

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NAUGHTY ONE

Mehran and Azita

“Arms up! Arms out! Touch your toes! Make a wave! Swim into the air! Big circles! Again! Now the salute! Salute and honor your country!”

Morning gymnastics have a touch of both Montessori and military discipline. About one hundred small children make a very serious attempt at synchronicity on a recently defrosted lawn, where patches of grass have sprung up in the dry mud.

It has taken the headmaster about twenty minutes to form her troops and move through the attendance call. When she calls a name, an arm shoots up with a loud *“bale”* from boys, and a softer version from the girls inside the densely packed crowd of six- to ten-year-olds.

The head boy at the top of each S-shaped line is keeping order, and Mehran stands next to one such fellow second-grader in shirt and tie. After the wobbly gymnastics is done the two friends adopt identical poses—hands in pockets, hips forward, resting broad-legged and bored looking. Behind them, boys in pants and girls in shift dresses—but no head scarves—line up. The required school uniform color is green, and it comes in as many nuances as the school has students, since every mother outfits her own child from whatever green fabric is available at the bazaar. Mehran’s belly exceeds her pants; the front button above the zipper has been replaced by an uncomfortable safety pin. Her toes are bare in her sandals, and in one pocket is a leftover cookie from breakfast.

The students are mostly children of Kabul’s recent-vintage professional class. Many of their parents are educated, and drop their children off here before going to work in government or for international organizations. The private institution offers English instruction and teachers who have graduated from high school. A few

even hold degrees from a teaching academy.

When the headmaster calls out for a volunteer student to perform a solo song before the students, Mehran stares blankly. A girl humbly walks up to face the crowd of students, her head bowed and her hands clasped together in front of her. Mehran, still with hands in pockets, leans over to her friend and whispers something, with a nod at the girl in front of them. The friend grins widely in agreement and they giggle, before being urged to join in singing the national anthem. A few Koran verses follow, and the headmaster offers her daily nugget of life advice for the children: "Brush your teeth, cut your nails, and never lie."

Older students are dismissed first, and they slowly pour into the two-story stone building and up the stairs, where an elderly helper has placed a red bucket of water and brown pressed soap under posters of Russian fighter jets and an Iranian passenger airline. The old woman rinses each child's hands with a splash from a red plastic pitcher and sends them off to their classrooms. Mehran's teacher declares that in honor of the foreign visitors on this day, she will begin with the English lesson—a class, it turns out, that will be conducted without books, and entirely in Dari.

MEHRAN FIRST ARRIVED here, to the school's kindergarten, as Mahnoush, in pigtails and a pistachio dress. When school shut down for a break she left and never returned. Instead short-haired, tie-wearing Mehran began first grade with the other children. Nothing else changed much. Some teachers were surprised but did not comment except to one another. When the male Koran teacher demanded Mehran cover her head in his class, a baseball cap solved the problem. The other children did not seem to pay much attention. The school's high turnover of students helped, as did the school's coed policy of not separating boys and girls for lessons or play.

Miss Momand, who started her job as a teacher after Mehran's change, remembers being startled when a boy was brought into the girls' room for afternoon nap time. As she helped Mehran undress it was clear she was a girl. Miss Momand was so confused she called Azita to ask why she had sent her child to school looking as she did. Azita simply explained that she had only daughters, and that Mehran went as the family's son.

It was all Miss Momand needed to hear—she understood perfectly. She herself used to have a friend at school who was a family's only child and had assumed the role of a son.

Mehran seems to have adapted well to her new role, in the eyes of her teacher. A little too well, perhaps. She takes every opportunity to tell those around her that she is a boy. She will refuse such activities as sewing and doll play in favor of cycling, football, and running. According to Miss Momand, Mehran has fully become a boy, and neither her exterior nor her behavior is distinguishable from another boy's. All the teachers play along and help protect her secret by letting her change clothes in a separate room when necessary.

"So is this all normal to you? Common, even?" I ask Miss Momand.

"Not exactly. But it is not a problem."

The rules are clear: dresses for girls, pants for boys. There are no other cross-dressers attending school. But it is not for the school to get involved in a family matter, she explains. Whatever gender the parents decide upon, the school should help perpetuate. Even when it is a lie. The school has other things to worry about, such as how many armed guards are needed by the front gate. The teacher expresses some solidarity with Azita: "Mehran's mother is in parliament. She is a good woman. We do what we must."

