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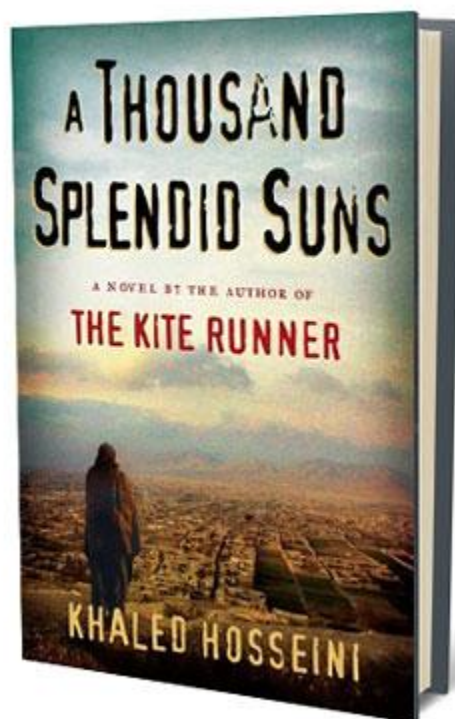
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KHALED HOSSEINI



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Translation of the poem "Kabul" by Josephine Barry Davis

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ALSO BY KHALED HOSSEINI

The Kite Runner

This book is dedicated to Haris and Farah,
both the *noor* of my eyes, and to the women of Afghanistan.

PART ONE

1.

Mariam was five years old the first time she heard the word *harami*.

It happened on a Thursday. It must have, because Mariam remembered that she had been restless and preoccupied that day, the way she was only on Thursdays, the day when Jalil visited her at the *kolba*. To pass the time until the moment that she would see him at last, crossing the knee-high grass in the clearing and waving, Mariam had climbed a chair and taken down her mother's Chinese tea set. The tea set was the sole relic that Mariam's mother, Nana, had of her own mother, who had died when Nana was two. Nana cherished each blue-and-white porcelain piece, the graceful curve of the pot's spout, the hand-painted finches and chrysanthemums, the dragon on the sugar bowl, meant to ward off evil.

It was this last piece that slipped from Mariam's fingers, that fell to the wooden floor boards of the *kolba* and shattered.

When Nana saw the bowl, her face flushed red and her upper lip shivered, and her eyes, both the lazy one and the good, settled on Mariam in a flat, unblinking way. Nana looked so mad that Mariam feared the *jinn* would enter her mother's body again. But the *jinn* didn't come, not that time. Instead, Nana grabbed Mariam by the wrists, pulled her close, and, through gritted teeth, said, "You are a clumsy little *harami* This is my reward for everything I've endured An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little *harami*."

At the time, Mariam did not understand. She did not know what this word *harami*--bastard--meant Nor was she old enough to appreciate the injustice, to see that it is the creators of the *harami* who are culpable, not the *harami*, whose only sin is being born. Mariam *did* surmise, by the way Nana said the word, that it was an ugly, loathsome thing to be a *harami*, like an insect, like the scurrying cockroaches Nana was always cursing and sweeping out of the *kolba*.

Later, when she was older, Mariam did understand. It was the way Nana uttered the word not so much saying it as spitting it at her that made Mariam feel the full sting of it. She understood then what Nana meant, that a *harami* was an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance.

Jalil never called Mariam this name. Jalil said she was his little flower. He was fond of sitting her on his lap and telling her stories, like the time he told her that Herat, the city where Mariam was born, in 1959, had once been the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters, and Sufis.

"You couldn't stretch a leg here without poking a poet in the ass," he laughed.

Jalil told her the story of Queen Gauhar Shad, who had raised the famous minarets as her loving ode to Herat back in the fifteenth century. He described to her the green wheat fields of Herat, the orchards, the vines pregnant with plump grapes, the city's crowded, vaulted bazaars.

"There is a pistachio tree," Jalil said one day, "and beneath it, Mariam jo, is buried none other than the great poet Jami." He leaned in and whispered, "Jami lived over five hundred years ago. He did. I took you there once, to the tree. You were little. You wouldn't remember."

It was true. Mariam didn't remember. And though she would live the first fifteen years of her life within walking distance of Herat, Mariam would never see this storied tree. She would never see the famous minarets up close, and she would never pick fruit from Herat's orchards or stroll in its fields of wheat. But whenever Jalil talked like this, Mariam would listen with enchantment. She would admire Jalil for his vast and worldly knowledge. She would quiver with pride to have a father who knew such things.

"What rich lies!" Nana said after Jalil left. "Rich man telling rich lies. He never took you to any tree. And don't let him charm you. He betrayed us, your beloved father. He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily."

