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 façade 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 Iran, 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 th a finger.

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

th old.
longish face,
Yes, Jalil
when
the
arms,
lullaby.
though it
Mariam be-
chose the
Mariam asked.
he said and smiled.

3.

One of Mariam's earliest memories was the sound of a wheelbarrow's squeaky iron wheels bouncing over rocks. The wheelbarrow came once a month, filled with rice, flour, tea, sugar, cooking oil, soap, toothpaste. It was pushed by two of Mariam's half brothers, usually Muhsin and Ramin, sometimes Ramin and Farhad. Up the dirt track, over rocks and pebbles, around holes and bushes, the boys took turns pushing until they reached the stream. There, the wheelbarrow had to be emptied and the items hand-carried across the water. Then the boys would transfer the wheelbarrow across the stream and load it up again. Another two hundred yards of pushing followed, this time through tall, dense grass and around thickets of shrubs. Frogs leaped out of their way. The brothers waved mosquitoes from their sweaty faces.

"He has servants," Mariam said. "He could send a servant."

"His idea of penance," Nana said.

The sound of the wheelbarrow drew Mariam and Nana outside. Mariam would always remember Nana the way she looked on Ration Day: a tall, bony, barefoot woman leaning in the doorway, her lazy eye narrowed to a slit, arms crossed in a defiant and mocking way. Her

Mullah Faizullah admitted to Mariam that, at times, he
derstand the meaning of the Koran's words. But he said
enchanting sounds the Arabic words made as they ro
tongue. He said they comforted him, eased his heart.

"They'll comfort you too, Mariam jo," he said. "You ca
them in your time of need, and they won't fail you. God
never betray you, my girl."

Mullah Faizullah listened to stories as well as he told th
Mariam spoke, his attention never wavered. He nodded
smiled with a look of gratitude, as if he had been grante
privilege. It was easy to tell Mullah Faizullah things
didn't dare tell Nana.

One day, as they were walking, Mariam told him that
she would be allowed to go to school.

"I mean a real school, *akhund* sahib. Like in a class
father's other kids."

Mullah Faizullah stopped.

flock to graze on the grassy hillside. Mariam and Nana milked the goats, fed the hens, and collected eggs. They made bread together. Nana showed her how to knead dough, how to kindle the tandoor and slap the flattened dough onto its inner walls. Nana taught her to sew too, and to cook rice and all the different toppings: *shalqam* stew with turnip, spinach *sabzi*, cauliflower with ginger.

Nana made no secret of her dislike for visitors—and, in fact, people in general—but she made exceptions for a select few. And so there was Gul Daman's leader, the village *arbab*, Habib Khan, a small-headed, bearded man with a large belly who came by once a month or so, tailed by a servant, who carried a chicken, sometimes a pot of *kichiri* rice, or a basket of dyed eggs, for Mariam.

Then there was a rotund, old woman that Nana called Bibi jo, whose late husband had been a stone carver and friends with Nana's father. Bibi jo was invariably accompanied by one of her six brides and a grandchild or two. She limped and huffed her way across the clearing and made a great show of rubbing her hip and lowering herself, with a pained sigh, onto the chair that Nana pulled up for her. Bibi jo too always brought Mariam something, a box of *dishlemeh* candy, a basket of quinces. For Nana, she first brought complaints about her failing health, and then gossip from Herat and Gul Daman, delivered at length and with gusto, as her daughter-in-law sat listening quietly and dutifully behind her.

But Mariam's favorite, other than Jalil of course, was Mullah Faizullah, the elderly village Koran tutor, its *akhund*. He came by once or twice a week from Gul Daman to teach Mariam the five daily *namaz* prayers and tutor her in Koran recitation, just as he had taught Nana when she'd been a little girl. It was Mullah Faizullah who had taught Mariam to read, who had patiently looked over her shoulder as her lips worked the words soundlessly, her index finger lingering beneath each word, pressing until the nail bed went white, as though she could squeeze the meaning out of the symbols. It was Mullah Faizullah who had held her hand, guided the pencil in it along the rise of each *alef*, the curve of each *beh*, the three dots of each *seh*.

He was a gaunt, stooping old man with a toothless smile and a white beard that dropped to his navel. Usually, he came alone to the *kolba*, though sometimes with his russet-haired son Hamza, who was a few years older than Mariam. When he showed up at the *kolba*, Mariam kissed Mullah Faizullah's hand—which felt like kissing a set of twigs covered with a thin layer of skin—and he kissed the top of her brow before they sat inside for the day's lesson. After, the two of them sat outside the *kolba*, ate pine nuts and sipped green tea, watched the bulbul birds darting from tree to tree. Sometimes they went for walks among the bronze fallen leaves and alder bushes, along the stream and toward the mountains. Mullah Faizullah twirled the beads of his *tasbeh* rosary as they strolled, and, in his quivering voice, told Mariam stories of all the things he'd seen in his youth, like the two-headed snake he'd found in Iran, on Isfahan's Thirty-three Arch Bridge, or the watermelon he had split once outside the Blue Mosque in Mazar, to find the seeds forming the words *Allah* on one half, *Akbar* on the other.

Mullah Faizullah admitted to Mariam that, at times, he did not understand the meaning of the Koran's words. But he said he liked the enchanting sounds the Arabic words made as they rolled off his tongue. He said they comforted him, eased his heart.

"They'll comfort you too, Mariam jo," he said. "You can summon them in your time of need, and they won't fail you. God's words will never betray you, my girl."

