



THE SHADOW THAT BREATHES

WRITTEN BY NAZI-MAYSAM
TRANSLATED IN ENGLISH BY SAKINA NAIMI

THE SHADOW THAT BREATHES

Introduction

“The Shadow That Breathes” is a haunting and deeply moving narrative that echoes the unheard voices of countless Afghan women silenced by oppression, tradition, and violence. It tells the story of Farkhunda, a sixteen-year-old girl forced into marriage, suffocated by the weight of patriarchal control and domestic abuse. Her journey unfolds in a world where being a daughter means walking on shattered glass, where girlhood is not celebrated but suppressed.

Told in the first person, this story is not just a personal account of pain and loss—it is a powerful testament to resilience.

THE SHADOW THAT BREATHES

It brings to life the emotional torment of a young mother whose only source of hope is violently taken from her, yet who still finds within herself a flicker of strength to survive, to speak, and to fight back.

Blending harsh realities with a glimmer of imagined freedom, *The Shadow That Breathes* becomes more than a story—it becomes a voice for those who are rarely heard. It calls on the reader to listen, to reflect, and to recognize the urgent need for justice, empathy, and change.

The Shadow That Breathes

Life is vague; like madness.

It is sorrowful; like the night in the atmosphere of my homeland.

Sorrow has reached my throat, and time has been stopped in the most bitter calendar of the era.

And I am full; like that water.

I am alone and without anyone, like someone who is fond of the moon, and whenever I want to sing a song of sorrow, the moon hides behind a cloud.

I am lost and waiting...

Say, O God!

This extent of confusion,

This amount of disgust,

Justice has been lost

In this land.

The sun of love,

The impossible dream,

Obligation and loneliness,

Have they done this and you have forgiven?
Join me, for I weave a story for you from the most sorrowful,
far-off corner of the world.
Where the skin of our bodies is burned by the difference of
evident distinctions.
Where women and girls have been fighting an unequal and
unjust war for years.
Where restless and broken hearts want peace like death.
Yes, here there is no trace of happiness.
The cry of the suffering has been stolen.
But I try to be the voice of thousands of women and girls with
all the unburied wounds in my heart, those whose fate is the
same as that of Farkhonda.

I look out the window of the hospital. The autumn leaves
dance in the wind and cover the ground with yellow and
orange colors, but these beauties mean nothing to me. It
seems that nature, with all its power, is trying to show me a
sign of life, but my heart is emptier than that to feel anything.
The cold, white room has no scent of life. The tired walls, the
fluorescent lights, the smell of medicine, all remind me of the
hard moments that have left me with no hope.
Life is like these leaves; trembling, empty, and silent.
Sometimes wandering in the wind, sometimes crushed under
the feet of passersby. At any moment ready to fall, my lifeless
existence will take me where? But maybe, just like the leaves, I
will one day sink into the soil of storms and return to life,
stronger, greener, and filled with a new hope...

Ah, from a life that did not allow me to adapt to its events! My hand slides gently over my stomach, where my little hope once breathed. Now only silence and emptiness remain. Tears flow silently, like wounds that never heal. I know many why's are wandering in your thoughts, and perhaps you cannot swallow my words correctly.

From me:

So come and know me, dear
With black eyes and tangled hair, a woman who perhaps
never wanted to narrate her life story this way. . But no longer
do I have the path to a future, and I will scream...

I am Farkhonda, a girl with eyes like stars I am lying on the
cold hospital bed.

The whiteness of the ceiling is monotonous and soulless, just
like my life. My fingers involuntarily slide to a place that is
now emptier than ever. Oh! The seven-month-old child who
was once my hope for a better life, is now gone. But the pain
of today is just one of the many wounds I have endured in my
life. My story began long before this.

Autumn has always been colored with sorrow for me. Since
childhood, I loved this season with the sound of rustling
leaves and the cool breeze, but I always felt a heavy burden in
my heart.

