

Darkness Is Your Candle

I held her hand for the last time, it was cold and still. Underneath the white cloth her young body was naked. She had been thoroughly washed and prepared right before we came in. Even in death she was beautiful. Her thick eyebrows were arched perfectly. She was skinny, as expected for a preteen. Her body had not yet begun to develop, but the cancer did. This was all for her: America, our new life. I just wish she was here to see it, to see me.

The funeral was similar to the ones we had in Kabul. The cemetery was a landscape of dirt, no grass in sight. No perfectly manicured lawns. Just dirt and death. The sun was brutal like it had been since the day we arrived. Late August in Los Angeles reminded me of home, the sweltering heat gave me hope for a new life here, over 7,000 miles away from Afghanistan.

After the service we loaded up into our cars to head to the local mosque. The parking lot was small, only about fifteen cars could fit. Fifteen cars were all we needed. We didn't have people here, no family or friends. The few people that showed up were our neighbors, mostly from countries like Pakistan and Iran. We didn't share much, but we shared a religion and that was enough for them to take a day to pray for the twelve-year-old Afghan girl that died of cancer. I scanned the room and I noticed Omar was missing. He lived on our floor, I remember he said he was a Muslim, I guess just not the type to come to a mosque.

Inside, the mosque prayer was segregated by gender: men prayed downstairs, and the women prayed upstairs. I took off my black dress shoes and placed them on a shelf. I started walking towards the men's section alongside my father, as I always had. I was stopped by my mother. She grabbed my arm tightly, ushered me upstairs with her, and pulled a black hijab out of her purse and motioned for



me to wear it. Now I was more confused than ever. This is what she wanted, her son. Now Laila is dead and she wants her daughter back.

Laila was the daughter my parents had wanted, and I was the son. Except I was not a boy. My birth came as a great frustration for my parents. They had already suffered three miscarriages. Then my brother was born, the son my dad dreamed of, and then he died naturally as a baby. In his sleep, not even a week after his birth. Then they went through it all again with my next brother. When I arrived, they decided they wouldn't count on me to survive, but I did. The only issue being I was not the preferred gender. But this was an easy fix, my father simply decided to raise me as a boy, a *bacha posh*, as is common for families in Afghanistan. For my entire fourteen years of life, I've been known to the world as Abdullah, only known as Mena to my parents and Laila.

Upstairs I felt out of place, everyone knew what I was. Rumors about my gender passed through the hallways of our apartment complex like wildfire. They all thought I was strange, they all were upset that I was clearly a woman now, and yet I still pretended to be a boy. I looked so masculine in front of these staring eyes. I wore a black button-down shirt, my breasts tightly pushing against the buttons that were made for a man's body. I wore black skinny jeans. My hair was cut short and slicked back the way I liked it. My eyebrows were thick and untrimmed, my light mustache also made an appearance, I never bothered to shave it. Man or woman, I knew I was about the ugliest thing in this room, on this planet.

The session upstairs lasted too long. I was sweating too much. Sweating because people were judging me, sweating because it was 100 degrees outside and the A/C inside broke. I ran out to the underground parking garage for an escape. The caterers were preparing lunch. I could smell the fresh kabobs, rice, various stews; my stomach grumbled, and I quickly forgot about the people



upstairs. I stepped out into the sun, looking for my father. I found him sitting in our rusty green minivan, the A/C blasting. I had an ice-cold water bottle ready for him, but I saw that he already had a drink in hand, whiskey. I was shocked. I've never seen something like this before, especially not in the parking lot of a mosque. He pleaded with me and I promised not to tell anyone. I rushed back inside before he could say another word.

After lunch it was time to leave. We packed up the rest of the leftover food and headed home as a family of three. The drive was less than pleasant. The van swerved in and out of the lanes. Dad drove too slowly, then too fast. My mom was too occupied with her own thoughts to even notice. I wondered if this was the first time he had driven drunk—the first time he had a drink. For my family's sake, I hoped this would be the last time.

We came home and I ripped off my thick black hijab that I wore to the funeral. My first hijab. I still wore men's clothes. I felt comfortable in this state, half-man and half-woman. I stared at myself in the mirror. I really did look like a man. Tall and gangly. Short, thick black hair. Thick eyebrows, even a slight mustache that I refused to shave. I stared at my ears. I wanted them pierced soon. A knock at the door drew me away from my reflection. It was our neighbor, Omar. A small, dark Pakistani boy. He was one of the few friends I had here, I was sad that he didn't come to the funeral.

