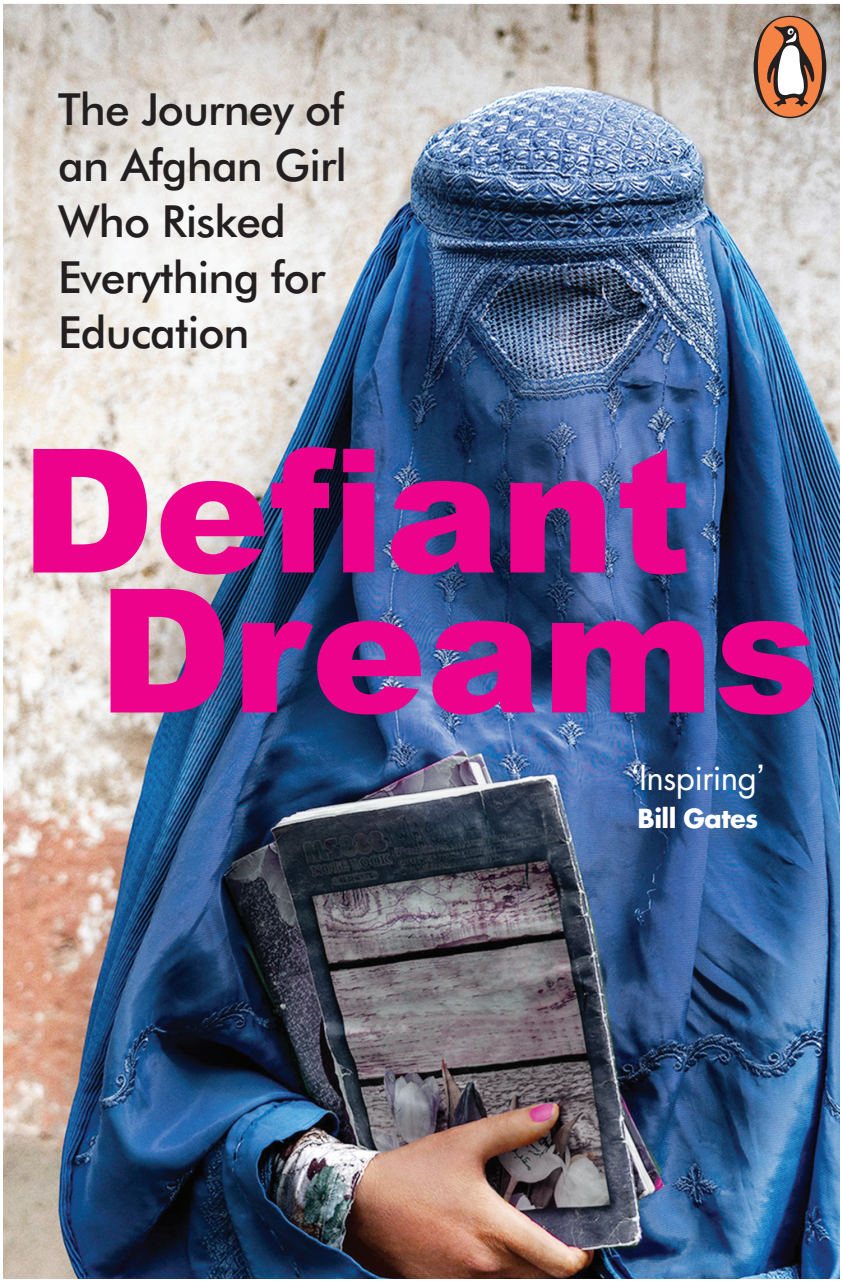

Sola Mahfouz and Malaina Kapoor

Praise for Defiant Dreams

'Stories like this inspire me. Seeing the way people like Sola Mahfouz think about the world reinforces my optimism about the future.'
Bill Gates

'Sola Mahfouz was born in a city where speaking too loud was unacceptable for a girl – and yet her voice is now reaching overseas. Her story is one of how the impossible became possible.'
Homeira Qaderi, author of *Dancing in the Mosque*

'A compelling, fascinating book.'
Daily Mail

'Sola reminds us that the greatest untapped resource around the globe isn't gold or oil, but the female half of the population.'
Nicholas Kristof, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author

'Beautiful and haunting . . . her courage is admirable.'
Suad Aldarra, author of *I Don't Want to Talk About Home*

