminal case file. She was hopelessly near-sighted, and never wore her glasses to read. Guljan came in and out from the kitchen, where she was cooking meat soup, or shorba. Nobody had tried to make shola again, not since Najla’s last attempt that sent Ustad into culinary indignation and her family into wry laughter.

At 11:30, Najla heard gunshots. They were used to hearing intermittent gunfire, but only from a far distance — usually many miles away — never this close, and never in their own neighborhood. She could hear people running in the streets, the walls of the house rumbling with the noise. She dropped her pen amidst the piles of papers and ran to the front door. People were running down the street away from her house, in the organized chaos of fearful, mobilized bystanders. “Someone’s been shot to death,” she heard one person say while rushing by.

She began to run in the opposite direction, against the crowd. *Why were they running away, if someone needed help?*

“Najla, get back inside! Why are you going out — you’re not even dressed!” Guljan called to her from the front door before she could get much further. Najla stopped and looked down at herself. She was in jeans and a tank top, and no matter how enlightened the walls of her family home, they were still under the mujahideen regime.

She dashed back into the house, wrapped herself in a large Afghan cloak, and sprinted back out again. Her vision was fuzzy without her glasses. Blurred lines of people flew by. Their flight merged with the noise that had become a distorted din. Her eyes had trouble focusing.

A few paces closer and she could vaguely make out at a short distance a single figure lying in the street. *What are these people doing? Can’t they see he needs help?* she thought.

She didn’t see the neighbors watching anxiously from their front porches. All she saw was the solitary figure, and the cloud of dust that was filling the street from the people who still were running by.

“What are you doing?” she cried aloud to the crowd. “Why are you running? Who has been shot to death? And why is no one helping?” The questions came loudly one after the other as she ran, her voice raised to a high pitch. Something unknown had taken hold of her, pulling her in the opposite direction from all these people and toward the fallen figure in the street.

Just as she reached the crumpled body dressed in light olive and a warm gray cloak, she heard a neighbor call out to her.

“Bachim, dear one, it is your father.”

When she heard those words, everything stopped. The noise and dust and running vanished. She touched the the limp figure. It was his dress, his perahan tunban. He liked his clothes to match. Later, she wouldn’t remember turning him over — but she must have, because she remembered that when she touched his chest her hands came up covered in blood. It ran down her hands and wrists. Padar.

The dreamlike state that takes over when the deepest soul wounds happen covered Najla like a veil. She vaguely heard her mother crying behind her in the street. The neighbors were pulling her back into her house, telling her he would be OK. “He is gone,” Guljan shouted. “He is already gone! I feel it, I know it,” she screamed between

sobs. Ustad's young, strong wife from a sheltered village — now grown into the love he had showered upon her and into the life they created together — had not needed to hear a pronouncement. She waited with the neighbors, but she already knew.

More neighbors came together, bringing a stretcher with a small mattress to carry him to the hospital.

“Damn you, God!” Najla heard herself shout.

She walked with her neighbors down the street.

“Goddamn you, damn you people!” she continued, lifting her small fists into the air. She tried to wipe the blood off on her clothes but it was useless. “Damn you, mujahideen, and damn the government of Afghanistan!”

She cursed the cowardly killer who shot an innocent teacher in the back on his walk home from school, three houses away from his own, where his wife and children waited for him.

Upon seeing Nadera, Najla said dazedly, “He's just injured his hand. We are taking him to the hospital.”

The walk could have been five minutes or five hours. Somehow she was at the hospital. Somehow the rest of the family had arrived too. Somehow her father was lying in a hospital bed with his toes tied together and his head wrapped gently with linen so that his mouth wouldn't open — the first preparations for the dead according to Islam. Somehow the doctors had not told her he had died. Instead, she saw his head and his feet and she knew it to be true the same way Guljan had, the same way her own soul had pulled her out into the street and toward a fallen body that could have been anyone, when a Najla on any other day would have thought it daft to run into a street with open gunfire.

They returned to the house with her father's body on the makeshift stretcher the same way they'd left, still surrounded by friends and neighbors. Najla started wrestling with the bloody mattress to dispose of it before her siblings could see it. Two neighbors gently guided her away, and rid it themselves. Everyone was crying except Najla, whose body had been shocked out of tears by her discovery of the crumpled figure in the familiar gray cloak.

According to Islam, a [non-mahram person](#) is not to touch the body of their deceased. Even the wife, once the husband has passed, becomes a non-mahram woman. Guljan didn't care. She touched her husband and stroked his face, still dusty

from when he had fallen. She gently wiped it clean. To Najla, it almost looked like he was just sleeping.

When the body of the deceased continues to bleed long after the time of death, in Islam this is revered as a symbol of the indisputable innocence of the one who died.

Ustad Ayubi's body was still bleeding, even as he was being buried.

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After his death, Najla's sense of time remained fragmented. In between the visits and tears of friends, family and neighbors, the house was silent.

Ustad had been a revered member of the community, a figurehead in the province, known for his peaceful ways and his ability to mediate disputes. "What will we do without you?" Najla heard over and over from her family, from their neighbors, from herself.

When the Criminal Department of Provincial Police came to the house to file a criminal investigation report, Najla drove them away angrily. They had done nothing to protect her father, and they would do nothing with their report. She knew the system inside and out: it was her job. The least they could do was leave their family alone.

Six days later a family friend named Rabi paid them a visit. He had happened across some information, maybe at the mosque, or maybe in one of his business transactions. He didn't disclose the source. Ustad had been on the list of a mujahideen commander named Agha Shiren-Salangi, he informed them.

Rabi paused gingerly before delivering the rest of the news. "Najla, Najiba, Shafi and Nasir are on his list, too," he said quietly.

They decided to leave for Kabul. The women wore veils for anonymity, and rumors traveled from home, circling them. "He was targeted because he was too open-minded," one said. "It was because he had worked in the government before, when it was run by [Soviets](#)," another said. "They wanted to take over his good business, that was it."

They would never know. Even if somebody did know why such an unlikely and peaceful figure would be targeted by a jihadi commander, it was unlikely they would speak up. Nobody wanted a hand in that kind of trouble during that climate in Afghanistan. As much as Najla yearned for the truth, she knew the danger that came with trying to uncover it — if it was even possible — and it was not worth risking her living family to find out.

It was also a collective decision. Not long after her husband's assassination, Guljan sat down with her children and spoke firmly on the topic of revenge.

"We have to not think about what other people are telling us. We have to think about this very carefully — I don't want to lose the rest of the family." She wore her sadness with dignity. "*Vina pa vina na pakezhi*. Blood cannot be washed clean with blood. Blood can only be washed clean with soft water."

"Blood cannot be washed clean with blood. Blood can only be washed clean with soft water."

In the same week, the Criminal Department of Provincial Police would file a report on Ustad Ayubi's killing. The case, as Najla predicted, would never be opened.



## Please, Choose One

### **1993, Parwan**

Life reorganized itself around death's visitation, and its implications. The Ayubis moved to Kabul for eight months until the danger from insurgent fighting there outweighed the danger of being a target in their hometown, living in fear of an unidentified killer.

Meanwhile, Najla had been fired for being a woman.

She received a letter from the Provincial Court excusing her from her position as a judge. The new jihadist regime marginalized women in employment and discriminated against anyone who may be "open-minded." She wrote letters to the courts and various contacts, fighting to obtain another position, and was waitlisted for a job with the Supreme Court Human Resources Department. With her father gone, she and her eldest sister Najiba were now the breadwinners for a large family.

Later, Najla would discover that in official letters between jihadist government officials reviewing her requests to work as a judge or attorney, they had been referring to her as a prostitute. "We don't want to hire her because she may be a prostitute," one letter explained. "She studied in the Soviet Union."

With the help of a high-level friend of her father, Najla obtained a meeting with the Minister of Defense, Ahmad Shah Massoud, to plead her case. [Massoud](#) was a formidable character, one of the most recognized Islamist leaders and fighters against the Soviet occupation.

When she arrived at his office Najla was shown to a separate waiting room for women. The building was surrounded by military and security. She could see the line of many Afghan VIPs — mostly warlords, key jihadists and governmental officials, with their bodyguards and armored cars — waiting to meet with him.

When Najla was shown into Massoud's office, she noted his calm demeanor. He spoke in a quiet, strong voice, and had the stature of a soldier and an open-minded intellectual.

"I was very sorry to hear about your father, Miss Ayubi," he said. "He was a good man, and it was a crime."

Najla looked down for a moment, and took a deep breath. She thanked him politely, then placed two documents on Massoud's desk. One was passport paperwork that required his signature so that she could leave the country. The other was a work order.

"Please," she said, "choose one. If I cannot work here, am I Afghan? If I cannot work in my own country, then please help me leave so that I can work somewhere else."

Massoud looked thoughtful. "Studying abroad is not a crime," he replied, reviewing the documents and referring to her time in the Soviet Union. "You will work here."

Massoud wrote a strict order to the Parwan Provincial Court to hire Najla. He could have ordered her to be a judge again in the Supreme Court, but after experiencing such discrimination there, she preferred a position as a criminal lawyer back home in Parwan.

Najla accepted the position, though it had been offered on one condition: that she wear a black burqa to work. One of the most conservative coverings for women, it veiled the entire body, leaving only the eyes exposed.

She hated the scarves and burqas and head wraps that covered women, that blamed them for simply being female and distinguished them as lesser in society. In the court system, it took two female witnesses to equal one male witness. Inheritances were divided unequally according to gender: half might be split between two brothers, for example, and the other half might be split between four sisters.

Between her new job, a small sewing business she had created to earn enough for food, and the beauty parlor Najiba ran out of the home, the family recovered economically. But the women recognized that Shafi, who was nearing the end of high school, needed a job. They sought to keep him in close proximity for safety's sake, and came up with an idea.

They set up a small kiosk across the street from the house and stocked it with cookies, chocolates, crackers, stationary, eggs and other small items that Shafi could sell. It became his shop, where he could learn about work and be occupied, while still visible from the house. It also became apparent that a large amount of the chocolate they had purchased for the shop was disappearing mysteriously quickly, and that he was less hungry for dinner than usual.

One day, he came bursting through the door in a panic.

