In the Absence of Grace

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Characters:

FARZAD: *Early twenties. Thin, weak, and pale. Afghani.*

KHATIRA: *Farzad's mother, in her late forties. Though she is young, her movements are laboured. Afghani.*

NOUSHIN: *Farzad's wife, sixteen, petite and pretty. Afghani.*

PATROL # 1: *He is a heavy set man. Afghani.*

PATROL # 2: *He is a small man, his face is scarred and marked. Afghani.*

ACT 1

Prologue

Somewhere in south Afghanistan.

The room is small and rectangular. The walls are covered in wallpaper, torn and faded. The room is bare, except a bed and a wooden dressing table. The mirror attached to the table is broken in places but it is still beautiful. There are intricate patterns bordering the mirror. Carved camels cover the base of the table and there is a hint of gold on the edges. They seem to have been rubbed vigorously almost to a dull yellow. The bed is placed underneath the only window in the room which has been covered with paint, but some of it has peeled or been scratched away. ***FARZAD*** *lies on the bed. He is thin and pale. He has a beard and his mouth is half open. A dirty bandage is wrapped around his eyes and his arms are folded. His body is covered with a dirty and torn blue cloth. It's a burqa fashioned according to the Taliban regulations. He seems to be asleep.*

KHATIRA *sits next to the bed, wearing a long faded dress which is soiled and torn in places. Her hair is covered with a hijab. She holds a foldable small knife with a handle made up of chased silver. She runs her fingers through Farzad's hair and then she starts to shave Farzad's head slowly. The wet, long straggly hair falls off on the floor and bits of hair fall on Khatira's lap. She dips the blade of the knife occasionally in soapy water in a brass bowl that lies next to her. When finished she grabs a damp cloth from beside her and wipes Farzad's head gently. She runs her palm across his head and satisfied with the job, gets up. She leaves the room with the cloth and bowl. She returns with a broom with a broken handle. She sweeps the hair under the bed*.

Scene 1

It's dawn, ***KHATIRA*** *sits on her heels, praying. Her hands are on her knees, her fingers close together. Her eyes are closed. She sits on a rug.*

KHATIRA: Fayawma-ithin la yuaaaththibuaaathabahu ahadun
(For, that day, His chastisement will be such as none can inflict)

Wala yoothiqu wathaqahu ahadun
(And His bonds will be such as none (other) can bind.)

Ya ayyatuha alnnafsualmutma-innatu
(To the righteous soul will be said: "O thou soul, in complete rest and satisfaction)

Irjiaaee ila rabbiki radiyatanmardiyyatan
(Come back thou to thy Lord,- well pleased with thyself, and well-pleasing unto Him)

Faodkhulee fee aaibadee
(Enter thou, then, among my devotees)

Waodkhulee jannatee
(Enter thou my Heaven)

She stands up and folds the rug. She places it next to the bed. She walks out of the room.

FARZAD *remains on the bed, sleeping.*

Scene 2

KHATIRA *sits next to the bed, where* ***FARZAD*** *remains sleeping, eating a small piece of stale Nan-e Afghani with half an onion. She tears a piece of the Afghani bread with her teeth, chews it for a few seconds and then takes a bite from the onion. In between bites she tries to swat a fly.*

KHATIRA: Go away.
Pesky fly.
Go.

Keeping an eye on the fly that's sitting on a crumb on the floor, she reaches for something under the bed and pulls it out and throws it forcefully on the fly, killing it.

Got you.

Realising that the object that she threw was the Qur'an she quickly wipes the holy book with the end of her dress, kisses the book and touches it to her forehead.

Zeh mutaasif yum
(I am sorry)
Forgive me Allah
Zeh mutaasif yum

She places the Qur'an gently under the mattress. She resumes eating. A woman's soft cry is heard offstage.

Scene 3

A little portable gas stove sits in the middle of the floor with a brass pot on top. ***KHATIRA*** *enters carrying a brass bowl full of water and a cloth. She dips the cloth in to the bowl. She squeezes out the extra water and places the cloth on* ***FARZAD****'s brow. Gunshots can be heard in the distance.*

KHATIRA: Your fever hasn't come down.
It's been almost a week.