'Defiant indeed! I could not put this beautifully written book down.'
Helen Zia, author of *Last Boat Out of Shanghai*

Copyrighted Material
www.penguin.co.uk

Copyrighted Material

Defiant Dreams

The Journey of an Afghan Girl
Who Risked Everything for Education

Sola Mahfouz and
Malaina Kapoor



Copyrighted Material
PENGUIN BOOKS

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Penguin paperback edition published 2024

Copyright © Sola Mahfouz and Malaina Kapoor 2023

Sola Mahfouz and Malaina Kapoor have asserted their right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the authors of this work.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with
reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize
for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the
appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN
9781529176056

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

To my mother, whose positive outlook toward life, like light in a dark lane, gave me the courage to go through the darkest time of my life with defiance

—SOLA MAHFOUZ

For my family, who has given everything to give me everything

—MALAINA KAPOOR

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Defiant Dreams is a work of nonfiction. However, some names, identifying details, and locations have been changed for security reasons. The name Sola Mahfouz is also a pseudonym.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Defiant Dreams

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PROLOGUE

I BEGAN TO GROW UP THE DAY MY MOTHER WARNED ME TO stop laughing. She was terrified that even my momentary giggle could bring a strange man to our door, ready to yell, kidnap, or even kill to silence the sounds of a young woman. Don't dance outside your room, she'd warn me. Don't sing in the hallways, where the sound can carry. I was eleven years old.

I was more interested in playtime than in my mother's fears. I escaped the thick heat of Kandahar, my Afghan hometown, by jumping through the water pump inside our family compound, shielded by walls so tall they kissed the cloudless sky. I dragged a speaker into the kitchen to blast the Bollywood music I'd heard on TV, flinging my arms into the air and moving with my sisters and cousins to the strong beat. Outside my home, bombs were exploding. Soldiers patrolled the streets, and the Taliban shot to kill. But in those days, I still woke up mostly oblivious to how brutal a place my country was to live in. I was excited just to race my brothers or buy fried snacks at the crowded bazaar, my skirt hiked up above my knees and the dusty wind sweeping through my tangled hair.

Copyrighted Material

Just before my twelfth birthday, my female cousins and I were biking in our courtyard. We were the only girls in our entire neighborhood who were allowed to ride bicycles. However, we still had to stay behind the walls that closed in our sprawling family compound, where I lived with my parents, siblings, and cousins. I perched precariously on a metal-frame bicycle far too big for me and raced freely in the waning sun, giggling. One of my cousins burst into a popular Bollywood song, and we all sang along, laughing harder and harder as we pedaled across the small squares of pavement that framed the garden.

Suddenly, something came sailing over the walls. Before we could figure out what it was, we heard a group of boys just outside the compound erupt in laughter, whooping at their victory. Their voices were sharp and caustic, and we froze at their tone. They roared even louder once they realized they'd silenced us.

Eventually, after the sound of their voices receded into the alleyways behind our house, I turned to see what the boys had thrown over. Two unidentifiable packages lay just a few feet away from me. Immediately, I grew afraid. I wondered for a moment if the packages might be bombs or containers of acid meant to blind or disfigure us. I stepped forward for a closer look and then recoiled in disgust. The boys had thrown two large plastic sacks stuffed with excrement. One of them burst and leaked across the grass and toward our rose bushes. The awful scent assaulted our senses, but we stood still, stunned and horrified and unable to move.

After that day, I listened to my mother's warnings. I began to understand her fear. I started to live the same life

Copyrighted Material

as so many women and girls in Afghanistan, trapped within the four walls of our kitchen. I was deeply jealous of my brothers who would go on road trips together, talk politics, and speak of visiting bazaars and enjoying street food. By age thirteen, I rarely left the house. When I did go outside, I viewed the world through the crisscross slats cut into my first burqa.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PART ONE

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER ONE

In secret, Baba loves to dance. My father's bare feet move slowly across the embroidery on our Afghan carpet, as the sleeves of his dove-gray *kameez* billow to a beat emanating from a portable stereo. My mother peeks out of the kitchen, laughing softly as he throws his arms into the air. Like most Afghan men, Baba is guarded, steeled by the memories of war and the demands of a patriarchal culture. His tufted beard and piercing black eyes often intimidate. In photographs, he rarely smiles. But music betrays him, forcing a sheepish, mischievous grin across his face.