"We women, or we Afghans?"

"Both."

As for academic skills, Mehran is "intelligent, but a little lazy," according to her teacher. She is quick to smile, and equally quick to put on an angry-looking, annoyed face when she is not immediately understood or agreed with. A few years after leaving Mahnoush behind, Mehran's personality has grown louder. She spends breaks floating in and out of the boys' football games and other outdoor activities, depending on where the action seems to be at the moment. And whereas most other students want to stick to friends their own age, Mehran appears eager to catch the attention of older boys, often trying to impress them and seek some attention by being obnoxious. She will yell, touch, and push those around her. Most of the time she is ignored, but at times she needs to be pulled away from a clash with an older boy. Mehran is well aware she is a girl, according to the teachers. But she always introduces herself as a boy to newcomers. Since Mehran was a

girl for several years before she was remade into a boy, there should be little confusion to her in that regard.

Sigmund Freud claimed that children are not even aware of genital differences until around the age of four or five, but in the 1980s, Dr. Eleanor Galenson and Dr. Herman Roiphe proved that children's understanding of a sexual identity begins much earlier. According to their findings, a child can be aware of his or her birth sex as early as fifteen months.

Yet in Afghanistan, there is a certain interest in keeping children in the dark or at least blurring the lines about boys and girls. Specifics about anatomical differences are purposely not explained by many parents, in order to keep the minds of children—and especially those of little girls—“pure” for as long as possible before they marry.

It goes along with how my mother once told me the story of how she, as a ten-year-old in a more conservative version of Sweden of the 1950s, proclaimed to her mother that she intended to become a boy when she grew up. My mother had only one sister and a dim view of differences between men and women, never having seen her father or any other men without clothes. My grandmother scoffed at her daughter and called her stupid but did not offer any explanation for why the plan wasn't feasible.

At Mehran's school, children are never supposed to see the opposite sex naked, either; that is absolutely forbidden. The headmaster tells me that at this stage, she is certain that to most students, what sets little boys and girls apart is all exterior: pants versus skirts.

That, and the knowledge that those with pants always come first.

ON FEBRUARY 7, 1999, Azita knew she had failed, but she was too exhausted to speak or to show any reaction at all. She had just given birth—twice. She was in her mother-in-law's small freezing house, insulated only with dried grass baked into the mud walls. The first twin had been born after almost three days and three nights of labor, one month prematurely. She weighed a mere 2.6 pounds and her breathing was shallow. Ten minutes later, her face had turned blue and she showed few signs of life as her sister arrived. She, too, was unconscious. The women who had helped Azita deliver her children did not wash the

babies. Instead, they just handed them to her wrapped in cloth—it was too obvious to all those present that the children would not make it.

When her mother-in-law began to cry, Azita knew it was not from fear that her granddaughters might not survive. The old woman was disappointed. “Why,” she cried, according to Azita, “are we getting more girls in the family? What will I tell the neighbors? And the villagers?”

Azita felt nothing. The year before, she had crossed the doorstep of her primitive new home as the property of a poor farming family, carrying only one thing of value—a womb. Her husband already had a wife whose womb was the very reason Azita had been drafted as wife number two. The first wife had given birth to a daughter, but her second child—a son—had died. After that, she had only miscarried. It was what had prompted the mother-in-law to seek out a second young and healthy wife for her son. With Azita came the promise of a better future for the family in a small farming village perched on a hillside and even more isolated from the outside world than Badghis’s provincial capital of Qala-e-Naw. At the time it was reachable only by horse or donkey, or by foot.

The ten-person household, with two husbands who were brothers, their three wives, and all the children, was run by Azita’s mother-in-law. She wielded her power down to the smallest details of the lives of her sons’ wives. She decided how chores were distributed among them; when they ate and what; who spoke and what the conversation should be about. She also held the keys to the food pantry. Following her rules meant the difference between eating and going hungry.