KHATIRA *removes the cloth and dips it in water again. She squeezes it and places it back on* ***FARZAD****'s brow.*

KHATIRA *removes the burqa which covers* ***FARZAD****'s body. He is bare chested and wear torn and dark Afghani trousers. The string from the waistband is missing and the front is knotted. His left arm and waist are covered with strips of cloth. His chest is covered with bruises that are horribly swollen and discoloured.*

KHATIRA *gently and deftly removes the bandages from the arm.* ***FARZAD*** *doesn't move throughout. She puts them in the brass pot. She unravels the bandages from* ***FARZAD****'s waist and in a practiced movement lifts his torso up and removes the bandages completely. She places them in the brass pot.*

She lights the gas stove and places the brass bowl on top of the fire. A few minutes later she reaches underneath her dress and pulls out the foldable knife. She fishes out the bandages which drip water on the floor and puts them in the brass bowl. She squeezes the extra water out and starts re-bandaging ***FARZAD****'s arm and waist with infinite care.*

The sounds of gunshots become clearer. Near.

They are closer.
I could hardly hear them when you had come back.
Few more days.
And.

KHATIRA *shudders.*

Al-Muqtadir.
(The Powerful)

KHATIRA *finishes bandaging* ***FARZAD****. She stares at him for a moment and then places a palm on his cheek.*

Don't you remember, Farzad, how it was.
The road led up past the mosque,
and it wound,
and it wound
and there
suddenly
was the field.
Do you remember?
You ran around barefoot.

And you came back and asked me, why the grass felt so good under your feet.
Why the sun seemed to shine brighter.
Why the birds sounded sweeter.
You asked me whether we could build a home there.
Just you and I.
You said that you had come home.
And there is where you wanted to stay.
We had spent the whole day that day,
under the apple tree.
We watched the sun set together.
That was the first time in years,
when I hadn't said my evening *namaz* (prayer).
My first sin,
but to me it was a prayer.
A moment of happiness and peace.
You held my hand,
and I sighed.
And then.
Then you kissed me.
Right on my cheek.
You weren't ashamed of it.
You had never done that before.
To you it wasn't something extraordinary.
To me it meant everything.
You had never included me in anything before.
And there you were,
willing to share a house,
with just you and I.
Right then and there
I loved you.
Loved you so fiercely.
Like a devout.
I thought that the earth you tread was blessed.
I thought I was blessed
To know you,
To have you.
To be wanted by you.
Do you remember?
Because that is all I do.
Remember that day.
I don't want to.
It makes me miss you.
And I know I can never have that day again.
You again.
I wish I didn't know you,
As you were back then.
To hate you would have been easier.
To regret you wouldn't be *haram* (sin).

The sound of gunshots get louder.

Why don't they ever stop.
All I can smell is smoke
and decaying flesh.

The Adhan, the call for prayer, is heard in the distance. Followed by silence.

Listen to that.
Listen to that Farzad.
It's so quite.
Absolutely quite.
Almost
Peaceful.
That was how childhood looked to you.

KHATIRA *picks up the rug and unfolds it. She places it on the floor ready for the prayers.*

Scene 4

It's dark. Sounds of gunshots are louder, almost as if the gunmen are just a few feet from the house. ***KHATIRA*** *sits on the floor with a radio in her hand. She keeps trying to tune the radio but it produces only white noise. She presses buttons on the radio in random order and pulls and pushes the aerial. Frustrated she hits the radio on the floor. She leaves it on the floor.*

KHATIRA: I can't get this to work,
I don't know what is out there.
It's bad out there.
Isn't it?
I don't understand the point of it.
But then again, I wouldn't
Would I?
Do you think everything will be bombed and just disappear?
The mountains?
The lands?
Will you and I disappear?
And Noushin?
And your unborn child?
There won't be any trace of us?
There won't be anyone to remember us.
It will be like we never existed.
Not us.
Not our skins and bones.
None of our problems.
Nothing.
Then why?
If this is what is to happen, why?
What is this fight for?

KHATIRA *places her head on* ***FARZAD****'s chest. Her head rises and falls in time with his breaths.*

If you ask me
It's just idiots making trouble outside.
It's become a war none of us understand.

KHATIRA *caresses his forehead.*

I wish you would reply.
Do you feel this?
Do you feel my hand?
On your forehead?
Can you feel me around you?
Hear me?
Hear my prayers?
Do you pray along with me?
Just some answer.
Some sign.
To let me know, that you're still there.
That you know I am here.