As a young girl, I was ashamed by these glimpses into my father's more joyful dispositions. Our family and our province are ethnically Pashtun. In Pashtun culture, the strength of a man and the honor of his family are determined by his stoicism and authority. He is expected never to display emotion.

A man is also obligated to keep a tight rein on the women in his household. In the most traditional communities, it is the deepest shame for a man to ever allow his wife or daughters to be seen, even through the whispered shadows of a doorway.

Copyrighted Material

Men in Afghanistan spend lazy afternoons under the dusty shade of local pomegranate groves, gather at restaurants to enjoy Indian biryani and cans of ice-cold Coca-Cola, and maneuver motorcycles every morning into the city for work. Women spend their days indoors, with only a brief respite to drink tea with friends before lunch. They squat low to the ground and sweep cracked tiles with brooms made of dried grass, the embroidered hems of their *salwaar kameez* dresses just brushing the floor. They wring sopping-wet, hand-washed laundry and hang it on clotheslines to dry. In the evenings, as a hazy dusk falls on the city, the women emerge from the kitchen. They serve elaborate meals to their husbands and sons, meals that they have taken the entire day to prepare: lamb soup with vegetables and coriander, rice crispy with crystallized sugar, lentil stews, fresh tomato salads, half-moon flatbreads studded with caraway seeds. It is only after the men eat that many women do, spooning cold leftovers onto their plates from behind the kitchen doors.

Baba could never devote himself completely to this culture of conservatism. He grew up with a gravely ill father, so his mother filled the traditional male role at home. He was one of only a handful of university-educated men in our province. He had spent years in the bustling capital city of Kabul and even visited Russia, a land devoid of restrictions in the name of religion. So he never forced the women in our house to inform him when they left for the bazaar or to visit a friend. He let his daughters go to school. When no other fathers would, he danced, listened to his children sing, and allowed us all to take photographs and watch movies.

Copyrighted Material

The neighbors gossiped about us: *Did you know he allows his little girl to go swimming in that river near the pomegranate groves? Look, look! His wife's sleeves aren't long enough to cover her wrists.* I was ashamed that my father was seen as weak. Why, I wondered, did he care so much about preserving our little delights and liberties, even in the face of ridicule?

Perhaps it was because he understood what I didn't yet: in Afghanistan, freedom is transient and every small happiness is fleeting, forever threatened by the weight of tradition and the crossfire of war.

IN 1952, BABA WAS born in Kandahar, a city ringed by mountains and accented by teal-blue mosques and brightly painted food stalls. The streets are without lane markings and swell with people. A cacophony of blaring horns and sputtering motorcycles pierces the air, and smells of stale oil and roasted meat emanate from open-air butcheries and street vendors. A thick, dusty heat snakes through the city, enveloping gray buildings, slinking between the folds of ubiquitous blue burqas and pastel turbans.

Baba grew up in the decades after the British retreated from their occupation of our country, as an exhilarating spirit of patriotism surged across the nation. Under colonial influence, Afghanistan had been a poor country, one without electricity or a basic educational system. But independence offered the promise of cultural and institutional reform, led by King Zahir Shah and his cousin, Prime Minister General Mohammed Daoud Khan. Beginning in 1953, Khan enacted widely popular social measures centered

Copyrighted Material

on women's rights. Most notably, he lifted restrictions on women entering the workforce and allowed them to decide on their own whether to wear a veil in public.

As a part of his broader push toward modernization, the prime minister also solicited investment and military assistance from foreign nations. Brimming Cold War tensions served Afghanistan well, as both Moscow and Washington poured money into the country in an attempt to secure political influence. In northern Afghanistan, the Soviets were dominant. They spearheaded massive infrastructure projects, improved the education system, and funded scholarships for young Afghans. In the south, where Kandahar is located, the United States had more influence. American engineers flew in to help build new highways, dams, and electric power plants. They started construction on the Kandahar International Airport, whose terminals were meant to have the same grandeur as those in neighboring India and Pakistan, with state-of-the-art underground refueling stations and massive airport hotels for travelers who would spend layovers in Kandahar while traveling between Europe and East Asia. Local schools suddenly offered English lessons taught by volunteers from the Peace Corps. It wasn't uncommon to witness groups of sixteen- and seventeen-year-old boys belting out American nursery rhymes like "The Itsy Bitsy Spider."