"Hello," I said to him as I opened the door.

"Hey, I just wanted to say I'm sorry for your loss, your sister was a very nice girl. I lost my parents at a young age, so I know what you're going through," he told me as he handed me some flowers.

"Thank you, Omar. Would you like to come in for some tea?" I looked at him and wondered if he knew what I was. Right now, I seemed like a boy. If I were a girl, would he feel differently towards me?



“No, I’m okay, thank you. Let me know if you need anything, Abdullah” he replied and I had my answer, to him I was just a fourteen-year-old boy. He heard me being called Mena enough to know I’m a girl. Maybe he just saw me as a boy like the rest of the world had.

I decided after Laila’s death and after Omar’s unwillingness to accept me as a female that I should finally act like one, but the idea of it scared me. It also scared my parents who had known me as their son for so long. My mother supported the idea, but my father was gravely against it. I was told to keep pretending, for just a bit longer. My father just lost his daughter and he did not want to lose his son as well. So, I sucked it up, I kept pretending to be a boy, to be something I’m not.

Four Years Later

“Abdullah wake up! Your baba is in jail!” my mother woke me up screaming. “Jail? What happened?” I asked, but I knew the answer. It was the damn alcohol.

Six months in jail. My father was locked up for six months for driving under the influence. This had a big impact on my family. My mother couldn’t work. She failed to assimilate. She could barely drive, barely speak English, barely be American. What that meant for me was that I had to put my college plans aside, I needed to work so we could survive. I was upset but at least it was only temporary. I picked up my dad’s shifts at work, sixty hours a week working as a minimum wage parking lot security guard. It was a good thing I was still a boy. His supervisor, an old Afghan man named Kanishka, would have never hired me if he knew I was a girl. So, the *bacha posh* facade kept going, years after I began puberty, years after we came to America; I was still a boy.



The neighbors gossiped about my family once again. Although now the focus was on my alcoholic father, not my gender. Everyone but Omar participated in the gossip. Probably because he didn't live under his parent's influence, he was all alone. After college he got signed by some big movie studio. Apparently, he's a big deal in Hollywood but he never talks about his work life. He offers to help my mother and I, but we know better than to accept anyone's help.

Life continued this way. I worked. My mother complained. My dad stayed locked up. This wasn't the American dream I had hoped for. I wanted to be a young beautiful girl. I wanted to be in college. I wanted to be away from my family for once. This was just a dream. Reality sunk in and the overnight shifts kept piling up. Men treated me as one of their own. Women were reluctant to be my friend. This life also kept me safe in a way. If there was one benefit to this life, it was that everyone was repulsed by what I was. It was my greatest shield against the harsh world.

Everything changed when we got the phone call. Only two weeks shy of my dad being released, we received a call from Kabul. My grandmother, my Bibi Jaan was gravely sick. She was my father's mother, but also a distant relative of my mother. Like Laila's sickness bringing us to America, Bibi Jaan's illness would bring us back to Kabul, forever. After hearing the dreaded news, I ran out to the shared community balcony. I could smell the distinctive scent of lit cigarettes. I looked over and saw Omar leaning over the railing with one in his hand.

"I didn't know you smoked," I said as I stared at his face in the moonlight. His glasses shined as he looked up.

"I just started actually; do you want one?" He asked me as he held one out for me. I had nothing to lose so I accepted the offer. We stood in silence. The balcony overlooked the courtyard. From across the way, we could see all the neighbors in their own apartments. Some cooked in the kitchen under the



glow of orange-colored lights. Some sat in the darkness of the living room, the only light coming from the TV. I thought about life in those apartments, each probably better than my own. My thoughts were interrupted as Omar spoke up, breaking our peaceful silence.

“I heard your dad’s coming home soon. That’s good,” he spoke without looking at me, his eyes fixed on the woman in the kitchen.

“It’s not really,” I replied.

“You can finally quit that stupid job. It’s not safe for a young girl to be out working security,” he flatly stated.

“Only I’m not a girl, remember?” I questioned him.

“You are. I know you can’t be Mena right now, soon you can,” he tried to reassure me.