My father used to say: "Autumn is the time of endings. A time when everything dies to give way to winter." Perhaps that was the sentence that turned autumn into a season of loss for me. My father was a harsh and cold man, but not always merciless. Sometimes he gently stroked my head, but these moments were rare. He always differentiated between me and my brother; my brother was the crown of his head, and I? A burden. Since childhood, I knew that being a girl meant stepping on broken glass because my father always said: "A girl is like glass, no matter how strong she seems, she will eventually break. These sentences of him was like a knife that slowly sank into my heart and was with me like a shadow throughout my childhood.

When the Taliban came, the shadows became heavier. My father no longer allowed me to have even the occasional freedoms I once had; he became stricter, as though he believed that girls were a danger to the honor and dignity of the family. He said: "You must go to your husband's house soon. This time is dangerous for girls."

How difficult it is to live in four walls called home, which never offered refuge for my sorrow and the sting of my father's insults.

A place where no one ever listened to my dreams, never asked me what I wanted. They only wanted me to be what they expected me to be. Every day my father wounded my heart, but the real wound came when I turned sixteen.

Yes, I was sixteen when he made his decision; he neither consulted me nor gave me a chance to disagree. One winter morning, my father announced at the breakfast table that I was engaged. It felt like someone had taken the air from my lungs.

He said firmly and mercilessly: "Farkhonda, you can no longer stay at home. You are going to be a bride. Milad has arranged a proposal, and I have accepted. This week you will be engaged." His words fell on me like a hammer. My hands began to shake, and I felt the ground beneath me crumble. I asked myself:

Father, why? I am still a child! Why are you giving me to a man whose eyes have no feelings?" But I didn't have the courage to speak. His sharp gaze, as always, forced me into silence. My fiancé, Milad, was thirty years old, a relative of ours. He never smiled, never said anything pleasant, and his gaze was always heavy and terrifying.

I knew my father believed that a girl should go to her husband's house as soon as possible, but was it right to sacrifice his sixteen-year-old daughter to this belief?

"Why did he accept a marriage with a man three times of my age, a man whose gaze was cold, heavy, and his soul void of affection? On the day of the wedding, when the white veil fell over my head, my soul screamed, but no one heard. My mother, who undoubtedly was also a victim of these customs, squeezed my hand and murmured: "My daughter, this is life. Endure."

But no one knows that enduring is not always easy; that day, my soul cried. I felt like a prisoner, trapped in a dress I had never dreamed of wearing...

After the wedding, my life entered a phase that I could not have imagined even in my worst nightmares. Milad, who was now my husband, started unleashing his anger on me from the very first days. The first time he raised his hand, I can still hear the sound of the slap in my ears. The reason? My food had a little too much salt. When his face turned red with rage and he shouted:

"Don't you know how to cook?" and then... I received the first hit.

I realized that there would be no end to this pain.

But whose fault is it?

Is it my father's, "A father who gave his innocent daughter to a man his own age is he like me, or am I just a mere victim?"

Life and its games made me a wanderer in my childhood; my home had turned into a prison where every corner smelled of anger and violence. Milad did not need a reason for his rage, and every time he would crush my body under his heavy kicks without any explanation.

God!

My name, which gives a meaning far from sorrow and pain, why can't I at least give meaning to my name?

Why do I have to live every day and every moment in a house that should have been my refuge, with fear?

Why does every hit hurt my face, my heart, and my soul?
Oh God!

Some people cannot be called human.

"Some hurt those around them so deeply that every passing moment becomes a longing for death."

In the harshest days and the darkest moments,

While the Taliban outside had turned life into a nightmare, and no peace breathed inside the house,

I realized that I was pregnant, and a small being was growing inside me. Fear sprouted in my heart, a fear deeper than the terror flowing outside the house. I thought to myself: "How can I bring a child into this world, in this unjust world, in a house that is no love and affection?"

My hands trembled, my heart became heavy, and my mind filled with unanswered questions.

Motherhood is beautiful, isn't it?

But I myself need a mother's embrace to escape the narrow spaces of the crime placed upon me for being a girl.

Does she too have to experience this injustice and darkness?
Can I protect her? A world that is not safe for me,
How can it be a shelter for her?

But in those moments of despair, a small light sparked in my heart. A weak but determined voice whispered within me:

"She might be a hope for a better tomorrow. Maybe her presence can change something." My tears flowed with this thought. There was pain, but there was also hope. I decided to fight, for her and for the future she deserves.