Americans affiliated with government-aid organizations or private contractors settled in southern Afghanistan. In Kandahar, many lived in homes or barracks erected at Manzel Bagh, a palace gifted to a private contracting company by the king. The nearby city of Lashkar Gah was nicknamed "Little America" for the number of American vacationers

Copyrighted Material

and workers who stayed there. As a child, I heard many stories of what my family thought of these visitors from the West. "They were wealthy and so different—we loved to just peek at them as they walked down the street," my aunt would tell me. "But . . . well, they were a little uncultured," someone would chime in, before describing the brazen assurance with which American women walked through Kandahar. "They let doors slam behind them! When they would eat dinner—Sola!—they spoke so loudly, their voices carried to the next house over."

As a child, Baba was mostly oblivious to this whirlwind of change occurring outside his door. Instead, he was consumed by domestic troubles. His father, whom I called Agha Jan, had been struck with an undiagnosed illness, likely diabetes. That left Baba's mother, whom I called Ana Bibi, to care for their ten children and help provide for the family.

In the beginning, Agha Jan's illness was not too serious, and he tried to maintain his dominance as the patriarch of the household. As Baba remembers him, his father was a simple man. He was set in his ways, stuck in the past, and cantankerous about the cultural liberalization occurring around him. In contrast, Ana Bibi, came from an educated family, though she herself never attended school. She possessed a fierce intellect and often wielded it against her husband.

For instance, Agha Jan did not believe that girls should be allowed to attend school. Ana Bibi disagreed but brokered a compromise. "Our daughters will attend school until fifth grade," she said. "After that, we will pull them out."

Copyrighted Material

Agha Jan agreed. But somehow their daughters never seemed to reach the fifth grade. One girl supposedly failed the fourth-grade final exam several years in a row. Another seemed suspiciously old for her class, but Ana Bibi promised she was still finishing second grade. Agha Jan was confused and exasperated. "How can these girls *still* not be in the fifth grade?!" he would ask. But somehow he trusted Ana Bibi, who cleverly managed to educate five of her six daughters right underneath her husband's nose.

In the late 1960s, when Baba was a young teenager, his father was struck with constant, debilitating pain that forced him to quit his job as a driver. He soon became bedridden, leaving Ana Bibi with the responsibility of supporting the children and paying for his medical care. She expanded her small sewing business and sold clothes to neighbors and friends. But it wasn't enough. So Baba got a job after school laying bricks for the Kandahar International Airport, helping to construct the characteristic arches that line the building today. When that project was completed, he moved through a series of odd jobs before landing at the local ice factory as a teenager. At the time in Kandahar, there was no refrigeration, so Baba's job was to pack and deliver ice at four in the morning to all the restaurants and shops in the city. His bosses refused to provide him with food or any breaks, so he sneaked slices of bread from home and ate them when no one was looking. He was paid just ten afghanis, or around ten U.S. cents, per day.

Meanwhile Agha Jan grew sicker, lying listless in bed for days at a time. Baba often considered leaving school to work full-time and provide better for the family, but Ana Bibi re-

Copyrighted Material

fused to allow him to quit. "You must study hard and make it to university," she insisted. "You have to leave Kandahar and make something better for yourself." So, urged on by his mother, Baba continued at school. He split long days between the ice warehouse and his science classrooms. He spent nights studying, squinting at calculus problems in the unsteady candlelight.

AS BABA GREW OLDER, the political modernization in Afghanistan continued. King Zahir Shah attempted to transition the country into a constitutional monarchy, where political parties would have influence and power alongside the king. A traditional assembly of tribal elders and community leaders approved Shah's new constitution, which created representative bodies made up mostly of elected officials. In 1965, spurred by these increasing political freedoms, a group of men met secretly at the home of Nur Mohammad Taraki to form the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The group became especially attractive to young people with its promises of equality and progressive social reform. But it faced stiff political competition from another rising group, the Islamic Society. Members of the society, known as Islamists, were firmly against the recent trends toward liberalization. Deeply religious and conservative, they valued a return to an Afghanistan of the past by whatever means necessary, including violence.

As the two political parties gained momentum, King Zahir Shah—likely afraid of what he'd unleashed—stalled

Copyrighted Material

the reforms he had promised to enact, effectively nullifying major elements of the new constitution. This only increased tensions between the Communists and the Islamists as they tried to assert their authority against the increasingly unpopular monarchy.

