

## Window Girls

I have watched all the girls I know leave. When we were little, we'd play out in front of our houses while our mothers watched and talked. As we got older, they'd begun to disappear, and they never came back whole. When they returned, they carried mirrors over their eyes, and hunched their shoulders like their mothers. Shuffled their feet when they used to run, while their fathers and brothers marched.

I didn't have any brothers to march with, but my friend Abra and I would look at these girls at school, and while we walked home. We knew they'd seen Amatullah. Amatullah wasn't her real name, but my mother and all the other women in the neighborhood never called her anything else, and they said the name as if opening a bird cage, always afraid something might escape. She had thin, rough hands, and they reminded me of talons.

Abra and I wondered when we would have to go see Amatullah. While I hoped that day would never come, Abra spoke of it in a hushed voice, like the other women. I don't think Abra had ever been to Amatullah's home, like I had. She'd never been there when someone left, never heard the women putting the mirrors in your eyes.

When my cousin Badi'ah left, I had to wait outside the house while she went in with Amatullah and my grandmother and my aunts, and even my mother. She cried so loud, I thought someone surely must come. Someone must have thought something was wrong. But no one came.

That night, I dreamt that it was dark, and I was lying down. All the girls who had left were standing around me, staring at me with their blank eyes. They had bruises on their arms, and their legs were bound in black rope. As they stood, a wail started to pick up, swirling through their hair and lifting it up. It got louder and louder, wavering like the crying wind, and it felt like my ears might shatter before I realized that I was the one screaming.

I recognized each girl, and began calling to them by name, begging one of them to look me in the eyes.

Fawz. Iman. Najat. Qamar. Daliyah.

Sana. Abal. Kifah. Zuha.

Maysam. Intisar. Badi'ah. Abra.

Abra! No! Abra hadn't left. I shouted Abra's name the hardest, but her eyes never looked into mine, only somewhere through my body. I wanted to grab her, to shake the mirrors out of her eyes and knock her shoulders back into place, but my arms and ankles were pinned by hands that as I watched, grew into my grandmother, and my aunts. Their grip was like stone. I struggled, still screaming, gritting my teeth.

As I thrashed, I watched the rope around the girls begin to glow, like embers in a dying fire. They burned, brighter and brighter, eventually bursting into flame. I started crying, throwing my shoulders forward, trying to break my limbs free. Directly in front of me, I saw the light of the fire glint off of something metal. Amatullah stepped out of the shadows. She was holding a knife.

I woke up when my mother slapped me across the face. I was only eleven, and her strong arms gripped my face tight between her hands.

“Shahd,” she whispered, “You must stop screaming.” She held my gaze, shifting her focus between each of my eyes until she was sure I was back in my body, that I knew where I was and had left the room full of fire. She picked up a bowl and pulled a cold washcloth from it, setting it against my forehead. I realized I was sweating, and the white nightgown I wore clung to my neck and my back. I closed my eyes and let my mother continue to wipe the washcloth against my hot skin and breathed deeply. As she did, I rubbed the spots on my wrists, unable to get the feeling of stone hands clutching my skin out of my mind.

After a few moments, my mother got up and retrieved a hairbrush, and came back to my bed. She laid down with me, brushed my hair, and sang to me. Her voice carried ocean waves, and softened the ringing in my ears and the heat in my face. I fell asleep feeling her heartbeat against my back.

When I woke up in the morning, my mother was already in the kitchen making tea. I got ready for school and ate my breakfast of flatbread and goat cheese in silence. Across from me at our small kitchen table, she had placed a cup of coffee where my father used to sit every morning. I watched my mother’s long, dark hair swing behind her as she drifted through the kitchen, humming a song I didn’t know. Sometimes, I stopped breathing trying to hear her feet touch the floor.

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Three weeks later, Abra wasn't in school and we didn't walk home together. I watched the girls who had left ambling home and I missed walking with Abra at my side, comforted by her easy smile. She was always thinking about what it would be like, after.

Maybe she was sick. Maybe she'd come down with something and was actually home in bed, resting. Maybe there was some chance my friend would come back. I decided to ask my mother when I got home from school. But when I approached my house, I saw my grandmother and two of my aunts were visiting.