“The shop!” he cried. “Everything’s gone!” Najiba and Najla tried to calm his distress, unconcerned with the small goods that had been pilfered and could easily be replaced. The shop was for his learning and his safety, not for income. They reassured him, hiding that they were tickled by his intensity.

He agonized over the missing goods and re-secured the kiosk’s door after replacing them the next day, taking a swath of chocolate just in case. He and his band of friends would mind the shop after school: Marai taking one shift, while Jawid made jokes about passersby and Shafi ate what “didn’t sell.” It became a hangout for his friends, and he took his charge seriously.

The second time it was robbed, he rushed through the front door again.

“*THEY EVEN TOOK THE EGGS!*” he shouted in distress.

Najiba covered her hand to her mouth and left the room to release her giggles in the kitchen. Najla attempted a straight face to offer consolation.

For weeks afterward, Shafi would lie awake at night in bed, convinced that the next time the robbers came they would take the entire kiosk with them. “Is it even possible?” he asked Najla.

She reassured him that it would take a mighty effort to remove the entire kiosk, and that the noise across the street would surely wake them up. Shafi still laid awake many nights in worry for his small shop, imagining the horror of bandits uprooting the small kiosk and making off with it, eggs, chocolate and all.

After her laughter subsided, Najla realized that in spite of the humorous moment, she was troubled. Replacing the goods was not a problem. But this was the first time in 10 years of war and occupation that the neighborhood had had a robbery.

It spoke of something different, a new kind of desperation and self-preservation that was taking hold of the people, and of strangers on the family’s familiar streets.

## **Her Hands Were Her Only Giveaways**

### ***Parwan, October, 1996***

The week the Taliban arrived, the mood in the house was already somber. Najla's grandfather had just died.

No one knew what to expect with this new group. Phones, public services and public radios had been destroyed during the war. Operating radios could receive news from BBC and Voice of America, but nothing of local or national news.

The Afghan public had been robbed, subjected to mass killings and ethnic cleansings, fighting, and destruction under the mujahideen — so when they heard that there was a group called the Taliban that would bring peace, there was a ripple of optimism. Even Najla looked forward to the possibility of having harmony in the country once again.

It was already too late by the time Afghans realized the extent of the brutalities that constituted Taliban policies. When the group took over Kabul in late September, the ["bodies of former Afghan president Mohammed Najibullah and his brother Ahmadzai swung from a traffic post in a busy Kabul road,"](#) one international news correspondent reported. Afghans realized that the propaganda for peace had been just that: propaganda. The truth revealed itself to be infinitely darker than any citizen could have imagined.

Local resistance groups formed, for the mujahideen government had barely put up a fight — leaders fled to the north, leaving civilians defenseless.

The Taliban began making announcements. Afghans almost didn't take them seriously at first, they were so extreme. Women were barred from working: they were to stay inside the house. If they left their homes, they were to wear a blue burqa that covered them entirely. Men were ordered to grow long beards.

Going from door to door, the Taliban stormed houses, removing televisions, radios, books and any forms of entertainment. Dogs, cats, birds — all pets were prohibited. People were ordered to paint their window glasses a black tint so that women could not be seen inside. Family pictures and videos were also outlawed, with families forced to burn them lest they be found in a raid.

During raids, they pulled citizens from their houses, from buses and off the streets to beat them publicly with the blunt end of a rifle, or with their whips affixed with

glass shards, accusing them of being mujahideen supporters. Some were arrested, and some were killed outright.

“You have a nice house! You are rich and spoiled!” One Talib soldier shouted at Najla’s neighbor while dragging him from his home. “You must be mujahed. You fought against us, and [now we are taking you.](#)”

Women disappeared, especially those of marriageable age; since the Taliban was not primarily Afghan, they sought to establish themselves in their newly claimed provinces, and forced marriages were common.

The Taliban had grown out of Pakistan as a mix of Pakistanis, Iraqis, Arabs, and others, as well as Afghan refugees; upwards of 3 million had fled to Pakistan in previous conflicts. There, many were recruited and trained at [madrassas](#) before being sent back to Afghanistan to fight for [extremist Pakistani groups](#).

They set fire to large swaths of natural reserves, forests and vineyards, burning them to the ground. Punishments for being a suspect, or for breaking their strict laws, included public executions or the taking of limbs.

It was common for a Talib soldier to show up at a home in a rural village and say to the father of a family, “[Give me your son to fight, or give me your land and home.](#)” They began “arresting” young men to use as soldiers and to test the land-mined areas in the north to determine which paths the Taliban could use to cross. They would go on to use those abducted to swap for their own soldiers in prisoner exchanges, or if the kidnapped had been killed they would keep the bodies to [sell back to their families](#).

When this last piece of information was discovered, the Ayubis and their neighbors held a secret and careful meeting in their houses. Shafi and some of the neighborhood boys — the ones who had worked Shafi’s little shop and eaten it bare of chocolates — were of arresting age for the Taliban. The families formulated a plan.

“Shafi, my son, you must go,” Guljan told her child. The memory of the son she had lost never faded.

Shafi, Marai, Jawid and his friends were sent that night with family friends to Pakistan. Travel was risky, but the risk if they stayed was far greater.

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### ***Chaikal, a nearby village, 12 days later***

When a handful of quiet knocks came on the wall from outside, Guljan was already wide awake. It was the middle of the night. Her children lay in various positions of rest around her in the darkness, but she knew no one was sleeping.

The knocks were warnings from the head of the village, codes previously established among neighbors to alert them when the Taliban arrived.

Najla heard the knocks too, and sat upright with dread. *My God*, she thought. *We accidentally fled TO the frontline, not AWAY from it.* The conflict's movement was difficult to predict.

Her cousin opened the door and spoke with the head of the village in hushed tones, then relayed the information to the rest. Najla was right: the Taliban were advancing in this direction. The family had left the bombings at home in hopes that Chaikal would be safer, but it turned out to be the eye of the storm.

Safety was elusive as fighting unfolded. A place would seem just stable enough to stay in before it too came under fire, one province and city after the next.

A few days before, the Ayubis had been eating lunch at home when two large bombs exploded at their neighbors' house. Najla couldn't hear anything when it happened. She couldn't even feel the house shake, or see the windows blow out, or smell the fumes. The force of the bombs knocked out her senses. When she came to, shards of glass, shrapnel and other debris littered the house. They had been spared because they were eating in the windowless living room, in the middle of the house.

The neighbors were not so lucky. Najla's friend Laila lived down the street — Laila who would eat ice cream with Najla and Jamila when they were in high school, and whose little sister Nadia played with Najla's little sister. Nadia was home when the bomb went off, and was killed. Neighbors frantically searched for bodies amid the rubble, and found one woman who had been thrown to a roof four houses over. Najla used to sew dresses for her.

After the bombing, Guljan, Najla, Najiba, Nadera and Nasir left for their cousin's house in Chaikal. But there, too, was now unsafe.

They packed their things yet again to leave at first light. Their relative had a daughter about 22 years old.

"Take her with you, please, to Bagram, so that she will be safe," her mother asked. She hoped to stay and guard the house from being taken by soldiers, but wanted to send her daughter to safety — precarious hopes that would hinge on the whims of war.

The car pulled away from Chaikal, cousin in tow, mother standing at the door, waiting for the Taliban's impending arrival.

When they stopped in at home to retrieve what they could — food, and the valuables they could carry — it was apparent that the bombing hadn't stopped. *We have to get out of here*, Najla thought. *We have to get to Bagram.*

The rented car turned down their street. Najla's head turned in horror as it passed the little green neighborhood park, where 13 bodies had been laid out in the open, casualties from a recent bombing. Those were her neighbors, people she had grown up with and loved, people who had come to her to sew dresses for their daughters' weddings and embroider their shirts for special occasions. There were children among the bodies.

In Bagram, they waited out the fighting.

When the ex-government and Northern Alliance took control of Parwan from the Taliban a month later, the Ayubis returned. Najla hoped the mujahideen would stay in power. *Imagine*, she thought, *the people who were part of killing my father, we are rooting for them, trying to go under their control. We're choosing the best of the worst.*

When the security proved to be short-lived, they fled to a cousin's house in Kabul and secured a house to rent, which would prove to be one of many as war tossed them about the city. Within a week they realized they needed the rest of the valuables they had been unable to take with them when they left Parwan, if only to pay rent. They had lost everything and the war inflated the cost of basic items to an extreme degree.

It was decided that Guljan would make the trip to Parwan to collect whatever else they could salvage from the home. As the matriarch, it was safest for her to go. One son would have to stay with the women in Kabul, for the sake of safety and custom, and it was too dangerous for the other son to travel alone. Nor could two young women travel by themselves. Guljan was the only woman old enough to travel and not be at high risk for rape, abduction and a forced marriage.

Talib soldiers raiding a bus in transit would inspect the hands of a woman to determine her age. Covered head to toe in a burqa, her hands were her only giveaways. Guljan's were gnarled and wrinkly with the age and wear of decades of motherhood. She would go, and take Nasir with her.

Shafi returned from Pakistan to stay in Kabul with Najjiba, Nadera, Najla and Mary. Guljan and Nasir took as much as they could from their family home in Parwan, but once they loaded up with basic living items there was not much room for the

THEY DANCED IN WINDOWLESS ROOMS

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souvenirs, family heirlooms, photos or the cherished objects that had belonged to  
Ustad Ayubi.



## Little Brother, Large Cloak

***Late January, 1997***

When Nasir answered the knock at the front door, four Talib soldiers stood on his doorstep in the morning light.

They had arrived in a military truck, with rifles slung over their shoulders. Wearing large Pakistani-style scarves, they dressed all in black and had black kohl under their eyes — worn throughout Islamic history when Muslims were fighting non-Muslims.

“Are you Nasir Ayubi?”

“Yes,” Nasir answered hesitantly. If only Guljan had answered the door. Normally she did, but Nasir had been hovering near it, speaking with a neighbor and trying to assess if conditions were safe enough to leave for work.

Once airstrikes had stopped, Nasir had returned to Parwan with Guljan to resume his job at the Telecommunications Ministry and bring much-needed income to the family. However, the Taliban had continued arbitrarily arresting young men, targeting those of military age or educated backgrounds, for they feared the resistance groups that had sprung up to fight them. They detained the men at “military checkpoints,” and often simply killed them.

