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I am in Paradise.

My toes tickled by the moist, green carpet under me, I am tumbling toward the breathtaking tapestry of reds, blues, violets, and yellows. The flower beds are rich and lush. They are perfectly sculpted, a rainbow of visual magic. I am romping through the rolling landscape to the orchards. The sun kisses my cheeks, the wind laughs in my hair, and then . . . a hush. I am under the cool shade of the orchard. Crimson pomegranates, chubby golden pears, trembling to be picked, almonds and quinces . . . the ripe fruits hang over me, a ceiling of sweet delights. Birds drape me with their twittering music. A pear falls beside me. A gift from heaven as I giggle and stretch out my arms in wonder. Blissfully, I take a bite. The juice dribbles down my chin and I am transported by the peace and beauty of it all.

I will always live here, under the orchard trees, the flowers and grass a cocoon of heaven to shield me against the thorns of Earth. I close my eyes and sleep.

I am at Babajan's farm.

These are my earliest memories. I spent much of my early childhood in eastern Afghanistan, in the gardens of Babajan, my mother's father. He was a kind man, gentle and compassionate. He wore a beige *chappan*, the traditional robe, and a *karakul*, a soft oval-shaped lambskin hat. He and Bibijan, as we called my grandmother, lived with various children, grandchildren, cousins, and miscellaneous other family members in their immense mansion. I say "mansion," but actually, it was more like a compound—a series of

attached town houses with a shared mosque and several indoor and outdoor bathrooms, all surrounded by a wall. It was almost a self-contained village. In our language, this is called a *qallah.*

My grandfather was not only wealthy, but also gracious and hospitable. His home was always open to wayfarers as well as to family members. "Why spend money on the inn if you can stay here?" he used to say. Consequently, his home became a haven for travelers, even those he did not personally know. This practice continued after his death, and there were always some twenty-five to thirty people at any given time eating in the guesthouse, or *mehmankhana.*

Bibijan and Babajan had a very special relationship, I am told. My grandfather had been married before, but his first wife died young. Once he married my grandmother, he never took another wife, which was quite unusual for a man of his generation and stature. The peaceful energy of their marriage pervaded the house long after his death. Just walking onto his property, I felt tension dissipate and melt away. Their home became a haven for me and remained so until I left Afghanistan in 1979.

I was born in 1954, and although I spent a great deal of time at Babajan's house, I was actually living at the home of my paternal grandparents, Aghajan and Guljan, which was also located in eastern Afghanistan. Like Babajan, Aghajan was a very wealthy and important man. He was a landowner of some real prestige and a shrewd businessman besides. He moved to eastern Afghanistan when land was cheap, then when real estate values rose, he found himself quite wealthy. Like other Afghan men of his generation and background, he did not use his wealth to acquire a new car or a new horse. Instead, he used his money to acquire more wives and yet more land.

Aghajan's estate was also quite beautiful but looked wild and unkempt. Aghajan did not believe in spending money on landscaping. The untamed quality of the property reflected much of my grandfather's personality. Under his controlled, proper exterior, a terrible temper simmered, a wildness that we all found terrifying. When I think of his garden, with its stream, its tangled flowers, its unpruned orchards, and its farmlands, I think of something that could have been beautiful had it been nurtured, but instead it was harsh and unfriendly.

Aghajan was a difficult and complex person. He could not bear to be beholden to someone else—perhaps it made him feel powerless,

and Aghajan was all about power and control. So he constantly resisted accepting invitations to other people's homes. In Afghanistan, hospitality—*mehman nawazi*—is one of the most important values. Afghans become deeply offended if an offer of hospitality is refused, and they do not take no for an answer easily. So Aghajan was often forced to dine at the homes of others. On such occasions, he sent rice, sheep, and other gifts to pay them back.

As I've grown older, I've come to believe that there was another reason for Aghajan's insistence on paying his hosts for his meal. He and Babajan were distant relatives, both wealthy and prestigious. While there was no enmity or hatred between them, there was some rivalry. Babajan was known to be a generous and giving person. I believe Aghajan wanted to make the same impression on others—but he did not have the nature for it. In fact, he was quite stingy. He begrudged spending money on anything. Certainly, wayfarers and poor people were welcome on his premises—but for a price. He built a series of houses on his property. Poor people were allowed to live in these houses for free, but only in exchange for tending the orchards and helping with security around the *qallah*.

The atmosphere in his household was tense, a simmering pot of conflict. The four wives squabbled incessantly. Of course, they could not be very loud in their arguments. Women were expected to maintain a peaceful atmosphere in the house, and to remain inconspicuous. When the men were out, the wives allowed themselves the luxury of screaming, cursing, and raging, but when the men were present, they fought with silent hisses, glares, muttered laments, and pursed lips. They argued, stopped speaking to one another for a few days, then grudgingly resumed contact, only to have the cycle repeat itself. Sometimes a particular event such as *Eid*—the festive day with its message of peace and forgiveness following the end of the Ramadan fast period—would trigger reconciliation. Otherwise, the natural passage of time usually brought some softening of feelings—until the next time anyway.

Although Aghajan respected Guljan, who was his oldest wife, very much and always spoke to her, as well as to his third wife, politely and affectionately, he spent most of his time with his fourth wife, who was the youngest. And it seems that he was intimate almost exclusively with his second wife. This was bizarre because otherwise, he never spoke to her at all. In fact, he treated his second wife with

the utmost contempt by day. But he visited her residence in the *qallah* almost every night—and far more frequently than he visited his other wives. I found this out when I was an adult, and it bolstered my impression of my grandfather as a strange, mysterious, and difficult man.

The real friction was between my grandfather and my father. Father, whom we called Abajan, had a small business as a freelance photographer, taking family portraits. The rest of his time, he devoted to his father's crops of wheat, rice, sesame seeds, and cotton—but with no form of recompense. Aghajan believed that being allowed to live rent free on his property was enough pay. In desperation, Abajan started his own sesame seed oil company.

"You are forbidden from using my seeds for this company," Aghajan said, his voice as sharp as his farming implements. "If you really feel the need for extra money—and I cannot imagine why you would, since I am allowing you to live for free on my property and eat at my table—then you must do as I did. Purchase land of your own. It is not seemly that my son should be selling oil like some peasant."

Abajan remained silent. One did not argue with a parent. One certainly did not defy a parent. The word of a parent was considered equivalent to the word of the Qur'an. Just as you could not talk back to God, you could not talk back to an elder. But Abajan reached a decision. He would move out of his father's house and seek his fortune in the big city of Kabul. And he would make it on his own. He would not accept Aghajan's hospitality, nor would he ever accept money, should Aghajan be so disposed to offer any. Never again would he be beholden to Aghajan.

My mother, whom we call Madarjan, was only too glad to leave her in-laws' home, where she had been regarded as the lowest in the family pecking order. All the wives and other daughters-in-law took their share of food, clothing, money, and other privileges first, leaving my mother to scrounge around the leftovers. For Madarjan, this was humiliating. As the daughter of a wealthy, generous man, she was used to being treated with respect and being given plenty of material comforts. My mother is a person of quiet dignity, restraint, and patience. She did not complain, nor did she turn to her own parents for help. She bided her time, suffered silently, and felt profound gratitude when Abajan decided to move to Kabul.

I was five years old when we moved to Kabul. My older brother, AbdelKarim, was nine, my younger sister, Husna, was two, and Madarjan was pregnant. Abajan began establishing his photography career in a more organized fashion. He made connections with magazines and government ministries, and slowly his business grew. But his family grew more quickly than his business, and my parents were forced to return to Aghajan's house when Madarjan gave birth to my brother AbdelAsim. Abajan needed a short period of respite when his family would be fed at someone else's expense, and Madarjan needed help during childbirth. But Abajan resisted Grandfather's attempts to pressure him into staying. Kabul was his home now. We returned to Kabul when the baby was a few weeks old and remained there for many years afterward.

It took a long time for us to get established. My father was barely eking out a living at first and had to supplement his photographer's income by buying a minibus and leasing it to a bus company. We rented a series of progressively larger homes, as my father's income gradually inched upward. When I was seven, we moved to the large house that remained in our family until long after I left Afghanistan. Meanwhile, my mother continued to have babies. When AbdelAsim was two years old, my brother AbdelZamin was born, followed by a sister, Gula, in 1964. We did not call our brothers by their full, formal names. In Afghanistan, the father picks out a prefix or suffix for all his sons that stands for some ideal or important family value, such as courage or adherence to God's will. Father chose *Abdel,* which means "servant of God." But in day-to-day conversation, we called them by their individual names—Karim, Asim, and Zamin.