I entered the house quietly. My grandmother and my aunts voices sounded sharp. They bounced off the walls like banging pots together, and I froze, hoping no one had heard me come in.

"What are you doing, Rafidah? You're only making this harder for Shahd." My grandmother shushed my aunts' murmurs of agreement. I could hear her frown, imagine her hands reaching out to my mother. "You have a responsibility to that girl, to all of us."

"She's my daughter," my mother said, her voice small but strong. No hint of pleading as she sipped at the coffee she'd made in honor of our guests.

"And she's *our* niece. You're ruining her chance for a future. Just because *you* don't want to find a husband and get married, doesn't mean you need to ruin *her* hopes for a husband!" My lip twitched. That was Rabab. I'd learned she'd never liked my father, and after he died, she'd done everything she could to remarry my mother. Who was she to talk about ruining my life?

"I *was* married, and this is not your choice." My mother's voice broke. She never talked about my father, only poured him his coffee and refused the proposals Rabab threw at her like seed at birds.

"I've allowed you to make your own decisions since Ubaid passed, but you've had three years and you're not going to do this. This doesn't just affect you," my grandmother said, nearly hissing her last words. The room went silent, but I could hear the *swish* of one of the women shifting. Probably Takiyah, who always seemed to fidget with her chador, pulling it closer to her body and around her stomach, heavy with her third son. My mother could always count on her judgemental glare for bearing only a single daughter.

I didn't want to hear any more of my future being planned. I started to back away, ready to close the door and announce that I was home. When my grandmother finally spoke again, her voice was final.

"I'll call Amatullah tomorrow. We need to move this along." Suddenly, my ankles were weighted with stone. I felt my legs bound and burning. A scream built in my lungs.

"Ah, no, mother. It's fine." She paused and sighed heavily. "I'll do it." I could hear my mother stand and begin clearing the glasses from the table. The other women all practically sang their pleasure at her choice, clinging to their coffee though my mother appeared to be done with their visit.

I closed the door behind me, making sure it was heard, and made my way into the kitchen. I greeted my grandmother and my aunts warmly, before excusing myself to my room. I never asked about Abra.

And my mother never called Amatullah.

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Every time my grandmother has looked at me since, I have worried she's seen windows in my eyes instead of mirrors, and that she would know. Know that I hadn't been cut. That there was still something inside me that yearned to scream, rather than burn in silence.

My mother told me to lie about it. Say that I'd seen another woman, not Amatullah, when we went away a few weeks after my grandmother and my aunts cornered her into making the decision they wanted.

"I'm sorry, Shahd. I had to tell them I would do it," my mother said. "It's going to be hard, but I can't..." She spent that whole evening crying into my hair, and thinking about my father. She never said that's what she was thinking about, but I knew. She stopped setting out a cup of coffee for him at breakfast a few days later, and I forgot to hold my breath to listen for her footfalls.

When I finally saw Abra again, I knew she wasn't lying. She shuffled home with all the other girls now, girls missing the puzzle piece to their womanhood, while I walked stiff kneed and hoped the secret I carried never showed. After that, I practiced bowing my shoulders and shifting my gaze, but I was never able to make my eyes lie the way my mother could. Six years of practice, and I've never been able to lie the way she could.

Once, when I was out with my mother, I passed a girl. I had stopped to glance in a bookstore window as she hurried out of it, arms full of the spoils she'd purchased. We

crashed right into each other, sending her books to the ground. I apologized profusely, knowing I'd been lost in my thoughts instead of paying attention.

I bent to help gather them back into her arms. She must have been going to college, as she was carrying mostly large, heavy hardcovers. As we each picked up the last of the books, I moved to hand them to her and our eyes met.

Windows. Windows, straight into golden brown seas, pools of honey, and laughter lines. For a moment, one of her dark eyebrows raised, and I swear a corner of her mouth twitched into a memory of a smile. She gulped it down, almost as quickly as I saw it, and she shifted her eyes back to her books. Hunched her shoulders and thanked me. As she walked past, she grazed her shoulder against mine.

I couldn't help smiling at the ground as I hurried to rejoin my mother.