

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FUTURE BRIDE

Zahra

IT WAS JUST a small blink, and she wanted to take it back.

The world could not be let in. Especially not the bloody, intrusive woman part of it. Zahra lay motionless in the hospital bed, breathing slowly, trying to make herself go back to sleep again. Maybe she could wake up somewhere else. As someone else.

Anywhere but here in the bright, white children's ward.

When it first began, soon-to-be sixteen-year-old Zahra hid in the bathroom several times a day, frantically washing her underwear, praying for the bleeding to stop. It came from down there, so she did not tell anyone. August had been scorching hot, and Ramadan did not help with the mess her body was making. No eating or drinking—or, for some Afghans, at least not in public—during the day made most everyone sleepy and tired and gastric problems were expected.

At first, the family did not notice Zahra's increased bathroom presence. But then Asma found a pair of stained underpants.

"It is nothing to worry about," she told her daughter as she appeared from the bathroom. "It already happened to your sisters, and it's normal. All women have it."

Zahra quietly looked at her mother. Then she said: "No. No. No."

"You do not have to be afraid," Asma tried to comfort her by saying. "It makes you a real woman. It means you can have children."

With that, Zahra turned around and went into the sitting room. When Asma followed, Zahra fainted to the floor.

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She came to quickly, but was rushed to the hospital by her mother. When the very upset Asma arrived with a child the doctor at first took to be her son, it took a few minutes before he understood the reason for their visit. The doctor told both Asma and Samir, who came as soon as he could get out from work, that their daughter had lost a lot of blood. She was slightly anemic, he explained, as she had likely been bleeding for a few days. But Zahra just needed to rest, he advised.

Zahra had seemed numb, refusing to speak to the hospital staff and shrinking from their touch. She really should have been referred to the women’s department, the doctor said, but due to the initial mixup she had been put with the other, younger, children. But now that her birth sex and her condition had been clarified, Zahra should probably be taken to a “lady doctor” to make sure everything was in order for the future, the doctor concluded.

There was another concern, though. He believed Zahra was likely suffering from shock. The doctor had seen such cases before: Once puberty had commenced for a *bacha posh*, her acceptance of the future as a woman was not always immediate. Zahra had been something else for a long time—and now nature would have her revenge.

Asma and Samir felt a little embarrassed upon hearing the doctor’s theory. They quickly assured him things soon would be set right with their daughter.

On the way home, Zahra refused to speak. Since then, she has only menstruated every two or three months. Asma has found herself wondering if the law of nature has just given in to Zahra’s persistent mind: “She does not want to be a girl. So much so that maybe God has granted her wish in some part, and that is why she is not bleeding like she should?”

ASMA HAS HER sewing machine out on the living room floor. There are three orders for new girls’ dresses from neighbors and friends to fill. Samir’s air force salary isn’t much, and feeding eleven costs at least two hundred afghanis per day. It is the equivalent of four U.S. dollars, which

is what we pay our driver as the standard foreigner fare for a fifteen-minute ride to Zahra's house. Plus a dollar in tip.

Fabric snares in the hand-cranked sewing machine every few minutes, and Asma mutters as she frees it. She is hoping a cousin will bring an electric machine from Pakistan soon so she can make zigzag patterns, and maybe something for herself, too. She wistfully looks at Setareh, whose Pakistani creation hints of her slim frame after she has removed her coat. "When I was young, I, too, had a figure. I was always wearing something beautiful."

Zahra brings juice and cookies from the kitchen, but Asma prompts her to bring the other cookies—"the better ones." Her daughter grumbly obeys.

"You are so different from my other children," Asma yells after her. "You are always angry, never in a good mood. You don't smile. You don't speak friendly to me."

Zahra says nothing as she puts the better cookies on the table and sits down. They are in little white plastic wrappings, with the WFP logo. The World Food Program's iron-fortified biscuits are made for malnourished children and meant to be given away for free to the hungry, but somehow make their way to bazaars. They are a favorite snack of Setareh's and many other Kabulis who can afford them. Zahra arranges five biscuits for me on a napkin. Abundance is a sign of hospitality. Then she sits in one of the big chairs, legs apart, hands on armrests, her body taking up more space in the room than any of ours do.

One of her younger sisters enters, modeling one of Asma's new designs, a shiny purple dress with a wide skirt and short sleeves. She takes a swirl in front of us, before Asma grabs her to pin the back a little tighter. It is on order for a teenager who is to wear it at a wedding. Her mouth full of pins, Asma calls Zahra's attention:

"Your sister will wear a dress. Look at her—she is beautiful. She is a girl. You look like a monkey compared to her."