Late at night, with abundant hope and to escape the baseless tensions, I turned to my husband's always cold face and spoke about the blooming flower growing inside me. I thought maybe this child could become a bridge between us, and light the heart of a father with love. But Milad didn't soften even for a moment. His violence increased; it seemed he couldn't bear my happiness because my response was a bitter and cold laugh. Milad, without even glancing at my hopeful eyes, said: "Child? You are not even the woman you should be, far from being a mother."

And these words stayed with me like a deep wound in my heart. From that moment, I understood that even this small light could not erase the shadow of oppression and cruelty from my life. But I didn't know that fate had drawn a darker plan for me.

It wasn't just my child and his father. I felt downhearted, not because I wasn't loved by my husband, but because of the future awaiting her, with a mindset like my father's. In the silence of the night, I placed my hands on my belly, and with a trembling voice, but full of determination, I whispered to myself:

"I am a mother, even if I am sixteen, even if my world is made of cruelty. Motherhood means strength, means fighting for what you love, for that which breathes within you. My husband is a tyrant, like all the oppressors waiting outside this house. He might derive his power from his age, but I derive mine from something bigger... from the love that roots deep within me.

I am sixteen, but a mother has awakened within me, one that not even the darkness of this world can extinguish. I will fight for you, my child. Maybe I seem weak on the outside, but in my heart, there is something stronger than any tyrant.

You are my hope, you are my light. For you, I will break this world. For you, I will be a mother that not even oppression can bring down. I am a mother, and that means nothing can stop me."

And with tears flowing down my cheek, I took a deep breath, as if for the first time, I had believed: I am stronger than everything that threatens me.

Weeks passed. With every moment that passed, my heart beat more for my child. I still hoped that our child might be the only window of happiness for me to escape this hell of cruelty. Seven months passed; seven months each day felt like a year. Since the day I realized that a small life was growing inside me, it seemed that the whole world had found new meaning. However, for me, these seven months were more than the wait for motherhood. These seven months were a never-ending battle with the injustices, both small and large, that I witnessed from a man who should have been my protector, not my enemy.

Every morning, I woke up with unease, fearing what reason his anger would ignite today. Sometimes, just a tea glass that was prepared late was enough for a slap to land on my face. Sometimes, even breathing seemed a crime to him.

But it wasn't just my body that suffered. Every time I was humiliated, every time I heard his screams in my ears, a new wound opened in my heart.

And every time I placed my hand on my belly and felt its small movements, I told myself: I must be strong. I must endure. Not for myself, but for her. She must be born into a world where laughter is louder than screams.

These seven months felt like a lifetime. Every night, I fell asleep with my tears, and every day, I woke up with a small hope. A hope that was the only reason for this small life growing inside me.

