

I creep up to the corner that connects the alley to the street. This is my last obstacle; I am almost there. I look right, left, then right again. Good; I don't see any of the Talib guards. If I am so unlucky to run into them, they will stop me and batter me with questions. *Who are you? What is your purpose on the streets at this hour of the night? Where is your mahram, your escort?* It is risky for anyone to walk the dark streets of Kabul at night. But for a woman, it is out-and-out insanity. If the guards found out my true purpose, it would become a death sentence.

I stay on the far side of the sidewalk, plastering my back to the buildings. This is a ritual that happens many times a week. I slowly move down the block, aware that I must dive to the ground at any sign of danger. I pass one house, then two; three, then four. At the fifth house, I knock quietly.

The door opens and I quickly slide inside. Now that the door is closed, the light comes on.

"Allyah Jan!" exclaims Monica Watson, a missionary from America. She is also my closest friend. And tomorrow, we will risk our lives together.

I met Monica Watson almost two years ago, when she and her husband came from New Orleans, Louisiana to begin a Christian church in Kabul. However, the crackdowns banned this. Monica and her husband, Adam, have been holding Christian fellowship in their home every Sunday morning.

I was raised in a typical Muslim household. My parents use the name Mohammed with reverence, as my younger brother and sisters do. To me, however, the name always filled me with a deep sense of revulsion. As a child, I thought I was unfaithful. After meeting the Watsons, however, I realized I could always see Islam's hypocrisies. How could Allah choose Mohammed as His great prophet? Doubts flitted in my head. Mohammed had twelve wives, one whom was his five year old cousin-five! —as well as concubines and slaves. I had so many unanswered questions: *How could*

Mohammed be Allah's prophet? How could Allah encourage such violence? How many men have died for this immoral cause? What about this Jesus? Was he only a prophet? Or something greater?

Monica and Adam helped me answer this question. There is no true God who would demand innocent blood to be shed in His name. There is one true God, the One who gave his Son: Jesus Christ, who I accepted as my Savior and Lord.

This, of course, is the worst secret a young Afghan woman can keep. As I walk to the Watson's home every Sunday, I always wonder: *Will this be the day we are caught?*

In these last months, I have become infinitely closer to the Watson's-Monica, especially. She is twenty-five, three years older than me. Monica always felt like a fresh breath of air in the cruel, humorless regime of 1997 Kabul. I have begun spending hours at a time with Monica, talking and studying the Bible, contrasting in my mind its message to that of the Qur'an. I now stay with the Watson's many nights a week, just as I would spend time with my girlfriends as a child.

My bond with this couple became ever closer months ago. One lazy Saturday, spent drinking tea and reading forbidden books, Monica turned serious. "Aliyah," she began, "Afghanistan is no place for women."

"I know," I say in accented English. I wonder what she means.

"America is for everyone," Monica says softly. She looks toward the drawn curtains, and lowers her voice. "America is for everyone," she repeats, digging in a desk drawer. She grabs a few papers and turns to me. "Even for you, if you want to take this chance."

That is how it all began. Monica and Adam were set to leave Afghanistan on June 7th. As missionaries, Monica and Adam have to come and go in secret, so that the Taliban do not find their Bibles, books, and papers. We are to travel through the Hindu Kush range, through China into northern

India. There, Monica and I can remove our veils. We can laugh, shout, and even say the words "Thank You, Lord," words that are worse than a curse in Afghanistan. Adam has obtained for me, in some unworldly stroke of luck, an American passport. He is somber when he first hands it to me, and I do not ask where it came from. For me, it is enough to be leaving the world that would dare force women to hide from the world. Life in this cruel, corrupt place will soon be over. And another chapter of my life will begin.

So we begin preparing for the journey. Every time I speak to my mother I feel as if I'm lying to her. Our conversations become distant.

"I love you, *Aliyah Jan.*"

"I love you too, *Maman.*"

"Are you okay, *Aliyah?*"

"Yes, *Maman.*"

"Okay," my mother would reply hesitantly. "May Allah be with you."

As the days drew closer, I spent much of my time in my room at my parents' home, deciding on what to bring. I had to narrow down my life into two traveling satchels. I packed items as tightly as I could. I added the quilt my mother made for me; the sketchings my father made years ago, before such things were forbidden and had been kept in my mattress; a small square my sister knitted before she died. *Oh, Jazmyn, I think, if only you could be here to help me now.* I try to bring along one of everything. However, the most important items are what I am leaving behind: my veils. My dark blue *burqa*. I vow that when I leave this country, I will never hide from the sky again.