Mariam would listen dutifully to this. She never dared say to Nana how much she disliked her talking this way about Jalil. The truth was that around Jalil, Mariam did not feel at all like a *harami*. For an hour or two every Thursday, when Jalil came to see her, all smiles and gifts and endearments, Mariam felt deserving of all the beauty and bounty that life had to give. And, for this, Mariam loved Jalil.

* * *

Even if she had to share him.

Jalil had three wives and nine children, nine legitimate children, all of whom were strangers to Mariam. He was one of Herat's wealthiest men. He owned a cinema, which Mariam had never seen, but at her insistence Jalil had described it to her, and so she knew that the facade was made of blue-and-tan terra-cotta tiles, that it had private balcony seats and a trellised ceiling. Double swinging doors opened into a tiled lobby, where posters of Hindi films were encased in glass displays. On Tuesdays, Jalil said one day, kids got free ice cream at the concession stand

Nana smiled demurely when he said this. She waited until he had left the *kolba*, before snickering and saying, "The children of strangers get ice cream. What do you get, Mariam? Stories of ice cream."

In addition to the cinema, Jalil owned land in Karokh, land in Farah, three carpet stores, a clothing shop, and a black 1956 Buick Roadmaster. He was one of Herat's best-connected men, friend of the mayor and the provincial governor. He had a cook, a driver, and three housekeepers.

Nana had been one of the housekeepers. Until her belly began to swell.

When that happened, Nana said, the collective gasp of Jalil's family sucked the air out of Herat. His in laws swore blood would flow. The wives demanded that he throw her out. Nana's own father, who was a lowly stone carver in the nearby village of Gul Daman, disowned her. Disgraced, he packed his things and boarded a bus to Bran, never to be seen or heard from again.

"Sometimes," Nana said early one morning, as she was feeding the chickens outside the *kolba*, "I wish my father had had the stomach to sharpen one of his knives and do the honorable thing. It might have been better for me." She tossed another handful of seeds into the coop, paused, and looked at Mariam. "Better for you too, maybe. It would have spared you the grief of knowing that you are what you are. But he was a coward, my father. He didn't have the *dil*, the heart, for it."

Jalil didn't have the *dil* either, Nana said, to do the honorable thing. To stand up to his family, to his wives and in-laws, and accept responsibility for what he had done. Instead, behind closed doors, a face saving deal had quickly been struck. The next day, he had made her gather her few things from the servants' quarters, where she'd been living, and sent her off.

"You know what he told his wives by way of defense? That I *forced* myself on him. That it was my fault. *Didi*? You see? This is what it means to be a woman in this world."

Nana put down the bowl of chicken feed. She lifted Mariam's chin with a finger.

"Look at me, Mariam."

Reluctantly, Mariam did.

Nana said, "Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam."

2.

To Jalil and his wives, I was a pokeroot. A mugwort. You too. And you weren't even born yet."

"What's a mugwort?" Mariam asked

"A weed," Nana said. "Something you rip out and toss aside."

Mariam frowned internally. Jalil didn't treat her as a weed. He never had. But Mariam thought it wise to suppress this protest.

"Unlike weeds, I had to be replanted, you see, given food and water. On account of you. That was the deal Jalil made with his family."

Nana said she had refused to live in Herat.

"For what? To watch him drive his *kinchini* wives around town all day?"

She said she wouldn't live in her father's empty house either, in the village of Gul Daman, which sat on a steep hill two kilometers north of Herat. She said she wanted to live somewhere removed, detached, where neighbors wouldn't stare at her belly, point at her, snicker, or, worse yet, assault her with insincere kindnesses.

"And, believe me," Nana said, "it was a relief to your father having me out of sight. It suited him just fine."

It was Muhsin, Jalil's eldest son by his first wife, Khadija, who suggested the clearing. It was on the outskirts of Gul Daman. To get to it, one took a rutted, uphill dirt track that branched off the main road between Herat and Gul Daman. The track was flanked on either side by knee high grass and speckles of white and bright yellow flowers. The track snaked uphill and led to a flat field where poplars and cottonwoods soared and wild bushes grew in clusters. From up there, one could make out the tips of the rusted blades of Gul Daman's windmill, on the left, and, on the right, all of Herat spread below. The path ended perpendicular to a wide, trout-filled stream, which rolled down from the Safid-koh mountains surrounding Gul Daman. Two hundred yards upstream, toward the mountains, there was a circular grove of weeping willow trees. In the center, in the shade of the willows, was the clearing.

Jalil went there to have a look. When he came back, Nana said, he sounded like a warden bragging about the clean walls and shiny floors of his prison.

"And so, your father built us this rathole."