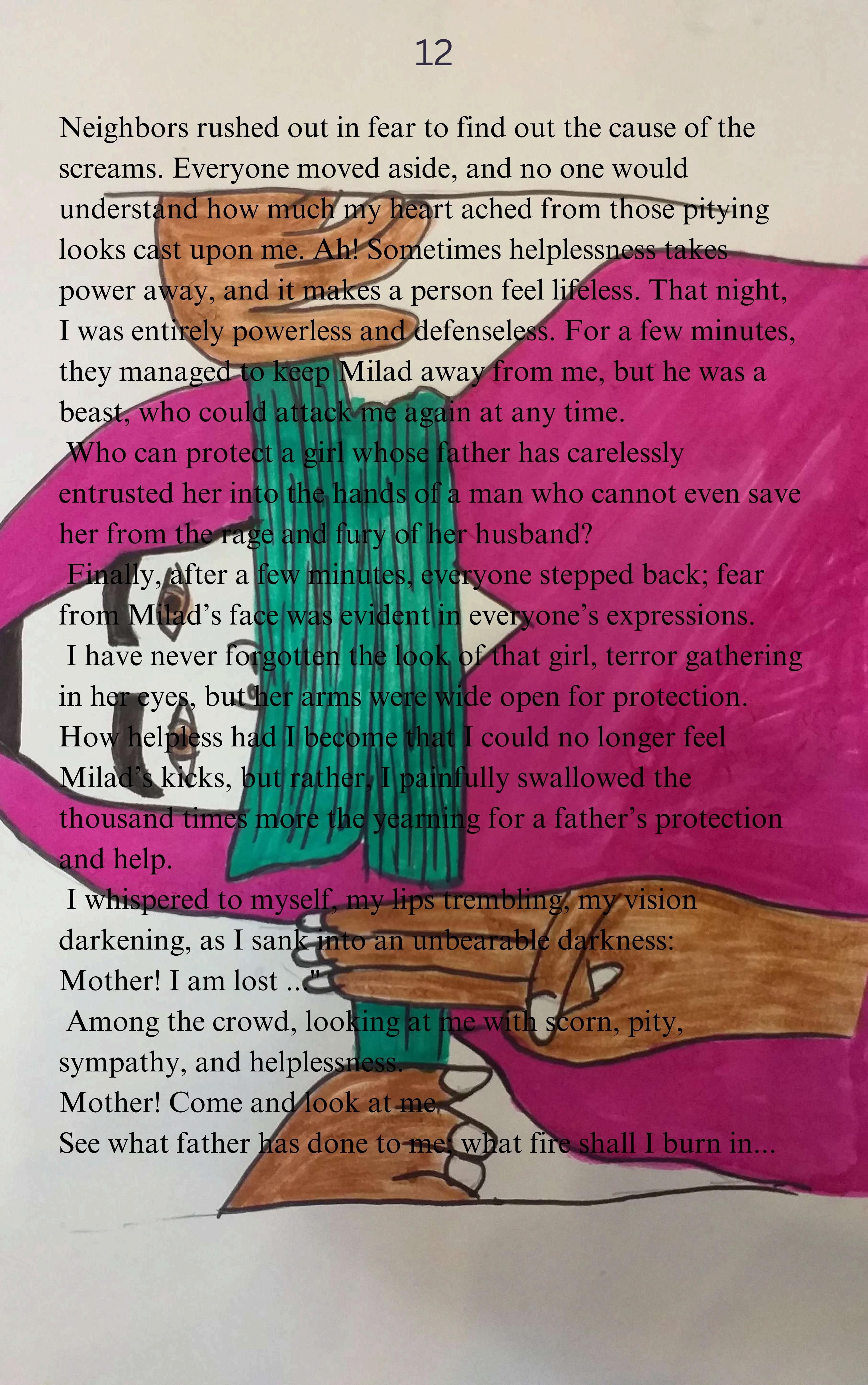
Time turned, and without warning, it stopped on one night. That cursed night, Milad had returned from outside. He was drunk and angry. He couldn't find a reason for his anger but suddenly threw me to one side. I fell to the ground, and intense pain twisted in my belly. His voice was loud, and his hand heavier than ever.

His eyes were barely open, but his blows came down hard and mercilessly on my body. I could hear my bones breaking, and even the last pieces of my heart felt it. That house was never safe for me. The walls were full of painful memories that came to me every night in my sleep.

But that night... that night was different. I thought this was the final hit, that I wouldn't survive. I gathered all my strength and opened the door. With a wounded body and legs that couldn't carry me anymore, I pulled myself outside. I shouted as loud as I could: Help me!

From Milad's gaze, blood and anger poured, and with no mask or resistance to preserve my dignity, I experienced fear. My screams echoed as if they were skyscrapers, and I kept trying to escape from my husband. He tried to lead me back to the house, but I clung to the walls. My resistance caused me to stay outside until the deadly silence arrived.





Neighbors rushed out in fear to find out the cause of the screams. Everyone moved aside, and no one would understand how much my heart ached from those pitying looks cast upon me. Ah! Sometimes helplessness takes power away, and it makes a person feel lifeless. That night, I was entirely powerless and defenseless. For a few minutes, they managed to keep Milad away from me, but he was a beast, who could attack me again at any time.

Who can protect a girl whose father has carelessly entrusted her into the hands of a man who cannot even save her from the rage and fury of her husband?

Finally, after a few minutes, everyone stepped back; fear from Milad's face was evident in everyone's expressions.

