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No More Mulberries

author

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Chapter 1

ONE

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'Daddy's home!'

Hearing Ruckshana's delighted cry Miriam, hunkered in the shade of the mulberry tree, raised her head from the pile of rice she was picking over. She watched her daughter tear bare-footed across the compound, oblivious to obstacles. Chickens contentedly pecking at nothing scattered, squawking alarm, as the three-year old, flung herself at her father. He lifted her, throwing her high in the air, laughing at her squeals of mock terror when he pretended to drop her.

Iqbal lowered Ruckshana to the ground, smiling over her head at his wife. The late afternoon sun had lost some of its heat but the path to their home, crouched high on the mountainside, was steep and he was panting slightly when he straightened up. Farid emerged from the kitchen carrying, with the careful solemnity of his eight years, a glass of water. Balancing the glass on his outstretched right palm, left hand under his right elbow, he offered the water to Iqbal, who acknowledged him with a nod before drinking.

Miriam reached over and smilingly patted her husband's stomach. 'You've put weight on since we came here,' she commented.

'I'm blaming your Scottish Afghan cooking,' he replied. 'What are we eating tonight? And when? I'm starving.'

'Rice and chicken - totally Afghan. Ready in about an hour.'

Miriam put the rice to cook and began preparing a salad. Slicing tomatoes coaxed with determination and loving care from her vegetable plot's stony soil, she listened to the children and Iqbal talking in the background. Farid was telling with quiet pride how he'd done in his arithmetic test while Ruckshana chirruped non-stop, sounding like the mullah bird, as she tried to engage her father's undivided attention. When Miriam lifted the lid of a pot on the kerosene stove the rising steam carried an aroma of slow-cooked chicken, oil, tomato and garlic.

When the food was ready, she called Farid whose task was to unroll the *dustakhan* over the striped gillim on the living room floor then, while Miriam carried through the dishes of rice and chicken, he fetched the *nan* wrapped in a cotton cloth. Ruckshana squeezed in between her parents, sitting cross-legged on the *toshak* as they did. Miriam, knowing how easy it was to hurt her daughter's dignity, hid her smile at the sight of the dimples on the little girl's chubby knees.

Over dinner she and Iqbal swapped stories about work. As well as dealing with the usual skin infections and gastric problems, he'd been consulted by Murtaza, the determined hypochondriac from the next village. 'He swore he could hardly put one foot in front of the other. Insisted he really needed a course of injections. When I said I'd have to examine him,' Iqbal's eyes crinkled in amusement, at the memory, 'he leapt up onto the couch like a nine-year old.' Miriam laughed with him. Murtaza had been known to gatecrash the women's clinic in his attempt to acquire medicines.

'Oh, and I met Mother of Naeem on the road home,' Iqbal continued. 'She's pregnant again. I think she'll be up to see you soon for a check up.'

Miriam counted on her fingers, saying, 'It's barely a year since the last one and this'll be her fourth. Last time, she'd a problem with her blood pressure so it'll be good to keep an eye on her.' She paused. 'Did she mention why Naeem and Sultan didn't come for English class today? It's not like them to miss a lesson.'

'I told them there wouldn't be any more classes,' Iqbal said, mopping his plate with the last piece of *nan*.

'What?'

'They won't be coming back.' He popped the bread into his mouth, not looking at her.

'But why?' Miriam asked in astonishment. 'They're both so keen. And they've made such good progress in the few weeks they've been coming.'

Iqbal, continuing to chew, looked down at his empty plate and Miriam began to think he wasn't going to answer her. Finally, he said, 'I have my position to think about. My reputation. Not only in this village, but the whole district. It's not right for young boys to be here in the house alone with my wife. People will talk.'

'Come on Iqbal, Naeem is, what? Thirteen? Sultan is eleven, twelve at the most. How could that cause talk in the village?'

With a glance at Farid, Iqbal switched from Dari to English. 'Are young boys in Scotland not thinking about sex?'

'Oh, for goodness sake, yes, of course. Think about it, talk about it, fantasise about it - but not about doing it with a woman who's nearly forty, the mother of two children.'

Iqbal's eyes narrowed and his voice was cool. 'The subject is closed.'

About to protest, Miriam became aware the two children were still sitting in the room. For once Ruckshana had fallen silent, gazing round-eyed at her father. Farid's head was bowed and she couldn't see his expression, but knew his face would have the closed, tight look it assumed whenever there was the possibility of an argument. She'd wait until the children were in bed before continuing this discussion. Hoping to dispel the tension in the room she rose to her feet, saying, 'Come on, Farid, you clear the plates while I bring the *toot*.'

