

**The Peggy Chapman-Andrews  
First Novel Award 2014**

**1ST PRIZE**

**Swimming Pool Hill**

by Caroline Chisholm

*'Man lives by measuring and he is measured by nothing. Not even by himself.'* Antonio  
Porchia, *Voices*

## Chapter One

**Sangatte, June 2004**

It was after midnight when I saw him, the man who came out of the sea. I walked with Ghulam through the shanty town of tents littered amongst the dunes to the beach, and we kept walking along the dark-tarred sand until the orange haze of Calais sunk low on the skyline. A trail of moonlight laid a shimmering path over the Channel, as if the sea had parted for us to cross, but that night it lit the way for another. On the horizon I could see a small fishing boat and in its sights the man swimming, moving his arms so slowly in the water that for a long while he seemed not to get any closer to the shore. At last he rose from the waves, wading through the shallow surf.

'Wait here,' Ghulam kicked off his shoes and ran towards the water's edge. The swimmer thrust out his hand defensively as if he might strike Ghulam, and although there was no contact between them, Ghulam fell to his knees and bowed as if in prayer. The man staggered on to a rocky outcrop and stood up on the loose stones for a moment raising his arms, before turning towards the open water and swimming back out to sea.

I helped Ghulam to his feet. 'What did he say to you?'

'He said, "Don't touch me."'

'You were only trying to help.'

'No, you don't understand. "Don't touch me," he whispered it. 'It's what Isa said to Mary at the resurrection.'

'It does seem a strange thing to say.'

'Don't you see Adeela, it's a sign.'

I often wonder if two people ever bear witness to the same things; that perhaps the act of looking changes what we see. Whatever we saw that night, I know one thing. Ghulam was right about it being a sign. It was a sign for me.

The Channel was waiting for us when we arrived: Calais was where the land ran dry. On a clear day you could see England across the straits; as if someone had drawn a line of chalk to separate the sea from the sky. I liked to trace my finger along it because it reminded me of the chalk I drew with when I was a teacher. I'd never seen the sea beyond a few glimpses of the water's edge as we passed by the land locked Sea of Marmara in Istanbul on our long journey from Kabul. In those weeks I seemed to breathe through sound and smell, hiding in the container trucks and trains that followed the route of the old Silk Road, through Iran and Turkey and on through the Balkans and Northern Italy to France. I lived for weeks in those boxes, in the dark and the quiet; the huddle of men, their low voices whispering and with Ghulam beside me. We listened always for the guards through the checkpoints and borders, and the piercing shearing of brakes that might mark an abrupt end to our journey, or announce our arrival in a new city.

In all that time of travelling with Ghulam I knew little more than this: he was 28 - three years older than me – he'd studied engineering and that he'd converted to Christianity. I guessed his faith might have been the reason he left, though he wouldn't say and spoke only cryptically of his past. Instead, I learned to know him by observing the way he moved; how he would pace as we waited at each stop; the way he ate quickly, holding his food close to his mouth as a squirrel does; how his long fringe was always getting in his eyes, though he didn't like it cut. I wondered how Allah could have drawn him with so much animation but to have left him mute. So I studied Ghulam to fill the spaces he wouldn't inhabit, to build a history for him from the handful of clues he dropped.

We made a pact that first day we met in Kabul, to travel as if we were husband and wife. Perhaps our closeness, the easy comfort with which we ate and slept was not authentic, though our silences could be mistaken for a marriage. But it kept the other men at a distance, as Ghulam said it would. In looking at him as a husband for so long, perhaps I fooled myself more than anyone, that I did love him as a wife should. But I didn't know who it was I loved. Unlike the union my father arranged for me, I'd entered this marriage of sorts willingly, consenting to its terms with so little resistance.

We met Reza on our first night, down by the docks where aid workers were serving soup and bread to dozens of other migrants. I joined the long queue of men behind him, and watched as he rocked gently from side to side as we waited, as if lulling himself to sleep. He must have felt my eyes on him because he turned around and spoke to me in Dari.

'You're a long way from Kabul,' he said.

'Not far enough yet.'

He shook his head, 'This is no place for a woman.'

'Then I should feel right at home.'

'It's ok,' Ghulam said, stepping forward. 'She's with me.' He held out his hand.

'Reza. It's good to meet you my friend. Your wife has a quick tongue, but I don't mind if she sharpens it on me.'

'I'm not...'

'Adeela isn't feeling well tonight. We've had a long journey.'

'Come then my friends, we must eat together.'

At the head of the queue a tall Indian man stood ladling soup into polystyrene cups, chatting all the while without breaking his rhythm. He spoke in English with a strong accent.

'Ghulam, Adeela, meet Kiru. Kiru is from South Africa. He's almost one of us – running from his own country. The only difference is he's happy to put down roots here.'

Kiru laughed, 'I still love my country from afar. The wind blew my roots clean a long time ago, so they can take anywhere. Home is where I'm needed, and for now that's here. I see you've been introduced to our resident escape artist.'

'I hadn't got round to that,' Reza said. 'But it's true, six times unlucky.'

'He's the only refugee to have a customs cell named in his honour,' Kiru said.

'It saves them cleaning it,' Reza said. 'But my time will come.'

'Do you have anywhere to stay tonight?' Kiru asked.

'I will show them where to camp,' Reza said. 'You must come with me. I insist.'

Reza led us through the dark industrial wasteland of the docks to the outskirts of the town, where makeshift tents and huts made out of blue tarpaulin and driftwood littered the dunes along the coastline. The camp was quiet, as most people were taking shelter from the mizzling rain; just a few men gathered in small groups, talking and smoking as they huddled over the embers of a fire. There were hundreds of footprints in the sand, as if a great exodus of people had swept through the camp, casting their shadows as they fled. There was always that sense in the camp of passing through, but it wasn't people passing through, it was time.

'Welcome to Sangatte,' Reza said. 'It's mainly Afghans here. You'll find it's much like home. There are people who are decent, and those who would slit your throat for an afghani. We're mostly left to our own devices, but the gendarmerie is kind enough to pay us a visit from time to time. You'll get to know them soon enough. We should sleep now, and in the morning, I'll show you where you can get some materials to build your own shelter.'

'Ghulam's good at building things,' I said.

'Ah, a man who works with his hands,' Reza slapped Ghulam on the back. 'We have much use for you around here.'

'I was an engineer, not an architect,' Ghulam said.

'Here, you will learn that you can be anything,' Reza said.

Reza's shelter was on the edge of the camp, under a wind-bowed beech tree. It was solidly made, with a door nailed together from wooden pallets and lined with felt and moss.

'How long did it take you to make?' Ghulam asked.

'It's a work in progress,' he said. 'It helps to fill the hours. The only thing you don't need to make here is time.'

'Is there somewhere we can wash?' I asked.

'There's a hammam beyond the dunes that stretches as far as you can see. You'll find its waters are very refreshing.'

'There are no facilities here?'

'They closed down the Red Cross Centre two years ago. The government thought if they stopped helping us, people would stop coming here, but still we come. They round us up every couple of weeks, and like cattle we are counted and catalogued and set to fend for ourselves again.'

'Do you have any relatives in the camp?'

'My cousin was here, he made it to England before I came. I have no friends, I trust only myself. You have each other, that is enough.'

'But you've been kind to us,' I said.

'Trust no one. You'll learn that in Sangatte we are invisible, and if you are invisible then the things that you do cannot be seen.'

We rose early to wash our clothes, following a procession of bedraggled men through the dawn mist to the beach. They stripped to their waists and ran into the sea, yelping with the cold. I crouched low in the surf to clean, making myself less conspicuous. I recognised a man from the journey; he looked over at me for a long time and nodded, though I wasn't sure if it was a greeting or if he was pointing me out to his companion.

I wrung out my clothes and left the beach with Ghulam. 'It's not as far as it looks,' I said. 'Reza says it's just 21 miles at its shortest point. That's just a few miles further down the beach.'

'It doesn't matter how far it is if we can't get on a boat,' Ghulam said. 'We can't walk on water Adeela.'

We spent the day gathering materials for the shelter. I went with Ghulam to the beach to scour for driftwood and other treasures the sea might muster. Reza left us hunting and returned a couple of hours later with several plastic sheets and a roll of felt.

'I see your supplier was in,' Ghulam said.

'Luckily for you, he was out.'

Ghulam began work on the shelter. 'He will not work any faster while we are watching,' Reza said. 'Here, come with me, I will show you something.'

We walked up from the dunes and across the main road into Calais, where a large area of wasteland was enclosed by a high wire fence, with just the steel skeleton of a large building giving form to the landscape.

'What do you see?' Reza asked.

'A building site?'

Reza smiled. 'They're not building, they're cleansing. This is all that remains of the Red Cross Centre. First they destroy the flesh, then the bones.'

\_\_\_\_\_ 'We still have our faith.'

'We?' Reza said. 'Don't assume you speak for others. They know that many of us come here with our spirits already crushed. If yours remains intact then you must guard it ferociously.'

Ghulam worked quickly in the time we'd been away and by the end of the afternoon, he'd built the frame of our shelter. Another box to contain us, I thought.

'Are you rebuilding the Darul Aman palace?' Reza asked.

Ghulam smiled, 'I don't intend to stay that long.'

‘Yes, yes, we are not building a new city,’ Reza said.

I would find it wasn’t a new city in any sense. Though we travelled only with what we could carry, the camp was filled with the ghosts we’d left behind. They were waiting for us, because the dead are always ahead of you and where they lead you must follow.

Though there was little to do, we followed the same routine each day, walking along the beach in the early morning to collect driftwood, as if the tide had delivered it to order. Sometimes I’d pick wild herbs and grasses and Ghulam made wind-chimes out of old nails and pieces of tin discarded around the camp. He was always happiest when he was making things. It was the same when he talked about the new life that waited for him in England. That it was something tangible, as if he could mould it out of clay.

In the evenings we sat with a fire outside the hut. We talked always of what lay ahead. The past, even the events of the day, seemed to find no place in our conversation. Reza would join us and tell us tales of people from the camp who made it to England. They were always doing something typically English, like playing cricket and drinking tea out of china cups or talking incessantly about the weather. But he couldn’t have known if they made it, because no one ever wrote. If anyone was lucky enough to make the crossing through the tunnel, or by sea, they went to ground. The only certainty was that they didn’t come back.

