

Distant Heart

Australia, *March 2013*

I stand at the iron gates, holding my sister's hand on one side and my Mama's on the other. I stare up at the towering architecture in front of me, and I shiver. I once read that a shiver can mean that a person is either experiencing cold weather or an extreme emotion. Then I feel the hot wind whip through my hair.

Here I am at an Australian school, in Australian clothes, on Australian soil, and yet there is no part of me that is Australian. No part of me that wants to be here, seconds away from stepping through these gates and into another era, another beginning, another me.

I imagine that Baba is beside me, arm around my shoulder, instead of back home in Afghanistan. "I'm sorry, *habibti*," Mama says softly, "but you know why he cannot be with us today..."

I take a deep breath, inhaling the Australian air, before slowly walking through the gates, step by step. It's like I have removed a pair of earplugs, and the ambient noise grows louder, until it fills my ears like a stormy ocean.

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The classroom is different to the one in Afghanistan. The desks are spread around the room, instead of evenly placed in straight lines. The walls are dotted with colourful posters and pictures, not like the plain, chalk-white walls I remember. The room seems almost too bright, like a blinding reminder of the person I used to be, the life I used to live.

As soon as the class is underway, I feel a sense of dread. Words in foreign languages fly between the teacher and the students, and the words written on the board look like code to me. I suddenly feel very, very small.

This is going to be **a lot** harder than I first thought.

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I hear a soft knock on my bedroom door. For a fraction of a second, I hope that it's Baba, but then my mother walks in and shuts the door behind her. "Can I sit down?" she asks quietly. She takes a seat next to me on the bed. "It's not supposed to be easy," she whispers, "but it will get better. Give it time." I don't reply. I want to believe her, but right now my life in Afghanistan seems achingly far away.

"I understand, Latifa. I know it's hard. It's difficult for me, too," Mama says. I jump up. "No! It's not the same for you. If it was hard for you, you wouldn't have made us leave our home! Do you not even care about Baba? Are you too *scared* to stand up for our own home, our own family? Are you going to just *run away* from life when it gets too hard?"

Then I know I've gone too far. Mama stares at me for a second, but it feels like years. Then she leaves the room in a cold silence.

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The next day at lunchtime, I take my silver container out of my backpack, feeling the heat from the *bolani* inside warming the metal. I see a large group of girls sitting on the grassy oval, blonde ponytails blowing in the wind. With a deep breath, I walk over. "Can I sit?" I ask quietly, afraid that my words are the wrong ones. Their conversation ceases for a moment. One of them turns to me and says 'yes', which I do understand. But it is as if I am not here at all. Their words fly around me, and none of their eyes meet mine. Eventually I leave, warm tears threatening to spill. I feel lost. A red Lego brick in a box of blue ones. A single fish, swimming alone.

I sit behind the big senior school building, eating my lunch alone. I finger the warm *bolani*, smelling its delicious savory taste. It reminds me of a time...

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The crackle of the pan and the familiar smell from the kitchen draw me from my bedroom. Baba stands at the stove and flips the *bolani*, emitting a huge cloud of steam. "Hello *habibti*." He smiles and hands me a spoon. I scoop some of the leftover filling from the ceramic bowl and taste it, savouring the flavour. "Delicious, Baba!" I grin. I can't wait for dinner tonight.

But then I see something in Baba's eyes. The usual spark of cheerfulness and mischief is gone. While his mouth says he is happy, the rest of his face seems broken. "Baba?" I whisper. I wonder if this is about the war. But surely not...both my parents assured me that I shouldn't worry. That it will be over soon, that all the dark and sinister things we hear about from friends are rumours, and nothing more. "Baba?" I repeat. He freezes, the stove the only sound breaking our silence. He puts his hand on my shoulder.

That was the last time I saw him.

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"Are you okay?" a voice breaks me free from my thoughts. Only now do I sense the tears streaming down my cheeks, feel the screaming in my chest that's impossible to silence. I open my eyes and see a girl. Her thick dark hair covers her shoulders and most of her back, and her skin reminds me of my own. Her brown eyes, deep and understanding, pierce mine, as if she can read my thoughts. I open my mouth to say that I'm fine, but she holds up a hand. "I know," she whispers. "I know." She slides down next to me, and then I feel something I haven't felt since I last saw Baba.

Australia will never be my home, but maybe, just maybe, part of my home, part of Baba, still remains inside me.