

THE VEIL OF FEAR

Erik Jensen

A cold draft just brushed her face as the doors closed and the iron vehicle carried on its ride. Zakia sat on one of the dozen ragged seats right next to her husband. Mohammad was as tired as she was but she could feel the rising tension in his blood. His eyes swept from one side to the other as if he was trying to let the menace disappear. *They knew we were here.* She searched his rough warm hand. She was dead bet. Only the monotonous bumping stopped the noise of the muddled crowd. *A place full of letters you cannot read and languages you do not understand.* That was what the translator at the embassy in Kabul had told them once.

When they got out of the subway, the couple found themselves in the fresh spring night of Brooklyn. Black silhouettes appeared, passed and disappeared. Mohammad just moved on without even taking a moment to enjoy the wonderful flair of the accurate and artistic streets that Zakia was never allowed to visit. *But one day. But one day I will walk through every shop, every arcade and every bar until I am fed up with it!* Zakia swore herself. Finally, they reached their hotel – an old redbrick building, redeveloped and now run by a chain.

The familiar smell of their apartment in which they had now lived for four months gave her back her certainty – they were safe. For the past two years, Mohammad and Zakia had always been on the run seeking a place that would offer peace and security. Until they eventually applied for asylum in New York City Zakia had forgotten what it meant to be secure because their lives had lost any sense of normalcy a long time ago.

“Good night. I love you.” Mohammad said and the light was switched off. Lying in bed Zakia wondered about the darkness which was still lightened up by the city lights and provided with the sound of cars and music in the

background. It was not the same kind of darkness she experienced in the high mountains of Afghanistan where they had hidden from the police and their bloodthirsty families. Every time she thought of those months the coldness came back to her like chains she could not get rid of. *You were never meant for each other.* That was the only reason she got to hear at home in Bamian Province. Apparently, it gave them legitimacy for all their acts: for the round-the-clock-surveillance at home, for all the intimidation, for all the violence, for all the betrayal and hatred. *You were never meant for each other.* It was the one and only reason why their families sought to kill them in the name of honor after they had eloped. Never would she forget that torturous odyssey. Never could she forget living in fear where not even a tuft of grass grew and they had had to move from one hiding place to another every month – for two long years. *And they knew we were here.* She closed her eyes and found herself on one of the vivid streets of Brooklyn walking along food stands and clothing stores while listening to all the rhythms and sounds and smelling the overwhelming mix of freshly cooked dishes, blossoming trees and car emissions. A smell she was not familiar with. A smell she always dreamed of. *The smell of freedom.* Besides the fancy cars and yellow taxis that rushed through the streets, a flow of people spread between the streets and corners like ink. They all looked different: white, brown, black. They had different hair: black, brown, blond, red or even more conspicuous. Some wore business clothes, some were lightly dressed and some even were veiled – colorfully like her. But even though she looked everybody in the eyes, she never received back a glance. Suddenly, all people turned away and cleared the path. Zakia forced her way through and finally reached an old, shabby, threatening store.

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But neither the spine-chilling outside of it nor its familiar appearing inscription aroused panic in her. It was the two pitch-black eyes which stared at her through a to the bottom extending burka. Before the figure could take a step forward Zakia screamed and leaped up in her bed.

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Mohammad had already been lying awake when Zakia began to scream. As in many other nights he could not sleep even though he was dog-tired of all the bureaucracy and the endless rushing around. But every time he wanted to close his eyes a gloomy figure dressed in a black burka followed him and tried to grab his face with the long bony fingers. He switched on the lights, touched Zakia's shoulder and gently kissed her neck. Although she turned her back to him he recognized the tense shrugging of her body. She cried. "'Ami? All okay?" a soft mumbling voice suddenly asked from the other side of the room. Two sparkling brown eyes tried to look over the edge of a wooden cot hardly to distinguish from the dark filling the unlit part of the room. *Our angel.* "Everything is alright Ruqia, darling! You know, even your parents have nightmares sometimes." *Though this was no dream.* Luckily, their 2-year-old daughter was still too young to realize what was going on. *We fought for our love and God gave us Ruqia, a healthy little girl, as a gift.* Meanwhile, he did not notice that his wife fell asleep again her face turned towards him. She had been so young, 18, but had been determined to escape from the suppression she had to endure. Sometimes Mohammad regretted that he had made her risk her life for him. But what would have been the alternative scenario? He could just think of one. *Life would not have been worth living.* The threat was not gone. Not yet.