On the top of my last suitcase, I add the most special possession I own. It is a photograph, one of our entire family: *Maman* and *Baba*, both much younger. I am on *baba's* lap, in a sunny yellow dress. I am maybe nine, and I know nothing of a world where I cannot run and play outside. And lastly, Jazmyn. She is only a toddler, sitting on my mother's lap in a soft pink dress. My sister will be taken from us only a few years later, in an accident while she was playing in the street. This is the most important thing I own, because it is the only record of her face. Her smile. The dimple on her right cheek. As I latch my suitcase, I wonder what she would think of me now.

I do not sleep this night. I go upstairs to my room early, on the pretense of being ill, to wait and pray. I hear my mother and father moving around downstairs, finally going into their own room to sleep. *Oh, please forgive me, Maman and Baba, I think. I am sorry I cannot say goodbye. That must wait.*

The clock has stopped moving. I know that Adam will park his small car in the alley behind my house, where it cannot be seen by anyone passing by on the street. I watch the minutes slowly tick by, sending prayers for God to protect my parents, who will be childless now. I ask Him that they will forgive me and understand why I must go. Why I have to fly.

Finally, the clock reads 2:00 a.m. I creep downstairs holding my bags, when a scary thought strikes me. I am no longer living my old life. I haven't started my new one yet. I wonder, *where am I now?*

When I climb into the Watson's car, those fears leave me. The headlights are not turned on. Monica turns to me. I can barely see the outline of her face in the moonlight. "Aliyah," she says.

"Yes?"

"We did it." She feels for my hand in the dark, and stay like that, hand in hand, silently watching the Kabul streets slip by, for a long time.

I look around, and it is light. Somehow, I must have fallen asleep. I don't know how this could have happened. I look over, and Monica is watching me, smiling. She still has my hand in hers.

Adam turns slightly to look at me. "We passed through Khandud about two hours ago," he says.

At first, this seems like a pointless statement. Then, it dawns on me. "We're not in Afghanistan anymore." I speak slowly, grasping my new freedom.

Monica smiles. Then, she slowly unties her veil, letting her light blonde hair fall down her back. I smile, reach up, and pull off my green veil. I grasp it in my hands, and I have a thought. I unroll the window and toss away the veil. I put my head out, watching it fly down the road. I look up, and the sun hits everywhere: my hair, my eyes, even my teeth. I lean back in the car, and start laughing. Monica joins in, and soon we are laughing and crying at the same time. "We're on our way," she says.

"We really are," I say. I see Adam hiding his smile in the front seat.

Our plans are to fly out of Delhi, and we will go to the Watson's hometown of New Orleans. Adam will take over preaching at a church they founded. As for what I am going to do, I cannot even imagine. I barely finished high school when the Taliban banned women from the universities. In America, I can go to college, and I will choose my future. The world is wide open, and I am going to take hold of everything I can.

Jazmyn. Her name whirls into my mind out of the blue. I think of how much I loved my sister, with her seven-year-old humor, easy smile, and twinkling dark eyes. "I want to be a teacher."

Adam turns to look at me. Monica's mouth drops open. "I mean it," I say. "I want to teach children how to love. I want them to know that it's never okay to hide from the world."

Monica smiles at me. "That sounds like a wonderful idea."

Hours later, I look around in wonder at the inside of the big jumbo jet. I have never seen anything so... *different*. Here, men and women mingle freely, talking and laughing. Monica and Adam are sleeping. I simply sit and watch those around me for a long time. There is a small, nagging thought in the back of my mind. There is one more thing I must do.

I take out a piece of paper and a pencil. The words flow easily, clearly, through my hand onto the page.

Dear Maman;

Forgive me Maman, but I did not know how to tell you goodbye before I left. You do not need to worry anymore; I promise you that I am safe. Iran is no place for a woman, Maman Jan; where I am going, it is for everyone. My friends Monica and Adam Watson are here with me, on an airplane leaving from Delhi, India. Maman, they are taking me to America! Just like you always wished for me.

I will miss you and Baba Jan so much, Maman. There is so much I want to tell you. But for now, I will only say farewell. I am going to go to school in America. I will be a teacher, and I will work as hard as I can. I will write to you when I arrive in the city where I can really begin my life. I will write to you of all the wonderful things that will happen. I promise I will be the person that you want me to be. I love you and Baba, so much Maman Jan.

Your Daughter,

Aliyah

(1,997 words)