Life in Translation

By Steven T. King

Chapter 1: Korea 1952

Airman Frank King looked down to check the gauges of his small twin propeller aircraft as he slid into the lead position in front of three B52 bombers.

“This is Sinatra, the road is paved and the skies are clear,” said King into his radio. Frank had received the Sinatra nickname early in his time at the Air Force Academy from his bunkmate who over heard him singing in the shower.

Sinatra led the decent to 6,000 feet and the bombers following behind him opened their bomb doors. The seven-plane squadron quickly approached a dark and silent city. There were no streetlights and no movement on the streets.

“Pyongyang must be the darkest capital in the world,” King thought to himself as he flew over the empty streets.

As the first bombs began to fall, Frank was startled by streaks of light that few past his canopy. Frank knew the sight of machine gun tracer rounds so he instinctively pushed his control stick forward and dove towards the source of the streaks.

“Guns on the ground” Sinatra screamed into the microphone as he continued to dive. “Bombers, stay on target. I’ll take the guns.”

Frank focused on the target and pulled the trigger as he dove through the streaks of yellow passing in the dark night. Frank’s priority was to take out the gun in order to protect the bombers and their mission. He heard the horrible of sound of three strikes to his hull echo through his cockpit but he remained on target and continued to hold the trigger. A huge ball of fire erupted in his sights directly in front of him and he quickly pulled the stick up and to the left to climb back into formation.

“Got’em!” Frank said into his radio. “Returning to point.” The bombers were closing the large payload doors and veering back west as Frank pulled up on his control stick. As he climbed he felt a steady pull against his hand as the stick failed to move the plane to the left.

“Pony Boy, I have a problem. I can’t turn. I think my ruder is shot.

“Coming down to take a look,” Pony Boy said as he dove off the starboard edge of the bomber formation to check on Frank.

“Sinatra, you are loosing fuel and your tale is shot to pieces. Try pulling to the right.”

“Negative Pony Boy, no control left or right,” sighed Frank as silence filled the airwaves and Pony Boy was not sure of what to say.

“Can you get to the sea? We can send a boat after you,” Pony Boy finally said while trying to sound upbeat.

“I am trying Pony. You are going to have to take the lead back to base. Get those bombers home,” said Frank.

“What are you going to do Sinatra?”

“I am not sure but I will figure something out. Just send the Big Mother after me.”

“Will do… May God keep you friend… Returning to base,” Pony Boy hesitated and then eventually pulled away to lead the bombers back to base.

Frank flew North into the darkness over the rural northern point of the Korean Peninsula. His fuel gauge was falling faster than the second hand on his watch and he new he had little time. The ocean was to the east and the North China Sea to the west but he was headed north and unable to turn left or right. Frank hoped and prayed that he would find a soft place to set it down but all he saw in the dark night was miles of forests. As the engines choked out and the plane went silent, Frank took a deep breath, said a quick prayer, “God please help me!” and he pulled the ejection handle. The glass canopy over his head flew off and the one-second delay to allow the canopy to clear before the seat launched seemed like an eternity.

The seat launched Frank out of his cockpit with such force his back popped as he rocked up. As the chair reached it’s peak altitude the chute deployed without any problems. During his slow decent, Frank watched his plane crash into the trees below and burst into flames. The fire illuminated the area and it was the only light he could see for miles. He knew an explosion like that would not be missed and the North Korean army would be looking for him soon. A slight wind blew him east, away from the wreckage.

Surprisingly, his descent was quiet and peaceful as he slowly fell towards the dark forest. As he got closer to the trees, the fall did not seem so slow. Hitting the canopy of the forest, branches scraped and scratched him as he fell through the dense branches stopping suddenly as his feet slammed the ground and his body quickly followed. A sharp pain shot from his right ankle up through his knee and he wanted to scream in agony but resisted, hoping to remain hidden.

Frank quickly pulled in his army green parachute while still laying on the ground. He looked in all directions and listened intently for any sign of the North Koreans. All he heard was the sounds of the forest. His actions were calm and deliberate as if he had been in this situation before but his mind whorled with questions.

*Should I move towards the wreckage or away? Should I turn on the emergency beacon or keep silent? Could I run if I had to?* Hundreds of questions and possible scenarios raced through his mind and he had only been on the ground less than a minute.

Frank patted his chest and thigh pockets with both hands like a guy who had lost his wallet. He was looking for his emergency rescue radio. He quickly found the small green plastic box and turned the only dial to the on position and a small red light began to flash on a steady beat. His location was being transmitted and Frank was comforted by the idea for a brief moment. He just hoped the North Korean’s weren’t able to track him or the Marines would be faster.

He felt around his ankle and figured it was broken. He had sprained his ankles before playing basketball and the pain now was ten times worse than he felt on the court. Knowing he would not be able to move quickly, he pulled himself up to the thick trunk of a pine tree. Refolding his parachute to use as a blanket and for camouflage, he pulled it around him and covered it with leaves, pine needles and dirt. The only sounds he heard was the leaves he rustled as he pulled them around to hide himself incase someone came along. Frank sat under the cover of the forest for several hours startled by every natural sound the forest made that night. He had four hours before light would illuminate his position. He knew he needed energy so he tried to sleep but pain combined with fear made that a difficult exercise. *How fast can the Marines get here?*

When the sun began to rise, amber rays of light peaked through the trees.

“I made it through the night,” Frank whispered to himself as he woke from his restless and fearful sleep. He reached inside his utility vest and pulled out a leather bound book from his inside pocket. Putting his thumbs together, he opened the tattered pages to whatever page he happened upon and began to read.

He continued to read as the forest awoke. He heard birds chirping and saw something like a squirrel dart across the ground in front of him. It reminded him of camping in the woods on his grandparents’ land when he was a boy.

After finishing a passage, he slowly closed the book, held it in his hands and a smile came across his light bathed face. Injured and not knowing who or what would find him, Frank figured he was in the toughest situation of his life but he was surprisingly content, calm and hopeful.

A few moments went by and he heard voices. They were Korean voices coming towards him from behind. He tucked the book back inside his vest and pulled a branch over his face. The voices seemed to be getting closer and were coming directly towards him. Frank could tell it was a man and a woman’s voice meaning probably not military but what would they do if they saw him? Frank lay perfectly still as his heart raced and he tried to control his breathing.

Abruptly, the voices stopped and so did his heart. *Had they seen him?* he thought. Frank held his breath as he felt them approach. The man picked up a stick and poked at the pile of leaves. Frank did not move. The man poked again and then he yelled something in Korean. Frank could not understand a word he said but knew the man was talking to him. Frank held his hands in the air and said the only thing he could think of.

“Hello, Hello, Hi,” Frank said several times quickly.

“I am Frank… from America.”

The man yelled something at the woman who Frank assumed was the man’s wife and she ran back the way they had come. The man was dressed in thick brown cotton pants and a heavy long sleeved shirt that buttoned high on the throat. The man grabbed the parachute and pulled it off of Frank’s legs in a quick jerk.

Broken Korean words and phrases Frank had learned on base ran through his mind as he tried to think of something to let the man know he meant no harm. The only word he could remember was “Help!” which he learned quickly after arriving in South Korea.

“D toh-om,” he said softly somewhat under his breath and then repeated it louder. The man stopped and looked intently at him and turned his ear towards him so he might understand what Frank was saying.

“D toh-om,” Frank said and pointed to his leg.

“D toh-om?” the man repeated in the form of a question.

The man looked down at the injured leg and finally understanding, excitedly said “D Toh-oom!” and knelt down at Frank’s ankle.

He felt around the leg and with every touch, Frank winced and gritted his teeth. Words came fast at Frank and he did not understand a single one but knew the man was trying to help. Abruptly, the man pulled Frank’s arm up, lowered his head under Frank’s armpit and pulled him on top of his back. The man was much smaller than Frank but was built stout. He stepped quickly up the hill and over the rough terrain as if he had walked this hill everyday of his life. The man maintained a steady pace and never stopped to rest. Within a few minutes, Frank smelled smoke from a small fire that was cooking something and he noticed four small huts positioned around the fire.

The man took him inside the first thatch hut they came to and gently laid him on the hard, compacted dirt floor. The woman from before came in through the doorway as the man scurried around looking for something. She yelled something in Korean as she pointed in Frank’s direction but the man did not pause or respond to her. He continued at what he was doing and grabbed a blanket and small stool. She continued to yell as the man worked. He placed the stool under Frank’s injured leg and reached for a jar of dry tea. He pushed past her and walked outside holding a small black kettle in one hand and the jar in the other.

Frank could hear the woman talking outside but the man never responded. After a few minutes the man returned to Frank’s side with a kettle and a towel soaked in dark murky bowling water. He took the tea-soaked towel and placed it around the injured ankle. Frank winced in pain again but tried to calm his reaction because he knew the man was trying to help and was putting his own life at risk by helping him.

“That feels better,” Frank said forgetting momentarily the man could not understand him. Frank’s smile communicated the message when his words could not.

In thick accented English the man in his thirties said slowly, “I… am… Kim.” That was the only sentence he knew in English.

“I am Frank,” he said as he patted his chest. “Thank you for your help.”

The two men smiled at each other and sat in silence, continuing to smile again and again. It was their only form of communication to fill the awkward silence.

Kim’s home consisted of walls made of mud and the roof had straw that was about a foot thick. There was not a traditional bed but only a straw mats and blankets that could roll out of the way during the day.

The woman who Frank assumed was Kim’s wife entered the small room with a bowl and a pair of chopsticks.

“Kiami-Chi,” she said and he answered “Thank you,” in English.

Kim pointed to his wife and said, “Dae.”

“I am Frank. Frank,” he said pressing his palm to his chest as he had before. She smiled and exited with a nod of her head.

Frank ate the fermented cabbage and actually enjoyed it better than any Kiamichi he had ever tasted on base or in the restaurants in the South.

The next morning Frank awoke with this new friend sleeping on a bamboo mat next to him but did not see Dae. The sun had just started to peek over the trees and beams of light entered the room through the cracks in the wooden door. Kim awoke and stretched his arms.

“Good Morning,” Frank said.

“Annyong-hi jumushyossoyo” and Frank assumed that was good morning in Korean. He practiced it under his breath and if he awoke there the next morning he would try it out. But Frank hoped help would be there soon. He knew he was in enemy territory and despite the hospitality of his new friend, Frank knew he needed to get out of there. If the North Korean Army found him they would torture or kill both him and Kim.

Kim headed out the door leaving it slightly open and helped Dae start the fire. Frank looked at the emergency radio and it was still transmitting his location. Unable to help them with making breakfast, Frank pulled out the old book and began to read. A few stories in, he heard several men approach the huts and talk to Kim as he stoked the fire. Frank peeked through the cracked door and saw four North Korean soldiers with rifles talking to Kim. Frank placed the book back in his vest and pulled out his pistol. He covered it with the blanket and pretended to be asleep while trying to watch through the sliver of space between his almost closed eyelids.

*There are four of them and I have seven shots*, thought Frank while his heart raced and he listened intently. Dae spoke not a word and Kim was speaking quickly. Frank could see one of the soldiers began to walk around looking into the huts and he made his way towards Frank’s new home. Right as he pushed the door further open and Frank prepared to take a shot he heard Dae’s voice also at the door. She offered him a cup of hot tea and he steeped towards her to take the cup and joined the rest of the group drinking around the fire.

After finishing their tea, the men walked down the hill towards where Frank landed the day before. Frank swallowed hard and knew the woman who did not want him there in the first place had saved his life.

The couple came in and closed the door behind them. Kim wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and Dae gave him a nervous smile.

“Thank you, Komapsumnida,” Frank said and he disengaged his .45 and placed it back in his vest.

Three days later, Frank awoke as the sun beamed in through the cracks as it had every morning this week but Kim was already up and working on breakfast by the time Frank awoke. For the first time, Frank struggled to his feet using a farm tool as a crutch and hobbled out to the cooking fire. To Frank’s surprise, there was a crowd outside going about life. Kim’s parents and sister were all preparing for the day. Kim’s parents lived in the hut on the far end and stayed out of Franks view through the door for the last few days. Kim met him with a smile and pulled up a small stool that was only a few inches off the ground and offered it to Frank. Frank was no longer clean-shaven and his beard was starting to show. He had not had a shower in a week but was unsure if Kim or Dae had bathed either since he arrived.

Frank made himself as comfortable as a 6 foot 2 inch, 210-pound man can on an 8-inch squatting stool. After struggling to say “Annyong-hi jumushyossoyo” to everyone in the family, he pulled out the leather book to avoid the awkward stares and silences. As he read, he heard the sounds of a helicopter in the distance.

Kim said “He--lo,” and grabbed a white shirt from inside his hut and the radio off of Frank’s survival vest. Kim then sprinted to the top of the hill above his family village and stood at a break in the trees waving the shirt in his left hand and holding the transmitter in his right. Two green helicopters circled the hill and when Kim realized that he had the attention of the pilot, he hung the shirt in a nearby tree and ran back down to the hut with the transmitter while the chopper started to land.

With excitement in his voice, Kim returned to the hut yelling for Frank.

“Frank, Americans, Frank Americans!”

“*Big Mother had finally made it*,” Frank thought to himself as a feeling of excitement and relief filled his body.

Frank was already to his feet and hobbling along towards Kim. Without hesitation, Kim put the transmitter on Frank’s vest and threw him over his bare shoulder as he had a week ago. Bounding up the Hill, the sound of the helicopter got louder and Frank could feel the wind from the blades as they reached the clearing. Two medics and two other soldiers jumped from Big Mother, grabbed Frank from Kim and placed him on a green stretcher.

“We are here to take you home Captain,” said one of the medics trying to be heard over the sound the helicopter.

“Thanks guys. I am grateful for the lift but I have been well taken care of thus far,” said Frank.

As the medics strapped Frank into the stretcher, he motioned for Kim to come over. Frank reached into his vest and pulled out the brown book from his chest pocket.

“Komapsumnida my friend,” Frank said as he handed the book to Kim.

Surprised, Kim shook his head but Frank pressed the book into Kim’s chest and said “Komapsumnida my friend.”

“Thank you Chin-guu,” Kim replied.

“This book will give you strength.”

Kim nodded as if he understood but Frank knew he did not understand his words. The medics picked up the stretcher and quickly moved him into the helo. Frank and Kim did not break eye contact the entire time.

Frank waved and so did Kim as Frank few off leaving North Korea and Kim forever. Kim held the book tightly with both hands and looked at the cover. It read in Korean, “The Book”

Chapter 2

Kim walked down the hill wondering why the words were written in Korean. He had seen Frank read the book several time and never noticed the cover had Korean letters. He thumbed through the worn brown pages expecting to see unreadable English but he was wrong.

“*This is in Korean*,” Kim noticed. “*Could Frank read Korean? He struggled with three words. There is now way*,” he thought.

Kim arrived back as his home to find his wife sweeping the dirt between their home and Kim’s parents home as if nothing had happened.

“Look at this book. It is in Korean,” he said.

“Is this Frank’s book? How did you get it?” she asked as she thumbed through the pages.

“Yes, he gave it to me before he left.”

“How could Frank read Korean?”

“I don’t think he did,” Kim replied.

Dae handed the book back to Kim and he went inside propping the door open to let in some light. He squatted in the corner, placed the book on the hard ground between his feet and began to read from the first page.

Time passed faster than ever before as he read page after page turning as fast as he could. Dai came to the doorway.

“Dinner is ready, would you like to eat in here or outside?”

Kim did not respond but continued to read.

“Kim, dinner is ready,” she said again.

“I will be right there,” he finally answered.

Dai went back to her kettle and spooned out the boiled cabbage into bowls. Kim finally closed the book, looked up for the first time in hours, smiled and walked outside to join his family.

“The book is fascinating,” Kim said to Dai. “You will love it.”

“Then bring it outside and we can read it together after dinner,” Dai said.

Kim ate quickly and then went back to the first page and began reading out loud.

Weeks went by and as summer turned to fall, the cold weather rolled into the Korean peninsula. There was not a lot of work to be done in the fields so Kim used the time to read to his wife. Each night they spent reading together the closer they grew to each other. Kim would also read to his parents outside the huts before they went to sleep.

Life was still filled with the same struggles and chores as before but their outlook on life was different. The war which had found it’s way into their home now seemed a world away.

One cold winter night, Kim was reading in his parents home and his father and mother dosed off. As he finished a passage, Dai slowly reached across him, closing the book and pulling his hand towards her. The couple quietly made their way across the dark lawn to their own hut and pulled the door closed. Not only had the book made them happier during the day, they also enjoyed each other more at night.

A few months later the winter slowly left them and the water began to thaw.

“It is time to set the rice now. My father and I have work to do,” Kim said to his lovely wife who wanted him to come back to the mat.

“I will have a surprise waiting for you when you get home,” she said.

Kim and his aging father walked down the hill to the rice fields and began to work. Slowly moving through the rows, bent over side-by-side, they poked holes in the dark rich soil with pointed sticks about six inches long with a curved handle. They dropped in a few seeds and covered each hole with a kick of their foot. Kim had done this a thousand times and his father had planted thousands more than Kim. They worked quietly but on occasion would speak will continuing the process of planting.

“When are you going to make us some help?” his father asked. “I will not be able to help you in this field forever.”

Kim continued to work without responding immediately. It had not been the first time he had thought about this idea and he knew Dae was ready for a child. He was ready for a child but was not sure when it would happen.

“I am not sure. Maybe next year,” Kim finally replied.

The two continued without another word, taking only a few breaks to stretch and then bending over to work again. They worked until the sun fell below the trees and they could no longer see the lines of the field. The two walked back up the hill and as they arrived home Kim’s mother yelled across courtyard at her husband.

“Come here. We are eating alone tonight,” his mother said to his father.

Kim smiled as this father and anticipated the surprise he had been promised earlier. Dae was standing at the doorway dressed in her best traditional Korean dress. The yellow garment was tight across the shoulders and shined in the moonlight. A red belt tied high on her body and the fabric belled out from the belt. Kim had only seen his wife wear this for weddings and very special family events. It was the only dress she had and she looked great in it.

“You look as pretty as the yellow flowers on the hill,” he whispered to his wife. In a pretend shy way she grabbed his hand, pulled him in and closed the thatch door. Kim was dirty from working in the fields and she led him to the corner of the home to the water basin. She removed his shirt and he sat on the short stool next to the water. Protecting her dress, she knelt beside him and placed a towel over her knees and began to slowly wash his feet and slowly moved to wash his hands, chest, and face in a slow and calming way. Then she gracefully rose, took the towel and dried her husband from behind him. She placed a clean white shirt, his wedding shirt, over his shoulders and he finished putting it on. She handed him his dark dress slacks and jacket and moved across the small room to place dinner on the mat.

“What is all this for?” he said as he buttoned the last button of his collar?

“I told you had a surprise for you,” she quietly and mischievously answered him.

Kim moved the stool over to the dinner mat and sat down after dawning his coat. Dai always knew he was a hansom Korean man but seeing him in his dark suite she remembered just how attracted she was to him.

Dae handed him a bowl and a pair of chopsticks. She took her bowl and the couple began to eat the best meal they had had since New Years Day. Dae prepared some fish she picked up at the market while Kim was in the field. They and most Koreans loved fish but because they lived two days walk from a major river it was tough to get and expensive so they only ate fish only on special occasions.

“This is a wonderful surprise my dear woman,” Kim said smiling.

“This is not the surprise. You will have to be patient for the surprise,” she said continuing in her quiet secretive demeanor.

Kim looked at his beautiful wife in her favorite yellow dress and knew he was the most blessed man in all of Korea. Through the entire dinner they rarely broke eye contact and constantly smiled at each other. Dae moved off of her stool and sat in Kim’s lap with her nose just under his chin.

“Are you ready for your surprise,” she whispered.

“Yes, please.”

She stretched her head so her lips were right beside his ear and whispered the exciting words. “We are going to have a baby.”

“What?” he asked astonished.

“I am pregnant.”

A huge smile came over his face and he grabbed his wife by the shoulders pulled her even closer. She could hear his heart beak increasing with each moment he thought about the new baby.

After a long time, Kim reached over and picked up the leather book and he read her an ancient story about a woman who received some exciting news about a baby that was given to an older woman. In the story, she and her husband praised God for the gift and so did Kim and Dae for they knew a child was a gift from God. They held each other into the night and feel asleep dreaming of the future.

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After the war ended in 1953, communist rule began to take over even in the rural areas and visits by the local Socialist Party leader became a regular occurrence.

“Mr. Kim, in order to secure a happy life in this world and the next for your coming child you must become a member of the workers party of Korea,” the party leader in a dark black suite said sitting on the stool by the cooking fire.

“What do you mean?” Kim asked. “I know how to secure a happy life for my child.”

“The Workers Party of Korea will provide security and prosperity for your children and your children’s children after you have died,” the party member said as if he had said those words a thousand times.

“I do not need to join your party. My family is strong and we can take care of each other. Besides, I know what will happen for me in the end. I have read and I understand,” Kim said in a confident but respectful way with his agreeing wife kneeling beside him.

“What have you read?” the party member asked.

“The Book.”

“A Korean book?”

“Yes, it is Korean,” Kim, said.

“Where did you get this book?”

Knowing that if the party member knew it came from an American who he called ‘Imperialists’ he would take it away. Kim avoided the question and said, “It was a gift.”

“May I see this book?” he asked authoritatively.

Dae who had been sitting quietly grabbed her husband’s knee and with great anxiety in her voice said, “It’s time!”

“It is time? Now?” he asked.

“Yes, Now,” she answered and beads of sweat beaded up on her forehead.

“Sir, please go fetch the doctor in town,” Kim said to the party official.

Kim screamed towards his parent’s home, “Mother, it is time for the baby!”

The official went running out of the family village and Kim’s mother passed him running towards them. She and Kim helped Dae into the hut and placed her on the mats.

She examined Dae and said, “We can not wait for the doctor. The baby is going to come now.”

“Are you sure?” Kim asked confused.

“Yes. I did not have a doctor when I had you and she will not have a doctor when she has your child. Heat some water and soak this blanket in it.”

Kim ran outside and looked for the kettle. His father sat on the short stool and calmly said, “Relax my son. Slow down and take your time.”

At that moment, Kim stumbled over the kettle he was looking for. He took the kettle, fetched the water and placed it over the ever-constant fire. His father just watched and smiled. While waiting for the water to boil, Kim heard the most amazing sound he had ever heard. He heard the crying of his new daughter.

The moment Kim walked in the door of the hut with the wet towel in his hand, the new grandmother and acting midwife said, “Bring me the towel and water.”

She took the towel from her son who was frozen at the door in amazement, and she cleaned the baby. In a moment he would never forget, he knelt beside his sweating but lovely wife and his mother placed the baby in Dai’s arms. The couple began to weep with happiness and Kim called her “Hea” meaning grace. The three of them hugged together and were so happy and content with each other that they did not notice Kim’s mother leave the room to give them this moment alone.

After a while of holding each other, Kim reached over to the shelf and picked up the brown book and turned to the first page. That night he began the habit of reading from the book every night. Dai enjoyed the nightly readings and could not be happier holding her baby in her arms and hearing her husband’s calm voice read the engaging stories. Many nights, Kim would get so enthralled reading in the story that he would not realize that Hea and Dai had fallen asleep.

When Hea reached the age of five, it was time for her to go to school. The party official that had been there the day Hea was born came to collect Kim’s signature and deliver a red scarf to Hea for her first day of school.

“The scarf is the symbol of the Children’s party who support our Dear Leader. It is required to be worn at school by all good Korean children,” the official explained. The official wanted Kim to show his allegiance to the Workers party and the Dear Leader by signing his name and wearing the colors of the party.

Kim thought for several moments. He did not see a need to sign the document or to be a member of the party but his daughter was five years-old and would not be able to receive an education unless he signed it. She could already read from the book but Kim knew she needed to be educated and needed to learn more than a farmer could teach her. Kim took a deep breath and reluctantly signed the paper, becoming a member of the Workers Party of Korea. The official pined a red pin on Kim’s warn and ragged farmers clothes and gave a red scarf to Hea.

“School starts tomorrow. Wear this and you will be given a book from our Great Leader,” the official said as he stood and moved towards the path.

Hea was excited about receiving a new book. She loved the stories in the one book she knew and looked forward to another one but her father was not so excited. He sat in silence the entire night and for the first time went to bed without reading with his family so Hea took the book and read it to herself.

When the sun rose the next morning, Kim and Dae walked Hea to her first day of school. The school was a two-room building with wooden desks inside. One room was for kids 12 and older. The other room was for kids 5-11 years old. Every child was wearing the same thing. The boys wore navy blue suits with a red scarf and the girls wore a navy blue skirt, white shirt and the read scarf but Hea was wearing the brown skirt and shirt that she always wore in the fields with her father. Kim was getting nervous that his daughter was not prepared and he did not have the money to go buy a uniform. He looked around and other young students arrived with only a scarf and Kim realized that the new students would get a uniform from the school.

Kim and Dae knelt down, hugged Hea and said goodbye. She ran up the two steps into the class, stopped and waved at the top of the stairs.

“Sit down. Everyone Sit down. I am Kyon,” said the teacher of the younger class. The entire class became silent in a moment. Hea looked around to see what the slightly older kids were doing. They sat up straight as if they were sitting at attention with their fingers interlocked and on the desk in front of them. Hea did the same.

The students were seated in rows according to age or class with the older, thus taller ones on the back row and the youngest and new students on the front row. The teacher was dressed in a traditional Korean dress like the one her mother only wore to weddings. Hea wondered if she would wear the same dress every day. The teacher walked over to a phonograph player, a device Hea had never seen before. The sounds of brass horns and drums came from the large metal horn on the device. All of the students rose to their feet and looked to the large portrait of a man Hea had never seen before. Hea followed what the other students did. When the music finished, everyone sat down and the teacher began handing out books to the youngest students. The older students removed their book from their desks.

Hea was startled by the loudly growing sound of the 24 students simultaneously reading from the book behind her. She quickly found the page and joined in. Of all the new students, she was the only one that did so. The teacher sitting at her desk looked at Hea while she read. When the page was finished she walked over to her. “Hea, how did you learn to read?” she asked.

Hea stood up and said, “My father taught me.”

“That is good so you already know this book.”

“No teacher. I read a different book,” she said unknowingly to the problems this would cause.

“You read a book other than this book?”

“Yes teacher.

“Thank you. You may be seated,” and Kyon returned to the front of the room.

The older students in the back began to whisper because they knew the only books they were allowed to read were the books written by the Great Leader.

“Silence. It is time to begin,” and Kyon started class.

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Hea walked home from school and was met by her mother where the path to her family village met the road.

“How was your day?” she asked her daughter.

“I was the only one in my grade who could ready and the teacher asked me questions,” she said confidently.

“That is wonderful,” her mother answered with a proud smile.

The two walked up the path and inside their family hut. Kim dropped to his knees to hug and speak to his educated daughter.

“What happened at school today?”

“I was the only one in my grade who could ready and my teacher asked what books I read and I told her about the book we read every night,” Hea said excitedly.

“What did she say?”

“Nothing really.”

That night the close family of five, read from the book. Seated in her father’s lap, she listened to the words of her father while she followed his finger across the pages. Quickly her grandparents fell asleep and Hea was soon put to bed as well.

The next morning Dae took Hea to school and Kim went to work the fields with his father. They had only worked a couple of rows when the party official arrived and walked across the dry raised path of the rice field.

“I need to see the book you have been reading,’ he said without a proper greeting.

Kim continued to pull the weeds from around the green stalks pushing though the muddy water at his feet. Kim was using the time to think about the question.

“Why do you need to see my book?”

“Because the only book we need are those given to us by our Great Leader.”

Kim stopped what he was doing, looked at the official and without responding began walking up the hill to his home. The man followed two steps behind. Kim went inside his hut, got the book and brought it to the official who was standing at his door. As Kim handed the book to him, Kim noticed the letters on the cover slowly disappeared fading into the leather.

The man thumbed through the pages and started asking, “Do you read this every ni…” but ended the sentence because of surprise. He flipped through to the end of the book and back to the beginning.

“These pages are blank,” he said.

Kim kept quiet confused as well.

“Are you trying to trick me? I know you read from a book every day and I need to see that book.”

“This is the book I read to my family.”

“Let me see the real book,” he said emphatically.

“This is the only book I have,” Kim answered.

“Then let me in your house so I can see for myself.”

Kim stepped aside from the door and let the man dropped the blank book on the ground outside and entered the hut. He looked around the small room and saw three sleeping mats rolled up, some food, clothing and a fading photo of the entire family. He lifted the mats and moved the other things around but did not find another book.

‘So you just make up these stories and look as if you are reading to your daughter?”

“I do not know sir.”

“I will be back one day soon and then you will become a faithful servant of the workers party of Korea,” he said and turned to leave. Kim watched him walk away, picked up the book off the ground and wiped it clean seeing the letters embossed on the cover.

After he left, Kim found a bag and dug a square whole in the ground about 10 inches deep between his home and his parent’s home. He lined the walls with some flat boards and cut a wooden lid for the hole and coved it will dirt. When Hea came home he explained the power of the book and that the family must protect the book and not tell anyone about it. He walked Dae and Hea over to the hole and showed them how to hide the book in the ground.

Each night after reading the stories, one of them would go outside and burry the book in order to keep it from being taken away.

###

Hea grew older and she realized the ideas and views of her Great Leader she has been taught in school are very different than those her father had been teaching her in practice, his words and through the worn pages. By the time she was 14, the evening reading became longer and more of a question and answer secession. Hea’s mind had many deep questions that were difficult for Kim to answer but he always tried. Sometimes the answer was, “ I do not know. We will have to read again to find that answer.” Other times Kim would use his own life experiences to explain tough answers to his intelligent and intrigued daughter.

Hea never spoke of the book outside of the family but at school her eyes and speech was filled with hope, joy and freedom and her teacher and classmates noticed something was different in her.

While walking home from school down the same road she had walked for the last 10 years, a boy in her class stopped her.

“Why do you think you are better than the rest of us?” he asked.

“I do not think I am better than you our anyone else. I just have hope in the future and I believe in something greater than anything I have ever seen.”

“You mean you believe in our Great Leader? We all do,” he said in an inquisitive tone.

Hea lowered her head and she continued to walk home but the boy followed.

“I believe in something greater than him.”

“But nothing is Greater than our Dear Leader. He saved us from the imperialists and will always care for every Korean.”

She spoke softly and thoughtfully and answered him.

“I respect and support our Dear Leader but I also believe in someone who is greater than he.”

“I do not understand but if you are not carful the Party is going to arrest you for saying these things.”

Hea lowered her head and continued to walk in silence. The boy did not say anything more.

###

Kim and his father were working in the field when they heard Dai scream. Kim dropped the bag of rice seed, ran up the hill and saw four men in dark suits. One grabbed his wife by the arm and threw her to the ground.

“What are you doing to her,” Kim screamed as he ran and two of the men moved towards him and tackled him to the ground.

Hea was walking down the path when she heard the commotion near her home. She saw one of the men grab her mother by the hair and drag her across the dirt. Hea tried to scream out but the at the moment she did a hand reach around from behind her and covered her mouth. Fear ran through her veins but quickly subsided when she heard the familiar voice of her grandfather whispering in her ear to keep quiet. She knelt down behind a tree out of sight and watched as they beat Kim and Dae in front of his home. Her grandfather quietly moved around to the back of the house.

“Where is the book,” they yelled again and again and with each question came another blow. One of the men held him down while the other kicked and punched him. Blood streamed down his face and into his eyes. The third man pulled Dai into a green military truck and the fourth searched the home destroying everything in the process.

“Where is it,” and the question was immediately followed by another blow to the head.

Hea saw her grandfather quietly sneek between the two homes and crawl to the hole where they kept the book. He quietly removed the cover, removed the book and replaced the dirt. Kim saw his father between the homes and behind the man who was beating him so he fought to keep the attention on him allowing his father to get the book and get away returning to Hea without being detected.

“You must take this and run. Get far away from here!” he said. But Hea cried and shook her head no.

“You must go and go now!” Hea remained frozen behind the tree.

“I must try to rescue your mother,” he said as he left her again.

He approached the man holding his daughter and he took a swing at the soldier but the old man was no match for the twenty-year-old government agent who quickly knocked him to the ground with a strike to the head with his club. Hea winced and covered her mouth with her hand to avoid making a sound. She heard the question again.

“Where is the book? We know you have it. But Kim remained silent. The man beating him wiped the sweat from his brow and pulled a black rope or cord from his pocket. Hea thought the man was going to beat her father with the cord but he tied his legs and arms and the two men drug him to the truck.

Three of the men quickly loaded the two into the truck while one of them walked over to the center of the family village. He took some straw, dipped it into the cooking fire and then set the thatch roof of Kim and Dai’s home on fire. The homes burned quickly and a thick black smoke filled the air as they drove away with Kim and Dai in the back.

