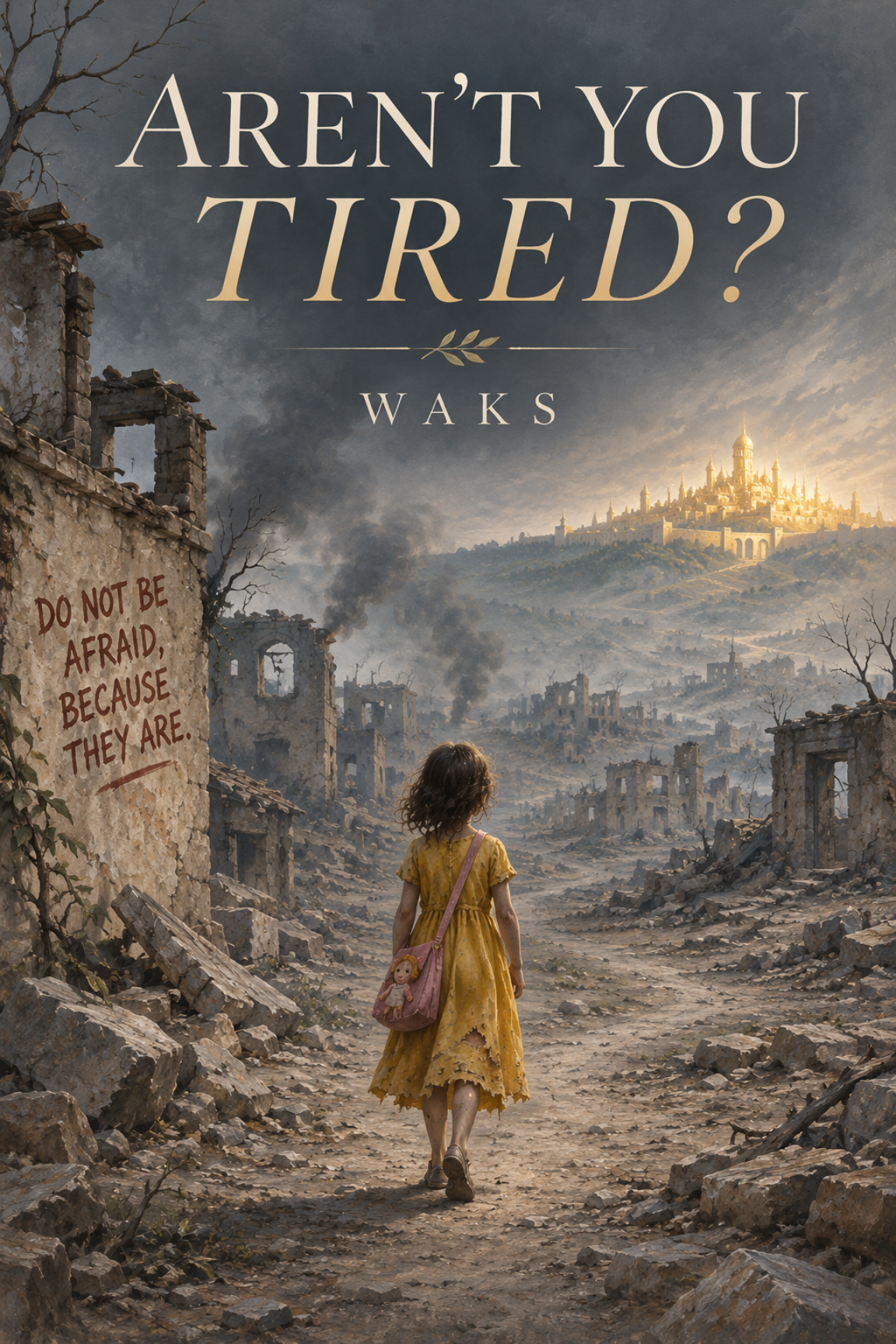
AREN'T YOU *TIRED?*

WAKS



AREN’T YOU TIRED?