The children whooped as she placed a large basin heaped with a pyramid of mulberries - white, red, purple - on the cloth. Washed in icy cold well water the berries glistened like jewels in the light of the oil lamps. Everyone gathered round, busy fingers searching expertly for the choicest fruit, the children's faces and hands soon stained purple with juice. At last, Miriam sat back. 'My favourite, favourite fruit. I wish they were in season all year round. I'll put some up to dry tomorrow. They're not the same dried, though, with their chewy texture and...' she groped for the word she wanted, shrugged, 'dustiness. Right, you two,' she continued, pointing at Ruckshana and Farid in turn, 'hands and faces washed before you get a story.'

'I'll get them ready for bed and read to them,' Iqbal said. 'I don't need to go out tonight.' She gave him a fleeting smile in outward acceptance of what she understood was a peace offering, though inwardly she still seethed. It would take more than a bedtime story to make peace.

Miriam twisted the ends of her faded black chaddar behind her back to keep them out of the way then stacked the dishes from their meal into a large aluminium basin. She carried it into a little room adjoining the kitchen, before fetching the water heating on the kerosene stove. Darkness had fallen and, leaving the dishes to soak she went out, carrying a lamp, which she set on the ground. Its feeble light was barely sufficient for her to see the chickens as she rounded them up, shutting them safely in their house for the night. As usual, the little black one had to be coaxed down from the branch on which she liked to roost. 'Come on, you silly bird,' Miriam called, throwing a handful of grain at the bottom of the tree. 'The foxes will get you.' Greed overcoming her resolve to remain free the bird fluttered down, squawking when Miriam grabbed her firmly. Laughing at the hen's ruffled look of affront at her ambush, she returned to the washing up, squatting comfortably beside the basin. When she had finished she poured the wastewater down a hole in the bare, packed-earth floor.

Her thoughts kept circling around the cancelled classes until, feeling her simmering anger come to the boil she stepped outside into the cool night air. Iqbal was being ridiculous but if she was going to persuade him to change his mind, she must stay calm. She really didn't want it to turn into a major row. She took a deep breath, which ended on a yawn. Too tired for one thing.

Maybe she should agree to Iqbal's suggestion and employ a girl from the village to help with the housework? She'd always refused, telling him she'd feel uncomfortable having someone working in the house. She didn't admit to him she hated the idea of people thinking the foreign wife needed help to run her home, couldn't cope with hard work. Bad enough they knew she couldn't spin wool - or milk a goat. That bloody-minded animal, feeling her first tentative touch, had looked knowingly over its shoulder at her with its nasty, wrong-way-round eyes and walked away. Tightening her grip only made the goat go faster, forcing her into an idiotic crouching run, while her friend Usma, in between shouts of laughter yelled at her to let go. When she did, falling over in a heap on the stony ground, the pain of her scraped knees had been nothing compared to the hurt to her dignity and pride. For weeks after everyone asked her if she'd milked any more goats. The day she could join in the laughter at the episode had not yet arrived.

She sighed and looked upwards. Familiarity with Afghanistan's night skies never lessened her sense of awe. On moonless nights the Milky Way was a magical white path through stars that didn't twinkle - they blazed. Constellations her father had taught her to recognise when she was a child -

Orion, the Plough, the Seven Sisters – demonstrated proudly that here, they possessed far more jewel-bright stars than she had ever seen in Scotland. Tonight, though, the moon, almost full, had risen, dimming the stars' brightness, silvering the jagged peaks of the mountains that kept the valley safe. 'Our moon,' she whispered. 'Oh, Jawad, what have I done?'

'Miriam?' She jumped at the sound of Iqbal's voice close behind her. Had he heard her whisper?

She turned to face him relieved to see he was smiling. 'Children ready for bed?' she asked. 'I'll go say goodnight to them.'

He shook his head, coming to stand next to her, saying softly, 'Ruckshana's already asleep. Farid is learning his spelling words for tomorrow.' He reached for her hand. 'Miriam, look, I suppose I should have mentioned it to you – cancelling the boys' lessons.'

'Mentioned it?' She snatched her hand away, the need for calm forgotten. Tilting her head to look up at him, she asked, 'What about discussing it with me?'

He stepped back, stared down at the ground, 'I see no need for discussion. I told you – I won't have my wife talked about.'

'Shouldn't you have thought about that before you brought a foreign wife back home, then? Anyway, who's talking about me and those boys?'