Mullah Faizullah listened to stories as well as he told them. When Mariam spoke, his attention never wavered. He nodded slowly and smiled with a look of gratitude, as if he had been granted a coveted privilege. It was easy to tell Mullah Faizullah things that Mariam didn't dare tell Nana.

One day, as they were walking, Mariam told him that she wished she would be allowed to go to school.

"I mean a real school, *akhund* sahib. Like in a classroom. Like my father's other kids."

Mullah Faizullah stopped.

The week before, Bibi jo had brought news that Jalil's daughters Saideh and Naheed were going to the Mehri School for girls in Herat. Since then, thoughts of classrooms and teachers had rattled around Mariam's head, images of notebooks with lined pages, columns of numbers, and pens that made dark, heavy marks. She pictured herself in a classroom with other girls her age. Mariam longed to place a ruler on a page and draw important-looking lines.

"Is that what you want?" Mullah Faizullah said, looking at her with his soft, watery eyes, his hands behind his stooping back, the shadow of his turban falling on a patch of bristling buttercups.

"Yes."

"And you want me to ask your mother for permission."

Mariam smiled. Other than Jalil, she thought there was no one in the world who understood her better than her old tutor.

"Then what can I do? God, in His wisdom, has given us each weaknesses, and foremost among my many is that I am powerless to refuse you, Mariam jo," he said, tapping her cheek with one arthritic finger.

But later, when he broached Nana, she dropped the knife with which she was slicing onions. "What for?"

"If the girl wants to learn, let her, my dear. Let the girl have an education."

"Learn? Learn what, Mullah sahib?" Nana said sharply. "What is there to learn?" She snapped her eyes toward Mariam.

Mariam looked down at her hands.

"What's the sense schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon. And you'll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me."

"You should not speak like this to her, my child," Mullah Faizullah said.

"Look at me."

Mariam did.

"Only one skill. And it's this: *tahamul.* Endure."

"Endure what, Nana?"

Nargis, was expecting her third child, Jalil smiled courteously and nodded.

"Well. You must be happy," Nana said. "How many is that for you, now? Ten, is it, *mashallah*? Ten?"

Jalil said yes, ten.

"Eleven, if you count Mariam, of course."

Later, after Jalil went home, Mariam and Nana had a small fight about this. Mariam said she had tricked him.

After tea with Nana, Mariam and Jalil always went fishing in the stream. He showed her how to cast her line, how to reel in the trout. He taught her the proper way to gut a trout, to clean it, to lift the meat off the bone in one motion. He drew pictures for her as they waited for a strike, showed her how to draw an elephant in one stroke without ever lifting the pen off the paper. He taught her rhymes. Together they sang:

Lili lili birdbath,
Sitting on a dirt path,
Minnow sat on the rim and drank,
Slipped, and in the water she sank.

Jalil brought clippings from Herat's newspaper, *Ittifaq-i Islam*, and read from them to her. He was Mariam's link, her proof that there existed a world at large, beyond the *kolba*, beyond Gul Daman and Herat too, a world of presidents with unpronounceable names, and trains and museums and soccer, and rockets that orbited the earth and landed on the moon, and, every Thursday, Jalil brought a piece of that world with him to the *kolba*.

He was the one who told her in the summer of 1973, when Mariam was fourteen, that King Zahir Shah, who had ruled from Kabul for forty years, had been overthrown in a bloodless coup.

"His cousin Daoud Khan did it while the king was in Italy getting medical treatment. You remember Daoud Khan, right? I told you about him. He was prime minister in Kabul when you were born. Any-

effort to stay in the doorway, to wait, to watch him slowly make his way to her, to not run to him. She restrained herself, patiently watched him walk through the tall grass, his suit jacket slung over his shoulder, the breeze lifting his red necktie.

When Jalil entered the clearing, he would throw his jacket on the tandoor and open his arms. Mariam would walk, then finally run, to him, and he would catch her under the arms and toss her up high. Mariam would squeal.

Suspended in the air, Mariam would see Jalil's upturned face below her, his wide, crooked smile, his widow's peak, his cleft chin—a perfect pocket for the tip of her pinkie—his teeth, the whitest in a town of rotting molars. She liked his trimmed mustache, and she liked that no matter the weather he always wore a suit on his visits—dark brown, his favorite color, with the white triangle of a handkerchief in the breast pocket—and cuff links too, and a tie, usually red, which he left loosened. Mariam could see herself too, reflected in the brown of Jalil's eyes: her hair billowing, her face blazing with excitement, the sky behind her.

Nana said that one of these days he would miss, that she, Mariam, would slip through his fingers, hit the ground, and break a bone. But Mariam did not believe that Jalil would drop her. She believed that she would always land safely into her father's clean, well-manicured hands.

They sat outside the *kolba,* in the shade, and Nana served them tea. Jalil and she acknowledged each other with an uneasy smile and a nod. Jalil never brought up Nana's rock throwing or her cursing.

Despite her rants against him when he wasn't around, Nana was subdued and mannerly when Jalil visited. Her hair was always washed. She brushed her teeth, wore her best *hijab* for him. She sat quietly on a chair across from him, hands folded on her lap. She did not look at him directly and never used coarse language around him. When she laughed, she covered her mouth with a fist to hide the bad tooth.

Nana asked about his businesses. And his wives too. When she told him that she had heard, through Bibi jo, that his youngest wife,