In 1970 Baba was accepted to the brand-new Kabul Polytechnic University in Afghanistan's capital city. He left his home in Kandahar and settled into a campus whose vibrancy rivaled that of many Western universities. At college, Baba was exposed for the first time to Afghanistan's political forces. Universities had become centers of national political expression, and groups with affiliations ranging from Chinese Maoism to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood sprang up across campuses. Baba regularly stumbled upon peaceful protests by the university gates and fended off eager recruiters from a range of ideological groups. Most disagreements on campus stemmed from the fundamental question of Communist versus Islamist, which seemed to infiltrate every classroom and conversation.

Baba faced enormous pressure to join one of the student political groups. Maintaining any sense of neutrality between the Communists and the Islamists was nearly impossible, and he believed it would serve only to anger both political behemoths. So he sided casually with the Communists but refused to commit to attend their innumerable peaceful protests or serve as a recruiter of other students. He was going to college with one goal: to land a job that could support his large family. Baba couldn't afford the dangers and distractions that would come with political engagement.

His unyielding neutrality ultimately served as a boon.

Copyrighted Material

Baba was able to make many friends across political, ethnic, and religious lines. Though he often forwent college parties in order to study, he still managed to find a circle of friends who spent evenings together enveloped in puffs of cigarette smoke, laughing about everything and nothing at all. Years later, when some of my brothers and cousins were able to leave Afghanistan to attend college, my father would wink at them and say, "Don't forget to have fun!" It wasn't until I heard stories from a family friend about Baba's time at university that I understood the mirthful, remembering look I'd seen in his eyes.

But Baba's collegiate escape from his troubles at home didn't last long. Just months into his first year, he received word that Agha Jan had taken a turn for the worse. Alone, Baba boarded a rickety, overcrowded bus bound for Kandahar. He gazed blankly out the mud-splattered window, steadying himself by grasping the tattered seat in front of him. Once he arrived home and saw how ill his father was, Baba decided to take Agha Jan back with him to Kabul to seek medical treatment. By then, diabetes had caused his father to lose control of his legs. Baba carried him across his shoulders through the streets of Kabul, searching for a doctor who might be able to help him. When Baba finally found an open office and lowered Agha Jan onto the dilapidated examination table, the doctor confirmed what the family had feared: Agha Jan's disease was incurable. He lived for only a few more painful weeks before dying at home in Kandahar, tucked into the bed he'd been confined to for Baba's entire adult life.

After the burial, Baba wondered what was going to hap-

Copyrighted Material

pen to Ana Bibi. He couldn't imagine leaving his mother alone in Kandahar to fend for herself as he returned to his carefree university life in Kabul. So he sat down to talk with her, steeling himself for her reaction to what he was about to say.

"I am the head of the family now," he began. "I won't go back to school. Instead, I'll get whatever job I can to support you. Who will look after you if I am so far away, wasting precious time studying?" Ana Bibi stood up and met his eyes with an unmoving gaze. Her response would become a legend in our family, a story told to me often as I grew up.

"*I* am the head of this family," she said, emphatically. "And you absolutely must go back to university."

Her outburst made him hesitate, but he refused to yield.

Ana Bibi grabbed Baba's wrist and pulled him roughly toward the front door. "Look out there," she said, pointing to the dirt path just outside their home. "I will disown you and you will never again enter through this door unless you swear to me you will continue your studies."

Faced with that ultimatum, my father boarded a bus back to Kabul Polytechnic a few weeks later. Though Agha Jan had been sick for many years, the finality of his death made Baba solemn, introspective. He devoted himself to circuit diagrams and physics courses and little else.

IN 1973 THE AFGHAN monarchy was unstable and clinging to power, threatened by the surging popularity of the Communist and Islamist political parties. Sensing an opportunity, former prime minister Daoud Khan partnered with a

Copyrighted Material

faction of the Communist PDPA and staged a coup. Khan eradicated the country's monarchy and declared a new Republic of Afghanistan. He also enacted several modernization policies that built on what he had accomplished as prime minister a decade earlier. For his newfound alliance with the Afghan Communists, Khan earned the nickname "the Red Prince."

Yet soon after he seized power, Daoud Khan pivoted away from Afghan Communism. He demoted and transferred government officials aligned with the PDPA and decreased Afghanistan's dependence on the Soviet Union, instead making deals with wealthy Islamic nations like Iran and Saudi Arabia. Khan also courted American government officials and investors, urging them to continue financing development efforts in the south of the country. When asked to explain his foreign policy strategy, Khan was apparently known to say, "I'm lighting my American cigarette with a Soviet match."