“No, I can’t. At least not here. We’re moving back to Kabul when my dad is released. My grandmother is ill. My dad is a drunk. My mother hates this country,” I replied with tears flowing confidently down my face knowing Omar wasn’t paying attention.

“They can go back, you can stay. You’re old enough. Just get a job, go to college, live your dream,” he said as if dreams come true for people like me.

“Where would I even go? What would I do?” I questioned him as I began considering the idea.

“Go to some college on the beach. Then get a job in a mall. Apply for scholarships. I did it all on my own, my parents left me too. Only their death brought my independence. You can do the same,” he stated and for once I began to believe in myself.

“Okay.” I smiled as I stared at the man on his couch watching football.

“Also, Mena, I don’t mean to offend you, but you need to cut it out and start acting like a woman. No man will want you the way you are now.” His last



remark was like a knife jabbed into my heart.

“You don’t know how hard it is for a person like me. You don’t understand because you were actually born as a boy!” I screamed now taking my attention off the man in his apartment and towards Omar.

“I know, but you can’t keep dressing like a boy. You need to take care of yourself, wear makeup, fix your hair, shave that goddamn mustache off!” He replied back, now looking away from the woman in the kitchen and staring back at me.

“It’s not that easy! You don’t understand. Why don’t you worry about yourself for once? You claim you’re some big Hollywood producer, but you don’t even own a car! You lock yourself in that apartment all day and rot! We are the same, you’re no better than I am,” I muttered and felt I was being too harsh to him. That’s what happened when I got too comfortable with a person. I walked away before he could reply, tossing my lit cigarette towards his direction.

The bags were all packed. I stared at the tiny one-bedroom apartment that we called home for four long years. I took it all in as I grabbed the rest of our stuff to move out. My dad had the least amount of stuff accumulated. He could fit his entire life into one suitcase. I managed to fit mine in two. One for Mena, one for Abdullah. I didn’t know what I would do with the numerous amounts of men’s clothes stuffed into my suitcase, there was simply no use for them anymore. I hauled it out to the front porch and saw a familiar face approaching me. It was Omar. I hadn’t talked to him since that night on the balcony. It felt so long ago, more than a month had passed but it felt like a lifetime.

He had seen me, and I knew what he thought. He was happy that I finally took his advice. I was a proper woman now. He stared at my revealing outfit. I wore a tight white turtleneck top that displayed the large shape of my breasts. I had on a short plaid mini skirt that revealed my long legs and thick thighs.



And to complete the look, tall black thigh high boots. I felt good. I felt sexy. My face was lightly covered in makeup, my hair curled with blonde highlights. I no longer felt weird; the new look was freeing. I hated to admit it, but Omar was right. I never got this much positive attention in my life and I couldn't stop now. My parents lowered their heads as they walked past me and headed towards the car, ashamed of the type of woman I had become.

"Hey Mena," Omar said as he looked at me, really looking at me for the first time.

"Hi Omar," I replied quietly. Suddenly feeling naked in front of his staring eyes.

"So, you're leaving for Kabul? Dressed in that?" He questioned me.

"No, I'm not. My parents are going. I took your advice. I threw a fit until they agreed to let me stay. I'm going to Santa Barbara right now, I'm attending UCSB in the fall," I explained to him.

"UCSB, wow that's a great school. Right on the beach too. I'm proud of you" he responded genuinely smiling.

"Yeah, well I guess I have to go. Bye, Omar," I responded as I started heading down.

"Wait! You have my number, call me if you need anything. You're all alone in America now, no family or friends in Santa Barbara. You also need to remember you're a woman now, a very beautiful one. Take precautions to protect yourself, you're not as safe as you were being Abdullah," he sternly warned me.

"I know. I'll call you if I need anything," I replied as I headed out. I knew I'd never call him again. Moving was a fresh start for me. I didn't need anyone in my life that knew about my complicated past.

The best version of myself came about after my parents left for Kabul. I was finally on my own as a free woman. A free woman. Something I never could've



had if I moved back home. Life wasn't amazing, but it was so much better. I lived in a tiny two-bedroom beach house in Isla Vista. I had five roommates, all women. There was Janice, my closest friend and bunkmate. The rest of the girls and I became good friends. They were very feminine, which I liked. They always helped me get my hair and makeup ready because I had no idea how to do it. Every weekend we would go to parties. We would get drunk. We would go to the beach and I'd wear bikinis. Forgetting all modesty my past had taught me. I went crazy for this new life, because I knew back home, I'd either be a wife and mother, or worse, a social outcast based on my expanded time as a *bacha posh*.

