A Dream Behind Closed Doors

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That morning, the sun rose over Kabul just like any other day, calm and warm, blissfully unaware of what would befall the city a few hours later. I, Maryam, seventeen years old and a twelfth-grade student at Sayed Ul-Shuhada High School, woke up at six o'clock as I did every day. It was my final year of school, and the dream of attending university breathed more life into my mind with each passing day. I put on my school uniform and adjusted my white headscarf. I didn't know why I lingered in front of the mirror longer than usual that morning; it was as if I wanted to memorize everything. In the kitchen, my mother was preparing naan and tea. I had a quick bite, grabbed my bag, and said my goodbyes. She said, "Come back soon, my daughter." I smiled. "I will, Mother." I stepped out of the house. The morning air caressed my face. A few shopkeepers were just rolling up their shutters, and the singing of birds could be heard from the trees. Everything felt like an ordinary morning, yet there was an unnamed anxiety etched onto the faces of some passersby. A man was speaking in hushed tones on his mobile phone, and a woman hurried past me with rapid steps. I felt that the city had lost its usual tranquility. On the way to school, I thought about my future: university, continuing my education, and the life I had studied for all these years. About twenty minutes later, I arrived at the school. The gate was half-open. My steps slowed. Usually, at this hour, the chatter of girls would echo from the courtyard—the sounds of laughter, conversations, and pages turning. But that day, none of those sounds were

there. I entered the yard. Only Kaka Ahmad, the school guard, was there. Seeing me, he said, "Maryam, my daughter, why did you come? No one has come today." I asked, "Kaka Jan, what has happened? Why haven't the girls come?" He lowered his gaze. "It's not good news. They say the Taliban are closing in on Kabul." My heart sank. I asked, "If they come, what will happen to our school?" He fell silent for a moment. "God is great, my daughter. Nothing is certain yet. It’s better you go home today." I thought of the twelfth grade and my university dream. I said, "But Kaka Jan, I have to graduate this year." He offered a bitter smile. "Inshallah, you will study right here again." Just then, the sound of gunfire echoed in the distance. Kaka Ahmad moved toward the gate. "Maryam, don't wait any longer. Go home." I looked at the schoolyard one last time; at the empty classrooms and the flowerbeds along the wall. I squeezed the candy Kaka Ahmad had given me in my hand and walked out the gate. The street no longer looked as it did in the morning. Most of the shops were closed, their metal shutters clattering down one after another. A man hastily locked his store and sprinted to his car. A woman, clutching her small child's hand, was almost running. As I passed by a group of men, one said, "Kabul is falling..." My steps faltered. I didn't want to believe his words. Another gunshot rang out. I tightened my grip around my bag's strap. I just need to get home, I told myself. I knew the way, yet that day, every alley seemed unfamiliar. A car sped past me. The driver shouted, "Go home, girl! Don't stay here!" I kept walking. Every time a gunshot pierced the air, my shoulders tensed, and I glanced around. My mother was waiting for me. That single thought propelled me forward. A few streets down, the road had practically emptied. People were rushing to their homes, and the sound of gunfire echoed, sometimes distant, sometimes near. My lips were dry. I stopped beside a half-open shop. I asked, "Uncle, do you have water?" The middle-aged man pointed to the corner of the shop. "It's right there, my daughter, take it." I grabbed a bottle of water, but my hands were shaking so violently I couldn't open the cap. The man took the bottle from my hand and opened it for me. I took a few sips. "I don't have any money with me," I said. He gave a brief smile. "I don't want money. Go home, my daughter. It is dangerous to stay here." I thanked him and stepped back outside. I hadn't taken more than a few steps when the roar of a Ranger pickup truck approached from behind. I froze. The vehicle drew closer. For a fleeting second, I thought it might be the government forces, but when I saw the Taliban flag, my whole body turned ice-cold. My legs lost their strength to move. The street was nearly abandoned. I could only think of my mother. The truck drove past me, its engine noise slowly fading away. Only then did I realize I had been holding my breath. I tried to move, but my knees were trembling. I took a few steps when a voice called out from behind me: "Maryam!" I stopped. "Maryam, my daughter!" I turned around. It was my father. His clothes were dusted with dirt, his face etched with exhaustion. He rushed to me and grabbed my hand. "Thank God I found you," he said. "Your mother is sick with

worry. Come, we must get home quickly." I looked into his face. I asked, "Baba... have the Taliban really come?" He was silent for a few moments. "Yes, my daughter. Kabul is no longer as it was this morning." He held my hand tightly, and we set off together. On the way, I looked back several times. The school was no longer in sight, but the image of its empty courtyard and half-open gate remained seared in my mind. I looked at my bag; my books were still inside. When we reached home, my mother ran to me and embraced me tightly. She didn't say a word; she just looked at my face and held my hands. I opened my bag. My books were still there. I took one out and placed it on the table. In the morning, I had thought I would go back to school tomorrow. Now, I didn't know when I would ever be able to sit in that classroom again. That day, I realized that war doesn't just change the streets; sometimes, it reshapes people's futures in a matter of hours. I closed my book and placed it next to my bed. Outside, the sound of gunfire could still be heard. I looked at my book and said to myself, "I don't know what tomorrow will bring for now; but I refuse to forget my dream of studying".