Zahra's face turns into a grimace. "Stop it! Don't say that!"

She fires back by apologizing to us, her guests: "My mother is just jealous. One time I rode a horse, and she yelled at me. I know it is just because she will never do that in this life. Look at her—she will just stay in the house all her life."

It may be less that Zahra desires to be a boy, and more that, like so

many other *bacha posh*, she merely wants to escape the fate of womanhood in Afghanistan. Over the past months, tensions between Zahra and her mother have simmered and inched closer to a showdown, as Asma has tried to make the case for Zahra to accept her birth sex and live like a woman. Zahra, in turn, has insisted that is impossible. Because she is no girl. Nor is she a woman.

There is really no in-between period for a young woman here, who can never live on her own before marriage, since she must always officially be under the guardianship of a man. Her few legal rights are socially curtailed, and as a practical matter, she could not easily rent an apartment, hold most jobs, or even get a passport without the explicit permission of a father or husband.

"We have a common saying here," Asma says in a matter-of-fact tone. "When your luck shows up, nothing can stop it. I will not let Zahra be single her whole life."

She barely gets to finish the sentence before Zahra interrupts.

"No! I will not get married. I will not get married for as long as I am alive."

"So what will you do?" her mother asks, rocking her head back and forth, to mock her daughter. "You are a girl and this is a fact. You will have to get married."

"It's my choice," Zahra shoots back. "Will you force me?"

Asma just looks at her daughter.

As Zahra defiantly stares back, tears begin to stream down her face. Finally, she gets up and leaves. She begins to scream from the other room instead: "There is a girl in Pakistan I know about! She changed herself through an operation. I will find money, too, and change myself into a man. I know it can be done, and I will be rid of this body."

Asma looks at the wall separating her from her daughter. It pains her every time Zahra brings this up. Why would her child not want the body she has been given? It would appear to be an act of defiance against both her parents and God.

From the other room, Zahra throws out what by now has become another one of her common threats: She will run away. Or: "When our relatives from America come and visit, I will force them to invite me. I want to study, and work."

"You are dreaming," Asma says in a low voice, almost as though she

were speaking to herself. "No one will invite you."

Options for getting out of Afghanistan would seem bleak for Zahra. Holders of Afghan passports have little chance of obtaining visas to most countries. Student visas for particular talents are available, but competition is fierce for the Fulbright and other scholarships. Zahra is ranked in the lower half of her class and does her best to avoid reading books. As for sex-change operations, the nearest option is Iran, where they have become more common due to the strict ban on homosexuality. To change gender is, for some, the only way to have a same-sex partner without risking the death penalty.

"So what do you want?" Asma repeats to Zahra, as she reappears in the doorway. "You cannot live at home with me. Do you want to marry another girl? Should I find you a wife instead? You need to have children."

Asma throws out a random number that seems reasonable to her: "Five."

It sends Zahra over the edge. "No! *You are crazy*. I wish you would leave me alone!"

And she is gone again.

Asma looks tired as she slowly unfolds a low ironing board on the floor and begins to press her husband's long white shirts. She wants to complete this chore before the electricity goes out. The stroking movement causes her some pain after carrying her youngest on her hip all day.

Zahra's resistance has also begun to wear her down. It has come to the point that they can hardly speak without ending up yelling at each other, when Zahra will taunt Asma for having too many children and for rarely leaving the house. As if she could, Asma will retort. And since when did a woman have to defend having many children?

Asma worries about Zahra. She is seeing signs that the outside world will come down much, much harder on Zahra than she ever has, in trying to get her to adopt a female identity. Neighborhood harassment of Zahra has increased, too: "The girls are the worst," Asma says. "Sometimes they ask her to prove she is a girl—they ask her to take her clothes off." Devastated by the humiliation, Zahra will then run home and hole herself up in one of the bedrooms.

Asma, too, is frequently challenged by neighbors: "People ask me if she

is a third gender, something between a boy and a girl. I tell them absolutely not. She is totally a girl. I tell everyone—there is nothing wrong with her! She is normal and she has all the things girls have.” Asma makes a gesture toward her own body. “But they scream ‘*izak*’ after her. I have heard it.”