When Azita first arrived, she was tasked with several jobs. She soon learned how to handle the cows—one for milking and three for fieldwork—the ten sheep, and the flock of chickens. In the spirit of an older sister and as someone who had grown up very differently, she soon began offering opinions and ideas on how the family did things. Azita suggested they wash their hands before eating, that they cut their nails, and that they help one another with the children. She advocated for them all to join forces and bring much more water into the house, to combat poor hygiene and disease. She suggested that the men and women of the family share meals—a radical idea in a household that strictly separated men and women except at night, when a husband was expected to sleep together with one of his wives. Having more contact

within the family made sense, Azita argued, and it was how she had been brought up.

None of her ideas were well received.

A particular provocation was the many dresses Azita had brought with her from her family home. Each woman in the village household owned only two dresses—one that was for special occasions such as weddings and should not be worn otherwise, and the other a regular dress that was to be worn for ten days before it would be washed, since water was so scarce. Azita was told that if she wanted to wear fresh clothes more often, she could fetch her own water from the faraway well.

Next, Azita protested her mother-in-law's system for keeping the wives in check, when any sign of insubordination rendered a response by her walking stick. The first wife was beaten most often, as she made the most mistakes. It upset Azita, and she argued against it. That escalated to yelling and finally, one day, Azita stepped in to shield her husband's first wife, jerking the stick away and breaking it in two. Infuriated, she threatened her mother-in-law: "I will beat you back. I am not afraid of the Taliban, and I am absolutely not afraid of you."

Islam does not condone the beating of wives, she added. Women should not beat other women, either. The old woman stared at her daughters-in-law, silently fuming before turning around and leaving them both. The family's longtime ruler of its women had no plans to abdicate. Mute obedience was not only expected of the family's wives—it was the norm and a prerequisite for their lives to work. As Azita had taken it upon herself to shelter her husband's illiterate and shy first wife, things threatened to spiral out of control. So the mother-in-law took the issue to her sons, who agreed something needed to be done. Since Azita was from the city, they concluded, whatever evil she had picked up there needed to be stemmed. There was still time for the newcomer to be recalibrated into a normal wife, and to remove whatever ideas a decadent Kabul upbringing had instilled in her.

They were to be beaten out of her.

THE FIRST BLOW came as a surprise to Azita. She had never seen her father beat her mother, and she had rarely been slapped as a child. Now,

her husband would use a wooden stick or a metal wire, when one was available, for regular preemptive beatings without a specific cause, just to make sure there would be no arguing with his mother. Sometimes, he just used his fists.

"On the body. On the face. I tried to stop him. I asked him to stop. Sometimes I didn't."

"And sexually?"

Azita goes silent.

"It is not called rape in Afghanistan if your husband forces himself on you," she says. "People would think you are a stupid woman if you call it that."

A woman's body is always available to her husband, not only for procreation, but for recreation as well, since male sexuality is seen as a good and necessary thing. If a wife does not submit, the husband could feel frustrated and look elsewhere, the thinking goes, which would then endanger the fundament of a family and with that society as a whole. Predominantly Christian countries did not recognize marital rape as illegal, either, until fairly recently, as one of the original purposes of marriage itself was to legalize sex. In the United States, marital rape was not criminalized in all states until 1993; in the United Kingdom, 1991.

Early on in her marriage, after the physical beating had begun, to everyone's relief, Azita became pregnant. With that, she had taken the first step toward fulfilling her purpose. Expecting a son, the family left her alone as she grew bigger. "Look at her—she is so fat and healthy. Surely, she will have a son," they said.

Azita was grateful for the semblance of peace. She, too, prayed for a son.

Delivering the twin girls was not only a disappointment; Azita had almost made a mockery of the family. Azita's brother-in-law had also only fathered girls; it was as if the family was cursed. The one consolation was that the premature twins might not live long.

Not even Azita felt any love for her daughters at first. It was a different emotion that made her fight for her tiny newborns: pity. The doctor who had come from town offered no congratulations when she examined the twins after a few days. They still had little chance of making it, she decided. She turned to Azita and said, simply, "I am sorry."

Azita accepted the doctor's prognosis, but being unable to breast-feed,

she still begged her mother-in-law for some milk from one of the cows. After Azita offered to pay for the milk, which her mother-in-law argued could have been sold for a profit, she was able to spoonfeed her two daughters. Slowly, their condition improved. After two months, they smiled a little, and that's when Azita began to love them. They became her reason for living in those first years of marriage.