Reza was the only other Afghan in the camp who made time to talk to Ghulam, and I wondered if it was because of his faith. Christianity was an underground religion in our country, one which you had to wear on the inside. When I think of Ghulam praying to Isa back home in Kabul, I think of him as literally under the ground, like a rabbit digging burrows. If enough burrows are dug, then the ground will fall away. But the greater danger is to the digger, whose tunnel can collapse at any time, with barely a dip registering on the surface.

They came for us at dawn, like Reza said they would, the gendarmerie in their midnight blue uniforms, with truncheons and guns slung from their belts. There must have been two hundred migrants in the camp, so they marched from tent to tent, picking out the new faces for interrogation. I was herded into the back of a van with Ghulam and eight other men, wedged together on narrow benches. As we pulled away I watched the soft rays of the morning light filter through the small barred windows of the van and for a moment I was inside my burqa again, seeing the world through a grille.

We waited in the bright strip-light of the reception room, as they processed and filed away our belongings, before coming for us, one by one.

‘You’re new,’ a tall officer with a shaven head stood in front of me. An interpreter sat in the corner of the room, repeating his words monotonously in faltering Dari. ‘Why did you come here?’

I paused to speak, but he carried on. ‘There are refugee camps in your own country, why did you not go there? There is nowhere for you to go from here.’

He fired his questions one after another, so I did as Reza told me, I lied. ‘I have family in England. They will send me money.’

‘Of course,’ the officer laughed, ‘you all do. There are more Afghans living in London than Kabul. I don’t know what you’ve been told, but no one makes it across the Channel. The ones who try come back in a coffin.’

The officer stopped pacing around the room, and sat down next to me. He sat so close I could feel his leg against mine. He took off his cap, and spoke in a low steady voice. 'They say you have books with you. You come to this country with nothing but words? Well I have some words you should hear. You think the people in that camp are your countrymen? They're rapists and murderers. You think they'll spare you because you are a good Muslim? They are savages and if you stay they will devour you. Go home, while you can.'

'I have no home,' I said.

The officer looked at the translator and made a sweeping gesture towards me. 'I don't want to see you again.'

Ghulam was waiting for me by the reception desk, 'What did they say to you?'

I shrugged, 'Welcome to France, or something along those lines.'

'Were you afraid?'

'No,' I said, though the vitriol of the officer alarmed me.

'They only have words to use against us,' Ghulam said. 'Words will not make us disappear.'

I collected my bag from the duty sergeant, 'Is this all you have?' he asked.

I checked through my things to make sure nothing was missing. 'It's all there is, it's not all I have.'

In the evening I walked with Reza to the docks to eat. Reza liked to call the aid workers 'cleaners', because they tried to clear up mess that wasn't of their own making. Kiru was always the kindest to us. 'What is it to be tonight my friends?' he would ask when he saw us, his face breaking into a smile. Of course there was never any choice, just stew with rice or soup and bread. But sometimes I would play along, 'I'll have some Mantu with Dampukht on the side.'

'I'm afraid we've just run out of that,' he'd say in return. 'You can have some of my special Shorma instead, an old Afghan recipe.' And somehow it tasted better, knowing he took the trouble to imagine it infused with our own spices. Kiru ran favours for us, much in the same way that mules smuggle drugs - at great personal risk and with little discernible profit.

'Where's Ghulam?' Kiru asked. 'He wasn't beaten up by the gendarmerie?'

'No, he's fine, he wanted to be on his own for a while.'

'Don't tell me he had another vision?' Kiru raised his arms, 'As if Jesus would waste his time in this God forsaken place.'

I smiled, 'I think it was just an ordinary man we saw.'

'You're both wrong,' he said. 'It takes a superhuman effort to make that swim. Dozens of people attempt the crossing every summer from Dover. It's the shortest route across the Channel to the Cap Gris Nez.'

'I don't know why they'd want to come here.'

‘Indeed. But they have to touch down on French soil for the crossing to count.’

‘So why was the man so fearful to be touched?’

‘Just as Islam sets out the moral code by which you must live, so there are rules for how you conquer an ocean. You must make it to clear land without any help, or the crossing will be void. You must touch France, if you like, before France touches you.’

‘If someone touched you, it wouldn’t undo the distance,’ I said. ‘It wouldn’t make it void in your heart.’

I wondered what courage it took, to stand alone before the open sea. I’d never learned to swim. When I was a child the Russians built a swimming pool on top of the biggest hill in Kabul. It looked like a snow-capped mountain in the middle of the desert. And at the end of the pool, there were three high diving boards that stepped up to the sky. They built it so that the Olympics might come to the city. But they didn’t heed the advice of our classic poet Bedil, ‘Water never travels to a high place’: the swimming pool was so far up the hill that they couldn’t get the water to climb. So no one sent an invite to the athletes and they never came. And when the pool was used again, it was not the Olympics that visited us.

## Chapter two

### Afghanistan, 1979

My birth was hailed not by a single star, but by many bright lights that burned briefly in the night sky before falling to earth. The invasion of the Russian troops - the Suvari as we called them - heralded a new era for Kabul, and I was to grow up not knowing our land under its own rule. The Suvari paved their way into Afghanistan; they built the airports where their planes would land, they laid the roads that led their troops through Kabul. They say that minutes after birth, a baby is colonized by millions of bacteria. That’s how it was for me. I took a breath of freedom, before surrendering to occupation.

My father Ahmed was a tall and broad man, with a beard so unruly it was difficult to tell if he was smiling or about to break into a rage. Instead, I learned to gauge his temper by the way his brow contracted into folds, like the furrows of a walnut shell. He used to say I looked like my mother Amina and it wasn’t meant as a compliment. My mother was slim and small; too small to bear another child safely. Hers was a lithe beauty so at odds with the homely plumpness of a typical Afghan wife. For my father, I was merely a bad omen. He would sit outside the teahouses he owned and tell any passer-by how his daughter’s birth had opened the gateway to the Suvari and closed the door to a son.

Our house was quite grand, on the third floor of an apartment block in the Wazir Akbar Khan district. In those early days we still had running water and electricity. Not for us, one of the simple mud brick dwellings in the outskirts of the city, where my mother grew up, that still bore the fingerprints of its builders. My father furnished the apartment in the style of his teahouses, or perhaps it was the other way round, with rich red Bukhara print rugs and the finest kelim cushions. The best of these were kept for the hujra, where my father entertained the businessmen and government officials who frequented his teahouses. I was only permitted to go into the hujra once a week to clean it.

On the eastern wall, hung a huge map of Kabul, with our apartment and his two teahouses marked out; the three points forming an almost perfect haft, the number seven in Dari, which was

very good luck. My father liked to point this out to all his visitors, as if luck, like a mantra, could be embedded the more times it was repeated.

When I was five, my father took another wife. Publicly my mother bore this shame with dignity, and threw her energies into giving me the kind of education poverty had denied her. -‘You won’t have to use your looks to get what you want in life,’ she’d say, for which I was secretly glad because I didn’t feel they were mine to trade. As my father’s only daughter, I could cook and clean long before I could write. Each day I would wake next to my mother and we would rise with the dawn to prepare food and wash clothes as he slept in the other bedroom with his young wife, Laila, and my two little brothers Nadir and Mateen. ‘One on the stage and one waiting in the wings,’ my father would say. Later I learned that my parents came to a pact about my education. My father would wash his hands of me until I was old enough to marry, and until then my mother was free to indulge me at her will. My education was to be her project: one that had no discernible plan but a predetermined end.

‘It will not help her to marry any better,’ my father said. ‘You don’t need to go to school to learn to run a house.’

‘They’ll be time for marriage later,’ my mother replied.

‘Look what happened to Fara,’ he’d warn. ‘You can’t say *that* was visited on her for no reason.’

Fara was my father’s sister. She’d trained in medicine and worked as a doctor at the Charsad Bestar Hospital. It was difficult to know what *that* applied to – the fact that Fara never married, or that she died young, of breast cancer. For my father who was always in robust health, disease was a personal slight by Allah himself, a punishment for flouting the natural order of things. A lingering death, like cancer, was most shameful of all. ‘Allah will take you when you’ve breathed enough air,’ he would say. As I was never sure how much ‘enough’ was, I would often practise holding my breath for a minute or longer, in the hope I might preserve some air for when it was really needed.

Fara died when I was three – at the very age when I might have hoped to remember her. She exists in my mind devoid of colour or smell or movement; a black and white photograph taken at my parent’s wedding. A memory that is and isn’t mine. Her pink silk dress bleached white by the film, she stands like a defiant bride in waiting, as if it is she, not my mother, who will follow her vows to the grave. After my prayers each night I would often think of Fara and ask her things that puzzled me, such as why caterpillars don’t need to eat after they’ve changed into moths and how many times I would need to hold my breath to make sure Allah didn’t take me before I was ready. I would imagine that I could hear her voice in reply, but it never formed itself into words, just a distant note that faded the longer I listened for it.

At school I made friends easily, after I learned that the feeding habits of moths was not a subject the other girls held in much regard, whereas my mother’s gossip from the hammam, which never much interested me, was highly prized. The latest scandal, or at least the kind of scandal that my mother considered suitable for my ears, almost always revolved around dissecting the fallout from a marriage proposal. Even at that age, I knew that a proposal was thinly gift-wrapped; a rehearsal of all the jealousy, shame and betrayal you might experience in the duration of a marriage itself. It was an arrangement to be made in the best interests of both families, its occasion declared to the bride-to-be like an announcement in the newspaper, with silence being the terms of acceptance. But that was not the case with Fara, my mother told me, though she received many proposals. Fara wouldn’t stay quiet to please a husband; Fara, who could only be silenced by cancer. ‘If you make an enemy of your allies, you’ll be alone in battle,’ my father liked to say, as if revelling in

the memory of her struggle. And after Fara died, he took her dowry and poured it into his teahouses, and he watched it stew along with leaves of green tea, which he served to the soldiers he cursed her for helping.

When I began my first English lessons, my mother took me to an old bookshop in Kabul where I was to choose three books to last me until the next school year. It was cool and dark inside the shop, a fan in the corner of the room whipped up the dust from the counter. There were more books than I'd ever seen; row upon row of brown and green leather spines ascended out of reach, their pages turned to the wall.

'We have some good books for children,' the bookseller turned and lifted a couple of titles from the dusty shelves.

'No thank you, they're not the ones I want.' In much the same way my mother bought clothes for me, I would chose books that I could grow into. 'Can I look myself?'