A short story by WAKS

SHADOW NEXUS • DIGITAL READING EDITION

I. The Morning

The first thing Mariam noticed was that the birds were gone.

There had always been birds. Even on mornings when the planes came, even when the windows shook and her mother pulled her beneath the kitchen table with a hand clamped gently over her mouth, there had been birds. Little brown birds with black, suspicious eyes gathered on the courtyard wall to quarrel over crumbs. Her father said they were foolish creatures because they did not understand war. Her mother said they understood it perfectly well and refused, on principle, to stop singing.

This morning there were no birds, and no kitchen table, and scarcely anything that could still be called a courtyard. Above Mariam was the sky: enormous, unbroken, pale as water abandoned in a bowl. She did not remember going to sleep beneath the sky. She remembered her bed with its scratchy blue blanket, the seam in the wall shaped like a crooked finger, and her mother promising that if the electricity returned they would have warm milk in the morning.

She was six years old. Her father sometimes called her seven because she argued like a grandmother. She had dark eyes and one stubborn curl above her left ear that resisted every attempt to smooth it. Her yellow dress, with white flowers along the hem, had been chosen for a day that never arrived. One sleeve was gone. Where the flowers had been, there was dust.

Something heavy held her legs. She pushed until a slab of plaster moved just far enough for her feet to slide out. She sat up. The world tipped to one side. A ringing filled her ears, a sound so

steady that she thought at first it might be a kettle.

“Mama?”

She waited. She called again, using the small, private voice she reserved for darkness and bad dreams. Then she crawled past blue kitchen tiles scattered over the floor and a chair leg pointing at the sky. Her mother's copper milk pot lay upside down. Mariam lifted it and peered inside. Nothing. She turned it over twice, as if the milk might have become trapped in some secret place.

The empty pot made her cry.

Not the roof. Not the broken room. The pot, because her mother had promised.

She remembered a sound in the night, a noise that seemed to begin below the house and rise through her teeth. Her father shouting. Her mother coming toward her with both arms out. The floor shuddering. A flash of white. Then the dark, where the dark had no end.

Her father was near the doorway, beneath fallen masonry. Mariam knew him by his shoes: brown, one tied with a black lace because the original had broken, a matter about which her mother had complained for weeks. He was turned toward the wall. Mariam touched the heel of his shoe.

“Papa? I wake up.”

He did not turn. He always turned, even when he was listening to the radio, even when she had interrupted three times to ask a question she already knew the answer to. She touched his shoe

again. She waited for the old joke—Who wakes up the sun? Mariam does—and when it did not come she pulled her knees against her chest and watched the light move across the stones.

She found her mother where the bedroom wall had folded into the corridor. There was no graceful way to make sense of what she saw, and she did not try. She knelt. A lock of her mother's hair was caught beneath a brick. She freed it gently, as she had seen her mother free thread from the teeth of a comb. The gold wedding ring glinted in the dust.

Mariam remembered that hand better than she remembered her mother's face. The hand turning dough on a wooden board. Checking her forehead for fever. Guiding hers around the pencil when she first learned to write the letter of her name. At bedtime her mother made a little circle with her thumb in the center of Mariam's palm. She called it the place where bad dreams went to sleep.

On the nights when the planes sounded close, Mariam would hold out her palm without speaking. Her mother understood. The thumb would begin its slow circle, and Mariam, listening to the planes and her father's breathing, would pretend the whole world had narrowed to the warmth of that touch.

“Come,” her mother used to say. “Give me your little hand.”

Mariam sat with her a long time. Later, when she remembered the morning, she would remember certain things very clearly: a blue bead on the floor, the smell of scorched cloth, the way a shaft of sunlight made a thousand little stones glitter. She would not remember everything she did. Some acts belong to a silence larger than memory.

