

Shooting Kabul

By N.H. Senzai

IT'S A PERFECT NIGHT to run away, thought Fadi, casting a brooding look at the bright sheen of the moon through the cracked backseat window. It reminded him of the first line of the book *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*.

“Claudia knew that she could never pull off the old-fashioned kind of running away.”

Fadi was only halfway through the first chapter, so he didn't know how successful Claudia had been in her getaway, old-fashioned or not, but he sure hoped that his family would be. If they weren't, they were going to be in an awful lot of trouble.

Under the protective cover of darkness, the taxi he and his family were traveling in swerved around a bombed-out Soviet tank and exited the pockmarked highway. They needed to avoid the checkpoints set up by black-turbaned men on the main road. With the headlights turned off, the car careened over a rocky plain, rattling the passengers' teeth. Fadi pressed his nose against the cold glass, peering across the desolate landscape.

His reflection flashed back, revealing a thin face with unruly dark hair escaping from beneath a traditional beaded cap. His nose sloped slightly to the left, evidence he'd broken it once. He held his breath when the driver nearly hit a tree stump while plowing through a parched wheat field. Another mile and they

arrived at the outskirts of the sprawling city of Jalalabad, in the eastern province of Afghanistan.

The driver slowed, weaving his way through narrow alleys toward the crumbling buildings that rose in the distance. They bypassed quiet residential neighborhoods and a shuttered local vegetable market. Finally, the brakes squeaked in protest and the taxi came to a lurching halt alongside a row of deserted warehouses. The concrete walls were riddled with bullet holes and grenade blasts.

“Is this it?” asked Fadi’s father, leaning forward in the front seat.

“Yes, Habib. We’re on the corner of Jalalkot Road and Turi Street,” replied the driver.

Habib peered at the corner, his lips compressed in a tight line.

“As a boy I remember coming here with my father,” added the driver with a heavy sigh. “For generations the merchants here created beautiful handcrafted paper.”

Fadi took in the desolate junction, trying to imagine bustling streets, shops overflowing with stacks of gleaming paper, customers haggling over prices.

“All right, then,” said Habib, his voice quavering for a moment. “Let’s go.”

“Come on, Fadi, snap out of it,” whispered Noor, Fadi’s older sister. She pushed

open the door and stepped out first, followed gingerly by their mother.

“Zafoona,” said Habib, turning to his wife, “are you all right?”

“Yes,” said Zafoona, her voice a thin whisper.

Noor took her mother’s elbow and gently propelled her toward the side of the road.

Fadi emerged next, keeping a protective hand on his younger sister, Mariam, who slid out behind him. The faint moonlight provided just enough light to help guide them into the sheltered doorstep of a shuttered tea shop nearby. Noor and Fadi’s mother stood enveloped in burkas, two smudges of light blue against the drab gray walls.

Fadi glanced back and saw his father push a wad of cash toward the frail white-haired taxi driver, who shook his head. After a heated whispered discussion the driver finally pocketed the money and opened the trunk so that Habib could pull out their meager belongings. Fadi eyed the two scuffed suitcases. Most of what they’d owned—the plush carpets, color television and video player, radios, jewelry, fine china, toys, clothes and even his mother’s beloved books—had been sold on the black market, or used as bribes to get their paperwork and passports in order.

“*Salaam Alaikum*, and good luck, Habib,” whispered the driver. His eyes glanced

nervously over the deserted, dusty street.

“*Walaikum A’Salaam*, Professor Sahib, and thank you for risking your life to bring us here,” replied Fadi’s father with a grim smile.

“How could I not?” replied the driver. “You were my best student in Kabul University,” he added, cracking a tired smile.

“That was a long, long time ago,” said Habib, giving the man a fierce parting hug.

The family said their good-byes and watched as the taxi disappeared down the road, its broken taillight fading into the gloom.

Fadi peered down the empty street, trying to make out the words on the broken signs lying on the dusty pavement. ZAKARIA’S PAPER EMPORIUM read one, while another claimed to have the finest writing vellum in all of Afghanistan.