The bookseller eyed me for a minute. 'I think I might still be of some assistance.' He reached behind the counter and produced a wooden stool.

I worked my way along each shelf until I found the books that piqued my interest: an Afghan-English dictionary and a world Encyclopedia.

My mother picked up an extravagantly bound book with gold tinted pages, 'How much is this one?'

The bookseller whispered to her under his breath.

'Oh,' she said. 'Is it real gold?'

'No, but there's treasure inside,' he said, 'some of the greatest words ever written.'

'Can I see?' I asked.

My mother handed the book to me. 'The collected works of William Shakespeare,' I read it out loud, 'Can I have it too Mama?'

'It's very expensive,' she turned to the bookseller with the same pleading look she used on my father.

So it was thanks to my mother's Magpie vision that I found Shakespeare and because she was easy on the eye, that I took his plays home. From that day, it was always England that held me in its spell; the tales of kings and queens, poets and paupers, called to me like the light of a fading star. And it seemed that I could no more reach out to it, than I could step into the past, but in my dreams I painted England's green and pleasant land over the canvas of our desert landscape.

After my chores each day, I would wait for my cousin Raouf to arrive to escort me to school. Raouf was many things to me in those days: a companion, a chaperone, a captive audience. He was wiry and full of nervous energy like a street dog, always roaming, always dirty. Raouf was a year younger, but he looked up to me as perhaps a brother might. Not my own brothers, who would quickly learn their place in the family usurped my own standing regardless of age. What I remember most about Raouf as a child was that he seemed to have no concept of boundaries - though a swift clip around the ear meant he was never in doubt when he stepped outside them. Perhaps I'm being unkind to

Raouf and maybe it was as much my influence as his youth, but I wonder if I was responsible for breaking down his inhibitions in much the same way that alcohol is used to loosen the tongue.

There was much to be discovered around the city, though we were careful to front each of our missions with its own cover story. Sometimes we would take a longer route through the dusty streets on the way home from school. But it was better to explore on the days when we ran errands for our Nana, Bushra. She still lived in the single story house where she'd been born and my mother and her sisters had grown up; where the sweet smell of Roht bread seemed to ooze through the walls. I sometimes imagined the whole family living in just those two rooms, huddled together to sleep in the small living room, its floor cushions doubling as pillows until the muezzin's call for namaz ushered in the day.

Nana was small and slightly hunched over and she always dressed in black linen, as a mark of respect to her dead husband, the grandfather I'd never met. She became a little more hunched with each year, 'Allah is drawing me closer to the grave,' she would say without a hint of melancholy. Nana was unmoved by the Russian occupation because she'd lived through six regimes. Born at the cusp between independence and civil war, she'd known Kabul as a monarchy, a democracy and a republic. Her fondest memories were for the early years of Zahir Shah's reign, who kept the Soviets at arm's length and Afghanistan neutral during the Second World War. 'We were at peace, when the rest of the world was at war,' she used to tell me with pride, and her eyes would dim and lose focus, as if she was gazing into her own mind to recall the memory.

Even Zahir Shah drew Nana's ire when he invited the worst kind of bad luck on the country by putting his image on a coin, when it should have been reserved for the words of Allah alone. To Nana it was no surprise that Shah's blasphemy resulted in the Russian invasion, only that it took them a full 18 years to get round to it. But the main reason Nana wasn't fazed by the Russians was because she'd ceased really living in the present, something I'm ashamed that Raouf and I exploited. For Nana, time was speeding up as she was slowing down; the spaces between the routines in her day grew narrower, so that it seemed to her that she was always busy cleaning, praying or eating. So Raouf and I were free to fill her empty spaces with our expeditions, as long as we made sure to steer clear of my father's teahouses and remembered to bring something back for Nana.

Once, when we'd been stalking leopard geckos at Babur's Gardens near the old city walls, we forgot to buy anything on our return.

'Let's see what you've got for me,' she insisted.

I elbowed Raouf in the ribs and he emptied his pockets which contained only a stone he'd saved for throwing at the crows along the river bank.

'A rock?' she frowned.

'It's not just any rock Nana,' Raouf said. He paused, 'It's a meteorite that fell from the sky. It was once a bright burning star, flying through space. We got it from the market. They said it would bring good luck.'

Nana was as superstitious as she was religious. She eyed the sandy coloured stone, which couldn't be told apart from any other stone you could pick up off the street.

'Was it expensive?' she asked.

'We got a good price for it,' I said, and handed back three of the four afghanis she'd given me.

On our way home I gave the other coin to Raouf. He smiled and tossed it high into the air and it dazzled in the sun as it span. He caught it on the way down, and flipped it onto the back of his hand. It was the obverse side, the afghan coat of arms. 'That's means I'll have good fortune,' Raouf said. But I sensed Raouf had already used up his luck, because it was the only time his storytelling saved us from trouble, rather than digging us deeper into it.

I did well at school, though in those early days I had little reference for comparison. In my second year our teacher, Rashida, left halfway through the term to get married. I heard from my mother that she accepted a proposal from her cousin whose wife had died, leaving him with four small children under the age of seven. 'She's 29 with no dowry, only family would offer such an act of kindness,' my father said. So after eight years of teaching, Rashida was to swap a life of seeding young minds for a life of feeding hungry mouths. I didn't think I'd miss her, as I wasn't one of her favourites. I asked too many questions. There was nothing wrong with asking a question, but you had to be sure the answer could be found in Rashida's 'book'. This could be tricky, as Rashida's book wasn't a reference manual, it was in her head. 'Everything I need to know is up here,' she would say, tapping on her forehead as if jolting loose the layers of data she stashed there. Rashida consulted her book, much in the same way I called on my Encyclopedia, but it wasn't full of interesting facts like how many Everests would fill the mid-Atlantic trench; instead it was packed with multiplication tables and classic Arabic grammar.

Rashida became very uncomfortable if you asked a question which wasn't covered in her book. She would begin to flush and stammer and rub her palms together. I told my father about Rashida's book and he said, 'There's only one book worth keeping in your mind and that's the Koran'. But I rarely saw my father read the Koran, though he professed to know it by heart.

'Muhammad said that everyone should be educated,' I told him once.

'He said no such thing.'

I showed him the hadith, 'Seeking knowledge is a duty on every Muslim.'

'It says Muslim, it doesn't say women.'

'But women are Muslims too.'

'They are not the Muslims Muhammad means,' he said.

### Chapter three

After the fire died each night, we would follow the same ritual before sleep. I would pray to the East, and after I was done, Ghulam would kneel on his blanket with his head bowed, gently whispering his prayers. He had such a rich tone to his voice, that sometimes I would be carried away on it, drifting towards Isa. It wasn't often that Ghulam and I talked about faith. Maybe it was because it was a part of what we were running from. But if we argued, it was always about Isa, and what it meant to follow him, because Ghulam believed in it quite literally, and I didn't think that's what Isa intended at all.

There was one book we shared that was a neutral ground between us. *Voices* was a small volume of aphorisms, that I'd found in the old bookshop in Kabul. An Italian immigrant in Argentina,

it was Porchia's only published work and he was hardly known outside his adopted country. Sometimes I would read about the life he lived in solitary and on the fringes of poverty. How in his later years, he would help a woman he once loved, a prostitute, who was sick. But mostly we would sit quietly before bed and choose a page to read to each other.

'This one's perfect for today, with all the rain we've had.' I said. "'Mud when it leaves the mud, stops being mud".'

'That's true,' said Ghulam. 'Here, mud becomes labour instead.'

I laughed, 'My labour, with all the washing I do.'

'Pass it to me,' he flicked through the pages, "'If I did not believe that the sun looked at me a little bit, I would not look at it".'

'Perhaps it looks at you a lot,' I said.

He turned the page, "'The flower that you hold in your hands was born today and already it is as old as you are.'" Ghulam looked over to the corner of the tent where I'd placed a bunch of wild jasmine, bound up with a reed of grass. 'We're both dead tomorrow,' he said.

Ghulam settled onto the floor beside me and curled into a foetal position, facing the opposite way. I waited until I could hear him relax into a light sleep and I lay still and listened to his shallow breathing, willing that he would remain there for a little longer. But as usual he woke in the early hours, sweating and shouting. I'd stopped trying to comfort him because he was always so disorientated and confused, as if he had no memory of the nightmare. Sometimes he would imagine that I'd woken him from his sleep and I'd long given up protesting; it seemed as if Ghulam's terrible dreams only lived in me.

'Wait,' he cried out, 'Wait!'

'It's ok,' I said, gently shaking him awake.

'What is it?' he asked. 'What's wrong?'

'It was a bad dream,' I said. 'You can go back to sleep now.'

The things he said in his sleep were always entreaties, to stop, to wait, always to wait. I didn't know what he was trying to hold back, but I was sure that whatever made him call out in the dark was the same thing that dwelt in his silences during the day.

'Are you ok?' he asked.

'I'm fine, I don't remember what it was.'

It was then that I felt his arm gently circle my waist and rest down. I was surprised by how heavy it was, as if his hand held the weight of his whole body. In all those weeks we travelled, Ghulam never touched me like that. It was his idea, from the beginning, to tell people we were together. He didn't think it was safe for me to be around the other men, if they knew I was on my own. And after that I wasn't on my own. Ghulam was always there, guarding me as a dog might - faithfully, possessively, asking for nothing in return. But he never touched me as a lover would. We lay there without moving for a long time, as if by reaching out to me Ghulam had cast us in that moment, closer than we'd ever been but still an arm's length apart.

Ghulam was already up when I woke and said nothing of the night before, but I could still feel his hand on my side, like it had left an imprint. It was a warm day with a gentle breeze from the North, so we walked along the coast to the Cap, where we'd seen the swimmer two weeks before. I followed the meandering trail of the high tide mark, inspecting the strange harvest the sea had borne to the beach. The plastic bottles and mangled tree trunks and solitary shoes, always rooted upright, as if the wearer had left in haste. Ghulam liked to walk close to the water's edge, his eyes drawn to the white strip of coastline. He was always quiet when we walked, absorbed in his thoughts, and I imagined them keeping pace with the rhythm of his stride, roaming freely along the deep stretch of sand that folded out for miles before us, with no obstacles to block their way.