No one in the house knew of my past, any of it. My dead sister, my alcoholic father, my pushy mother, my dying grandmother. No one needed to know what it took for me to get where I am now. I fit in relatively well given my circumstances. My roommates noticed how comfortable I was around guys, having been surrounded by them my whole life as a boy it wasn't strange to me. They noticed how I was much stronger than them, how I was more willing to do the tedious jobs around the house that they didn't want to do. I was clearly bigger than all of them, I towered over them at 5'9". Sometimes I forgot I even was a woman, only to be reminded when strange men would approach me to flirt with them. I always turned them down, I was waiting for the right one to come across my way.

Six months of living on the beach with the girls and they still didn't ask any questions about me. I began to wonder if they even cared about me. They never offered to go to campus with me, they didn't even know what I was majoring in. I slowly began to feel like less of a roommate and friend, and more of a house servant. I was the one that carried Sheila home whenever her tiny body became too drunk. I was the one that took out the trash, did the dishes, swept the floors. I made sure the girls didn't go home with the wrong men, and if they



tried, I would step in the way. I did so much for these girls, but at the end of the day, I still felt so different from them, even though I tried so hard to become one of them. I grew tired of it, so I slowly cut them off. Instead of spending my weekends partying, I stayed home. I got a job at Target and worked as often as I possibly could, sometimes thirty hours a week. Knowing all my efforts would soon pay off.

This weekend there would be a big party for the students of our college. The girls looked forward to the event for so long. I shrugged it off, knowing I would pull a late-night shift at Target instead. Everyone else needed the weekend off to party which meant more money for me. As they lived it up on the beach, I restocked shelves, marked sale items, and helped customers. I worked until my knees ached. This job was much harder than the six months I worked security. Here you actually had to work; security meant sitting on your phone for ten hours. Finally, it was midnight and I was ready to clock out. I grabbed my stuff from the breakroom and started my walk home. It was short, only about fifteen minutes. I was never scared walking alone at night, I was used to it. As I walked with my headphones in, I stared at the palm trees that surrounded my tiny city. I thought about the meal I would eat when I got home, frozen fish sticks with French fries. My mouth watered at the thought. I picked up my pace and suddenly, I felt hands grabbing my body, I was being taken away.

There were three men in total. I screamed out for help, but no one came to my aide. I was shoved into an old green van that resembled the one my father bought when we first came to America. I longed to be back with my family. My mouth was taped shut. I got a look at my captors, there was one older man that looked about forty. He had graying hair and blue eyes, and a long beard. There was another man that looked to be about my age, maybe in his twenties. He had long dark curly hair and dark eyes. He looked just like a college student, or



maybe one of the guys my roommates would bring to the house from time to time, but not the kind that steals a woman off the street. The last one was quite surprising because he was not a man, he was a young boy. He looked about twelve years old. What would a child be doing here with these men? With me? He looked identical to the man in his twenties, probably a younger brother. The odd pairing confused me. Mentally I prepared for what I knew would happen next.

All the seats were down in the van. My body lay flat as they began beating me, preparing me to be weak when it happened. The oldest man kicked my head with such force that I thought he wanted to kill me. I think I would rather be dead. I pretend that I was knocked out so he could finally stop. He did and then ripped my pants and underwear off. He ushered for the young child to rape me, which he hesitantly did as I struggled against him. My whole life had gone by without even kissing a man, now my innocence would be taken by force. I pushed against the boy, kicking him hard in the chest until finally one of the men hit me so hard that I knocked out.

I woke up and it was early morning, probably 5am. They still weren't finished with me. The seats were soaked thick in blood and all other fluids. I was knocked out once again. I woke up and was instantly covered in water. I opened my eyes and instantly saw I was on the beach, alone. They must have dropped me off here when they were done. I stood up but grew very dizzy. It was difficult to walk, difficult to stand. I laid back down on the cool sand to catch my breath. I was still wearing my red Target polo, but my jeans were no longer on. I looked down and saw I had on a pair of men's baggy red basketball shorts. The red concealed the blood that pooled at the crotch. I began crawling now, looking for my backpack, hoping that the men that did this at least had the decency to let me keep my backpack. I found it fifteen feet away from where I woke up. Inside



was untouched, I pulled my phone out as I tried to figure out who to call.