I have never forgotten the look of that girl, terror gathering in her eyes, but her arms were wide open for protection. How helpless had I become that I could no longer feel Milad's kicks, but rather, I painfully swallowed the thousand times more the yearning for a father's protection and help.

I whispered to myself, my lips trembling, my vision darkening, as I sank into an unbearable darkness:
Mother! I am lost ..."

Among the crowd, looking at me with scorn, pity, sympathy, and helplessness.

Mother! Come and look at me
See what father has done to me; what fire shall I burn in...

In the cold night, exactly as everything started, it ended. Suddenly and mercilessly, a hit from the side of Milad not only broke my body but also shattered my small, hopeful world.

The last thing I remember was the severe pain in my stomach and the sound of my weak, silent screams. When I regained consciousness, I was in the hospital...

A nurse had previously told me that I had lost my child, and I had just realized that a girl was growing inside me, and she had tried her best to survive. The nurse, while indifferent to her duties, says that she was alive after the operation, but that life didn't last long, and after two hours, her little eyes were shut forever in this cruel world. My tears flow endlessly. I feel that I have lost not only my child but also my last glimmer of hope.



She no longer breathes, but I speak to her:
"momy's live! I wish your death hadn't left me so helpless
I feel a deep emptiness in my heart
An emptiness that no one and nothing can fill
Though my joys are miles away from me
You, however, sleep peacefully because this world wasn't a
safe place for you Sleep peacefully, my body's patch!"
I don't know how long I have slept, but when I wake up to
the sound of familiar footsteps. It's none other than my
father.
Has my father changed? Is he regretting his actions?
Has he come to take me home and not let me return to
Milad?
I hope so; I also hope that he has changed.
I stared at the ceiling and didn't look at him; the only thing
he said after the long silence was: "For the sake of our
honor, remain silent. No one should know anything." And
then he left.



His words brought out mixed feelings inside me: anger, helplessness, defenselessness, revenge, and silence.

I can't allow Milad to walk freely in the house as if nothing has happened, can I?

Now, as I lay on this hospital bed, I can only think of one thing: if one day the voices of women like me, the only victims, are heard, perhaps we can break this cycle of terror. But until that day, it's we, like me, who are buried in silence.

Yes, today a woman died

The familiar hand of her husband and father

With hands that were able to hold her

But ended the life of a baby who was not able even to talk.

Oh, my daughter, you were too young to understand where you were, and why you were born, under the boots of a man who was supposed to be your father, crushed and scattered. A child was buried today, and a mother wept. Today, my child perished before she blossomed, and this time I will not submit to my father's demands.



I swear to the pain-filled cries, and perhaps the unjust vengeance. As I grapple with my thoughts, a few people enter the room; but I don't bother to look at them. One of them, who I guess has been far from love for years, and whose voice carries no trace of affection, starts speaking: "You girls have become so materialistic that you've become targets for early marriages, and now this is your fate!"

"You are torn apart, and worse still, your child, that innocent girl, became a victim of this marriage..."

But I am hollow and empty inside

Empty of words and emotions

Staring at the ceiling

In turmoil Lost in thought

With a heart that has turned to stone!

I am a mother,

sitting in mourning for my child

But not a single tear falls from my eyes.

My thoughts burst out

With the loud voice of another man, waking me from my daze:



“Don’t start again, this sick woman won’t make it with your words. She’s not in a good state. Her daughter is dead, and for sure, Get over it, so we can go back.”

I don’t know what they had come for, but now they’ve left, and I find myself once again within the four walls that strangely resemble a cage and prison. I look around, and this time it’s not fear, but I feel an unrelenting, burning volcano inside me as unanswered questions flood my mind, and I sit in silence, confused, weak, and tired: Why did I end up here without complaining about Milad?

Why did no one ask how my little bird died forever?

Why did my father, oh, why did my mother allow me to fall into this situation again?

The loud and jarring voice of Milad shakes me: “You thought I was stupid enough to let a woman as weak as you send me to prison?” He laughs and continues: You don’t understand. The Taliban government doesn’t value you women at all.

What difference does it make if a girl dies or a woman sits waiting to complain?”

“Now, shout all you want, cause a scene. When I return, dinner better be ready...”