We walked as far as the rocks where we'd seen the swimmer at midnight. Though I'd told Ghulam the man was a Channel swimmer, he never spoke of him as an ordinary man. It became a kind of pilgrimage we would make most days, or if the evening was clear, sometimes at night, when Ghulam would sit by the rocks and wait for the ghostly figure to emerge from the sea.

Ghulam set his bag down on the rocks, 'It's a nice day, we should go for a swim.'

'Where did you learn to swim?' I asked.

'I spent some time with my uncle in Pakistan when I was a boy.' It was as much as he'd given away for a long time.

'The only problem is I can't swim.'

'Then it's about time you learned.'

It'd been wet and windy most of the time since we arrived in France, or perhaps it seemed that way to me, coming from Kabul's long hot days and cold still nights. I'd always looked at the sea here as a barrier we had to cross, it hadn't occurred to me that it was something we could enjoy. Ghulam stopped and began to undress, folding his trousers and shirt in a neat pile over his shoes. Then he ran into the water, diving under the first wave. He emerged a few seconds later, shaking his hair and let out a cry of exhilaration. 'It's wonderful, you have to come in.'

'What about my clothes? I don't have anything to change into.'

'Just roll up your trousers, they'll dry on the way back.'

I was running out of excuses. 'Ok, but I'm only going in as far as my knees.' I hitched up my trousers as far as they would go, and left my shoes and socks on the rock next to Ghulam's.

The water was much colder than I expected. It swirled round my ankles, its scalding numbness creeping into my skin. As I waded a little further, I could feel its weight pressing down on my feet, making each step more difficult, as if gravity were clinging to me and wouldn't let go.

'This is far enough,' I said.

Ghulam waded through the water towards me, 'Just a little further. Here, take my hand.' He led me through the breakers that were racing towards the beach, and as each one peaked it swept a spray of cold, salty water in my face.

'It's calmer if you come out a bit further,' he said.

I followed him until I was up to my waist, and though I was past the breakers, the sea swelled in rising currents that raised me off my feet. I looked out towards the white cliffs in the distance and it seemed as though the space between us was much shorter than I knew it to be. And I thought of the swimmer, and how it must have appeared to him that each time he reached the horizon, it would renew itself again taking him back to his beginning.

'This is definitely far enough,' I said.

'Ok,' said Ghulam. 'I'll teach you to float. It's easy just watch me.' He leant back into the water, his feet rising to the surface and lay flat on his back. 'It's your turn now, I've got you,' he said.

I leant back, as Ghulam had, and felt the sea lift me gently, as if it were offering me up to the sky. I lay there for a while, letting the waves carry me.

'That's good, now try it the other way,' Ghulam said.

'How can I breathe if my face is in the water?'

Ghulam stood up and bent his upper body over, rotating his arms around mechanically in the air. 'You take one breath for every three strokes, like this.'

'Can't I swim without getting my face wet?' I asked.

'Not really,' he laughed. 'You'll get used to it once you get the breathing right.'

I'd found it easy to float on my back, so I thought it would be the same for my front, as long as I remembered to breathe, like Ghulam showed me. And I did remember to breathe, but it wasn't air that I inhaled, just a mouthful of sea water which made me retch.

Ghulam slapped my back until I stopped coughing. 'That was a good start.'

'I only managed two strokes,' I said, 'I swallowed more water than I swam through.'

'You'll go further next time,' he said. 'Swimming is like faith. When you believe it's possible, everything else will follow.'

While Ghulam swam up and down in lengths that were measured only by his own limits, I practised floating in the water. I lowered myself down until my shoulders sunk below the surface, and lifted my feet off the silt at the bottom. And I found I could keep afloat, if I circled my arms quickly enough, as if gathering the sea to my breast, its cold embrace making me breathe in short, fast gasps. That's how I learned to swim, by treading water.

My trousers dragged heavily on the long way back, the wet fabric chaffing against my legs as we walked. As we left the beach, Ghulam turned to look out to the coastline once more.

'We'll be there soon,' I said. 'We'll walk along the beach in Dover and look over here and remember this time.'

'I won't be looking this way,' Ghulam said.

'You had a nightmare last night,' I said. 'Do you remember?'

'I remember it was cold, but I don't think that was a dream.'

‘Was it about your family?’

‘I have no family,’ he said, and then he turned to me and smiled, ‘You’re my family now’.

And in a way I was, though we were a family without history. Although Ghulam shared little with me, I would often tell him about the girls I used to teach, or the expeditions I would take around Kabul as a child. He especially liked to hear about Raouf, as I think he saw something of himself in my young cousin. They were not unlike – Ghulam was lean and athletic, as Raouf might have looked at his age, and they shared the same restless green eyes. When I talked about places I know he must have been, I would look at Ghulam for some flicker of recognition, as if from the expression on his face, I could attempt to reconstruct a past for him, as I was telling mine. But it made Ghulam uneasy if I dwelt too long on the details, so I learned never to fix my stories too clearly in time or space. Instead, I would speak of them as if they were always happening; that in the process of retelling itself, I was like a visitor checking in to see how they were getting on and finding all was fine.

Reza would often join us after supper at the docks. He thought of us, as the others did, as husband and wife, and we never corrected him. When Reza was with us, it sometimes felt like I was back in my father’s house, listening to conversations that were sealed away out of reach, where I would no more think to interrupt, than I would try to talk to a person on the television. Even when I’d ask Reza a question, he would turn to Ghulam instead. ‘It’s just his way, don’t be offended,’ Ghulam would say. ‘It takes time for some people to let go of the old ways. Remember, this is a new beginning for all of us. And beginnings don’t have a past.’ But it seemed to me that while we were waiting for our new beginning to start, the old ways were growing in its place like weeds.

Reza promised to let us know when we could join the next shipment going to England, because he knew all the fixers. We’d all be in England before the summer was out he said. And while we waited, Reza would tell us about the attempts he’d made, embellishing a little each time. After several repetitions, it was difficult to distinguish one attempt from another, and I think of his stories like one epic journey, beginning and ending in the same place. According to Reza, there was practically a scientific theory behind choosing the right vehicle, though he had not yet mastered it.

‘Where the lorries are from makes all the difference,’ he said. ‘It’s easier to board the ones from Eastern Europe, but they’re more likely to be stopped. You don’t want to pick a big haulage company either because the bigger the name, the greater the security. And no solid containers, because there’s only a limited amount of air. One delay and you’ll not come out alive. The ones with plastic covers are the best. They can be easily unclipped, or cut and patched behind you, providing the driver isn’t too vigilant. But before you get onto a lorry, you have to get into the docks. You’ve seen the fencing and the patrols. It’s easier to get through in another vehicle. That’s the first hurdle. I’ve been stopped twice in the docks, the first time we didn’t even get out of the van, and you’ve still paid your money upfront. It’s best to go in a small group, but you don’t always know how many of you they’ll be. The fixers get greedy. Six at the most, otherwise someone always gives you away. When you’re going through the customs check, you have to put a plastic bag over your head and hold your breath. They’ve got all kinds of high tech equipment to use against you – carbon dioxide monitors and heat sensors, and the dogs to sniff you out.’

‘What happened the last time?’ Ghulam asked. ‘How did you get caught?’

‘There was this boy,’ said Reza. ‘He was barely a teenager, and as soon as we were shut inside the back he started hyperventilating and someone tried to stop him by putting the bag over his head. But that just made him worse. He was making this terrible wheezing sound as the plastic was sucked in and out of his mouth. I was sure he was going to suffocate, so I pulled it off, and then the

others started turning on me. We didn't even hear the police until they sliced open the side. Two of the men spilled through the cover backwards, like they'd been cut from the belly of a cow. Then we were carted off to customs. You still have to be processed, even if you don't get anywhere. Sometimes the magistrates keep you detained for a week or more, especially if they've seen you before. I was in the cells for a month the last time.'

'What became of the boy?' I asked.

'He was a minor,' Reza said. 'He should have been taken in, but he didn't have any papers. He was from the country; I don't think he even knew his own birthday.'

'Did he make it to England?'

Reza looked down. 'After I was released I looked for him. Maybe he made it.'

But the boy was never in Reza's tales of England. He never drank tea out of china cups, or watched cricket, debating the vagaries of the English weather.

'Perhaps he went home,' I said, though none of us believed it.

There were some people in the camp who came from countries like Bangladesh. They'd sell their homes and farms and spend all the money on the journey. They were in this no man's land because they'd been promised a better life and couldn't afford to return. But if you came to the camp from Afghanistan it was different, there was no going back. And with the coast of England in your sights, there was always hope. Because when you've left all that you have behind, you're not left with nothing. You still have your dreams, but your dreams become everything.

## Chapter four

Rashida getting married was fortuitous for two reasons. It meant that her cousin's children didn't become orphans when he was killed six months later fighting for the Mujahideen, and it brought Nasifa our new teacher into my life. Nasifa was the most beautiful woman I'd seen apart from my mother. She had light hazel eyes and a proud straight nose and eyebrows that darted when you asked a question in class. 'Let me have a think about that,' she'd say and if she didn't know the answer she would find it. She'd seek out for me why birds didn't live as long as mammals, 'faster heartbeats,' and why elephants and giraffes slept standing up, 'to stop their internal organs being crushed by their own bodyweight'. 'Imagine that,' she'd often finish, her eyes widening, and I did imagine it because of her.

Everyone in the school was half in love with Nasifa, but there was no one who did more to please her than me. I made Raouf wait for me after class as I helped her to clear away the books and she would tell me about the classic Persian writers, and how she thought Bedil was a greater metaphysical poet than Donne. Nasifa didn't just teach me history, she taught me how to love my own country. She liked most of all to talk about the legion of heroic Afghan women, from Rabia Balkhi, who wrote her last poem in her own blood on the hammam wall, to Meena Keshwar Kamal who founded RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women.

'Did you know that your aunt Fara was a member of RAWA?'

Of course I didn't know because I wasn't supposed to know.

'I'll tell you about it sometime,' she said.

I wanted more than anything to hear about Fara, but as it turned out I didn't have to wait much longer at all. Nasifa came to school the next week and I knew immediately there was something wrong, because she didn't have the same lightness she always had about her. I waited until after class, when we were putting the books away, and I didn't ask what was wrong, because I knew even then that people only told you things when they were ready.

'My father wants me to marry,' she said. 'It's not what I want. I'd have to stop teaching.'

'I don't think you should get married then,' I said.

She laughed. 'If I don't I might have to find somewhere else to live.'

'You can come and live with us.'

'I'm not sure that would please your father.'