When Azita's younger brother came to check on her on behalf of their parents, she tried to be upbeat and assure him it was not so bad. She hoped he would bring their parents good news, not making them think of her as a quitter. It was only when her father, Mourtaza, came to visit that the veneer cracked. She told him she hated her life. When he showed no reaction, her fury grew in a way that she had never dared to show her father before. As he walked out the door to leave, she followed and screamed at him from the doorstep: "*Thank you very much!* Because of you, I am suffering every day. You told me to educate myself. I did, and now I am treated worse than a donkey, or a cow. You did this."

Mourtaza looked at her in silence. Then he spoke. "Yes. I did this to you. I am so sorry."

It was the only time she had seen her father cry.

IN CURRENT-DAY KABUL, when Mehran returns home from school in the late afternoon, her special snack is already set out on the kitchen counter: two oranges on a plate, with a little knife to peel them. She attacks the oranges in a frenzy, and then, her hands still sticky, she crawls up onto her mother's lap. The goal is to convince Azita to release her laptop so the sisters can watch a film. While her sisters smile as they gently make a request, Mehran is loud and insistent. Her right ear sports a large Band-Aid, after a failed attempt to pierce herself with a needle inspired by the male Bollywood action hero Salman Khan, who wears just one earring.

"He is very much a boy right now," Azita mutters, trying to hush Mehran while she is on the phone. "The other day I came home, and he was trying to take apart my computer, saying he was looking for the games inside." She laughs. "Mehran is not like the girls. He is my naughty one."

Azita caresses her daughter's arm while switching between two cell

phones and three languages. “I will try,” she tells one caller. “I will call the principal and discuss it with him.” A colleague has had a child expelled from school and asks that Azita pull some strings. There are some things she won’t do: suggest young unmarried girls as wives for constituents or their children, for example. She never says “no” outright but will always take time to explain that she may not be entirely suited to help with some tasks.

Azita’s daughters spend this afternoon like most others—in frustrated boredom between the apartment’s yellow walls, watching Indian television or favorites *Hannah Montana* and *Harry Potter* on DVD. They will raise the volume, as well as the level of bickering, as each hour slowly passes. Mehran needs to do her homework, and until it is done, the girls have been told no one goes outside. When the twins find a pirated Tajik CD with pop music under Azita’s desk and begin to dance, Azita becomes worried. The neighbors might hear, and a parliamentarian’s family can’t be suspected of listening to something like that.

Azita loves to dance, but she does not do it often. Dancing falls into the same category as poetry for a woman—it equals dreaming, which may inspire thoughts about such banned topics as love and desire. Any woman reading, writing, or citing poetry is a woman who may harbor strange ideas about love and romance in her head, and thus is a potential whore. When Azita once posted a poem on her Facebook page, she immediately received comments suggesting she was inappropriate.

Though the sun has already begun to set, Azita decides to allow the girls an hour of outside play, on the condition that they stay within her range of vision from the window. The four girls almost fall over one another as they slip on their sandals and tumble down the stairs and into the small yard. The neighborhood crew of two older boys and a cadre of smaller children are already there, all in bright-colored clothing emblazoned with cartoon characters. No other girls of Benafsha and Beheshta’s age are present. Allowing young girls outside is uncommon, even in less conservative neighborhoods, and Azita’s ten-year-old twins may be able to go, at most, three more years without head scarves. Their father has let it be known that he would prefer they cover themselves already now.

On the grass, a few boys toss a weathered football between them, and

when the ice cream man comes cycling by with his cart, its one speaker playing a monotonous little melody, the scene is momentarily peaceful.

Benafsha and Beheshta do not envy Mehran, they assure me. Why would they want to play football and get dirty like Mehran? Scream and yell and fight with the boys? Mehran may be their much-cuddled younger sister who rules the family with her temper, but they would not want to trade places with her. With Mehran's boyhood, she has become the most spoiled child of the family. Or perhaps, as the baby of the family, she always was. The twins only know they have a much harder time extracting money from their father, who seems to give Mehran anything she asks for. To the twins, he appears to listen more attentively when Mehran speaks and to laugh a little louder at her jokes.

In eight-year-old middle child Mehrangis's view, on the other hand, Mehran absolutely has the better deal. Mehrangis is not included in the twins' giggly camaraderie, where they always have each other's backs, and she receives less attention for her appearance. She reveals a proposal she recently made to her parents: "They say I am a little bit fat, so I told my mother that maybe it was best they make me a boy, too, since I am not pretty."