Izak is a colloquial term familiar to most Afghans, as a derogatory slur for someone who is *without* a distinct gender. The actual meaning is “hermaphrodite,” but it is used for anyone who appears different.

Even Zahra’s little brother, who is only six, urges his sister to put on a head scarf, accusing her of embarrassing her family. Sometimes he pleads with her—he is teased by his friends at school for having an *izak* sister. Zahra usually responds by slapping him in the face.

IT IS THE responsibility of Afghan parents to gauge the timing of when something that is silently accepted for children becomes an outright provocation. A few days earlier, in another house, I had been told the story of how a thirteen-year-old *bacha posh* was found out by one of her former neighbors. A member of her football team heard a rumor she was actually a girl. Not long after, the boys on the team locked her inside a circle and demanded she prove her gender. As she tried to break out, onlookers gathered. Her father ran out to defend her, striking down some of the young boys for getting too close to his daughter. The neighbors were infuriated—but not with the young harassers. They had done nothing wrong. Instead, blame came down hard on the girl’s father. He had allowed his daughter to play football with teenage boys, and that made him alone responsible for the street fight. And what kind of man was he?

The problem Afghan society has with a *bacha posh* who approaches puberty lies less in the rejection of gender and more in the rules, social control, and expectations that surround a *proper* young Afghan girl. As soon as she can conceive, she must be shielded from all men until she meets her husband for the first time. That responsibility, to keep a young girl pure in a culture of honor, is entrusted to the male members of her family. If they fail, the entire family will be disgraced. Just as an adult, a married woman must carefully avoid being likened to a whore at all times, a younger woman must demonstrate absolute purity. Her

virginity is capital belonging to her father, and it is his to be traded. The more sheltered, demure, and quiet parents can demonstrate a daughter to be, the higher the value of her virginity. If a girl is discovered alone anywhere near a man who is not a blood relative, rumors can spread. Judgment is always in the eye of the beholder. And the Afghan beholder's imagination can run wild.

Since neither a groom nor a groom's parents will usually speak to a bride before the deal is made, everything hinges on her reputation. That reputation is perpetuated by the opinion and observation of everyone who has been in contact with her, and information is usually obtained through rumors. Thus, a woman's honorability depends only to a very small degree on her own chastity. It has much more to do with "gossip" and what the neighbors conclude based on observing her. A wife or a daughter who is allowed to move around too much risks turning her husband or father into a *begherat*, or a coward, who cannot protect his women, in the eyes of others.

Much like in the historical culture of honor and guns in the American South and Southwest, an Afghan man must be able to protect and control both his property and his women at all times. An Afghan man needs to demonstrate readiness to use force against any threat. The three pillars of Pashtunwali, the Pashtun code of conduct to live by, are *revenge*, *refuge*, and *hospitality*. (A favorite phrase of gun owners in the United States may as well be used by the ever-polite and always gun-carrying Afghans: "An armed society is a polite society.") Should an Afghan man fail at this, his most fundamental task of protection, he can no longer function in society, since his honor capital will be depleted.

A young unmarried woman is, in other words, under a bigger threat from within her own family than the outside world, should she even be suspected of not behaving properly. That's why it is called "honor killing"—justifying the murder of a young daughter by her own family to preserve and protect their own reputation.

At almost sixteen, Zahra no longer feels like "both" a man and a woman, as she described it when I first met her. At this point, more than a year later, she dismisses her physical sex and views her female body as something that must change.

Neuroscientists agree with Dr. Fareiba's observation that puberty is "a dangerous time for the mind"—or rather, that puberty is when the

human brain expands and takes a huge leap forward, fueled by hormones, which help grow a personality and form a gender identity.

As Zahra's situation shows, the experience of a *bacha posh* also begins to leave a more permanent mark when a girl goes through puberty as a boy. As I encounter more adult women who have grown up as *bacha posh*, I note that those who herald their boy years usually experienced them only as children. Any potential empowering effects of living on the other side seem to be preserved in an adult woman only if her time as a boy was brief, and ended before puberty. After that, just as in the case with Zahra, it quickly becomes far more complicated.

In another country, Zahra would perhaps by now be suspected of having what the World Health Organization terms *gender identity disorder*. It is defined as "persistent and intense distress about being a girl, and a stated desire to be a boy." Resistance to growing breasts and to menstruating are two other things cited in such a determination.

