

ROBIN FASANO

The Orphanage in Kabul

I SECURE MY HEAD SCARF and get out of the car. My driver, Latif, is with me; women don't drive here. Months ago, when Latif met me at the airport, I told him I came to Kabul to teach English. His eyes brightened and his eyebrows lifted, "Ah, my granddaughter wants to be a teacher," he said.

Today, it's taken us nearly an hour to find the address as we've dodged potholes, zigzagged on rutted roads, and scanned the dusty streets to find the house.

I meet Mariam first. She's at the door to greet us. Her hair is wrapped tight in a black head scarf just like mine. Latif and I take off our shoes, as is customary, and add them to the pile by the door.

Mariam tells us that she's fifteen, she's been at the orphanage since she was one—the longest of anyone.

She welcomes us and leads us inside, down a long hallway with faded white paint flaking and chipping and curling. At the end of the passage-way I spot the kitchen, with a sloped, corrugated linoleum floor, and weathered cabinets hanging lopsided off broken hinges.

We enter the main room, where forty children—twenty girls and twenty boys—are standing in a horseshoe curve: tall, short, dust-smudged pants, long-sleeve shirts, cropped hair, head-scarf covered, a runny nose, a scratch on the chin. Latif and I move one by one through the line of children. I extend my hand to each child, asking his or her name and age. Some speak in clear, crisp voices. Others shy and softly, and with a few I have to lean in to catch the syllables.

Then the house manager, with his trimmed beard, deep-set eyes, and thick black mane of hair, instructs them to continue with their daily activities, and they disperse.

A young girl is standing apart from the group, near the back of the room in the corner. She's quiet and does not speak or engage with the other children.

"What's her name?" I ask Mariam.

"Zainab," she says.

Zainab has an oval face, and her hair is cut short like a boy's. Her

brown eyes are bright and round like a full moon. Toothpick shoulders jut out from under her worn-out dress. Leggings hang loosely over her knobby knees and rumple at her ankles. Her wrists are so thin, a rubber band would slip right off.

“She arrived at the orphanage a few weeks ago,” Mariam explains. “Her family couldn’t take care of her. They couldn’t feed her.”

I crouch down so I’m eye level with her piercing brown eyes. “How old are you?” I ask.

No response. She stands stiff. Her eyes dart to Mariam.

Mariam speaks to her in quick, choppy sentences. She tells her that I’m a teacher who is working in the country and teaching at a Kabul school. She tells her I’m visiting the orphanage and prods her to reply to my question.

I try again to crouch down and ask how old she is.

With barely a thin puff of air, she replies: seven.

At seven years old, Zainab is as small as a four-year-old.

Concerned, I glance over at Latif. “Why do you think she’s so little?” I ask.

Latif’s eyes sag. He has gray hair at his temples, and his creased face is weary from decades of living in a crumbling country. With a downturned mouth, in a serious, low tone, he replies, “This is what happens. This happens to children who have no one to take care of them. She can’t grow. She doesn’t grow because she doesn’t have anybody to give her anything. This happens . . . no care, no grow.”

Her upper and lower teeth—which should be white and square and shiny—are yellow and brown and crusty.

“She feels shame,” Latif says. “That’s why she doesn’t talk and covers her mouth with her hand. She doesn’t want to show her teeth.”

He pauses.

“Shame,” he says flatly. “This is common here.”

Mariam says she will show me the girls’ bedroom. We walk down the hallway to the bedroom.

Zainab’s miniature footsteps follow me like bread crumbs into the room.

Creaky, rickety, metal bunk beds line the walls, each covered with a single sheet, pulled firm, and a blanket as thin as a pancake neatly rolled at its foot. Worn blue carpet covers the cement floor. White bare walls surround us, paint peeling down from the ceiling in the far corner.

Mariam says she’s going to the main room to set up colored pencils and paper for the children to draw with, and then she leaves.

I bend on my knees and sit on the carpeted floor in the bedroom. Motioning with my hand, I signal to Zainab that she can sit on my lap.

Her round eyes widen.

I nod, to confirm.

And then her tiny frame bunches low on the carpet. And she sits in the fold of my crossed-legs, the back of her head snug at my sternum—like a bird in a nest, like mother and child.

Because she is not used to being held—is not used to feeling the press of flesh—her tiny frail limbs are stiff, awkward, afraid to move—afraid that if she moves even an inch to the right or left or up or down, she'll lose the touch, she'll lose the warmth—she'll fall out of the nest. And so she is very still, perched as if on the sharp edge of a table.

And we sit like this, in a nest, in silence.

The bedroom window is open and the sheer white curtain is billowing in the gentle breeze. A stream of sunlight is pouring in, shining on us like a spotlight. The brightness colors our cheeks to rose-pink. And we are silent, in a ray of light.

In the main room down the hall, girls and boys are chattering and murmuring as they're sitting in a circle on the floor, drawing with pencils on rustling, crunchy paper. Mariam briefly peeks her head into our doorway to see how we're doing, then goes back to drawing with the children. At the end of hall, pots and plates clatter and clank in the kitchen as a few girls help to prepare lunch. Through the open window, we see a crowd of boys outside hollering, whooping, and kicking up clouds of dust as they scrimmage in the dirt with an old soccer ball.

And still we sit in the nest.

After a while, Latif enters the room. "It's time to go, Miss Robin," he says solemnly. "Visiting time is over."

I don't say anything. I glance at Zainab's smooth black hair shining like a piece of silk in the sun, the soft air from the open window embracing us like a cocoon. Zainab's bony legs settled on top of mine, her resting dangling feet, the small of her back leaning into me. And after a few minutes, my voice barely audible, I finally mutter, "Okay."

Leaving is like cutting an umbilical cord, breaking off the supply of oxygen and nutrients and blood that keep one alive. Zainab's round brown moon eyes gaze up at me—wordless—then she glances down at the strands of fraying carpet. Her tiny body slowly unfolds upward like a puppet on strings.

Silence.

She stands limp like a rag doll, eyes cast down.

From my position on the floor, I reach out to hug her. I squeeze her tightly. Her stick body is like a sack of twigs. Because she doesn't know how to hug back—isn't used to being hugged—her arms hang lifeless at her side. And I keep hugging.

Latif is waiting in the car for me. In the main room, the children are putting away their pencils and paper to clear the floor for lunch. Staff are spooning out equal amounts of rice and beans and naan for each plate. Zainab needs to sit with the others or else there won't be enough food for her. I finally release my arms. She lifts her eyes to meet mine, then silently trudges over to the other children taking their places to sit on the floor for lunch.

I get up and walk down the hall to the front door. I'm standing at the door lacing up my shoes, just about to reach for the doorknob, when Mariam hurries over to me, tugging at the ends of her head scarf. And with one quick stroke she brushes her cheek up against mine with a kiss. Then without saying a word she turns and wedges herself between the other children on the floor.

I open the door and as I'm walking to the car I think of Zainab, and hold her in the nest.