The eerie stillness was broken by muffled coughing as Zafoona covered her mouth with a handkerchief. Before she could tuck it away, Fadi saw a trace of blood on the snowy white cloth.

She is getting worse, he thought, worry creasing his forehead. He glanced at his father, who gave him an encouraging wink and gently squeezed his shoulder. Fadi smiled in return, but he could see the fear lingering in his father’s eyes, fear coupled with determination. As a Pukhtun, his father was bound by the ancient,

sacred code of Pukhtunwali to protect his *namus*—the women of his family—with his life. With a shiver Fadi recalled the moment, nearly six months before, when his father had revealed his plan.

It was a blustery day in January as the family sat together at breakfast, trying to keep warm under layers of clothing. Fadi's mother set down a plate of old bread she'd reheated, along with chunks of white cheese, a rare treat.

"Ooooh!" said Mariam. Her hazel eyes sparkled as her fork inched closer to the plate. "Something to go with boring old bread... . Come to me, my yummy in the bummy tummy." At Zafoona's nod she speared a large sliver.

"Hey!" squawked Noor in mock anger. "Leave some for us." She poked Mariam in her ticklish spot, under the ribs, and got a loud giggle.

"I only took a tiny, tiny piece!" squealed Mariam, and wiggled out of the way.

"Girls, behave yourselves," said Zafoona, casting them a weary disapproving glance.

While Mariam spread cheese on the bread, her expression turned serious. She glanced at Noor with pursed lips. "Hey, Noor," she said in a loud whisper.

"What, Ms. Yummy in the Bummy Tummy?"

“I need your help with something.”

“With what?”

“Will you teach me how to sew Gulmina a new dress?” Next to Mariam’s plate sat a Barbie that was the envy of all her friends. She’d inherited Gulmina from Noor when her older sister had outgrown it. And now, even though the doll’s features had faded and she was missing her left hand, Gulmina accompanied Mariam everywhere.

Noor took a piece of cheese and looked at her younger sister with a raised eyebrow.

“Please, please, pretty please?” begged Mariam. “I’ll do your chores this whole week—peel the potatoes and turnips, take out the garbage, and iron the clothes.”

“I don’t know ... ,” began Noor. “You’re not even allowed to use the iron—”

“Please,” cried Mariam. “I’ll do whatever you want.” She put on her sad puppy-dog face and flashed two dimples at her older sister.

“Oh, all right.” Noor sighed. “I guess there’s nothing better to do than design a new wardrobe for Gulmina the Glamorous.”

“Sure,” said Mariam eagerly. She chattered on about what colors to use, mostly

lavender and pink, while braiding Gulmina's patchy honey-colored hair.

Fadi tuned out his sisters' phenomenally boring conversation, added a chunk of crumbly brown sugar to his watered-down hot milk, and stirred. He watched fat snowflakes swirl through the crisp air and land in the backyard. He shut his left eye and pretended to look through the viewfinder of his father's old camera, which Habib had given to Fadi for his eleventh birthday, a few months before. He squinted, framing the old plum tree against the cloudless blue sky. He wished the weather were better. Maybe he could have convinced his father to take him to the quiet back hills of the city to take pictures. But, no. It was too cold—and too risky—to be caught with a camera. His eye fluttered open as his father cleared his throat.

"I have something I need to tell you," said Habib.

Fadi glanced away from the accumulating snow with a frown. His father didn't sound like himself.

"The situation has become too dangerous for us here," said Habib. There were deep circles under his eyes, as if he hadn't slept for many nights.

"Situation." That's an understatement, thought Fadi as he resumed stirring his milk. Over the past year things had gotten more and more frightening. Even going out for bread could get you in all sorts of trouble.

“And so it’s set. We are leaving,” announced Habib, looking around the table.

“Leaving?” Fadi mumbled, blinking slowly, like a confused owl.

“What?” said Noor, as her fork dropped with a loud clang.