“You have a nice house,” one of the soldiers commented darkly.

“Are you mujahideen? Why do you have this house?” the first one demanded, stepping forward aggressively. “Is it you who has been fighting us these past few months?” He pulled the rifle off his shoulder.

“No no,” Nasir replied. “I’m not mujahideen. I work in the Telecommunications Ministry. I do not fight! I have not been fighting.”

“I think you should come with us and explain who you are in our office.”

Nasir didn’t have a chance to answer. One soldier stepped behind him and shoved him forward with the side of his rifle. Two more took him by either side and forced him into the truck.

A while later, Guljan came downstairs.

“Nasir, have you decided if you’re going to work today?” Her voice met empty silence. “Nasir?”

She wandered the rooms, but the yard was empty, the washroom unoccupied. When she approached the front door, she found it unlocked. Even if he had left for work without telling her, he would have locked the door behind him.

Panic set in. She called Nadera, who had also returned to Parwan to take a job at the hospital’s blood bank.

“He’s gone, Nasir is gone,” she cried into the phone hysterically. “They’ve taken him. I know they have.”

The two women began making calls to everyone they could possibly think of. Guljan went from neighbor to neighbor, begging for help in finding her son. She had already lost one. She could not lose another.

Nadera put out requests to various officials and went directly to the head of the hospital, Dr. Safi, who was a Taliban supporter and well-connected.

“We are alone now,” she said, referring to the way women were incapacitated in society without male family members. Without them, they could not leave the house or do the most basic things. They could not even buy food.

“We are alone now,” she said, referring to the way women were incapacitated in society without male family members.

“My brother has been arrested. We don’t know where he is, or if he is alive. Will you help us, please, to find him?”

Dr. Safi was a Talib by convert, not by origin. Many Afghans had affiliated themselves with the Taliban after the invasion for various reasons of power or security. He was swayed by their pleas.

“I will see what I can do to get him back. But give me time,” he said.

Nadera and Guljan had an agonizing night. Dr. Safi’s connections located Nasir at one of the military checkpoints. The next day, Najla arrived from Kabul and was there when Dr. Safi delivered Nasir personally to their house.

“Take him away,” he advised. “They will come back for him.”

Najla's brother was unrecognizable. His face and every part of his body not covered in clothing was a sickly mixture of black and red. He was expressionless.

They gathered under dimmed lights around their small sandali, the heated table with a blanket for warmth. Nasir explained how they interrogated and beat him, accusing him of being a jihadist: "You've been fighting against us. Now you have to pay the price, or tell us," they had said.

At first glance it appeared that only his face, neck and hands were discolored. But when Guljan left for the washroom, in the presence of just his siblings Nasir pulled off his shirt to reveal the hideous shades of blackened, bruised skin mixed with red covering his entire body. His abductors had attached shards of metal to the ends of the whips they used.

Nadera and Najla worked quickly to sanitize and dress the wounds before their mother returned. Nasir went in and out of shock, unable to follow the conversation. As the women finished the dressings, Najla reached behind her for a towel. She paused when she caught sight of her mother's silhouette, dark against the window. Guljan stood watching, one hand covering her mouth. Najla turned back to Nasir and quickly pulled his shirt back over him.

The next morning, Najla called Ihsan, their most trusted driver.

The Taliban had given Nasir strict orders not to leave the town. But they agreed with Dr. Safi that they had to get him out. *Some people are so good. He didn't even know us*, she thought. And what an anomaly that such pure goodness could coexist alongside such atrocity.

And what an anomaly that such pure goodness could coexist alongside such atrocity.

Nasir could not stay, but nor could he exit out the front door. The Taliban could be watching the house, and his disfigured face would be spotted easily. Najla spoke with the neighbors, who had become an even closer community bonded together by the unpredictability of the war. They agreed to move him from house to house, over the walls with the emergency exit stairs, so that movement would not be visible from the street. At the last house Najla and Nasir would come down a set of stairs into an alley, where they would be ushered immediately in Ihsan's van.

Najla pulled a large cloak over her little brother, covering his head, face, neck, arms and hands. Carefully, they moved according to plan.

Her muscles were tense until they reached Kabul. If they were stopped, they would both be arrested. With his injuries, it was impossible to hide who Nasir was.

A week later, the Taliban force evacuated Guljan and Nadera from their home. “You don’t need to live here anymore,” they said.

And Nasir refused to stay in Kabul. For months he had experienced post-traumatic stress from being captured and tortured, now jolting at quick movements, startling easily or bolting upright in bed during the night.

When his injuries healed, he returned to their old home in Parwan, against the family’s wishes. He wanted to be there. He wanted to work. But most of all, he didn’t want the Taliban to win.

The first time the house was bombed during his stay, his next-door neighbor was killed, and Nasir didn’t tell his family in Kabul. The second time, he was spared by not being home. When he finally did leave, it was a bitter exit. This was his neighborhood, where his brother had set up a shop, where the streets held their stories, where their father had walked to school every day to teach. This was his neighborhood. Not theirs.

## Shor-Angez

***Kabul, January, 1998***

Najla opened the door to a small posse of little innocents, children dressed carefully by their mothers, shuffling and readjusting as children do, and speaking amongst themselves quietly. As they filed past her into the house one by one, the volume rose in the comfort of safe walls.

They gathered around Najla in the living room on pillows, pulling out textbooks from beneath shirts and scarves. These books were forbidden, but Najla and Najiba had managed to obtain them through Sahmey, who had run the corner store on their street for as long as Najla could remember. He clandestinely rented forbidden books and movies to trusted, longtime neighbors. Under the rule of the Taliban, the neighborhood survived on trust and mutuality.

Under the rule of the Taliban, the neighborhood survived on trust and mutuality.

The children quieted themselves and sat in expectation for the morning's class. Najla commenced a science lesson. She taught only the basics — she was not formally trained as a teacher, but the Taliban had banned girls from attending school at all. Hers was one of a few underground schools that sprang up in resistance. Boys attended too, though not as many because they were allowed to attend Talib schools. Some parents, however, veered away from the skewed Taliban curriculum, which the regime had filled with its extremist ideologies.

“That completes Lesson Three,” Najla said to the small class with a smile.

“Miss Najla?” A small hand popped up. It was Adeela's. Sometimes Najla was struck by how open the children's faces were, how untouched they were from the world around them.

“Yes?”

“Why does Pluto only have five moons and Jupiter has like 50 more?” she asked.

Oh, no. Of course Adeela would have a really specific question that Najla didn't know the answer to.

It was a fine balance of deciding when to tell the kids that she didn't know an answer. She had to maintain their respect as a teacher. But because the Taliban had

burned so many books and made it next to impossible to get hold of proper reference texts, she had nothing she could use to look up the answers.

“Adeela, that is truly an excellent question, and I will respond as soon as I return from the washroom.” Najla stood and hastened to the kitchen, hoping Najiba would be there. Guljan sat with the children in the meantime, talking and laughing.

Najiba, the official and credentialed teacher, was making tea.

“For goodness’ sake, why do some planets have more moons than others?” Najla asked.

Najiba smiled and reached for a clove of cardamom. “Oooh, they got you again, didn’t they? Was it Adeela?”

“Oh, come on! Yes, it was Adeela.”

Najiba raised an eyebrow. They both laughed.

“It has to do with the planet’s size and composition. For example, the bigger ones have bigger gravitational pulls, which will attract and keep more moons in orbit.” She stirred the cardamom into her mug. Najiba taught many of the classes too. She’d been a teacher before the war for several years in a boys’ school — [a position not traditionally allowed for women](#). But Najiba was strong-willed and firmly spoken. When her male students showed up in her classroom with guns, she promptly threw them out with little regard for her own safety.

She took a sip of her tea. “Anything else?” she asked.

“I should hope not. If she starts asking me about the composition, I’ll be done for,” Najla said, giggling. She returned to the living room, where Guljan was playing a small game with the children.

“Adeela?”

“Yes, Miss Najla?”

“Some planets have more moons than others depending on their size and composition. For example, the bigger ones have bigger gravitational pulls, which will attract and keep more moons in orbit,” she repeated. Then she held her breath.

Adeela looked thoughtful for a moment.

“OK. That makes sense. Thank you, Miss Najla.”

Najla was relieved.

“You’re welcome, little one.”

Najla watched the children replace their books under their shirts and scarves, composing themselves into quiet as their little feet shuffled them out of the house. She stood at the door beneath a sign that read *Shor-angez*, the name of their tailoring shop. It was a romantic Dari word that meant “stormy,” “exciting” or “tumultuous,” and she thought it fitting for the time.

This was how many underground schools maintained their front. If questioned, the comings and goings of children could be attributed to picking up their mother’s tailoring or dress work. Students were trained to give these answers if stopped. Classes were staggered throughout the day so that they didn’t all come at once, to avoid drawing [attention](#).

As the rest of the children left, Najla recognized a woman and her child approaching — Shimah and her daughter Nilab, introduced to Najla by another friend. It was too risky to let in an unknown outsider without a well-known referral.

She welcomed them inside and gave Shimah a basic description of the school. She immediately liked the bright-eyed Nilab, who waited until the women were finished speaking before asking a question she had been holding inside for the whole conversation.

“*Madar*, why is Miss Najla dressed like that?”

Now that was a question Najla loved. Not the science ones she didn’t know the answers to, but those outright, unfiltered observations, both wise and funny.

Horrified, Nilab’s mother spoke to her in a harsh Dari whisper. Shimah wore the most conservative possible dress: a black cloak with a black burqa veiling her. In the comfort and safety of her own home, Najla wore jeans and a t-shirt. The difference was stark indeed.

When the moment had passed, Najla offered Nilab to stay for the next class. After her mother had left, Nilab asked again. “Miss Najla, why is my mom dressed like this and why are you dressed like that?” This time, she added: “And why do you have short hair?”

Najla was all smiles. She loved being able to offer a gentler perspective to Afghan girls.

“Well, Nilab, that’s an astute observation,” she said. “This is OK. It’s OK that the dress is different. Some people will be like me, and some people will be like your mom, and some people will be like Najiba.” She waved to indicate Najiba, who wore a scarf and was sitting on pillows nearby. “They are all OK, just different,” she explained.