Hea ran to her grandfather who was slowly beginning to move.

“Grand pa, are you o.k.”

“Yes, you must go,” he struggled to say through the blood that filled his mouth and throat. “You have to run.”

“No, why did this happen? Where did they take them?”

“To a work camp and the men will come back looking for you. They are probably looking for you now,” he said.

“You must take the book and run. Go now.”

“No, I will not leave you.”

“I am an old man and I have lived my life. I am prepared to leave this world but you have an important life to live,” he said.

“But where will I go?”

“I do not know but trust the book to guide you.”

“Hea had the book in the waist of her school skirt and she ran back to her grandparents’ home to find her lying on the floor. She found the little bit of money they had saved, some cabbage and some fruit that had been thrown across floor when the men were searching for the book.

She kissed her grandmother, cried as she said goodbye and then ran back to her grandfather who was struggling for each breath. She knelt beside him. Kissed his forehead and she held his hand. He squeezed her hand slightly, closed his eyes and took his last breath as Hea’s tears droped from her chin to his face.

Chapter 3

The rural area she lived in was entirely supported by the rice crop and the checkerboard fields could be seen for miles in the distance. With only a small sack half filled with some food and the book, she ran down the hill into the rice fields. She marched from one field to another walking along the six-inch mud dam that separates the field into paddies. Hea found some twine left over from a previous harvest and tied the book to her bare back and pulled her shirt down to hide it.

Just before the sun fell below the horizon she reached a wooded area. She had been running for at least four hours without stopping. She sat down beside a tree and tried to catch her breath. As her breathing slowed, tears fell. Her grandparents were killed in front of her and her parents had been taken to a work camp.

“How could this happen?” she asked herself out loud.

She pulled the book from behind her and opened it to the center. As she began to read, tear drops fell from her chin onto the pages smudging the characters a little. Soon the tears quit falling and she was comforted as she imagined her father’s voice reading to her and it was as if he were sitting there with his arm around her shoulders. She read until she could no longer hold her heavy eyes open and slowly placed the leather book under her head and fell asleep against the tree.

Hea awoke to the sound of a large truck driving nearby. She knew the only vehicles she had ever seen in her country were government officials or military. She assumed they must have been looking for her.

She jumped to her feet, grabbed her stuff and ran deeper into the woods away from the road that continued north to avoid being seen. Hea could smell and see smoke from a small cooking fire off in the distance and she made her way towards the beautiful thin line of gray smoke painted on the blue morning sky. When she arrived she saw a woman who looked like her grandmother and she paused for a moment.

“Hello, do you have any water?” she asked the woman.

The woman jumped after being startled by the sound of a stranger’s voice.

“Of course my child. Drink this and I will make you some ginger tea.”

As the woman began to bail some water from the large basin and pour it into the kettle she asked Hea, “I know where you are going but where did you come from?”

“How do you know where I am going?” Hea asked.

“Because you are not the first to cross my fields and I can see the fear in your eyes.”

“I am from just on the other side of the mountain,” Hea said.

“You are a long way from home my child? Why are you running and why are you alone?”

“The Party arrested my parents and killed my grandparents.”

“My dear child, why did such a thing happen?”

“Because my father has a book that was not written by our Dear Leader,” Hea said with a hint of fear not knowing if the woman would turn her in.

“And they killed your grandparents for that too?’

“I saw the entire thing. My grandparents were killed trying to stop the officials from beating my mother and father. When my father would not tell them where the book was, they put them in the back of a truck and I am sure they took them to the work camp in Haengyong.”

The woman poured the steaming water into a clay cup and dropped in some tealeaves and a slice of ginger root. She handed the cup to Hea with her right hand and moved her left arm across her body placing the fingers of her left hand under her elbow which was a sign of hospitality and that she meant no harm to Hea.

“Where is the book now?” the woman asked as she pulled up a small log and sat down beside Hea.

“I have it with me.”

“Then you are not safe. You must give the book to the Secret Police or they will continue to hunt for you and could kill you.”

“I could never give up the book. This book is very special to me. My father died trying to protect it.”

There was a long pause and Hea could read the woman’s disagreement with her idea. Changing the subject, the woman asked, “When was the last time you ate?”

“Before I went to school yesterday.”

“Let me make you some rice in soup. It will give you strength for your journey,” she said as she got to her feet to begin.

Hea ate the soup and continued her journey across hundreds more rice patties. After three days of walking she could finally see a city on the horizon that must be Dandong, China.

Gray buildings rose above the tree lines ten to twenty stories, the largest buildings she had ever seen. There was also a gray haze that hovered over the city. This gray sight was more than a border city; Dandong was a city of freedom. But between her and freedom were soldiers, a rusty barbed wire and a river she had heard was filled with explosives to kill anyone who tried to swim across.

Hea felt her best shot was to try and swim the river but if she failed it would cost her life.

“*Should I take such a challenge?* *Is it worth the risk*,” she thought to her self.

There were no trees to take cover under and soldiers were constantly patrolling the border. She made her way to the middle of a rice field and laid face down till dark. It was almost harvest time so the grain grew high and the ground was dry. Every sound she heard she jumped and fear began to take over. She placed the book on the ground in front of her face and began to read. As she turned a page, she dreamed of a place she could read freely and read this book or any other book she might find without fear.

The sun finally sat and a full moon rose casting a beautiful blue light over the top of the rice and the lights in the distances signaled her freedom so she thought. She crawled through the field on her hands and knees to displace and move as few stems of as possible. Her knees bleed and her palms were cut by dried rice husks and chaffs that laid from a previous harvest. Twelve rice fields later; she reached a barbed wire fence on the bank of the Tumen River.

With her book tied to her back again and covered by the waist of her now torn and dirty school skirt she had been wearing for days she looked for a place she could fit through the wire. The fence had been built more than twenty year ago and was not well maintained so it was not long before she found a place she could raise one wire with a stick, hold another down with a rock and crawl through.

As she tried to fit without cutting her arms and legs the book and her shirt caught the top wire etching a long deep scratch into the back of the leather cover. She lowered her self to get through and quickly pulled her legs through and removed the stick and rock allowing the fence to bounce back into place. She quickly lowered herself into the cold but gentle moving river and gasped as her body was submerged. The water was only about four feet deep but she choose to swim with just her head above water rather than wade so the patrols on the bank would not see her. She swam quickly and quietly rarely breaking the surface of the water with her hands. She swam as fast as she could across the thirty feet of polluted murky water but she did not swim fast enough. A spotlight illuminated the water around her. Guards in a tower behind and south of her were yelling for soldiers to catch her. North Korean soldiers raced towards her running on the bank behind her.

Hea did not see anyone waiting for her on the bank as she approached so she continued to swim for her life as the light followed her every stroke.

Bullets splashed around her at the same time she heard the guns fire. She continued to swim with all she had. The rising bank shortened her strokes and she began to crawl as fast as she could into the brush as the shots continue. She pulled herself through the vines and grass out of sight from the Koreans and the shots stopped.

The silence lasted only a second before she heard soldiers coming towards her on the bank she just landed. Hea ran down the bank in the opposite direction of the sound not knowing where she was running but just ran for the lights. The Chinese soldiers did not fire upon her but gave chase.

“*If I can only make it to the crowded town, maybe I can blend in,*” she thought as she fought her quick breaths and racing heart.

She finally broke free from the brush and stepped onto a concrete street. The men and women walking in the streets were wearing dark clothes with thick pants and she was soaking wet in a torn and dirty school uniform that was dripping water.

Walking down a street lined with apartment buildings and a crazy web of electrical wires hanging above, she was the only person on the street at this time of night. She heard the footsteps of three men walking up behind her. She looked over her left shoulder and saw the outline of soldiers with guns holstered walking only a few steps behind her. She picked up her walking pace but trying to remain at a walk. As she felt the men closing in on her an iron door swung open and a man stepped out and griped her arm tightly. Hea gasped for air and pulled against him but he forced her inside and pulled the door closed. As the door slammed he covered her mouth and said in Korean, “I am here to help you. Stay quiet.”

Someone pulled at the door but it was locked. Switching to mandarin he asked, “What do you want?”

“We are looking for a Korean defector. Open the door!”

He opened the door and placed himself between Hea and the door in order to protect her and hide her wet clothes. Hea bowed her head.

“She is my daughter who stays out at night with men.”

“She looks Korean,” one of the soldiers said.

“My mother was Korean but I am Chinese and she is my daughter. She is going to pay for being out late and is going to be punished.”

Satisfied with his response, the soldiers moved down the street and the door slammed again. The man checked the lock and Hea whispered, “Thank you

“Come with me,” he said as he led her up the dark iron stairway to the 12th floor. Each flight of stairs made her more and more nervous. This was the highest Hea had ever been since she grew up in a village. The man unlocked another door and Hea found six people asleep on the concrete floor.

“There is a blanket over there and here is water and some rice.”

“How did you know I need your help?” Hea asked.

“Shush, I will tell you in the morning. Eat and get some sleep.”

She ate the rice in the dark and looked around the room wondering who all the people asleep on the floor were. She grabbed the blanket and curled up by the door in the only space left.

Hea was exhausted and tried to sleep but her mind raced with all that had happened in the last four days. Here eyes swelled up with tears but she kept silent and eventually fell asleep.

She awoke to find everyone eating rice and in addition to the six Korean men and women was the man who had saved her life. His twelve-year–old son also ate with the group.

“Would you like some rice a Korean woman only about ten years older than her said as she offered a bowl to her.

“Thank you,” and Hea took the bowl and began to eat.

“Are you a defector too?” the woman asked.

“What is a defector?”

“Are you from the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea?”

Hea answered with a quick, “yes.”

“Then you are a defector like all of us.”

She looked around to size up the two woman and four men eating and looking at her. Everyone was Korean and much older than her.

“Do you have a life here?” Hea asked.

“No, we are waiting here to move south to Thailand. The Thai government will deport us to South Korea.”

“When are you leaving?” Hea asked.

“We do not know.”

“Why did you leave North Korea?” Hea asked the woman.

“I was going to be locked up unless I worshiped Kim Il Sung. They took my family and friends and I decided to take my chances at the river.

“Hea told her story about the book and everyone in the room listened. Hea was not sure if it was because it was a good story or if they were all listening because it was a new story to hear in what seemed to be a boring existence.

A few minutes later the man told them that a few could go to the bath house a few blocks away but they must be carful and watch out for each other.

The group left in groups of two and Hea went with Park, her new friend.

“You can not speak to anyone and do not speak in Korean even to me.”

Hea and Park walked with their heads down and tried to not make eye contact with anyone.

“Do you speak Chinese,” Hea whispered in Korean.

“Yes, my father traded with them before the war and I traveled with him sometimes but I speak with an accent and everyone would know I was a defector if I say a word.”

The two walked in silence as they entered the more crowded streets.

Bicycles moved down the street and venders lined the way selling fish and pork both dried and fried.

As they approached the bathhouse they noticed two police officers standing on either side of the entrance. Park leaned into Hea and the two moved away and sat on a dirty curb facing away from the bathhouse. Park listened to the two men seated near by speaking in Chinese. Two other policemen passed them on the street and Park knew they must have been looking for defectors looking to bathe. Hea’s book was in her waistband so she pulled it and hid her face in the pages.

“What are they saying” Hea whispered in Korean.

“Sush!”

“He said the police are looking for a Korean girl who stole military documents from the Koreans. They want her and the documents.”

Hea quickly closed the book and placed it behind her in the place she had been hiding it for days now.

“Are you sure they are looking for a girl with documents?”

“Yes, a leather book I think he said.”

Panic filled Hea’s face and she made sure her shirt hid the book from view.

“Is that you?” asked Park.

“Yes, but I did not steal any documents. This is my father’s book. They killed him for it and I know they will kill me if they have the chance.”

“Then we must hide right now. Quickly, go to the outhouse over there,” and Park pointed at a wooden building about thirty yards away. The two walked towards the public restrooms that were a quickly assembled shack with wooden slats for a floor over a pit of muck. As they entered, Park looked back to see two soldiers following them. The two Korean girls stepped inside the long room and went down the line as far as possible. Hea had grown up in the country and had never smelled something so bad in her life. Hundreds of people must use this each day and she thought she could smell everyone of them.

“They are after us!” Park said.

Hea could see two soldiers standing outside waiting for them to come out.

“We must find a different way out,” Park said as she looked around but the walls were made of concrete with only a small vent near the roof. A Chinese woman who was squatted nearby heard the two whispering in Korean and said, “You must separate and you,” pointing at Hea, “you must change your clothes.”

The woman began pulling off her cotton shirt and said “Quickly, switch clothes with me. If they see that outfit they will know you are recently from Korea.”

When Hea removed her skirt, the leather book fell to the floor and landed face down on the filthy slats.

“You have to get rid of that book,” Park said.

“But I can not! It is very important to me. It was my father’s.”

“If they catch you with it they will give you and the book to the Koreans who will probably kill you.”

Hea thought hard as she continued to switch clothes. As she buttoned the thick wool pants the woman had given her, she heard one of the men yelling at the door. The other women in the room quickly ran towards the door and the three of them were left alone in the corner. The woman, now dressed in the warn, Korean school uniform smiled nervously and ran towards the door but it was too late. The men were coming towards them and Hea knew she was going to be captured. As the solders approached, Hea lifted one side of the book with her toe and let the book slide spine first into the sewage below. At the same time the Chinese woman tried to stop the soldiers but the first soldier hit her across the head with his baton and she fell face down on the wooden slats and did not move.

Hea ran towards the left and Park to the right. The soldiers knocked Park into the concrete wall with such force it shook the entire building and gray dust and rock rained down. The other soldier grabbed Hea’s arm spinning her around and then pulled a hand full of her long dark hair in a tight grip. Hea fell to the floor but the solder held her body up by her hair. The soldiers pulled Park and Hea out of the women’s outhouse and Hea’s already cut knees banged the threshold leaving two bloody marks. Hea knew she was going to be deported and prayed she would be placed in the same camp as her parents.

A few moments later, the unconscious woman, weaing Hea’s damp school uniform awoke with her face against the mud-caked slat floor. She looked down as her vision slowly cleared and noticed that the book the girl had dropped was lying in the brown slop below. The book was less than three feet away and if she could fit her arm through a slat, she could probably reach it.

She began to pull at a loose board. The dried wood split easily and she laid back down on the floor reaching through the hole while stretching her fingers towards the muck. She strained to pinch the leather cover between her index finger and thumb. She slowly pulled the book towards her, rolled over and leaned against the wall. She took the shirttail of the shirt she had just traded and wipe the dark muck away from the cover to revile the title written in Chinese Characters.

Chapter 4

Xia took the book she had found and hid it in the waist of the skirt she had just received and pulled the dingy shirttail over it. Crusty waste was stuck to her face from when she was knocked to the floor and a cut above her left eye ran with blood. She walked straight home forgetting to stop at the markets, as was her custom. After arriving in her small one room apartment on the 15th floor. She striped off the dirty clothes and went to the basin in the corner of the room to wash herself.

Alone, she stared past the iron bars on her window into North Korea. Xia feared what would happen to that girl and was thankful she was not arrested for trying to help. The book was dirtier than she, so she took the cleaning cloth and wiped the cover clean. She was curious what these Chinese characters mean and why the Korean girl had a Chinese book.

She quickly thumbed through the book and noticed the tattered brown pages that now smelled like sewage. Xia wanted to read the pages but could only read a handful of words she recognized from signs she knew from the market. Xia’s son Shen would return from school in a few hours and she would ask him to read the book to her.

Xia pulled her dark hair back and dressed again for the market. She returned with two large baskets, one over each shoulder. One held a fresh cut of red meat and the other was filled with fresh vegetables for tonight’s dinner. She started the small gas burner that sat on the floor and poured oil in the deep round pan. While she chopped the greens her son walked in the door.

“Ne hau,” he said as he placed his books on the shelf and walked towards the kitchen.

“Ne hau,” she responded “How was your day?”

“Ok. When will dinner be ready?” he asked.

“Very soon. Wash your hands and get ready.

He walked over to the basin and knelt to begin washing his hands. As he moved his hands under the water he notices the book lying nearby.

“What is this book,” he asked his mother. “Where did you get a book?”

“I found it at the bath house today,” keeping the details of how she found it to herself. “What does the cover say,” she asked him.

“The book is all it says.”

“Can you read the words inside?” said Xia.

Of course I can read the book.”

I want to know what is says. Will you read some of it to me after dinner?

The two quickly finished their meal and the only conversation was about Shen’s father.

“When will dad be home from the mine?” asked Shen.

“Next week. They get off the week for New Years.”

Xia took the bowls to the basin, grabbed the book and the two sat on small wooden stools facing each other. Shen flipped through the book.

“It is a collection of stories, not one big story like most books,” he said.

“Then I guess start in the beginning.” Xia said.

He began to read and she held onto every word. He was good at reading aloud. Story after story he continued to read and she listened intently to every detail of every story. As the sun went down and the outside light failed to illuminate the concrete room, she turned on the one light bulb in the house and he continued to read until the words began to blur because his eyes were fatigued. He finished the story he was reading and said, “Mom, I am getting tired.”

“It is time for bed and you have school tomorrow for the last time before New Year’s celebrations. As Shen changed his clothes, Xia prepared the bedding on the floor and began to wash the plates by pouring the dirty was water out the window on to the street.

She finished, turned off the light switch and laid on her mat across the room from Shen. She missed her husband who when home, laid between them but was forced to work in the mines in the neighboring province to the west.

###

On new years day small explosions could be heard from the busy street 15 stories down. Shen’s father arrived in the night before, as did most of the miners and farmers who worked outside the city in the surrounding provinces. Everyone in the villages came to the city for the festival. Firecrackers could be heard constantly and Shen awoke to find a read envelope on his bedding mat. He knew what was inside but did not know how much. He smiled as his father and mother who were now sitting on his bed. Shen carefully pealed back the sealed flap off the crisp read envelope embossed with gold characters that read, “Good Fortune.” He slowly removed the contents six RMB bills and a fortune.

“You will gain knowledge and share it with the world,” Shen read aloud the fortune for his year of birth before he carefully placed it back in the envelope. He counted the money again and placed it in his pocket. Shen knew his farther had to work two days to give him that much money and he was thankful. He walked over to the shelf in the corner to pull out a wooden box and added the envelope to the other 15 he had received in the past. Then he placed the box back on the shelf with pride and pulled down the leather book to show his father.

“Look at this book Mother found. It is amazing.”

Puzzled, he took the book and flipped through the pages but he could not read either.

“What are you going to do with this,” he asked his wife. “You can’t read.”

“I am reading it to her,” Shen answered. “And I will read it to you too of you like. There is one in here a about a king’s celebration, his son said with excitement.

“Please, read it to me.”

###

For years Shen read the stories to his family, most of the time it was just him and his mother but when his father was home he would read him his favorites. Soon, he had memorized most of the stories word for word.

After school he would go to the old market and stand on the corner walk way near the live animals and start speaking. The shop owners nearby listened while continuing to work and others gathered around him. The people were fascinated and began tossing a few coins at his feet and he was even paid to tell his entertaining stories at a few parties. Shen reluctantly took the money because he enjoyed telling the stories but he did not have a regular job to help his family.

In his final year of secondary school, the headmaster of the school called him to his office. Shen was fearful, knew he had done nothing wrong, but had no idea why he was being called into the headmaster’s office. Shen walked in and stood quietly before the headmaster’s desk with his shoulders straight and his head bowed.

Shen, kept his mouth closed, one of the few times he was ever seen not talking.

“The governor of the province is coming to graduation this year and we must honor him with a great celebration,” said the headmaster.

“Yes, Sir,” Shen answered respectfully.

“I have heard you tell stories that people enjoy.”

“Thank you sir.”

“I would like for you to tell a story about a distant land during the commencement ceremony for the governor,” the headmaster requested.

“It would be my honor,” Shen said and then quickly turned for the door.

Shen ran home to tell his mother.

“We must get you a new suit,” she said in a proud voice. “Your father will be proud when he sees you at graduation speaking in front of the governor.”

###

Early graduation morning, every student in the school lined up in formation on the courtyard. Standing in perfect lines as they did each morning, they now stood at attention for an audience of the governor and most of the village. Each student wore the school’s blue and red uniform except for the graduating class. The oldest boys wore dark suits with red scarves and the girls wore a dress made from the same material with a red belt.

Shen had the honor of sitting on the stage, only four seats from the governor. The ceremony began with the playing of the national song and the headmaster gave a brief introduction thanking everyone on stage. The official ceremony continued on for a while as Chinese are great at official ceremonies. As the time approached for Shen to speak, sweat filled his palms and butterflies filled his stomach. Just before stepping to the podium, he remembered a different story than the one he was going to tell. He remembered a story about a man who was not confident speaking in public but lead a great number of people. Suddenly, his butterflies went away and he dried his hands on his pants before placing them on the wooden podium.

The audience was captivated and silence filled the air as he shared the story with his classmates, the village and the governor. He spoke each word in tones that pulled his audience in as if they wanted to know a secret.

When he finished the story, Shen took a deep breath and took one step back from the podium. The crowd clapped for several moments as he walked to his seat on the stage. The headmaster stood, shook his hand and whispered in his ear, “You made me and your family proud.”

After the ceremony Shen walked to the edge of the crowd to try to find his parents. Walking across the dusty courtyard Shen could see big smiles on both his parents’ faces.

“You honor our family,” his father said as he greeted Shen.

Shen’s mother had tears coming from her eyes and when she grabbed his hand they were interrupted. The governor approached and said, “Congratulations on your accomplishment today. I will be dining with the President Li’s home for New Year’s celebrations and I would like for you to accompany my wife and me to the Presidential Palace in Beijing to share a story as my gift to the President.”

“It would be my honor to entertain the President,” Shen said trying unsuccessfully to hold back his excitement. Smiles filled the already proud Wong family and they walked home dreaming about the presidential palace.

###

The governor’s black sedan pulled up to the Wong’s apartment building before the sun rose. Shen said goodbye to his father and mother. It would be the first time the family would not be together for New Years. Mr. Wong handed Shen a red envelope for his New Years gift. “This is for you to open in the morning,” his father said.

The governor, his wife and Shen made their way to Beijing. This was the first time Shen had ever left the province of Liaonin where he was born and despite being sleepy he kept his eyes always looking out the window. The arrived at the train station and boarded a special government train. The sedan was pulled onto the last car and the five-car train pulled out of the station moments after the governor’s party arrived.

The governor’s sitting care was lavish and ornate. Beautiful red velvet curtains with gold fring lined the walls. The train car had two sets of bunk beds and a round table with four chairs in the middle. Shen had never seen such decorations or comforts and was not sure of his place.

“You may sit here,” said the governor’s wife. “You are our guest and you should have a nice view.”

She placed him in one of the chairs near a window that had an excellent view. The seat swiveled to allow Shen to have an obstructed view of the passing province. The trip would have been 14 hours by car but in the governor’s train that does not make stops, the trip should take less than four hours.

Through out the entire trip Shen took in the sights of his province and the neighboring. He had never seen so much farmland, so many vehicles or such high mountains. He had also never traveled at such a high rate of speed and the motion of the train and the trees passing by took its toll on his stomach. Shen decided he should close his eyes for a moment.

He awoke to the feeling of the train coming to a stop in Beijing. The workers quickly unloaded the car and the party-of-three climbed back into the sedan.

The palace was in the center of the city guarded by an ancient gray stone wall and a wide mote with dark water. The back sedan approached the large wooden gate and stopped for the guards. After a few moments a wooden bridge was lowered by two large black chains and the large doors opened.

Two soldiers jumped into a small jeep and lead the sedan through the gate and towards the palace. The wall was thicker than Shen had realized. It was wider than the car was long, Shen noticed as they drove through it. Red flags lined the road as they drove in and red lanterns could be seen across the property in preparation for the New Year’s Celebration.

With his face stilled glued to the window Shen said, “This is the most beautiful sight I have ever seen!” The governor and his wife laughed politely.

Every tree, bush and shrub was carefully crafted and placed. The flowers were bright and beautiful and the road of continuous gray stones weaved through the garden accented the organic beauty of the grounds. The governor leaned over and pointed out a few specific plants and said, “Rivers curve and trees bend. Nothing is perfectly straight in nature and you see nature mimicked here.”

The rock-paved road they were on curved as well. The jeep and sedan finally stopped on the stone path that ended in front of the grand palace. 100 or more soldiers lined the front of the building and red banners with gold characters reading “Good Fortune for the New Year” stretched over every doorway.

A soldier wearing white gloves opened the door and saluted as the governor stepped out first, followed by his wife and then Shen. Shen was unsure what he was suppose to do or how to act so we watched the governor carefully and repeated what he saw. The governor buttoned his coat at the top of the steps before entering the doorway and so did Shen.

The three entered the grand foyer where every inch of every wall was hand painted in red and gold ancient Chinese designs. The governor’s wife leaned over and whispered in Shen’s ear, “When you meet the President, bow and do not speak until he addresses you.”

Two soldiers with long swords by their sides accompanied the small group. Two other men opened the tall double doors and all the three of them walked through leaving their escort at the doors. Shen’s heart raced and he swallowed hard while walking down the long red carpet. The room was lined by long tables and distinguished looking men and women were seated. Shen assumed they were the other governors and wives. He did not notice any other students his age but did not get a great look while trying to look like he belonged. They walked the remaining 10 yards and stopped before the main table. The governor cleared his throat and boldly and respectfully introduced himself and his wife.

“And this is a gift I have brought you.”

Shen slightly bowed his head.

“He has the gift of oratory and is very entertaining,” the governor added. After a long and nerve racking pause, the president nodded his head and pointed to the left side of the table and said, “Welcome to my home.”

The governor and his wife moved to their seats and a servant came to accompany Shen to his seat. Shen was escorted to the balcony, which he had not wanted but it did give him a great view to whatever was going to unfold below.

A beautiful Chinese girl about his age and dressed in a red dress to her ankles knelt beside him and placed a tall glass of hot herbal tea in his hand. Smiling she said, “Mister, whatever you need, I will gather it for you.”

She stood and walked to stand by the door and Shen’s eyes followed her the entire way. He thought she was gorgeous and could not hide his admiration. Already, this had been the greatest day of Shen’s life and it was not even lunchtime yet. He had met the President and now spoken to the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

Shen watched as others arrived and introduced themselves to the President. When the final seat was filled, at least a dozen servers entered the room wearing black tuxedos and carrying large platters of food pilled high. Shen could see twelve roosted ducks served across the tables and lost of other dishes, many he had never seen before.

The smells made him hungry and he wondered if he would get some food but was afraid to ask. The girl from before startled him with her soft voice from behind him. “Your table is ready. Please come with me,” she said.

She led him to the corner of the balcony where a table for 8 people was set with 8 plates. There were two ducks and four other dished and the largest bowl of rice he had ever seen. Shen sat down and the girl spooned the rice on his plate and poured him a new glass of hot tea.

“Who else is coming to eat,” Shen asked.

‘I believe you are the only one today,” she answered softly.

“So all of this food is for me?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then will you join me so I do not have to eat alone,” he asked her.

“No sir, I am sorry. I would be fired for eating the palace food.”

“Ok, then at least tell me your name.”

“I am Ling.”

“Thank you. I am Shen,” he said and she walked away to her post.

Shen started with the duck. He had never seen a duck that big before and actually never eaten duck. “*This bird would feed my family for a week*,” he thought. He ate the saucy chicken and the spicy pork. More and more dishes apeard on the lazy susan. There was a dish from every province in China. Spicy from Sichuan, Lamb from Inner Mongolia and lots of dumplings. Shen thought about putting some in his pocket for the trip back and to give to his family but was afraid it might be stealing. After he finished eating an usher came to him and said, “The governor has requested your presence on the floor.

Shen wiped his mouth, stood up and buttoned his new jacked. When he arrived at the large doorway, the governor was waiting for him.

“Go to the center of the carpet, address the president and deliver your best story.”

Over the last few weeks, on the train and in the car ride Shen had thought long and hard about which story to share from the leather book but with all the excitement of the last hour he was now unsure.

Then in a moment, the perfect tale came to mind. He adjusted his coat, lifted his head and walked to the center of the room. There was a light buzz of conversation and the sound of ivory chopsticks clicking against porcelain bowls. Shen confidently began his story and slowly the room’s attention turned to him. The president looked directly at Shen but Shen could not tell if he liked what he was hearing or not. Shen continued in great detail and cadence slowly reeling in his audience for the climax.

Ling was also captivated by every word. She slowly and almost unknowing abandoned her post and walked in a trance like state to the railing of the balcony. She knelt and listened intently to the words coming from the boy who faced away from her but she heard him perfectly. Her imagination rolled as it had never before and she dreamed of the place he spoke of and hoped the story would not end. She also dreamed to hear more stories from the boy about her age.

His words finally came to and end and the story was complete. A long silence hovered over the room and not a single person moved for several seconds. The president slowly arose from his seated position and began to clap. It was the only time during the festivities that President Li stood for anyone. Following his lead, the room exploded with applause as everyone rose to their feet including Ling. The clapping continued for what felt like several minutes to Shen.

When the applause stopped, the President said, “You have honored this hall, myself and all who heard the virtuous words you spoke. You have spoken truth to all of us and I thank you for your story.”

Shen bowed his head and thanks the President.

“What are your intentions for this new year now that you have finished your schooling?”

“I would like to travel across our great country and tell other countrymen these stories.”

The president motioned for one of his assistance and whispered something in his ear.

“Son, what would you need to complete this task?”

“Permission from my father and money for the bus.”

The crowed laughed at the small request before the most powerful man in the country.

“It is my wish that you travel my country and share these stories with my people. On your way you will be treated as if you were my son.” The President looked around the room at the men seated and they all nodded in agreement. The assistant had returned and he took two envelopes from him and extended the white envelope towards Shen.

“This is an official note with my seal. Present this to the officials when you arrive and they will give you whatever you need.”

Shen bowed as he reached forward to accept the gift.

“And this is for your service to me and this hall. Happy New Year,” the President said smiling and handed him a red envelope like the one his parents have given him every New Years day but Shen noticed this one was a little different. Instead of the gold paint being pressed into the red paper, this had real gold melted and poured on the envelope in Chinese characters.

Shen nodded and said, “Xia, Xia.” He nodded at the governor and made his way towards the door.

Shen could not wait to get back to the balcony so he could see what was inside both envelopes. *“What did the seal look like?*" *“What gift had he been given?”* Shen also thought he must be the only person in his entire province to be given a gift from the President of China.

Ling was standing by the door when he walked in and they both smiled at each other. He sat down and immediately began to open the white one.

The envelope contained a bi-folded letter that read.

“This is an agent of the President and should be afforded all benefits and hostilities that would be bestowed upon the family of the Presidents.”

It was signed, Presiden Li Xiannian and had a large round stamp in red wax. He placed the letter back in the envelope and then opened the red one, looking around to see if anyone was watching.

He pulled out the fortune and a single bill. The fortune read, “A book holds a house of gold.” Shen had heard his mother say this many times to encourage him to do well in school. Shen then slid the fortune behind the bill and saw a red piece of money he had never seen. It was not a bill but a note or a check from the president for 100,000 Yuan. Shen’s first thought was, “This can not be real!” But he knew it was.

He quickly placed it back in the envelope and put both envelopes in his jacket pocket as he had seen businessmen do with important letters or money.

“This is enough to travel across China for the rest of my life,” Shen thought. Shen’s mind did not stop turning all evening. *“What will I do with all that money?” “Where will I go?” “What will I see?”*

Ling came over to him and said, “What was your fortune?”

“A book holds a house of gold. Which is appropriate because the story I told him came from a great book. He also gave me a generous gift of money.”

“Then the words my mother has taught me is true,” she said in her lovely quiet voice.

“I wish we could spend some time together. I would like to talk to you more.”

“We can. I will request to serve you for the rest of the evening. Then we can take a walk to the far north west corner of the gardens and talk.”

“That would be wonderful,” he said.

Later that day, the two walked across the gardens along the stone path to the farthest pagoda. A slight smell of sulfer filled the air and the sounds of firecrackers and fireworks outside the walls carried in. Thay sat together in silence for a moment before Shen started.

“I am not the son of a governor or a business man?”

“I know. But who is your father?”

“My father is a miner.”

“My father is a truck driver for the palace. We live in an apartment about an hour walk from here.”

Shen told her his life story and he told her about the book and how important it was to him. The two talked as the sun went down and when it was completely dark they were interrupted by an explosion of red above them. The New Year’s celebration had begun and leaned close to watch the show. They did not say a word but just sat together until the blasts ended which was longer than an hour.

“I will come back to Beijing very soon and then I will travel the country. Will you go with me,” he asked her as they looked in each other’s eyes.