'No one...'

'So why cancel the lessons?'

'Come on, you're making too much of this.' He spoke lightly, as though the matter were of little import. 'Someone mentioned it to me, asked me if you were still teaching English to Sultan and Naeem.'

Miriam gaped at him. 'Someone mentioned it? Maybe someone else wanted their son to join the class? I think it's you who's making too much of this. I don't understand...'

He interrupted her, 'Of course you don't. It takes a long time to learn the village mentality; to understand what kind of behaviour is acceptable, what's not...' his voice faltered, as though he'd thought better of what he was saying. He looked away from her.

'Don't patronise me, Iqbal. I didn't arrive here yesterday. Don't forget I spent ...' Now it was her turn to let her words trail away.

'Go on,' he said, his voice taking on a chilly edge. She sensed him tense, his expression hardening the way it always seemed to at any mention of her past life. This wasn't about her understanding the culture. It was about Iqbal and – she didn't know exactly – his concerns about his status – his fear, a fear that seemed to her quite illogical, of being made to look a fool. She shook her head and gave a sigh. No point in trying to reason with him He wouldn't change his mind and talking about how she used to teach classes, been encouraged by ... She swallowed hard as memories threatened to overwhelm her. Stay in the present. This is your life now. Call a truce. She put a hand out, touched his cheek. 'I'm trying to learn, Iqbal, okay?' She felt him relax and added, 'Come on, let's go and see how our own student's getting on with his spelling for tomorrow.'

Farid, lying flat on his back, arms and legs spread like a starfish, was fast asleep. Miriam removed the open schoolbook from where it had fallen across his face. In sleep his face lost its habitual

anxious expression. Kneeling, she pulled the blanket up to her son's chin, leant over and kissed him, wishing she could kiss away the sadness that seemed never to leave him.

Back in the living room Iqbal was sliding two *toshak* together, leaving a gap between them and the one on which Ruckshana slept, thumb plugged into her mouth. Miriam untied the bundle of bedding, stored during the day in a corner of the room, passing Iqbal the blue and green peacock-patterned blankets. Leaving him to make up their bed, she slipped into the adjoining bathroom to wash for the night prayer. The centre of the small room was taken up by a diesel-fuelled *bukhari*, which heated water in a round tank with a hinged lid for filling and a tap on its side. In the summer, when the sun could warm water left outside in buckets, it was only lit once or twice a week. In winter, when it was lit daily, taking a bath was a pleasure few people in the village enjoyed. She shuddered at the thought of stripping off in the bitter cold. No wonder people who didn't have such luxurious trappings were reluctant to bathe more than was strictly necessary in winter. Next to the *bukhari* stood an array of galvanised buckets, some containing cold water, and three plastic water jugs. Towels hung on nails driven into the mud-plastered walls alongside a small square mirror, in which she noticed her grey eyes still held a spark of anger.

Mentally preparing herself, Miriam washed her face, and then her hands, letting the water run from above each elbow to the tips of her fingers. When she finished *wadoo* she returned to the living room, where she placed the small tablet of baked mud from Karbala, representing Allah's earth, on the floor in front of her. Opening with the obligatory *Allahu Akbar*, Miriam began her prayer. As she murmured the words, followed the rituals of standing, bowing in *ruku*, prostrating herself until her forehead touched the *mohr*, the familiar repetition soothed her.

By the time she'd finished and returned the tablet to its embroidered pouch Iqbal was already in bed. Yawning, she turned out the lamp and slid down beside him. He pulled her close until she was snuggled against him, his hand sliding round her waist. He spoke softly, 'Miriam, I'm sorry about... well, about... the class.'

Knowing how difficult it was for him to apologise, she nodded her head against his shoulder. When she felt his lips seek hers in the dark, she turned more fully towards him, winding her arms round his neck.

Later, she gave a sleepy reply to his murmured *shubakhair*. Before long, his even breathing indicated he was asleep but Miriam found herself wide-awake, restless. Despite the continued intimacy of their lovemaking something had changed in their relationship - not suddenly, but gradually. Nothing she could pinpoint, but it felt as though Iqbal disconnected from her sometimes. Had his feelings for her altered in the five years since they married? He'd never been one for talking about emotions but back then she felt he loved her. Was it just that he showed it differently from...No, re-visiting the past won't help.

Her thoughts were interrupted as Ruckshana sleep-crawled across the room, burying herself, without apparently waking, like a heat-seeking missile between her parents. Moving to make room for her daughter, Miriam felt a stab of guilt - wishing for the past was to wish Ruckshana unborn.