He leaves, and I think of all the humiliation and bitterness in my life.

I am a woman; a women from Afghanistan, and the only voice that keeps echoing in my ears is my father's: "A girl should leave her father's house in a white dress and leave her husband's house in a shroud. Otherwise, if she returns from her husband's house, it's considered shameful."

Ah, my life is a story of wounds and silence, but this silence will one day turn into a cry that will bring down the walls of cruelty I am buried in the frozen snow that no cold can withstand.

Tonight, I am burning in the flame of anger, deep in the mountain, But I will not let my flame be extinguished nor my rage be suppressed.



Enduring inner struggles, silent suffering

Being ignored

Obeying the commands of others

Deeply wounded

And saying nothing is enough!

Tonight, I will leave, for myself, for my lost child, and for all the women who silently suffer, swallowing the bitterness of life.

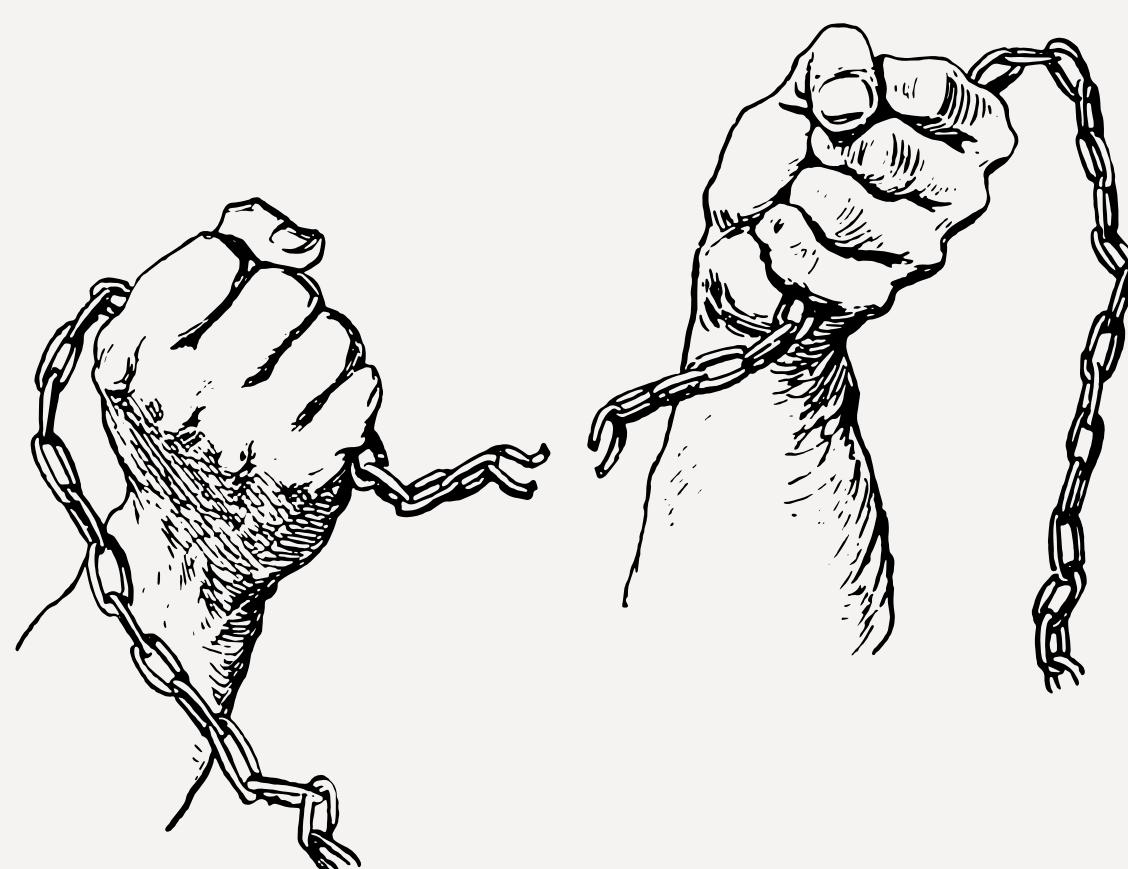
I don't know where my heart will take me

But staying is no longer an option

Even if I go to nowhere and die along the way It's better than experiencing death every moment!