Nilab seemed satisfied. Her mix of intellect, mischievousness and excitability held Najla’s heart. By the time the second lesson was over and Najla was standing under the Shor-angez sign again to send out the last class, Nilab seemed a little more comfortable with how Najla’s jeans and her mother’s cloak somehow walked the same streets.



### **They Danced in Windowless Rooms**

The Taliban's interpretation of scriptures led them to believe that "nothing on the body should be added or taken away." Makeup was legal only if it was in the privacy of a woman's own room, where nobody but her husband would see her.

This made the Ayubis' home beauty parlor even more dangerous than their underground school. A woman decorating herself was a grave offense, especially if it was for a wedding.

Previously, weddings had been the main occasion for hair and makeup — they were traditionally one of the richest and most joyfully celebrated affairs in Afghan culture. Huge wedding halls had been constructed in cities to accommodate hundreds of guests.

Under this regime, marriages were to be quick and silent affairs, official meetings with a brief reading from the Quran.

But the people still celebrated. They celebrated in their basements, and set someone on watch outside. They danced in windowless rooms, and went to the secret beauty parlors to have their hair curled and eyes made smoky, sultry dark for their special day.

The Taliban raided these underground weddings whenever they got wind of them. They broke down the doors, pulled out the bride and groom and beat them with metal whips. They assaulted guests and destroyed the gifts, turned over the food tables, shredded the cassette tapes used to play music.

Still, the clandestine weddings continued, and still, the people celebrated. Najla knew because the women came to the Ayubis' beauty parlor filled with the chatter and excitement of getting married.

Some of her regular customers to the beauty parlor, ironically, were Talib wives. They were easy to identify because not only were they strangers in the community, but their dress, speech, mannerisms and accents were those of rural village women — yet they carried huge amounts of money and gold with them.

The first time Najla and Najiba served the three Talib wives at their beauty parlor, they were uneasy, not knowing how high-level their connections might be.

When the wives returned a few days later to retrieve the dresses they had left to be tailored, the tall one spoke directly to Najla. Her brother was a Talib, and she had come to retrieve not only her dresses, but also Najla's sister Nadera — whom she had met at the hospital — as a wife for him. Many families had risked the danger of travel to send their daughters out of the country for protection from incidents like these.

"He is the nephew of the Minister of Justice," the stranger said with importance, referring to her brother.

Najla was unimpressed. Holding a government position in the Taliban simply meant that that individual had ousted the previous minister at gunpoint. Many who filled the positions were soldiers from rural areas, often illiterate, uneducated and without qualifications for government work.

She proceeded with great tact. Najla had always been good at making friends.

"Oh, sister," she exclaimed with a smile, "we are so honored that you had seen Nadera as a woman you would want in your family! This is very kind indeed. And why have you chosen her for your brother?"

The woman spoke from beneath her burqa, which she never removed. "Nadera is very beautiful and kind, and she is a doctor," she replied. Najla could see the sea-foam green and sequins of her dress beneath the veil. "She will bring very good income to the family."

Najla nodded, pausing before responding. "Yes, I see. Now, Nadera is a very educated woman. What skills does your brother possess that he would want an educated woman like her?"

Najla was following traditional social customs of pre-marriage negotiations. Frequently, the women would initiate the request for marriage of a daughter or sister, and discussing the traits of the potential husband was a standard part of the deliberation as the family decided whether or not to give away their daughter. Najla was not sure how closely these women would adhere to tradition, and hoped to lean on convention and a sense of camaraderie as far as both would take her. She hid her fear.

"Well," the woman replied thoughtfully, "he can drive a car or bus or taxi, he is very good at selling things — he can run a shop. *And* he is working for the Ministry of Justice."

Najla coughed instead of laughing, nearly forgetting the gravity of the situation. The humor would wait until after they had gone, when she was relaying the conversation to the rest of the family later.

Instead, she smiled graciously. “OK, good, I understand. Here’s the thing: Nadera is a doctor and she has spent many, many years in school to become a doctor. She has spent this much of her life for her work,” Najla spread her arms out wide to demonstrate, “and if your brother is going to marry her, I’m sure that he will not let her work. So maybe it is best to not have this kind of communication. It may not be the best combination for them to both be contented, and for him to be satisfied.”

The Talib woman was unfazed. “No problem, no problem!” She said with a smile. “If it’s about his education, that is OK: we can have a diploma printed for him. We can buy a graduation document from the university.”

The part of Najla that revered education, as her father had taught her, was saddened that her country had come to this.

“True, this is true,” Najla said, putting a hand on the woman’s shoulder, knowing her sister’s fate was at stake. “You know also, though, there are many ideas to be learned, and even if there is the official paper, there may not be the ideas — and then it is still not the best combination for both people to be satisfied.”

The Talib wife held her position. “Perhaps, then, you will speak with your family, and we will return tomorrow to speak again.”

Najla’s stomach sank. The idea of Nadera, her beautiful, free-spirited, well-educated sister entering a forced marriage with a rural Taliban soldier made her feel sick.

But she nodded her head, playing along in a friendly manner. “Yes, I will speak to my family and see what they decide, and we can speak again tomorrow.”

When the next day came, the tall Talib wife and her two silent companions returned. Najla delivered the news as diplomatically as possible, explaining that while they deeply respected that the woman had chosen Nadera, the family had decided it would not be the best match. Nadera lived and worked in the city, and the Talib man was from a rural province, where he would take her after they were married.

“She would not be able to work there, and she would be missing her family so much.” Najla appealed to the woman’s own sentiments.

There was much back-and-forth. Finally, Najla asked the woman a question.

“Sister, if it were you, and there was somebody whom you didn’t want to marry, somebody you would not be happy with, what would you do? Would you marry him?”

The woman paused. “I would do yes or no, whatever my family would decide.”

Najla smiled kindly. “So you understand, because you are the same. Nadera’s family decided against it, and she would do just as you would. We are both the same, sister.”

The Talib woman did not like giving up, but she understood this convincing perspective. And Najla had treated her with the intimacy of a friend.

“I will tell our family the news,” she acquiesced.

“In the future, if there is opportunity we may become relatives, and I will let you know,” Najla added, following through with the Afghan decorum of polite declination of a marriage request.

Within a few weeks, the Ayubis took down the tailoring sign. They packed up and moved to a different rental in another part of the neighborhood, just in case, where it would be harder for the fast-talking Talib wife to find them. The roof had been leaking in the house anyway.

## A Woman's Prison

**1998 – 2001**

Najla sat down in front of the large square mirror on her vanity table and adjusted it slightly. She examined her eyes, finding lines in the corners she hadn't seen before.

Slowly, deliberately, she selected from a colorful array of eye shadow, eye pencils and lipsticks, arranging her choices in a circle on the table. Her hair was in huge rollers. She was just getting started.

In the year before, she had barely recovered from a bedridden depression. The house was a woman's prison. They could venture out occasionally for groceries, but had to be accompanied by a male, even if it was a child. Najla found this comical: They would "rent" the little neighborhood boys to accompany them so they could go to the store. *Imagine, she thought, a grown woman renting a child so she can walk down the street!*

The last time she had gone out, she and a neighbor boy had walked brusquely to the corner market for eggs. She wore the mandated blue burqa — [the wrong colored meant certain arrest](#)— and she was relieved to feel the cool, clean, outdoor air, even being covered from head to toe. Together, they walked past shredded video and cassette tapes dangling from traffic poles in the streets, alongside bodies, to the store.

Najla had looked away. She knew that the Taliban itself freely used the things they banned: satellites, television, radios and more. She hastened the neighbor boy who carried the eggs, for she had heard a patrol truck approaching, announcing illegalities and punishments on the loudspeaker.

Najla now closed one eye and pulled slightly at her eyelid, so that the pencil would glide on smoothly. First a line of black, then a line of blue to soften it. It was a movement familiar from so many preparations for dinners, lectures and events with friends. It reminded her of the reality she knew. *This other life and its rules are so outlandish — it feels like a joke, she thought. But these people are serious.*

Joy was a strange thing to feel.

She began layering the carefully selected shadows above the liner, feeling delight at the way the colors blended and changed. Joy was a strange thing to feel. Just last week, unlucky Nasir had been arrested again, this time for listening to music. He had been driving his taxi and listening to music at a very low volume, with the windows

rolled up. A Talib soldier saw him sitting at a stoplight, tapping his thumbs on the steering wheel to the rhythm — giving away the music that was playing inside. Fortunately, he was released after a week of starvation in solitary confinement.

This came on the heels of Najiba's narrow escape, after she accidentally unveiled a part of her face while riding in a bus. There were separate buses for women, with heavily-curtained windows so that nobody could see them inside — even though they were also covered in burqas. One of the soldiers patrolling for crimes such as these spotted the momentary flash of Najiba's unveiled cheek in the bus. He stopped them, pulled her from the bus and beat her on the street with a cable whip, warning her to never unveil herself again.

There were no veils here, in Najla's beauty room. Not a burqa or headscarf to be seen. Instead, a white graphic t-shirt with Rastafarian colors lay flat on the couch, next to a pair of oversized sunglasses. She began pulling the rollers out of her hair one by one so that her head could fit through the hole of the t-shirt, teasing her hair upwards with a brush after each one. She pulled the shirt on, shook out her hair again and leaned forward toward the mirror. With a stick of bright red lipstick, she traced the lines of her mouth.

Finally, she added the finishing touch and stood to observe her 1980s costume: red lipstick, big, teased-out hair, retro sunglasses and a graphic t-shirt.

A stack of books — filled with activism ideas for if and when she escaped — waited on the corner of the table.

## You're Not in Power Anymore

***November, 2001***

An eerily silent morning marked the day the Taliban fell. Najla and her family had received reports that the group was beginning to flee to Kandahar.

In the month before, airstrikes had been unrelenting. The Ayubis had found themselves constantly moving from one place to another within the house, trying to find the places safest from debris and shrapnel: first the kitchen, then the living room, then the closet. Some nights they would fall asleep in their beds and awake to the bombings, dragging each other down the stairs in the dark to huddle in the bathroom.