Shortly before eight o'clock next morning Iqbal and Farid set off together down the path towards the village. Only one or two white puffs of cloud dotted the brilliant blue sky. It was already warm, would soon be hot. As one, the women waiting to consult Miriam in the female clinic averted their eyes, shielding their faces with their hands or the edge of their chaddars until Iqbal passed them. Miriam watched until Farid turned to wave where the path curved out of sight, smiling as his chanted spelling words floated back to her.

She turned to her patients, who'd resumed their chattering as soon as Iqbal disappeared from sight. Some of the older women wore baggy trousers, which fell in folds before tapering to a cuff at the ankle but the younger ones had adopted the more fashionable straight-legged *tunban* under knee-length, wide-skirted floral-patterned dresses. Most wore waistcoats richly embellished with silver and gold braid and some of the unmarried girls fastened broad, beaded chokers round their necks. Children were squatting on the ground together playing a game, which involved throwing small stones in the air and trying to catch them on the back of the hand before they fell.

Unlocking a door, Miriam wrinkled her nose as she breathed in the familiar crushed-aspirin smell of the room which doubled as both consulting room and office. An examining couch, two simple wooden chairs and a small table cluttered with Iqbal's paperwork took up most of the space. On the packed-earth floor, of what had originally been built as a storeroom, a covered mattress and a woven gillim with bright orange stripes added a splash of colour. Shelves on one wall held a selection of basic medicines, textbooks and teaching aids; on the wall opposite posters depicted the stages of a baby's growth in the womb. Two small windows, set high in the walls let in very little natural light, making it far from ideal as a consulting room.

Before Miriam had come to Sang-i-Sia, named after the black stone of the surrounding mountains, she had assumed when Iqbal had talked in Pakistan of them working together he had meant exactly that - together, under one roof. It had been a shock to learn he did not want her in his clinic. Oh, he had dressed it up with various reasons, some of which, like the fact the women preferred to consult Miriam away from the eyes and ears of male medical workers, were valid. It still came down to the fact he didn't want his wife seen working outside his home. Miriam shoved the papers aside, noting Iqbal's statistics were still not up to date. Deciding she'd better tackle them in the afternoon, she called in the first patient.

Bibi Gul, wisps of greying hair escaping her *chaddar*, hobbled in, carrying her small granddaughter in her skinny arms. Miriam invited her to sit, asking after her family. Only once it had been established that every member of both families, their livestock and their crops were all, thanks to Allah, in good health was it possible to learn what had brought Bibi Gul to the clinic.

'It's Chaman. She has diarrhoea.'

'Let's have a look, then. How long has she been sick?' Miriam asked, reaching out for the listless child who immediately let out a wail, clinging to her grandmother.

'Three or five days.'

'What's she been eating?'

'She's not eating. I told you she's got diarrhoea. She needs medicine.' Bibi Gul took a small plastic bag, pinned for safekeeping inside her waistcoat. Although they had no decent sized pockets, waistcoats took the place of handbags. Safety pins and sewing needles were embedded in the fabric, matches stowed away in a small side pocket while, pinned to the inside were the keys to unlock the tin trunks in which were stored sugar and sweets and other household valuables. Now she handed over a piece of paper from the bag. It was a scrawled prescription for streptomycin, a tuberculosis drug. Her son, she told Miriam, had been a *mujahid* with *Wadhat* in Kabul. A big doctor there had given him the prescription. She was sure it would be good for *Chaman*.

While Miriam tried to explain the prescription was not for diarrhoea, the child continued to cry until, with soil-begrimed fingers Bibi Gul scabbled for the soother hung on a string around the child's neck. She plugged it firmly into her granddaughter's mouth. Miriam smothered a sigh.

'I'll be right back,' she said. She hurried to the kitchen where she tore off some *nan*. When she returned to the consulting room, she removed the soother at the same time offering the child the bread. The little girl lost her listless look and began to chew with evident relish. Ignoring Bibi Gul's disapproving clucking Miriam continued her examination of the child. 'Well, she doesn't have any fever,' she said a few minutes later shaking down the thermometer, adding, 'but she's very weak because she's so dehydrated. She needs to drink plenty to replace the fluid she's lost. And she needs to eat nourishing food to help build her strength.' She paused as Bibi Gul's silence told her she wasn't listening.

'She needs medicine,' the older woman repeated.

'No, Bibi Gul, she doesn't need medicine. The diarrhoea will stop by itself. In the meantime I'll show you what to do to help Chaman get better.'