They knew we were here. That is the reason why he could not let his wife go out alone and experience their new world. It would be too dangerous for many reasons. Something could happen to her. Someone could have found out where they lived. *Bloodlust is never forgotten.* Even bigger were his concerns on how she would orientate herself. She had never been to such a huge metropolis before and, most importantly, she was illiterate. They both were though he had already learned and could at least understand most of what people wanted from him. But even if he wished for it, Zakia would not be ready yet.

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The first sunbeams were tickling her ears when Zakia woke up. They bathed the apartment into an orange-red Elysium. As she had presumed she found the left side of the bed empty. Mohammad had told her that he would arrange another meeting with the lawyer from the aid agency that took care of the young family. Apparently, it was about their application for asylum. She took a deep breath. "Hopefully, the uncertainty will be over soon." she heard herself saying. Then she went to Ruqia's bed. Before she took her up Zakia hesitated a moment. Every time she looked at her daughter she remembered the day of her birth when the sun shone as golden as her skin had become and when her heartbeat was like a beat of a mockingbird's wings. *You will be our future.* Zakia was glad her little girl would not have to work on the potato fields but instead go to school and maybe to university. She could not wait for it. But first she had to make breakfast.

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For one moment Mohammad had to breathe in deeply but then his delight became overpowering. He just received the letter they had been waiting for so yearningly. They were officially acknowledged refugees. Or as their lawyer Ms. Naderi put it: “Congratulations, you just received the ticket to a future!”. Finally, he was allowed to work, to rent an own apartment, to have something to offer to his family. Outside the building the streets were filled with colors. The people seemed to smile at him. It was hard to tell whether they smiled due to him or his jittery behavior but Mohammad did not care. He was happy.

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And then came the part of the day Zakia hated. The time when Ruqia slept and there was nothing to do. Dare she would to go out but it was forbidden to her. Her husband had forbidden it. Her husband who tried his best to give them what they had been seeking for a long time: love and security. But what did he know about the boredom and one-sidedness she experienced all day when Ruqia slept? *Just five minutes. One time around the block.* She stole away softly and went on the street which was occupied by workers running into restaurants and shops for lunch.

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The streets emptied. It felt as if the cold breeze blew away the crowd not mentioning a small group of people in business suits. They almost seemed to melt together with the glass front of the high towers and buildings. Although the breeze did not blow away Mohammad it let him calm down. The grey shine of the sun reflecting in the windows replaced the colorful atmosphere

he had enjoyed that much. He was surprised by himself when he realized that he was overwhelmed by a trace of worry and scare. “What is wrong here? Am I running crazy?!” he asked. Mohammad flinched frightened by the volume and intensity in his voice. Fortunately, there was nobody close to him – except for one.

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The boost bump on her skin felt like a stony crust when Zakia went around the second corner. She regretted not having taken at least a thin jacket. But these sorrows broke in thousand pieces when she suddenly stood in front the old, shabby, threatening store she had seen in her dream last night. All of a sudden everything became clear. Although she could not read it she instinctively knew that the inscription was written in Persian – Afghani’s mothers tongue. The cold breeze became stronger. And there she could see the figure in the black burka reaching around the corner and slowly heading towards her. Zakia just thought of one thing: *Ruqia*. And then, all the memories came up repeatedly: the stares, the humiliation, hiding in the bleak mountains and being robbed by gangsters. Her heart jumped as the black burka came closer and closer. She couldn’t breathe.

Where is Mohammad? Did they catch him already? Did they kill him? What about my baby?!

The black burka was just two steps away. A slim bony hand reached out to Zakia before the colossal veil brought darkness over her.

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Zakia woke up in the open air screwing up her eyes to catch a first view on the blue sky and the fleecy clouds. The green leafs of the branched maple trees that surrounded her were rustling and the soft grass was turned down by the wind. Ruqia's silky hand touched her face and she could hear Mohammad snoring monotonously. *He could sleep.* The little girl smiled showing her three white teeth that seemed to reflect the bright sun light. *The angel was guarding them.* Everything appeared so clear and living as if it was relieved by its chains. *The veil was gone.*

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