

TWELVE

[Return to Contents](#)

Parvana stayed home for a few days. She went out to get water, and she and Nooria took the little ones out into the sunshine, but beyond that, she wanted to be with her family.

"I need a break," she told her mother. "I don't want to see anything ugly for a little while."

Mother and Mrs. Weera had heard about the events at the stadium from other women's group members. Some had husbands or brothers who had been there. "This goes on every Friday," Mother said. "What century are we living in?"

"Will Father be taken there?" Parvana wanted to ask, but she didn't. Her mother wouldn't know.

During her days at home, Parvana coached Maryam on her counting, tried to learn mending from Nooria and listened to Mrs. Weera's stories. They weren't as good as her father's stories. Mostly they were descriptions of field hockey games or other athletic events. Still, they were entertaining, and Mrs. Weera was so enthusiastic about them that she made other people enthusiastic, too.

No one said anything to Parvana when the bread ran out, but she got up and went to work that day anyway. Some things just had to be taken care of.

"I'm glad you're back," Shauzia said when she saw Parvana in the market. "I missed you. Where were you?"

"I didn't feel like working," Parvana replied. "I wanted some quiet days."

"I wouldn't mind some of those, but it's noisier in my home than it is out here."

"Is your family still arguing?"

Shauzia nodded. "My father's parents never really liked my mother anyway. Now they depend on her. It makes them grumpy. Mother's grumpy because we have to live with them since there's no place else to go. So everybody is grumpy. If they're not actually arguing, they sit and glare at each other."

Parvana thought about how it felt in her home sometimes, with everyone going around with tight lips and unshed tears in their eyes. It sounded even worse in Shauzia's house.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Shauzia asked. She led Parvana over to a low wall, and they sat down.

"Of course you can tell me. I won't tell anybody."

"I'm saving money, a little bit each day. I'm getting out of here."

"Where? When?"

Shauzia kicked at the wall in a rhythm, but Parvana stopped her. She'd seen the Taliban hit a child for banging on an old board like it was a drum. The Taliban hated music.

"I'll stay until next spring," Shauzia said.

"I'll have a lot of money saved by then, and it's better not to travel in the winter."

"Do you think we'll still have to be boys in the spring? That's a long time from now."

"I want to still be a boy then," Shauzia insisted. "If I turn back into a girl, I'll be stuck at home. I couldn't stand that."

"Where will you go?"

"France. I'll get on a boat and go to France."

"Why France?" she asked.

Shauzia's face brightened. "In every picture I've seen of France, the sun is shining, people are smiling, and flowers are blooming. France people must have bad days, too, but I don't think their bad days can be very bad, not bad like here. In one picture I saw a whole field of purple flowers. That's where I want to go. I want to walk into that field and sit down in the middle of it, and not think about anything."

Parvana struggled to remember her map of the world. "I'm not sure you can get to France by boat."

"Sure I can. I've got it all figured out. I'll tell a group of nomads that I'm an orphan, and I'll travel with them into Pakistan. My father told me they go back and forth with the seasons, looking for grass for their sheep. In Pakistan, I head down to the Arabian Sea, get on a boat, and go to France!" She spoke as if nothing could be more simple. "The first boat I get on might not go directly to France, but at least I'll

get away from here. Everything will be easy once I get away from here."

"You'll go by yourself!" Parvana couldn't imagine undertaking such a journey on her own.

"Who will notice one little orphan boy?"

Shauzia replied. "No one will pay any attention to me. I just hope I haven't left it too late."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm starting to grow." Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "My shape is changing. If it changes too much, I'll turn back into a girl, and then I'll be stuck here. You don't think I'll grow too fast, do you? Maybe I should leave before the spring. I don't want things to pop out of me all of a sudden."

Parvana did not want Shauzia to leave, but she tried to be honest with her friend.

"I can't remember how it happened with Nooria. Mostly, I watched her hair grow. But I don't think growing happens all of a sudden. I'd say you have time."

Shauzia started to kick the building again.

Then she stood up so she wouldn't be tempted. "That's what I'm counting on."

"You'll leave your family? How will they eat?"

"I can't help that!" Shauzia's voice rose and caught, as she tried not to cry. "I just have to get out of here. I know that makes me a bad person, but what else can I do? I'll die if I have to stay here!"

Parvana remembered arguments between her father and mother—her

mother insisting they leave Afghanistan, her father insisting they stay. For the first time, Parvana wondered why her mother didn't just leave. In an instant, she answered her own question. She couldn't sneak away with four children to take care of.

"I just want to be an ordinary kid again," Parvana said. "I want to sit in a classroom and go home and eat food that someone else has worked for. I want my father to be around. I just want a normal, boring life."

"I don't think I could ever sit in a classroom again," Shauzia said. "Not after all this." She adjusted her tray of cigarettes. "You'll keep my secret?" Parvana nodded.

"Do you want to come with me?" Shauzia asked. "We could look after each other."