Bibi Gul looked mutinous. It was going to be a long morning. Why did Bibi Gul have to be the first patient of the day? Now she would have to spend ages convincing her not only that Chaman didn't need medicine but she did need to eat, and especially, to drink. Many of the villagers attempted to cure illness by '*perhez*', or fasting, cutting out foods they believed caused the problem. On the face of it, it was a logical treatment - eating and drinking often produced more frequent diarrhoea in the acute stage. Unfortunately they usually cut out the most nutritious foods. Miriam headed once more to the kitchen, returning with a jug of water, an enamel teapot and a spoon. Knowing she would at some point have to tackle the subject of the dirty soother - one of the most likely causes of Chaman's diarrhoea - but deciding to leave it for now she gave the child another piece of bread. For the next twenty minutes Miriam explained, with the help of her plastic baby, what happens to a child with diarrhoea and how the family should treat it. Several of the other women crowded into the room to watch.

Once, this lack of privacy had worried Miriam and she had shooed spectators away but now, unless she was examining a patient, or someone indicated they needed to speak to her alone, she let them stay. All the better if more than one woman got the message.

The women murmured amongst themselves as the doll plumped out when Miriam poured in more water than it was losing at the other end. At last Bibi Gul, seemingly convinced, or at least partly mollified by the packets of oral re-hydration salts she was given, rose to leave. Although not all her patients were so time-consuming Miriam found herself, as always, having to explain why she would not prescribe capsules or, most-sought after, injections. Even when it was something as simple as a child with worms for which she could legitimately hand over pills she felt compelled to explain to mothers how they could prevent a recurrence. 'I know, I know,' she said, almost laughing at the astonished expression on one mother's face. 'It's impossible to stop your kids playing in the dirt, or putting their fingers in their mouths - but at least please try to stop them playing near where people go to shit.'

By lunchtime the sweetish odour of unwashed bodies overlaid the room's medicinal smell. Miriam turned to invite the last of her patients into the consulting room. The older of the two women carried a tightly swaddled baby. Wordlessly she handed the bundle to Miriam who, unwrapping the layers of cloth, struggled to hide her emotions when she saw the wizened, old man face, the emaciated bundle of skin and bones that emerged. Addressing the younger woman she asked, 'What's his name?'

'Sadiq,' she replied in a voice little above a whisper.

'How old is he?'

'Two months.'

The other woman suddenly reached over and grabbed the young woman's breast, making her gasp in pain as she squeezed hard. 'She hasn't enough milk. Can't feed him. Useless daughter-in-law I have.' The younger woman's eyes filled with tears but she said nothing.

'You old cow,' Miriam murmured in English, before addressing her questions to the baby's mother, Bilquis, who explained she had three older children at home, the youngest only 18 months old. As well as the work in the house she sometimes had to spend whole days out on the mountain cutting *butta*, carrying the firewood home piled high on her back. The children were left at home until her return. Her mother-in-law, insisting she personally was too weak to work - besides, what else was a daughter-in-law for - kept up a running grumble of complaints until Miriam wanted to slap her. No wonder the poor woman's milk's dried up.

Sadiq whimpered as she weighed him. At barely six pounds, his chances of survival without intensive feeding were nil. She handed him back to his grandmother. She could think of only one solution. He'd have to stay here. She turned to the mother-in-law, the one who would make any decisions. 'You're right. Sadiq does need powdered milk. But because he is so weak I need to see him every day.' The old woman began to protest about the difficulty of making the journey to the clinic each day. Miriam nodded in agreement, 'Yes, I can see it would be a problem. Could you persuade your daughter-in-law to leave him here for some weeks? And,' she added, 'you would be most welcome to stay too - so you can keep an eye on me. Then when you go home you can show Bilquis how to mix Sadiq's feeds.' The woman's eyes flicked from Miriam to Bilquis, to the baby. 'Look, ' Miriam said, 'I'll leave you for a few minutes to talk about what you want to do.'

Miriam stepped outside, blinking in the sunshine. She must be mad. He'd probably die and she'd be blamed. No one would trust her again. She should just send them home with a supply of milk powder - but then he would die, for sure. Closing her eyes she saw again the tiny scrap of skin and bones, the eyes huge in the skeletal face and marched back into the consulting room ready for battle. Bilquis was holding Sadiq, tears streaming down her face and Miriam knew she was going to leave her baby. The distraught woman held the re-wrapped bundle out to her. Oh shit! What had she let herself in for?

...excerpt...

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