The motivation reminds me of this home, its owner, the dark walls, and the sorrow of my daughter

Reminding me of her presence within me.



My last Oh, my daughter,
forgive me for being late
I was late to leave, and this delay
Buried you in the arms of the death.
Forgive your mother for never seeing you once;
She drowned in false beliefs and
Obeyed those who had no value for me or you.
I know I wasn't a good mother to you
Because they didn't let me
Because no love was planted in my heart to grow and hold
you.

Under the starry sky, a decision has been made I am alive
tonight. I don't know where the path I've chosen will end,
but I know that I can no longer stay in this house.

My beloved!

I am leaving tonight, with seven months of memories of you
and the forgetfulness

Of every second before you.

Maybe one day our stories will be the guiding light for other
women

Maybe no woman will ever again, on a night like this,
Have her soul wounded and her heart turned to stone!

Now I am here, in this
hut of sorrow and cold, somewhere between life and death.
Maybe my heart is still full of pain and wounds, But
something inside me tells me it's not over yet. Maybe my life
is like autumn, but autumn is not the end; It's the beginning
of winter, and after that, spring.

With hope in the hearts of thousands of women I,
Farkhonda, a woman who has lost everything, but still
wishes for revival I am the story of hope That this story will
end.

Oh God!

The path I have chosen is full of pain, but at least I have
hope for a better tomorrow. For myself and for the child
Who may never get the chance to breathe. Life goes on, even
if it's bitter, even if it's unclear.

Please don't abandon me, after all this!

Tonight, Farkhonda goes for the spring of her life
She has spent years in autumn

And from tonight

Her life, crossing winter, Will reach the spring destination.

Now, in the darkness of the night, my strong steps lead me far away from the cage, and even farther from my father's house. I had saved this poem in my phone and now recite it under my lips, the poet's sorrowful and beautiful words:
"I had a positive outlook from the beginning of life
Despite the great misery I had.
Because I always heard the phrase "It wasn't meant to be,"
I had a firm and unwavering belief in destiny.

My crime was that I was a "girl," without wings to fly,
Otherwise, I had the courage of a hundred men.

Sometimes, I felt a sense of ownership over pain,
Sometimes, I even had immense pride over sorrow.

Being the same as others was never easy,
I was always bitter because I had the truth!



Everywhere is dark, and a fear nests in my heart.

And this fear is not baseless—because the sound of the Taliban's vehicle can be heard.

And I, not knowing exactly where I am in Kabul, take refuge inside a shop whose entrance door is open.

It smells like books in here, and there is a calmness; I don't know why I feel safe and my fears have melted away, but I feel I've arrived at the right place.

Minutes pass, and as I sit quietly in a corner, my eyelids grow heavy, and I fall asleep...

I wake up in a panic at the sound of a stranger's voice and see a man sitting at a distance from me, gazing ahead.

Only then do I realize where I am:

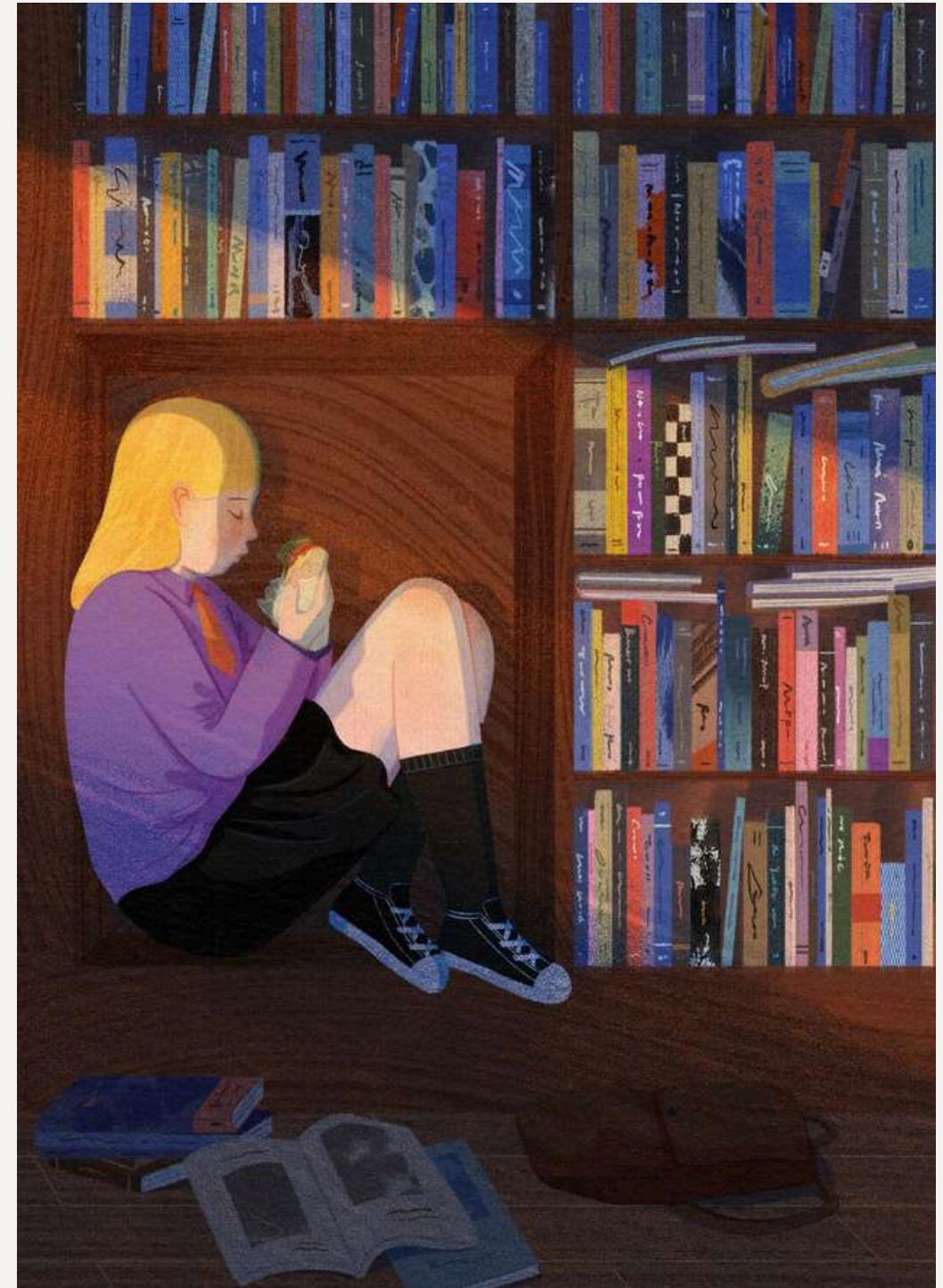
This is a large library, with books and silence everywhere I look.

He begins to speak softly:

"I want to remind you
that you are beautiful just
the way you are.

Don't be afraid at all, and rest
among the shelves of books.

It's true that you should move
toward becoming better,
but don't underestimate yourself
now.



You are not defined by the things you had no control in choosing.

You are different from any other reader who has come here —you are beautiful because you came with your heart. And I promise you, books will be a safe haven for you; a refuge far better than people.

Don't be sad if you carry a pain that no one can understand. You have yourself—and that is the most important thing! And you can stay here, my daughter."

With his final sentence, my heart calms, and the hidden fear turns into delightful, joyful waves.

I ask myself:

What is the secret of my strength?

And I gently respond: that my wound has never dried.

The truth is, from years ago until now, I have been like a shadow that only breathes...

My child!

I hear my own heartbeat. Though wounded, though alone, a hope has sprouted within me; a hope that might one day rise beyond this darkness.

Maybe my story is the voice of thousands of women and girls who no longer smile—but still carry a flame of life inside.

The story of your mother begins here;

Yes, I will become the scream of hidden stories!

Here, my dear daughter, I will write the story of your mother

and the story of thousands of women like myself in Afghanistan.



#Writer_Nazi_Maysam

This story is based on the real life of an Afghan woman,
But some events and the final part are the author's
imagination,
Depicting the hope for a different future for her.