Najla had begun to notice that the time between bombings was longer. Fewer explosions shook the house. The day the Taliban fell, the morning was completely silent. Intuitively, she knew it was over.

She stepped outside into the chilly, clear day. She wore a burqa, but walked without a male escort. She didn't need one anymore. She walked by herself in the sun, noting Northern Alliance soldiers on the streets.

When Nasir came home from work, he told a story of a Talib soldier who had been asleep in one of the government offices and was awoken by a Northern Alliance leader. "You're not in power anymore," he was told.

Najla had two customers coming to the beauty parlor that day for haircuts and perms. The women spoke excitedly.

"Ha! We don't have to hide our makeup today!" one exclaimed. They wore colorful dresses — color that Najla would remember from that day.

In the evening the Ayubis huddled around their now-legal radio in the dark and listened to the reports of the Northern Alliance's victory, aided by the U.S. and NATO forces. The electricity had been out from the bombings for most of the month, so they drank tea in darkness and simply listened, the new and contagious energy of hope spreading between them. They had survived.

Outside, people set off gunshots in celebration. They played music and danced in the streets.

Inside, Mary opened the curtains and put on her favorite Bollywood music in celebration, dancing about in the candlelight. Guljan's heart, accustomed to carrying the weight of motherhood in wartime, released it ever so slightly.

An undercurrent of uncertainty ran beneath the celebration. Memories of being caught in the tug-of-war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance in 1996 were indelible in their minds. Nobody knew for certain if this freedom would last.

She saw the lost years in terms of activism, of what she could have done had she not been in hiding. And yet, she was alive.

The next day, Najla went to work for the first time in five years. Her walk up the stairs to the Attorney General's office felt familiar and relieving, as though the world had been set upright after being oddly tilted. She sensed the space between the Najla who had walked the stairs for the last time five years ago, and the Najla who stood there now. She saw the lost years in terms of activism, of what she could have done had she not been in hiding. And yet, she was alive.

She stood on the steps in the sun, her old fire still alight for justice and the possibilities the future managed to hold, even in such an unpredictable world.

She began climbing the stairs. Najla was ready to work.



## Always, He Remembered Tokyo

### *Tokyo, 2005*

There is an Afghan warlord so rich that he matches the color of his suit to the color of the car he will be driven in that day. If he buys a suit of a new color outside his fleet, he will have a car purchased to match it. The flick of his pen creates a government coup. The nod of his head can command one of his innumerable regiments of soldiers to fight for the highest bidder, killing thousands while he drives silently in his custom car and custom suit. It is rumored that one year the U.S. government paid him \$100 million just to “keep him calm.” He is feared.

He is also a governor.

This warlord-mercenary-turned-governor oversaw the Province of Mazar at the same time Najla was part of overseeing the Joint Election Management Body as an election commissioner at the ministry level. A governor’s technical jurisdiction is only his or her governing province. A minister, however, oversees his or her designated area of affairs for the entire country. Her position was higher than this governor.

On the day they met, Najla was wearing heels — a rarity for her — and walked with extra care as she entered the room. The Afghan delegation was convening at the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Office in Tokyo to observe the postwar reconstruction planning the Japanese had implemented after the Second World War, in hopes of bringing best practices back home.

The waiting room was spacious, with fourth floor windows looking out on the Tokyo skyline. Najla’s heels sank softly into clean blue carpet as she entered alongside four of her male colleagues. She wore a modest headscarf but no veil, and western clothing.

In a single sofa in the center of the room sat the warlord-Governor of Mazar, Atta Muhammad Nur. His hand rested on the arm of the blue sofa, and Najla watched as one by one, each man who entered walked up to him to offer a greeting and kiss his hand. Nur acknowledged each with a brief nod of his head.

*Why are you people feeding this?* Najla thought. He looked away from her in a marked gesture, intentionally ignoring her.

*Huh*, she thought. The old fire was lit, the one that had been sparked as a 5-year-old when her pencils were robbed, and when she threw stones at the man who put his

hands on her, and when she threw out the lawyer from her office when he tried to bribe her. She knew of Atta Muhammad Nur, and she also knew well enough to know that his mercenaries had a hand in her father's killing.

She waited until the men settled themselves and finished their ritual of kissing Nur's hand. Afghan custom dictated that a woman sit in a single sofa so that a man couldn't sit next to her. There were several single sofas in the room, but Najla had her eye on the one across from Nur. He had chosen to ignore her. Now he would be forced to know who she was.

Heels holding steady on the Japanese carpet, she walked to the sofa and sat down. The room quieted, and the silence between Najla and Nur hung thickly over the low coffee table between them. She stayed seated in front of him. He made no eye contact.

Ten minutes went by. He was called into the [minister's office](#) before the rest of the Afghan delegation. Apparently he was traveling as his own personal delegation from Afghanistan in addition to joining Najla's from the Afghan Government Ministry. He spent 15 minutes in the office before the rest of the delegation for reasons unknown, raising eyebrows of suspicion.

Despite the level of collaborative discussion that took place when all the members were called in, and despite her executive level government position that outranked him, Nur ignored Najla for the remainder of the meetings in Japan.

Najla was accustomed to being treated as less than a man, though sometimes it still caught her by surprise. At the introductory dinner for the delegation in Kabul, she had reached out to shake hands while being introduced to a male colleague. He did not extend a hand back to her. *Stupid, Najla, stupid!* She'd thought. *He must be handicapped, and now you've embarrassed him!*

When she saw his non-handicapped hands reaching for a plate at the buffet later that evening, she approached him.

"Why did you refuse to shake my hand?" She asked.

"Because I follow Islam, and you are a non-mahram woman," he replied. Muslim women must adhere to strict rules around non-mahram men, such as keeping their face covered lest they incite sexual arousal in the man, for which she would be blamed.

"You know," Najla had said kindly, "I do respect your beliefs, but when I am shaking your hand, I am only greeting you. That is all." He looked away.

Three months after her silent statement in the Tokyo waiting room, Najla was reintroduced to Nur by Abdullah Abdullah, Afghanistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs and soon-to-be Chief Executive Officer.

Abdullah Abdullah said brightly, "Governor Muhammad Nur, do you know Miss Najla Ayubi, commissioner in the Afghan Independent Election Commission?"

This time, the warlord smiled.

"I know Miss Ayubi," he said. "We met in Tokyo."

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Three years later Najla was implementing a nationwide labor law program as part of her job at The Asia Foundation. She needed Nur's official signature for his province.

His guard showed Najla in to a lavishly decorated room with an Afghan carpet worth a year's salary. Brown and red textured colors played from carpet to the curtains that were drawn, both against the winter cold and for security. Being a mercenary-warlord-governor, he was always a target. Better that no one could see in to identify him.

Najla observed Nur, the room and the tasteful décor. *Maybe this is the décor of the day*, she thought wryly. *Where he got that kind of taste, out there fighting in the mountains half his life, I'll never know.*

It seemed paradoxical, but made more sense at second look: The lifetime that Nur had spent as an insurgent fighting in the mountains was not for nothing. It was for this — for the tailored suits and matching custom cars and standing personal army and personal delegations to international governments. It was for the fear. And it was for what every one of the 17 jihadist factions in Afghanistan were fighting for at any given moment: power.

The lifetime that Nur had spent as an insurgent fighting in the mountains was not for nothing. ... It was for the fear. And it was for what every one of the 17 jihadist factions in Afghanistan were fighting for at any given moment: power.

When the government was overhauled to reach relative stability after the international intervention in 2001, the first to take seats in government ministries were the warlords. The people who had fought against each other, killed thousands of civilians, carried out human rights atrocities and led civil wars against each other now sat neatly in power as Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Interior, of Defense — and as governors, such as Nur. They had grown rich and powerful through systems of drug

trafficking, being on the payroll of neighboring governments for their own political interests, and through large portions of land theft or drugs, both of which they would resell to the people.

This was the new government of Afghanistan after the Taliban.

These were now Najla's colleagues, coworkers — the same groups who had had her father and brother assassinated.

*The people were good to each other even when the leaders were fighting, she thought, remembering when the two male strangers had stopped on the empty street to walk her and Zahra safely back to the hostel, the friends who had sneaked food to them in between bombings, the strangers who had banded together to keep each other safe. It's for the people that I can do this, and work with these jihadists.*

Her fuel was the future of her country and the hundreds of innocent faces of women who had pleaded their cases to her as a judge, when she had been so limited in what she could do for them within the strict parameters of Islamic law.

The ill-fated Safa, with bruises on her arms from the pliers her husband used to torment her; Montezura, named for her mother's long wait for the freedom that would never come; Yalda who died in a prison; the innocents beheaded under the Taliban, the women pulled out of buses and beaten, the husbands and fathers and brothers who had disappeared.

It was for them that she sat among her father's and brother's killers.

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Nur offered her tea, and she accepted. They spoke about the details of the labor program, the thick curtains keeping out cold and threat while a thousand unspoken ghosts circled between them.

He spoke to her in a friendly manner and referred to their meeting in Tokyo. Always, he remembered Tokyo.

## **In Spite of Dark Nights**

### ***November 2011, Kathmandu, Nepal***

Najla screamed as a monkey catapulted itself through the window and into her hotel room. She froze. Najla knew war. She knew soldiers wielding weapons. She knew negotiations and mediation — not monkeys.

He landed himself squarely and lightly on her desk, plucked the piece of fruit that was sitting on the corner, and darted back outside as quickly as he had come in.

She rushed to the open window and secured it tightly. She double-checked the other windows, too. Her body relaxed and she lay down on the bed for a moment, the warm hues of the room absorbed by the dark wooden furniture that decorated the hotel. It felt good to rest, to be out of Afghanistan for a moment, and to be working on a project that held such potential for the women of her country.

Najla had come to Nepal for the first meeting of the Women's Regional Network, an advocacy organization she'd cofounded with Canadian activist Patricia Cooper for women in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. This was the first official gathering, with four women representatives from each country. Najla was delighted. But right now, her bum was hurting.

She had made a near-full recovery since a major depressive illness in 1998, but her stomach still required maintenance. She had an antibiotic injection before she left Kabul and the site was becoming reddened and painful, refusing to heal.

A knock came at the door. When Najla answered, she found a slight porter with dark hair holding out a plate of lettuce.