In order to qualify for an adult diagnosis of the disorder, there should also be distancing from one's own body. The definition of adult *transsexualism* is "a desire to live and be accepted as a member of the opposite sex, usually accompanied by a sense of discomfort with, or inappropriateness of, one's anatomic sex, and a wish to have surgery and hormonal treatment to make one's body as congruent as possible with one's preferred sex."

But what Zahra is or has, or what she might be afflicted by, cannot be directly compared to any Western version of a child or young adult who is uncomfortable with his or her gender, and upon which existing research in the field has been made.

According to Dr. Ivanka Savic Berglund, a neuroscientist at Karolinska Institutet's Center for Gender Medicine in Stockholm, who studies the formation of gender identity in the brain, a person's diet, personal experiences, and environment all affect hormone levels. So even if Zahra were to be examined by doctors, her blood drawn, and psychological evaluations made, she could still not be placed side by side with most Europeans or Americans in similar studies. Growing up in war, living as a refugee, and eating a different diet, Zahra may have a physical and psychological makeup that is too different to compare.

What also makes Zahra distinctly different from other children or young adults in the Western world with a possible gender identity

disorder is that she was picked *at random* to be a boy. As with other *bacha posh*, the choice was made for her. For that reason, it would be hard to argue that she was *born* with a gender identity issue. Instead, it seems as though she has *developed* one. That, in turn, could mean that a gender identity problem in a person can be *created*.

IN A WESTERN context what may constitute such a disorder is not far from clear-cut, either.

The children brought to Dr. Robert Garofalo, director of the Center for Gender, Sexuality and HIV Prevention at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, can be as young as three or four when expressing a feeling of having been born in the wrong body. Among those at the forefront in the world of understanding how gender is formed in children, Dr. Garofalo receives one or two referrals per week, often from parents who have at times lived in fear and shame because their children do not fall into expected gender roles.

In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association removed "gender identity disorder" from its list of mental health illnesses. Dr. Garofalo prefers not to pin a specific term on the children he works with, as he tries not to get stuck on a binary view of gender and the idea that a person always needs to be one or the other and possess absolute feminine or masculine traits only. In his view, what goes on with these children is "part of a natural spectrum of the human being—not an -ism or thing or condition that requires fixing."

No one knows today exactly why some children identify with a gender that is different from their anatomic sex. Multiple factors such as genetics, hormones, and social structures are all thought to play a role. Treatments for advancing one gender or the other in children who fall in the middle of the gender spectrum are currently still experimental and controversial.

"There is plasticity in children," says Dr. Garofalo, who believes that what he calls a nonconforming gender identity could probably be created in a child over time, such as the case with Zahra seems to be.

But one would also need to consider what part of Zahra's desire to be a boy is directly related to the experience of being a woman in Afghanistan. Would she really want to be a man in another

environment, where most people did not care whether she wore a head scarf or a pair of pants, and where women had more opportunities?

Maybe Zahra could be seen as healthier than most. Or does the desire to wear pants and not to get married actually need a cure? Maybe it is something else that should be defined as sick. Zahra's situation could even prompt a whole new category in the World Health Organization's index: "Gender identity disorder due to severe and longtime segregation."

When one gender is so unwanted, so despised, and so suppressed, in a place where daughters are expressly unwanted, perhaps both the body and the mind of a growing human can be expected to revolt against becoming a woman. And thus, perhaps, alter someone for good.

ZAHRA SITS CROSS-LEGGED on a carpet, her eyes fixed on the small television set on the floor. The title of the Indian drama translates as "story of love," and Zahra has been following it for a while. It is a Bollywood take on the *Twilight* series: The main character is from a vampire family, but one day he falls for a non-vampire girl. From that, a complicated romance unfolds.

I ask if she's ever been in love. She smiles faintly. "No. I don't want to be. I'm not crazy like that."

"What will you do if they force you to get married?"

"I will refuse to get married. My *no* is a no! When I grow up, I will go to the West, where nobody gets involved in your business. My will is very strong, and I will refuse my parents. Nobody can force me to do anything."

"Would you dress like 'a woman' in the West?"

She shakes her head at me in disbelief. "Don't you understand? I am not a girl."

I hand her our parting gift from one of the Kabul stores that sells torn T-shirts and jeans, supplying the trash-rock look popular among the city's teenage boys. It is a gray felt fedora. I explain that I have seen both men and women wear it in New York. Zahra beams with excitement and jumps up to try it on in the mirror, adjusting the brim to give it the perfect angle, casting a shadow over her eyes.

"It's beautiful," she says.