That you know you can come back.
It's okay.
It's alright
Everything is fine.
A little sign.
To let me know you will come back.
To me.
To your wife and child.
There is hardly any food left in the house,
there is not enough oil left for the lamps.
Nothing.
I am doing all I can but how long can we last on stale bread and rotten fruits?
Farzad please.
Please answer.
Just a word.
Just that and I'll know that I can carry on.
That you are there.
And that we are fine.
Farzad come back.

A woman's cry is heard off stage.

Any moment now.
Any moment
Your baby is going to arrive.
Noushin is doing well
She is handling it well.

Another cry.

Noushin is better now.
The baby hasn't come yet.
It will
Soon.
Farzad

Pause

Farzad I am scared
She is weak.
If I look after the baby,
Who will look after you?
You need to get better.

KHATIRA *continues to fan* ***FARZAD****.*

She suddenly reaches under the mattress on the bed. She pulls out a small tin box. She opens it. She looks at the contents.

Muniz brought this.
Mullah Muzahim gave it to her.
He told her that if one puts this charm around their loved one.
Repeats these words written on this paper five times and then blows on the charm

their wishes will come true
That is
If their heart is pure
and true
I have been saving this
I wanted to use this
But.

*She stares at **FARZAD**. She lifts his eye lids up and watches them close.*

But Allah knows
that my heart isn't pure
nor true
and even if it was

Beat

I can't read
So there.

She closes the lid and puts the box under the mattress.

*A sudden sound of a crash. **KHATIRA** looks around wildly. Sound of footsteps are heard. They are closer now. She crawls around until she finds her hijab. She ties it around her head. **PATROLLER # 1**, a heavy set man holding a gun, walks in. He is wearing a loose dark coloured shirt that reaches his knee and matching trousers in the same fashion of a Taliban member. He wears a turban and the end of the turban covers his face. He looks at **FARZAD** and then at **KHATIRA** who hides her face. He puts the barrel of his gun on Farzad's chest. Farzad doesn't move. He continues to lie there, sleeping.*

PATROLLER # 1 (*shouts*): There are two of them here.
A man

*He digs the barrel of his gun deeper into **FARZAD**'s chest.*

He's not moving.
I don't think he is dead.

*He removes the gun and shakes **FARZAD**.*

He just lies there.
There's also a woman.

PATROLLER # 2 (*offstage*): There's a woman here as well.

PATROLLER # 1: This one is old.

PATROLLER # 2: This one seems ill.

KHATIRA (*whispers*): She's pregnant.
Please.
Please don't hurt her.

PATROLLER # 1: Don't touch her.

She's pregnant.

***PATROLLER # 1** points his gun towards **FARZAD**.*

Stay where you are or I'll kill you.

*He walks around the room taking in the details while continuing to point the gun towards **KHATIRA**. **PATROLLER # 2** walks in holding a smaller gun. His face is hidden with the end of the turban. He is thin but dressed in a similar fashion. He walks towards the bed. He pokes **FARZAD** who doesn't move. He pokes him again.*

PATROLLER # 2: Hey
Hey wake up.
Wake up.

PATROLLER # 1: Leave him.

***PATROLLER # 2** looks at **KHATIRA** who is still hiding her face.*

PATROLLER # 2: Where have you hidden everything?

***KHATIRA** doesn't answer.*

Where have you hidden everything?

***KHATIRA** starts shaking.*

I am talking to you.

***PATROLLER # 2** raises his hand to strike **KHATIRA**.*

PATROLLER # 1: Don't.

***PATROLLER # 2** lowers his hand. He walks towards the dressing table and starts emptying the drawers. It has nothing valuable.*

PATROLLER # 2: Where is your *Burqa*?
Why aren't you wearing it?
Cover yourself.

KHATIRA** points at the Burqa covering Farzad without looking at **PATROLLER # 2.

There's nothing.
It's empty.
The whole house is empty.

***PATROLLER # 1** removes the cloth from his face. He is middle aged. He walks towards **KHATIRA**.*

PATROLLER # 1: Do you have anything?
Anything at all?

KHATIRA *starts crawling away from him.* ***PATROLLER # 2*** *starts laughing. He stands in front of her and tries to obstruct her path. She stops and starts crawling away from him. She finds herself blocked in between* ***PATROLLER # 1*** *and* ***PATROLLER # 2****.*

PATROLLER # 1: Don't move.