"Here, ma'am, the cabbage, as you requested," he indicated the lettuce leaves between them.

Najla proceeded with her usual delicate manners. "You are so kind to bring this to me," she said. "But I'm afraid this is not cabbage. This is lettuce, and I am searching for cabbage. It's a big, round, light green vegetable, like this." She demonstrated its size by pointing to a round vase on the entryway table.

The porter nodded, repeating "cabbage" to himself before retreating with the lettuce plate.

She had been on the hunt for cabbage ever since Nadera had insisted over the phone that it was what was needed to cure her bum. “Cabbage poultice, sister, I’m telling you. It’ll do the trick.” The porter had been running back and forth with various kinds of leafy vegetables in hopes of finding the one his guest required.

Najla pulled on a sweater and headed downstairs to meet the other women in the conference room. The brick building felt warm, insulating them from the chilly Nepal air. Hotel guards walked past carrying slingshots, and she shuddered. It wasn’t until she saw a guard using it to deter a monkey from entering the front door that she realized it was not for beating humans.

When Najla met the other Afghan women, she was nervous. She was the only one dressed “openly” — two were in conservative dress and headscarves. But soon the women from India, Pakistan, Canada and the U.S. joined, and the group bonded, sharing their stories of war and conflict and their ideas and hope for creating a different future for the women in their regions.

The isolation of their individual losses became lessened with the voice of the collective.

One woman named Rangina had traveled to the meeting from Afghanistan with her small daughter, her husband and her mother. Her father had been killed by a suicide bomber three months earlier. Her mother was crying now, and as Najla sat next to her she saw her own mother’s face after receiving the news of Ustad’s assassination. The isolation of their individual losses became lessened with the voice of the collective. In the years that followed, Najla and Rangina would become best friends.

The group decided to begin by quantifying the needs of women in each of their countries, and then identifying policy changes and the local and national level advocacy necessary to meet them. The two projects were ambitious and extensive, but held promise of change.

Before the end of the meeting, Najla asked the group somewhat sheepishly if they happened to know where she could find cabbage. When she explained why, they were sympathetic. One went to the porter to assist with the translation. Later, he would return with an actual cabbage, and Najla would phone her sister from the comfort of a healed bum.

She returned to her room, where she would spend the next few nights working at her desk after the meetings, kept company by an electric bug zapper that hung on the wall. As she sat and wrote and browsed through documents, its low humming noise seemed to agree with her steady diligence — until an unfortunate mosquito flew into it,

when the device would make a clamorous declaration. Najla turned toward it with a raised eyebrow.

“Are you finished?” she asked. After resuming its low hum in answer, she turned back to her notes.

When the electricity went out she worked by candlelight, swatting at the mosquitoes that flew freely in the face of the temporarily disabled bug zapper. She worked away, quietly documenting the women’s rights themes that were emerging from the meetings and paralleling them with her knowledge of judiciary and policy processes. By candlelight she mapped out the commonalities, needs and methods of advocacy that would be hope for the women of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan — to have the right to vote, to work, to walk freely, to be relieved of slavery marriages and domestic abuse.

When Najla returned to her desk after the final evening of the Women’s Regional Network’s first series of gatherings — now a week later — there was a cabbage sitting on it: Rangina’s goodbye gift. Najla laughed aloud with delight.

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Najla — the same Najla who had cried walking to court on her first day as a judge because she was mandated to wear a headscarf — felt shy without a burqa.

... the same Najla who had cried walking to court on her first day as a judge because she was mandated to wear a headscarf — felt shy without a burqa.

She had worn it for five years under Taliban law and now felt strangely exposed without it, especially in front of male colleagues. She had avoided eye contact with men for half a decade in accordance with the regime. She wore the burqa three months longer than she needed to.

When the UN asked Najla to join the Election Commission as head of Public Outreach and Media Relations for the upcoming presidential election, she immediately accepted. For Najla, returning to work after the fall of the Taliban was like a holding gate flying open to set a racehorse free — except the racehorse had spent five years pacing the holding stall. Her career as an activist had steadily progressed: She had worked for the UN-sponsored Mine Action Program, the Attorney General’s Office again, and the Constitution Commission, along with organizing with women lawyers and activists [about how to prioritize the needs of women.](#)

Najla worked furiously to connect the Election Commission with civil society. Her media appearances increased, and with them her messages of women’s rights and equality. That’s when the threats began. Not the serious ones — those would come

later — but the small ones, like “Watch out,” or “Don’t say this anymore,” or “You will be in trouble.”

Her goal was to promote women’s roles in the election processes. She worked on increasing women’s participation in political processes, accessibility to polling stations for them, and civil outreach. She bridged women, civil society, media and policymakers. She even pushed for female staff at the voting ballots locations, because male family members would not allow a woman there to vote if it was in the presence of another male.

In all of these processes she saw herself and thousands of women under first the Communist, then the jihadist, then the Taliban regimes, in which they had no voice. The reclamation of these voices made her efforts tireless, and she was proud of those who joined hands to create the legal changes direly needed for justice.

When she was appointed in 2005 as a commissioner for the parliamentary election, her work gained a broader reach than ever before. She was in a policymaking position, charged with procedures, policies and timelines for the election. There was no gender department during the presidential election, so she became one — accepting visits from civilians, policymakers and government and NGO officials alike.

In policymaking, the racehorse had big wins for women: Najla and women’s rights groups were able to secure within the new constitution never-before-seen provisions for women: [a quota system for women in Parliament](#), equal vote and equal responsibility in front of the law, rights to nomination and rights to vote, and additional opportunities for women in the health and education sectors. She even managed to have an electoral law passed allowing for a quota system for women to be representatives at the provincial level, not just at the Parliamentary level. This was a first in Afghan history.

Najla’s pen flew across documents, signing women’s rights into Afghanistan’s government policies.

Had Ustad seen how far-reaching was his love, support and encouragement to this woman who was once a little girl, perhaps even he would have been surprised. Or maybe not, since he intrinsically understood the value of the freedom and equality he had bestowed on his daughters. He had raised a zorowar who fought for the things he had taught her, and for women who did not have fathers or brothers or leaders like Ustad.

In this way he was alive still through Najla, even in the darkest moments when she could not see it, even when she would find herself awake in the middle of the night,



having walked in her sleep to a window to escape the imagined bombings in her dreams.

In spite of dark nights, Ustad's zorowar laughed as much as she fought. As good teachers do, he showed her how laughter weaves itself throughout the days, months and years, to alight along the way family and friends, goodness and hope and justice — with the aid, of course, of a simple pen.

## The Hijab is for Women

### ***Kabul University, 2013***

A young, dark man stood up and raised his hand to interrupt Najla's lecture. They were at Kabul University, and there was a protest happening outside that had everyone on edge.

"Excuse me," he said. "But I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Why is that?" Najla asked, thinking perhaps he was from a different province, and that there might be a language barrier.

"Because I am only able to focus on your body and your face, on your outfit," he replied.

Najla took a deep breath. She wore no headscarf. She had chosen to wear a conservative dress with a blazer for the lecture. She observed the student. He had dark hair heavily gelled, and wore a neatly put together suit and tie.

"Do you think this is wrong?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "The hijab is for women."

The class burst into a cacophony of disruption. Najla calmed them before responding. She gestured toward his outfit.

"Do you think our prophets wore this suit?" she asked. He was silent.

"Do you think these things that you're wearing, do you think they are written in Islam?" She continued. "Islam says to not make yourself fancy. Why are you allowed to make yourself fancy and dress this way, and I am not? Islam also says to cast down your eyes if you are excited by a non-mahram woman — why do you not cast down your eyes?"

*They always seem to forget that part,* Najla thought, recalling the highly selective scholars of Islam she had encountered over the years who used the parts they wanted to their advantage.

Patriarchy is so normalized; women accept it.

By that time the class had broken into total chaos, students arguing with each other, some taking his side and others Najla's. She was dismayed by the number of women who had sided with the young student. *It's so normalized. Patriarchy is so normalized; women accept it*, she thought sadly.

She calmed the class again and asked the student to lunch in hopes of opening a dialogue with him. Instead he disappeared after class and she was left feeling sympathy for both sexes in Afghanistan. She watched the female students shuffle out of the room, making themselves as small and quiet and covered as possible. Drawing attention to their face meant they would be deemed morally corrupt. Attention from a man was the woman's fault, not the man's.

She thought back to the many married men who had approached her, to the comments that had been made over the years. *They see that you studied abroad, they see that you're not wearing a scarf, and that you're open to things — and they think you're open to anything*, she thought.

When it came to the subject of marriage for Najla, these experiences had left her with a deep understanding of the layered social dynamics at work. She didn't think she could ever trust an Afghan man as a husband; male friends she'd known for years had often tried to seduce her, ignoring their own wives (sometimes Najla's friends) and families at home. It was so common in Afghanistan that she had heard about it from other women countless times — as much as domestic violence and abuse.

Dating and boyfriends were prohibited anyway. Even had they been allowed, war made it logistically impossible in between surviving and fleeing from one place to another.

While sometimes she laughed to herself that she was not very talented in attracting men, especially because she was an activist, she had not been without suitors. The closest she had come to marriage was Kamran, a colleague and former classmate of 15 years — leader of the mantu charge that wintry day in Kabul so many years ago.

They were good friends, he was open-minded and also a judge. Najla would have considered it. But in the end he gave in to his family's pressure to marry someone of the same ethnicity.

After marrying his first wife, he would continue to return and profess his love to Najla, saying that no one could replace her. She experienced this repeatedly with other men as the years went by, just as she had heard other women say. Women typically had no choice in who or whether or not they would marry, but men had those choices — plus three more, according to this interpretation of Islam. *It's why they don't even care*,

she thought. *They just keep coming back to you. And when they get the second marriage, the first marriage goes straight to the garbage.*

Had she walked away from Kamran and ceased communication completely, he would attribute it to her dating someone else, or that she was interested but shy. By showing it was possible to be non-sexual friends with a man, Najla was not only overturning the sexual connotations men were conditioned to assume — she was also showing that not all women were accessible, even if men wanted them.