When Daoud Khan came into power, my father had just graduated from Kabul Polytechnic. At the time, all men were required to complete a mandatory service in the Afghan military. Given his college degree, Baba was considered an intellectual and so was required to complete only a six-month military mission with limited exposure to dangerous conditions. He served alongside Mohammad Najibullah, a future president of Afghanistan. When Baba returned to Kabul, he took a well-paying job in the mining industry, surveying potential resource-rich sites. He rented a small house in western Kabul and sent for his mother, brother, and younger sister to move in with him.

Copyrighted Material

Living with his family again, Baba found it impossible to dodge the topic of marriage. At thirty, he was considered the perfect age to settle down with a wife. In Afghanistan, most marriages are arranged, and it is extremely rare for a couple to have a "love match" and get engaged without the help of their families. Instead, a young man's mother and sister bring him potential wives to choose from. They take note of his preferences: Tall or short? Educated or not? Fair-skinned or darker? Then they tell anyone they know to keep an eye out for a suitable girl.

Baba had few requirements. He wanted to marry someone educated, and his family would never consider a woman from outside their ethnic group, the Pashtuns. Millions of Pashtuns live throughout South Asia, most of them Muslim, united by the soft-toned Pashto language and the Pashtunwali code of conduct that emphasizes principles of family honor, hospitality, and the protection of women.

So Ana Bibi, acting on recommendations from family members and friends, visited dozens of families to assess in person if a suggested girl was right for her son. As is customary, she was shown into the house of every potential daughter-in-law and given the chance to speak with her mother. Then the girl would have to enter demurely, her hair draped loosely in a scarf to project modesty. She would wear delicate clothes and intricate jewelry to try to impress Ana Bibi. The girl would never stay longer than two minutes—that was all the time Ana Bibi needed to assess her beauty.

If Ana Bibi was dissatisfied, she would not return for another visit. However, if she liked the girl, she would make preparations for Baba to meet her in person.

Copyrighted Material

But my father wasn't eager to marry anyone whom his mother presented. And so he stayed an unmarried man in Kabul, working during the day and gathering with his friends in the cool evenings, waiting unhurriedly for the right girl.

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER TWO

My maternal grandmother, Ana Jana, was considered an unlucky woman. In 1942, at age seventeen, she was married off to a dried-fruit merchant. Within the next three years, she gave birth to two daughters. They both died, and a few years later her husband did too. After the funeral, as is the custom in Afghanistan, Ana Jana remained with her husband's parents in their family home. In the beginning, her parents-in-law were struck by an all-consuming grief at the loss of their son. But their sadness quickly turned to virulent anger that they directed toward Ana Jana. In tearful outbursts, they declared her the cause of all their suffering. They insisted it was her presence that had killed their son, her shortcomings that had given them sickly granddaughters instead of healthy grandsons.

As Ana Jana shrank from these blistering accusations, she also had to fend off advances from her husband's brother. In Pashtun culture, it is tradition for a man to marry his brother's widow in order to take care of her and keep her within the family, even if he has to take her on as a second wife. But Ana Jana couldn't bear the thought of

Copyrighted Material

marrying her brother-in-law, a married man who leered at every woman he saw and beat his wife.

My mother's father, Agha, lived next door to Ana Jana. At just seventeen, he became deeply affected by the predicament of his young neighbor. One morning he approached his own father and declared his intent to marry Ana Jana and rescue her from her miserable living conditions. Agha's parents were horrified. "She is nine years older than you are!" they shouted. "She's bad luck, she's a widow!" They told Agha that he had his whole life ahead of him, that there was no reason to settle down so abruptly. They threatened to withhold any financial support and refused to pay for his wedding. Not surprisingly, Ana Jana seized the opportunity to marry Agha. Despite his family's objections, my grandparents wed in 1952 in a modest ceremony in Kandahar.

Agha and Ana Jana moved into a small house on the outskirts of the city. In 1955 Ana Jana gave birth to my aunt, Yasmin. Five years later my mother, whom I call Moor, was born.

In this second marriage, Ana Jana had only the two children, which was unusual in a time when most families numbered upward of ten. People gossiped about how she'd failed to give birth to any sons and insinuated that she was bad for her young husband, that maybe she was cursed.

Moor remembers Ana Jana as a quiet, almost silent woman. She was a devout Muslim who woke up early every morning to read her Quran. She prayed five times every day, first at the crack of dawn and finally after sunset, as the

Copyrighted Material