PATROLLER # 2 *walks closer to* ***KHATIRA*** *and haunches next to her. He removes the cloth that covers his face, it's covered with crudely stitched up wounds and scars. She keeps staring at the floor unwilling to look at the two intruders.* ***PATROLLER # 2*** *grabs her chin and pulls her face close to him. She avoids meeting his gaze.*

PATROLLER # 2: Look at me.

KHATIRA *shakes her head.*

Look at me.

KHATIRA *slowly lifts her eyes. She is horrified by his face*.

Boo.

KHATIRA *flinches and* ***PATROLLER # 2*** *bursts out laughing again.*

PATROLLER # 1 *kicks him hard. Patroller # 2 stops laughing.*

PATROLLER # 1: What do you think we are doing here?
Do you find this funny?
Is this entertaining you?

PATROLLER # 2 *looks down shakes his head.*

Cover that hideous face of yours and leave her alone.

PATROLLER # 2 *stands up and covers his face.*

KHATIRA *crawls away and sits in the corner of the room. She pulls her knees to her chest and rests her head between them.*

Lift him.
With the mattress.

PATROLLER # 2 *lifts the mattress with Farzad sleeping on top of it.*

PATROLLER # 1 *finds the small tin box, the Qur'an and another book. He opens the box. Closes the lid and puts the box in his pocket. He kisses the Qur'an and puts it back under the mattress. He looks at the other book.*

PATROLLER # 1: What does this say?

PATROLLER # 2 *looks at the book. Takes it from* ***PATROLLER # 1*** *and flips through it.*

PATROLLER # 2: I don't know.

I can't read.

PATROLLER # 1: Looks like English.

PATROLLER # 2: It does?

PATROLLER # 1: Look at the alphabets.
The way they are.
It's English.
What is she doing with this book?
I doubt she can read.

PATROLLER # 1 *looks at* ***KHATIRA****.*

Can you read?

Beat.

Of course she can't.

He throws the book on the floor. It lands near ***KHATIRA*** *who hasn't moved.*

Search him.

PATROLLER # 2: Him?

PATROLLER # 1: Yes.

PATROLLER # 2: But.

PATROLLER # 1: She must have hidden something.
Search him.

PATROLLER # 2 *lifts up the Burqa covering* ***FARZAD****.*

PATROLLER # 2: No there's nothing there.

PATROLLER # 1: Search him properly.
Thoroughly.
I don't like repeating myself.

PATROLLER # 2 *removes the Burqa. He puts his hand inside the pockets of* ***FARZAD****'s trousers.* ***PATROLLER # 1*** *watches as* ***PATROLLER # 2*** *unknots* ***FARZAD****'s trousers and pulls them down.* ***FARZAD*** *is now naked.* ***Patroller # 2*** *looks away disgusted. He turns back and searches* ***FARZAD****'s body, lifting him and moving his legs. When he finds nothing he wipes his hands on the Burqa.*

PATROLLER # 1 *nods, looks around the room and then at* ***KHATIRA*** *who hasn't lifted her head. He walks out.* ***Patroller # 2*** *covers* ***FARZAD****'s body with the burqa, picks up the broken radio and also leaves.*

Scene 5

FARZAD still sleeps on the bed. He hasn't moved. A woman's cries are heard. The whole scene takes place offstage.

KHATIRA : Did they hurt you?
Did anyone touch you?
Are you okay?

NOUSHIN : No,
no,
I am fine.
I stopped bleeding.

A moment passes.

KHATIRA: I can't see anything.
I think there is still time.
Don't cry.
I am here.
It's fine.
Just keep breathing.
Do you want water?
A *patu* (shawl) to keep you warm?
Some *shlumbay* (yogurt drink)?
The yoghurt will keep your stomach cool.

FARZAD *continues to sleep.*

Do you want me to rub your feet?
Don't be afraid.

KHATIRA *starts humming. The crying reduces.*

NOUSHIN: Is anyone
Coming?
To help us?

KHATIRA: Don't talk.
Don't stress yourself.
You have a long day ahead.

KHATIRA *resumes humming.*

NOUSHIN : Water.
Can you give me some water.
I am thirsty.

KHATIRA: Of course.
Rest for a moment.
I'll bring some cold water.

Footsteps can be heard approaching. ***FARZAD*** *moves. It's a sudden and a small shudder that travels through his body. It stops.*