Zafoona sat calmly. It was as if she had been expecting the news.

“Father, what do you mean we’re leaving?” asked Noor.

Even Mariam, who’d been busy scraping out the last of the honey from a metal tin, paused to stare at her father. “*Why* are we leaving?” she asked, her brows knitted in confusion.

“Your mother needs better medical care,” said Habib.

Fadi glanced at his mother’s pale face. She sat shivering, cold despite wearing two sweaters, one of Habib’s old coats, and a shawl. She’d caught a cold at the beginning of winter and it had gotten worse. The few doctors left in Kabul didn’t have the right equipment to diagnose what was ailing her or the right medication to make her better. She’d taken a turn for the worse the week before when they’d buried her mother, Fadi’s grandmother, in the cold, hard ground next to her husband.

“It’s because of *them*, isn’t it?” said Mariam, her eyes wise beyond her six years.

They all knew who she meant—*them*, the Taliban.

“Yes, *jaan*.” Habib sighed, reaching across the table to ruffle Mariam’s fine reddish brown hair. “The Taliban have made it very difficult for us here.”

Zafoona cradled her steaming cup in her hands. “It had to come to this,” she murmured, muffling a cough.

“You were right, Zafoona *jaan*,” Habib said with a deep sigh. “We shouldn’t have come back.”

“You only had the best intentions for the country ... for the people,” said Zafoona. She patted her husband’s hand. Her face was laced with sadness and a trace of pity.

Mariam frowned, looking from one parent to the other. “What do you mean, ‘We shouldn’t have come back’?”

“Mariam *jaan*,” said Zafoona, giving her youngest daughter a resigned look.

“Remember I told you we used to live in America?”

Mariam nodded. “Father went to university there to get his P ... PH ... PH something.”

Noor wrinkled her nose. "PhD, silly. Doctorate of Philosophy in Agriculture."

"Yeah, PhD," said Mariam, grimacing at Noor's know-it-all-ness.

"You were born in America, in Wisconsin," added Noor.

"But why did we come back to Afghanistan, then?" asked Mariam, her sticky fingers drumming against the table, the honey tin forgotten.

"Father and Mother wanted to help the people in Afghanistan," said Fadi, trying to shut her up. He wanted to know more about how they were going to leave.

"And you did help them? Right?" prodded Mariam. Zafoona's lips tightened at her impertinence, but she stayed silent.

Fadi rolled his eyes. Mariam somehow managed to get away with everything.

"Yes, *jaan*," explained Habib, as if trying to remember it all himself. "When we returned to Afghanistan, the Taliban asked me to help get rid of the country's vast poppy fields that were used to make drugs."

Fadi had heard this all before, how Afghanistan had become the world's largest producer of opium and how the heroin derived from the poppies was ruining the country.

Mariam nodded uncomfortably. She had seen the thin, ragged drug addicts huddled on street corners, begging for scraps.

“Slowly I convinced the farmers to destroy their poppy plants and start growing food for the hungry people,” said Habib.

“Your father worked very hard,” interrupted Zafoona, “but things didn’t work out as we’d hoped.”

Fadi looked at his father’s defeated expression with growing apprehension. His father had always been optimistic, even during the most difficult times.

“But if the Taliban did such a good thing, why are they bad now?” asked Mariam.

“Mariam,” said Zafoona, her tone full of warning.

“It’s all right,” said Habib, holding up a weary hand. He turned to Mariam, his expression solemn. “It’s human nature, Mariam *jaan*. Whenever someone is handed lots of power, they have a tendency to abuse it. The Taliban was a group of young religious students. When they first came to power, they brought peace and order to the country. But with time their strict interpretation of Islam began suppressing the people they’d helped free.”

“That’s why they made you grow a beard,” Mariam said, and smiled, reaching out to stroke her father’s face.

Habib laughed. “Yes, they did, didn’t they? But what they don’t see is that you cannot force someone to be religious. It must come from their heart.”

“It’s not fair,” burst out Noor. “The Taliban is oppressing everyone, with a version of Islam that they’ve cooked up. They’ve banned everything! Music, movies, books, photography, and kite flying. Show me where it says that in the *Qur’an*. Show me!”

Fadi knew that wasn’t the main reason she was upset. Although many women in Afghanistan traditionally chose to wear the burka, a head-to-toe covering—including his grandmother and his aunts—the Taliban now made it mandatory. Women were compelled to cover up when they ventured outside. Worst of all, they’d closed down the girls’ schools, saying the schools would reopen when stability and safety had been restored to the country.

Zafoona murmured, “Oppression is the worst thing in Allah’s eyes. He forbade it not only for himself but also for us.”

“True,” said Habib, “but unfortunately, the world is full of oppression—oppression of men against men, group against group, and nation against nation.”

Fadi sighed. Life in Afghanistan had become more and more dangerous for their family, especially since the Taliban’s most recent visit to their house.

“Where are they?” grumbled Noor, interrupting Fadi’s thoughts. She tapped her foot and pulled back her burka, revealing flashing brown eyes under arched eyebrows.

“They should be here any minute,” Habib said in a soothing voice.

Fadi pulled Mariam under the tattered awning as she tried to inch toward a skinny dog nosing through a pile of garbage. She hadn’t spoken a word during the white-knuckled six-hour ride from their home in the capital city of Kabul. Now she clutched Gulmina at her side and looked up at Fadi, a frown marring her usually cheerful round face.

“It’ll be great, you’ll see,” he whispered. “There’s lots of chocolate where we’re going. And Barbies,” he added with a grin.

She nodded, fingering the bright pink burka that enveloped Gulmina. Noor had sewn it for her just the week before, during a fit of boredom. The Taliban had banned all toys that depicted human figures, since they were considered sacrilegious, so Gulmina was hidden away in the folds of the bright cloth. “If you say so,” murmured Mariam.

“I do say so,” said Fadi, ruffling her hair. He sensed that Mariam knew they were never going back to their sprawling villa on Shogund Street, with its airy rooms and plum trees in the backyard. Well, only one plum tree. Since the war, the trees had been cut down for firewood. And after years of neglect and lack of money for

repairs, the house was falling apart.

“Remember,” whispered Habib, pinning an especially stern gaze on Mariam, “under no circumstance are you to tell anyone your real name. If anyone asks, tell them we are farmers escaping the fighting in our village.”

Mariam nodded with a gulp. She’d been warned repeatedly not to reveal who they were or they could be arrested and taken back to Kabul.

“And, Fadi, pay attention. We won’t have a lot of time once the truck shows up.”

Fadi nodded, straightening his back.

Habib glanced down at his wrist, but it was bare. He’d given his watch to their faithful servant, Shamim, that morning as they’d left the house. “What time is it, Noor?” he asked, pulling thoughtfully on his white-streaked beard.

“Seven minutes past midnight,” replied Noor, glancing down at her glow-in-the-dark Mickey Mouse watch with the frayed strap.

A braying donkey rounded the corner, its owner in tow, causing the family to shrink against the building, trying to disappear into the shadows. Fadi peeked around the cement wall to watch the one-legged man pet the long-eared animal. Fadi closed his left eye and imagined the scene through his camera’s viewfinder. There was something sad yet endearing about the image. Many men, women,

and children had lost limbs to land mines across the country. Fadi blinked, his eyes watery. For all the problems in Afghanistan, this was still home. Dread crept into his heart. Would this be the last time he ever saw it?

“Oh, Rosebud, my lovely four-legged friend,” coaxed the man. “Let’s go home so you can have potato peels for dinner.”

Rosebud tried to bite her owner, causing Mariam to smother a giggle.

Fadi smiled and shrugged off his morose thoughts. His mind wandered back to Claudia and her great escape. *We need to be successful in ours.* He didn’t want to imagine what the Taliban would do to his father if they were caught.