* * *

Nana had almost married once, when she was fifteen. The suitor had been a boy from Shindand, a young parakeet seller. Mariam knew the story from Nana herself, and, though

Nana dismissed the episode, Mariam could tell by the wistful light in her eyes that she had been happy. Perhaps for the only time in her life, during those days leading up to her wedding, Nana had been genuinely happy.

As Nana told the story, Mariam sat on her lap and pictured her mother being fitted for a wedding dress. She imagined her on horseback, smiling shyly behind a veiled green gown, her palms painted red with henna, her hair parted with silver dust, the braids held together by tree sap. She saw musicians blowing the *shahnai* flute and banging on *dohol* drums, street children hooting and giving chase.

Then, a week before the wedding date, a *jinn* had entered Nana's body. This required no description to Mariam. She had witnessed it enough times with her own eyes: Nana collapsing suddenly, her body tightening, becoming rigid, her eyes rolling back, her arms and legs shaking as if something were throttling her from the inside, the froth at the corners of her mouth, white, sometimes pink with blood. Then the drowsiness, the frightening disorientation, the incoherent mumbling.

When the news reached Shindand, the parakeet seller's family called off the wedding.

"They got spooked" was how Nana put it.

The wedding dress was stashed away. After that, there were no more suitors.

* * *

In the clearing, Jalil and two of his sons, Farhad and Muhsin, built the small *kolba* where Mariam would live the first fifteen years of her life. They raised it with sun dried bricks and plastered it with mud and handfuls of straw. It had two sleeping cots, a wooden table, two straight backed chairs, a window, and shelves nailed to the walls where Nana placed clay pots and her beloved Chinese tea set. Jalil put in a new cast iron stove for the winter and stacked logs of chopped wood behind the *kolba*. He added a tandoor outside for making bread and a chicken coop with a fence around it. He brought a few sheep, built them a feeding trough. He had Farhad and Muhsin dig a deep hole a hundred yards outside the circle of willows and built an outhouse over it.

Jalil could have hired laborers to build the *kolba*. Nana said, but he didn't.

"His idea of penance."

* * *

In Nana's account of the day that she gave birth to Mariam, no one came to help. It happened on a damp, overcast day in the spring of 1959, she said, the twenty sixth year of King Zahir Shah's mostly uneventful forty year reign. She said that Jalil hadn't bothered to summon a doctor, or even a midwife, even though he knew that *the jinn* might enter her body and cause her to have one of her fits in the act of delivering. She lay all alone on the *kolba*'s floor, a knife by her side, sweat drenching her body.

"When the pain got bad, I'd bite on a pillow and scream into it until I was hoarse. And still no one came to wipe my face or give me a drink of water. And you, Mariam jo, you were in

no rush. Almost two days you made me lay on that cold, hard floor. I didn't eat or sleep, all I did was push and pray that you would come out."

"I'm sorry, Nana."

"I cut the cord between us myself. That's why I had a knife."

"I'm sorry."

Nana always gave a slow, burdened smile here, one of lingering recrimination or reluctant forgiveness, Mariam could never tell. It did not occur to young Mariam to ponder the unfairness of apologizing for the manner of her own birth.

By the time it *did* occur to her, around the time she turned ten, Mariam no longer believed this story of her birth. She believed Jalil's version, that though he'd been away he'd arranged for Nana to be taken to a hospital in Herat where she had been tended to by a doctor. She had lain on a clean, proper bed in a well lit room. Jalil shook his head with sadness when Mariam told him about the knife.

Mariam also came to doubt that she had made her mother suffer for two full days.

"They told me it was all over within under an hour," Jalil said. "You were a good daughter, Mariam jo. Even in birth you were a good daughter."

"He wasn't even there!" Nana spat. "He was in Takht-e-Safar, horseback riding with his precious friends."

When they informed him that he had a new daughter, Nana said, Jalil had shrugged, kept brushing his horse's mane, and stayed in Takht-e-Safar another two weeks.

"The truth is, he didn't even hold you until you were a month old. And then only to look down once, comment on your longish face, and hand you back to me."

Mariam came to disbelieve this part of the story as well. Yes, Jalil admitted, he had been horseback riding in Takht-e-Safar, but, when they gave him the news, he had not shrugged. He had hopped on the saddle and ridden back to Herat. He had bounced her in his arms, run his thumb over her flaky eyebrows, and hummed a lullaby. Mariam did not picture Jalil saying that her face was long, though it was true that it was long.

Nana said she was the one who'd picked the name Mariam because it had been the name of her mother. Jalil said he chose the name because Mariam, the tuberose, was a lovely flower.

"Your favorite?" Mariam asked.

"Well, one of," he said and smiled.