She answered with a simple, “Yes.”

Shen was surprised by her word but loved what he heard.

“But it would not be honorable for us to travel together and staying together and not be married, so will you marry me?’

Shen had been the great public speaker but he was nervous and she controlled this conversation.

“Only if you ask my father for permission.”

“Then I will ask him the first time I meet him,” he said and took her hand in his.

“I will volunteer to serve you for the rest of the day and then we can watch the parade and fireworks together.”

“That would be wonderful,” he said.

###

The next morning Shen road home and could not push Ling from his mind long enough to have a good conversation with the governor.

Shen’s father did not have to return to work until the following day and both parents were waiting impatiently for their son to return. When the car drove up, all the neighbors came out to see the governor who rolled own his window to wave and drove off leaving Shen there in the crowd. Everyone wanted to shake his hand and ask him questions but Shen only wanted to get to see and tell his parents about his experience.

They were waiting for him by the door when he came up the stairs.

‘Did you meet the President,” his mother asked.

“Yes, I met him and spoke in the great hall before all the governors and the President. He also gave me a gift!”

Shen pulled the two envelopes from his coat and handed them to his father.

“This one is the seal of the President and this was a New Year’s fortune with a check in it.”

Mr. Wong pulled out the fortune and saw the bank note.

“100,000 Yuen!”

“Let me see that,” and his mother removed it from his father’s hands.

“Is that real,” Mr. Wong asked.

“I think so.”

“That is more money than I will make in my entire life!”

“I know father. The money was given to me so that I can travel across the country and share the stories from the book to people across China.”

“You will be able to travel for the rest of your life with this money,” Mr. Wong said. “You must take this to the bank first thing when it opens in the morning.”

“The seal is also for my travels.”

“What do you do with the seal,” she asked.

“When I arrive in a new city or province, I present this to the local government and they will give me whatever I need. Like food or lodging or whatever.”

“This is unbelievable,” his father said.

“I know. And there is more!”

“More?” they both said simultaneously.

“I met my future wife at the palace.”

“Is it the President’s daughter,” his mother asked.

“No, but she works in the palace.” Shen said. “ If I have your permission, I am going to take the bus to Beijing, ask her father to marry her and then we are going to travel telling stories together.”

“There are so many things to be happy for I don’t know what to do,” his mother said.

The next morning Shen and his father walked to the bank together. He was supposed to go to work but with his new son’s new fortune he could afford to miss a day. They entered the Bank of China and Mr. Wong stood by the door and proudly watched his son walk to the counter. Shen wore his suit for the third day in a row because he felt it made him look successful.

He presented the check to the woman dressed in a read business suit and red hat pinned to her head.

“I would like to open an account please,” he said to the woman.

She took the note and without expression looked directly at Shen and said, “Just a moment please.”

She walked over to the manger and showed him the check. They both looked at him. Shen knew they were wondering how a boy his age in rural China could have a check for so much money from the President. The manger finally came over to the window.

“Where did you get this money,” he asked in an accusatory tone.

Shen slowly reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out the white envelope he had been given and removed the cream colored embossed paper and slid it across the counter to the manager. Both of them looked at the paper and were amazed at what they read.

“Yes sir Mr. Wong. We will take care of this right away.”

Shen took back the paper that read in embossed red letter, “Agent of the President of China,” and placed it back in his pocket.

They quickly opened the account and Shen finished his business and walked to the bus station with his father. Shen gave his father a bank envelope with enough money to buy a home in cash.

“We are going to miss you son. When will you come home,” his father asked.

“I do not know. I have to do this. I have to share the book with the rest of the country. I have been given an opportunity few ever receive.”

“I know. That book changed our lives and I am thankful for how it has impacted you to do something great.”

Mr. Wong got on his bus and headed back to work on the mine. Shen got on a train and headed for Beijing to meet his wife and start his journey.

Chapter 5  
Beijing, China 1989

The train took much longer than his first trip to Beijing. He arrived after lunch and walked out of the station with the herd of people and made his way towards the Pallace. He was excited to see Ling again even though it had only been two days since he left her. He was not sure if the guards would let him in to speak to her but if not, he would wait for Ling to come out on her way home.

He arrived at the gate and tried to explain to the guard.

“I would like to speak to a server named Ling,” Shen said.

“I am sorry. You may not,” the guard answered firmly.

Shen understood and started to walk away and remembered he had the president’s seal in his pocket. He turned back to the guard and presented the white envelope to the guard who opened it while wearing his white ceremonial gloves. He quickly recognized the document and said, “I am sorry sir, what is the name of the person you would like to see?”

“Ling.”

Just a moment and he walked into the guard shack to call someone. After a few moments he came back out.

“Please step inside the gate and this man will escort you to her location.”

“Thank you,” Shen said as he walked forward.

She was waiting for him at the steps to the side entrance of the main building. She grinned from ear to ear as she watched him approach. Ling held back the desire to run towards him and remained calm on the outside.

“Hello Ling,” Shen said when he was a few steps from her. She smiled and the guard quickly made an about face and returned to his post leaving the two alone.

“I never expected to see you again so soon.”

“I have come to give a gift to you father and I hope that he will return your birthday to my family.” Shen said.

She smiled knowing exactly what he meant. She enjoyed the romantic idea of him coming back to her so quickly and that we was trying to hold to a traditional engagement.

“But you must have some to act on your families behalf,” she said.

Shen thought for a moment and he knew this was the custom but he did not know anyone in Beijing except Ling. She saved him the embarrassment and interrupted his thinking and said, “Let me introduce you to my friend Guan-yin. She can act for your family.”

Ling quickly ran up the steps into the building to get her friend who unbeknownst to either of them, She was listening through the door. Ling quickly explained what Guan-yin already knew and the two walked back outside to Shen smiling.

“Thank you for your help,” Shen said to Guan-yin. “Will you give this to Ling’s father?”

“Of course,” she said and began to walk down the path with the small box.

The box contained a piece of paper with Shen’s name and birthday and a package of cha-li, or tea presents. She walked towards the palace garage to find Ling’s father who worked on the grounds as a driver.

“I must get back to work but you can wait at that bench until Guan-yin returns,” Ling said.

The wait felt like he waited for days but she soon returned with a piece of paper in her hand. It read, “Year of the Boar in the 5th hour of the 5th month.” It did not matter what year she was born because Shen already knew they were perfect for each other. It only mattered to him that her father returned the information signaling his willingness for the engagement.

Guan-yin walked inside the door to find Ling waiting there trying to listen without being notices. The two young women met with great smiles and no words had to be spoken. Ling jumped down the three steps to her waiting fiancée.

“I am leaving in the morning to travel across China to share stories of hope. Will you join me on this mission and will you join on the journey for our entire lives?

“Yes,” she said as she reached for his hand and the two walked towards the garage to tell her father.

###

The next day her family gathered at scenic green grounds just outside the palace at a small covered bench. Shen stood waiting for his bride at the bench with no one at his side. Typically, he we have a huge processional of his friends and family but today he stood alone. He nervously tugged at the traditional red sash tied across his chest. He held his red cap; one his father had given him from his wedding years before. Shen wished his parents could be there but they understood his mission and his love for Ling.

Walking across the grass came Ling’s father leading the large group of family members. Shen could not see his bride in the crowd and he looked with great anticipation to see how beautiful she would be in red.

Ling’s father approached Shen with a smile.

“Mr. Kang, will you dawn my father’s groom hat,” Shen asked.

“It would be my honor to make the cap yours.”

Shen handed the small red silk cap to Mr. Kang and sat on the bench. Mr. Kang walked around behind him and placed it gently on his head. It fit snug and Mr. Kang said, “One day, you will place this on my grandson’ head.”

The rest of the family gathered around the bench but Shen could not see his bride. She was being carried on a woman’s back and Guan-yin held a parasol over her. Shen stood in honor of his new bride. She was placed beside him. Both of them wore bright red shoes. Ling was dressed in the finest red silk embroidered with gold beds. A red veil made of hundreds of beads on silk thread formed a curtain over her face.

The two took hands and turned to face away from the crowd in the direction of the bench and the gardens. Ling gave homage to her family ancestors and then said, “I give myself to Heaven and Earth.”

Shen bowed but did not speak alould for a few moments. The he softly said, “I give myself to the creator of Heaven and Earth and to this woman before me.”

The two bowed together and then turned to the family, who celebrated loudly with firecrackers and clapping. The woman who had carried Ling on her back pushed the vale behind her ears reveling Lings big beautiful smile. Her mother motioned for the two to sit on the bench and placed a single cup of tea in their hands. Two lotus seeds floated to the top of the dark tea and symbolized the two coming together. Ling passed the cup to her new husband who drank and passed it back to her who gracefully did the same.

Typically, the party would continue to the bedchamber but the two did not have a home to go to. They were to be a couple of nomads across China so the group followed them to the train station. Led by Ling’s father and his friends the group of more than 50 walked down the stone streets of Beijing to the train station. Shen had already bought the tickets so the group continued to the platform. Mr. Kang smiled as he handed the bags to Shen while Mrs. Kang cried as she said goodbye to her daughter.

“I wish many blessing on your family,” Mr. Kang said as they boarded the train.

They made it to the train in perfect timing. The new couple dressed in beautiful red silk stepped onto the car and turned around to wave at friends and family. Everyone in the station could be seen with a smile upon his or her face. Heads were leaning out the windows of the train to see the happy couple and station workers stopped their work to watch the event. Smiles were all around.

The train slowly began to pull away and the two waved goodbye to the family as they headed south to Guilin.

###

After a full day of riding the train hugged the side of the Lipu Mountains and followed the Lijiang River. Shen was torn between looking at his beautiful smiling wife or the amazing karsts formations and the reflective river outside.

“During the ceremony today, you said you commit yourself to the creator of Heaven and Earth. I have never heard of the creator. Is that the custom from your province or family?"

“It was not the tradition of my family but I hope it will become the legacy ours.”

“I do not understand,” Ling said.

“It will take time but it is my deepest hope that you will understand one day.”

The couple changed into more fitting clothes part of the way into the trip. After 12 hours the train pulled up in the downtown area of Guilin as the sun was setting. The couple took their bags and signaled a taxi.

“Take us to the governor’s house. The taxi driver looked back over his shoulder, wondering why a young couple getting off of a train would be going to the governor’s home.

Shen closed the door and the driver started off without asking questions. They drove through the million plus person city to a stone house that sat on hill that overlooked the city and the Lijang River. Shen paid the man and the two approached the gate.

“Should I wait here?” asked the driver.

“No, sir, that will not be necessary.”

Hoping to get a fare back to town when the teenagers were rejected at the gate, the driver waited anyway.

“We are here to see the governor,” Shen said confidently with his new wife standing beside him.

The guard asked, “Is he expecting you?”

“No, but he will want to see us. I spoke to him at New Years.”

“What is your name?”

I am Shen Wong and this is my wife Ling. Maybe this will help answer your questions.” Shen pulled the white envelope with the President’s seal and handed it to the guard. Shen had hoped only to use the seal when necessary but he knew he would not see the governor with out it.

“Just a moment,” he said as he quickly moved to open the gate. “Let me take your bags.”

“Please, take my wife’s bag. I can carry my own, thank you.”

They walked in the door and waited in the main hall. The guard left them taking the seal up stairs.

Ling was somewhat nervous and lowered her head because she had only interacted with governors as a servant and now she was hoping to be a guest in a governor’s home. “Are you sure this is ok?” she quietly whispered to Shen.

“No, but I have faith it will be,” he answered.

Soon the governor came down and greeted the couple. “Welcome to Guilin and to my home sir.”

“Thank you sir. This is my newly married wife, Ling. We were married this morning.

“Welcome and congratulations. I hope you find my home worthy of such an occasion.

“Yes sir,’ she nodded somewhat embarrassed.

“We are here in your city to share stories from my book to the Chinese people,” Shen said.

“Yes, I remember the story you told of a great natural force in the grand hall that day,” the governor said. “I would like very much if you would speak to our athletes who train at the stadium. Do you have a story that would be relevant to them?”

“Yes sir, I have a wonderful story about running a race to receive a prize.”

“Then you must tell our athletes. This is where our country’s best runners train for our Olympic team.”

“That would be a great opportunity,” Shen said.

“Let my wife show you to your room so that you can enjoy your first night as a couple.”

The next morning Shen woke excited about the night he had experienced and looking forward to speaking to the future Chinese Olympic team. The two got dressed, left the residence and walked down the hill to the track stadium. A round concrete sidewalk went completely around the stadium and several older men and women were running and walking around the stadium. Others were gathered on the grass areas performing slow movements with bright red fans and ribbons. Inside the stadium the serious athletes were training and stretching. It was the largest track and largest stadium either of them had ever seen.

“Mr. Wong?” a voice asked from to the couple’s left.

“Yes.”

“Welcome to our training center. I am coach Cheng.”

“Thank you,” said Shen and Ling nodded respectfully.

“Athletes, Gather here,” the coach, yelled. “The governor told me you were coming.”

The athletes gathered around and sat on the concrete stadium risers. The coach introduced Shen and motioned for Shen to step up. Shen rose and moved in front of the 20 young men who where about Shen’s age but were much stronger than he.

“I am here to tell you a story that comes from an ancient book,” Shen said.

That line did not capture the attention right off but it was not long before every man in the group was dreaming of greatness. As Shen spoke, dreams and ideas raced through the athletes heads but the story being told was of greater glory than a gold medal.

The coach was also amazed by the inspirational words from this young man. He knew that his runners would run better today than they had the day before and he hoped the words would impact them for life.

As Shen completed the story, every eye was glued to him. They wanted more but Shen knew that at that moment they only need the story he had just delivered.

“I must go tell others these stories. I hope that it has had an eternal impact on you.”

Ling and Shen exited through the walkway under the seats and the coach ordered the men back to training. The newly married couple walked alone down the river. They passed fishermen in long boats and women washing clothes on the banks. This river is the lifeline of the people and it reminded Shen of another story about a group of fishermen.

Ling listened closely to the story and when he finished she asked him, “Is the man from the race the same as the fisherman?”

“No, they are not the same person but they are both stories that come from the leather book.”

“I love to listen to you tell me of these great people in distant lands. I want to know more and I want to read them for myself,” she said.

The couple rode trains across southern China moving west towards Tibet. In each province or city they would spend a few days at markets or public halls telling stories. As they traveled Ling read the stories in the train and learned to tell them herself. She would often teach the women while Shen spoke to the men.

The couple continued their journey west across China towards Tibet. In Chengdu, they took at 10-hour bus ride across the Himalayan Mountains passing over 16,000 feet elevations. The bus was filled with people, many who had never been in a vehicle before, much less for 10 hours across winding mountain roads at high elevations. The air was thin and everyone had trouble breathing. When some of the men got nervous, they started smoking unfiltered cigarettes lowering the oxygen level for the entire bus.

Ling took a nap with her head leaning against the cold window. After several hours Shen noticed the man behind them was getting sick. He pushed her head forward and pulled down the window. She looked at him in suprize and then notice the man behind threw up out he window spraying it along the side of the bus as cold air filled the bus.

The bus only stopped for outhouse breaks every four hours. At the top of the highest pass of the trip, the driver pulled to the side of the dark mountain road. The driver had to relieve himself. He and all the men jumped off the bus, including Shen, but the women stayed on board despite their need to go as well. Shen knew his wife needed to go badly.

“Sir, can you wait two more minutes so the women can go?” Shen asked the driver.

“Quickly!” He grumbled and Ling and the other two women jumped from the bus. There was nowhere to go. On one side of the road was a very steep drop off. On the other, a rock wall towing up the mountain. Every man on that bus could see them but at this point, it did not matter. It was more important to empty their bladders than to be shy. They quickly got back on the bus climbing over bags of flower and live chickens in the isle of the bus.

The bus was only two hours late arriving in a small mountain town of mostly Tibetans. The couple ordered some food at the only open restaurant and ate in the dark. They rented a small room at the hotel attached to the bus station. The room had no heat and no running water. There was a basin and a hole in the floor of the bathroom. It was just like Shen had done when he was a child. Ling had only lived in the city and had always had running water.

The night was cold and they huddled together under five wool blankets.

“I am glad we are married,” said Ling as Shen watched her breath. “I might have froze to death if you were not in the bed with me.”

The next morning Shen woke early with the sun rise through the window and set out to find some breakfast. Ling enjoyed the comfort of the warm bed and hardly noticed when he left.

The town was dusty and only two streets. The one they took into the town that went to the top of the hill and a cross road that lead to the market. Outside the bus station stood several men leaning against their beat up four-wheel drive vehicles. Shen knew he could find one of them to take them further out was not sure where he was going yet. Across the dry, dust-covered road was a woman steaming boutza, a been-curd dumpling. He walked over and ordered four boutza and some water for the two of them to eat breakfast. Behind him in line was a Tibetan hills man. He was dressed in a long dark leather coat and high brown boots. He had a head of full dark hair and you could tell he had just got out of the bed because his hair laid in several directions.

“Excuse me Sir,” Shen got the man’s attention. “My wife and I are looking to live in the mountains for a few weeks. Do you know of anyone who could use two extra people to work in exchange for a place to sleep and some food?”

“What is your name and where are you from?”

“I am Shen and we are from the eastern coast provinces.”

“My name is Narayan and we are building a new house not far from here. My entire family is helping but we could use a couple of extra hands to get the job done before the snow falls.”

“We would be happy to help,” Shen said.

“I have to buy some yak butter from the market. Meet me back here in half an hour and you can contract one of those drivers to follow me to my home.”

Narayan got on his large motorcycle and drove it up the steep street and turned into the market. Shen went back to the hotel to eat, pack and get ready to go.

In the safety of the red jeep that had been abused by the rough roads they followed Narayan’s cloud of dust through the mountain trails. It was late November and getting cold but not near as cold as it would be in January. When the road ended, Narayan looked over his shoulder to make sure the driver was still following him and continued through the brush and rough terrain just as fast as when he was on the road. The iron welded shin guards protected his legs from the brush and rocks and he had leather gloves lined with sheep’s wool sown to the handlebars to keep his hands warm. The jeep followed and the rocks bounced Ling and Shen around in the back seat. Finally, after about and hour they arrived at three stone homes in the valley of two mountains split by a fast moving river. The first two homes had been there for years and were three stories tall. The last home was just being built and Ling pointed at the women carrying stones up a ramp to the second story.

Work on the top of the house stopped. Everyone wanted to see who had come with Narayan. The men walked down the ramp and the women took a break to sit down on the stone wall they were building.

“This is Shen and Ling,” Narayan introduced them to the men of the family. Narayan’s mother stood at the door of the home and slowly made her way to meet Ling.

“Welcome to our home,” she said in Tibetan. Ling did not understand the words but her smile and touch communicated much more. Shen was quickly shuffled in behind Ling into the traditional Tibetan home. A large wooden door stood open and the entire group of about eight men including Shen and Narayan walked through the doorway. The bottom floor of the home protected the livestock at night. Shen could tell by the obvious smell of dung and hay. They walked up the stairs to the living area. A large fireplace with a deep iron pot or wok was built into one end of the room. The men gathered at the other end and the women filled small iron pots with hot coals and placed it at their feet to keep everyone warm. The embers smoldered as they talked

Ling was given a stool in the cooking area near the fire while the rest of the women began to boil water and start churning the yak butter into tea.

“Have you ever had yak butter tea?” the grandmother of the family asked Ling who did not understand her Tibetan.

The woman’s daughter and Narayan’s sister, Bayarmaa, noticed and asked her in Mandarin.

“Have you ever had yak butter tea?”

“No, but I have heard about it.”

“It will warm you up and add meat on those skinny bones,” said the grandmother through her daughter.

They filled a wooden cylinder with butter and after the water came to a boil, they poured it over the butter, added several large wooden spoonfuls of salt and began churning. After a few minutes of churning the daughtor poured it into small bowls and handed it to Shen and then to Ling before serving the rest of the house full.

Communication was difficult at first but the youngest generation had learned Mandarin in school and so Narayan and Bayarmaa could translate. After a few bowls of thick butter tea, the workers went back to work on the house in progress but Narayan and his grandmother stayed behind to entertain the new guests.

Ling and Shen told about their journey so far and Narayan told them of their way of life in the western parts of China.

“Would you like to see my new house we are building?”

“Of course,” Shen said and the three left Narayon’s grandmother in the home and began walking down the river.

The water moved quickly and looked cold. Nestled between the two ridges was this green valley. Narayan showed them where they kept a few yak and several hogs. The family worked together and raised just enough meat to feed themselves. They were completely self-sufficient and independent of the outside world. As they walked down the stream they could hear the sounds of stones being laid one on top of the other. The women carried several stones on their backs up a steep wooden ramp. The men laid the stones one by one, choosing each stone carefully.

“We have been working for two months and we must finish before December when the snow falls,” Narayon said.

The three walked up the steep ramp to what would soon be the living quarters of the new house. Tibetans keep their livestock on one level, they live on the second and they place idols and do work on the third level or roof.

“I am sorry to say, I do not know much about laying stone but I am happy to carry it,” Shen said.

Everyone laughed. “That is the job for the women,” said one of Narayon’s uncles. What are you good at?”

“I enjoy reading and telling stories.”

“What kind of stories?” the man asked and set down the stone in his hand.

“I have this book of stories that gives hope, courage and teaches disapline through the lives of many people in different places.” Shen took the book out of his shoulder bag and showed them. All work on the project had stopped as the new guests intrigued everyone. Shen passed the book around and many of the women sat down on a few stones so the men did the same. It was obvious to Narayon that his family work crew was far more interested in what this young couple had to say than racing winter to finish his home. But Narayon was also interested.

“We can not read. Will you tell us a story?” Narayon’s uncle said as he flipped through the pages.

“Maybe I should start at the beginning.”

A light wind blew through the valley but the air was comfortable. The words flew off of Shen’s tong in Mandarin and a teenager about Shen’s age named Shamar translated each phrase as if it were straight from his own mind. Each member of Narayon’s family was captivated, totally ignoring the work they were seated on. They laughed and cried and pondered the words from these two young boys. It was if there was a message sent just for this family and they heard and understood every syllable.

As Shamar translated, Shen noticed how well he comprehended every word by the expression on his face and his animated delivery. After the story was complete, everyone sat quietly and looked through the beautiful valley they had lived in for years but saw it with fresh eyes. The mountains that protected them looked stronger than ever and they were grateful for the great soil and water that provided them so much. Slowly, as each of them comprehended the words they had just heard, one-by-one they began to go back to work, except Shamar. He sat on his stone looking into the sky. His mind raced with questions and he wanted to know more. As the worked picked up, Shen sat beside him.

“What are you thinking about,” Shen asked him.

The rhythm of stones being placed and the footsteps of women walking up the large ramp resonated but Shamar did not answer.

Shen waited. More stones were delivered and more were placed.

“I want to know more,” Shamar said softly. “I want to understand how the world was created. I want to know how to lead my family. I want to know how to be a good man. I want to know more.”

“Can you read?”

“Yes, I completed school and I was a monk for seven years. I have read many writings but none have answered my questions. After this home is complete I am going to journey to Nepal and if able, to the home of the eastern religions.

“Why would you make such at long journey?” Shen asked him.

“Why are you traveling the country to tell these stories?”

The two sat quietly while more stones were laid. Shen picked up the book, dusted off the cover and handed it to Shamar.

“I don’t know if you are going to find what you are looking for in here but it has answered all of my questions,” Shen said.

“I could not take this book. It is yours.” At that moment both boys sat in silence. They both noticed the characters change from Mandarin to Tibetan script.

“How did that happen?”

“I don’t know. It has never happened before.”

“Is this book magic?” Shamar asked his new friend.

“I do not know if it is magic but there is great power in that book. It has given me an audience of the president and helped me find my wife. It gave my family hope and security when my father was away at work. It has given me an understanding few have. I hope it will do the same for you.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You must go. You cannot wait her for the answers to find you. You must go about your journey and find our for yourself.”

“But I promised my uncle I would help with his house.”

“My wife and I will take your place. I will learn a new trade and I can share the stories to your family while you find the answers you are looking for.”

“But I have no money,” he protested again.

“No worries. I have enough to get you on your journey. Now go tell your uncle and start packing.”

“I think I will pack first and tell him before I leave.”

Shamar ran down the timber-supported ramp to his home about 500 meters down the river. He filled a shoulder bag with a change of winter clothes and the book and walked back to the construction site.

“Uncle Narayon, I need to tell you something.”

Shen and Ling walked down the ramp for the family meeting. Shen had already explained to Ling and she liked the idea of settling down for a few months.

“Uncle Narayon, I want to go to Dharamsala, India to study.”

“You want to study with the Dalai Lama?” Narayon asked.

“Yes, and Shen will take my place working on your house.”

“I am not worried about my house. If this is what you must do then I support you. Go!”

“Thank you Uncle.”

Narayon gathered the family and let Shamar explain where he was going.

“I must leave you to go on a journey to find answers.”

The family understood and it was not a foreign concept because most Tibetan men serve as a monk for some time in their lives. Everyone took turns saying goodbye including Shen and Ling.

“I hope you find the answers you are looking for.” Shen said. “I have read the book and my answers were inside it.”

The women loaded him down with fruit and nuts and Shamar started walking down the valley next to the river with a basket over one shoulder and his bag over the other.

Chapter 6

The stream that had served him and his family his entire life flowed beside him. It was leading him away from home and he hoped it would one day lead him back knowing more than when he left. Sahom had been gone about twenty minutes when his uncle Narayon drove up behind him on his motorcycle.

“Climb on, I will take you to the bus station,” Narayon said over the rattling of the engine caused by cheap gasoline.

Sahom jumped on and rode behind his uncle into town as he had done a hundred times before. The cool wind cut across their faces as they bounced over the rocks and brush.

The bus station is at the bottom of the hill below the town. In the winter, the busses can’t make it all the way up the hill to the center of town so they stop at the bottom and everyone must walk up the icy roads carrying their supplies. Some of the local boys are able to earn a few extra qui by helping travelers with crates and bags. Sahom got off the bike and said, “Goodbye,” one last time.

Narayon turned around and drove back home into the sunset anticipating a warm dinner.

Sahom looked at the wall map of China. He guessed it was about a 1000-kilometer journey to the boarder with India and another 300 kilometers to Dharamsala. Sahom stepped into line to buy his ticket.

“One ticket to Lhasa,” he said to the clerk and he handed her 10 qui.

He took his ticket and looked again at he map. There were no busses from Lhasa to the border so he would have to figure something out when he arrived.

Sahom bought the last ticket for the 20-person bus to Lhasa that left at 10 p.m. and drove across the Himalayan Mountains overnight. The bus was crowded. Everyone had luggage and baskets of food and gifts. It is Tibetan custom for friends and family to give you things before you leave on a journey so everyone had extra things in the isle or in their laps. Everything from honey in used beer bottles to nuts and fruit could be found in the isle of the bus. Sahom carefully placed each foot trying not to step on anything as he struggled to make his way to the back of the bus. He went straight for the last seat against the window hoping he could get some sleep in the night ride and see the sights as he traveled west in the daytime.

Every seat was filled and most of the passengers were Tibetan men going to Lhasa looking for work. The bus made it’s way up and down and around the Himalayan Mountains. Passing peaks over 16,000 feet high on roads just broad enough for the bus’s mirrors not to scrape the ice and rock wall on the right. It was difficult to sleep because entering every turn; the bus driver blew the air horn to warn anyone on the other side he was coming. This was a constant nuisance and after several hundred turns Sahom finally fell asleep against his bag of clothes. He kept his basket of fruit between his legs to make sure no one would help themselves to his food.

The light from the rising sun broke Sahom from his restless sleep. He reached for the top of the bus stretching and then he wiped the condensation from the window. He could see a beautiful white city built in the gray Himalayan Mountains. The bus approached the largest city Sahom had ever seen. The white buildings that once housed the Dali Lama and the Tibetan government shined bright in the morning sun. Temples doted every street; each serving the same purposes but every one of them was different.

Sahom wanted to check out Lhasa and see what it had to offer but he knew the answers he sought were not there. When the bus arrived at the station, he looked for drivers sitting around. A group of men were gathered around a small round wooden table and a cloud of smoke hung over the men because each of them had a pipe or hand rolled cigarette in his mouth. A couple of men played an ancient Tibetan game on the table, which was really, an old reel for electrical cable, stood on its side.

“I need to get to the Nathu La on the border,” Sahom said as he approached he group.

“How much are you willing to pay?” a middle aged man said speaking for the group.

“Not much. I don’t have a lot of money.

“Then you need to ask over there,” and the man pointed down the street to the market. “We are drivers for hire.”

“Thank you,” Sahom said as he walked on with his bag and basket. He walked down the street to one of the markets in search of truck drivers.

The city amazed Sahom. It was only 600 kilometers from his home and filled with Tibetans but everything was different than his home. Things moved much faster and the people were not as hospitable. Sahom continued his search. Behind the marked he found a couple of truckers waiting to unload.

“I need to get to Nathu La.”

“That border crossing is closed,” said one of the drivers as he spit on the ground.

“I was told it was open until the first snow.”

“That’s right. The first snow there was two months ago.”

“Then where can I cross?” Sahom asked.

The other man standing there said, “I am headed to Nathu La. I can drop you there and you can find a ride the rest of the way. It is only about 30 kilometers from the border.”

“Sounds great,” Sahom said.

“I leave in about half an hour in that truck over there.”

“I will be waiting.”

The large shipping truck moved much slower than the bus but there was no bus that would try the roads he was about to embark. The driver spoke Tibetan so the two talked for several hours before Sahom became sleepy from the rhythm of the diesel truck.

He slept several hours before waking when the truck stopped for fuel and an outhouse break. When Sahom opened the door of the cab, he quickly noticed the air was much colder and thinner than before. It woke him quickly!

“We must be at a much higher elevation,” he thought as we walked towards the mountain cliff to relieve himself. As steam lifted off of his warm pee stream, he was amazed at the beauty in front of him. The iron gray mountains were mostly covered with white snow and clouds blocked the sky making it look like a black and white photo. All the colors were muted around him. Everything at the station was covered with a thin layer of gray dust.

His driver picked up some food and motioned for Sahom to get some for himself.

“I have some in the truck,” he yelled back across the station and he began walking back to his ride to freedom.

His driver friend removed a large metal box of rusty chains from behind the cab of the truck. He pulled a set out and Sahom realized it was snow chains for the tires; all 14 of them.

“Watch me and then you can put them on the other side.”

Sahom watched closely and it did not look difficult. He picked up a set of chains from the box and begin working on the front tire. It was more difficult than it appeared. He tried to make it fit properly and it took a while to get it hooked together. The driver completed two tires in the time it took Sahom to finish his first.

The two moved quickly and in less than 30 minutes they were back on the road. The scenery from the passenger’s side window was amazing but repetitive. The further they went, the roads narrowed and became icier. With each kilometer closers to the boarder Sahom became more fearful of an accident. Every hairpin curve, felt as if the truck would easily slide off the mountain.

“My name is Renzay,” the driver said trying to help Sahom relax.

“I am Sahom.”

“How many siblings do you have?”

“Two but we live in a house with my uncle and his wife. She is expecting her first.”

“It is always good to have a new child enter the family,” Renzay said with his eyes focused on the road.

“After each village, the roads get tougher,” said the driver. “The less people on the roads the worst they get. Out here and during this time of year, you could go days without seeing another truck.”

Sahom sat in silence and his heart began to beat harder. It was one thing thinking the truck could slide off the side at any moment; it was another thing to think if the crash did not kill them, the cold would.

“Years ago, these roads were cut by teams of Tibetans working year around to open trade with India. A long time before the Chinese government took over Tibet, trucks moved through this pass all the time. Well, at least in the summer.”

Sahom continued to dwell on the driver’s words. They approached the steepest grade yet and the driver put it in the lowest gear. Sahom thought the truck was crawling up the hill and it felt like it could roll backwards at any moment. He could feel the tires spin and catch, spin and catch as they slowly turned over the ice. Steady and slow, the truck climbed the grade and reached the peak before picking up speed and rolling down the decent in front of them.

They were moving faster than anytime before and Sahom griped the dashboard. Renzay did not touch the breaks but continued to shift gears.

“I know this is fast but if I break, we slide. This is a steep hill on solid ice so I just need to keep it straight.”

Sahom had confidence in the skills of his experienced sophfere but was still very nervous. The truck hit the trough between the two hills at about 45 kilometers per hour and when the truck took a dip, Sahom was thrust into his tight seatbelt. He might have stayed in the seat but he felt he left his stomach back at the dip.

Finally as the sun began to fall the lights of the last outpost city in Tibet could be seen just over one more ridge and Sahom finally could relax for the first time since they put the snow chains on.

The truck pulled into the small town and Renzay looked for a place to park the big rig. As they toured through the two-street town, Sahom notices a mix of Tibetans, Chinese soldiers and a few ethnic Indians who must have outdated communist control of Tibet. They spoke Tibetan, dressed just like the men they were speaking with, but their faces were dark and they wore thick turbans. Renzay parked just outside the market. It was dark and the market was abandoned so the load would not be unloaded till morning.

“See those buildings on that hill?” the driver said as he checked the lock on the cargo door. “That is the army base.”

The base was on a hill that overlooked the city and the boarder to India. Sahom could see soldiers standing post but a lot of soldiers were walking the streets around him.

For the last two days, Sahom had only eaten the fruit and nuts his family had given him and he was very hungry. A small restaurant with two tables was open not far from where the truck was parked. As they approached, they could see soldiers and a few locals eating inside.

“I never asked you why you wanted to come here and I don’t care,” said Renzay. “But you should not tell anyone around here why you have come. Just tell them you are delivering a load.”

“Thank you.”

“And loose that basket. They will know your family sent you off and that you are not delivering a load. My family quite giving me a basket of goods years ago.”

Sahom tossed the basket near a pile of scraps and walked into the warm establishment.

The Tibetan woman running the place laid two bowls of Yak Butter tea on the table and said, “What will you have to eat?”

“Yak and peppers and Pork and potato strips,” Renzay said over Sahom’s hesitation.

The two sipped on the warm tea in silence before two small bowls of rice appeared on the table quickly followed by the oily food they had ordered only a few minutes before. The woman refilled their tea bowls and Renzay reached into his belt and removed his long field knife and it’s sheaf. It was a few inches longer than Sahom’s with an ornate sheaf and handle. Thinking something might be wrong, Sahom reached into his coat for his blade and Renzay notices the reaction. Renzay communicated more with a smile than he could with words. Then he removed two chopsticks from the bottom side of the sheef.

“You had me wondering what was going on,” said Sahom.

“This was my great grandfather’s, father’s knife. He took it off of a Mongol he killed during an invasion and carried it the rest of his life as did his son and now so will I.”

Most Tibetans carried a blade especially in this area and when traveling. It was mostly out of tradition rather than out of necessity but Renzay’s carried clean chopsticks in his and Sahom had to use the ones on the table.

Renzay went straight for the pieces of Yak and not another word was spoken the entire meal as they two ate quickly. When the waitress, cook and owner came over, Sahom asked, “Do you know where we can find a room for the night?”

“Upstairs. 10 yen per person per night.

So, she added hotel keeper to the resume.

“We will take it,” Renzay answered.

“Not like you have much choice unless you both sleep in your truck,” she said.

The two placed enough money on the table for the food and one night's stay and walked up the stairs.

The room had a fireplace and six beds. The ones closed to the fire were already in use. Sahom took the one closest to the window so he would awake with the sunrise. The room was cold despite the fire but under the three heavy wool blankets tucked around him, Sahom felt warm. Only the popping sound of the fire could be heard in the dark room. No one spoke and that was fine with Sahom because the less questions he had to answer the better.

Outside the window he could see the border fence. It looked like rolling barbed wire that stretched all the way through the valley. It was only a kilometer or two away but he did not know how much farther he would have to walk on the other side.

Guard towers could be seen every few hundred meters or so with spotlights scanning the snow for brave Tibetans attempting to flee for India. The wire reflected the light when it passed over so Sahom knew the fence was maintained. While he was studding the valley, quick flashes of light, mussel fire, caught his attention and a second later the sounds arrived to his ear. The shots were coming from two guard towers and they were relentless for ten to fifteen seconds when a long silence filled the town and the room.

A familiar voice from the dark room spoke, “It must be someone fleeing for the boarder again.”

Silence continued in the room and Sahom did not respond. He laid back on his bed and replayed the events he had just witnessed. Questions also ran through his mind. “What was on the other side? Was it worth the risk? Jail is one thing but death is another?” His thought consumed him and soon it was clear. “I seek truth. What is life without truth?”

Sahom broke the silence of the room and said, “Goodbye Renzay.”

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The sun rose signaling the end of the night but Sahom had not sleep a wink. He quietly jumped from his bed, picked up his bag and headed out. The morning was cold and he walked down the street without a plan. As he moved through the small town he passed the back door of a butcher shop. Outside was a huge side of a yak hanging from a hook with blood dripping to the concrete floor. Steam slowly rose off of the recently killed carcass. On the ground was the yak head and the skin.

Sahom now had a plan.

He placed 10 yen on the butcher block under the knife and took the head and skin. He found a large burlap grain bag and placed the costume in the bag to start his journey to the border.

After an hour of walking south, he could see the towers he watched the night before. Sahom took the skin and head from the bag and placed the bag over his shoulders. He pulled the yak head on top of his head making sure that the skin covered the rest of his body. It smelled horrible and the flies followed the costume giving an element of authenticity as well as annoyance.

Sahom spend the next few hours crawling on his hands and knees through the snow. Up close, the costume would not fool anyone but possibly from a distance he would go unnoticed by the guards. He choose a spot equal distance from the two closest guard towers and lumbered through the ice and snow.

The last 500 metes were long and cold. His hands were numb and the smell of the dead animal had not disapated. His back was sore but he knew he could not stand upright and give himself away. Sahom made a point to zigzag back and forth through the snow at a slow pace so it was not obvious he was making a run for the border. He could see the fence ahead. Only a few meters more to go. Sahom could not see if anything was waiting for him on the other side because he had to keep his head down just like a yak.

When he got to the fence he could see quickly that he would not fit through. Sahom took out his knife and begin to twist the wire around the blade and turn it over and over. The wire warmed with the friction and soon it broke. Trying to keep the facade of the Yak he moved a few yards down the fence line and did the same breaking the middle wire. He then hung the yak head on the medal fence post and spread the skin over the fence. He dove through the opening he had just made and hid in the shadow of the skin hanging above him.

One of the barbs on the wire cut through his thick pants scraping his leg and drawing blood. Sahom felt lucky it was just a scratch and not a bullet hole. He quickly gathered himself, his bag and took off running up the mountainside into the protection of the rocks. The air was thin and cold and Sahom had trouble breathing. He stopped to catch his breath and looked around. He did not see any patrols on the Indian side of the border and felt safe for the moment. His hands were frozen and his leg bleeding but all he could think of was to keep moving. Sahom knew the town was a few kilometers south and west from the border but did not know how far or how long it would take. He got to his feet, looked to the sun and walked southwest.

The wind blew across his face and the snow was up to his knees at times. By noon, his unprotected fingers were frostbitten and he felt like his nose was gong to fall off of his face. It was so painful, at times he wished it would. He pushed on through the snow knowing that if he stopped he would die. His pace slowed as the sun fell closer and closer to the edge of the mountains ahead of him.

The sound of a truck coming gave him a burst of energy and he picked up his steps. He did not see a road but knew it must not be far. His pace became a slow run as the hope of a truck energized him. After a few moments, his lungs burned but he pushed on. He reached the road but the truck was long past. He hoped another one would come along soon and hoped this road was more traveled than the one he had spent the day before riding on.

Sahom sat on a bolder that had obviously fallen onto the road and been pushed off to the side sometime before. He pulled his bag off his shoulder and rested knowing he had survived the toughest part and a car or truck would come along soon. He hoped.

The sun finally hid behind the mountains perfectly outlining the cliffs in a beautiful amber stroke. Sahom soaked in the beauty and felt comforted but did not know why. He had been traveling across the snow all day and had no idea how far he was from shelter.

The ambient light around him faded and so did it’s warmth. Millions of stars slowly appeared and he become lost in his view of the sky. No truck, no car, no patrolls and he felt he would be there till morning. He laid down on the black top because it was warmer than the ground. It had absorbed some of the sun’s radiant energy. He huddled into the bolder to shelter him from the blowing wind and covered his body with the rest of his clothes and placed his bag around his feet. He took the book and placed it under his head and quickly fell asleep, exhausted, cold and not knowing if he would live through the night.

More than 12 hours later, a truck drove down the mountain but Sahom did not hear it or even know it was there. His body kept him asleep, trying to survive the extreme cold. The truck passed him by and Sahom did not even know help was gone. Then in a quick moment the truck came to a screeching halt. The driver backed up about 20 meters, got out of the cab and walked over. Sahom still did not move. His lips were blue and his fingers locked in a fist and could not even be pried open. The driver felt his neck, which was warmer than the air around him so he picked him up, and carried him to the passenger’s side of his truck. Running back to driver’s side he notices the bag, clothes he had dropped and the book. He ran over and picked them up before jumping back in the cab.

In the truck, the drive took off his coat and laid it over the blue Tibetan boy. He somehow turned the long truck around in the narrow road and drove as fast as he could back in the opposite direction he was going. The Indian driver knew where the Tibetan boy was headed. Every Tibetan that crosses the border is headed for the monastery. The driver also knew that if he took him to the hospital they might not give him any treatment and let him die because he was illegal.

The driver could smell the hot break pads as he raced into each turn trying to get him to the monastery as fast as possible. It was about an hour away and he knew the how to push the limits of his breaks from years of driving these roads.

Finally, they arrived in town and drove right through. His cab was warmer than the outside air but also knew the boy’s best chance was with the Tibetan monks. Arriving at the main gate of the monastery, he blew the horn several times as he approached. A Tibetan monk walked over to the truck as it stopped at the main gate.

“I have a Tibetan boy who is sick. He is as cold as a mountain stream,” said the driver with an anxious tone. The monk ran over to the other side while calling for help and others came over quickly. They opened the door, pulled him from the cab and quickly carried him towards the main hall. The driver got out of the truck and handed the boys bag and book to anther monk.

“Thank you for your help. You have earned merit for your service today,” said the monk.

The driver got back in the truck and backed away not knowing if the boy would live. He did not even know his name.

Inside the hall, they prepared some warm tea, wrapped him in wool blankets and placed him by the fire. After about an hour he regained consciousness and they tried to give him some tea.

“Drink this slowly,” an older monk said to Sahom and handed him the cup.

He immediately dropped it because he had no control of his cold fingers.

“It is ok. I will hold the cup for you.”

Another monk came over with a new cup and a third monk cleaned up the spill. Sahom sat on a feather mat placed on the hardwood floor wrapped in wool blankets sipping on tea held by an old monk. It was not how Sahom had envisioned his journey but he felt as if he had survived something more difficult than anything he had ever experienced and he thought hard about his life before.

After the tea, they poured off some rice water from the morning alms, heated it and served it to him. Just before noon they fed him some rice and Sahom’s fingers were gaining feeling again, although that feeling was crippling pain.

“We are going to let you sleep with the novices in the bunk house,” said the old monk. “My name is Lobsang and this is Dawa. He will help you while you are here.

The two young men walked out of the main hall and into the bunkhouse. The long room contained 20 beds all neatly made and the floor was spotless. Sahom laid in the bed and admired the ancient paintings on the ceiling above him. The ornate gold, orange and green on the red walls and ceiling allowed his imagination to flow freely as he drifted off to sleep. He slept for several hours and awoke to Dawa sitting on the floor besides his bed reading from an old book.

“How are you feeling,” Dawa asked.

“Better, but I am hungry.”

“I am sorry but we are not able to eat after the noon hour,” the monk answered. “But you may drink this tea because you are not a monk or novice and I prepared it for you before noon this morning. Sorry it is cold.

“That will be fine and Sahom reached for the cup.”

His fingers were bruised blue from the cold but he was finally starting to regain control of his fingers and was able to hold the clay cup in both hands and sip it.

“So what does it take to become a monk?” Sahom asked.

“First you must commit yourself to the teaching of Bhuda and strive to become enlightened. Then there are several rituals that you follow and you serve at a monastery for a set amount of time or for your entire life.”

“What do you do everyday?” Sahom asked.

“Maybe it would be best for you to see for yourself over the next few days when you are feeling better,” Dawa said.

The conversation ended and Dawa went about reading while Sahom finished his room temperature tea. The room was cool but Sahom felt warm under the blankets. Not knowing what else to do he reached into his bag and pulled out the book that Shen had given him. He opened the book and began to read from the first page.

“What is that book?” Dawa asked.

“I don’t know. Someone gave it to me and said it had answers within.”

“If it is answers that you seek, then you should read the teaching for Bhuda first,” said Dawe.

“Ok.”

The short and skinny monk gracefully got to his feet from his seated position on the wooden floor and pulled a book from the shelf.

“This is the teaching of Bhuda for you to read and meditate on his teachings.”

Sahom opened deep red canvas cover and started to read. He turned himself so the light from the doors shined on the pages and Dawa left the room.

Sahom had learned to read in school but this book was difficult for him. Despite the struggle, he pushed though as he had the day before in the wilderness. When the sun finished shining for the day, he closed the book and began to think about what he had just read. He tried to push the things he had recently experienced from his mind and think only of the idea of enlightenment but he was unable to do so and quickly fell asleep.

He fell asleep with the beds around him empty and the next morning he awoke to empty beds around him. The sun was just starting to shine and his roommates were already preparing for the day. The older monk Lobsang who had helped him the day before walked into the room and said, “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes sir,” Sahom answered.

“How are your hands?”

“They are in pain but I can move them today.’

He examined Sahom’s hands and said, “That is good. I don’t think you are going to loose your fingers.”

“That is good news,” Sahom said.

“My question to you is why have to come all this way from your home?” the monk asked and sat on the floor beside him.

“I am looking for answer to the questions of life and this world,” Sahom answered.

“Maybe those answers are here and maybe they are not. Some people find the answers they are looking for but most people find more questions.”

Sahom thought about what the monk had said. Then the monk continued

“There was a man who had three questions. He spent most of his life looking for the answers. He left his family, went on a long and difficult journey looking for those answers. He did not look in a monastery; actually, there was no such thing back then. He looked in the world and in himself. He found that the answers were all around him.”

Lobsang paused.

“You can stay as long as you like but I feel as if you already possess the answers to the questions you seek. You just have to find them.”

Then the old monk rose, and walked out of the room.

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When Sahom woke a few days later, he methodically packed his bag and made his bed as he had learned to do over the last few days. He tucked each corner in with deliberate detail and spread his arms across the wool blanket pushing out each wrinkle. He placed the bag over his shoulder and waited for his friends to awake. The sun was still an hour from showing itself when Dawa awoke, for prayers and alms.

“Dawa it is time for me to continue my journey.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” said Sahom. “I want to go to a big city to see what I find there.”

“You must find your life’s place where ever it is. Go in peace.”

“Same to you.”

Without tears or embracing, the two friends looked at each other for a moment, said goodbye silently and Sahom began walking towards the door. Dawa watched him leave knowing it would be the last time he would see his new friend.

By the time the sun rose, Sahom was already into town and hitching a ride to Patna. New Delhi was the closest major city and was less than a thousand kilometers away. He could take a train from Patna most of the way. Sahom was looking for something different than what he had always known. He was looking for what he did not know. He knew life in the valley, with his family and life as a Tibetan man. He wanted to experience life in a big city with strangers. He wanted to know things about the world that he would never find in the valley of his home. Sahom had no idea the answers he saught were in the bag on his shoulder.

The bus ride was about the same distance as a week before but took less time and was much easier than his last experience on a bus. The roads were better but the bus was more crowded than before. The farther west they drove, there were less curves and the road became smoother. At the front of the bus was a larger TV that showed a Bollywood movie with lots of dancing and singing in Hindi language. Whenever the movie got to a musical number, everyone on the bus ignored the scenery around them and watched the grand performances of hundreds of men and women dancing in the style that has made Bollywood famous, even in his small family village.

He arrived in Patna after eight hours on the bus. The bus dumped them in a huge herd of people just outside the train station. The crowded moved in a hundred different directions pushing and shoving for every step. Not knowing where he was headed, Sahom got lost in the crowd like a piece of driftwood on the sea. Somehow he was pushed towards the main entrance of the train station and made his way through the door. Inside was only a little better. There were just as many people but at least there was more order to the crowd. Everyone was either moving towards the trains or out the door he had just been pushed through. Sweating and nervous, Sahom was thankful he happened to join the crowd moving towards the trains.

He bought a ticket, boarded the train to New Deli and tried to find his seat. The cars were crowded and there was a smell that Sahom could not figure out but it did not really bother him. As the train pulled out of the station hundreds of men began running to catch the train. Sahom knew that most if not all the seats were filled so why would these men be running for the train. Sahom looked back to see them jumping for the ladder and climbing to the roof of the train. The free ride jumpers continued to leap for the train till it reached a speed that no man could keep up with and pulled away.

Sahom reached into his bag and pulled out the book that had been with him through the cold mountains and now in the warmer hill of India. He still had not read a single page despite owning the book for more than a month. He turned to the first page of the first story and began to read. In the first twelve words, his first question was answered. He closed the book and pondered his discovery looking out the window that was partially blocked by a man’s legs hanging over from the roof of the car. After a few moments pondering, he opened the book and began again.

*“Maybe the next question will be just as easy,”* he thought.

Sahom never took his eyes off the book and turned page after page. The stories on the warn parchment was filled with answers and explanations that gave him understanding but also provided him with more questions. The train pulled into Deli after about 6 hours on the tracks but because he was so engrossed it felt like less than an hour. When the train stopped he tried to disembark while still reading.

He finally had to close the book to figure out where to go next. He looked around and noticed buildings as tall as the mountains that surrounded his home now dwarfed him. This was the largest city he had ever seen. New sights, new sounds, new smells and more people than he knew existed but all he wanted to do was to read.

He was able to ignore the rickshaw drivers that petitioned him for a fare and the food stall owners that invited him to see inside their shop with great persistence. But what he could not ignore was a group of children who were begging everyone who walked down the street. There was a dark, skinny girl about 9 or 10 years-old with no shoes and a dirty maroon dress that might have never been washed. She held a naked 18-month-old baby in her arms resting it on her small boney hip as she naturally held the child with one arm and begged with the other. There was a group of younger children that surrounded her. It looked as if she was their mother. They looked to her for guidance and seem to follow her down the street stopping only to ask for a handout.

An American tourist got out of a nice vehicle. He wore a starched button down shirt that was tucked into his jeans and a Columbia safari hat. He was an obvious tourist and an obvious target. When the kids approached, he did not even try to turn them away. He smiled back at them and seemed to enjoy the interaction. He said something in English and Sahom could not understand the words but all of the children followed him to a small food stall. They were walking back in Sahom’s direction so he sat on the curb to watch this fascinating meeting. The man asked the attendent for a bag of flat bread and picked up a hand of bananas. He handed each child one banana and half a piece of bread. The group of children surrounded him like flies to honey or in this case, hungry children to a willing tourist. He was not overwhelmed nor upset as many tourist are when attacked by a swarm of people. He just continued to hand out the food until it was gone. As the man turned to walked back to whatever he was doing, he noticed that two of the children did not receive any of the food. The huge crowd of children ran down the street ahead but the two children stood stoic without saying a word.

It was obvious the American’s heart was broken. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a few coins and walked back towards the food stall smiling at the children. He bought two more bananas and a piece of bread. Then he knelt on one knee breaking the bread in half before giving it to them. He spoke kindly to them, patted them on the head and the children ran off. He sat down on a step. Took a rag from his pocket, and in a simple motion removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his brow. He took in the view of the busy street with the children in the distance.

Sahom was intrigued by this man but he was not sure why. No one else seemed to notice him as this obvious foreigner sat in a dirty part of town watching the world pass him by and saying hello to anyone who made eye contact. Sahom wanted to ask the man why he was so kind and generous. He wanted to know what was different about him but he was afraid to ask. Sahom knew the man could not speak Tibetan and Sahom could not speak English. So Sahom just watched.

Soon the man stood up and went back to whatever brought him to this part of town in the first place. Sahom knew he needed to find a place to sleep before the sun went down but he did not have enough money for a hotel. Making the task more difficult was that all the signs were in the Indian script or English, neither could he understand. There was a small blue and white sign across the street that had a single picture of an open book on it and an arrow pointed to the right. Not knowing where else to go, he followed the sign thinking that a place with books might be a place to find shelter. He walked down the busy streets. Small gas powered taxies flew through the streets cutting in and out of traffic while thousands of people walked in different directions somehow not getting killed by the drivers.

The sign finally lead him to a large university. It was an urban campus of medium sized brick buildings nestled in the shadows of the high-rises all around. Sahom walked down the main sidewalk and walked into one of the old buildings. As he stepped over the threshold, the city sounds became muffled and only an ignorable static. Sahom looked down the hallway to see more than twenty doors standing open all the way down the hall so he began to walk. He could her a professor lecturing at the far end as the sound echoed down the hall towards him. He passed a couple of students but they paid no attention to him.

Sahom stepped into the men’s bathroom after recognizing the universal sign. He wanted to wash his face and clean up after his long day of traveling. The room was empty so he took his time and tried to relax for a moment.

Felling refreshed he walked back out into the world and up the stairs to the next floor. Each floor of the building was the same; long hallways with open classrooms and an occasional lab or office. The fifth floor was much busier. The rooms were filled with more than twenty computers in each room and students were working but no one notice his watching them. Sahom had only seen computers in government office before and never twenty in one place.

He decided to go up one more floor thinking it would be less busy. He found an empty classroom where the wooden teacher’s desk faced the door, allowing Sahom to be hidden from sight by crawling under the desk.

He checked the class schedule mounted on the wall. Sahom could not read the letters but could read the numbers on the chart and was able to understand that there was not a class scheduled until 8 the next morning. He turned off the light, closed the door and took up residence inside the three-walled large wooden desk.

Sahom was just short enough to lay fully extended and fit within the desk. He took his book out and had just enough light coming in from the windows to begin reading. After a few hours of resting and reading, he heard someone walking down the hall. Sahom assumed it might be a guard or night watchman. Sahom did not make a sound or move a single mussel in his body for several minutes. He heard the footsteps come towards his room and then stop right outside the door. The knob turned but the door did not open. Then a key slid into the lock and the sound of the bold hitting the wood echoed in the empty classroom.

The footsteps walked away and Sahom could breath again. Someone was just locking the rooms. But that also meant he would be there till morning when the door was opened from the other side.

The sun had fallen below the city buildings long before but he struggled to read from the yellow city lights coming in through the window. He wiped his eyes and closed the book to think about all he had experienced in the day. He could not forget the joy he saw on the American’s face when he was giving to those children. Sahom nestled into his a comfortable position, using his bag as a pillow and fell asleep.

The next morning, instead of waking to the sunlight he was startled by the sound of a key turning the lock and the door swinging open. Sahom did not move. Footsteps entered the room and Sahom knew he was in trouble. The steps came closed and Sahom looked around his small space preparing to gather his things quickly. Then the sounds of several books dropped on the surface of the desk that was his hiding place. The books shook his small three walled quarters. Knowing he was going to be seen in less than a few seconds, Sahom began gathering his things in his arms and prepared to make a running dash for the door and down the stairs.

The sound and sight of a boy leaping from under the desk like a sprinter starting a race from a crouched position startled the well-dressed Indian man. As Sahom moved, he threw his bag over his shoulder and moved towards the door. The man screamed a single word in the Indian language but Sahom did not understand and probably would not have stopped even if he did understand him. Sahom struggled to get the door open when he heard something he understood.

“Wait!” the man said in Tibetan. “Why are you sleeping here?”

Sahom stopped and thought for a long moment before answering him.

“Because I have not money and I do not know anyone in this country.”

“Are you a student her,” the man asked.

“No sir.”

“Then why have you come to Deli?”

Still amazed as this Indian man speaking Tibetan, Sahom did not answer him but threw a question back at him.

“How do you know how to speak Tibetan?’

“My family is from a town near the border and before. Before the Chinese took control of Tibet, my father traded with the Tibetans and when my mother died, I was taken care of by several different Tibetan women over the years of my youth.”

“Are you a teacher here?” Sahom continued questioning. It was great to talk to someone in his language.

“I am Raju Narasettie. I am a graduate student and teaching assistant,” he said. “I teach Computer Science classes in this room. My class starts soon.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Sahom said as he turned back towards the door.

“Wait,” the man said. “Call me Raju.”

“Nice to meet you. I am Sahom.”

“I would like to improve my Tibetan. It has been years since I have spoken more than just a few words. Will you help me?” Raju asked.

“Sure. I would like to have someone to talk to as well.”

“How about tomorrow morning. Right here,” said Raju.

“That will be fine. See you then.”

“Oh, you are welcome to sleep here until you find a place. I will not report you.”

“Thank you for your kindness,” said Sahom and he walked into the hallway.

Sahom knew he would have to find work soon. He had just enough money for one, maybe two meals. He walked through the city streets and stopped at a produce stall. He bought several pieces of fruit to last him the day and for breakfast the next morning.

Eating his apple seated on the curb as cars, rickshaws and people passed by. Sahom tried to think of a job he could do without speaking the language. Now he was looking for not only answers to his questions about life but he was also looking for a job. After finishing his simple breakfast, he took out his brown book and picked up where he left off the night before. He happened to read an ancient story about building a stone- wall and it gave him an idea!

Not far from the school had had passed a construction site. When he arrived there were numerous activities going on. Many workers were moving supplies back and forth. Some were welding and others were riding a piece of steel being lifted by the crane to the top of the half erected building. Each floor was closer to completion than the one above it. Looking from the bottom floor to the top, Sahom could see the progression of the build.

There was a skinny Indian man holding a set of plans and he looked like he was in charge. Sahom approached him and asked in his Tibetan language, “Do you have a job for me?”

The man answered him quickly with disgust and turned away. It was obvious by the man’s actions what the answer was. Sahom walked across the street, found a place to sit and tried to think of something else. He watched the mason on the lower level building the brick façade. Sahom had laid brick and stone many times before while building his families homes in the valley and he knew it was a job he could be great at. The mason was carrying two bricks at a time, setting them and would get two more bricks.

He ran back across the street, weaving in and out of the crazy traffic and walked directly to the mason who was prepping the next brick with a trawl.

In Tibetan, “May I work for you?”

The mason did not understand him and waved him off. But Sahom persisted, asking again.

‘May I help you?”

The mason continued about his work. Sahom laid his bag down on the pallet of bricks, grabbed three in his arms and walked to where the mason was working. Standing behind him, Sahom studied the mason’s work process. Dip the trawl in the mortar, clean the edge and spread some mortar on the blocks. Set the trawl down. Pick up a brick and set it in place. Repeat.

The third time the mason went to set the next block, Sahom placed one perfectly on the spread. The mason looked at him in disgust but then turned to the wall and saw the block was set perfectly. He finished the block and spread for the next block. Sahom placed it perfectly once again and the mason finished with the spread. Brick after brick, the two worked without saying a word to each other. They worked so efficient; it was as if they had been setting stone together their entire lives.

By the end of the day, they had finished three of the four main walls.

Smiling, the mason said, “You come back tomorrow.”

Sahom did not understand the words but he got the idea he could return the next day.

Instead of going directly back to the school that had become his default home, he decided to explore the city a little more. After all, he had come here to learn about the world. Not to just work and sleep.

Deli was filled with people. Millions of people were stacked on top of each other in high-rise apartments. Back at Sahom’s home in the valley of the mountains, there were only his family of 12 people within 20 kilometers.

That many people in a city required lots of food and there were plenty of options for eating, from nice sit down restaurants with tables both inside and out, to rolling street carts with unidentifiable items. The smell of curry was abundant and on every street. The smell made him hungry. A cart expelling the wonderful smell was parked on the corner. Sahom only had a little money but needed something more substantial than just fruit. He ordered yellow curry chicken on rice. Not understanding the prices, he gave the woman all he had and she politely returned him two bills choosing not to take advantage of the Tibetan boy.

The food came in a tin bowl. He sat on the corner and enjoyed filling his stomach. His entire mouth burned from the spices and his forehead began to bead with sweat. The woman noticed his pain and offered him some water in a tin cup with a smile on her face. Sahom thanked her and enjoyed the temporary relief. He finished every last grain of rice, returned the bowl and cup and started walking again.

He turned the corner and saw the young girl in the same dirty maroon dress he had seen the day before when he arrived. She had her hand held out and despite her cirmanstances, her eyes were bright and she had an unforgettable smile.

Sahom had only two bills in his pocket; just enough for one more meal. In the past, he would have never considered giving a beggar all the money he had left but after seeing the American and the joy he received and reading in the book about giving gifts, he reached in his pocket and took the two bills out. He rolled them up and held it in his hand as he approached the girl. There were six or eight children sitting on the steps leading into an apartment behind her. Some had shoes, some had shirts but all were filthy.

A nice black sedan pulled up to the curb and a large man in light colored pants, orange shirt and lots of gold around his neck got out. As soon as 9 year-old defacto-mother figure noticed the man she told all the children to flee and she started walking away with the small child on her hip. The man walked after her, grabbed her by the arm forcefully and turned her around to face him. Her eyes of joy had turned to fear as she looked around. A shopkeeper was sweeping the sidewalk in front of her store and the quick thinking child yelled at the woman and tossed the baby the two feet into the suprized woman’s arms. She caught the baby and dropped the broom. She ran inside the shop with the baby and closed the door.

Sahom had stopped walking and watched as the man spoke harshly to the girl. Sahom could not understand them but he knew something was not right about the situation. Everyone else continued to do whatever they were doing, ignoring the wealthy man yelling at a poor child. It was as if everyone knew what was happening but was afraid to act.

Never letting go of her arm, the man started pulling her towards the waiting car. She drug her feet and tried to pull away but was unable to break his grip. When he took one hand off her to open the door, the girl dropped to the ground and her arm slide from his fingers. She immediately got to her feet and ran into an alleyway perpendicular to the street. The man gave chase with his gold bouncing on his chest. Sahom had stood there doing nothing long enough. He sprinted to try and catch the man before he got to the girl. The three of them raced though the alleyways. The girl could hear the chains jingling and she knew he was closing in. He was so close to catching her that the girl’s bare feet ran through puddles of dirty water splashing spots on the man’s white pants.

Sahom, younger and in great physical condition from hard work on the mountain, closed in on the man as the man reached for the girl. As she almost turned a corner, the man caught her arm and threw her against the brick wall causing her to hit the back of her head.

In the man’s drive to catch the girl he failed to notice Sahom following them until just in time to turn and see Sahom lower his shoulder, tuck his chin and drive into him. Sahom’s colar bone struck the man’s rib cage and he wrapped his arms around him as the two fell to the trash-filled stone street. As the two struggled on the ground, the girl ran back in the direction they had come from.

The man fought Sahom hard. They rolled around, hit each other, pulled out hair and poked at each other’s eyes. They fought through the ally in a scrap for several long minutes before the larger Indian man ended up on top of Sahom with Sahom’s back to the pavement. The man held him down by the throat putting all of his weight on Sahom’s windpipe. This freed Sahom’s hands allowing him to reach under his shirt into his belt and pull out his Tibetan field knife.

As he drew it, the sheath came with the blade. Sahom flicked his wrist while simultaneously pulling on the handle of the blade sending the metal and wood sheath from the blade. He then quickly slide the blade across the man’s stomach slicing through the orange shirt and about an inch of skin and mussel. Immediately the injured man removed his hand from Sahom’s throat and grabbed his cut. In one fluid motion, Sahom threw his forearm into the man’s face and knocked him off. Sahom quickly got to his feet and paused over the man hunched in the fetal position. He had the opportunity to kill him but thought for several moments. Then, in an instant he fled and ran back towards the street leaving the man in the ally.

Running through the streets, Sahom felt no pain although his body showed the battle he had just waged. His left eye was swollen under the eye lid. His nose was bleeding out of both nostrils and running into his mouth painting his teeth red. Sahom started to slow to a walk knowing that if the man had gotten up, he would not have been able to run this far.

Sahom walked down the ally way he had just run through and heard the sound of whimpering like a small dog. It was coming from behind a small dumpster. He stopped and saw the girl in the maroon dress. Her eyes were now filled with tears. She held her face in her hand and did not acknowledge he was standing there. Sahom squatted down and placed an arm around her shoulder. She buried her head in his chest and cried.

After several minutes of crying, Sahom started to feel pain in his ribs and on his face. He wiped his face with his shirt and the two sat there behind the dumpster together. They could not understand each other’s language but Sahom was able to communicate a love she had never felt.

Eventually the two stood up and walked back to the street. Sahom leaned over, gave her all the money he had and in Tibetan said, “Goodbye.”

She smiled, hugged him, and in her language said, “Goodbye.”

Sahom slowly walked back to the campus with his head down thinking about what he had just experienced. *“What would have happened if I had not been there?”* he wondered. He also had another feeling. In the book he had read about different forms of love and sacrifice. For the first time he had a real understanding of what it meant to love a person you never met. To sacrifice yourself for someone else. Sahom had experienced so much and been through so many emotions and he had no one to share them with.