When she rose, she went looking for her bag. It was a little pink doll's face with two round ears, a button missing from one eye, and a zipper across the forehead. Her grandmother had given it to her before the family learned to measure time by bombings rather than birthdays. She found it beneath the broken frame of her bed, dusted it off, opened it, and carefully made room inside.

She returned to her mother.

When Mariam finally stood in the street, the bag hung heavier than it once had. She looked back at the doorway and the brown shoes beneath it.

“Bye, Papa.”

Then she walked west, because her grandmother had once lived west and because every road must go somewhere.

The village had disappeared without moving. Where the baker used to set warm loaves behind fogged glass there was a crater. The school stood open to the air; its desks had spilled into the courtyard. The fig tree outside it had split, exposing a heart of pale wood. There were no bicycles, no women calling from balconies, no old men arguing beneath the shade as if an argument properly attended to might improve the world.

On the surviving wall of the grocer's shop, words had been painted in black letters large enough for a person riding past to read:

DO NOT BE AFRAID, BECAUSE THEY ARE.

Mariam sounded them out with her lips. She looked behind her and then toward the empty road. She did not know who they

were. She wondered if the message was meant for a different girl, one old enough to understand why anyone should be afraid of her.

Her ankle hurt. Her stomach was empty. The sun climbed, and with it the heat.

“I'm so tired,” she said to the air.

She waited a moment, as though a question must always be followed by time enough for an answer.

“Aren't you tired?”

The wind passed through what remained of the houses. Nothing answered.

II. The Road of No Shelter

By midday Mariam had passed three villages. One had burned so completely that she could not tell where the houses ended and the road began. In another, the street shone with broken glass. In the third, she found a hospital, recognizable by its faded symbol above an entrance blocked with concrete.

She had once been taken to a hospital because of a fever. She remembered white sheets, a nurse with enormous hands, and a doctor who smelled of coffee. This hospital had no windows. Beds were arranged beneath a collapsed awning. Their sheets lifted and settled in the breeze as though people slept beneath them, breathing together.

“Hello?” Mariam asked.

A cough answered from the shade. An old woman sat with one arm pressed against her ribs and dust gathered in the lines of her face. She looked at Mariam for a long time, not quite believing what she saw.

“Child. Where did you come from?”

“Home.”

“Where is home?”

Mariam pointed east. The woman followed her finger to the smoke on the horizon and shut her eyes.

“Are you alone?”

Mariam considered this. Alone seemed a difficult word. Her parents were still at home. She knew exactly where she had left them.

“My mama is sleeping.”

The woman's mouth moved, but no sound came. She reached for a bottle with a finger of water left at the bottom. Mariam drank three small swallows and returned it, though her throat wanted all of it.

“What is in your bag?” the woman asked.

“My things.”

“And where are you going?”

“To find somewhere.”

“Somewhere?”

“To sleep.”

The woman looked beyond Mariam, toward the road that joined one ruin to another. “There is nowhere,” she whispered.

Mariam frowned. “There must be.”

The woman did not argue. Perhaps children were entitled, even now, to believe that somewhere existed. Before Mariam left, the woman touched her cheek and said, “May you be protected.”

“My mama says that.”

The woman began to weep, turning her face away as though she could spare Mariam the sight. Mariam had become accustomed

to grown people crying without explaining why.

In a schoolyard farther west, she found an exercise book open beneath a stone. A child had drawn a house in green pencil, with four windows and a tree full of red circles. Above it a yellow sun smiled. Below, in letters carefully separated from one another, was written: My country is beautiful. Mariam looked from the drawing to the roofless classrooms. She thought perhaps the child had drawn a place she intended to visit.

She passed a well whose rope had been cut, a burned orchard, a family photograph standing upright on a shelf that no longer had a wall around it. In one kitchen she found a spoon set neatly beside a plate. The plate was covered in dust. It troubled her that someone had put the spoon down expecting to pick it up again.

On a canal wall, the words appeared a second time, painted red this time:

DO NOT BE AFRAID, BECAUSE THEY ARE.

The paint was dry. She pressed her finger to the final period. