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Parvana’s Journey
To children we force to be braver than they should have to be
A man Parvana didn’t know gave one final pat to the dirt mounded up over her father’s grave. The village mullah had already recited the jenazah, the prayer for the dead. The funeral service was over.

Small, sharp stones dug into Parvana’s knees as she knelt at the edge of the grave and placed the large stones she had gathered around it. She put each one down slowly. There was no reason to hurry. She had nowhere else to go.

There were not enough rocks. The ones she had gathered only went halfway around the rectangle of turned-up earth.

“Spread them out,” a man said, and he bent down to help her.

They spread out the stones, but Parvana didn’t like the gaps. She thought briefly about taking rocks from other graves, but that didn’t seem right. She would find more rocks later. One thing Afghanistan had was plenty of rocks.
“Rise yourself up now, boy,” one of the men said to her. Parvana’s hair was clipped short, and she wore the plain blanket shawl and shalwar kameez of a boy. “There is no point staying in the dirt.”

“Leave him alone,” another man said. “He is mourning for his father.”

“We all have dead to mourn, but we do not have to do it in the dirt. Come on, boy, get to your feet. Be the strong son your father would be proud of.”

Go away, Parvana thought. Go away and leave me alone with my father. But she said nothing. She allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. She brushed the dust from her knees and looked around at the graveyard.

It was a large graveyard for such a small village. The graves spread out in a haphazard pattern, as if the villagers thought that each person they buried would be the last.

Parvana remembered digging up bones in a graveyard in Kabul with her friend, Shauzia, to earn money.

I don’t want anyone digging up my father, she thought, and she resolved to pile so many rocks on his grave that no one would bother him.

She wanted to tell people about him. That he was a teacher, that he had lost his leg when his school was bombed. That he had loved her and told her stories, and now she was all alone in this big, sad land.

But she kept silent.

The men around her were mostly old. The younger ones were damaged somehow, with an arm missing, or only one eye, or no feet. All the other young men were at war, or dead.

“A lot of people have died here,” the man who had helped her said. “Sometimes we are bombed by the Taliban. Sometimes we are bombed by the other side. We used to be farmers. Now we are targets.”

Parvana’s father hadn’t been killed by a bomb. He had just died.

“Who are you with now, boy?”

Parvana’s jaw hurt as she held her face tight to keep from crying.

“I am alone,” she managed to say.

“You will come home with me. My wife will take care of you.”

There were only men at her father’s grave-side. The women had to stay in their homes. The Taliban didn’t like women walking around
on their own, but Parvana had given up trying to understand why the Taliban hated women. There were other things to think about.

“Come, boy,” the man urged. His voice was kind. Parvana left her father’s grave and went with him. The other men followed. She could hear the scuff of their sandals on the hard, dusty ground.

“What is your name?” the man asked.

“Kaseem,” Parvana replied, giving him her boy-name. She didn’t think any more about whether to trust someone with the truth about herself. The truth could get her arrested, or killed. It was easier and safer not to trust anyone.

“We will go first to your shelter and retrieve your belongings. Then we will go to my home.” The man knew where Parvana and her father had set up their lean-to. He had been one of the men who had carried her father’s body to the graveyard. Parvana thought he might have been one of the men who had checked in on them regularly, helping with her father’s care, but she couldn’t be sure. Everything about the past few weeks was blurry in her memory.

The lean-to was on the edge of the village, against a mud wall that had crumbled from a bomb blast. There wasn’t much to retrieve. Her father had been buried in all the clothes that he owned.

Parvana crawled into the lean-to and gathered her things together. She wished she could have some privacy, so she could cry and think about her father, but the roof and walls were made of a sheet of clear plastic. She knew the man could see her as he waited patiently for her to go home with him. So she concentrated on the task in front of her and did not allow herself to cry.

She rolled the blankets, her extra shalwar kameez and the little cook-pot into a bundle. This was the same bundle she had carried on their long journey from Kabul. Now she would have to carry the other things, too — her father’s shoulder bag where he kept his paper, pens and little things like matches, and the precious bundle of books they’d kept hidden from the Taliban.

She backed out of the lean-to, pulling the bundles out with her. She took the plastic down from where it had been spread over a ragged corner of the building, folded it up and added it to her blankets.
“I’m ready,” she said.

The man picked up one of the bundles. “Come with me,” he said, leading the way through the village.

Parvana paid no attention to the rough mud-walled houses and piles of bomb-damaged rubble that made up the village. She had seen many places like it, traveling with her father. She no longer tried to imagine what the village might have looked like before it was bombed, with homes in good repair, children playing and flowers blooming. Who had time for flowers now? It was hard enough just finding something to eat every day. She kept her head down and kicked at pebbles as she walked.

“Here is my house.” The man stood before a small mud hut. “Five times my house has been destroyed by bombs, and five times I have built it back up again,” he said proudly.

A flap of tattered green cloth covered the doorway. He held it aside and motioned for Parvana to go in.

“Here is the grieving boy,” he said to his wife. The woman, crouching over her needlework, put aside her sewing and stood up.

Parvana was young, so the woman did not put on her burqa. Three small girls watched from a corner of the room.

As a guest, Parvana was given the best spot in the dark one-room house. She sat on the thickest mat on the floor and drank the tea the man’s wife brought her. The tea was weak, but its warmth soothed her.

“We lost our son,” the woman said. “He died of a sickness, like two of our daughters. Maybe you could stay here and be our son.”

“I have to find my family,” Parvana said.

“You have family besides your father?”

“My mother, my older sister, Nooria, my younger sister, Maryam, and my baby brother, Ali.” Parvana saw them in her mind as she spoke their names. She wanted to cry again. She wanted to hear her mother tell her to do her chores, or Nooria say something bossy, or feel the little ones’ arms around her.

“I have family in many places, too,” the woman said. She was about to say more when some neighbor men came into the house. She quickly took her burqa down from a nail, put it over her head and fetched the men some tea. Then she sat in a corner, quiet and faceless.
The men sat on the mats along the walls and looked at Parvana. They had been at the grave-side.

“Do you have other family somewhere?” one of them asked.

Parvana repeated their names. It was easier the second time.

“Are they in Pakistan?”

I don’t know where they are,” Parvana said. “My father and I traveled from Kabul to look for them. They went to Mazar-e-Sharif for my sister’s wedding, but the Taliban took over the city, and now I don’t know where they are. My father and I spent the winter in a camp north of Kabul. He was ill then, but when spring came, he thought he was well enough to continue.”

Parvana did not want to talk about her father’s growing weakness. For days, it seemed as though he would die while they walked alone through the Afghan wilderness. When they arrived at the village, he just could not go any farther.

For so long now they had been wandering from village to village, from temporary settlement to larger camps for people displaced by the war. There were times on the journey when his cough and his weariness were so bad he could not leave the lean-to. There was never much food, but sometimes he was even too tired to eat what there was. Parvana would scramble through the camp, desperately searching for things that would tempt her father to eat, but often she would come back to the lean-to empty-handed.

She did not speak to these men of those times. She also did not tell them that her father had been in prison, arrested by the Taliban for being educated in England.

“You can stay here with us in this village,” one of the men said. “You can make your home here.”

“I have to find my family.”

“That is important,” one of the men said, “but it is not safe for you to wander around Afghanistan on your own. You will stay here. You can continue your search when you are grown.”

Weariness hit Parvana like a tank. “I will stay,” she said. Suddenly she was too tired to argue. Her head slouched down on her chest, and she felt the woman in the house lay her
down and cover her with a blanket. Then she fell asleep.

Parvana stayed in the village for another week. She piled rocks on her father’s grave and tried to become brave enough to leave.

The girls in the family helped her feel better. She played string games with the little ones. The older girl, who seemed only a couple of years younger than Parvana, went with her each day to her father’s grave and helped carry and pile the rocks to keep him safe.

It was comforting to have a mother taking care of her again, too, cooking for her and watching out for her, even though it wasn’t her own mother. It made her feel almost normal to be around the everyday tasks of ordinary living, the cooking and cleaning. As a guest she was not expected to help, so she spent most of her time resting and mourning her father. She was tempted to stay and be a son to the good people who had taken her in. The journey ahead of her would be long and lonely.

But she had to find the people she belonged to. She could not pass as a boy forever. She was already thirteen.

One afternoon toward the end of the week, a group of children poked their heads in the door of the house where Parvana was staying.

“Can we take you today?” they asked. “Can you come now?”

The children had been begging for days for her to go with them to see the village’s main attraction. Parvana hadn’t felt like seeing anything, but today she said, “All right, let’s go.”

The children pulled her by the hand up a hill on the far side of the village from the graveyard.

A rusty Soviet tank stood on the top of the hill, hidden by some boulders. The children scrambled on it like it was the swing set Parvana dimly remembered from her old schoolyard in Kabul. They played battle, shooting each other with finger-guns until they were all dead, then jumping up to do it all again.

“Isn’t this fine?” they asked Parvana. “We are the only village in this area with its own tank.”

Parvana agreed the tank was lovely. She didn’t tell them that she’d seen many other tanks, and crashed-down war planes, too. She always avoided them, afraid the ghosts of the people who died in them would jump out and grab her.
Parvana was awakened the next night by a gentle shake. A small hand was pressed over her mouth to prevent her from crying out.

“Come outside,” a voice whispered in her ear. The oldest girl took up Parvana’s bundles and went out the door. They had to be very quiet. The rest of the family was asleep in the room.

Parvana held her sandals and her blanket shawl and crept out of the house.

“You must leave now,” the girl said once they were outside. “I heard the old men talking. They are going to turn you over to the Taliban. Some soldiers are coming by here any day, and the men think the Taliban will pay them money for you.”

Parvana wrapped her blanket around her shoulders and slipped her feet into her sandals. She was shaking. She knew that what the girl was saying was true. She had heard many stories about this in the winter camp where she and her father had stayed.

“How do I thank you?”

“How do I thank you?”

“Take me with you,” the girl pleaded. “My life here is nothing. There has to be some place better than this on the other side of those hills, but I can’t go by myself.”

Parvana couldn’t look at the girl’s face. If she took the girl with her, all the men of the village would come after them. The girl would be in terrible trouble for dishonoring her family, and Parvana would be turned over to the Taliban.

She put her arms around the girl, aching for her sisters.

“Go back inside,” she said stiffly. “I can’t help you.” Then she picked up her belongings, turned quickly and walked out of the village without looking back.

She didn’t stop walking until the sun hung low in the sky late the next day. She found a spot sheltered from the wind by some boulders and gazed out at the magnificent Afghan landscape. The land was bare and rocky, but the hills picked up the color of the sky and now glowed a brilliant red.

She sat down and ate some nan and drank cold tea. There was not another person in sight, just hills and sky.
“I’m all alone,” she said out loud. Her words drifted away into the air.

She wished she had someone to talk to.

“I wish Shauzia were here,” she said. Shauzia was her best friend. They had pretended to be boys together in Kabul so they could earn money. But Shauzia was somewhere in Pakistan. There was no way to talk to her.

Or maybe there was. Parvana reached into her father’s shoulder bag — her shoulder bag now — and took out a pen and a notebook. Using the surface of the bag as a desk, she began to write.

_Dear Shauzia:
A week ago, I buried my father..._