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The next morning, Sahom was away and waiting for his student, the only person he could communicate with in the city of millions. He sat at the wooden desk that he slept under the night before and read from the book. The particular story that morning was about a man who sacrificed his life to save people who hated him. Sahom’s stomach was in knots. After yesterday, this story pulled at his heart and a lump came into his throat. He continued reading hoping to get to the end. As he read, his palms began to sweat and Sahom realized that every story in the book and everything he had experienced up to this point led up to this single moment in time. For some reason, call it destiny or something else; Sahom knew he was supposed to read this story on this day. When he got to the triumphant end, he closed the book and began to cry. Sahom had an understanding of the creator and a sacrifice that was counter to everything he had been taught before.

Sahom was startled by Raju’s key turning the lock. He sat up straight in the wooden chair and tried to dry his eyes with his shirtsleeve.

“Hello Raju,” Sahom said while sniffling.

“Hello Sahom,” said as he walked to the desk.

“What happened to your face?” Raju asked noticing Sahom’s eye was swollen shut.

“I have had an amazing time in the last 12 hours!”

“That is not what I expect to hear from a guy who looks like he got his face beat in by an iron pipe.”

“Actually, I had a run-in in an ally way.”

“What do you mean?” Raju continued to probe.

“A man tried to drag a beggar girl into a car and I tried to stop him. We wrestled around in the alley until she could get free.”

“Unbelievable!”

A pause hung in the air as they both thought of what had happened.

“Is that why you are crying now?” Raju asked.

“Yes and no.”

The two sat there in silence a while longer.

“What did the man want with that girl?” Sahom asked Raju.

“I am not sure but probably was going to take her into the sex trade and make her a prostitute. You saved her from something far worse than she can imagine.”

Silence filled the room once again.

After a few moments, Sahom said, “Lets get started.”

Sitting across the desk from each other, the two began to practice the tones of the Tibetan language. Raju knew the words but because he had never lived around Tibetans his accent was obvious and his tones were off. They practiced for half an hour before Raju said, “I also want to learn to read your language too.”

“I have a Tibetan book right here,” Sahom said as he opened the leather book. He opened the book to the first page and read the passage aloud. Then he turned the book to Raju and slid it across the desk. As the book moved across the wooden desk the letters slowly morphed from Tibetan to Hindi script. Neither actually saw the change and Raju began to read.

“This is in Hindi!” he said. “Can you read Hindi?”

“No, it is in Tibetan.”

Raju pushed the book back to Sahom and they both noticed the letters change. Not sure if what he saw was real, Sahom pushed the book back across the table to Raju and they watched the words re-adjust. The letters changed and even the margins moved to accommodate the new text. The two just looked at each other in amazement.

“This must be a magical book from one of your Tibetan magic men," said Raju.

“This book is filled with extraordinary stories of great men from far away lands. It holds the history of the beginning of the world and I think it will show me the purpose of my life,” said Sahom. “I did not know it was magical.”

“If the words change does the meaning change and is it a different book for everyone?”

“I don’t know,” said Sahom. “Quickly, read the passage I just read to you and tell me if it means the same in Hindi as when I read it.

Raju took a moment to read the passage and said, “Yes. It is the same thing just in my language.”

“This is amazing.”

“Yes, but it makes it hard to learn how to read in Tibetan if it switches every time!”

The two laughed and tried to move on with the lesson but the magical book completely disrupted the flow and the two spent the next hour thinking about what they had just witnessed. It was soon time for the class to start and Sahom needed to get to his new job so he packed up and headed out. Raju was thinking about the magic of the letters changing but Sahom was still thinking about the content of the book and how he felt when he read it that morning.

He joined the mason who was already working but had not been working long. Sahom started by carrying three bricks over and they picked up in perfect time just like the day before. When lunchtime came, Sahom did not have any money to buy lunch so he took the time to sit and read. He had an apple that morning but the work had made him hungry. He opened the book and began to read eager to learn a new story. As he read, the mason came over and gave him a bowl of rice with a dark sauce on it.

“Thank you,” Sahom said in Tibetan taking the bowl with two hands and nodding his head. The mason sat beside him and the two ate together but never spoke a word. This became their habit. Each day the mason would buy Sahom lunch and they would sit together and eat but not talk. At the end of the week the mason pulled out several bills and paid him an honest wage for a week’s work.

“Thank you,” Sahom said and the mason said, “Your welcome” in Hindi.

Each morning Sahom started his day reading from the book and then teaching his friend Tibetan. They found another Tibetan book to practice with in the university library and it was not long before Raju was reading well.

After several weeks of study, Raju came into the classroom, Sahom’s home and office, with a sad look on his face.

“What is wrong, friend?” Sahom asked.

“I am moving to Dubai in the UAE to take a job.”

“When?” Sahom asked.

“I graduate next week and I leave the next day.”

“You should be excited and we should celebrate,” said Sahom.

Raju smiled and the two laughed together.

“There was a time when I had to leave everything I had ever known to come here.” Sahom said. “Now you must do the same.”

“But what are you going to do?”

“I think it is time for me to return home. I want to share with my family all that I have seen and experienced. They need to know what I know. Next week, you will leave your home and I will go back to mine.”

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The two walked together to the train station. Sahom was headed northeast and Raju was headed south to Mumbai to take a plane to Dubai.

“The last time I was here I followed those blue signs to your university and that is how we met,” said Sahom.

“I am glad you did.”

The two stood on the platform to say goodbye before Raju needed to board.

“I want you to have this,” said Sahom as he reached in his bag and pulled out the book that held so many life-changing answers for him.

“I can’t take that,” said Raju as he tried to push it back.

“Obviously, you will be able to read it and I think I am suppose to share it with you. You must take it”

Raju did not answer but took the book and smiled.

“Goodbye friend,” said Raju.

“Goodbye.”

Raju boarded the train and took his seat by the window. He waved one last time as the train pulled away and then he took the brown leather book in his hand and opened to the first page.

Chapter 7

Over the Persian Gulf

It was Raju first time to fly. It was his first time to leave the country and it would be his first time for a lot of things. He sat in coach gripping both armrests embedding his fingernails in the hard rubber underneath. He tried to control his nerves but was unable to as he watched every move of the flight attendants looking to see any sign of a problem. Emeriti Air is a world-class airline with great service and beautiful flight attendants. One of them approached Raju after noticing the sweat on head and his tense grip.

“Are you ok sir?” she asked in English.

“Yes, I just don’t like planes and it is my first time.”

“Everything will be fine. We will be landing in less than one hour,” she said calmly. “Try reading something and that might relax you. Would you like me to bring you a magazine or newspaper?”

“No thank you. I have a book right here.”

“Let me know if you need anything,” she said as she walked away.

Raju reached into his carryon bag and pulled out the book Sahom had given him. He opened it to the marker he had placed before getting off the train and started to read. It was not long before he quit sweating and his demeanor relaxed. He read until it was time to land and then realized that he had forgotten about his fears. The woman was right. He put the book down and watched out the window as a beautiful city of tall buildings surrounded by construction cranes and Muslim mosques hugged the coastline of the crystal clear blue Persian Gulf. As the plane descended, he even saw the famous seven-star hotel he had seen in the in-flight magazine. The Burj Al Arab looked like a boat sail catching the breeze off the blue water. He smiled as he thought about his new adventure.

Raju got out a blue folder from his bag and checked on the details of his arrival. He would take a cab to a high-rise apartment building where someone from the company would meet him.

“Sir, can you please put your tray table up? Thank you,” said the flight attendant.

Raju did as she asked and held his book, folder and passport in his hand.

After landing, Raju walked to immigration and got in line. He noticed there were more immigrants coming into the country the Emerities. When he finally got to the counter he made it through without issues. The software company that hired him which was owned by the son of the Sheik of Dubai, had prepared his work visa. Raju gathered his bags from the belt and walked through customs. The airport was much cleaner than in his home country and it was obvious they country had a lot of money.

Raju made his way to the taxi cue, which was not much of a line at all and entered a clean white car.

“Where are you going sir?” the driver asked over his shoulder.

Raju pulled a business card out of the blue packet and handed it to the driver.

“Sure. It is only about an hour if traffic is good.”

Raju was amazed at the beauty he saw through the taxi window. Despite the sand the streets were so clean. The buildings were huge and the bright windows reflected the beautiful skyline.

The place Raju would be living was in Shadgra just outside of Dubai. The driver took the highway that went along the coastline and Raju got a beautiful view of the clear blue water and white sand. He also saw a man walking on the beach in a long white robe and red and white head cover two steps in front of a woman fully covered in a black burka. There were many Muslims in India but very few were that covered.

“Why are they dressed like that?” he asked the driver.

“The are Emirate. That is the way the dress.”

“Then why are the other people on the streets dressed like you and I?” asked Raju.

“Because they are immigrants like you and I. Anyone you see working a service job is an immigrant. Anyone you see driving a fancy car or walking on a beach in the middle of the day is an Emirate.”

“Where are you from?” Raju asked.

“I am from Iran. I have been here three years and I have to return home next month.”

“Do you like it here?”

“Yes, the money is great. The country is stable. I would stay if I could but my work visa is running out.

“I also have a three year work visa,” Raju said.

“You will like it. You are staying in a very nice apartment building.”

Raju watched the traffic. It was much calmer than in India and there was far less of it. While stopped at a light, the driver said, “Look there! That is the Sheik of Shardja.”

Three white Land Cruisers flew through the intersections and turned into a walled estate. The guard saluted the vehicles as they drove in and closed the gate behind them.

“Who was that?” Raju asked.

“Royalty. He is in charge of this city. There is a Sheik of each Emirate and they are like a governor with lots of money.”

Raju thought the sand must be the money because every car that passed was a German luxury car or an Italian sports car.

“This is your place,” the driver said as he pulled up to a 25-story condo building with large balconies that overlooked the Gulf.

“This is my apartment?”

“This is the address on the card you gave me,” the driver said with a laugh.

Raju was amazed and could not hide the grin on his face. The taxi pulled under the awning to the front door where a man dressed in a dark suit and a bellmen came to the car.

“You must be Mr. Narasettie,” said the man in the suit.

Stepping out of the car he picked up his folder and answered, “Yes, call me Raju.

“This man will get you bags and I just need you to come in and fill out some paper work.”

Raju followed the man inside to began a successful career as the taxi pulled away with the book still laying on the back seat.

Chapter 8

Javeed drove his taxi back towards the city of Dubai. He turned on some Iranian music while looking to pick up a fare headed into the city. Entering the roundabout, he notices an Emeriti hailing a cab on the opposite side of the circle. There were several taxies entering the traffic circle and Javeed accelerated to be the first to arrive at the man’s request. He moved across traffic and slide in front of another cab just in time to grab the fare and avoid an accident. But the other driver showed his disgust at Javeed’s actions with a jester out the window and some harsh words.

“Take me to the Seafood Souk in Dubai,” said the Emirate man as he removed his expensive dark sunglasses while getting into the car. Javeed started the digital meter and pulled away from the cub without saying a word.

“I think someone left something in you cab,” said the guest.

“What?” Javeed was caught off guard because it was not common for Emirates to speak to immigrants doing service jobs.

“Here,” and the man handed the book to Javeed.

Javeed flipped through the pages as he drove. The words were in Persian but he had not had a Persian-speaking customer all morning.

“Thank you,” he said as he tried to drive and look at the book at the same time. After a couple of miles they pulled into the seafood market on the waterfront.

“15 dirhams, said Javeed as the man already had two twenties out.

Javeed gave him his change and then pulled around to the taxi stand to wait in line for another customer. There were six cabs in front of him and it would be a few minutes. He took a moment to rest in the car with the windows down. A cool breeze blew off the water and the obvious smell of fish blew in as well. There were ships docked on every inch of the harbor and others waited to tie up and unload their catch. Dock hands carried large blue plastic tubs filled with iced down fish and attentive customers followed the men looking in the tubs to find the freshest catch for their restaurant or store.

The action would continue all day and he had seen it many times before. He hoped the line would move quickly so he could avoid the smell and make some money. Javeed looked down and picked up the book. He could not figure out why a Persian book would be in his car. He picked it up again and looked through it looking for a name or something to explain who left it. There was nothing. He studied the aging book and knew it was a well-read collection of stories. Flipping through, he stopped in the middle and started reading one of the passages.

In just a few lines he was hooked. He read until the car behind him blew their horn, startling him from his trance. The cabs had pulled up several length and Javeed need to move up. He put the car in drive and slowly inched forward while still reading and peeking over the top of the book to stop the car just inches from the next taxi’s bumper. He read on, checking the taxi line periodically, until some one jumped into the car.

“Dubai Town Center,” said a man dressed in a Kandura, a long white cloak.

He quickly put the book down and started the meter.

Javeed decided to call it a day after 13 hours of driving in the hot city picking up more than twenty fares. He turned off this light and headed back towards the garage.

Javeed lived in a 36 story high-rise apartment with thousands of other immigrants. It was a small, one bedroom apartment that he shared with his cusin another taxi driver from Iran. The two lived together for two years. Both had families back home and had come to the UAE for work and would send most of the money they made back home. Javeed slept in the bedroom and his roommate slept in the living room. They shared the kitchenette attached to the living room but had separate TVs in each room. Both a shared kitchen and separate TVs were a vital necessity to their relationship. Javeed’s cusin Kismet had learned to cook while in military service, a requirement of all Iranian men, and he was good at it.

Javeed took his shoes off at the door and slide his socked feed across the unfinished concrete floor.

“Hello Kismet,” said Javeed.

“Hello,” his roommate never looking away from the Turkish music video playing on the TV.

“How many fares did you get today,” Javeed asked. It was the same question one of them would ask the other every night.

“19 but two from the airport,” said Kismet as he broke away from the and walked the three steps to he kitchen.

“Not a bad day Kismet,” Javeed said getting his book from his bag while his cusin began dishing out the rice from the rice cooker. “Look at this book someone left in my cab,” he said.

“What is it?” Kismet asked finally looking at Javeed.

“A Persian book but I am not sure who left it.”

Kismet opened the cover and got food grease from his dirty hands on the cover. He saw only blank pages.

“It’s just a journal. That does not make it Persian. You should write your deepest thoughts in it,” Kismet said laughing.

“No, the words are Persian.

“There are no words in this book,” Kismet said handing the book back and went back to the food.

“Yes there are, I read it today,” said Javeed taking the book and seeing the letters.

“You are a crazy man,” he said walking into this bedroom.

They sat together in the only two chairs at the small round table. Kismet has cooked a meetball stew with fresh vegetables in a pressure cooker for the last hour. The tomatos, onions and potatoes flavors melded in a wonderful culinary experience from back home. They poured it over rice and had some warm flat bread from the Persian bakery down the street.

The two ate quickly and quietly. Javeed thought about the customers he had that morning, trying to figure out who had left the book. Maybe they would reward him for returning it he thought.

After finishing the last bite of bread he washed his hands and started working on the dishes while his cusin finished. The living arrangement was good for both of them. Kismet cooked and Javeed cleaned.

After he finished the dishes and wiping the table, he laid down on the bed holding the book a few inches from his face. While his wife put his children to bed in their small home in southern Iran, Javeed read in his high-rise apartment. Javeed had a good life in Dubai but he missed his family. Everything he made that did not go to pay rent or food, he sent home for his children. He worked long hours and long weeks because he had no one to go home to and had a short time before having to return to his country.

After a few hours of reading Javeed placed the book under his mat and quickly fell asleep.

The next morning, Javeed rose early and walked down the street to the Seven Eleven store. Outside was a bright yellow international pay phone. Inside the store he bought a calling card that would allow him to talk for 15 minutes to his family.

As the traffic passed on the street and the desert sand blew across the parking lot, he waited with great anticipation to hear his wife’s voice.

The simple but beautiful word of “Hello,” from a soft-spoken woman came through the handset.

“Hello Nazilla, it is me,” said Javeed. “How are you?”

“I am fine,” she answered in her calm voice “I can not wait to see you.”

“I look forward to that moment every day.”

“When do you arrive,” she asked.

“I will get to the airport on Monday evening.”

“Only a few more days. I can’t wait,” she said.

The two spoke until the card cut them off and Javeed would not talk to her again until her arrived back in his home country.

He hung up the phone and walked down the street to rent his taxi for the day. He carried the book and a sack lunch in his hand walking down the busy city street. He thought about his family and seeing his two girls.

Javeed’s first fare was to the airport. It is always a good day when he could start with a long trip to the airport because he could always get a return fare back into the city. He dropped the man off at the main terminal and then swung around to arrival gate and waited in the taxi line. He was several cars back so he picked up his book, as had become his custom anytime he was waiting. He picked up where he left off the night before and finished the last sentence of a story just as a man opened the door to his cab.

“Where would you like to go,” Javeed said smiling and putting the book in the seat.

“The Grand Hyatt please,” said a British man with a thin dark beard and hair. The man was well traveled and had a confidence but not arrogance about him.

After leaving the airport Javeed asked, “Where are you from?’

“The U.K.,” he said while still looking out the window.

“Is this your first time in Dubai?” Javeed asked.

“I have traveled all around and only flown through never stopped before,” the man said and quickly followed with, “Where are you from sir?’

“Iran.”

The British man sat quietly not really knowing what to say next. He kept his attention outside at the city. Traffic slowed and quickly came to an abrupt stop. Javeed hit the steering wheel with his hand as he firmly applied the breaks. It was obvious to the traveler that his Iranian driver was frustrated by the traffic.

Eventually, the traffic began to creep along at about a walking pace.

“There is an accident up ahead,” Javeed informed his passenger. “It will be only a few minutes like this. I can see the cars from here.”

When the taxi passed the wreckage, Javeed saw it was two women drivers who had crashed into each other.

“Women drivers! They should not be driving at all,” Javeed said abruptly.

“You do not like women driving?” asked the man in the back seat.

“No. Several years ago in my country when they let women drive they took jobs from the men and left the home in shambles. They became firefighters and taxi drivers. It is because of them I could not make a living driving a taxi and I had to come here.”

It was obvious to the man that he had hit a sensitive issue for his driver.

“In the U.K. we joke about the fact that women can’t drive but most people don’t really mean it.”

“There is a place for a woman and it is in the home,” said Javeed.

“Choosing his words carefully, the man said, “I believe all men, and women, were created equal by the creator. There are some things that men are better at, and some things that women are better at. And I believe that we were given free will to choose who we want to be or what we want to do with our lives and I pray my daughter will one day be able to live in a society that allows her to choose her God and her profession.”

The two men sat in silence. Javeed thought hard about the words of that man and the words he had just read in the book. He thought about choices and the freedom to choose. After several miles, while pulling into the Hyatt, Javeed asked, “Are you a religious man?”

“I believe there is one God. Mohammad was his prophet and Jesus was his Son. I learned who created me and why.”

The well-spoken man paid the fare, left his business card and exited the taxi leaving more than just his card.

It was traditional for Muslims, especially Arabs to say the phrase, “There is one God and Mohammad was his prophet” But Javeed had never heard it in that manor. It was as if the man has chosen those specific words just to peak Javeed’s curiosity and he had succeeded. Javeed thought on those words and the exchange before about choices and freedom. The man spoke only a few sentences but each pierced through and left Javeed wondering about his life.

It was nearly lunchtime so Javeed pulled into the parking lot of a large shopping center and found a palm tree to give him shade while he ate. He got out of his cab and sat on the small grass island that surrounded the tree in the sea of blacktop spaces. He pulled out his leftover flat bread and chickpeas. As he ate, he continued to think about all the encounters he had experienced over the last few days and wondered why.

After finishing his meal, he wiped his hands on his dark pants and opened his book. He leaned against the trunk of the tree and the warm sun warmed his skin as he read.

After about an hour Javeed finally noticed the time. He did not have a boss but he knew he needed to get 12 more fares to have a good moneymaking day. This would also be one of his last few days to work before returning home to his family. As he cruised through the parking lot of the shopping center looking to pick someone up he noticed a Persian woman, with only her head covered and two little girls. They were about the age of his girls. He looked forward to seeing them could not wait for the week to end.

Three days later, Javeed had read about a third of the book. It had challenged his ides about the world, politics, his family and his life. Each passage made him think and wonder about his life and his current circumstances in a different way than ever before.

The book was the last thing he packed before leaving for the airport. His cousin, Kismet was going to drive him to the airport. A trip they both knew well.

“Only once will I take you to the airport free of charge,” said Kismet. “Next time, you will be on the meter.”

“Hopefully, there won’t be a next time and I can find a job at home.”

“I hope the words you speak are true for you and me as well,” said Kismet.

Javeed rode in the passenger’s seat of a taxi on a route he had driven thousands of time before. This time he ignored the traffic, the Iranian music on coming through the speakers, and the chatter from his roommate. Javeed was deep in thought and was thinking about his life and the father he would be when he returned. His palms sweated and his heart picked up to a fast pace. In this moment, while riding to the airport on a desert highway, he knew it was time to make a decision.

“Stop the car!”

“What? What did you forget?”

“Stop the car right here. I need to pray.”

“But it is not time to pray and you do not have your rug. When did you become a devote Muslim?” ask Kismet. “I have never seen you stop to pray before.”

“I guess I am about to get religious.”

Kismet pulled the car over too the side of the long flat highway that crossed the Arabian Desert. Javeed got out leaving the door open and fell to his knees. It was typical to see men stop on the highway for the call to prayer but this was not one of those times nor was it Javeed’s habit. Kismet just watched as the sand blew across his cousin’s back as he prayed.

After several minutes he stood up, got back in the car and sat in silence. Kismet pulled back on the highway and could tell something was different about him. Javeed continued to think about his life and the fact he had been gone for three years. His youngest daughter was now five years old. He knew he left home for good reasons, to provide for them, but five and seven year-old girls could never understand their father’s absence.

In his heart, he had the will to be a better father than when he left. He did not want just be a provider but he wanted to have a deep relationship with his girls. For reasons he could not explain, he also wanted to be a better husband and lover to his wife. The tattered book he held tight in his hands contained an epic love story. It contained a story that gave him an understanding of forgiveness and sacrifice. A story that modeled true love and he hoped to model that for his daughters by serving his wife. Javeed had never dishonored her but now he felt he had more of a capacity to love her and he hoped she would be able to return his love in the same way.

The taxi pulled up to the curb. “See you soon, friend,” said Javeed.

“An sha la,” his roommate said. “If god wills,” a common Muslim phrase.

Javeed boarded the plane, sat back and began to read. The time passed quickly and the plane landed before he ever took his eyes off the book. He placed it in his shoulder bag, took a deep breath and asked God, “Assist me in this new commitment, An Sha la.”

Stepping off the plane in his home country, Javeed was a different person than when he left. Not because of his new experiences over the last year but because he mad a choice. A choice that changed his life forever and would impact his family in dramatic ways.

After passing through immigration and getting his bags through customs, Javeed saw his daughter on the other side of the iron railing. Hundreds of people pressed against the gate looking for friends and loved ones arriving in Tehran. Javeed ran over to the gate and reached through the bars to hug his family. He held them for a long moment but quickly let go, as was the custom. He moved as quickly as he could to the exit and met them on the other side.

“Your daddy is home,” he said as they looked at him dropping to one knee. He grabbed both of them, stood to his feet and spun them around. Through tear filled eyes, Javeed did not notice the crowed watching such a jubilant moment. He was oblivious to the curious expressions and judgmental glances. He only wanted to enjoy the moment with the women of his life. The family of four walked out of the airport to the waiting taxis. Standing there was a woman driver and in the taxi behind her, a man.

“Take the first one,” said Javeed to his wife. “You ride in the front with her and I will share the back with my girls.”

Nazilla was not sure how to respond but she was not going to challenge her husband in public.

“Excuse me lady, I only drive for women,” said the petite driver politely.

“You are driving women; three of them,” said Javeed smiling. “I do not mind sitting in the back seat.”

The driver smiled and began helping get the bags in the trunk.

The entire way home the girls took turns telling stories of days missed and sharing laughs. Nazilla knew her husband had changed but she did not know whom the man was playing with her girls. She quietly hoped his culturally inappropriate actions were only temporary because the neighborhood would shun them if he kept this up.

After several days of bliss, the new attitude of her husband did not falter. Javeed showed his emotions in ways Iranian men never do. He spent time during the day with Nazilla and read from the old book to the girls every night when they put the girls to bed together. Nazilla knew it was against the custom but it did not bother her anymore. She enjoyed the attention and the love and what it meant to her girls. Things were also better after the girls went to bed because he cared for her and her needs before his own.

On Saturday, Javeed woke early and was ready to start the day. He walked out the door to the ancient city gate. Yazd was an old town and men still hung around the eroding gate talking about politics, the weather and revisiting the same issues they discussed for years. Worship at the Mosque did not start for another few hours so there were twenty or so men gathered around.

“Hello friend,” Javeed said to an old man with a white beard seated on a concrete block. The man struggled to place who had just spoken to him. After a moment of delay, it was obvious when the man remembered who was speaking. He stood up to welcome his return home.

“Ali has brought you home,” said the man who reached to shake hands, with Javeed griping with one and patting the back of his hand with the other. The man did not let go and pulled the smiling Javeed over to the group of men seated around a tray of tea perched on the old stones. One of the men poured Javeed a cup and the excited white haired friend introduced Javeed to the group.

“Tell me friend, how have you been,” he said.

“Ali had made me a better man today than when you knew me before.”

“That is great you are a faithful servant,” said the man as he pulled at his army green canvas jacket that fit snug over his traditional Iranian clothes.

“No, it is more than that. I am fully committed to the creator God. I am a change man,” Javeed said with authority.

The men around the table were unsure what to think about this stranger to them. Looking over their teacups that hid their mouths, the men made eye contact with each other, each signaling their lack of understanding of what Javeed was saying.

“I guess you are happy to be back from the Arab world in your Persian home,” said Javeed’s old friend.

“Well, I am happy to be home but there is more to my joy. I am a new man. The old has gone and the new has come!”

“That is good to hear, how was the UAE?” his friend said trying to change the subject and save Javeed some embarrassment but Javeed did not take the hint.

“I am reading this book and it change my entire outlook of the world,” Javeed said to all the men seated and gathered around, not attempting to hide his excitement. He held everyone’s attention as he explained what he had learned and experienced over last week. They all sat quietly, not responding just listening and passing looks at the other men across the table.

Javeed did not stop to take a breath. He continued to share his joy and tried to explain to the men what he felt but they were not changed. Eventually, Javeed noticed the lack of understanding on their stern faces.

“You don’t understand,” Javeed said tapping the leather cover on the tray. “You have to read the book.”

The men sat in silence and Javeed knew they could not understand. He stood from his seat and politely said,” Good bye, have a good day gentlemen,” as he exited the circle. As he walked away the men burst into laughter and Javeed knew it was at his expense but he was undeterred.

He walked down the dusty street and turned into an empty garage bay.

A man seated behind an old wooden desk, said without ever looking up from his paperwork, “No taxis today. Come back tomorrow.”

“You don’t even have one taxi for an old friend?” asked Javeed.

“Ali has seen fit to bring you back home,” said the grease-covered man struggling to get from his chair to shake Javeed’s hand.

“Yes, He willed it for me to return and am a different man than the one who left.”

“So, you want to get back to the road?” asked the taxi garage owner.

“I need a job and I enjoy driving and you know I am good to your cars.”

“Javeed, I have to tell you that taxis are hard to come by these days. I have 20 cars and a waiting list about 50 drivers deep,” the man said. “There are just not enough cars or fares in this town to make a good living.”

“That is ok friend, Ali will provide if it is His will.”

“How is your family?” the old friend asked changing the subject to something less depressing.

“Wonderful. My oldest daughter is going to school now and learning to read.”

“And you think it is a good idea for your daughter to be educated? You have seen first hand what happens to this country when women leave the home.”

“I once thought as you do but my opinion has changed. I have a new understanding of the world because I can read. I do not have to depend on what others recite for me but I am able to discover truth for myself and I want my daughter to have the same opportunity.

“It looks like those liberal Muslim women in the Arab world got to you while you were over there,” said his friend.

“No, that is not the case. I found a book and I have been reading and thinking about a lot of things,” Javeed said softly but confidently.

“What book?”

“I found a book in my taxi one day and just started reading it.”

“A Western book?”

“No, it is a Persian book,” Javeed said pulling the book from his rope belt under his chook and handed it to his old friend. He opened the book and found only blank pieces of paper.

“Are you being a funny man?” he asked continuing to flip through the book. Javeed looked down to see nothing on the pages.

“I don’t understand. I was reading it this morning,” said Javeed taking the book back.

“You are a changed man. A crazy man! Come back next week and I might have an open taxi then when you have calmed down.”

Totally confused, Javeed walked back to the city gate and threw the book on the table shaking the tray causing tea to spill.

“Who can read this book?” he asked interrupting the group of men he had spoken with just a few minutes before.

The men stopped the conversation and one of them pulled the book towards him. He opened the cover and said, “Read what?”

Without speaking he took the book back and walked away to hear them laughing at him again. He walked down the street looking at the pages and seeing the black writing on the torn pages. He now realized that only some could see the words and as he walked home he prayed that his wife would see the words. He hoped for his sake and hers.

Javeed walked inside his home and went straight to his wife who was washing clothes on the back step of the house.

“Can you read this book?” he asked hopeful.

“You know I can not read,” she said continuing to wash the laundry. “I did not go to school as you did.”

“Can you see the words on the page?”

“Yes, I can see words. I am not blind.”

Javeed breathed a sigh of relief hoping that one day she would be able to experience the truth as he had.

“Why did you ask me that?” she asked.

“Because when I showed the men in town, they only saw blank pages. The letters just vanished.”

“Maybe they were not meant to see it or maybe just not right now?”

Javeed walked back in the main room of the house and sat on the floor. He thought about what his wife has just said and wondered if he was suppose to read the book for a purpose. Was the book written just for him? He looked close at the pages and knew the book was well read. When he pulled back the pages exposing the binding, he notices several different kinds of dust, sand and dirt that would not be found in Iran or Dubai. He sat and wondered about the origin of the book and how it found it’s way into his hands.

As he pondered, his two daughters walked in from being outside.

“Girls, come here,” he summoned.

They both came over to him and they both sat in his lap a position they had enjoyed over the last week.

“Fareeza, can you read this page?”

“Yes father,” his oldest girl said as she began to read the first sentence aloud.

“Great! What about you Tala?”

“Yes, she said and she struggle to pronounce the first three words.”

“That is wonderful baby. We will read it together,” he said hugging them both tightly. After I return from morning prayers we will read together.

Javeed arrived at the Mosque right on time and removed his sandals outside and washed his feet in the plastic tub before stepping into the main hall. He took his place in the large room with a high ceiling among about one hundred other men and began to pray to the God he knew better that day than ever before.

He left wondering if the other men he prayed with knew what he did and if they felt as he did. I assumed not but hoped they did.

That afternoon the family gathered in the corner on a silk rug and Javeed read to the three most important women in his life. His wife Nazilla followed her husband’s finger across the page as she studied the words. She enjoyed the warmth of his arms and the love in his voice as he read aloud to her and her daughters.

The daily readings continued, as did Javeed’s expressions of love towards his girls. Each day they read and after only a few months both Tata and Nazilla were reading at the same pace taking turns with Fareeza throwing in the difficult words.

Javeed had finally worked his way up the waiting list and was able to rent a cab every day. The money was not near as good as in the UAE but he did not care because he was with his family. Javeed was not accepted in the town because he was different than everyone else. Most of the men though he was crazy and a few of them accused him of joining a cult. He was also not welcome for prayers at the Masque anymore because he said some things that contradicted the words of the emom. After being laughed out of the gathering by the gate and kicked out of several restaurants he choose to eat his lunch alone on a curb most days.

One afternoon while eating some bread on a quite street a man came up behind him and sat beside him.

“You are the man with the strange book?” asked the stranger.

“Yes,” said Javeed sighing and continuing to eat.

“I heard some men talking in the market about stealing your book. They planed to go into your home today and take it.”

“But it is not in my home.” Javeed said as panic struck. His heart immediately began to race.

“My wife is at home. When?”

“Today I think.”

Without hesitation he jumped to his feet and ran to his car. “Thank you,” he screamed as he opened the door and jumped in.

Javeed speed through the streets sliding around corners on the dusty roads. He weaved in and out of traffic and drove faster than he ever had before. Finally, he came to a sliding stop at his house slamming the breaks and locking up the poorly treaded tires. He ran in to find the door open and the house destroyed. He ran through the small home screaming, “Nazilla! Nazilla!” As he turned into the bedroom he heard her say softly, “I am in here.”

She sat in the center of the room in tears with clothes and papers all around her. Javeed quickly fell to the floor and embraced his wife.

“Are you hurt?” he asked softly.

“No, I am ok. They did not hurt me. Just told me to stand aside,” she said between sobs.

Javeed continued to hug his wife as her tears fell on his dusty shirt. He looked around the room and saw all of their stuff was scattered across the room.

“Why did they destroy our house?” she asked. “What were they looking for?”