But her parents denied her wish to cross over to boyhood. Mehrangis had actually been her father's first choice for *bacha posh*, but since she is older and would have had to become a woman sooner, they decided against it. Mehran would last them longer as a son. Mehrangis shrugs her shoulders when she tells the story; it didn't happen for her, and that's just the way it is. She knows she is not considered as charming or as cute as her older sisters. But because Mehran goes as a boy, at least no one talks about her being fat or not pretty enough.

For Mehran, there is no need to play well behaved, adorable, or pleasing. There is no expectation of grace or adoring smiles. When I take pictures of the girls, or when they take pictures of one another with my camera, Benafsha and Beheshta strike well-rehearsed poses, pouting their lips and batting big flirty eyelashes, sometimes pointing fingers at each other and swirling their arms as they perform a little Bollywood-style dance routine. At times Mehrangis attempts to emulate them, but it mostly earns her mockery. Mehran goes in the exact opposite direction—looking angry, staring into the camera, hands on her hips. When she does smile, it is a big grin, showing off the large gap between her two

front teeth. Her clothes barely hold together at times, especially after she has been rolling around outside for a few hours. And she is the biggest eater in the family, after her father.

Benafsha pulls my sleeve. She wants to say something, but we must move away from the others. We move closer to the wire fence toward the road, and she says it quickly, her voice low and her face down.

"Two of my friends call her a girl. They know I have a sister and not a brother." Not only that: "She fights a lot. The boys, the older neighbors' boys, they say 'You are a girl.' She tells them 'No, I am a boy.' But they know."

The twins try their best to comfort Mehran when it happens, Benafsha says. But sometimes she becomes too upset, and they do not know what to do. Certainly, Mehran annoys the twins at times, but what upsets them more is when other children gossip about her.

"She was quiet before," Benafsha says. "Now she's naughty, and she fights. Now, she cries a lot. When we go to sleep I ask her 'Why do you cry?' She says, 'Because they say I am a girl.'"

Luckily, Benafsha feels, it will all be over soon. In a few years, Mehran will have to change back into being a girl. They all know it—their mother has told them several times. At some point soon, whatever privileges Mehran now enjoys will end.

Not sure what to say, I look up at the building. Three windows are full of faces wrapped in head scarves, smiling and waving down at us. The girls are too old—too close to puberty—to be allowed outside.

WHEN A STORM arrived from over the mountains to her small village in Badghis, Azita used to imagine the clouds came from Kabul. As a child, she had been scolded by her mother for running around in rainstorms and getting sick. In those early years as a married woman, she would stand on the doorstep of the village house, her eyes closed, and let the rain pour over her face. In her mind, she would go up to the locked gates at the end of the yard. She would open them, and just keep walking.

It would be years before she began to dream of a big future again, but with time, she extracted permission to do more things beyond caring for her children. By teaching neighboring women to cook the exotic dishes she had learned to make in Kabul, she gained a reputation as the

mashed-potato lady. Based on her preparatory studies for medical school back in Kabul, in Badghis, she also began receiving villagers for small health care needs. Volunteering for the Red Crescent, she administered shots to children and diagnosed the most common illnesses. Villagers paid what they could—often nothing, but sometimes a few onions or tomatoes, even a chicken. Most of the time, Azita used them as trade with her mother-in-law, in return for fresh milk from the family's cow for her daughters. She also taught basic writing and reading in Dari to any girl in the neighborhood who would come over, under the guise of reading the Koran.

WHEN THE UNITED States, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia launched the attack in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, it was a direct message to Azita that her world might open up again. As the Taliban leadership crumbled, she began an attack of her own, to convince her husband that the family should leave the village and move to the provincial capital of Badghis. In Qala-e-Naw, she would be able to work now that the Taliban was no longer in power, and the family could make a better life from that income. Her husband had already invested in a small street stall that sold chewing gum and phone cards, but profits were not enough to sustain them. If Azita were allowed to work, he would no longer need to labor in the family's small plot of land, she argued. She knew there would be ways to make money now that she could go outside.