Kamran then expressed two things: First, he complained that he couldn't discuss ideas and philosophy with his wife, that she was illiterate and from a rural area. (Najla explained it was now his duty to educate his wife, as he had been educated.) Second, after having met Najla, he was taken aback by the notion that marriage could be intellectual, more than “sex and raising children.” His surprise was sincere, and he not alone in it among Afghan men. In this way, men could also be trapped in arranged marriages, if they decided not to take another wife.

It became important to her to interact with the men who approached her, to give them a different experience of relating to women, one that Afghan culture under decades of extremist regimes had not allowed. It was fascinating to her that by blocking interactions between men and women in public, the restrictive society created the very thing it feared. By limiting any kinds of normal human interactions and conversations, it created conditions for the main avenue of communication to be sexual or romantic.

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Najla would never be a Muslim society wife, let alone a second or third. *I cannot even share my room or my bed with my own mother. How could I share my beloved one?* She felt disgusted. It was a religious conscription constructed by men, for their benefit — a kind of slavery for women.

“Get ready,” she had told her family at one point. “I’m not marrying.” They laughed at the time, but she was serious.

Alternately, if Najla were to leave Afghanistan and live her life in a free society somewhere else — free to date, free to have a boyfriend, free to choose, without hiding — she would be subjected to a terrible snag. She would be robbed of her true love born of long afternoons reading crime novels as a teenager, her career of forging pathways to equality for women in a society inhospitable to their plight.

She would also lose her citizenship.

Falling in love and marrying a non-Afghan man would mean losing all rights under Sharia law, including the right to inheritance, as well as [her Afghan citizenship](#). She would also lose her career and the credibility in her country that she had so painstakingly built for decades.

Najla had seen it happen to other women who had left Afghanistan, who were not public figureheads. One photo could end it all. A picture of her sitting next to a man in a restaurant — boyfriend or not — publicized nationally and proclaiming her a corrupt woman could wipe out an entire lifetime of credibility and work. The people would agree — the women too.

“Why would you marry outside of Afghanistan?” society would ask. “Why is the body of an Afghan man not good enough? This shows your moral corruption, that you would want a different body.”

Najla had evaluated the likelihood of finding an Afghan man as particular as herself, who could match her open-mindedness and intellect, and who she could trust not to turn to the controlling ways that characterized family systems in society. She joked to herself that she just survived a war — she didn’t need another. At first she wondered if she had been looking in the wrong places, or if the right person simply didn’t exist. But after returning from studies in the U.K., she realized she was simply no match for what her society had to offer. She had become more outspoken, more feminist, more steadfast in her ideas.

And now that there were enough people invested in the demise of her career, she also couldn’t help but suspect a set-up when approached by a man. It had happened before.

Najla knew well enough that life was a compromise. She knew because she finessed it in justice and peacemaking processes in her work. But she also knew there were core principles she could not, would not, concede.

So when faced with the choice between the possibility of love and marriage, and her work, Najla chose her work. She chose it over and over again as the years went by. Her love affair with activism had taken hold, and she wanted to stay with her partner — this work of social justice. She dreamt not of marriage to a person, but of marriage to a new and equal Afghanistan.

## Renovations

### ***Kabul, 2011***

“Najla, they’re trying to take me in.” Shafi spoke urgently to his sister through the phone.

“Can you stall them?” she asked.

“I can try. They want to take you also.”

“Don’t go,” she said. “Stall them. Stall them while I make some calls to find out what’s going on.”

After she got off the phone with him, her hands stayed steady to dial the number of her friend in the National Security Department. The Afghan Intelligence Service had somehow found Shafi. They were trying to get to Najla. *How on earth did they find my brother?* she wondered.

They had worked to stay low-profile. She changed the direction and streets she took to work every day. She avoided habits and scheduled routines, making it more difficult to track her. She rode in an armored car to and from meetings. Her workplace had 40 security officers, keeping her safe there. When she went from the armored car to her home, the pistol waited for her wedged carefully in between sofa cushions. Some nights she didn’t even stay at her family’s house, to keep them out of danger.

“Hamid, the IS has found Shafi. They want to bring us both in. Do you know about this?” she asked him.

“No,” he replied. “But I can find out. I have a contact in the intelligence service. Let me call him and I’ll call you back.”

Najla waited anxiously. Hopefully Shafi was being successful in stalling them. *I don’t care about my security, really,* she thought. *But my family’s is another matter.*

The death threats had begun in 2007 when she received a letter on the door of the family’s house during the night.

“You’re bringing Western ideas to Afghanistan. You’re immoralizing Afghanistan,” it read. “And if you keep doing this, you will not live to continue.” The threats only continued the more visible and educated she became, and the more she spoke out.

When she worked for the government, there was always someone waiting before or after a press conference or media interview to tell her what she could or could not say. While sitting on a panel in front of press cameras a few years before, the Minister of Education sitting next to her had given a firm elbow nudge and said sternly, “Najla, do not speak.” Immediately after, she resigned. Now, she could speak as openly of women’s truths as she pleased.

She paced the floor of her office, waiting for the call.

The last time the IS had contacted her, it was to deliver threats of their own. The government had contacted her to join a Peace Consultative Jirga, a nationwide collection of delegates mapping the implementation of peace processes in the country.

Meanwhile, scandal had emerged regarding fraud during the Presidential election, and Najla made a media appearance delivering her commentary on the process and on the restriction of women’s rights, as well as her criticisms of the Afghan government.

“President Obama visited his troops in Afghanistan without a visa, without informing President Karzai, and without even visiting him! Do you think we are a sovereign country? No, I don’t think so.” She said it on national television.

The next day, her colleague Ahmad phoned her in the morning. “Don’t come in to work,” he said. “They’re doing renovations.”

She was terminated from the Peace Jirga later that afternoon. Nobody seemed to notice that she was actually standing up for the sovereignty of her country.

Her friends and colleagues she had worked with for over five years had turned her in to the IS for her criticisms of government systems. It wasn’t the first time friends and colleagues of many years, decades even, had betrayed her. Over the years it had taught her to become very careful with her personal life, and with what information she trusted and to whom. Even close, old friends were not safe.

Shortly after the termination, the IS contacted her directly. “If you criticize the government,” they said, “You will be prosecuted.” IS used their extensive network to deliver more threats, all variations of the same theme: “You are criticizing the government. You are an American agent. You’re bringing immorality to Afghanistan. You’re bringing human rights and women’s rights and if you continue, you will be dead. You will be killed.”

The phone rang and she jumped. It was Hamid. “They have information to deliver about you. Don’t go in, and don’t let Shafi go in either, but let him speak with them on

the phone,” he advised. She relayed the message to Shafi, who had been successful in thwarting the agents.

When he spoke with them on the phone that afternoon, they had news for Najla.

“Your sister is officially a soft target,” they said. “Our intelligence has collected information that she is now on the hit lists of many insurgent groups.” The country was in the midst of a series of targeted killings of Tajik leaders. Many had already been assassinated. Najla was Tajik, and now on their lists. *I don’t think of myself as a target*, she thought. *I don’t even think of myself as a Tajik. I am Afghan.*

It was hard to tell who to trust. IS may have been delivering the news as a true courtesy. Equally, they could be planning to assassinate her under the guise of the Tajik killings, which would be a perfect setup for blaming the insurgents.

“Thank you, Shafi,” she said tiredly when he called her with the news. She would stay at the office with the security team, until she could figure out what to do next.



### ... And Still, a Part of Your Heart is in This World

#### ***Kabul, 2015***

It was evening. The workday was finished, but the work would never end. Najla curled up on the cream-colored divan she slept on in her family's house, pulling the Makarov pistol out from between the cushions and sliding it carefully under her pillow. *I hope I remember to take it with me if I sleepwalk tonight*, she thought to herself, half-jokingly, half-seriously. Since the war she found herself waking up in the middle of the night in various places, usually about to open a door or a window, a remnant of so many nights spent frantically moving from one room to another during years of bombings.

The little black and brown pistol was cold to the touch, and she felt its reassuring presence by the slight bump it created beneath her pillow.

She spread out, stretching her legs to the end of the sofa bed, and tried to relax. Afghanistan was a difficult place to do that. It was a hard place to trust anybody. The politics could change so suddenly, turning even the oldest friends into enemies.

She tried to put these thoughts out of her head, but they ran around. And she couldn't forget the red dress.

Najla had bought it for a UN event in the United States and couldn't wait to wear it. When she tried it on that evening and looked down to see her shins exposed, her heart sank at the bitter reminder of her country's struggle. If someone took a picture of her at the event and it was published, she would be accused of being a fraud in Afghanistan, a dangerous and immoral woman. She hung the beautiful red dress back in the closet and left it there, unworn.

Najla shifted positions on the sofa bed, rolling over to the left and listening for noises outside. Her mind continued to drift, as tired and sleepless minds do, from problems to memories to passions, and back again. Najla thought of the bodies, the children, the pleading faces she'd seen over the years. *And still, a part of your heart is in this world.*

She would give up all the red dresses on earth if it would give Afghan women sovereignty ...

She would give up all the red dresses on earth if it would give Afghan women sovereignty, and she had given up marriage again, too. And even if there was a liberal, humanist, feminist, extremely trustworthy, monogamous Afghan man masquerading as

a conservative Muslim out there somewhere, she wouldn't want to have to hide a relationship the way her other female activist friends did. It was against her honest nature. She wanted to be herself, through and through. It was what she stood for, after all.

Najla was acutely aware that she had the power, bestowed by Ustad Ayubi from birth, to choose who and if and when to marry. In her country this power, her father, and an Afghan man who would match the values of equality gifted to Najla, were each as rare as blue diamonds.

Suddenly her eyes filled with tears. *It was a gift so unique, to have a choice, and I cannot even use it.*

Into the pillow covering her pistol she cried tears for her father — her best friend — and for his gift she now felt had been unused. She missed him every day. She saw him sometimes, when she saw a man walking by who would have been his age, and she imagined kissing her father's scruffy beard.

Ustad's staunch assertion that his daughters have the right to their own decisions did not stay contained within their conversations or even the walls of the house. Rather, it spread through Najla like water through soil, touching the roots of gender equality. Because he had treated her this way, she knew nothing else. Her roots grew strong carrying this special freedom. She knew her own worth in a way very few other Afghan women did. This freedom became her platform.