“They wanted the book.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” he said softly while stilling sitting and holding her.

It was about time for the girls to get out of school and Nazilla started to calm down.

“I think we should go pick the girls up from school,” Javeed said. The two got in Javeed’s taxi and drove the couple of blocks to the small school. After arriving, Javeed leaned against the hood and waited with Nazilla in the car. The bell rang and children calmly and orderly walked out of the school to walk home. Javeed was the only parent waiting because most children walked home each day.

“Tala! Fareeza! Over here,” he yelled over the sound of children excited to leave school. The girls came running, surprised to see their father at school, especially with his taxi.

“What is going on?” Fareeza asked noticing her mother hiding her tears in the car. Javeed knelt down and spoke eye to eye to his girls.

“Something happened today that I need to tell you about,” he said softly but seriously. “Some men tore through our house looking for the book we read.”

“Did they take it?” Fareza asked.

“No, I had it with me in my car.”

“Then what is so bad?” she asked while he younger sister stood quietly.

“We need to talk about what to do if they come back.”

“If they come back we will not give it to them!” Fareza said seriously meaning every word.

Javeed smiled at his daughter, learning from her in this trying time.

She continued saying, “We have read together about men who stood up for what they believed and they were protected. Why are you afraid father?”

“I am not afraid anymore. You have the heart of a lion and I am encouraged by your bravery and commitment,” said Javeed as he hugged his two girls and put them in the car.

Driving back home, several stories ran though Javeed’s mind. Some that ended in triumph and others that ended in death but Javeed was not afraid. He had faith and hoped he would be as strong as Fareza if the time came again.

The next day he went to the same curb about lunch time hoping to see the man who had alerted him to what happened. He sat down and ate his lunch thinking about the day before while looking around for the man. Javeed finished eating and the man never came. Javeed looked around and saw a college student sitting near by eating his lunch alone. All of the sudden, Javeed felt the need to go talk to him and he did not know why. His muscles tensed and his hands shook but he could not explain why he was so nervous. He sat for a moment looking for the courage to get up and talk to the boy. “Why am I nervous?” he asked himself as he gathered his strength and walked towards him.

“Hello, I am Javeed.”

“Hello, I am Emod.”

“May I sit with you?” Javeed asked.

“Please,” and he motioned towards the seat.

“Why are you sitting here on this quiet street?” Javeed asked.

“I don’t know. I live just over there and I am studying to go to University. I like to get outside to study. What are you doing here?”

“I am not sure. Sometimes I eat around here. Today, I was looking for someone.”

“Who were you looking for?” Emod asked.

“I am not sure.”

Javeed then had the revelation that maybe he was supposed to meet Emod and he pulled the book from his belt.

Emod, can you read this page?”

He looked at the book and began to read the first paragraph.

“Thank you.” Javeed interrupted him saying, “I know who I was suppose to meet.”

“Oh, is he here?

“Yes, I want you to have this book.”

“Why?”

“Because you are suppose to have this book as was I for a time.”

“I don’t understand,” Emod said.

“Read it. Study it. Protect it and Share it.”

Emod closed the book looked at the warn leather cover as Javeed stood up to leave.

“Goodbye Emod.”

“Goodbye sir.”

Javeed walked back to his taxi and drove off looking for a fare to provide for his family. Emod pushed his school books aside, opened the cover and began with the first word of the first page, curious about the gift he had just received.

Chapter 9

Emod packed up his schoolbooks and the brown leather book he just received and began walking home. His blue jeans, now becoming common among students in Tehran, were warn and dusty. His thick dark hair blew in the warm breeze and the afternoon sun shined on his dark face.

“Emod, how are those studies coming?” one of the shopkeepers asked from across the street.

“Fine, Mr. Naazi.” Answered Emod waving and smiling as he walked on.

It was known in the neighborhood that Emod was trying to go to a foreign college and everyone was pulling for him. He had already finished high school and was trying to improve his test scores so he could get a scholarship. There were three schools on this list. American University in Beirut, University of Athens in Greece and the University of Liverpool in the U.K. All of the American schools were out because of the political situation.

Emod’s father, Taher, had been a lawyer. He was very intelligent and good at his work. Emod thought about following in his father’s shoes but was not really sure what he wanted to do. If he went the medial route then the University of Liverpool would be his best option but at this point, he was just not sure.

Emod walked into his family two-bedroom apartment and went straight to his father who was reclined on the couch with his legs propped up on the arm of the couch.

“How are you feeling today days?” Emod asked.

“Not bad, a little weak but not bad,” he answered. “How are the studies going?”

“Good, I think I am ready to take the test again.”

“Let me know when you are ready and I will pay for the exam. I want you to know I am very proud of you.”

“Thank you father,” Emod answered shyly ducking his head. “Today a man sat down while I was studying outside and gave me a book.”

“What kind of book?”

“Some old leather book. The pages are warn and it is pretty dusty.”

“Why did he give it to you?” Taher asked his son.

“I am not sure but I started reading it a little.”

Emod walked into the kitchen to greet his mother who was standing over a single gas hot plate cooking dinner. Her head was still covered with her scarf even thought it was expectable to be uncovered in the home.

“How was you day?” she asked.

“Fine. How is Dad doing?” he asked.

“He has been OK today. He has not moved off the couch all day.

Emod took his books to his room and washed his hands for dinner.

The Kattar family did not sit around a table because it was difficult for Taher to move around and sit up for that long. They gathered around him eating on the small glass coffee table. Emod’s mother, Nadia, sat on her knees in the floor and Emod leaned against the wall.

Not much conversation went on most night since Taher had to quit his job. They did not want to talk about the sickness and Taher was ashamed of the fact his wife had to work while he laid on the couch. After he lost his job, Nadia went to work in a local hotel cleaning rooms and the worst part about being sick was knowing that his wife had to clean up after someone other than her family.

After dinner, Nadia cleaned up and Emod went to his room to get the book the man had given him earlier that day. Emod was curious. The man said very little about the book but the few words he did say were intriguing. Emod sat on the floor and leaned up again the couch at his father’s feet. He began to read and tuned out the sound of the soap opera his father was watching.

Emod read for a few hours until his eyes became tired. “Good night,” he said softly to his already sleeping father and placed the book on the side table. Then he turned off the TV and headed for the bed.

The next morning Emod left the house early and walked to the library to study. It was much easier to be disciplined and stay on task in a quiet library than inside his home. The library was a concrete building built in the 1970’s during a thriving time in Tehran. Florescent lights hung over each heavy dark wood table illuminated the entire room. The books and furniture was well taken care of and it was always very quiet.

Emod made his way to the research room despite not needing to do any research. It was just the quietest and least trafficked room and he liked to sit at his regular table in the back.

“It’s good to see you again today Emod,” whispered the research librarian.

“Thank you. It is good to see you too,” he answered politely trying to continue to his defacto office.

“I hope you do well on that test and that you get into a school and become just like you father.

“Thank you,” he said as he moved past her.

Emod buried his head in his English language books and worked for hours. Other patrons of the library came and went but Emod kept studying. Around 1 in the afternoon, he decided to take a break and each lunch.

He walked down the street to a small food shop with only two tables. Without needing a menu, he ordered khoresh gheymeh, an Iranian stew and a white rice dish called basamati. He took an available seat among the regular lunch crowd and waited for his food.

It took only a couple of minutes to be served and Emod enjoyed every bite. The cubes of boiled lamb were his favorite but he loved all of the most fragrant Iranian dishes.

After he finished his lunch, he took up his post back in the corner of the research room. Hours later, Mrs. Vaziri, the research librarian broke his monotony and said, “I am sure it is about the time your mother has dinner prepared.”

“Yes, Mrs. Vaziri,” he said respectfully and began packing up his books.

He walked home cutting through the market that was closing up. On either side of the covered walk way of the ancient market; shop owners were moving the tables and goods back inside their wooden double doors for the night. The man selling flowers on the corner had not quite put everything away when Emod stopped him. “Can I buy those yellow ones for my mother?”

“Yes, take two bundles for the same price,” said the shop owner.

“Thank you.” Emod said as he paid the man and headed home.  
He walked the few more blocks home to his family apartment and opened the steel door. First he made his way to say hello to his father resting on the couch in the dull, tan painted living room.

“How was you day?” Emod asked his father who was reading the leather book for himself.

“It was one of the best days I have had in a long while!” he said closing the book but using his index finger to hold his place. “The day passed so quickly. I lost track of time and had no idea it was time for you to return.”

“What held your attention?”

“This book you left here,” he said lifting the book from his leg.

“Yes, I really enjoyed what I read last night!”

“Son, did you understand everything you read?”

“Most of it, but I think there is more to the book than just individual stories. I think the collection with tell a great epic tale.”

“I think you are right. I just hope I live long enough to finish it.”

“Father, you will. Don’t speak those words.”

A long pause filled and left the room, Taher placed the book on the table.

“Where is mom?” asked Emod.

“She is out with Kouros’ mother. She made dinner and left it in the kitchen for us.

Emod went into the kitchen and began preparing two bowls of Iranian rice. The wonderful smell of fresh saphran filled the room as he heated the bowls.

“Here it is father,” said Emod.

Taher sat up slowly, grunting as he prepared to eat. Emod took the seat beside him and served his father a cup of hot tea. With the first bite in his mouth, Taher said, “So, do you really think the story is true and could be our origins?”

“I don’t know but the story is logical and it sounds probable.”

The two debated and discussed the details of the story even after they finished the meal. They flipped through the pages and read quotations, delivered insights to each other and spoke more that evening than they had in weeks. The TV never came on, something that happened only when there was a blackout, and they both thoroughly enjoyed the evening as the conversation continued.

In the middle of a discussion, the opening of the front and only door to the apartment interrupted the two.

“How was your one evening without me?” asked Emod’s mother Nadia.

“Good,” answered her husband. “We have been discussing the book.”

“That old book Emod brought home?”

“Yes, it is more than a regular book,” said Emod.

As he spoke, he noticed the bowls from dinner were still sitting on the floor in the living room and hoped his mother did not notice. Emod knew she only had one evening free every month and Emod knew she worked hard taking care of his father. He picked up the bowls and walked them into the kitchen and Nadia followed him.

“The one night I leave and he wants to talk. He has been so depressed ever since he had to quite his job,” she said.

“I am sorry mom.”

She did not answer, walked towards the bedroom and closed the door. Emod finished cleaning the dishes and then took his place at his father’s feet and began reading where he left off the night before. After reading for close to an hour Emod stopped and said to his father, “Did you get to the part about king?”

“Yes.”

“Then why did he have him killed?”

“I don’t know but you might find out in a few chapters,” said Taher said as if he knew exactly why. Emod turned back to the book and kept reading.

Several hours after his father fell asleep; Emod finally closed the book and put it back on the side table. Then he turned off the light and went directly to bed as his father slept on the couch as he did most nights since he got sick.

Early the next morning, Emod woke and quickly ran out the door trying not to wake his father sleeping just beside the door. He walked down the busty street as he had every day to take his place in the library. This had become Emod’s daily habit and he worked hard every minute studding for the international entrance exams. He was pretty uncertain what would be on the test but he felt if he studied the basic disciplines and practiced writing in English it would help him. Emod spoke English well, better than most of the other students when he was in school but his composition needed work. Mostly, he struggled with verb tenses and spelling but he had improved greatly just from reading English novels and references.

Emod was a disciplined student and a systematic thinker who enjoyed the sciences and math. He also enjoyed logic problems and trying to find a solution or to understand the unexplainable. After a full day of study, he packed up his books and headed for home, hopping to have a similar conversation with his father as he had the night before. As he opened the door the questions started.

“Did you get to the story that takes place in the Egypt?” his father asked.

“Yes.”

“That has to be the most stubborn leader I have ever heard of,” said Taher.

Emod agreed and walk through the apartment to kiss his mother and put his books away in his room. Then he washed his hands in the kitchen and asked, “How can I help?”

It was not customary for men, even sons, to help in the kitchen but it was also not customary for a woman to work outside of the home while being expected to prepare meals and take care of the house for herself and two men.

She handed him some fresh vegetables she had just picked up from the market and he began to wash them without her needing to give instructions.

“Your father has been like this ever since I got home. He has been telling me all about this book. What is this book you two are reading?”

“It is just a collection of great stories,” he answered.

“Well I am glad to see him excited about something. It is wonderful you have found something to share together.

They both continued preparing dinner and she continued to speak. “I am sorry about walking out last night. I miss my old husband and his look on life and how we once interacted. Last night seeing him act differently and have a conversation made me very happy but I was jealous, no, more envious of you because the conversation was with you and not me. But, please understand I am very happy for him and I want you to continue to share. I just wish I were part of it.” Tears fell silently.

“Well, all you need to do is start reading this book and you can share in the joy we have received,” said Emod.

When dinner was served the two men debated and discussed how the stories lined up with recorded history and what they have both been taught in school. Taher was highly educated and went to law school in Beirut, Lebanon. Nadia listened quietly and was completely intrigued and wanted to read for herself. After dinner and a couple of hours talking about the book, Emod took up his place at his father’s feet and began to read where he left off the night before so he would be prepared for the following day’s discussion. Nadia went to bed long before Emod quite reading and Taher fell asleep with the TV on again.

Early, before the sun rose, Nadia quietly and gently walked through the apartment to her husband on the couch. She slowly picked up the book off the side table where her son had left it the night before and she retreated back to the bedroom. She started with the first page. She had completed secondary school but got married before attending college. She enjoyed reading for pleasure and she wanted to share in the excitement of her husband and son. She read twenty-four pages before having put the book down and get ready for work. She took the book back to the table where she found it and prepared for her bath.

While she was in the bath, and her husband asleep, Emod quietly followed in his mother’s footsteps and picked up the book from the table to take it with him. He placed it in his bag and walked out the door.

It was an early Saturday morning and Emod stood outside his apartment waiting on a taxi. There was little traffic and Emod hoped a taxi would come by soon. Inside his canvas satchel he carried a blank, black and white bound composition book, four #2 pencils, one ink pen and the brown leather book.

As he stood on the street his palms became sweaty and there was a nervous feeling in his stomach. After a few moments, an import care drove towards him and Emod flagged him down. The dusty taxi pulled over and Emod got in the car and closed the door.

“Tehran University please,” said Emod.

The driver pulled away and looked in the rear view mirror and saw a familiar face. He recognized the boy, he said, “How is that book I gave you?”

Emod looked up in surprise at the familiar eyes in the mirror and the two smiled.

“It is great. My father and I have really enjoyed it!”

“I am glad to hear that.”

“What are the chances of you being the first taxi I saw today?” asked Emod still surprised.

“Well, I do work this area a lot and I tend to work in the mornings to take people to the downtown market. Why are you going to the University today?”

“I am taking an international university entrance exam and the Toffel test.”

Until that moment, Emod had forgotten how nervous he was and his palms had stopped sweating.

“I hope you do well,” said Javeed.

“Thank you sir.”

“Are you nervous?” asked Javeed.

“Yes, very.”

“Have you been studying?

“Yes, a lot.”

“Then not to worry. You just need to do your best and know the rest is up to God.”

“Thank you sir.”

“If you have that book I gave you, can I see it for a moment?” Javeed asked while trying to drive and look in the mirror at his passenger.

“Yes I do, and he reached in his bag and handed the book to its previous owner.

While continuing to drive, he quickly turned to a page near the middle of the book, a part that Emod had not read yet. Javeed looked over his glasses and flipped one page at a time till he found what he was looking for while driving with his thigh to turn the searing wheel.

“Here, read this before your start. It will help you on your test,” Javeed said as he handed the book back to Emod as they arrived at the main gate of the university.

“Thank you very much,” said Emod and he held the page with his finger as he paid the fare.

Javeed handed Emod a card and said, “Here is my number, call this when you are finished and I can take you back home.”

Emod walked through the stone arched way and to the main and oldest building. He walked up the stone stairs and entered through two large wooden doors that came to a point at the top in traditional Persian architecture. Down the long hallway was a desk with a line of 10-12 students checking in. He walked down the hall and stood behind the last one. While standing and waiting, he opened the book to the page Javeed had pointed out. He read slowly and intently. He had not read this part of the book and was curious to what Javeed noted.

He read and stepped forward as the line moved, never taking his eyes from the page but knowing the line moved in front of him. After moving forward several places, he closed the book, smiled and stood confidently as he checked in knowing he was going to do well.

When the test concluded, he walked down the hallway he had entered 5 hours before. With each step his smile grew longer. He knew he would be able to go to an international university because he felt he aced the test. Emod walked to the pay phone outside and called the number on the card.

“Hello,” Javeed answered.

“Mr. Javeed, this is Emod, can you pick me up at the University?”

“Yes, I am just finishing up eating lunch not far from you. I will be there soon.”

Emod sat on the steps and dreamed of the possibilities. He dreamed of European Universities he had seen in the brochures and big Western cities he had seen in movies. He dreamed of sitting in a coffee café to study instead of an underfunded library made of concrete and he thought about the possibility of finding an educated woman to marry.

When the taxi arrived, Emod was woken from his daydream by the horn. He quickly picked up his bag and ran down the steps to the car. He opened the front door and sat in the front seat because this time he felt he was being picked up by a friend not a taxi driver.

“So how did it go?” asked Javeed.

“Great! I aced it! I knew almost every answer. I finished way before anyone else and not a single person came out in the time I waited for you to arrive.

“That is wonderful news. I knew you would do well. Now it is up to God to do the rest.”

Emod paid the fare, said goodbye and ran up the eight flights of stairs to his apartment to deliver the good news to his father. He turned the key, opened the door and said, “Father, I aced it!”

There was no answer. Emod looked to the left of the door to see his father with his eyes closed on the couch. The TV was on but static that filled the screen and Emod knew his father was not asleep but something was wrong. He dropped to his father’s side falling to his knees trying to wake him but to no avail. He placed his hand on his neck to feel a pulse. It was faint but there was a pulse. He put his ear to his father’s nose and felt a soft breath. Thinking quickly, he pulled out the card he had been given earlier that day and ran over to the phone.

“Javeed! My father is dying! I need you to take him to the hospital!”

“I will be there in just a moment,” said Javeed and the call ended. He turned the car around in the middle of a busy highway almost causing an accident and headed back in the direct he had just come from. He was not far away and arrived quickly. He slid across the dirt parking area throwing dust in the air. Then he ran inside the building an up the stairs but he did not know which floor or apartment.

“Emod! Emod!” he screamed as he ran up the stairs. “Emod!”

At about the fourth floor he heard, “I am up here!”

Javeed continued up. Finally, on the eighth floor there was an open door and he went inside. “Emod?”

“Yes! Here!”

The two picked up Taher; Javeed from under his arms and Emod grabbed his feet. They struggled to carry him down the narrow staircase to the car. With only two floors to go, Emod accidently dropped his father’s legs causing Javeed to do the same. They took a quick moment to rest their arms, wipe the sweat and then tried again. When they got him to the car they laid him across the back seat and Javeed ran to the other side to drive. He sped across town weaving in an out of traffic. He dodged cars and blew his horn almost constantly as he ran through intersections. When they pulled up to the hospital, Javeed accidently turned in the wrong way into the emergency drop off.

A nurse walked through the double doors and asked, “What is wrong?” as the two jumped from the vehicle.

“My father has kidney problems and I think he is dying!”

The nurse yelled for a gurney and two men came running through the doors. The three hospital employees managed to get him onto the gurney and into the hospital much more efficiently than Javeed and Emod had at getting him into the car. Emod followed his father inside.

Javeed parked the car and walked into the waiting room to find Emod sitting in tears. Without saying a word, Javeed took an empty seat beside his new friend and they sat together silently. After a few moments of sitting, Javeed finally said, “What about your mother?”

“She will be home within the hour but will have no idea what has happened.”

“Can you call her?” asked Javeed.

“No, not till she gets home. She does not have a mobile phone.”

“That is ok, I will go to your house and wait for her so she does not arrive to an empty house. Then I will bring her here.”

“Thank you so much,” Emod said as Javeed walked away.

Javeed drove back to the apartment and walked back up the stairs to lock the door. Emod’s keys were still in the lock from when he opened the door after arriving home from his test. Javeed picked up the overturned table before locking the door behind him. He waited in his car for about thirty minutes until Nadia arrived. Javeed had never met Nadia but knew when he saw a women carrying two bags of food from the market he thought it must be her. He got out of the car and said, “Mrs. Kattar?”

She stopped in her tracks. It was not customary for a strange man to speak directly to an Iranian woman, especially calling her by her married name. She sat one of the bags down on the street and pulled her head cover across her face to vale herself.

“I mean you no harm and I apologies for speaking to you in public. I am a friend of your son, Emod. He sent me for you.”

She wanted to ask what had happened but spoke not a word.

“Your husband is in the hospital,” he said as calmly as he could muster. She gasped for air and ducked her head. The other bag of groceries fell to the ground.

“I will take you to see him,” Javeed said as he picked up the bags and she got in the back seat of the car. She did not speak, which was the custom but she had so many questions. She only stared out the window watched the buildings of Tehran pass by through tear soaked eyes. As the car came to a stop outside the hospital she broke custom and whispered a soft, “Thank you” and exited the taxi to find her husband and son.

She found Emod pacing in front of the first row of seats in the emergency waiting room.

“How is he?” she asked as her voice cracked from crying.

“I don’t know yet. They have not told me anything,” said Emod and the two sat down on the front row. They waited for almost two hours not saying much to each other and repeating the same questions they asked each other moments before. Finally, a doctor entered through the door and walked directly to them.

“He is stable and conscience but there are some long term issues we need to discuss,” said the doctor. “His kidneys are failing and his blood has turned septic.”

“What doe that mean?” asked Emod.

“It means his blood is poisonous to his body because his kidneys can not remove the toxins.”

“How long does he have?”

“That is difficult to say. He is going to be fine today but he could have two week or to months. It is hard to tell. He really needs a new kidney.”

“Can we see him?”

“Yes, said the young doctor and led them through the doors of the ICU.

Taher’s skin was very dark. His face looked very fat and blotted from all the fluids they had injected into him. There were lots of tubs attached to his face and arms and he lay naked except for a sheet pulled up just over his waist. Emod went to the far side and Nadia to the other. They both held his hands. She stroked his arm and could not keep back the tears she tried to hide with her head cover.

“You are going to be alright,” she said softly and sniffling.

He opened his eyes and whispered, “Don’t lie to me. I know I am not going to be alright.”

All she could do was smile. Her smile spoke the truth. He looked as his son and asked softly, “How did your test go today?”

“Great! I aced it!”

Taher smiled proudly and said, “I wish I could take you out to celebrate.”

“We can celebrate after I get accepted to an international school.

Taher’s proud smile continued despite the discomfort he felt inside.

“If something happens to me, I have made arrangements for your mother to be take care of. Do not let my passing keep you from going to school.”

Emod nodded in agreement and looked at his mother. He knew it was very difficult for a widow in Iran to provide for herself and to fit into the community. Emod though for a moment, what if his father did die? This wanted to honor his father’s wishes but he knew it would be very difficult for his mother. He could not leave her that way even if there was enough money.

The three sat together in the room that was far from private and looked at each other. Few words were spoken but love was felt.

“I am sorry but you will need to return to the waiting room,” said a nurse walking by to work on the neighboring patient.

“Yes sir, Emod answered. They said, “Goodbye,” and left the room.

The two went back to the waiting room and both felt hungry. As they walked into the quiet room, Emod notice Javeed leaning against the wall in the corner. They did not know he was still there. Javeed walked over to them and said, “Can I do anything else for your family?”

“No, you have done so much. Thank you,” said Emod and Nadia echoed her thanks with her eyes.

“It was my pleasure to help you during this time,” he said and then he handed them a paper sack. “Here is some bread and pollo.”

“You did not have to do that. Thank you so much!” said Emod.

“I am happy to help. Also, I took your mothers groceries back to your home and locked your door. Here is the key and I thought you might need some comforting words.” Javeed handed Emod the book he picked up off the floor of the apartment. “I marked my favorite passage. Hopefully it will provide you with some encouragement in this difficult time.”

Emod was speechless at the thoughtfulness and generosity of his new friend. He did not know how to thank this man who he had only met one time before today. All he could say was, “Thank you. Why have you been so kind?”

“Because my life was changed by reading that book and hopefully it will change you too.” Javeed shook Emod’s hand and left for the night to return home to his family. “Please call me if you need anything else.”

Emod and Nadia sat in the waiting room quietly eating the rice by scooping it with the bread. After their short dinner Emod sat back in the chair and opened the book to the marked passage. He read slowly soaking in each word. He read a few sentences and then paused to ponder them before continuing. After about twenty minutes of so Emod felt his stress, fears and anxiety leave him. It felt supernatural. He felt a sense of calm engulf his body. Then he simply closed the book, leaned back in the chair and place the book on his chest with this arms crossed over the cover. It had been a day filled with highs and lows, of excitement and sadness and was emotionally draining. Emod needed some rest. Now his mind was clear and in a few moments his breathing slowed and he drifted off to sleep.

The next morning a different doctor came into the mostly empty waiting room to find Nadia and Emod asleep in the uncomfortable chairs. The doctor woke Emod and he quickly nudged his mother.

“Your husband is doing much better this morning,” the doctor said. “He is recovering but he is going to require a kidney transplant very soon. Has either of you two been tested? Especially you,” he said looking at Emod.

“Yes sir, we both have but neither of us are a match,” Emod said.

“Then we must wait and hopefully one comes available in time.”

“We must ask God to provide life for my father,” said Emod.

“I hope God answers your request,” said the doctor. Then he stepped away and said, “We are moving him to the ward and you can see him in about an hour or so.

Three hours later, they were finally allowed to see him. He was sleeping in a large room of men. Six beds lined both sides of the room and two nurses cared for all 12 men. Nadia was allowed to visit but was required to leave the room every evening, during Muslim prayer times and anytime a patient was treated with more than a simple injection. This happened often and was a nuscence to everyone but she remained quiet and did as she was asked. Emod was allowed to stay as long as he wished because he was male.

The two sat in hard wooden chairs on both sides of Taher’s bed and watched him sleep most of the day. After a while, Emod opened his book and began to read silently. After a few hours, Taher woke and said, “So, are you going to share with me or are you just going to keep the story to yourself?”

“Of course father. I will read it to you.” Then Emod flipped back a few pages to get to the beginning of the story he was reading. He spoke softly but his voice resonated across the open room and several patients began to listen in. There were no TVs and most rarely had visitors so the reading of a story was high value entertainment. Then the man three beds down said, “Can you read a little louder?”

Emod was startled and did not know anyone else was listening. “Sure,” he answered and took a deep breath before reading the next line. Other than Emod’s voice, nothing else could be heard through the ward. Even the nurse’s work slowed as they were distracted by the audible story.

After an hour or so, Taher began to get tried and he had trouble holding his eyes open. Emod decided to stop at the end of the second story so his father would allow himself to get the rest he desperately needed. The other patients were disappointed for the reading to stop but thanked Emod and then returned to their day of resting in their beds.

That night, Emod and his mother decided to sleep at home and would return the next day. They both slept well and the following morning Emod got up early to go the library. This time it was not to study but for a greater purpose. He was going to try and find his father a kidney. The library had Internet access on a few older computers donated by foreign businesses after they were finished with them.

Emod searched for hours trying to find some way for his father to get a kidney. If he found one he knew he would also need to find a way to pay for the surgery. Emod had found a way to pay for his college education through the Internet and he had faith he would find help for his father.

Mrs. Vaziri, the research librarian walked by to check on him after he worked through lunchtime. “I did not expect to see you here today,” she whispered from behind him. “How did your test go?’

“It went very well,” he answered.

“Then why are you here today? You should take at least one day off for a break after weeks of studying.”

“My father is very sick and I need to find some help for him,” said Emod as he turned back to the computer screen.

“I am so sorry to hear that,” she said as she walked on.

Emod continued his work and eventually stumbled on an article about group transplants. He read about a story in Chicago where four people needed a transplant and their loved ones were willing to give but they were not a match for their loved one. The hospital worked it out and basically traded the kidneys so that each patient could receive a matching kidney given by someone else’s family member. Emod’s face lit up. There was hope. He was willing to give and started researching how to get his father on the international register.

With answers in hand, he quickly made his way across town to the hospital to ask his father’s doctor for help.

When he walked in the ward, his father was awake and sipping on some water. His mother was there by her husband’s side. “How are you feeling today?” Emod asked.

“Better today but I am still weak.”

“That is good news to hear,” said Emod. I have found some information and I want to talk to your doctor. Have you seen him?”

“He has not come by this afternoon yet?”

“OK, I will wait for him here,” said Emod.

“You should read some more,” his father requested motioning to the book on the eating table.

“Sure,” said Emod as he flipped to where he left off the first day. He cleared his throat and began to read to his father but loud enough for the rest of the room to hear if they wanted to listen. Those patients in the ward who could get out of bed moved chairs close and gathered around Taher’s bed. For hours he told stories of great kings and fallen empires, of grace and justice and love and wars.

The stories were a distraction and a comfort not only to the patients but also to Nadia as she firmly held her husband’s hand.

Soon, the doctor came in and the men returned to their beds for consultation with him. Taher was the third bed on the right and it did not take long for the doctor to reach him.

“Doctor, I was reading about multiple patient transplants. Is that an option for my father,” asked Emod.

“I have read about that in other countries but we do not have a national network of information here in Iran like those in the States and Europe.

“Anyone can be put on the international registry, would you fill out the paper worked to get him entered into the network in Europe?”

“How will you pay for such a surgery in another country and their travel expense?”

“I don’t know yet but I have faith if we find a kidney, we will find the money. There is a lot more money than kidneys so that should be the easy part!” said Emod.

The doctor paused for a few moments thinking about what Emod had presented. After a moment or two, the doctor said, “I will complete the necessary paperwork but the chances are 1 in a million that your father will find a match, be able to afford the procedure, and survive the travel and surgery. It will take a miracle.”

“A miracle is what I am praying for,” said Emod.

After several weeks in the ward and dialoasis treatments, the doctor finally allowed Taher to go home but he would have to travel to the hospital each day for his treatments. Emod was thankful to be out of school and he had the time and ability to care for his father while his mother was able to work.

Each day, on their way back from morning dialysis treatments, Emod stopped at the post office in hopes to receive a letter from one of the six schools he had applied for. Finally, after numerous days in a row with no word, a letter finally arrived from Greece.

The letter read: *Dear Mr. Kattar; It is with great excitement that I congratulate you on your acceptance at the University of Athens. We would like to offer you a full academic scholarship that includes room and board, contingent on your success at the University of Athens. You will also be asked to work 15 hours per week on campus.*

*Please begin the visa process by completing the attached form and sending it to the Greek embassy in Tehran, Iran.*

Emod could not contain his excitement as he ran outside the post office to tell his father seated on a bench by the road.

“Father! I have been accepted to the University of Athens in Greece with a full scholarship!”

A proud smile came over Mr. Kattar and he raised his posture and said, “I am so proud of you son.”

The two talked about the details as they walked home to the apartment. They would have to wait several hours for Emod’s mother to arrive home from work before they could tell her so there was no rush home. They both enjoyed the walks together and Emod hoped his father would be able to continue walking each day because he was learning so much through the conversations.

Three days later while walking back from the daily treatments, Emod received a similar letter. This time from the University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom.

“Well this is a good dilemma to be in,” said his father seated on the bench.

“What dilemma?” asked Emod?

“What school to attend.”

Yes, this is a very tough decision. I hope it is reveled to me which school I should attend not just which one I want to go to.

“Well, which one do you want to go to?” asked his father.

“I don’t really know,” said Emod as he stood up and began to walk home.

The daily walks to the hospital for treatments only continued for another week or so before Taher got too weak. Their taxi driver friend Javeed was happy to help and they agreed on a fair price to take him each day.

Emod also got a job working at the local western hotel as a bellmen. He was able to practice his English with the customers and earn extra money for his family to help pay for the treatments. Taher was proud of his son but was ashamed that both his wife and son had to work to provide for him when he should be providing for them.

The deadline for both schools was fast approaching. It was time to make a decision. Emod sat down on his father’s couch with both letters and asked his father’s advice.

“Which one should I choose?”

“Which one do you want to go to the most?” asked his father.

“I think the University of Liverpool’s is the best school but if I go to Athens, it will cost less and I can learn Greek.

“If God has not told you of his specific will, and your top choice does not go against his commands, then go with your heart and ask God to bless that decision.”

Emod sat and pondered those words for a moment and shuffled through the letters moving Athens to the top of the stack. He thought about it for another minute and prayed, “Ali, show me your will and please bless my decision to follow it.”

He sat in silence and with resolve stood up and said, “Father, I am going to attend the University of Athens!”

“May it be Ali’s will!”

Emod began filling out the required forms and prepared the documents. He diligently checked and rechecked each blank several times over before placing everything in the large white envelope.