Eventually he agreed to leave his mother's house behind, on the condition that Azita would support the family. They moved into a borrowed house, sharing it with another family. In the beginning, food was scarce. Benafsha and Beheshta still remember the luxury of tasting biscuits from a bakery for the very first time when their grandfather brought them as a gift.

Azita quickly lined up two jobs: During the day, she would teach in a middle school, and in the evenings, she offered even more classes for those girls who had been left illiterate during the years of war and Taliban rule. By now, Azita had three children of her own who came with her or stayed with neighbors when she worked.

But the real opportunities, she realized, lay with the foreigners.

She took it upon herself to learn some English—memorizing twenty words a day—and within a few months, she landed a third job as a translator for a German aid organization. They offered her the most she had ever made—\$180 per month. It was enough to turn the family's life around completely, and almost overnight, they moved several steps up society's ladder. As one of the few women with an education in her province, Azita was well served by the influx of foreigners and cash that came with a wartime economy. She soon could even dangle the prospect of a house of their own before her husband. She was determined to make their marriage work, too, and once out from under her mother-in-law, they did get along better.

As a fourth enterprise, Azita expanded her health services in the evenings.

There was still very little health care available, and even though Azita was rarely able to charge her patients, her reputation slowly built in the province, where people would travel from afar to see her for a shot, or to have their children seen by her. She also held preventive health seminars, where she taught simple things, such as the benefits of washing hands, and washing vegetables before eating them. Slowly, she built on her standing in the community, and for the UN-mandated 2002 emergency *loya jirga* meeting, where a transitional government after the Taliban would be agreed upon, Azita was elected as one of the representatives from Badghis province.

The Kabul meeting, where Azita carried her seven-month-old daughter Mehrangis on her hip to negotiations, offered a taste of what she had once imagined her life should have been. More than two thousand delegates from all around Afghanistan gathered for several weeks and Azita was surrounded by those with ambitions similar to hers. The idea of helping to build a new society—one where her daughters would not have their dreams crushed by authoritarian regimes and war—seemed perhaps less of a calling and more of a responsibility she should take on. The childhood dream of becoming a doctor would mean going back to school, and as she now had a family to support, she needed full-time work. As women were to be allowed into Afghan politics, it held the promise of an area where she could revive that old dream of making an impact, of becoming a leader.

Three years later, after getting her degree from a teaching academy in

Badghis while working for a United Nations office as a translator, a friend offered to lend her the two hundred dollars needed to register to run for parliament in the first national elections. At twenty-eight, and now a mother of four, Azita decided it was more money than she could afford to repay if she lost. She simply had to win.

AMID THE ENDLESS cement, blast-protecting sandbags, and dust of Kabul, the desire for beauty can become overwhelming. To those who make the five-hour journey past the infamous Bagram air base, where Afghans have been tortured to death by U.S. forces, through several Taliban-controlled areas, and down a dirt road where small homemade bombs frequently disrupt traffic, an untouched fairy-tale world is said to open up.

On this Friday, Azita has sent her husband and the girls off to that place for a picnic outing. While they are gone, she will rest. As she waves good-bye to her family from the third-floor window, she sees that Mehran has taken the front seat next to her father. The older girls, bubbly with excitement, share the backseat as long lines of cars head out of town early in the morning. Friday is the day for prayer, but it is also a day off that families can spend together. Going on a “picnic” is a much appreciated way for less conservative Afghans to meet, and for some to clandestinely drink, away from neighbors and other gossips in Kabul. Alcohol is banned, but that rule is freely bent, just as many other cultural and religious decrees in Afghanistan often are.

Our Friday morning convoy also includes a local fire chief, who is an old friend of Azita’s husband. His car is followed by two trucks with young Kalashnikov-carrying firefighter escorts.

The destination we arrive at is Kapisa province, an old mujahideen stronghold, where large stone formations and hills break up a dwindling green landscape just on the verge of bursting into full summer. Harsh winters have made knotty branches on century-old trees more resistant, and they reign over almost invisible paths through high grass and into fields where children herd sheep. On the other side of a hill are fields of shell peas and cucumbers, where a river feeds the thick, dark soil. Next to it, spread out on the grass, picnicgoers from Kabul sit together in groups. Some women have removed their head scarves and laugh loudly.