First, I called Janice because of all the roommates she was my closest friend. No answer. Then I called each of the roommates individually, Sheila, Marie, Lucia, and Grace. No answer from any of them. They probably got really drunk from last night's celebrations. I sent out a text in the group chat saying, "Call me now. Emergency" and hoped they would respond. Then I called my mother on WhatsApp, not even bothering to check what time it was in Kabul. Then after she didn't answer I left her a message too. I was running out of people to call. I debated calling the police, but I knew if I did, I would have to tell them exactly what happened. I was too embarrassed to even think about it. Then I decided to text Omar. Only I didn't know what to say. I simply shared my location with him, and he didn't answer either. I took note of what beach I was at and began the walk home, in shame. Others were beginning to wake up and smiled at me because to them looking like this signaled, I had a good night. If only they knew.

I made it home and pulled out my phone. I received one text, from Omar reading, "Do you need me to come?" and I simply responded "Yes", and walked into the shower. Our house only had one bathroom that was usually occupied with six girls in the home, but this morning it was empty. No one was home. I grew worried that what happened to me last night also happened to the other girls. I pushed the bad thoughts aside as I turned the shower to the hottest setting and began to cry, finally processing what happened to me. I laid in the shower for over two hours until I finally heard a knock at the door. I shut the water off and began to walk out. My skin was red and raw from all the scrubbing and hot water. I still felt dirty and violated. I opened the door and saw one of my roommates, Lisa.

"Hey! Are you done in there, it's been a while," she said to me.

"Yeah, all done," I replied as I climbed into my bed, still naked and wet. I hid



under the covers until I fell asleep.

“Mena, wake up, your boyfriend is here!” Janice said as she shook me awake. I instantly shot up, scared it was one of the men from last night.

“What? Who is here?” I demanded.

“Some guy said he’s your friend, his name is Omar?” She replied as if I knew he’d come.

“Right. Okay. Tell him I’ll be out soon,” I told her, and I instantly began to regret texting him. I didn’t want anyone to know, but now he’s here in my home, over two hours away from LA. I needed him to go away.

I searched through my closet looking for men’s clothes. It was the only thing I could feel safe in. I searched past the countless number of dresses and tight pants and came back empty handed. All I had were the red basketball shorts from last night that I already threw in the dumpster. I walked into the other room to try my luck with Lisa.

“Hey Lisa, do you have any clothes leftover from your ex-boyfriend? I really need to wear some men’s clothes today,” I prayed that she didn’t think the request was too weird. She stared at me blankly before going into her closet. She pulled out a large dark blue hoodie and basketball shorts. I accepted the hoodie but turned down the shorts. She returned with sweatpants and I thanked her profusely.

“You don’t have to return them, I only kept them because he was a jerk that cheated on me,” Lisa replied laughing. I smiled at her and walked off to change.

I walked into the living room and saw Omar sitting on the couch staring at his phone. He looked the same. Same glasses and short haircut. Same clothes. He awkwardly stood up to hug me and I instinctively backed away. I realized we have never hugged in the almost five years we had known each other. I apologized, feeling embarrassed now. He didn’t look offended.



“So... what’s up?” He questioned me as my roommates in the kitchen stared at us as they prepared a very late breakfast.

“Not much” I responded, feeling all the staring eyes on us. Omar noticed too as he ushered me to step outside with him. I stared at the ocean as he began to speak once again.

“Did you eat? I saw a nice brunch spot; we should go and talk,” he said, and I realized it had been over twenty-four hours since my last meal. I didn’t even think about eating.

“Sure,” I calmly responded, and we began the short walk to a restaurant I had been to a few times with my roommates. It was an outdoor restaurant that had a view of the ocean. We were seated instantly, and he began to start a conversation again.

“So how are you doing?” Omar questioned. I didn’t know how to respond.

“I thought I could do this, but I can’t,” I replied, telling the truth.

“Do what? Attend college? Live in America?” He questioned as he began to open and stare at his menu.

“Be a woman,” I flatly stated. Unsure if this was the right move, but knowing it was the next move.