The next morning on his way to work at the Hotel, he stopped by the post office to mail the package and check the family mail box. First, he paid the postage at the counter and went to the box and turned the key. He grabbed the few letters and began walking to work. Not looking at the return address he opened a letter as he walked and began to read. When he noticed the letterhead he stopped in his tracks as people passed him by. Athens International Hospital! His heart was beating fast and a lump filled his throat. He read the first paragraph and stopped. It was not the letter he expected. He could not believe what he had just read! Emod did an about face and ran back home as fast as he could forgetting his job.

“Father! Father! Listen!

*“Dear Mr. Kattar. You have been selected to participate in an experimental transplant surgery along with three other patients.”* Emod stopped there. “Father, do you know what this means?”

“It means I am blessed,” he said with a smile on his face.

Emod screamed, “Yes, Yes! Everything is going to be ok!”

Tears began to come down Emod’s face and he could not control his crying. “We have to go tell mom,” he said. The two left the apartment and walked to where Nadia was working. They walked as quickly as Taher could walk which to Emod seemed to take forever. Wearing his uniform for the competitor hotel, Emod walked into the lobby and to the back halls without question. His father followed close. He found his mother in the laundry room washing towels. “What are you doing here?” she asked looking around to see who had noticed.

“I have something important to tell you,” said Emod. Then she noticed her husband walk through the door.

“Dad is getting a new kidney! He is going to get a transplant!”

“What are you talking about?” she asked wiping her hands on her apron.

“There is a match for him in Europe and I will give my kidney to someone else and I think someone else will give a kidney to dad!” Nadia walked over to her husband and hugged him as she joined him in crying. All three of them let their emotions show right there in the laundry room with Nadia’s co-workers watching. Emod was mostly excited and Nadia and Taher were relived and filled with joy.

Nadia asked to take the rest of the day off and as they walked home together as a family, Emod re-read the letter to make sure he completely understood the details. “It says that you will have to be in Athens, Greece for about three months; a week before the surgery for some tests and the rest of the time to recover. The hospital is going to pay for the donor and recipient’s plane tickets, the procedure and a place to stay!”

“This is unbelievable,” Taher said softly as he continued to hold his wife.

“It is just like the story in the book. We just had to have faith!” said Emod.

“Yes, just like the book.”

It was two month before school was scheduled to start and time to fly to Athens for the surgery. Javeed pulled up outside the apartment building in his dusty taxi as he had now done many times but this time he was to take Mr. Kattar and his son to the airport, not the hospital. They could not afford for Nadia to go and she had to stay and work. They all were disappointed to leave her behind but it was the only way.

They said their tearful goodbyes but everyone was excited for the opportunity ahead of them even if they were to be separated for three months.

“Emod, take care of your father and do well in school. I am so proud of you!” she said hugging her son. She also knew that something horrible could go wrong and this could be the last time she would ever see her husband again. She held him with every muscle in her body clenched around him not wanting to let go.

“Have faith my dear,” whispered Taher to his crying wife. They kissed and he got inside the taxi. She fell to the dirt as the taxi drove away taking her son away to college and her husband to a life-threaten but life-changing surgery.

As they drove away Javeed said, “Don’t worry sir, I will have my wife check on her each week while you are away.” And Emod knew his dear friend would keep the promise.

In Athens, the two walked slowly through the international terminal. Taher was tired. The flight and travel had taken the energy from him. After passing immigration and customs they were met by three people from Athens International hospital.

“Mr. Kattar, I am here to take care of you and get you to your temporary home!” said a skinny Greek woman with long dark hair and olive skin. “This man will take you in this chair to the ambulance.” She paused, took a breath and said, “Now, when we go through those sliding doors, there will be a crowd of people and several TV and newspaper cameras. You do not have to say anything. Just smile or wave if you like. The nurse pushed Mr. Kattar through the doors while Emod walked beside him pulling the luggage. They walked into the main terminal to find a crowd of people waiting to see him. Two television cameras with bright lights and three still photographers captured every step he rolled as the crowd clapped and waved.

Taher smiled and waved as he had been asked to do and so did Emod. A sign written in Greek, English, Korean, and Farsi read, “Welcome International Hope Patients!” Taher and Emod were part of an in international program created by the hospital that joined six different nations together to help each other. The media, both local and international, loved the story and would be there to cover every aspect of the four-way transplant. The surgeries and all other expenses were paid for and the only requirements were to put up with the media for a while. Not a bad day’s work thought Taher.

The ambulance arrived at the Athens Hospital and both men were amazed at how much more advanced and newer the building and equipment was over the hospital in Iran. They took him up to his private room which looked more like a five-start hotel room than a hospital room complete with dim lighting, hardwood floors and plush furnature. Two female nurses were waiting to give him his needed dialysis treatments.

“I have my own room?” Taher asked in English to the Greek nurses.

“Yes, Sir,” one answered. “You have just about anything you like while you are here.”

The other nurse helped him into the bed and began taking his vital signs as the other prepared the dialysis machine. It typically took Taher 3-4 hours to complete the process so he laid back and pulled out his leather book. After about an hour of reading during his treatment a doctor entered the room. He had gray hair that was a little wavy, wore glasses and a white lab coat.

Mr. Kattar, my name is Dr. Kennedy. I will be performing your transplant surgery.”

“It is nice to meet you Dr. Kennedy,” said Taher as he shook his hand with the hand free from tubes.

“And I assume you are Emod,” Dr. Kennedy said with his slight British accent. “Dr. Swann will be performing your surgery. We have worked together many times and she is great! You can expect her to come by in a few minutes. You will be in the room next door and Friday is the big day for both of you.”

“Thank you,” said Emod as he noted that his doctor was a women, something he never considered before.

“We are going to bring all the patients together and explain everything in a meeting tomorrow morning after everyone arrives,” said Dr. Kennedy.

“Thank you,” they both said and Dr. Kennedy exited the room with his coat trailing in the wind.

“Father, you are going to get a new kidney in three days!” Emod said excitedly.

“I just pray it goes well for you. I cannot thank you enough for your sacrifice,” Taher said to his son.

“Anything for you father, I am happy to have the opportunity to give of myself to you.” Emod reached over and patted his father’s leg. Emod knew how thankful his father was and Taher knew how much his son loved him.

The evening slipped away while Emod read a few stories from the book to his father. Around 6 p.m. a Greek man in a suit delivered a tray for Taher.

“Here is your evening meal,” said the well-dressed man in a black coat with tails and a black bow tie.

“Thank you,” said Taher.

The man looked to Emod, “Would you like your meal here or in your room?

“Here please. You can bring it in here every night from now on,” said Emod. He planed on spend as much time as possible with his father.

After brining in the second tray the waiter said, “Enjoy your dinner,” as he removed the shiny warming covers.

“Dad, this will be your last big meal for a few days so enjoy it.”

Taher looked down and his mouth watered at the sight of a two-inch thick musaka and a bowl of plump read tomatoes and feta cheese. He quickly picked up his fork and had a big bite of the layered musaka, savoring the bite in his mouth. Then he speared one of the juiciest tomatoes he had ever seen and his first cube of feta cheese. It was a culinary moment he would never forget.

The next morning a nurse wheeled Taher and led Emod down to a large conference room. Seated around the table were six other patients, all in hospital gowns, just like the Kattars. There were also five doctors from several countries and at least two-dozen nurses in scrubs and a lot of other people wearing white lab coats. Emod assumed they were medical students or doctors who wanted to just witness the feat. He guessed there were more than 50 people in the room, everyone standing except for the patients. After a few moments of formal greetings and small talk, the woman who had met everyone at the airport began to speak.

“Welcome to this historical international medical meeting!” she said as everyone quickly became quiet. “I want everyone to be introduced and to see how many people are going to be involved in the miraculous events of the next few days.” She went on to introduce each doctor and list of their array of counterparts. Involved in different procedures were doctors from three countries and patiences from four different countries all of different religions and ethnic backgrounds.

Emod and Taher listened to every word and Taher worked hard not to miss a single detail. “Now we are going to group you up with your doctor and donor so you can meet them,” said the represenitive. “Dr. Bill Bangham will be transferring a Kidney from Mr. Ashish of India to Mis. Jenkins of Sudan.” The donor walked over to Mis. Jenkins and the two posed for photos.

“Dr. Kennedy will be transferring a kidney from Mrs. Barbara Ellison of the United States to Mr. Taher Kattar of Iran.” Taher was happy and excited to meet Mrs. Ellison and shook her hand.

“Dr. Dee Swann will be helping Mr. Emod Kattar of Iran give a kidney to Miss. BB of Greece.” And the matchups continued until everyone was paired and had a photo made before the cameras were ushered out to get in position for the press conference. After they left, a low roar of noise filled the conference room for several minutes while the groupings genuinely shared their life stories.

“Now, excuse me! Can I have your attention,” the hospital organizer politely yelled over the conversations. “In a few moments, we are all going to go out these doors to meet the world. There are lots of television cameras and newspaper photographers and they are going to have lots of questions. Don’t answer anything you are not comfortable with or don’t know how to answer.”

Emod made his way back to behind his father’s chair before they opened the doors. They all paraded out to and up the ramp of the small stage and stood before a hundred reporters. When the speeches and questions were over, a Greek reporter who spoke excellent English, as most of the Greeks they had met did, approached them and introduced herself. “I am XX from an Athens TV station, Can you tell me a little bit about yourselves?”

“Sure, I am Taher Kattar and before getting sick I was a lawyer in Iran.”

“And what about you,” she asked Emod.

“I am a student. I recently got accepted at the University of Athens.”

“That is wonderful, when do you start?”

“In three weeks.”

“What will you be studying?”

“International Relations. I would like to be a diplomat or work for the United Nations.

She wrote quickly in what hardly looked like Greek or English. “I would like to spend some more time with the two of you and do an on-camera interview if that is ok?”

“That is fine with us,” said Mr. Kattar “but you would have to talk to our agent,” He pointed to the hospital public relations agent who had been doing all the speaking. The reporter excused herself and walked over to ask permission. They spoke or a brief moment and then a nurse led them into another conference room that was set up with bright video lights, three chairs and two cameras. A tech assistant removed one of the chairs and they pushed Taher into place.

“Emod, you can have a seat and we will make this as quick and as painless as possible,” the reporter said in a calm voice as the tech placed the small microphone on her jacket.

She started the interview with some simple questions and then moved into some difficult ones. The lights were hot and they stopped a couple of times to wipe sweat from both of their brawls.

“Mr. Kattar, did you ever think you would receive a transplant?”

“I would like to say I had faith that I would but I did not. Even if we found a match I was not sure I would be able to afford the surgery. But my son had faith. He believed and he is why we are here today.”

“Why did you believe?” she asked Emod.

“I read a story about a young boy who took down a giant warrior because of his faith and I had faith that God would help me as he did in the story.”

The entire interview took about an hour and Taher was tired when it was over. The nurse took them back to their room after they said goodbye to the camera crew and reporter.

After two days of tesst, more tests and more tests, both were ready to get the procedure over with. They past the time together by reading from the leather book and talking about the stories. They discussed different themes and tried to understand if and how all the stories fit together.

On Friday morning, they awoke early and both felt a little nervous. Over their liquid breakfast, a glass of water, Emod opened to the passage his friend Javeed had showed home on the day of his exam. He read the words slowly and both were calmed but still hungry.

A team of nurses entered the room and told Emod it was time for him to return to his bed to get ready.

“Are you ready to start a new life?” Taher’s favorite nurse asked him with a smile as she took his vitals.

“Yes, I am and I pray it works out for all the patients, especially my son.”

“We are going to take good care of your son. He will be just down the hall and Mrs. Ellison will be in the same room as you.”

They wheeled Emod to the operating room and begin shaving his back. Dr. Swann entered the room with her hands above her waist and her mask loosely tied at the top with the strings hanging down. “Good morning Emod!” said Dr. Swann. “Are you ready to begin?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, then we are going to put you to sleep now. I want you to count to ten.”

“In English or Farsi?”

“You choose but I bet you don’t make it to six,” said Dr. Swann.

“1…2…3…” said Emod in English. “4…” in Farsi and gradually fading out before he reached 5.

With her scalpel in hand Dr. Swann mumbled a quick prayer to herself and then said, “Ok everyone, we have a long day ahead of us. Be smart. Be sharp and let’s save four lives today.” She griped the knife firmly and pressed with her index finger to make the first cut across Emod’s lower back.

Several hours later, Emod woke in his own room groggy and alone. It took him several minutes to comprehend where he was and why he was there.

“What am I doing here and where am I?” he mumbled to himself in Farsi.

Quickly, a nurse came into the room to comfort him. “You are fine. Everything is ok. You are in a hospital and you just came out of a successful surgery,” she said clearly directly to his face.

Everything became clear for a moment just as she increased the morphine drip. “How is my father?”

“He is doing fine. He has come out of surgery and is in his room next door.”

“I want to see him.”

“Not right now but maybe in a few hours we can take you over there.”

“O..K,” he answered with slurred syllables as the nurse walked out of the room. Before he fell asleep he said, “Thank you,” but he was not speaking to the nurse.

Recovery for both Kattars was a slow process but Emod was much faster getting to his feet than his father. After a few days it looked like Taher’s body had accepted the organ and that he would make a full recovery. Emod was free to walk around and go outside but for at least a few more days; Taher would have a stay on bed rest. In the afternoons, Emod would open the window to allow a cool breeze to flow into the room as he sat in the padded chair and read.

While the two recovered, Emod had one uncomfortable side effect. He could not go to the bathroom. His father had the opposite reaction to the medication and he could not control his body function for a few days. Both wanted to trade problems with the other but were forced to suffer through their own issues.

A week after the surgery, Dr. Kennedy walked in the room for his twice-daily visit. “Mr. Kattar, I think you are doing just fine. Your body has take to the kidney well and I think we can release you this afternoon. We will need to see you every Friday for the next two months just to make sure everything is healing and working properly but other than that you should be back to normal very soon!”

Everyone in the room, including the nurse were smiling as if all of them had reached the summit of a mountain and the struggle was complete. Emod and Taher looked at each other and for the first time they both felt a sense of release, as they knew the toughest part was over. They also felt excitement about the idea of getting back to a regular life.

The hospital moved them into a studio apartment about a block from the hospital. Emod needed to start school soon and his dorm would open in a week. For now, he was happy helping his father in the apartment. They needed some food supplies so Emod walked down the street to a small convenience store in the bottom of a high-rise building.

“Father, I met an Iranian man and his family in the convince store across the street. He said there are many refugees from central Asia living in the apartments a few block away.

“Really? I had no idea,” his father said.

“Maybe we can take your next walk that direction and see.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” said Taher. “What about today?”

That afternoon they walked the city sidewalk down the narrow streets. This was their first time to walk an area other than around the hospital. They looked on the city like two tourist on a stroll. They noticed how shops and restaurants on each side of the street and cars were parked illegal anywhere there was space enough to fit. The buildings were tall in their eyes and kept a lot of the street hidden in shadow for most of the day. Down a narrow street they stopped at a window with a sign written in Farsi. “Refugee center: Food for all.”

“This must be a place for meet up,” said Taher.

“Want to check it out?”

“Sure,” and they stepped inside.

The large room was dark and empty. Some light streamed in though the pulled curtains that hid the bars on the windows. Lots of plastic chairs were stacked in a corner and it looked like no one was to be found inside.

“Hello!” said Taher in English.

After a few moments a man came down the steep stairs and greeted them in Farsi. “Hello, I am Naazi, I run this center.

“Hello, I am Taher Kattar and this is my son Emod. We are from Iran.

“Nice to meet you. I am from Afghanistan and I have been here for four years. We have dinner served at six o’clock followed by Greek and English classes. So, if you need a meal you can come here.”

“Thank you but we are being provided for very well. We are not refugees. I am a patient at the hospital and my son is going to be attending the University of Athens starting next week.”

“Congratulations!” he said with a smile. “How is your English?” he asked.

Emod switched to English, “My English his pretty good but I wish it was better.”

“We are always looking for volunteers to help teach the English classes.”

“I am not sure I am good enough but I am happy to help,” said Emod.

“Well that is all that is required and yours is better than mine. Mr. Kattar, what is your line of work?”

“Please call me Taher. Before I got sick I was a lawyer in Iran and I hope to return to practicing when I am healed.”

“Would you be willing to give legal advice to Iranians here who are trying to get back home or have financial problems?”

“I am happy to but I will only be here two more months.”

“Then they will have to ask their questions in the next two months then,” said the Naazi. “Come back around six and you both can meet the people you will be helping. I know you will enjoy them.

“OK, we will see you again in a few hours then.”

The two walked back to the apartment, this time with a quicker step and via a different route than the way they arrived so they could see the rest of the neighborhood. There was a blacktop basketball court surrounded by a chain link fence with tall lights. Public courts with lights were unheard of in Iran. As they walked they noticed the number of Arabic and Farsi speaking people on the streets as well as Greeks. It was a neighborhood of mixed races and cultures with the majority still being Greek but there was a lot of central Asian culture too.

They stopped at the market to pick up some fruits and vegetables for dinner. The market was filled with individual venders, many immigrants but also Greeks. The building was much cleaner than the market they used back home but this market had stood in this very spot for at least two thousand years. They picked up some ripe tomatoes, their new favorite food in Greece, and some apples for breakfast.

By the time they made it back to the apartment, Taher was very tired. He needed to rest and was unsure if he would be able to make it back out at 6 p.m. He laid down on the bed and Emod laid across the couch and they both took a nap.

At 5:30 p.m., Taher woke up and said, “Emod, it is time to get moving! We need to meet those refugees and see how we can help them. Emod did not hesitate but began putting on his shoes and was thrilled to have his father healthily and energized.

They opened the glass door of the refugee center to find a completely different place than they had seen just a few hours before. There were more than a hundred people in the small room that had been completely empty before. The room was filled with plastic chairs in rows facing the opposite wall and every chair was filled. Men stood along the walls and children played, trying to weave in and out of the rows of people. Almost everyone had a bowl of Turkish chili and a piece of flat bread. Emod noticed one of the men put the bread in his pocket to save for later.

Emod and Taher slowly moved through the crowd towards the front of the room in search for Naazi. Before they could make it to him they were stopped several times as families from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran introduced themselves. When they finally made it to the front of the room they found Naazi in the kitchen, a small room tucked away to the side of the larger room.

“Hello Mr. Kattar and Emod,” said Naazi. “I am so glad you have returned. Let me introduce you to some people.”

Naazi knew everyone by name, every member of their family, their children’s ages and every detail of their particular situation. One after the other, they were introduced to families similar to their own with the only difference being that they did not have a home to return to or someone supporting them. Many were working professionals in their home countries with nice houses and jobs but as refugees they struggled to stay alive.

Naazi took the Kattar men to the elevated stage and clapped twice to get everyone’s attention. The talking stopped but everyone continued eating.

“I would like to introduce you to some new friends,” he said loudly across the room. “Mr. Kattar is an Attorney from Iran and his son Emod is a college student studying here in Athens. They have agreed to help us any way they can so please welcome them to our family.”

And welcome them they did. Before the two could get off the riser, several people came directly to them to greet them. They were sincerely happy to meet them and wanted to invite them to be a part of their community.

Emod sat down and began to talk to some high school or college age guys in the back of the room while Taher stood and talked to the men along the wall.

“How long have you been away from home?” Emod asked the guys he had just met.

“I left Iran after they killed my father three years ago and have been moving from country to country every 2-6 months,” one said as he ate his food.

“I left Afghanistan at the start of the war and have been here most of the time. We have a two bedroom apartment we share with another Afghan family,” said the oldest looking guy as he put the bread into his jacket pocket.

“Are you saving that for later?” asked Emod.

“Yes. Each night we get one nice meal and I save the bread to eat for lunch the next day. It helps my stomach make it through the day till I get dinner here.”

Emod felt thankful for the life he had. War had not displaced them and though he felt sad that his family was temporally separated, he was thankful for the reason they were in Athens. Emod also realized how blessed they were to have a home provided for by the hospital and that burden was lifted from them.

“Do you work?” one of the boys asked Emod.

“I start college next week here at the University of Athens and I will have an on-campus job. My father did work before he got sick. He just had a transplant last week an should be able to work again when he goes back home to Iran.”

“That is great news,” the oldest guy said sincerely.

Naazi clapped twice again and the rumble of families talking hushed. “Gather together for the Greek citizenship class and tomorrow night will be the English class. As Naazi began to teach about Greek history and political democracy, Mr. Kattar was feeling weak and knowing he had a long walk home decided to make his way to the exit. As he pushed open the door an Afghan man stopped him and said, “ I am Ahim. You are welcome back here anytime Mr. Kattar.”

“Thank you. I will return soon,”

As Emod and Taher walked home both knew they would do all they could to help their fellow people any way possible. Taher knew he had been blessed with a new life and he wanted to make the most of it.

“God has given me a new life and I have a duty to serve others with it,” he said to Taher.

The next morning, Taher wanted to go directly to the refugee center. He did not have any doctor’s appointments and nothing to keep him from going but he was unsure if anyone would be there at 7 a.m. He read from his favorite book, now more than half way through the ancient book, as he waited on his son to wake up. He ate two apples for breakfast while he read and drank a glass of juice. Just as the doctor had ordered.

“Good morning,” Emod said to his father after getting up from the pull out bed.

“Good morning son.”

Emod noticed his father was wearing a suit, the suit he wore on the plane when they arrived.

“Where are you going? Why are you dressed up?”

“Because lawyers wear suits not hospital gowns.”

Emod could tell his father felt 100 times better. It was as if he was a new man with a new life.

“Last night I was up late thinking about my life. I was thinking about before when I was sick. About what we have been reading and about what God has given me. He has not only given me a kidney, he forgiven me for my past and given me a second chance. A new life to live in service to something greater than myself.”

Emod was filled with emotion at his father’s heart-felt words. “A few months ago I had a similar life changing moment; a moment when I knew my purpose for living and I have been waiting for you to find that purpose as well. I am so happy for you father!” The two embraced and held the hug for several moments as they both examined the experience they had just shared together.

“Naazi! Are you there!” said Taher as he opened the glass door and stepped into the refugee center.

“Yes, come up the stairs.”

Above the main room was a makeshift office. Naazi had papers spread across a folding table and a small filling cabinet in the corner. An Afghan woman with her head covered by a black scarf sat at another table typing on an old computer with a black and green screen.

“How are you feeling today?” asked Naazi.

“Much better. I am getting better everyday!”

“Where is your son?”

“He has gone to see the university and visit the library. He loves going to the library much more than I did when I was in school.”

“You must be very proud of him.”

“I am! Not just because he is smart and a hard worker but because he is a selfless honorable man.”

“I am sure he is.”

“I have been thinking about your offer yesterday,” said Taher changing the subject to why he was there early in the day.

“Well, it was more of a request than an offer.”

“Either way, I am happy to help in any way possible.”

Nazzi could tell that Taher meant every word he spoke and that it meant a lot to him to be able to help. “Great, we will be happy to have you.”

“Would it be possible for me to setup one of these tables in the corner and see clients here? It would not be very professional to meet clients in my small studio apartment.”

“I am sure we can arrange that. As fast as you an I can set up the table.”

“Then tonight at dinner, let them know I will be here everyday to help give advice or to file any papers they need.”

“Sounds like a great idea and will your son be here tonight?”

“Yes,” said Taher. “He is planning to help out with the English class.

“Wonderful! Thank you so much,” he said while shaking Taher’s hand. With Taher in a nice suit and Naazi shaking his hand it looked as if they two had just struck a big business deal. Then Taher walked down the steep, narrow stairs into the empty large room that had been filled the night before. He looked around and smiled with pride.

Emod toured the University on foot. He found his dorm on the map and that was the first place he went. The doors were locked so he then walked to the library in the center of the urban campus. The library had more books than Emod had ever seen in his entire life, and that was just on the first floor. The library was 12 stories and every floor was filled with dark brown shelves packed full of old volumes. There was the familiar smell of old papers that filled the room and comforted Emod as we walked through.

He found the computer lab and sat down to check his email. Emod did not expect to have many emails but he wanted to check just in case. He had not been near a computer for weeks and he was excited to sit down to a keyboard. In his inbox he found several junk emails, a note from a friend back in Iran that he went to school with and some important information about registration for school. Then he moved to surf the Internet just to catch up with current events and to read about what was happening politically in Iran.

After leaving the library, he arrived back to the apartment just in time to have lunch with his father.

“I went to the center today and set up my office,” said Taher.

“You walked there alone?” Emod acted surprised.

“Yes, and you walked alone to your school. You think I can’t take care of myself in a nice European city?”

“I guess I am just not used to you feeling better and being more independent.”

“You mother won’t be used to it either. It will take some time for her I imagine. I miss her and I wish she was here with us to experience what we are doing.”

“I wrote her a letter last night,” said Emod. “I tried to explain how both our lives had changed and to update her. I hope she understands.

“It might take some time but I know she will.” There was a pause and then Taher continued. “I miss talking to her everyday. One of the biggest things to happen to me in my entire life and I can’t share it with the woman I love and the woman I have spent more than half my life with.”

Emod just sat quietly. Nothing needed to be said. Taher and his son had always been close but he had never opened up so much about his feelings. It was not customary for an Iranian man to talk about his wife that way.

“Are you going to the refugee center tonight while I help with the class?” Emod asked changing the subject and ending the awkward silence.

“I figured I would. I enjoyed meeting people last night. I felt very welcome.”

“Me too!”

The two arrived at the center and walked into an already crowded room. It was a similar sight as the night before. The same people were huddled around enjoying themselves while they ate from white Styrofoam bowls with white plastic spoons.

Ahim, the man who had introduced himself to Taher just before he left the night before approached.

“Mr. Kattar, it is great to see you again,” Ahim said.

“It is great to see you too.”

“I want to introduce you to my family,” Ahim said excitedly. “This is my wife Minoo and my son, Padshah.

“It is nice to meet you all,” Taher said and Emod shook hands with the 10 year-old boy.

“Are you refugees?” asked Taher.

“Yes, our village outside of Kabul was home to some intense fighting between American forces and the Taliban. I was a teacher at the village school and it was not safe for the children to come to school.

Taher listen intently, tuning out the noise in the background.

“We fled about a year ago and have been bounced around from country to country only being allowed to stay for three months at the most. I am trying to get a permanent work visa for all of us but there are hundreds of other refugees who have applied as well.

“Does the fighting continue back home,” Taher asked.

“My wife talked to her sister not long ago and she says the fighting comes and goes. Some weeks it is everyday. Some weeks not at tall.”

Taher and Emod were both captivated by the story. Taher wanted to do something to help them but could do nothing. He was also amazed about how content they were about the situation. They were not bitter or upset but they dealt with the situations.

A voice was elevated over the crowd and called, “Emod, can you come up here?” It was Nazzi and he was standing in the front of the room waiting to start the class. Emod worked his way through the crowded room and Nazzi stepped down off the riser to explain what he wanted him to do.

“Here is the lesson we are teaching tonight. If you could walk around the room to to let them practice saying the words out loud, that would be very helpful.”

“I will be happy to,” said Emod and he looked over the worksheet.

“When most people had finished eating their soup and either finished with their bread or saved it for later, Nazzi started the lesson. Emod did as he was instructed to do and made his way from person to person trying to help. There were various levels of skill and there were student from so many countries. As he walked, he noticed a couple of things they all had in common. Everyone was looking for a better life and they were all willing to work for it.

Most of the children finished the worksheets way before the parents. Ahim’s son Padshah who Emod had just met, finished early and was already looking board. Emod knelt in front of him and said in English, “Are you finished?”

With a timid voice he answered, “Yes, I am finished.”

“What color is your pencil?” Emod asked him pointing to the pencil in his hand.

He answered slowly and clearly, “The pencil is blue.”

“Good,” and Emod reached and took his pencil and held it in the same hand as his own pencil. “How many pencils do I have?”

“You have two pencils?”

“Great.”

Emod went on to question him about every object he could point to while the adults finished the worksheets. He answered every question correctly but had a strong accent. The entire time, Padshah’s mother Nadia watched the entire conversation. She was proud of her son. Emod noticed her watching out of the corner of her eye while she pretended to do her sheet.

“You have a smart son,” he said to her.

“Thank you,” she answered in English.

After the class was over, Emod met his father in the back of the room and they walked out the door. “Son, you did a good job tonight,” said Taher as they walked.

“Thank you. I enjoyed it,”

The next morning Taher put on a clean ironed white shirt and his dark suit. The only suit he had with him. He checked himself in the mirror and straightened his tie, despite it already being perfectly straight. As he looked at himself, he though “*How great it feels to be working again even if I am not getting paid*.” He left the house and walked the urban streets to the center along while Emod slept. Taher enjoyed the Greek lifestyle. He loved the wonderful food and the warm but not overly hot sun that shined through the blue sky. He was a happy man.

He entered the clean and empty center and walked up the wooden stairs to his so-called office. On the table were a yellow legal pad, two pencils and two black pens.

“Hello Mr. Kattar,” said the office worker over the consistent clicking sound as she typed on her keyboard. “I hope the setup will be sufficient for you.”

“It’s perfect!”

He sat down, straightened the paper and adjusted the pens. He smiled and leaned back in the chair.

“Now, I hope someone comes today so I can earn my keep.”

“I am sure they will,” she answered without looking up from her work and while the rhythm of typing keys continued without missing a beat.

The desk of Nazzi was empty and knowing it was not much of his businesses, Taher choose not to ask her where he was. As time went by Taher adjusted and straightened the supplies on his desk again and again. Then he paced in front of the window fro a while before returning back to his seat to play with the pencils again. He felt a little awkward with nothing to do and so did the assistant who worked furiously at the tasks before her while Taher watched.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” he asked her.

“No thank you. I have it under control.”

Taher went back to walking the floor. Around lunchtime they both heard the door down stairs open. Taher heard the footsteps walking up the stairs and he quickly took his position behind the folding brown table and awaited his first customer.

“Hello Taher!” a familiar voice called. Mr. Nazzi had returned from fundraising and came back to the office.

“Has anyone come in need of your expertise?”

“Not yet.”

“Don’t worry, there are many Iranians in our community who could use your advice. Hopefully, they are working and that is why they are not here.”

About that time a man came up the stairs.

“Mr. Kattar, are you busy?” asked the man in a respectful tone.

“No, not at all,” said Taher as he smiled at Nazzi like it was an inside joke that only the two of them understood.

“I am Giti. I am from the same country as you and I have a small problem.”

“I am here to try and help.”

“I left my home two years ago because I was being threatened by the government. I held a high office in the transportation commission and refused to hide the money my supervisor was stealing. I told his boss, who was in on the scheme and I was fired the next afternoon. After they threatened to kill my family if I talked, I fled to Turkey. Now I have no home but my family is safe.”

“I am sorry to hear about that. How can I help?”

“They have seized all my bank account saying I owe back taxes on my house and land but I sold the land and placed the money in an account before we moved to Turkey. So I do not owe property taxes for property I no longer own.”

As every lawyer does, Taher threw question after question at his countryman. Whatever came to his mind he asked. Sometimes before Giti could finish answering the previous question.

“Do you owe for just the last two years or for in the past as well?”

“I have always paid before but after selling I have not had to pay and I have been out of the country so they can not arrest me.”

“How did you find out about the problem?”

“When I could not get my money moved to a Turkish bank last June.”

“Do you have a bill of sale or receipt for the property?”

“Yes, right here,” Giti said as he fumbled through a stack of papers in his lap.

“Then I can help,” said Taher. “I will fax this to an associate in my office in Tehran and we will file a request for audit on your taxes. That will cause them to check on the property and my assistant will produce this receipt when they ask for it. Then they should open the account again.”

“Do you think that will work?”

“I do. I have faith in the system.”

“Then I have faith in you,” Giti said as he stood up, shook Taher’s hand and they bother parted with smiles on their faces.

Taher sat back in the plastic lawn chair serving as his desk chair and he felt better than he had in two years. He felt good about helping someone and he felt good about working again.

Later that afternoon, a couple came through the door to see Taher. Their problem was with filling documents with the Greek authorities.

“I am sorry to say, I do not have any experience in Greek law but I am happy to learn and research the problem and see what I can find out,” Taher said to the couple.

After they left, Taher figured that most people would have question or issues in Greece so he thought it would be prudent to catch up on Greek law. He knew he would never gain the credentials to practice in Athens but it intrigued him to study democratic law in the county that founded democracy.

The center got much busier in the afternoon. Two women began cooking for more than 100 people and Ahim arrived to start setting up plastic lawn chairs in rows.

“Ahim, can I be of assistance?” Taher said to his new friend who was setting each chair with precise placement.

‘Sure, if you want to bring those chairs over here so I can line them up, that would be helpful.”

