

SHADOWBOXING

She is sitting under the veil looking at the holes in the fabric. They are square, held together by the irregular thread of the weave. White and ochre, some gold, too. Her feet are touching the tassels of the fabric. It tickles slightly and reminds her of where she is.

She is sitting on the rich red carpet of the grandmother's Pashtun home. Today, it is draped over a wooden podium constructed to put her on display. This is the carpet that she used to run her hands through as a child, leaving wild patterns in its velvet sea. This is where she would have stretched out and rested her head to breathe in the age-old dust of tribal life.

Today, breathing is difficult. Her attire is heavy and the air under the veil-like shawl reduced. The warmth of the body next to her has further heated the air and its unknown presence has tightened her chest. She is nervous about this wedding with so many sounds muffled by the shawl and rendered unfamiliar. This is her wedding, yet she feels strangely cordoned off. Cocooned within the veil that marks this last island of her life so far.

She doesn't know the man beside her, can just sense his weight on the carpet, on their box. A treasure box? She isn't sure. However much she wished it was, there are nightmares lurking, too. The man, her husband soon, moves slightly and makes the wood beneath her quiver. Like the floorboards when bodies slump to ground after too much beating. His body is agile, lots of energy, now immobilised again on top of this box.

The nightmares, she used to have lots of them. As a child, in bed at night, the sound of foot hitting flesh and fist hitting bone frequently replaced the lullaby that her grandmother would sing to her on the other nights. This was when she visited her ancestral home during school holidays. It was like a return to old-age history with its ghosts of tormented women settling into her sleep.

The ghosts were not alone, though. They were kept in check by the words that her grandmother hushed into her ears on the nights when quiet prevailed. They were subversive songs: songs that mocked the man, songs that slipped through his hands to lead a free and happy life somewhere else.

Her grandmother never made it, her mother tried. Mother escaped the village and set up life in Kabul with father who was a free spirit activist. Soon, however, they hit the bad times when Taliban rule brutally pressed its suffocating cloak upon all freedom-loving souls. Her mother managed to slowly crawl out from underneath, some years later, but her father was a changed man. Broken and manipulated he had lost all zest for building a new Afghanistan. The violence witnessed had deadened his heart. He never touched her, let her be. But all support and love was gone. When her father left them, nearly destitute, the grip of the village started to extend its reach across the many miles that once had separated old and new.

The man beside her moves again, now stirring the fog of her sombre thoughts. What would his grip be like? She wants to reach over and touch his hands, feel his knuckles, the tendons and the muscles of his arms. Instead she buries her nails deep in the red of the carpet, holding on to the ground laid by her grandmother's songs. Her mother tried to follow their thread but got entangled whilst raising her daughter on her own. This was their moment to claim back if not the mother, at least the daughter. She was the offspring that needed to be brought back into the stonewalled compound of old traditions, a safeguard against the rebellious spirit that once had been let out by mistake when mother took to town.

Her mother had put a foot down and insisted they stayed in town. Her position at the university had helped. Yet, a constant stream of visiting uncles, brothers, boyish nephews, too, gradually looped around this foot of hers a rope of watchful eyes. They monitored each move and waited for their time. It came when she - the daughter - reached marriageable age. They pulled their strings with threats to kill and pulled one day too hard. Mother fell, they left her bleeding from the head, and she was dragged

back to the village for wedding negotiations. The night she had arrived back at this house her grandmother had looked on with eyes scraped empty and no voice left to hear. Her grandfather and uncles, on the other hand, were in high spirits flaring with the scent of bridal treasures in the air. The price never paid for her mother's life was finally in reach.

This was the backlash. It had left her paralysed for all those days spent locked up and tranquilised while decisions were taken and arrangements were made. The shock is still deep within her bones, their sound so hollow on top of this box now filled with unimaginable horror. Yet something is changing. She can sense it: a tingling in her hands. These are the hands that have made her life so different from what it was before. These are the hands that know how to make a fist and hit back. These are her hands with which she has to hold on now that mother's life is gone.

She needs to feel the wood beneath the carpet, make sure it's solid and there to keep it all at bay. A box to keep the horror well-encased, to keep it far away, that's what she needs right now. No escaping of bloodthirsty ghosts, no breaking open again to the brutal wounds. She knows that in a few days this wood would be used to make a crate for all her belongings to travel to her husband's house. What they can't box in is her spirit used to fight.