"I don't know." She could leave Afghanistan, but could she leave her family? She didn't think so.

"I have a secret, too," she said. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the little gifts she'd received from the woman at the window. She told Shauzia where they had come from.

"Wow," Shauzia said. "That's a real mystery.

I wonder who she could be. Maybe she's a princess!"

"Maybe we can save her!" Parvana said. She saw herself climbing up the wall, smashing the painted-over window with her bare fist and helping the princess

down to the ground. The princess would be wearing silk and jewels. Parvana would swing her up onto the back of a fast horse, and they'd ride through Kabul in a cloud of dust.

"I'll need a fast horse," she said.

"How about one of those?" Shauzia pointed to a herd of long-haired sheep snuffling through the garbage on the ground of the market.

Parvana laughed, and the girls went back to work.

At her mother's suggestion, Parvana had bought a few pounds of dried fruit and nuts. Nooria and Maryam put them into smaller bags, enough for a snack for one person. Parvana sold these from her blanket and her tray.

In the afternoon, she and Shauzia wandered around the market looking for customers. Sometimes they went to the bus depot, but they had a lot of competition there. Many boys were trying to sell things. They would run right up to someone and stand in the person's way, saying, "Buy my gum! Buy my fruit! Buy my cigarettes!" Parvana and Shauzia were too shy for that. They preferred to wait for customers to notice them.

Parvana was tired. She wanted to sit in a classroom and be bored by a geography lesson. She wanted to be with her friends and talk about homework and games and what to do on school holidays. She didn't want to know any more about death or blood or pain.

The marketplace ceased to be interesting. She no longer laughed when a man got into an argument with a stubborn donkey. She was no longer interested in the snippets of conversation she heard from people strolling by. Everywhere, there were people who were hungry and sick. Women in burqas sat on the pavement and begged, their babies stretched across their laps.

And there was no end to it. This wasn't a summer vacation that would end and then life would get back to normal. This was normal, and Parvana was tired of it. Summer had come to Kabul. Flowers pushed up out of the ground, not caring about the Taliban or land mines, and actually bloomed, just as they did in peace time.

Parvana's home, with its little window, grew very hot during the long June days, and the little ones were cranky at night with the heat. Even Maryam lost her good humor and whined along with the two youngest children. Parvana was glad to be able to leave in the morning.

Summer brought fruit into Kabul from the fertile valleys—those that had not been bombed into extinction. Parvana brought treats home for her family on the days she made a bit more money. They had peaches one week, plums the next. The clear mountain passes brought traders from all over Afghanistan into Kabul. From her blanket in the marketplace, and when she walked

around selling cigarettes with Shauzia, Parvana saw tribal peoples from Bamiyan, from the Registan Desert region near Kandahar, and from the Wakhan Corridor near China.

Sometimes these men would stop and buy dried fruit or cigarettes from her. Sometimes they had something for her to read or write. She would always ask where they were from and what it was like there, so she could have something new to tell her family when she went home. Sometimes they told her about the weather. Sometimes they told of the beautiful mountains or the fields of opium poppies blooming into flower, or the orchards heavy with fruit. Sometimes they told her of the war, of battles they had seen and people they had lost. Parvana remembered it all to tell her family when she got home.

Through Mother's and Mrs. Weera's women's group, a secret little school was started. Nooria was the teacher. The Taliban would close down any school they discovered, so Nooria and Mrs. Weera were very careful. This school held only five girls, including Maryam. They were all around her age. They were taught in two different groups, never at the same time two days running.

Sometimes the students came to Nooria, sometimes Nooria went to the students. Sometimes Parvana was her escort. Sometimes she carried a squirming Ali.

"He's getting too big to be carried around," Nooria said to Parvana on one of their noonday walks. Mother had allowed Nooria to leave Ali at home, to get a break from him. They only had Maryam with them, and she was no trouble.

"How are your students doing?"

"They can't learn much in a few hours a week," Nooria replied. "And we don't have any books or school supplies. Still, I guess it's better than nothing."

The little gifts from the window kept landing on Parvana's blanket every couple of weeks. Sometimes it was a piece of embroidery. Sometimes it was a piece of candy or a single bead.

It was as if the Window Woman was saying, "I'm still here," in the only way she could. Parvana checked carefully around her blanket every time she went to leave the market, in case one of the gifts had rolled off.

One afternoon, she heard sounds coming from above her. A man was very angry. He was shouting at a woman who was crying and screaming. Parvana heard thuds and more screams. Without thinking, she sprang to her feet and looked up at the window, but she couldn't see anything through the painted glass.

"What goes on in a man's house is his own business," a voice behind her said. She spun around to see a man holding out an envelope. "Forget about that and turn your mind to your own business. I have a letter for you to read." She was

planning to tell her family about the whole incident that night, but she didn't get the chance. Instead, her family had something to tell her.

"You'll never guess," her mother said.

"Nooria's getting married."