In 1970, two major events occurred in the family. After a series of miscarriages, my mother gave birth to my sister Hala; and my Uncle Murid and his wife, Aunt Nasima, were killed in a car accident. My parents adopted their little daughter, my cousin Surya, who was three years old at the time. We immediately started calling Surya "sister," and indeed, that's what she was to us. No one made any distinction in the household between the biological children and the adopted sister. It was typical of my father that he assumed responsibility for his niece and raised her as his own.

The big house we settled in had six bedrooms. I shared a room with Husna. Karim had his own room. Asim and Zamin shared a room, as did Gula and Surya. The newest baby always slept with my

parents in their room. As we grew older, Husna moved in with Gula, Surya, and Hala, leaving me to my own devices. The final room was occupied by Uncle Daoud and Aunt Layla. Uncle Daoud was studying at the university in Kabul. He was one of many relatives who lived with us while they were enrolled at the university, but he stayed on even once he had graduated. Visiting cousins slept on the floor in my brothers' rooms.

Our house was always overflowing with extended family members, mostly male students attending the University of Kabul. Because they were family, they were allowed to stay in the house and eat at the table with us, even though girls were present. Unrelated guests were accommodated in a smaller house separated from the main building—the guesthouse, or *mehmankhana*. These quarters were reserved for male guests who could not sit at the same table with the girls in the family. Because my father was very hospitable, the guesthouse was usually full. Often, the guests were college friends of my various cousins, but my father extended hospitality to others as well. When one of Aghajan's neighbors was going through some type of complicated legal procedure that necessitated his remaining in Kabul for two years, he was accommodated in our *mehmankhana*.

The presence of all these guests meant endless housework for the women. We did all the laundry for all members of the household, including residents in the *mehmankhana*. At mealtime, we served the guests, then withdrew. I myself started doing housework when I was about six years old. Gone were the days of freedom and laughter in the golden orchards of Babajan's estate, or even Aghajan's farm. Now I was in charge of my younger sister and baby brother. I was taught to wash cups and spent much of my day at the sink. In Afghanistan, drinking tea is like breathing air. You do it all the time. When a guest comes, offering tea is taken for granted. You don't ask if your guest wants tea, you simply serve it from a teapot, together with a pretty tray of sugar, candy, and cookies. Needless to say, the endless procession of guests led to an endless stream of dishes, which the women were endlessly washing.

At the hub of the giant, ever-changing family wheel was my father. Unquestionably the head of the household and its center, he held court in his living room or guest room when he was not working. I served countless cups of tea to countless men who came to discuss

politics, religion, and current affairs with my father. Abajan was a brilliant, thoughtful, and provocative man. And, like his father, he was a character. Fierce, stubborn, opinionated, and powerfully articulate, he captivated his guests with his political insights.

Abajan was attracted to communism when I was young. He held forth for many hours to his friends about the teachings of Marx and Lenin, about economic equality among all people, about how the rich oppress the poor. He argued and debated with his friends, and often I would hear an "Aha!" of triumph as it became clear that he had made his point and a friend had no appropriate rejoinder to offer.

Abajan's charisma and unique style permeated all aspects of the household. He was always reading and educating himself, then applying his newfound knowledge to the running of the household.

"We are going to change our practices so that we will all stay healthier," he announced after dinner one evening when I was about seven—it was shortly after we had moved to our house in Kabul. "You see, when we eat directly on the floor, we can get germs into our food."

"What are germs?" Karim asked.

Abajan flashed him a dark look, as he often did when he thought Karim was asking a stupid question—which was most of the time. "They are tiny things, so small we cannot see them without special glasses. But they are in everything, and if we eat them, they can make us sick. They come into the house from the dirt on our feet, even though we take off our shoes. It is unsanitary to simply spread a cloth on the floor when we eat. I am having a special table built so that the food can be higher than the floor."

There were so many of us that several tables were built, folded, and stowed away between meals. Abajan also forbade us from using our fingers to eat. In Afghanistan, people usually eat with their hands, scooping up the food with their fingers. No one used cutlery. It was strange learning to eat with knives, forks, and spoons.

Life became more complicated in the kitchen when Abajan became convinced that fruits were contaminated with germs and had to be washed with disinfectant. Plain water wasn't good enough. He insisted that all fruits be washed with potassium permanganate and, not trusting that the women would do a thorough enough job, he took over the fruit and vegetable washing himself. Soon he insisted

on being the one to buy fruits and vegetables, to be sure that only the cleanest and highest quality produce was brought into the house. I hoped that Abajan would decide that perhaps the dishes too were not being washed properly and would take over the thankless chore of dish washing, but he seemed to confine his worries to fresh fruit.

Abajan also became obsessed with our diets. "Children need a certain minimum amount of food," he told us. "You may not leave the house unless you have eaten at least this amount." He calculated the calories each of us needed in order to stay healthy, based on our weight and age, and kept careful watch over our eating. "No, Husna, you may not go to school because you have only eaten half a loaf of *naan* and a tiny daub of jelly. If you eat the rest of the bread with some more jelly, you may go."

During the fall season, Abajan would buy apples and carrots. He personally cut, squeezed, and ground them, insisting that we drink either a glass of fresh apple juice or a glass of carrot juice before school. On winter mornings, he gave us walnuts to eat after breakfast, telling us that the extra calories would help keep us warmer and that they "contained unsaturated fat, which is a healthy kind of fat."

I remember the cholera epidemic that raged through Kabul. I returned home from school to find Abajan standing outside the bathroom, a grim expression on his face. In his hand was a chamber pot.

"As long as there is illness in the town, you will all produce your *mawade ghaita* into this pot. You will show it to me before you flush it down. I want to be sure there is no blood in it. I want to be sure it looks healthy."

We exchanged glances, squirming in discomfort. Show Abajan our stools? "Do we have to?" I ventured. Although one usually did not argue with a parent, Abajan encouraged questioning—at least when we were young.

"Health comes before modesty," Abajan said, and from then on, stool checking became the protocol whenever there was an epidemic.

So Abajan was remarkably enlightened in some ways—and remarkably benighted in others. His autocratic tendencies brooked no defiance, no flexibility, and no consideration for the emotional needs of his family. He may have been advanced in his understanding

of our physical needs, but he was backward in his lack of understanding of our psychological needs.

For one thing, he picked favorites. In fact, *I* was his favorite.

"Where's my Sula?" was his first question whenever he entered the house.

"Here I am, Abajani!" I would come running out of the kitchen, my face radiating joy at being so singled out. *Abajan* means "father dear" and its diminutive, *Abajani*, means "father dearest"—which I suppose could be considered the Afghan equivalent of "daddy."

"Ah, so here's my baby!" He would scoop me up and give me a hug. "Do you want to come with me to Uncle Gum's house?"

Of course I did. Hand in hand, we would trot off to visit Abajan's best friend. I called him "Uncle Gum" because he always gave me chewing gum when I visited. We would knock on the door, and Abajan would call, "It's Nazir Obaidi and the beautiful Sulima!"

Sometimes Abajan would take me to the market to help him choose fruits and vegetables. Sometimes I would accompany him when he took photographs, and he would allow me to hold the camera equipment for him, my heart swelling and bursting with pride. "That's my daughter Sulima," he would tell anyone who passed by. "Isn't she smart? When I was a young man I used to say to myself, One day I will have a beautiful, smart daughter who will help me do my work."

It was intoxicating for a little girl to be so doted on by her father. I felt honored, special—and terrified. Abajan made no attempt to hide his preference for me, and Karim hated me for that. As the older son, *he* was supposed to be the favored and anointed one. Abajan should have been crowing over *his* accomplishments, celebrating *his* good looks and proficiency. Instead, Abajan showed obvious delight in me, and the most transparent contempt for his son. It went beyond contempt. Abajan actually pitted us against each other, fanning the fires of my brother's jealousy.

Wednesday night was schoolwork night. Once a week, we all lined up with our schoolbooks while Abajan grilled us about what we had learned. "Have you done all your homework this week? Let me see."

We opened our assignment notebooks and work sheets while Abajan pored over them.

"Karim? Why did you leave the first two questions blank?"

Karim hung his head. "I—I didn't understand the question."

"Sulima, come here."

My heart started thudding as I stepped forward. I had offered earlier that evening to help Karim with his incomplete work, but he had slapped me. "I don't need some little girl telling me the answers. I can figure things out for myself."

"What is one hundred twenty divided by sixty?"

I glanced quickly at Karim, then at Abajan. If I answered correctly, Karim would suffer and, of course, I would suffer later. If I feigned ignorance, Abajan would be angry and I would suffer anyway. The decision, though agonizing, was usually reached quickly. "The answer is two, Abajani."

Abajan scowled at Karim, then beamed at me. "Bring the flyswatter," he ordered. When I hung back, he repeated the command. "If you do not bring it right now, I will hit you with it as well."

I brought the instrument of torture from the kitchen.

"Now you hit Karim with it. A big boy like that, my firstborn. He should know the answer. He shouldn't need his little sister to help him out."

Of course, the last thing I wanted to do was to inflict any pain. First of all, I genuinely felt sorry for Karim. Schoolwork was obviously very difficult for him, and very easy for me. That wasn't his fault. And I knew that as soon as Abajan's back was turned, Karim would get back at me. Maybe if I only tapped his pants with the swatter . . . maybe if he could barely feel it, he wouldn't notice that I had done this to him? Maybe he would be gentler with me later?

Shyly, I brushed his pants with the swatter. Sometimes Abajan would see through this token gesture of discipline. "Hit him harder!" he would command. At other times, he appeared satisfied and returned to our homework assignments.

I knew I would pay dearly later. A sudden sharp blow to my ears. A kick on my shins when no one was looking. Or I would wake up one morning to find my mattress soaked. Karim, gloating and self-righteous, would point it out to my mother and say, "Sulima wet her bed." I remember Madarjan's disapproving frown, as she asked me to change my linens. And my utter helplessness. If I told her that Karim had poured water on my bed during the night, he would have simply found more sadistic ways to punish me. One day I found my allowance money missing from the can I used to keep it in and knew that Karim had stolen it—and that *there was nothing I could do about it.*

This scenario repeated itself every Monday night, when Abajan assembled all of us for his weekly lessons in manners. Each week, he lectured us on a different aspect of etiquette. "When you are invited to someone's home, you say 'hello' and 'how are you.' You do not touch anything. You do not turn on their radio without permission. If they offer food, you do not grab and stuff your face. You take only one piece. And you never go to their rooms without permission. When the food comes in, do not stare at the food as if you were starving. Just ignore the food." The following Monday, he would quiz us about last week's lesson. Husna, Asim, and Zamin answered adequately, and Abajan nodded approvingly at them. But the real drama was reserved for Karim and me. Inevitably, Karim would stumble over the question. Inevitably, I would answer correctly. Inevitably, the flyswatter would be called into play.

Sometimes, I tried to talk to Madarjan about my anger toward Karim. She counseled patience and compassion for him. "What good does it do for you to be angry at him? He is just upset because he is embarrassed. He feels bad about himself."

"He deserves to feel embarrassed for the way he's treating me," I growled.

Madarjan folded me into her arms. "Remember, Sulima, the best revenge is to be good to your enemy. Embarrass the person with your goodness. Rise above the petty differences and look for the good in everyone."

That was Madarjan's philosophy. She always encouraged us to be conciliatory, understanding, and loving, even to those who hurt us. Over the years, I have tried to come to terms with her vision of the world and its impact on me. Was Madarjan teaching me to become a doormat? Couldn't her philosophy have been caused by a culture that I was already resenting, that forced women to be submissive and allowed men to be abusive? I have struggled to understand how to apply Madarjan's humanitarian vision to the challenges I have faced in my life. Surely there must be a way to rise above pettiness and hatred, even while fighting for what you know is right. I am still working on that.

Even when I was quite young, I found Madarjan's approach to be unsatisfying, yet I found her gentle presence to be comforting. To my frustration, Madarjan did not offer concrete answers to the questions that troubled me, especially those that concerned the obviously

inequitable treatment of women. Why did women have to ask men for permission to leave the house? Because that's what's right. Why did women do all the laundry? Because that's the job of women. It has always been that way. Why do women have to listen to men? The Qur'an says so. Even though we were not very religious Muslims, invoking the Qur'an always ended a question-and-answer process. The Final Authority had been cited.

So my early childhood was a mixture of fear and pride, resentment of the subservient role of women, and grudging acceptance of that role because Madarjan, whom I loved and respected, modeled quiet acceptance of that role. And also because my daddy, my Abajani, who adored me and whom I adored in return, also accepted that this was the role of women and lived his life accordingly, as the unchallenged Male Head of the Household. Inequity was the price of love, and Abajan's love was the most important of all.