Her grandmother and mother have taught her well the pattern of subversion: spot the hole and slip right through. Spot the hole in the weave of our traditions. Spot the hole in the daily grind of women's lives. Spot the hole in the home-spun cloth and free your gaze upon the world beyond.

Her eyes are back on the holes in the veil: a shape with clear demarcations, so familiar to her. She had first stepped into this open space four years ago when the Kabuli Co-operation for Peace and Unity together with Oxfam had hit the town with a new project for teenage girls. It was a bold move against the stereotypes of submissive Afghan women. A slap in the face of old traditions and those who still couldn't see beyond the violence of tribal rule. It was a boxing project! Not to box in

girls' desires, nor to create memory boxes hanging onto the thin threads of female lives. No! Real boxing, with hands and strong bodies and a message for peace. A peace that is not achieved by recoiling in pain and resignation, but a peace that is reached by standing up, fighting for freedom and competing for a better and more equal chance to win in life.

She had always been good at athletics. Her teachers had encouraged her, and when she learnt about the project she lined up for the selection process. It was well-known national team boxer Saber Sharifi himself who put them to the test: endurance, commitment and determination – that's what he was asking for. And she had responded with a leap so powerful it even took her by surprise. In the end, she held her first pair of boxing gloves and boots within her trembling hands.

Her mother had been scared but understood. She helped her to vanish unsuspected by patriarchal eyes and to slip away to training for an hour at a time three times a week. Her gloves and boots, how much they mean to her! How much they have become her second skin in those four years. She can feel it clearly now, as if she had them on right here whilst sitting under veil.

She looks again at the threads surrounding the holes in the fabric. They resemble the demarcations of the boxing ring. How many times has she found herself slung over the ropes? How many times has she flung another body into its elasticised arms? The impact of this sport is profound. She feels her muscles tensing. The years of training have steeled her body and emboldened her spirit. She has spent countless hours in the cavernous gym of the National Stadium in Kabul where women once were stoned and flogged and heads had rolled into Taliban's blood-stained hands. This is where she has come into her own, bout after bout. The thump of each hit moving her closer to the pulse of life.

Her hands are burning. How could he take it? She is not a timid creature and only crouches in preparation for the next exchange. Submission is not her game. She is part of a special cadre, the first women's team in her country to leave the confines of

home and punch through to international terrain. This is her chance to be big and she won't let it go.

The music in the room has gathered pace and her pulse is racing in response. She feels very hot now, stifled. She wants the veil to go. But what will she do once it all comes out into the open? Her training, her passion, and her plan to join the team next year in London in their bid for Olympic fame? It will be the first time ever for women to box under the Olympic banner, and she wants to be there. She wants to step up with pride in her combination of hijab and tracksuit bottoms. She wants to swing her legs over the barrier, the elastic threads that hold it all together: the game, her life, and the small square of ground on which her body meets the other with full force.

A sudden halt in the music stocks her breath. This is the moment they have all been waiting for. Someone is passing the Quran and mirror underneath the shawl – a gesture so old and powerful in implication. This will be the official first time: a mingling of their prayerful voices and a first sighting of married reflection as they look into the mirror. Waiting, she holds the open book and he holds the mirror, ready for the light to enter. In her heart she cries out loud to Allah to stand by her, and in response she hears her trainer Sharifi's voice: "My girl, for goodness sake, keep breathing!"

The veil is lifted. With the next breath the air hits her face and she fully wakes up to the scene of this day. She has seen it all before, she knows what happens next. It has happened to her friend who was boxing, too. Until she got married. Back in the gym they all knew then that she would never be able to return. And she didn't. This was a year ago.

She looks into the mirror but focuses on her own eyes only, his she leaves blurred by the side. She has gone cold now, cold with rage and determination. They will not have her consumed. They will not go unpunished for her mother's death. She will get out, slip away tonight, when the moment is right. Her gloves and boots inside her

bag. Her grandmother might have stopped singing and her mother does not stand anymore. But she will fight. Not in the void of another lost soul. Under cover, woman sheltered maybe - but only for a little while. She will go on to fight in public with the shield of the press that has already picked up her story as an Olympic aspirant. She will not give up. She will be there, beside her team mates in front of the whole world next July. Then she will speak. With words that stream in her blood. Words that burn on her tongue. Words that tear on the fabric of their lives and rip open the holes in their souls. Until the veil is gone.

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