

# Women and Children Last

## Nafina Raha

“Get over here,” my mother whispers at us, ushering all four of her children into the cramped space of our living room. With twelve people living in one small house, space is always lacking and never quite enough—though it feels emptier than usual with my father gone. She gestures to us to sit around the table, where my aunt and uncle had our cousins sit as well. My grandmother sits off in the corner of the room, constantly peering between the curtains out of the window like she’s looking for something.

She looks scared.

Never before in my life have I seen my grandmother look scared.

My mother whispers something to my aunt, who nods her head and grabs a small pot from the kitchen. I try peeking into the pot, but she moves it out of my sight too quickly.

“We’re going to have to leave here soon, try to find another town to live in,” my mother says as she takes the pot from my aunt and dips a finger into it. She takes her finger out, now covered in what looks like dirt and grease, and looks each of us in the eye. “We need to cover our faces, okay? The soldiers might leave us be if we’re able to fade into the crowd.” She looks at me last, her eyes running over my face. “We don’t want them remembering any of our faces.”

“Mama, why do we need to leave?”

“Why are the soldiers coming?”

“Where are we going?”

Questions chorus from each of my siblings and my cousins.

“We’ll answer all your questions later,” my aunt says. She’s always been more severe than my mother, and I could see some unspoken conversation pass between her and her husband. “Get moving. Right now. We need to gather our things and get out of here. Before the soldiers come.”

She shushes our chorus of questions and ushers us, one by one, into the bedroom we all shared to gather our belongings after my mother smeared our faces with the strange liquid in the pot.

My mother kneels before me last. “Everything’s going to be okay, baby.” The smell of the grease and dirt makes my nose crinkle, and the touch of my mother’s fingertips smearing it along my skin feels cold and faraway.

“Where’s Baba?”

Almost too quick to catch, a look darts between my mother, my aunt, and her husband. There’s something about the look in my uncle’s eyes, something that tells me there was far more going on here than they were going to tell me. The adults always seem to be hiding things from us, especially since that first invasion.

They don't seem to realize that their children pick up on things, every little detail and breadcrumb we can get.

"Is Baba dead? Did the soldiers get him?" My voice shakes a little, but I think about my aunt's severity and straighten my spine, forcing myself to stay focused on the task at hand—prying information out of these adults. One of the other kids in our neighborhood said the soldiers were going after all the men first, looking for any reason to get rid of them.

I didn't want to think about what would happen after they killed all the men.

My mother's eyes turn glassy at that moment, and I can see the tears threatening to fall down her face, but she squares her shoulders and looks back at me.

"I don't know, darling." Her hand shakes a little as she finishes covering my face. "I don't know."

I can tell she's telling the truth.