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The gift was far from wasted — it was opened, revered, close to her heart and held in her mind every day, with every step of action taken on the part of the marriage she had chosen.

Nor was she bereft of love. She felt rich in it, in love with everybody: her family, her friends, her classmates — she loved humanity. She loved life as a whole. She felt this toward people she sat next to on the bus, toward strangers, and toward the bodies that were covered in a field of snow, left unclaimed, that she saw through the car window while fleeing Parwan years ago. *At the end of the day, whatever it was they were fighting for, they are human, she thought. Even the children of the Taliban, I would never want them to experience what I have experienced.*

Soon, she would leave Afghanistan. She didn't know if and when she would be able to return. Distanced from the country she loved, she would continue to fight for the

law that couldn't bring her brother back, or her gentle father, but that would save others the same losses.

She thought of the Afghan proverb that instructs one to “do good things, and put it on the river” — “*Nakiku dah dariah bindahs.*” Do good things without asking for compensation, because the river will take them onward in the flow of its continuity. The water goes on and on — it doesn't stop. The proverb invites one to be a part of this, always like a river, able to embrace acts of goodness without expectation and instead to join its onward current as part of a greater journey.

Najla became sleepy, the threats now fading in her mind as she drifted. *They cannot stop me*, she thought. *It will continue after I'm gone, of course. If they kill me, someone else will take my place, the same way I took the place of others who came before me.* She was a part of the *dariah* now, the river, a part of the life that continues beyond body and individual, and into the most ancient of things.

### **CONVERSATION WITH NAJLA AYUBI**

*The following is an edited transcript of select interviews between Najla Ayubi and her peace writer, Gabrielle Clifford, during the 2015 Women PeaceMakers residency.*

#### **What strategies do you use to speak out in your culture?**

In my culture, normally when I see someone who's angry and that they're making a wrong decision, in most of the cases I make them my friends first. You have to talk to people first, and if they don't listen to you then try a little bit more. Most of the time people don't know what they're doing, they don't get that what they're doing is wrong. You have to talk to them and find out what some of the issues are that they're having.

For instance, in many cases when I was harassed in the street, I would stop those guys and say "Hi, can we talk for a moment?" even though I didn't know them. I ask, with a smiling face not an angry face, "Do you think that this is good, what you did?" Most of the time they will even say, "I'm sorry, I did not understand." You start communicating and you start talking to them and leading them to see that this is not the right thing to do, particularly the schoolboys and at university.

Sometimes when I really get angry, of course I don't. But if you get angry you add another kind of pressure. You put another type of layer to the confrontation that he may do later to you or to others.

There are other ways that I use, like making alliances with people who can support you in the community. It's strategic to have the alliance or friendship or connection with the decision-making parties so as to influence them later on when they're making any type of decision.

#### **How did your social activism shift more toward gender equality?**

My perspective changed when I started as a judge because I saw how the laws were affecting the women differently than men. Even yesterday, I was reflecting on how I'm viewed as socially incomplete. You are seen as half of a man in Afghanistan. From a Sharia perspective, two women witnesses count as one male witness. Yesterday I was so mad internally, thinking, *how this can be?* When I started as a judge I thought, *how can I implement such a law that brings inequality to the system?*

For example, if you're a woman divorcing and you have kids, you have to choose between the property and the kids. And that's on the condition that she's not going to marry anybody else. But if she's going to remarry, then the custody automatically goes to the husband, and even if she doesn't, once the kids are past a certain age it automatically goes to the husband anyway.

#### **At the time of Safa's case [described in the story "Theories are Beautiful ..."], how many cases involved bribery?**

At that time maybe 30 to 40 percent. But now it's 100 percent, unfortunately. Giving or receiving a bribe at that time was a shame. There's not as much shame now because people have gotten used to it, because of the conflict and the destruction of the system.

**What other ways did you see that overlap of social injustice and legal injustice in your position?**

I could see that in many cases, particularly for me because I was sitting at the decision table. You see the number of men that are around you, and most of the time people listen to them because they're the majority, first of all, and second because they are socially powerful — because they have the space and the influence on the people to listen. Most of the time when we were sitting on the jury, I could see that my voice, even being a judge, was not reaching to the level that I expected a judge to be reaching.

**How did your experiences of war and conflict shift you into fighting for gender equality?**

My personal experiences of losing members of the family was a big shift. First of all, it was so difficult for us. These people could take away my father easily, and then I and Najiba were out of a job. If we hadn't had some skills we would have been on the street begging. When you travel, particularly during the war, you have to have a male member of the family to accompany you. So many things are involved: not only the security, but the social restrictions.

In the conflict era it was double for women. On the one hand, the man is in charge of the house, responsible to provide shelter, food and dress for women, and when the conflict came they were in charge of keeping the women down [hidden] as well. On the other hand during the conflict, there's nothing to control the men, because half the population now has a gun. They're also under the pressure of fighting this group. They had anger released on them in the fighting, and then release it on somebody else — sometimes their wives at home. This is how it works.

**What do you want people to know about your country?**

I want people to know that there are not only troublemakers. There are people who want to live like a human. They want to act like a human. They are human by nature. But in most of the cases they've been manipulated by the arms, by the people creating these armed conflicts — these are the minority. They're not the face of Afghanistan. They're not the majority of people of Afghanistan, who don't want all of these brutalities.

**What do you want the people of Afghanistan to know?**

To any problem there are solutions. And the solution is us, the people, because I don't want to wait for somebody else to come and bring that solution to me if I can make it. If I am able to do that by a little bit of effort, if I can make it, then I should not wait for others to come. We are living and our lives continue, and we have to make the efforts to try and make life better, our environment better for others and for us and for our children.

**Why did you choose the stories that you told in these narratives?**

Because for me — and I tell this to the students also — as much as you face problems and challenges, you became stronger. Even from childhood, each of us as a human goes through all of these difficulties or challenges when we come into this world. But some people take it and keep it as the weakest part and they sit back.

But I want to take it as a challenge and move on. In most of my experiences, I never saw only one aspect as being the victim, but I saw also another side of me that was empowered and powerful and motivated and encouraged. If you're in the role of playing the victim you never move on. That's not in my personality. This is not acceptable for me to be always in the survival mode or in the victim mode. You have to find ways and solutions of how you can move forward.

For example, I see what's going on in my province now and I was in that situation many times. You feel you are the one that has to go. It doesn't matter that you will not be sleeping. The part that matters is how you can help others. I never want people to experience the things that I experienced.

**Are there any justice processes in place for the jihadists?**

No, because about 65 to 70 percent of our Parliament is jihadist. When they came into power they passed an amnesty law for themselves.

**Is there any international intervention into justice processes that could be successful, such as war tribunals?**

Criminals of the war or maybe the war against humanity, most of them are now in Afghanistan and they're hiding. Nobody can do anything because we don't have a strong system in place to organize the things that would be needed for the justice. It's not the international community that can do that.

We have a conflict mapping report, done by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission in 2014. It was done, it was collected, but there is high-level pressure from these jihadists who are saying, "If you publish this we will fall into another civil war and we will go back to the mountains." Because each of them are named, the big ones, in the report.

Then the international community thinks that they have invested in Afghanistan so many years, how can you just let it go by publishing this report? So there is pressure against reporting or creating the kind of reporting that would be needed to bring justice.

**Does the international community see weeding out corruption as a priority to prevent future conflicts?**

They see, but they don't have control over it. For instance, these warlords who were named in the report, they said that they will boycott the government, go to the mountains, and start attacking human rights. They don't care about the system; they go by themselves. It's a lack of rule of law, and lack of enough strong government institutions in place. We don't have the capacity to do that.

The international community, of course, doesn't like to bring up the issue that may affect their investment in Afghanistan, and how they have to report back to their own people. There aren't people in the streets in Afghanistan saying that they're following the government and how they spend their money. Because the warlords are not under the pressure of their own people, they just do what they will.

At the same time, the protection is not there. For instance, if I'm going to speak on one part of this report, I'm not sure whether I will be protected by the government institutions. There's no trust. And that's why most of the people don't act.

### **What is your philosophy on continuing this work?**

When you're living in that type of environment and circumstances during the war, you don't think that it can be continuous. And it shouldn't be continuous, because there are so many other ways that you can go and find a solution. We develop discussions, talks or compromise. I'm not saying to compromise fundamental issues, but there are so many: I can compromise myself to wear this burqa — if that's truly for the benefit of the country, I would do that because then the future is not in fighting and not in revenge.

It's important because even though I am in so much pain in my heart, and always you have to carry your pain with you, you cannot do anything wrong or take action that can harm generations and generations.

As much as I got pain from the people who hurt me, my family and my people, they gave me more courage to work to fight against them with logic, to help them. I can help them. Maybe they don't understand. I can help them understand. This is humanity. It's what differentiates us from animals, because otherwise we can be animals. Animals are without logic when they're fighting each other.

That's why I look at how I can help even these people who did that to me and my family. Maybe I don't know their context. What is in their mind? That is how you become a peacemaker. I noticed so many people saying that it is strange: *Why are you putting yourself in this type of position?* But I don't have another choice. If I'm not doing anything, I feel useless.

You have to live for today. Tomorrow will come definitely. For me, today's important. I know my past is important because it drives my today, because I have to work on whatever happened yesterday. But live for today, and then tomorrow will definitely bring you something else.

**BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER —**  
**GABRIELLE CLIFFORD**

Gabrielle Clifford holds a BA (with honors) in global studies, socioeconomics and politics from the University of California at Santa Barbara, and two post-graduate certificates: one in sustainable business practices from the University of California at San Diego Extended Studies, and the other in impact investing from the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Her background is in international relations, conflict resolution and environmental sustainability.

Clifford has lived and studied abroad in Asia, Central America and Europe, including graduate studies at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland. As part of this program she served as a therapeutic facilitator at San Diego Youth Services for at-risk and underserved cross-cultural youth in San Diego. She has worked as a published freelance writer for 12 years, from technical writing to creative narratives, and currently works as a corporate sustainability consultant in San Diego. Clifford is passionate about the relationship between environmental sustainability and grassroots international sustainable development in the context of peacebuilding.



**JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE**  
**at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies**

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

**ENDNOTES**

[1] A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.