The young chain-smoking firefighters unload a large plastic sheet, two heavy Oriental rugs, and several large baskets and buckets from their trucks. They carry it all, plus guns and ammunition belts, across the pretty streams by jumping from stone to stone. When Mehran, dressed in white just like her father, falls and plunges knees-first into the water, she is swung back up and carried on his shoulders. She rides triumphantly, overlooking the procession at the tail end of which her sisters slip in their flat sandals, struggling to pick up the pace.

The firefighters act as pathfinders, who after a half-hour trek settle on the perfect tree, unfurling large plastic sheets underneath it. In this traditional rite of spring, the tree soon begins to vibrate, and clusters of little white and red berries patter down on the plastic sheet, held by two of them. A third firefighter, who has climbed up to the top of the tree, and wrapped his legs around a thick branch, lets out a loud, satisfied laugh when he is asked to give the branch another shake. And the mulberries rain down again, making their way from the plastic sheet into baskets. Our caravan sets off again, and the loot is carried to the side of a river stream that holds another little secret. A hole has been carved into the ground and lined with stones, allowing water from the stream to flow in. Baskets are emptied into the bathtub-like reservoir filled with ice-cold, clear water, and everyone squats around the tub to greedily scoop up the dark purple berries, scarfing them down by the handful. When all have eaten more than they can really stomach, hand-knotted rugs are spread out on the grass. For the prescribed digestive routine, several of the berry eaters go from cross-legged to fully lying down while large containers of runny yogurt are passed around.

AZITA'S HUSBAND OF thirteen years smiles broadly and turns his face toward the sun. In search of attention, Mehran crawls up onto him, only to be carefully pushed off his very full belly. It is rare for him to get out of Kabul, and to show his children much other than the apartment where they all spend most of their time.

He tells me he married Azita because she was his cousin, but also because he loved her. But mostly, he explains, he did his uncle and his family a favor. Otherwise Azita could have been forced to marry a stranger in wartime.

"That is why I stepped in. The whole family agreed it was the best thing."

"But you already had a wife?"

"Yes. But Azita is the daughter of my uncle. Since I lost my father, he became like a father to me. When he said he did not want to lose her to another family, I wanted to help."

He looks at Mehran. "He is completely like a boy, don't you think? He looks like a boy, and he behaves like a boy. He is a good son for us."

I look at Mehran, whose facial features resemble her father's, especially when she wrinkles her forehead or frowns. Grinning, he agrees that Mehran is more pampered than his other children. But she is the youngest, so she just needs a little bit more love—one must remember that, too. It's the same in every family. And Mehran will go back to being a girl; there is certainly no confusion about that. Ten or twelve may be a good age. Or a few years later, depending on how she looks. Her father is not entirely sure: "It is the first time we have done this. Let's see what will happen."

He does not foresee any trouble for Mehran, or believe that her time as a boy will be confusing later on. Planning for or even thinking much about the future is best avoided. Through a turbulent history and several wars he has learned that trying to foresee the future is often just cause for disappointment. "This is the need for today, and I don't know about tomorrow. She knows she is a girl, and when she grows up she will understand the difference better, too."

The deceit has worked so well he has almost fooled himself. "To be honest, I think of him as a boy. When I see him, I see my only son."

He fully expects Mehran to grow up to be a young woman, to marry and have children of her own. Anything else would be strange. "This is life in Afghanistan. Hopefully he will be lucky. Maybe it will be even easier for him since he is a boy now."

At the kebab lunch, Mehran is given the honorable placement between her father and the fire chief. She has become friendly with several of the firefighters, who allow her to hold each of their Kalashnikovs in a wobbly grip. If the firefighters have any clue of her real gender, they are too polite to say. Very politely, they also avert their eyes when the three other girls come their way, and they all make an effort to keep a distance, to avoid any physical collision. None of the other girls are

offered a chance to hold the guns. After ingesting a large amount of food, the fire chief takes out a sweet-smelling hand-rolled cigarette and lights up. He offers it around to his circle of escorts, who happily put their guns on their laps and accept. It will make the drive back to Kabul a little less dull.

On the way home, Mehran falls asleep on her father's shoulder, as the task of driving is turned over to a firefighter with droopy eyelids. Mehran has a few more years before the life of an Afghan woman begins. For now, she is on the side of privilege.