

The River Village

Wali Shaaker

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To Roya, Wasim, and Palatin

ONE

Kabul, winter 1980 - Mother's cry pierced through the wall separating Masih's room from that of his parents. Shaken awake, he sat on his bed, rubbing his eyelids. To make sure he wasn't having a nightmare, he listened for a few seconds. Mother wasn't the only one shouting in distress. Father too sounded upset. The fourteen-year-old had heard his parents argue before, but they had never yelled at each other with such intensity. He tried, but couldn't understand what they were fighting about as the concrete barrier held their voices muffled.

Then, he heard a third voice—a stranger's voice that sounded calm, as if he was explaining a process. Who was this man? At hours past midnight, no one, not even a friend of Father should have been allowed in the house, let alone inside their bedroom. Was he a burglar? Was he going to hurt them? Something must have been terribly wrong. His heart began to race, as he noticed a sliver of light zipping in through the crack of the closed door of his room.

Terrified and confused, Masih yanked the blanket away, jumped out of his bed, and barefoot dashed through the ice-cold cement hallway.

Father was stepping out of the bedroom, wearing a navy blue jacket over his traditional white clothes. The tips of his disheveled hair hung over his wire-framed glasses, behind which his eyes widened in fear. Masih's heart dropped when he saw two soldiers gripping his trembling arms on each side. However, he did not seem to resist the arrest. He had tried to explain to the intelligence officer and the military men accompanying him that he had no connections with the antigovernment forces, the *mujahedin* at all. And the fact that some twenty years ago he was educated in the U.S. did not necessarily mean that he was a spy for the CIA. But they didn't believe him. Prior to planning the raid on the doctor's house, they had received reports that he had been trying to undermine the Marxist regime by spreading antirevolutionary, pro-imperialist propaganda.

Looking inside his parents' bedroom, Masih saw books and papers scattered all over the floor. The intruders had searched every bookshelf, every box, and every closet. Yet, they had found no evidence indicating that Sharif was a CIA agent. They had also paid a visit to Masih's bedroom, only to realize that there was nothing there worthy of investigation. Besides, if the boy woke up, he would likely begin to make a scene, crying and clinging on to his father. Separating the two would be an unnecessary waste of time and effort for them as well as a disturbance for the entire operation. It was best not to wake him up.

On several occasions, Father himself had told Masih that he was supposed to be a *ba-ghairat*, an honorable Afghan boy, and that he must never be afraid of anything. But behind the clear lenses of his spectacles, his eyes seemed glossy with a layer of profound grief and intense fear. For the first time, Masih had witnessed his father not merely scared, but terrified. He could not detect the slightest trace of hope anywhere on his face—a kind face, which appeared as white as the color of the robe he wore at work every day. Yet, Father managed to maintain a defiant expression, keeping his chin militantly up.

At five foot ten, Dr. Sharif was not a small man. But a much taller, burly *Khadist*, a secret service agent in a black suit and a wrinkled red tie towered over him from behind. Tips of a dark mustache hung loosely on two sides of his wide mouth. As Masih ran toward Father, Dr. Sharif freed his arms with a powerful yank that stunned his young captors. He pressed his son's head against his chest and kissed the top of his head, drawing the scent of his straight hair into his

lungs. Then, cupping his hands around Masih's face, he wrinkled his forehead, assuming a serious expression, bent down to meet his eyes, and cleared his throat, "Take care of your mother. Always obey her, and finish school."

He laid a kiss on each cheek of the face that always reminded him of his own boyhood, and then let go of him.

"Father, what's going on? Where are they taking you? Are you coming back tomorrow?" Masih asked, fear striking his young heart. He knew of two boys in school whose fathers had been imprisoned in Pul-e Charkhi, Afghanistan's most dreaded jailhouse, and of one other boy, whose older brother was kidnapped on his way home from Kabul University by men in military uniform. No one had ever heard from them again.

"*Bachem*, Son, I'll be okay."

The pleading voice of Mother quivered from behind the broad shoulders of the mustached man in black, "I beg you. Fear God. Don't take him, *please!* He has done nothing wrong."

Judging by the coarse sound of her voice and the look in her bloodshot eyes, Masih could tell that for a long while his mother had been weeping and pleading for the release of her husband.

Then, he caught a glimpse of a handgun dangling on the Khadist's right hip. The soldier clutching Father's right arm had a machinegun slung over his shoulder, and the one grabbing his left arm had secured a firm grip around the midsection of an identical weapon. Masih could do nothing to rescue Father. And no, he was not going to implore for his release either. These men had already decided to take him away. Besides, begging for mercy would not have been honorable; it was not what Father would have approved. He circled his arms around Father's waistline, as though trying to restrain him from leaving.

"Father, I will wait for you," his tears left dark marks on Sharif's clothes.

"It's okay son, *Khoda mehraban ast*, God is kind," he forced those words through his choked throat, and patted Masih's back.

Then, he turned and hugged his wife, Nadia, the only woman he had ever loved.

"There must have been a misunderstanding. I will be back in no time," he assured her with a trembling voice. Through a brief eye

contact, lasting only a couple of seconds, they affirmed their love for each other without uttering a word.

“Don’t worry *hamshira*, sister. As I said, tomorrow as soon as the investigation is over, I will personally bring Dr. Sharif home. I promise,” the intelligence officer said to Nadia, trying to sound sincere.

Yet, both Nadia and the Khadist knew that the assurance meant nothing. He said those words and allowed the farewell to proceed only to keep Dr. Sharif’s wife and son calm. He had executed similar night raids at least a dozen times before. Usually, if the wife and the children of the detainee begin to wail and scream, begging for mercy, the neighbors would wake up, and the mission would turn into a show. Under such circumstances, it would become too embarrassing to get the suspect into the vehicle while everyone watched, standing on the doorsteps or the flat rooftops of their houses.

In addition, the man didn’t want to stay there any longer than necessary. He just wanted to finish the mission and go home—to his own wife and children.

Father sat in the rear seat of an idling Soviet-manufactured jeep, and the soldiers sat next to him on each side. Sharif glanced out of the half-fogged window to his right. He watched his wife and son standing on the sidewalk and staring at the vehicle with tearful eyes.

Nadia and Masih’s hearts sank as the doors of the vehicle slammed shut. The burly man occupied the seat next to the driver, who took the vehicle along with Father, and disappeared into the gloom of the night.

TWO

Kabul, winter 1979 – Masih tried to ignore the irritating noise of the military aircraft that buzzed over the city. About every hour, one of the stout transporters headed either north or south. It has been several weeks since the aircrafts, loaded with heavy military equipment and personnel have been flying back and forth between Moscow and Bagram Airbase.

“Why are there so many airplanes in the sky?” Masih asked as he held the spool to help his father fly the kite.

“They are coming from *Shorawi*, the Soviet Union,” Dr. Sharif answered, keeping his eyes fixed on the giant kite. As the wind billowed under its belly, it yanked on the glass-coated thread and caused the spool to spin violently in between Masih’s fingers.

“Go on. Watch what they are doing, and watch carefully,” Father whispered as if the kite could hear him. Although Dr. Sharif knew that it was impossible for his kite to reach the aircraft, slash its chest, and send it tumbling to the ground, he fantasized about it anyway.

That night, when a thin layer of ice had covered the outer surface of the windows, a fierce shuddering of Masih's bed and the rattling of the house's walls shook him awake. Startled, he asked himself, "*What is happening? An earthquake?*" Unable to see much in the dark, he sat up on his bed.

The commotion woke up Dr. Sharif and Nadia as well. Minutes later, the convoy arrived behind the doctor's house, pushing up toward the Bagh-e Bala hills. As the military vehicles roared forward, their chains chewed up the road and shook the ground underneath. Dr. Sharif slowly opened the front gate a crack and peered through. What he saw amazed and at the same time horrified him. A flood of headlights, seeming to stretch all the way from Bagram Airbase, steadily crept toward Paghman Valley.

In the midst of the darkness and a heavy fog of dust and smoke, Dr. Sharif witnessed what he had only read of in the history books occurring over and again in Afghanistan—foreign invasion.

"Go back to bed. The Soviets are passing by. It's going to be alright," he said to Masih, who stood behind him, shivering in the freezing temperature.

Is it really going to be okay? Sharif asked himself, and dreaded that this might be only a wishful thought.

He pulled the comforter over his son and blew out the candle that Masih had lit just minutes ago, "*Sher-e Padar, Dad's lion, don't ever be afraid of anything, okay?*"

"I am not scared. I am just mad," Masih said, closing his eyes.

When Masih woke up, it was too quiet to be morning. The sun had risen, but the traffic noise, which could normally be heard from the street, was silenced. The Soviet tanks were still out there, engines killed. He could see some of their antennas extending beyond the wall that separated their front yard from the sidewalk. The fume of diesel still polluted the air. As he cracked open the gate, he saw the most monstrous vehicles that he had ever seen in his life. A Soviet tank seemed even larger than the elephant that he had seen in Kabul Zoo six months ago. No wonder the entire house was shaking last night.

He stepped out, and looked to his left and right, but was unable to locate the head or the tail of the convoy. The serpent stretched beyond his field of view on both sides.

“Let’s go son, find out what this is all about,” Father said, standing behind him. His *Mazari* cloak, as thick as a comforter, with red, blue, and green stripes, draped over his shoulders. Masih zipped his leather jacket and began to walk next to his father. They hiked uphill toward Bagh-e Bala, stepping on patches of snow and ice scattered on the sidewalk.

Wearing thick woolen uniforms and furry round military hats, the Soviet invaders sat on top of their vehicles and enjoyed the crisp air under Kabul’s sunny winter sky. Some lit up cigarettes; others scooped food, most likely *haram*, forbidden in Islam pork out of a can and ate it without minding the taste. Many yet remained almost motionless, glancing around and trying not to appear nervous. Perhaps they were as shocked by seeing crowds of mainly Afghan boys and men for the first time as were the Afghans by their sudden visit.

“*Zdrast, kak d’yeblab?*” said a street vendor in Russian, hoping to make a sale. The Soviets answered with a nod, a fake smile, and a few words of their own, which including the vendor, nobody seemed to understand.

Masih realized that he had been mistaken in assuming the tanks were the most frightening machines. The roar of two helicopters hovering above made the hair stand on his skin. The belly of one almost brushed against the tip of an acacia tree. Accompanied by a tornado of crisp air, the flying monsters circled around the neighborhood not too far above the convoy. Exhibiting heavy weapons mounted on their sides, they flew at low altitude to intimidate the crowd with their sheer size and deafening roar. Masih was certain that if they opened fire, no one standing on those sidewalks would return home alive. Yet, no one seemed to care.

As they were walking, a soldier with a round face and features similar to the Uzbek carpet merchants of downtown Kabul locked eyes with Masih. He seemed relaxed, sitting atop his armored vehicle. The young man, who appeared no more than four years older than Masih, smiled and shouted, “*Salam alaikum*, peace be upon you.”

For a moment or two, Masih kept his gaze locked with the soldier’s and then spit far enough to hit the chain of the tank on which he was sitting.

“*Wa alaikum assalam*, peace be upon you too,” Dr. Sharif shot back and kept walking.

Some fifty steps farther, he stopped and faced Masih, “Listen. You are a Muslim, an Afghan. Every time someone greets you with *Salam*, even if he is your enemy, you answer with *Wa alaikum assalam*, not with spitting. What you did was not right. Do you understand?”

“*Bale*, yes,” Masih mumbled looking at the frozen sidewalk.”

“Look at me. I didn’t hear you,” Father stepped forward to face him. Lifting his chin, Masih answered, “*Bale Padar jan*, yes Father,” then he added, “I don’t like them. They have no right to be here.”

“Me neither. But don’t worry, son. They won’t last too long in this country. No one has.”

The sight of the Soviet soldiers reminded Masih of the stories Father had told him about the British invasion of Afghanistan. He couldn’t remember the details of all the events and the names of the people who led the freedom movement. But he knew that only a few decades ago, the Afghans had been able to fight off the British and defeat them on three occasions. Every time Masih heard those stories, he felt the hair standing on the back of his neck. He admired his ancestors, those honorable men and women who did not bow to the British bullies and made the ultimate sacrifice. Would he ever be able to exhibit such bravery? The question twirled in his mind.

But, meeting the Soviets on the battlefield in this day and age would be an entire new challenge. When the Brits invaded, helicopters and tanks didn’t exist. Besides, according to Father, Afghans possessed better guns than the enemy did. This time, however, it is much more difficult, if not impossible to get rid of the foreigners. Where would the *mujahedin*, freedom fighters get the firepower that matched that of the Soviets? Despite the disparities in force and technology, it would be an honor to fight against the Soviets. But, would his parents allow him to become a *mujahed*, a fighter? As these thoughts rushed through his mind, his heart pounded with excitement.

Unlike most other pedestrians, who stared at the convoy with curiosity and confusion, Dr. Sharif kept his gaze fixed on a point far away. As they walked, he too was thinking about the future of his son and his wife, and the future of Afghanistan. Despite his assuring remarks to Masih, he feared that the advent of a bleak period was inevitable, much darker than he ever could have imagined.

THREE

On the last day of winter and the final day of the Afghan calendar year, Masih and Nadia woke up at five in the morning as the sun was still crawling up on the other side of the mountains. An hour later, they left their house in Kart-e Parwan and headed for *Deh Darya*, The River Village about forty miles to the northwest of Kabul. To reach the village, they boarded one bus to Maiwand Boulevard in downtown, and took another toward Deh Darya. The second bus was owned and operated by *Khalifa*, the master, Zaman, a longtime family friend.

Dents and scratches on every side marked the insipid white paint of the battered vehicle. As she began to roar and roll, her windows shivered and metal collided against metal, plastic, or glass. With each gear that Khalifa Zaman shifted, her aged diesel engine growled louder, like a wounded beast.

Driving on the dirt road outside the city's parameters, Khalifa constantly turned and twisted the steering wheel, less than an inch away from his protruding stomach. He avoided potholes, rocks, and

puddles, mushrooming one after the other on the way to the village. Despite the fact that he had traveled along this road back and forth six days a week for many years, from time to time he would miss an obstacle. One of the tires would fall into a pothole or roll over a rock. The “*Palang*” Tiger, as Khalifa Zaman called it, would bounce up and down and swing from side to side; a kayak caught in a turbulent ocean. The passengers, sitting or standing, would then have to hold on to any piece of metal or plastic they could reach to avoid banging heads with each other or against the ceiling.

Nadia and her son were used to the ride and its hills and valleys. While Masih had made dozens of journeys to Deh Darya in this vehicle, Nadia has been riding in it since the time she was a student at Kabul University’s School of Literature. Back then, Masih wasn’t even born. Khalifa had struck a friendship with Nadia and her husband. In fact, over the years, he had made friends with most of Deh Darya’s households, including Baba Sekandar’s family. Therefore, now and then, villagers would invite him and his family to participate in special events and attend parties.

Deh Darya settled near the riverbank and on the foothills of the Hindu Kush. From those mountains, streams of melted snow flowed and poured into the river, passing through the village with its wineries, orchards, vegetable gardens, and lush fields of wheat and maize. It gave life to the village and its surroundings.

On the side of the road that led to the village, Sori’s mother, Mahro laid to rest in the cemetery. Nadia and Masih paused in front of her grave, prayed, and continued to stride toward the first mud house on the outskirts of Deh Darya, where Mahro once lived with her husband, Sekandar, and their sons, Jawad and Aziz. On the opposite side, the unruly river galloped down the mountains, crashing against rocks and boulders of different sizes and shapes.

Apple, cherry, pear, and peach trees stood naked in Baba Sekandar’s orchard and vegetable garden. Attached to it was the house that he had built with his own hands and with help from the chief, Qayoum Khan, the man who owned most of the land in the area.

Nadia and Masih crossed the road and continued to walk under the aged mulberry and *kingberry*, blackberry trees—all lined up along the riverbank. Judging by the thickness and rugged look of their

wrinkled trunks, someone must have planted them a long time ago—someone considerate, who had placed them in equal distances from each other. The ample space allowed them to spread their roots, stretch their arms, and fill them with as many leaves and berries as they wished. No one knew whose ancestor had done such a great service to the community. Nevertheless, many believed that this person must have been one of the first individuals who had settled near the banks of the river, hence laying the foundation for Deh Darya.

As they arrived at Baba Sekandar's house, Masih picked up the heavy knocker and tapped it against the thick metal plate attached to the gate. A few seconds later, he heard the jingle of Sori's bangles on the other side of the nine feet mud-wall as she approached to open the gate.

"Who is it?" Sori asked.

Nadia answered, "It is your aunt."

Sori unhooked the chain in a hurry, and opened the gate, "*Salam*, hello, what a surprise!" her eyes glittering with excitement.

Trying to conceal at least some of his own delight, Masih mumbled a simple greeting, "*Salam*."

The women hugged and planted several kisses on each other's cheeks. Next, it was Masih's turn. As usual, Sori bent a notch and clenched his face with her scrawny right hand, burying her thumb in one cheek, and four fingers in the other. She then deposited two loud and juicy kisses on each side of his face, the kind people of Deh Darya referred to as *pachi*, with sound effect and all. At first, Masih's face changed color to a bright pink. But by the time he had stepped inside, it blazed with red, not only because he was embarrassed, but also because he was irritated.

When was she going to treat him like an adult? When was *anybody* going to treat him like a man? After all, in less than nine months, Masih would turn sixteen. Still he had to get permission from his mother for everything he did, and be treated like a little boy by Sori, who by the way, was only four years older than he was. So what if he had not begun to shave yet? So what if he was an inch or two shorter than she was? One of these days, he would strike back: *Don't treat me like a kid. I am FOURTEEN years old!*

Regretfully, once again he had lost that opportunity.

Masih, Nadia, and their cheerful host crossed the front yard. They passed by Sori's little rose garden. Preparing to thaw, about a dozen frozen branches huddled in the center of the yard. In about four to six weeks, red, yellow, pink, and white buds would begin to bloom, surrounded by burgeoning baby leaves. Then, the front yard would turn into a blossoming mini garden.

The guestroom was better exposed to the sunshine, always tidy, and a couple of feet wider than the other room across the small hallway.

"Sori *Jan*, my soul," Nadia always called to her with this expression of endearment—the way Sori's mother would have called her, "come my daughter, sit next to me," she said, leaning against a spotless white pillow.

From a china teapot, Sori poured green tea, sprinkled with a pinch of cardamom powder into aunt Nadia's cup, "I just brewed some tea, as if I knew you were coming. Let me prepare for lunch; I'll be right back." She stepped out and disappeared into the kitchen across the yard.

Sitting on one of the two mattresses in the room, Nadia turned to Sekandar and asked one of the usual icebreakers, "So, how has the weather been Baba?"

"*Wallah*, by God, not too bad. With His blessing we have had many solid weeks of snow and rainfall. *Ensha'Allah*, God-willing we won't be left hungry." He took a long sigh and added, "Only if those Godless government boys leave us alone." Old age had carved deep creases around the bags hanging under his green eyes, and across his wide forehead. Not even a strand of dark hair had tainted his thick, well-kept beard.

"That's surprising. You are not even a feudal like Qayoum Khan."

"The problem is not that they want to bother me. Actually, they want to help me," Baba chuckled, exposing a handful of unhealthy teeth left intact in his mouth.

"How so?"

"Well, based on government's number-eight *Farman*, decree, they are distributing most of Qayoum Khan's land to landless farmers like me. They are taking it from the king and giving it to the beggar, so to speak," he sighed, reaching for the hot teacup and hold-

ing it in the palm of his craggy wrinkled hand, as if his skin didn't even feel the heat.

“Did they actually come and tell you that?”

“No, last month they came in the mosque. Mulla Salim didn't seem happy about it, but they came in anyway. They announced that they'll begin distributing most of Qayoum Khan's land to landless farmers before the beginning of the new growing season.”

“What are you going to do now?” Nadia asked, frowning.

“There is nothing I can do. Of course, I want to tell them what they are doing is against God's rule. Too bad, they are communists. They follow the Lenin's Law. The land belongs to the person who works it. That's what they say; that's what they believe. But that's not what *we* believe. We are Muslim, you know. We say the land belongs to whoever is blessed and destined by God to own it. Trouble is, as soon as you mention God, they think you are the enemy.”

“Yes Baba, I have seen their slogans all over the city. But you have always stood behind Qayoum Khan, in his good days and in his bad. You are a man of honor.”

“You know what? Even if it were *halal*, permissible in Islam, I would never agree to loot Qayoum Khan's land. My conscience and my *ghairat*, honor wouldn't allow me.”

“They don't know anything about our ways, Baba. They think what they are doing is helping the poor, making people happy. But in reality, they are making everybody's lives miserable,” Nadia said, shaking her head.

“The good news is that Sarwar has just come back from Pakistan. He is putting together a group of *mujahedin*, fighters. My sons are the first to sign up. This time, if those apostates return, I am sure we can deal with them,” Baba leaned against the wall with a fixed gaze at the wooden beams running under the ceiling.

Helpless in offering an alternate solution, Nadia said, “God is kind. He will show us some light.”

In a small windowless kitchen near the well, Sori lifted her head up from the blazing mouth of the *tanor*, clay-oven. Then, she stretched another dough ball on the smooth surface of a long wooden board. It was soon to be transformed into a steaming bread loaf. The aroma of smoke mixed with the delicious waft of freshly baked bread filled the air.

“I think you are in trouble. Tomorrow is *Nawroz*, New Year’s Day,” Sori said.

“What do you mean?” Masih asked. He sat squatting with his back against the blackened wall.

“Well, Baba is going to take you to the mosque, and you don’t even know how to pray. Aren’t you worried about that?”

“I know how to pray,” he answered swiftly.

“Really? And when did you learn to do that?”

“Father taught me. I have prayed in the mosque with him many times. Last Eid, I prayed with Baba too.”

“Yes, but that Eid was months ago. By now, you must have forgotten how to pray,” she said trying not to grin.

“No, I remember. I pray all the time. I am not a *kafer*, an infidel like you.”

“My God! Shame on you calling me *kafer*. You are the *maktabi*, school boy, not me,” she smiled.

“What are you talking about? You have been going to school for the past twenty years.”

“You are insulting me now. I have never been a lazy student,” Sori laughed.

“We’ll see. You might be right only if you graduate.”

“For your information, there won’t be any graduation for me. I used to be a student and a good one too, but no more,” Sori said. Then she leaned down, reached inside the oven, and slammed the elongated dough onto the smoldering wall licked by the blazing fire from the bottom.

“Why not?”

“Well, last week, that *Chaqo-kash*, knife-fighter who calls himself a *mujahed*, burned the school down.”

She was referring to none other than Sarwar, Qayoum Khan’s only son. He had earned the nickname by carrying a knife in his pocket and not hesitating to use it in a fight.

“What? Why would he do something like that?” Masih shook his head in disbelief.

“Apparently, during a Friday prayer, Mulla Salim had issued a *fatwa*, decree that those who send their kids to school are committing a sin. He said the government was brainwashing the children to turn them into communists. He gave people a choice: stop sending your kids to school, or it will be scorched.”

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