

ELEVEN

[Return to Contents](#)

"You're all wet," Maryam said as soon as Parvana walked through the door.

"Are you all right?" Mother rushed up to her. "Where were you? Why didn't you come home for lunch?"

"I was working," Parvana said. She tried to twist away, but her mother held her firmly by the shoulders.

"Where were you?" Mother repeated.

"We've been sitting here terrified that you had been arrested!"

All that she had seen and done that day came rushing into Parvana's mind. She threw her arms around her mother's neck and cried. Mother held her until she was calm again and could talk. "Now, tell me where you were today." Parvana found she could not bear to say it to her mother's face, so she pressed herself up against the wall and told her. "I was digging up graves."

"You were doing what?" Nooria asked.

Parvana left the wall and sat down on the toshak. She told them all about her day.

"Did you see real bones?" Maryam asked.

Mrs. Weera told her to hush.

"So this is what we've become in Afghanistan," Mother said. "We dig up the bones of our ancestors in order to feed our families!"

"Bones are used for all sorts of things," Mrs. Weera replied. "Chicken feed,

cooking oil, soap and buttons. I've heard of animal bones being used this way, not human bones, but I suppose human beings are also animals."

"Was it worth it?" Nooria asked. "How much money did you make?"

Parvana took the money out of her pocket, then dug the rest of the money out of the shoulder bag. She put it all on the floor for everyone to see.

"All that for digging up graves," Mrs. Weera breathed.

"Tomorrow you'll go back to reading letters. No more of this digging!" Mother declared. "We don't need money that badly!"

"No," Parvana said to her mother.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I don't want to quit yet. Shauzia and I want to buy trays, and things to sell from the trays. I can follow the crowd that way, instead of waiting for the crowd to come to me. I can make more money."

"We are managing fine on what you earn reading letters."

"No, Mother, we're not," Nooria said.

Mother spun around to scold Nooria for talking back, but Nooria kept talking. "We have nothing left to sell. What Parvana earns keeps us in nan, rice and tea, but there's nothing extra. We need money for rent, for propane, for fuel for the lamps. If she can make money this way, and she's willing to do it, then I think she should be allowed."

It was Parvana's turn to be stunned.

Nooria taking her side? Such a thing had never happened before.

"I'm glad your father isn't here to hear you talk to me with such disrespect!"

"That's just it," Mrs. Weera said gently.

"Their father isn't here. These are unusual times. They call for ordinary people to do unusual things, just to get by."

In the end, Mother relented. "You must tell me everything that happens," she told Parvana. "We will put it in the magazine, so that everyone will know."

From then on, she sent Parvana off to work with a little packet of nan for her lunch, "since you won't be back at mid-day." Although Parvana got very hungry during the day, she couldn't bear to eat in the middle of the field of bones. She gave her nan to one of Kabul's many beggars, so that someone would get some use out of it.

At the end of two weeks, they had enough money to buy the trays, with straps to go around their necks to carry them.

"We should sell things that don't weigh much," Shauzia said. They decided on cigarettes, which they could buy in big cartons and sell by the pack. They also sold chewing gum, by the pack and sometimes by the stick. Boxes of matches filled up the empty spaces on the trays.

"My tea boy days are over!" Shauzia said gleefully.

"I'm just happy to be out of the graveyard," Parvana said. She was

learning to walk and balance the tray at the same time. She didn't want all her lovely goods to fall into the dirt.

The first morning back at her letter-reading post was almost over before she felt something drop on her head again. Her aim is getting good, Parvana thought. Two direct hits in a row.

This time, the gift was a single red wooden bead. Parvana rolled it around her fingers and wondered about the woman who had sent it.

Her graveyard stint over, she was back to going outside with Nooria and the little ones in the middle of the day. A change had come over Nooria. She hadn't said anything nasty to Parvana in ages.

Or maybe it's me who's changed, Parvana thought. Arguing with Nooria simply didn't make sense any more.

In the afternoon, she would meet up with Shauzia, and the two of them would wander around Kabul looking for customers. They did not earn as much as they did in the graveyard, but they did all right. Parvana was getting to know Kabul. "There's a crowd," Shauzia said one Friday afternoon, pointing at the sports stadium.

Thousands of people were headed into the stands.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Parvana. "People will want to smoke and chew gum while they watch a soccer game. We'll sell out. Let's go!"

They ran over to the stadium entrance as fast as they could without bouncing their cigarettes onto the ground. Several Taliban soldiers were urging people inside, yelling at them to hurry. They pushed and shoved people through the stadium gates, swinging their sticks to get the slow ones to move faster.

"Let's avoid those guys," Shauzia suggested. She and Parvana dodged around some groups of men and slipped into the stadium.

The stadium stands were almost full. The two girls were a little intimidated by so many people and stayed next to each other as they went up into the bleachers to sell their wares.

"It's awfully quiet for a soccer game," Shauzia said.

"The game hasn't started yet. Maybe the cheering will start when the players come on the field." Parvana had seen sports events on television, and people in the stands always cheered.

No one was cheering. The men did not look at all happy to be there.

"This is very strange," Parvana whispered into Shauzia's ear.

"Look out!" A large group of Taliban soldiers walked onto the field close to them. The girls ducked down low so they could see the field but the Taliban couldn't see them.

"Let's get out of here," Shauzia said. "No one's buying anything from us, and I don't know why, but I'm getting scared."

"As soon as the game starts, we'll go," Parvana said. "If we try to leave now, people will look at us."

More men moved onto the field, but they weren't soccer players. Several men were brought in with their hands tied behind their backs. A heavy-looking table was carried out by two of the soldiers.

"I think those men are prisoners," Shauzia whispered.

"What are prisoners doing at a soccer game?" Parvana whispered back.

Shauzia shrugged.

One of the men was untied, then bent over the table. Several soldiers held him down, his arms stretched out across the table-top.

Parvana didn't have a clue what was going on. Where were the soccer players?

All of a sudden one of the soldiers took out a sword, raised it above his head and brought it down on the man's arm. Blood flew in every direction. The man cried out in pain.

Next to Parvana, Shauzia started screaming. Parvana clamped her hand over Shauzia's mouth and pulled her down to the floor of the stadium stands. The rest of the stadium was quiet. There was still no cheering.

"Keep your heads down, boys," a kind voice above Parvana said. "There will be time enough when you are old to see such things."

The cigarettes and gum had fallen off their trays, but the men around them gathered up the spilled items and returned them to the girls.

Parvana and Shauzia stayed huddled among people's feet, listening to the sword thwack down on six more arms.

"These men are thieves," the soldiers called out to the crowd. "See how we punish thieves? We cut off one of their hands! See what we do!"

Parvana and Shauzia did not look. They kept their heads down until the man with the kind voice said, "It's over for another week. Come, now, raise yourselves up." He and several other men surrounded Parvana and Shauzia, escorting them out of the stadium.

Just before she left, Parvana caught a glimpse of a young Talib man, too young to have a beard.

He was holding up a rope strung with four severed hands, like beads on a necklace. He was laughing and showing off his booty to the crowd. Parvana hoped Shauzia hadn't seen.

"Go home, boys," the kind man told them. "Go home and remember better things."