This was the first time Taher had done any physical activity, other than walking, since his surgery. He was carful and made sure not to over exert himself or to tear the incision that was not 100 percent healed yet.

“So do you do this everyday?” Taher asked Ahim while they both worked.

“Well, I have not been able to find a job yet so I try to help out when I am free. I come over a couple hours early and do whatever needs to be done.”

“Where is your lovely family?”

Ahim placed another chair with the same spacing as the ten before. “They will come later when it is time to eat. My wife is helping the kids with homework or whatever about now.”

“I really miss my wife,” said Taher. “It has been over a month and I only get to talk to her once a week.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Many times we are forced into situations that separate us from the ones we love for a better life. When will you see her again?” he asked as he placed the next chair.

“I should be able to go home soon. I am recovering well and I fell better than I have in years. I have a doctor’s appointment in the morning and I hope he says I can go home soon.”

“That is good. Something to look forward and work towards.”

“Something I look forward to everyday, but I am glad to have someone like you to talk to when I am here.”

“Me too,” said Ahim.

The men working together finished the rows quickly and filled the room in only a few minutes.

“That was quick work,” Ahim said. “Let take two of these chairs outside and sit on the sidewalk and while we wait for the others to arrive.”

The smells from the kitchen inside transcended the air outside the building. Several Greeks walked by and did not acknowledge the immigrant men.

“So what do you think of the Greeks?” asked Taher.

“They don’t say much to us but if I need something or approach them they are always helpful despite the fact that refugees are a political issue.”

“That is good. They have been very friendly to me and I love their food!” said Taher.

“Me too!”

Slowly, one by one, families began to enter the center. Two smiling Persian men greeted everyone before stepping inside to eat. The room buzzed with chatter as everyone ate and shared in fellowship.

Just before dinner was to be finished and after the sun had fallen below the buildings, Emod arrived for class.

“Hello Father. What are you doing out here?” he asked.

“Just enjoying the evening and some good conversation.”

“Sounds good, I am going to go inside before they get started.” Emod stepped through the door leaving his father to talk with his friend.

“And here comes my family,” said Ahim. The men greeted Ahim’s wife Minoo and his son Padshah and followed them inside bringing their chairs with them.

The English class started and Emod did as he had done the day before walking around helping and quizzing each of the students. He paid extra attention to Padshah. Not for any particular reason other than he knew him by name and he seemed to have a grasp for English.

“What color is the sky?” asked Emod to Padshah.

“The sky is blue.”

You are so smart. Where did you learn so much?”

“My father is a school teacher back home and he teaches us in our apartment each day here in Greece.”

“Keep up the studies. They will take you far in life,” said Emod as he stood up and continued to walk the room to help others.

The next morning, Emod and Taher made the short walk to the hospital for his check up. They walked quickly and after arriving Taher not even broken a sweat. It was a much shorter walk than to the center and he felt great. After a few moments of awkwardly trying to sit comfortably while wearing a hospital gown, Dr. Kennedy finally came in.

“How are you feeling?”

“I am doing very well. I feel better today than I have in many years!”

“It pleases me to hear those words,” said Dr. Kennedy as he checked the incisions. He studied Taher’s chart for a moment and looked at him again. “Mr. Kattar, I think you can go home next week!”

“Seriously?” he asked surprised. “I would love to see my wife and let her see the new me!”

“I will work some things out with your doctor in Tehran and let him know what to watch out for but the kidney seems to have been accepted and you’re almost to a full recovery.”

“Thank you Dr. Kennedy.”

“I am happy I could help. Actually, all of the transplants were successful.”

“Great news. Will I get to thank Ms. Ellison again?

“I think the hospital is scheduling a reunion of sotrs for everyone involved and she should be there.

“That would be great.”

“I will send the nurse with your discharge papers and your travel clearance in a few moments.

Taher sat on the examination table and thought about what he the doctor had just said. He thought about all he had been through, his wonderful family, the fact that a Persian man had an American woman’s kidney and that God had given him a new life. Tears of joy streamed down his face as he sat alone in the small room.

After the paperwork was complete, Taher walked into the crowded waiting room. Emod was so involved in the old book that he did not even notice his father standing in front of him.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked his son how was startled by the question.

“Yes. Sorry, I got so into the story I lost reality for a moment.”

“That is ok. I do the same. I will began reading and hours later not know where the time has gone.”

The two walked down the street back home.

“You gave your kidney to a woman and another woman gave a kidney to me.”

“Yes. Why do you bring it up?

“Well, for most Iranian men it would be an issue but not for me. I am a changed man. But I am also curious about the fact she was American.

“Go on,” Emod said as they walked.

“In the news we see the Americans at imperialists or war crazy but really they are just like us. I think it is amazing that an American woman sacrificed an organ for an Iranian man she had never met.”

That evening when they both arrived at the center, Ahim was waiting outside for his new and best friend.

“Hello Ahim,” Taher said with excitement but the greeting was not met with the same enthusiasm.

“What is wrong?” Taher asked and Emod took his cue to go inside while his dad stopped to talk.

“Let’s go for a walk around the block.”

The two started a gingerly stroll. “We are being deported back to Afghanistan,” Ahim said as if he had just delivered a death sentence.

“All of you?”

“Yes. The entire family has to leave in the next 7 days.”

“But I thought the war was still going on in your town?”

“According to the Greek government, fighting has moved on from our village and thus we are being kicked out.”

“Have you told Minoo yet?”

“Not yet. I just found out this afternoon. I am going to have to tell them after dinner and class.

“All I can do is pray for you and your family and tell you that God has a reason for you to be there.”

“Thank you brother,” said Ahim quietly. The two men finished walking around the block in silence but the silence spoke volumes. Taher kept his wonderful news about his health and getting to see his wife to himself but his friend asked as they got back to the door.

“How did the doctor visit go?”

“It went well. He said I can travel home in about a week.”

“That is great news. I am so happy you will be reunited with your wife.”

Then they stepped in the center and acted if everything was the same as the day before.

Emod woke before the sun rose. He was excited to move into the student dorm at the University. He had packed his clothes and book the night before and left the brown leather book on the table beside his father’s bed. Emod thought he would leave it with his father and then get it from him at the airport before his father returned home.

He put on a white, short-sleeved button down shirt and dark pants. This was standard daily dress for Iranian businessmen and students back home. His father was seated at the table waiting on his son. Emod sat at the table and ate some fresh fruit and bread for breakfast. The two ate in silence before Taher said, “Son, I am so very proud of you. You have worked hard for this day. You have always been a person of your word and a man of honor but today you are on your way to becoming an intelligent leader with integrity. Emod smiledat his father as he finished his last bite of fruit and moved towards the door.

“Thank you father. I will do all I can to be just like you.”

Both men wearing similar dress smiled as they walked down the urban street that had become their home for the last couple of weeks.

“When I studied at the university in Lebanon, there were no women there to distract me. That isn’t the case here in Greece. You will be surrounded by beautiful women and you must be vigilant in protecting yourself from dishonor and distractions from what you are here to accomplish.”

“Yes Sir,” Emod said thoughtfully but the words of wisdom coming from his father were the farthest things from his mind. He was dreaming of college life and thinking about his next big step in his life. As they walked and Emod dreamed, he also thought about the events of the last few weeks. It had been nice having his father around. Emod had always enjoyed spending time with this father but after this ordeal, they were closer than ever. At the same time, Taher was also thinking about the past few weeks and he knew had it not been for his son’s love, perseverance and sacrifice, he would not be in such wonderful health and being able to walk his son to college. Taher had been given new life because of the sacrifice of his son. It reminded him of one of the stories in the book they had been reading. Taher had such a personal greater understanding of a son’s sacrifice for the wishes of his father that when he thought of the story from the book it almost brought him to tears.

The two continued to walk in silence with only the repetitive sound of the suitcases rolling over the cracks in the sidewalk. When they arrived at the university they both stopped at the main entrance of the urban campus and looked at the Greek inscription and both knew exactly what it read.

“I wish we had a camera so I could take a photo for your mother,” said Taher.

“Me too, but you will have to share all the details with her when you return home.”

“She is also proud of you and I know she wishes she could be here for this historic moment.”

The two walked under the ancient marble archway, one of the few remaining buildings from the beginnings of one of the world’s oldest universities. Scholars, and philosphers have walked under that arch for hundreds of year and Emod was proud to pass under the words that translated to “All things good to know are difficult to learn.”

This was Taher’s first time at the university. He was amazed at the large buildings both old and new. Almost all of them had wide-open green courtyards and students sat around talking and studying. After walking through the center of the campus they arrived at Emod’s dorm. “I am on the 8th floor,” Emod said pointing high on the 12-story building that looked to have been built only 20-30 years before. At one of the oldest universities in the world, a dorm built in the 70’s seemed modern. There was no air conditioning but this would be the hottest time of the year and would get colder as the semester progressed. The heat did not bother Emod because he had lived without air conditioning all his life until he started staying in the hospital apartment.

Emod checked in with the student at the desk while his father stood back with the two bags and watched as parents and students carried in boxes and crates full of stuff. Most of the Athenian students had computers and Taher wished he had the money to buy one for his son but that was out of their budget.

The two got on the crowded elevator with their two bags. They were pressed against the walls tightly by the other student’s boxes and a TV. Emod’s room was at the end of the hallway. He opened the door and found another student placing his stuff on the left side of the mirrored room.

“Hello!” Emod greeted his roommate in English.

“Hello.”

“Well, I guess this is my side,” Emod said to his father so he could put the bag down.

“I guess so. My name is Daimen.”

“Nice to meet you. My name is Emod Kattar.”

“Where are you from?”

“Tehran, Iran,” Emod answered. “and this is my father.”

“Nice to meet you Mr. Kattar.

Taher shook the neat and trim dark-haired boy’s hand after setting the suitcase down on the bed. “Nice to meet you too. I hope you boys enjoy the year and do well in your classes.”

“Yes, Sir,” said Daimen. “Do you need some help carrying in your stuff?”

“No, thank you. This is all we have to bring in,” said Emod without shame.

“Well, I should leave you guys to get to know each other and to get ready for classes,” said Taher as he made his way towards the door they had just entered. Emod followed his father out and waked with him to the elevator.

“Tell Mom, I said, ‘hello’ and that I love her.”

“I will. She is proud of you and so am I,” he said with his eyes glistening with water on the brink of tears. The two embraced and then the doors opened with a ding.

Taher got onto the empty elevator and waved goodbye as the doors closed.

That evening, Taher picked up some dinner and ate alone in the hotel room reading from the book as he ate. It took almost an hour for him to finish his food because he read a couple of pages with every bite. Taher’s emotions were confused but it was as if the author knew how he was feeling right at that moment and the words seemed to speak directly to him. It was like the ancient stories of foreign people were no different than he and his son today.

Finally, after hours of reading, the sun fell below the horizon and he placed the book on the table and went to bed.

When the sun rose the next morning, Taher already had his button down shirt and black pants on, ready to start the day. He took his book and walked to the refugee center knowing that his son was sitting in class at a world-renowned international university. Taher took his seat in the plastic chair behind the table as he had the days before and he began to read while he waited for his first client to arrive. This day he saw three clients and worked to help them providing the best advice he could. He even referenced one of the stories from his book that gave encouragement to a young mother.

After work he made a point to stay for the classes even though his son would not be there to help this evening. He enjoyed the company of his friend and he wanted to take every opportunity to talk because they both would be leaving soon. Taher waited for a while before Ahim showed up at the center and the two talked late into the night like brothers.

Taher continued his habit of working and fellowshipping with the other Persians at the refugee center until Friday when his flight was scheduled to leave. Also scheduled to fly out the same day was Ahim and his family.

That morning, Taher shared a cab ride with Ahim and his family to the international airport outside the city. Minoo said little and stared out the window as she drove through the busy city that had become her home.

Emod took the subway and then the commuter train to the airport and met all of them outside the main terminal as the cab pulled up.

“Hello Father!” Emod said excited to see his dad. He also helped unload the bags for the entire group and placed them on a cart. Together they all walked through the sliding doors into the large terminal to say goodbye.

“I check in over there,” said Taher and pointed to the left.

“And we are down here,” answered Ahim looking in the other direction.

“Then this must be our place of goodbye,” said Taher

“So it is good friend.”

The two shook hands and non-verbally spoke to each other more than great Greek philosophers could share in an entire volume. Even though they had only known each other a few weeks they seem like life long friends.

Emod knelt down to say goodbye to his best students. “Goodbye,” he said in English. They both smiled and answered, “Goodbye!” but their smiles did not break the sadness the entire family felt.

As they started to walk away, Emod noticed Minoo starting to cry before she pulled her rarely warn vale over her face.

“Father, did you bring the book? Emod said quickly.

“Yes,” and he pulled it out of his shoulder bag.

“Mr. Ahim, Wait!” he yelled as they walked to the line.

“I want to give you something. This book has shown me how to live and has guided us here. It is filled with stories of comfort and strength and it will help you through what you are about to face.”

Taher nodded in agreement and placed his hand on his son’s shoulder, once again amazed at his son’s generosity.

Ahim was silent and Emod pushed the book into his hand. “Take it.”

“We want to share with you the joy we have. We want you to have this book,” said Taher.

“Thank you again! You have been so kind to us. We value your friendship and will never forget both of you.”

Then Emod and his father walked to the counter to check in. The two families parted. Taher could not wait to see his wife, Emod was staying for school and Ahim and his family was returning to their war-torn home in Afghanistan.

Next to Last Chapter

Ahim and his family walked down the mobile stairs off the small plane and without excitement walked inside the Kabul Airport to check-in at immigration. It had only been two years since Ahim had escaped his war torn country but his home country was a very different place.

Immigration was orderly and calm. No bribes were asked of him and the process went rather smoothly through the lines guarded by American soldiers. Waiting for them as they picked up their bags was Ahim’s brother, sister-in-law and his niece who ran to Ahim’s wife and wrapped her small arms around Minoo. Minoo was fully covered in the blue burqa she had not worn since she fled the country two years before. She remembered life prior to the Taliban and dreamed for the day when she would be free to dress conservatively as she did in Athens but not required to be fully covered in a burqa.

The family rode in a small beat-up jeep for several hours on a bumpy road that led to a village of Kahryabad east of Kabul. The village had been a base for terrorists trying to attack Kabul and Ahim was able to get his family refugee status after the bombings started but before the soldiers began a ground war in the village.

“There is the school I taught at,” Ahim said as they drove past an abandoned building. “Does anyone go there anymore?”

“Not anymore,” his brother said. “It is too dangerous for the children to meet in large groups. Most of the children never leave their homes except with their parents.”

Minoo took her seven year-old son and pulled him closer. Her vale hid the tears that were collecting in her eyes.

The jeep pulled up outside the dusty stone wall and building that had once been their home. Ahim paid the driver and the men began unloading the bags from the jeep as Minoo stepped over the broken gate that had once protected their home. Her son Padshah heard her cries and griped his mother’s hand tighter as they approached the door to the house. Ahim came up behind them with a bag in each hand and the family stepped into the previously abandoned home together.

“We can fix it up like it used to be,” Ahim said.

“How will be do that if no kids go to school and you can not teach to make money?”

Minoo did not expect and answer and the only thing Ahim could think of to say was, “We must have faith.”

Ahim walked into the second of the two-room house and discovered some homeless people had slept there and had a fire to keep warm. Black soot lined the ceiling. Everyone was silent as they each examined the home thinking back on great memories.

Ahim’s sister-in-law broke the silence and said, “You will need some new mats to sleep on and you are going to need food for tonight.”

“We will go to the market,” said Ahim. His brother and Padshah began walking to the market leaving the women alone.

When the door closed, Minoo fell to the ground and began to weep. Her sister-in-law lowered herself to the floor and leaned over her weeping along with Minoo. The tears and weeping continued for several minutes before Minoo looked across the room and saw the leather book that Taher had given them. It was sticking out of Ahim’s bag and she remembered what he said about the book. She crawled across the dusty floor for the book and leaned against the wall to read. Minoo was not used to reading with a veil on and had trouble getting through the first line of the first page so she lifted the blue mask of oppression and felt free. As he began reading the second line, a tear of comfort fell on the page and Minoo notice that it was not the first tear to ever hit that page. It caused her to examine the book closer and she could tell this book had taken some wear. The binding was thinner than the outer edges of the book because the pages were warn and she could tell had been wet and used before.

The story comforted her as the words flowed from the browning pages. She turned page after page forgetting her sister-in-law was even in the room. She had already started trying to clean an area to prepare the food and let Minoo have some time along.

The men returned from the market, each carrying rice sacks filled with food and supplies. Ahim began to put things away when he noticed his wife pull her vale back down because her brother-in-law was back in the room. She also did not want her son to know she had been crying. She closed the book and placed it on the dusty shelf, and it was the only item in it’s place at this point.

She dusted off her blue garment and moved towards the kitchen. It was a small corner of the main room with a concrete counter and a single burner fueled by a small propane tank and she started water to boil.

“How was the market,” she asked the group but it was only appropriate for her husband to answer.

“It was different and the same. Mostly the same venders as before but many of the stalls were empty. Many had left for quieter areas.”

“Do you think we can find someone to import tomatoes like we had every day in Athens,” Minoo asked.

“Not during this time of year and we could not afford it now if we could find imported tomatoes.

Minoo continued to prepare dinner and Ahim knew his wife was disappointed.

A few minutes later all five of them gathered in a circle around the food that Minoo had placed in the floor to eat. Ahim lead his family in asking for a blessing from God and each of them held their hands in front of them as if water was going to be poured into their hands.

“Amen,” Ahim concluded the prayer and each person made a motion over their heads as if they were wiping the blessing over their heads and face.

Just after they began to eat, they felt and heard a massive explosion in the distance. The dishes on the floor in front them rocked back and forth and dust fell from the ceiling. Ahim’s sister-in-law did not miss a bite but the newly returned family could not ignore this sounds they heard outside and the fear that filled them within.

The rumbling continued through dinner and into the night. When it finally stopped, Ahim’s brother and his wife decided to go home, kissed their family goodbye and walked home.

Minoo placed Padshah on the new mat in the back room of the house and pulled a thick wool blanket around him.

“It gets colder at night there than in Greece,” she whispered to him.

Ahim came in the room with the book in hand. “Padshah, I want us to read this book every day as a family and one day you will be able to read it to me.” Ahim sat down, crossed his legs while opening the book and placing it in his lap to read.

###

When word got around the village that a schoolteacher had returned to town, parents started to bring their kids to his home. It was not safe to take them to the known school but taking them to Ahim’s home seem much safer in their minds. By the end of the first week of being back, seven boys sat in a circle around Ahim.

All of the books had been stolen or burned so the only book Ahim had to tech with was the one that Emod and Taher had given him in Athens. The stories Ahim read and taught enthralled the children and they wanted to read more. The young boys enjoyed the hope and security the stories provided. It also intrigued them to ask questions and Ahim was able to teach about history, politics, government and economics.

“Everything in this world is related. You can not separate the air from the sky nor can you separate economics from politics,” Ahim said to his class as the recently repaired glass in the windows shattered. Another explosion had rocked the house and this time it was much closer than Ahim had ever heard before.

“Move into the other room! Quickly.”

Minoo herded the boys inside the room and told them to gather together in the corner away from the window. She took cover blocking the room’s door and trying to see what was going on out the front window.

The volleys of fire continued and Ahim tried to see who was outside but he could not see them. He could tell the difference from the sound of the Russian AK47s and the American machine guns from when he had fought against the Russians as a younger man. The Americans were close and the local rebels were in the distance. The boys in the other room remained silent in fear as two of the American soldiers advanced just on the other side of the wall. They were so close that Ahim could see the sweat beading on their faces as they focused on where the shots were coming from. Ahim whispered to the soldiers, “We have nine children in here. Please do not draw fire this way.”

One of the soldiers looked away from his target for a brief moment, nodded his head in acknowledgement and moved to the adjacent house across the street as the shots continued to echo through the streets. When he reached his new shooting position, his partner followed.

Soon the shots in the distance lessened till eventually all the shooting ended. Ahim knew the American’s had killed them off one by one. The soldiers continued to advance in tandem farther down the street. The only sound that could be heard was the shuffling of their boots over the sandy street.

After several minutes of silence, Ahim called for the boys to return to the main room to begin studying again. Ahim took the book and began reading again. Minoo began to sweep up the glass and dust from the first explosion had rocked the house. She held back her crying in front of the students but when she returned to the back room she notices a long vertical crack that went from the celling to the floor. For some reason, this was more than she could hold back. She closed the door, laid across the mat and cried.

Similar events continued weekly and sometimes the battles would last for hours. Ahim no longer feared the world he departed a few years before nor did he fear death. Now he had a greater understanding of life and had little to fear. Mino’s feelings of fear slowly faded as she returned to the life she had once known. She had a routine and it suited her to take care of the boys who assembled in her home each day.

“Father, will we ever go back to Athens,” Padshah asked his father one night before bed.

“ I do not know but not in the near future. We must live the life we have been given here. We must be thankful for the time we had there and be thankful for the time we have together.”

Padshah went about his studies and pondered his father’s words for days.

###

When spring arrived, class started earlier because the sun rose earlier and the boys were be able to help their families in the afternoon. The problem was that the students did not want to leave because Ahim was a great storyteller. He knew that if he could get the boys excited about something beside the conflict all around them, they would be more likely to succeed. They spent time learning and playing outside in the safty of the dust yard inside the block wall of their home. Ahim made sure the boys could get home before dark and would spent the rest of the evening with his family.

The family ate the simple meal Mino prepared and afterwards Ahim got up and went to his leather bag.

“What are you doing,” she asked.

“I have a surprise for you.”

Ahim pulled a paper bag from his satchel and grabbed a knife from the kitchen before sitting back down. He reached in the bag and pulled out two, ripe-red tomatoes. Minoo smiled and wept at the sight of them. Minoo had pushed the idea of tomatoes from her mind but her loving husband had not forgotten about something she enjoyed so much.

“Where did you get these?”

“One of the boys father’s is able to import produce for the Americans and I paid him to get me two tomatoes for you.”

Ahim cut one of the tomatoes into wedges and all three of them enjoyed every bite. They saved the other for the next meal.

The sun went down while the family huddled together and read. Minoo lit the candle because the electricity was still not working since they had returned six months ago.

Without warning, shots pierced the concrete wall of their home blowing out large holes and throwing dust into the air that extinguished the candle. Fear took over the entire family as they felt the walls shake from the explosions and watched as more bullets enter their home. Ahim laid on top of his wife and child holding each of their heads with his hands. They heard both American and Taliban guns all around the house in a constant barrage of fire. All of the sudden, something exploded just outside their home and an American soldier was thrown through the wooden gate Ahim had built a few months before. The explosion blew open the door on the house and Ahim could see the soldier lying in the open, unable to move. Ahim heard him moaning in pain and without hesitation Ahim jumped up from the floor and ran to the door. Ducking as he ran the six feet outside of his house he grabbed the soldier by the shoulder strap of his vest and pulled him back across the threshold into the safety of the house.

“Stay here,” Minoo commanded her son as she ran for towels and blankets.

After getting the soldier inside, Ahim closed the door and knelt beside him. In clear but simple English, Ahim asked, “Where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere,” the soldier grimaced. “My legs! My back!”

Ahim could see that his left thigh was bleeding fast and black grit stuck to his bloody face. His helmet had been lost in the explosion but his armor took most of the blast saving his life from the shrapnel.

The shooting continued outside as Minoo began dressing the wounds with the few towels they owned. An American voice came over the hand held radio attached to the soldier’s shoulder strap.

“Franklin, where are you. Franklin come in!”

The message repeated as gunshots flew through the air. Franklin reached for the radio but moaned in pain as he tried.

“No,” Ahim said and he reached to key the mic for him.

“I am hit. I am in a house on the south side of the road. Friendlies are in the house. Friendlies are here.”

“Understood,” came through the small speaker and Ahim keyed the mic again.

“He is in the third house on the left without a gate.”

“We are on our way,” said the voice.

Minoo leaned over the soldier’s soldier to wipe the blood and grit from his face.

“I am Franklin,” he said and Minoo leaned back and realized she was unveiled in the presence of a man who was not her husband. She quickly pulled her vale across her face and continued to work.

“I am Ahim and this is my wife Minoo.”

“Thank you.”

Shots and explosions continued and help did not arrive. After about ten minutes a voice came over the radio again.

“Franklin, We can’t get to you. There is a sniper in the building across the street pinning us down.”

Ahim crawled to the window and the outline of the gunman hanging out of the window firing on the Americans. He went back to Franklin and keyed the mic. “I see him. When you hear the explosion run around the back of my house and enter the back gate. It will be unlocked.”

Ahim ran through the small house and unlocked the back wooden gate and propped it open with a stone. Then he grabbed Franklin’s rifle and a grenade from Franklin’s vest and moved to the doorway. Ahim stood up and launched the grenade towards the building with the gunman using the launcher on the bottom of the rifle. The grenade hit just short of the window hitting the wall exploded one floor below. The gunman was forced to retreat inside the building and three soldiers made a run for the back of the house. As they ran Ahim fired a barrage of shots at the window to hold the sniper down. After they moved through the gate one of the soldiers took up Ahim’s position and began firing at the window.

“Get inside!” yelled the soldier over the gunfire.

Minoo held the door open as the two American soldiers ran inside and Ahim followed quickly behind. One took a position on one knee at the front door and covered his partner who had quit firing on the window but held that position.

“I am Sergeant Walker,” the man who had been speaking on the radio said to Ahim.

“I am Ahim.”

“Nice work! Thanks for your help.”

“No problem,” Ahim said humbly. “Your man is hurt.”

“Rick, find out where that rescue chopper is,” the sergeant yelled.

“Understood!” and the man by the door began calling into a larger radio.

“11 minutes Sergeant,” Rick answered quickly.

“Then we have 11 minutes to take out those guys across the street.

Ahim held Franklin’s hand because he did not know what else to do. Minoo, now veiled, held her son in the corner and tried to comfort him.

Franklin passed out and Ahim was not sure if he was going to live so he began to pray. Minoo also lowered her head and prayed with her son for this man who she only knew his first name. The sergeant began explaining his battle plan to other soldier as they moved towards the door.

“We will be back in a few minutes.” Sgt. Walker said.

The two men ran out the back door to join their third and the room was quiet again. Not knowing what else to do, Ahim knew the book gave him comfort when had been in dire circumstances so he asked Minoo to bring it to him as he held Franklin’s hand.

Blood ran down his fingertips and as Ahim opened the book he left bloody fingerprints on the edges of the pages. Ignoring the dark red stains, he quickly turned to his favorite passage and began to read the story in English to the dying solider.

Moments later there was a large explosion followed by numerous gunshots from the Americans and Ahim paused. There was no return fire.

“They got him,” Ahim said to his new friend who did not respond.

A few moments later Sgt. Walker and the others returned to the back door. One threw a can of blue smoke on the roof of the house while the others guarded the doors. The sound of a helicopter could be heard and the blue smoked blew sideways across the street. Within a few moments two men carrying a stretcher came in the door and began working on Franklin.

Ahim retreated to the corner with his wife and son and held them as they all watched the action in their home. The soldiers quickly got him strapped on the stretcher and lifted him up.

Ahim ran to hold open the door and asked the medic, “Is he going to live?”

“I think so thanks to you,” the medic said.

Franklin was strapped in with his hands cross across his chest and he was still unconscious. Ahim reached for his arm and placed the book on his chest under his two bloody hands as they carried him outside and ran right for the helicopter. The other soldiers jumped on board and Franklin left the refuge of Ahim’s home alive and with a gift.

Last Chapter

Walter Reed Medical Center, Washington D.C.

Franklin was asleep in a hospital bed as his family entered the room to see him for the first time in over a year. His wife, two sons, mother, father and elderly grandfather filled into the tight room. Tears filled Amy’s eyes and she cried as their children ran to the bed. Franklin’s grandfather, dressed in a light jacket and a green veterans hat with a purple heart pin pined to the left side, sat down in the chair as Amy began speaking to Franklin. He finally awoke to the most precious sight he had ever seen and water flooded his eyes. Merrick and Dea, timidly climbed on the bed afraid of hurting their father and Amy moved around so she could hug him and let his parents see him.

“We are so happy to have you home,” his mother said as everyone enjoyed this happy reunion.

“Frank, get over here Amy said to her grandfather-in-law and the family reposition to allow him to get in closer.

From his bed, Franklin told the story of what happened and how an afgan man named Ahim had saved his life. Amy could not stop crying the entire time he spoke because she had been so scared and was overwhelmed with emotions. It was a moment the entire family would never forget and one they hoped would not end. After a few war stories Franklin wanted to hear about how Merrick’s baseball seaon was going and Dea was doing in school.

“I hit .375 this season and we are going to the playoff,” Merrick said with excitement.

“And Daddy, I drew this photo of you at home taking me to the park in your chair,” said eight year old Dea.

The door opened and a nurse came in. “I am sorry but you have to leave or go to the civilian lobby. I need to do some work with Franklin and then you can come back in a few hours.”

Everyone began saying goodbye and slowly moving towards the door but Franklin’s grandfather Frank was focused on the leather book sitting on the end table. It looked familiar and he recognized the words on the aged cover. Frank reached for the book and began flipping through the tattered pages. His eyes swelled up with tears as he realized what he was holding.

“Come on grand-pa, we have to go,” Amy said.

The nurse noticed Frank’s hat and said, ‘Mr. Frank is a veteran and veteran volunteers can stay with the soldier as long as he wants.”

Frank did not respond but tears began to fall as he noticed the stains of blood, the smears of dark soil on the pages, and the wrinkles of fallen tears.

“Where did you get this son,” he asked his grandson.

“The medic said the man who saved me gave it to me as they put me in the helicopter.”

“I can not believe it,” Frank said.

“You can’t believe what grandpa?”

“Do you remember the story when I was shot down in Korea?”

“Of course, I have heard it a thousand times and I am sure I will tell my story a thousand times to my grandchild.”

“Do you remember that I gave a book to Kim when they put me in the helicopter?”

“Yes,” Franklin answered as the nurse drew some blood from his arm.

“This is that book,” Frank said.

“What?”

“This is the book I read in North Korea and is the exact same copy I gave Kim.”

The nurse continued her work as the two talked. She could not help but be intrigued by a story that brought an old soldier to tears.

“But how can this be grandpa. I got the book in Afghanistan.”

“I don’t know but I can prove it to you.” Frank said. “My dad, your great grandfather was a coal miner and everyday he took this book to work with him. And every day he would read it during his lunch break sitting in the coal mine.”

Frank took the book and turned to a specific passage.

“This was his favorite story,” Frank said, as he pulled hard on the pages exposing more of the page that had been held tight by the binding. He held the book up to his face and blew across the inside spine and a fine black cloud of dust filled the air. Coal dust had collect inside the pages and been held in the spine for almost a hundred years.

Frank passed the book to his grandson’s outstretched hand and he looked through the pages. There was red desert sand in the binding and dark soil smudges on some pages. There were drops of water that could have been tears that wrinkled pages and left spots and there were deep scratches and bloodstains on the dark brown cover. The book was filled with evidence of those that held it before. The edges were tattered and torn. The pages were browning and the cover was pretty beat up. It was obvious this book had been used but the question remained in both of their minds, “How did the book make if from Korean in 1953 to Afghanistan fifty years later?”

Final Chapter

Dullas Airport, Northern Va.

It had been six months since Franklyn was released from Walter Reed Medical Center. Standing just before the airport security line in the large terminal, Franklin, Amy, Dea and Merrick all began saying goodbyes to the grandparents. They had just checked 16 bags at the international counter. Each child had their own backpack and Mom and Dad each had two carry-on bags.

“Come see us when you can Dad,” Franklin said.

“We will and you take care of those kids. You know we will be worried,” his father said as Franklin and each kid moved down the line till they got to Frank who was the last one in line, still wearing his veteran cap. When Franklin got to his grandfather they embraced and Frank said. “I know what you are doing and I know why you have to do it. I am so proud of you!”

“Thank you,” Franklin said as he wiped the tears from his and his wife’s eyes.

“Ok, everyone must have a passport and a boarding pass.” Franklin said trying to round up the kids. “It is time to fly!”

The family slowly made their way through the security checkpoint and the kids looked over their shoulders every thirty seconds to wave goodbye to the family still waving and crying. They all passed the checkpoint and walked towards the gate. Amy was on the far left and Franklin on the far right with the boys holding hands they walked excitedly to a new life.

“Daddy,” Dea said,

“Yes, buddy?”

“Why are we moving to Africa?”

“You tell me. You know why we are moving to Sudan.”

“Because of the book.”

“That is right, because we have the story to share and there are people who need the power, grace and forgiveness found in this book.”

“Who Daddy?”

“I don’t know yet.” Franklin said as they walked down the concourse. “But I am sure we will know when we meet them.”

THE END.