'He's not home much,' I said.

'I think he'd notice. I used to see him sometimes, when Fara was still alive. I met her when she came to my school. I'd never met a woman doctor before. I remember her telling us of the protests following International Women's Day in Bukhara: the women who were raped or murdered, or were threatened with having their children taken away, just for removing their burkas. There was an earthquake that year and they blamed it on the women protesters. To think they believed us so powerful that the earth let out a seismic shudder at the sight of our faces!'

'Fara was there when we demonstrated against the Russian invasion, the year after you were born. It was extraordinary. There were thousands of girls, not much older than you are now. The Suvani arrested hundreds of us and locked us up; the jails were overflowing with young women, so they had to let some of the prisoners go. Can you imagine it, thieves and murderers let out onto the streets to make room for teenage girls?'

'What was Fara like?' I asked. 'My father never talks about her.'

'She was an inspiration. I remember she told us, 'It's not an easy time to be born a woman. Most women in Afghanistan are illiterate, but you can already read and write: you have a voice. Not all of you will be doctors or teachers, you may leave school to get married and become a mother. But you will still heal and you will still change minds, even if it's just in your own family.'

And at that moment it was as if Fara had stepped out of the shadow of her photograph and into the full glare of the sun.

The stories Nasifa passed down from Fara became like fables in my mind. I'd revisit them so often that when I looked at Fara's photograph I could imagine her telling me them herself, though her voice was always like Nasifa's voice. The more I thought of the women of Bukhara who made the earth move, the more it reminded me of a sura I'd been taught from the Koran.

'When earth is shaken with a mighty shaking and earth brings forth her burdens, and Man says, 'What ails her?' Upon that day she shall tell her tidings for that her Lord has inspired her.'

I often wondered that if Muhammad thought the earth female, then it would be impossible for her to turn against herself. Perhaps the ground shook not in defiance of the women, but in solidarity; when they were silenced, the earth roared with the sound of their voices.

My mother knew all about Nasifa's proposal because it was the talk of the hammam. 'Her father is furious, it was a very good match,' she said. 'A businessman from Pakistan with several factories.'

I didn't tell my mother that I knew about Nasifa's proposal already. 'Maybe she doesn't want to get married.'

'Textile factories at that: think of all those beautiful rugs.'

'I don't think rugs interest her Mama.'

'Rugs interest everyone Adeela.'

'Did they say why she won't marry?'

'She says she doesn't love him. You should have heard the other women in the hammam. Love,' she lingered on the word.

'Why are the other women so against her?'

'They're just jealous,' my mother said. 'Imagine the house she would've had.'

'Is it wrong of her, to want to choose?'

'Things were different once, but this is a country that learns its lessons in reverse. There were better options for women when Nana was a girl.'

'But Fara didn't marry.'

'Things were not easy for her; she chose a path she had to walk alone. I hope things are better for you, but hope is not a keen listener.'

It was after I started school that I really got to know Laila. In some ways we grew up together. She was more like a sister to me than a stepmother, a younger sister it seemed at times. For Laila I was a safe confidante; she could ask me anything without risking the wrath of my father or the scorn of my mother. Laila found it amusing that I taught Nadir to speak some English words, particularly as it drew the ire of my father.

'It's not right for him to be running around the house speaking a foreign language,' he'd say. 'I don't know what he's saying.'

'You don't mind it when I speak English.'

'You have nothing to say that interests me.'

While my mother was cooking, Laila would sometimes make me up, though I would have to wash it all off before supper so that my father didn't see.

'I wish I had girls,' she would say.

'You wouldn't wish that on them.'

'But boys are so noisy. I don't know why they have to be such fidgets, they never sit still.'

'They don't like being fussed over.'

'They never like any of the things I want them to like.' Laila applied the black kohl around my eyelids. 'You're lucky, you have beautiful eyes. You don't need make up. I would kill for eyes like yours.'

'Your eyes are beautiful too.'

'They're too close together,' she said. 'They shouldn't be so friendly with each other. I wish they were wide and distant.'

'Like a horse's eyes?'

She laughed, 'Yes, like a horse, so I could look all the way around myself. Then I would be able to see your father coming.'

'And run,' I said.

'Like the wind.'

At first my mother was pleased that I found a role model in Nasifa because it meant I spent less time with Laila. But she soon realised Laila was not a threat to her, because she could supervise the time we spent in each other's company. Sending me to school had always been my mother's aim, but she didn't plan on the separation; that we'd be parted not only by the hours in the day but that learning too would keep us at a distance. While I was at school, my mother was often left alone with Nadir and Mateen, while Laila went out to meet with her friends.

'I'm treated like a slave by everyone in this house,' my mother said.

'I don't treat you like that,' I said.

'By everyone.'

'I could teach you to read. It will give you something to do.'

'I'm too old to learn.'

'You're not too old.'

'It's not the way of things. Daughters shouldn't teach their mothers. I have enough things to do here already.'

Day by day we seemed to become more entrenched: me in my resolve to be more like Nasifa and my mother in her reluctance to embrace anything new. And all the while we were growing further apart, the battles between the Mujahideen and the Suvari crept closer to our door.

'I don't think it's safe for Adeela to go to school anymore,' she told my father.

'You're the one who wanted her to have an education,' he said.

'I just want her safe, with me.'

'It doesn't matter where she is. Allah will take her when she's ready.'

I had no intention of stopping my schooling when it had just begun. 'It's ok Mama, I'll be fine,' I told her. 'I'm not ready for Allah yet.'

Sometimes we had visits to the school from lecturers at the University or very important people in government that none of us had ever heard of. But when Allah came to our school there was no announcement, and he came for the boy who was least ready of all. Khalifa was always late for class, especially our English lesson. He had no interest in learning his own language, let alone another. 'I'll never go to England and I don't think England will come to me,' he said and he wasn't wrong. Khalifa was caught in crossfire outside the schoolhouse. I'd seen him only a moment before, peering through the classroom window, with the same look of surprise he always had when we started without him. There was a rally of shots. I saw him lifted off his feet by the force of the bullets and thrown against the door of the building.

'Get back under your desks,' Nasifa shouted. She crawled along the floor and reached for the door handle. Khalifa fell into the classroom, his eyes still wide with surprise. Deep crimson stains pooled through his white Perrahan like ink blots. Nasifa removed her headscarf and placed it over Khalifa's body and her long hair fell down over her face like a veil. She knelt down and prayed as we waited for the fight to die down and move to some other place where people who weren't ready to die were yet to be taken. I can't forget how they looked: Nasifa with her thick black hair covering Khalifa's lifeless eyes, as if she was trying to shield him from death itself.

Raouf and I went to Nana's the next day and I told her about Khalifa. 'He won't be late for school again,' she said after a while.

'He was killed by the Suvari,' Raouf said. 'I saw the bullets.'

'They all use the same bullets,' I said. 'We don't know who's to blame.'

'Everyone's to blame,' Nana said.

'Nana,' I asked. 'Was Grandpapa ready when Allah came for him?'

'The day he died, he was going to replace some tiles that'd fallen off the roof in a storm,' she said. 'But he sat down in that chair after namaz and he never got up again. If he was ready, I wouldn't still have a leak in my kitchen.'

Nana gave us a couple of afghanis to buy some flour, but we took a detour and trekked to the top of Swimming Pool Hill instead. It was more of a mountain in size, sitting at the edge of the city like a temple; the pool, a lavish offering to God. But Allah didn't seem pleased with this gift from the Russians and its vast depths were plumbed only with whirlpools of sand. Even when it rained in Kabul, it was said the swimming pool remained dry and empty.

I longed to see it up close as I'd never seen an Olympic sized pool, or any pool for that matter, beyond the hammam we bathed in once a week. It was forbidden to go beyond the summit of the hill, but after a while, the soldiers seemed at ease with us poking about amongst the rocks; Raouf with his fishing net, and me with my notebook. I think they regarded us as we did the geckos, a harmless curiosity to be studied and recorded, for no other reason than they existed. There was never any conversation between us and the soldiers, as we had no Russian and they no Dari. But Raouf and I often wondered why they guarded the pool with such vigilance.

'Maybe they're still waiting for the Olympics,' I said, though I knew any hope of the Olympics coming to Kabul had long passed.

'Do all swimming pools have special soldiers to stop people from drowning?' Raouf asked.

'They have lifeguards,' I said. 'I read it in my Encyclopedia. But they don't usually carry guns. I'm not sure how that would help someone who was drowning.'

'Maybe the soldiers can't swim,' Raouf said. 'And they have to reach out to people with their rifles'. He took his fishing net and held it at arm's length. 'Like this,' he said, 'Grab hold'.

I took the end of the net. 'I'm drowning, save me, save me,' I shouted, waving my other arm in the air.

At that point, one of the soldiers came over and spoke to us sternly in Russian. He was tall and pale with a moustache shaped like a hawk moth; his gun slung across his shoulders casually, the way my father carried grain.

'I'm sorry,' I said. I nudged Raouf, 'Say something.'

Raouf looked up at the soldier, 'Are you one of the lifeguards for the Olympics?'

The soldier frowned and then began to laugh. He called over to another soldier sitting on one of the diving boards and repeated something in Russian, and when he said the word Olympics, the other man started laughing too. The soldier turned back to us and said 'Olympics?' as if it was a question, and laughed again.

So Raouf laughed too. But that made the soldier go quiet, and then he slapped Raouf across the face. 'Otvali,' he motioned us away with his rifle.

I often wonder if I'd have known half the things I learned from life as a child, if they'd not found a mouthpiece in Raouf. And for these gems of experience, Raouf's mouthpiece often found itself on the receiving end of the back of a hand. Two weeks after our last visit, the Russian lifeguards took up their rifles and marched down Swimming Pool Hill and out Kabul for good.

When I think back to the days of the Suvari, I see my memories through a heat haze - warm and dusty and carefree. Maybe I was too young to be affronted by the occupation, waking to its legacy only when they left. Perhaps because I never knew anything else, I couldn't see it as my father did, as an evil wind delivered with my first breath. What we didn't know then was that those were the last days that Raouf and I would walk around the city without fear. And the geckos of Kabul would go un-catalogued for a generation.

## Chapter five

I soon became the go-between for Ghulam and Reza because we found there were places I could go that were closed to them. Some afternoons I would go to the supermarket to buy bread or soap for us to wash as I was the only one to go unchallenged. Reza was only half right about us being invisible. The cool bright lights of the supermarket that beckoned beyond its glass front marked a threshold through which the men couldn't pass. For the store managers and security guards,

migrants were not desirable customers. But in my western clothes, I seemed to go unnoticed amongst the steady stream of visitors who were drawn to its doors like worshippers to a mosque. The busy locals in their smart suits and linen dresses who filled their baskets with warm baked bread, fresh vegetables and the finest cuts of meat from the deli. And the tourists, their bare white limbs shining blue-luminous under the glare of the strip lights, stacked their trolleys with crates of wine and beer, more than any person could possibly drink.

There were whole aisles dedicated to cereals or washing powder or every kind of vegetable or fruit that could be processed in a tin. How ordered everything was, how inexhaustible it seemed. Almost everything that was edible was sealed away from sight, smell or touch in packets, plastic and metal. I thought of the vast spice shops back home and the chaos of the markets, where I'd haggle over the last portion of meat to make kofta for my father. There was no bargaining to be made in the supermarket, no interaction was necessary at all. Instead, a silent army of workers made sure that everything was always fully stocked; that each packaged idol was resurrected as quickly as it disappeared.

It was on one of my trips back from the supermarket that I saw the Alhambra cinema. I found it, as you discover most interesting things in life, when I was looking for something else. I was browsing in the bookstores on Boulevard Jacquard and I took a wrong turn down Rue Jean Jaures, and there it was in large Arabic lettering: 'The Red One'. I'd been to Cinema Park in Kabul with my mother and Raouf before it was closed down by the Taliban. We'd go to watch the latest Bollywood films, and sit captivated for hours as the dark, dusty interior of the building was transformed into the blazing palate of India. The cinema was very old and it rarely screened a film without some resistance by its ageing equipment. We didn't have intermissions in our matinees as much as enforced intervals: where the film and time itself would unravel and the actors would slow down, frame by frame like clockwork toys, until they were exhausted into stillness. Sometimes the heat of the Indian sun seared through the negatives, melting the vibrant colours into a pool of burnt umber until the projectionist could repair the reel and we would rejoin the film at the next scene.

I went back to Cinema Park only once after it reopened, to see *Titanic* with my mother. My mother had heard of the Titanic, but she knew nothing of its history. It was my mistake to tell her it was a love story, as it was not the kind of tale that my mother saw any romance in.

'All those people in search of a new life, their dreams are drifting at the bottom of the ocean.'

'Some of them made it Mama.'

'I don't understand why they couldn't allow just one happy story to come out of all that suffering.'

'They're just characters Mama, they're not real people.'

'They're real to me.'

'It happened a long time ago Mama, before even Nana was born.'

'So even the survivors are dead now, is that what you're telling me?'

'Some of the younger children may still be alive.'

'But they'll have no memory of it,' she said. 'Once you've died in someone's memory, you're lost forever.'

'Next time we'll see a Bollywood film,' I said, 'Like we used to with Raouf.'

'You won't ever leave me, will you Adeela?'

'No Mama, I'm not going anywhere.'

I would often go the Alhambra after I'd been to the supermarket. I couldn't afford to go and see a film but I liked to walk round the foyer, looking at all the film posters. The Alhambra was nothing like Cinema Park, with its concrete facade peppered with bullet holes, and the feeling you had when you walked in the building of such sparseness that you somehow felt you were still on the outside. Alhambra had a clean glass front, filled with colourful, neatly framed promotional prints you could only read in close-up. Not the faded, over-sized posters that flapped from the balcony of Cinema Park like laundry in the breeze. There was one film I was drawn to, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I knew nothing about it, but I recognised the actress from *Titanic*.

'What's the film about?' I asked the girl at the ticket office.

'It's a romantic comedy about a couple who try to erase their memories of each other. It's good, you'd enjoy it,' she said. 'There's a matinee on tomorrow. Would you like tickets?'

'I'm not sure I can make it,' I was too ashamed to admit I didn't have enough money. 'Does it have a happy ending?'

The girl smiled, 'That depends on your definition of happiness.'

'It doesn't sound like the kind of film my mother would like it,' I realised I was thinking out loud. 'She only liked happy endings.'

'Tell your mother,' the girl said, 'Tout est bien qui finit bien.'

When I got back to the camp I found Reza waiting outside our shelter. 'Just in time my dear, where's Ghulam?'

'He's probably collecting driftwood. He should be back soon.'

'It can't wait,' Reza said, 'We'll go and meet him.'

We walked down to the beach past the breakwaters and I could see Ghulam in the distance carrying a bundle of wood on his shoulder, his long loping stride covering the ground quickly.

'At last, Reza said, 'I've waited all morning for you both and that hasn't been easy my friends, I'm not the most patient man in the world. I don't know what it is about good news that there is such a compulsion to spill it immediately.'

'Well do tell us then,' Ghulam said.

'Yes of course. The time is here my friends, we leave tomorrow.'

Ghulam dropped the sticks. 'Where do we go?'

'The van will pick us up outside the docks at 8pm. It'll take us to the diesel station a mile outside the port and we'll board the lorry from there, while the driver's sleeping.'

'How much will it cost?' Ghulam asked.

'I was just getting round to that. It's 400 euro for you. For Adeela it is more, they will need 500.'

'But I don't take up any more space.'

'They say it's a risk to take a woman. Those are their terms, they won't negotiate.'

'It's ok, I should have enough,' I had just enough remaining after paying the fixers in Kabul. 'Will it just be us?'

'There are two other men, Pashtuns, they should not trouble us. It will all be fine if we follow the rules. Don't forget to bring some plastic bags. We must do everything by stealth, remember what I told you, even our breathing has to be hidden.'

I don't remember what I did for the rest of the day after I'd paid Reza. But I do know that time seemed to stretch out interminably, as there was little to prepare and only waiting to be done. It reminded me of when I was a child, and the long wait we had for the New Year celebrations at Nauroz, when we'd have a big feast and the table would be laid out with seven items all beginning with the letter 's' for luck. The sabzeh (wheat) for rebirth, samanak (sweet pudding) for affluence, sir (garlic) for health, sib (apples) for beauty, sumaq (berries) for sunrise, serkeh (vinegar) for patience and sekkeh (coins) for prosperity. The sabzeh was thought to collect all the family's bad luck, so it was always thrown away into running water, 13 days after the feast. My father followed this ritual religiously, because he believed that bad luck, like disease, could spread the longer it was left untreated. How I longed for Nauroz as a child, though I had to prepare much of the food along with my mother. Coming as it did at the end of winter, waiting for Nauroz was like waiting for the earth itself to thaw.

In the evening we made a final visit to the Cap, for Ghulam to say goodbye. We didn't speak of the next day though my thoughts were consumed by it. I hadn't planned how we would live in those first few days. I had plans in the longer-term, to find a house, a job, to teach again. But I didn't dare to imagine what we'd do once we landed in England because it seemed too big a risk, ungrateful almost, to think too far ahead. Once we'd made it safely over the Channel, then anything was possible.

Ghulam sat for a long time on the rocks with his head in his hands, as if he was waiting for another sign from Isa.

'Don't be disappointed. If miracles happened every day they wouldn't be special.'

'I wasn't expecting anything to happen. I just like being here. It makes me feel closer.'

'To England?'

'To God.'

'You never told me why you became a Christian.'

'There was a man I met once, who taught me the meaning of humility, of sacrifice. I swore that once the war was over, I would follow a different path. I didn't choose it, it chose me.'

'I don't understand why you had to turn away from Allah.'

'I needed to start again. I couldn't live with the things I saw that were done in Allah's name.'

'You think it's so different being a Christian? Half the wars in the world have been fought in the name of Christ.'

'They were not my wars.'

'Whatever it is that you saw, that you did, Allah would have forgiven you.'

'It's not that simple Adeela.'

'Allah forgives all who go to him truthfully.'

'I didn't want his forgiveness. It is Allah I can't forgive.'

Ghulam lay close beside me that night and stroked my face gently. 'I know that you've suffered, though you wear it silently,' he said. 'You're safe with me now. You feel secure with me, don't you Adeela?'

'Yes. I just wish you'd trust me more. You never tell me things. The few things I do know, like tonight, I feel that you tell me because I insist on it. I wish you'd share things with me because you want to. I don't really know who you are.'

'You do know me. You know me as I am now, not who I was before.'

'I don't even know who I've become in this place.'

'It won't be much longer now. And when we're in England you can write the future for us and it will be greater than all the stories in your books. It will happen because you've dreamed it into being.' He leant over and kissed me softly on the lips.

I lay awake for a long time after, wondering if I'd responded in the right way, if it was right that I should have responded at all.

Ghulam went down to the new portacabins by the docks early to have a shave. I packed and repacked my bag as I waited though it was not for the want of space; the few things I had were so easily contained. My books, a change of clothes I'd dried that morning on the branches of the tree; the plastic bags that would stifle our breathing and render us undetectable to the guards. Before long, I would be stowed away like my things; my fate carried by the hands of others.

Ghulam arrived back in good spirits. He was clean shaven for the first time in weeks and was wearing a blue checked shirt he'd got from Secours Catholique.

'You look younger without your beard.'

'Looks are deceptive. I'm a day older than yesterday.'

'I'm glad you look respectable, we're going out this afternoon.'

'What do you mean by out?'

'It's a surprise.'

'I don't like surprises.'

'You'll like this one.'

I walked through the town with Ghulam to the Rue Jean Jaures. I thought we were probably taking a risk walking together, that if the gendarmerie should pick us up we might not be released in time for the ferry. I tried instead not to think about it, because if you could will good things into being with positive thinking, then the same had to be true of the reverse.

I pointed to the Alhambra, 'That's your surprise.'

'We're not on holiday Adeela.'

'But it's our last day. Can't we do things that normal people do just this once.'

'We're not like normal people,' he said. 'I don't like films. All those rich actors pretending to live lives that aren't their own.'

'Is it such a bad thing to imagine your life to be different; to be somewhere else, someone else?'

'Life isn't like that.'

'I'll go and see it on my own then,' I set off down the street.

'Hang on. I suppose there's no harm in having a look.'

The girl in the ticket office smiled when she saw me, 'The film's just starting.'

'How much is it for two tickets?'

'12 euro,' she said.

'It's too expensive,' Ghulam said. 'Come on, we can go another time.'

I bit my lip.

The girl smiled and printed off two tickets. 'There's hardly anyone in there – it would be a shame to let all those seats go to waste.'

The screen was much brighter and clearer than the films I'd seen in Cinema Park; there were no scratches to obscure the picture or the sound of crackling to drown out the voices of the actors.

The low afternoon sun was still strong when we came out of the theatre, and we walked back, past the park where Rodin's Burghers stood as a testament to the Hundred Year's War.

'The start of the film, where Joel meets Clementine on the beach and her hair's bright red, that's really the end of the film isn't it?' Ghulam said.

'Yes in a way – or the beginning of them getting to know each other all over again. But her hair was blue at the start.'

'I'm sure it was red.'

'It was red when they were together, before she erased her memory of Joel.'

'That's why I don't like films,' Ghulam said. 'You can't re-arrange your life in any order you want. It just doesn't make sense. And what did they have to forget? Nothing really happened to them.'

'But that's the point, Clementine was bored. She wanted her life to be more exciting, to be different.'

'Why would you go to all the trouble of erasing your memory of a relationship that was forgettable?'

'Life's not the same for everyone – try to think of it from her perspective. Maybe having an uneventful life was intolerable. Have you thought of that?'

'A quiet life is all I think about.'

'So would you choose to erase your memories if you could?' I asked.

'I don't have the choice. Anyway, erasing your memory doesn't undo the act. You live with the things you've done, they become a part of you.'

'Or you become a part of them,' I paused. 'There are some things... even the memory of them I cannot forget.'

'It is not for us to forget but to endure.'

There were memories I had that were on the surface, that I would replay time and again as you might recall a favourite song or a cherished passage from a book. And there were memories that I didn't visit, that lay beyond the places I chose to go. I didn't need to find them, I knew they'd come to me; lying dormant as a virus does, waiting to be triggered into life again.

Reza told us to behave as normal, to avoid arousing suspicion. So we did as we always did, we ate supper down at the docks, though Kiru wasn't serving that night. After we'd eaten we sat on the wooden pallets that were stacked in rugged steps outside the warehouse, until most of the men had left.

'I didn't get to say goodbye to Kiru,' I said.

'That's the way it should be,' Reza said. 'No one can know about this, not even Kiru. He doesn't like goodbyes anyway.'

'It would have been nice, to thank him.'

'You can write to him when we're in England,' Ghulam said.

'I don't know where he lives.'

'You can always come back and help him serve soup to the migrants,' Reza said. 'All that trouble to get to England, and already you want to return.'

'I didn't say I wanted to come back,' I said. 'But maybe I will one day.'

Most of the other refugees had left the soup kitchen to go back to the camp, but a group of young men were playing football across the old tramlines as the last rays of the sun flooded the dock.

'It's admirable they can find joy in this place,' Reza said. 'In England they have the best football teams in the world. I'm going to watch a match with my cousin when I get to London. He supports the Arsenal.'

'It's just Arsenal,' Ghulam said. 'There's no 'the'.'

'Arsenal,' Reza said. 'It's a good name, is it not? They sound ready for action. Did you play when you were a boy?'

'No, it wasn't encouraged at my school.'

'That's too bad,' Reza said. 'Perhaps they are playing football again, in the Ghazi stadium.'

Ghulam nodded but said nothing. The Ghazi stadium was a place we all knew, though none of us spoke of it. Perhaps there'd been a time when we were all at the stadium at the same time; walked by each other on the way to the stalls, past the cigarette sellers and the crowds of men, women and children who gathered there each Friday. I tried hard to place Ghulam and Reza in the crowd, knowing that they could never have seen me in return. I wondered if they'd been there that evening when Nasifa and I were loaded into the back of the pick-up truck, half-blind under our burqas, as we were driven across the rocky playing field towards the goalposts. I could still hear the words of the mullah: 'This is a place for joy. Because when justice is done, that is a joyful event that brings order and security to our society.'

The van pulled up just before 8pm. It was a small, white transit van with the word *Déménagements* written on its side.

'Removals,' I said, 'that's apt.'

'Were you expecting a limousine?' Reza asked. 'Wait until you see the lorry. The second trip I made we had to travel with a truck full of rubbish. You cannot imagine the smell. This time, so the agent tells me, we will accompany a load destined for recycling.'

'That is rubbish, isn't it?' Ghulam said.

'There's a subtle difference my friend. Rubbish is only fit for throwing away. These unwanted items will be repurposed to live another life.'

Like us, I thought, like us.

## Chapter six

After the Russians left people held parties all across Kabul but my father didn't think there was anything much to celebrate because Najibullah was in power and he was 'a wolf in sheep's clothing', and that meant we were all still Communists whether we liked it or not. 'They leave us with this band of infidels, and what do they expect us to do next?' my father raged, 'Open our houses to the poor, give up our land, live as one big happy family on air alone?' I thought that sounded like a good idea, except for the part about air. As far as my father was concerned, everything associated with the Suvari was to be despised, apart from the bottle of Stolichnaya he kept for special occasions to drink with his friends in the hujra. But I wasn't supposed to know about that. My father did mark the occasion in his own way, and that was by getting a dog, because Nadir had just turned four and that was the same age my father had been when he had a dog. And Nadir was meant to follow in my father's footsteps, whether he liked it or not.

My father came back from the market with the dog on a cold day in early March. It was beautiful in a pathetic sort of way, scrawny with a matted fawn coloured coat and the biggest almond shaped eyes I'd ever seen on a Tazi. It was already about five months old and very tall and gangly, 'He's all legs,' my mother said, and he really was, like a puppy on stilts.

'It'll be good for the boy, he needs a companion,' my father said.

'He has Mateen,' I said, 'I need a companion,'

'You have your books, and Raouf,' he added as an afterthought, and I couldn't argue with that.

'I'll be the one who's left to feed it and clean up after it,' my mother said. 'She couldn't even look after that parrot.'

Laila just rolled her eyes. My father bought Laila a parakeet from the bird market when she was pregnant with Nadir, to keep her company when she was confined to the house. But the bird escaped after only three days because Laila left the cage door open and it flew away. I knew better, because Laila told me herself. 'What was I to do with a parrot, it didn't even talk?' The parakeet didn't escape - Laila let it go on the roof of our apartment block. It'd been very reluctant to leave she said. 'I held its body in my hands and I could feel its heart beating very fast, so I thought it must be desperate to get away. Then I threw it into the air, like they do in films, but it didn't fly, it just plummeted to the ground without flapping its wings once and it landed stone dead on the street. I didn't like the way it looked at me with those red eyes. I think it had a djin.' Laila wrapped the parakeet in a scarf and gave it to the donkey man to take away with all the sewage. I thought that was a very undignified ending for the parakeet, even if it was possessed by a djin.

'We should think of a name for our new pet,' my father said. 'What do you think Nadir, he's yours now.'

'Sag,' said Nadir.

My father looked downcast, 'I think we can do better than 'dog'. He may look harmless now, but wait until he's fully grown. In the old days Tazi were used to hunt wolves and leopards.'

'So he's a wolf in sheep's clothing,' I said. 'Like Najibullah'.

'Najibullah, Najibullah, Najibullah,' Nadir chanted.

'We're not naming him after that traitor,' said my father.

‘What about Nku?’ I said. There was a boy in my class that I liked called Nku. He was always getting into trouble, not because he was the naughtiest in the school, but because he was the one who got caught. ‘Always a follower,’ Nasifa said of him, and when I asked her to explain she said his name meant ‘sheep’.

‘Nku, Nku, Nku,’ this time Mateen joined in too because it was an easy name to say.

‘Nku it is then,’ my father said.

So our Tazi became a sheep in name and part of our flock. And the name suited him, because he spent all his time following us, craving for attention, and he loved my father the most, though my father had the least time for him. And Nku never showed the least interest in killing anything, never mind wolves or leopards. He would even let the mice scuttle past him in the kitchen, though he would sometimes put out his paw, not to catch them, but almost as a kind of greeting. I often wondered if Nku became the way he was because of what I called him, or if I’d somehow known to describe what he would grow into.

Nku was not my father’s only surprise that month. He announced that we were all going to visit his brother who lived in Mazar-e-Sharif for Nauroz, the Afghan New Year. We’d never really travelled outside Kabul when the Suviri were there, beyond day trips to the gardens at Paghman or to have a picnic at Qargha Lake.

‘How are we all going to get into *that*?’ my mother asked.

*That* was my father’s car, an old beige Toyota pick-up. It was in better shape than many of the cars in Kabul and my father was particularly proud of it as it never broke down and he said it was very practical for carrying things. And by things he meant people.

Since Laila had the boys, she’d replaced my mother in the cab, which meant Mama had to ride in the back with me.

‘There’s plenty of room for all of us,’ my father said.

‘I will not travel in the back with animals,’ my mother said. ‘You can go without me. Besides, my mother is ill so I should stay to look after her.’

This was true but Nana was never well; she was always suffering from some new ailment that eluded both diagnosis and treatment. ‘The pain is hastening me to the grave,’ she’d say but if you asked her where it hurt she would just shrug. Nana’s pain was always non-specific. It wasn’t somewhere but everywhere that it hurt. There was not one inch of Nana’s body that wasn’t afflicted with something.

‘Very well, you may do as you wish,’ my father said, ‘There will be more room for Nku, and Raouf.’

Although I felt sorry that my mother would be left on her own, I was too excited about the prospect of the trip to give it much thought. It was more than 300km away and would take two days to get there. Besides it was only the middle of March, so travelling in the back of the pick-up would be very cold and my mother hated the cold. It would be good to have Raouf for company; someone to talk to, to stop my teeth from chattering.

We set off on Sunday and Raouf and I wore our thickest Perrahans and my mother gave us extra blankets to keep warm. Nku was unsure of getting in the car, so I had to lift him in and he hid trembling under the blanket. I don't know why my mother disliked being in the back, because once you'd settled into the cold, you had by far the best view. When you rode in the front, the scenery seemed to spring upon you moment to moment, especially at the speed my father drove, and it was gone as soon as you noticed it. But in the back, the world was rolled out like a carpet, always in view. The places you'd driven through held on so long in your sights that they seemed reluctant to surrender to the horizon; as if the past itself didn't wish to let go.

Once we'd left the noise and dust of Kabul, Nku came out from under his blanket. He sat facing the front, his silky black ears blowing behind him and his cheeks puffed out by the wind, which made him look as if he was smiling, though it was an evil-looking kind of smile. We reached the start of the climb towards the Salang Pass, where a winding road snaked for miles to the tunnel at its summit, and the Hindu Kush mountains lay to the east, covered in mounds of fresh snow. When we reached the half-dome of the entrance we were plunged into darkness, as the lights in the tunnel weren't working, but it didn't make my father drive any slower. I felt safer facing the back; sometimes it was good that you couldn't see what lay ahead of you.

Raouf had never been out of Kabul either, and he was very taken with seeing the mountains up close. 'Are the mountains like trees?' he asked.

'How do you mean?'

'You can tell the age of a tree by counting its rings. But that mountain over there...' he pointed to a high range that ended in a sheer face as if it had been sliced through like a cake, exposing layers of yellow, brown and dark grey rock. 'That one has 27 layers and it's got to be older than that.'

'It's kind of the same,' I read it in my Encyclopedia. 'Except each layer isn't just a year old but a thousand years old, or even a hundred thousand years old.'

'As old as the dinosaurs?'

'Some of them are even older - millions of years old.'

'Why are they shaped like that?'

'The plates of the earth move against each other and that causes volcanos and earthquakes and the ground crumples up like a piece of paper.'

'Does Allah make the earth quake?'

'I think so. Though Nasifa told me that some men used to believe it was the sight of women's faces, when they took off their burqas.'

Raouf thought about this for some time. 'If that were true then there would be no cities left.'

'How come?'

'Well, all women have to take their burqas off at home,' Raouf said, he started laughing, 'And a lot more than that.'

I laughed too at the idea of all those naked women flattening whole cities as they undressed for bed. I laughed so much I felt quite dizzy and sick. We were so busy rolling around at the thought of Kabul collapsing like a house of cards that we hardly noticed my father slowing down to pull over. He was annoyed that we were in such good spirits as he had to stop because Nadir really did have to be sick.

After the Salang tunnel, we drove through the wide grasslands of the Asian steppe, past herds of Argali sheep; their thick golden ridged horns hanging proudly in giant coils, like the headdress of a Pharaoh. My father said that we would have to stay overnight in Pul-e-Khumri, and after we'd stopped three times more, once for diesel and to eat the nan my mother made and twice more for Nadir to be sick, I saw a sign for Pul-e-Kumru that said 20km. And it seemed that 20km wasn't far to go, as we'd driven well over 100km already, and that in itself was strange because just that morning 20km would have been further than I'd ever travelled in my whole life.

Pul-e-Khumra wasn't an interesting place, my father said, but it was roughly half-way to Mazar-e-Sharif, so it was as good a place as any to stop for the night. It was a small town on a flood plain at the foot of a mountain range that was so sharply folded it looked as if someone had thrown a sheet over a row of giant poles.

'The Suvari built the cement factory here,' my father said. 'The only foundations they got right,' he murmured, though I didn't really know what he meant and neither did Raouf.

'Why do they have to make cement, when there is so much mud and stones to build with?' Raouf asked.

'Cement endures,' my father said, 'unlike its makers. It is not eroded by the monsoons, or washed away by floods. The secret is in its core: it's held together by rods of steel, like the bones in your flesh. The only way to destroy it is to blast it to pieces.' My father lingered on the word 'pieces'.

'I would like to be made of cement,' Raouf said.

'Don't be ridiculous,' my father said. 'Cement is a poison and if it touches your skin, it will burn you as readily as a furnace.'

We set off from Pul-e-Khumru as the sun rose and took a break in Samangan on the way, which pleased my father as we were able to accommodate eating, filling up the car and Nadir being sick all in one stop. As we passed Samangan I could see the Buddhist caves on the hill, and from a distance they looked like tiny burrows in an anthill, but my father said they looked like that up close too.

We got to my uncle's house in the late afternoon; it was a small-holding a few kilometres outside the city that had belonged to my father's maternal grandfather. 'I could have had this place myself,' my father said, 'if I had the inclination to spend my life as the servant of animals.' The house was stone built with several outbuildings for the animals, two oxen, goats and an old pony for my cousins who were grown up now. It was much bigger than our apartment in Kabul, but my father said houses in the city were worth ten times those in the country, so although we had less room, our space was much more valuable.

My uncle and his wife laid out a huge meal for us, Qabli pilaw with raisins, almonds, pistachios and carrots, home-baked nan and some Quemaq chai to drink, which was especially pleased my father as it was reserved for very special occasions only and we never had it at home. I heard my father tell Laila that the tea was too strong and the cream on top a bit thin, but he was still pleased

with it because it showed his brother had great respect for him, even if he didn't make very good tea.

My father and his brother sat talking and chewing Naswar after we'd eaten and they gave Raouf some to try. He'd never had tobacco before and the sharp taste of the lime made him screw up his face.

'I don't think he likes it,' my uncle said.

'I do,' said Raouf. He swallowed deeply and then opened his mouth to show it had gone. 'Can I have some more.'

This made my uncle bend over laughing as you were meant to spit the tobacco into the spittoon.

'We'll make a man of him yet,' my father said. But I hoped they wouldn't because I liked Raouf just as he was.

'Adeela is growing into quite a beauty,' my uncle said. 'You'll not be short of offers for her.'

'I don't want to get married. I want to be a teacher,' I said.

'She will be married in good time,' my father said.

'I want to be a geologist when I'm older,' Raouf said. 'I want to study what makes earthquakes happen.' We both laughed but no one else got the joke.

'The two of them, always with their heads in the clouds,' my father said. 'They'll fall down the cracks in the earth because they never look at the ground.'

Later, as I was helping my aunt to clear the plates away, my uncle came over to me and spoke in a whisper, 'He's a good man your father, is he not?'

I paused a little too long, 'Yes.'

'He doesn't take his hand to you or your mother.'

'No.' It was true my father never beat us which made him a good man, because I knew many men beat their wives and children.

'I've something to show you,' my uncle went into his bedroom and brought back a framed black and white photograph. 'It's your father and me as boys.'

I'd never seen my father as a child; I found it hard to imagine a time when he'd not been exactly as he was. He still looked cross, even as a boy.

'I was like your father's shadow in those days,' my uncle said. 'Always following him, trying to do the things he did. Not much has changed since then.'

And I thought that was true, because the most startling thing about the photograph was the figure in the far right of the picture, almost obscured by the frame. It seemed that in life as well as death, Fara was visible only to me.

We woke early to go to the Blue Mosque, a shrine to Hazrat Ali that sat in the centre of Mazar-e-Sharif, and it was covered not just in brilliant blue tiles, but the brightest reds, golds and greens. There were thousands of people there to watch the raising of the janda flag and to pray for miracles for the sick. There were more ill people than I'd ever seen; my father said it was traditional for them to come to the mosque at Nauroz hoping for a cure, but there were so many of them that I didn't think Allah would have time to answer all their prayers. Some of them were sick with things I didn't think could be cured, like the beggars with their legs missing, but people were very generous to them because it was New Year, so they were cured in a way because poverty is a kind of illness.

There was a huge dove tower to the east of the mosque, where hundreds of white pigeons flew in and out like bees in a hive. 'Every seventh dove is meant to contain a spirit,' my uncle said, but these were good spirits, not like the djin that got into Laila's parakeet. I wondered if the doves carried the souls of pilgrims that Allah was too busy to save, but my uncle said it was not like that at all. 'Allah works miracles only occasionally because if miracles happened all the time then they would be commonplace and there wouldn't be anything special about them,' he said.

In the afternoon my father had another surprise for us, which was that we were going to watch a Buzkashi match, because Mazar-e-Sharif was the best place in the whole country to see it. Nadir and Mateen were very excited about it, though they didn't know what it was they were excited about, and when my father said we'd have to leave Nku at the farm, Nadir grew very sullen and said he didn't want to go.

The stadium was as big as the Ghazi stadium in Kabul, though it was dustier and the stands were much older. It was full of thousands of people, and I thought they were probably the same people we'd seen at the blue mosque. There weren't so many sick people, but the beggars still came because being poor was not something that you could be cured of in just one morning. I'd seen a Buzkashi match at the Ghazi stadium with Raouf and my father, but Nadir and Mateen were very young and didn't know what to expect. The chapandaz rode out on their horses and the referee brought on the boz to begin the game.

'What does that man have in his hand?' Nadir asked.

'It's a goat's carcass,' my father said. 'Each side will fight for possession and to score in the circle of justice,' he pointed to the pole at the far end of the field. 'You'll like it, it's a very fast game.'

Nadir did not like it at all, 'Where is its head?' he asked. 'It looks like Nku. Where is Nku?'

'He's back at the farm, don't worry.'

But as they scooped up the carcass to play, Nadir started crying, and I thought it did look a bit like Nku, with its thick beige coat.

'I feel sorry for the goat,' I said.

'You shouldn't pity it,' my father said. 'It lived a noble life and had a glorious death. That is more than any of us can ask.'

'Why don't they play with a ball instead?' Raouf asked.

My father was getting very impatient, 'Because it's tradition. You think those games that you borrow from the Americans, your football and volleyball, that they don't use animals for their sport? It's no less an animal because it's stretched and sewn into a ball and painted in bright colours.'

'We play with rubber balls,' Raouf said, and my father clipped him over the head.

'This is an honourable game. The boz is not wasted. It's fed to the poor when the game is over.'

At this, Nadir began to cry some more and he wouldn't be comforted until we got back to the farm to find Nku asleep in the bright spring sun. One day he too would cut the head off a goat or a chicken and not spare a thought for the animal. There was a silent rage in men that they took such pleasure in killing things that were no threat to them; they could only be satisfied by taking something that was whole and already perfect and cutting it into pieces. I'd seen the way chickens ran around for a few seconds after their heads were cut off and while you could live without limbs, you couldn't survive without your head. And all the prayers of Nauroz wouldn't cure you of that.

Our visit to Mazar-e-Sharif was to be the last time I would leave Kabul in more than a decade. I wonder if I'd known that, whether I'd have tried to experience more than I did. To see more things; to keep my eyes open for longer. In the years to come my father insisted that my uncle must have forgotten to throw away the sabzeh after our Nauroz feast, so all of our family's bad luck remained and spread like a virus until there was no one left untouched. It was like my father to always seek blame outside himself and he was never satisfied until it was duly apportioned.

As it happened, I needn't have worried that Nadir would turn out like my father. Nadir's gentle hands would not cut the head off anything because he didn't live long enough for that.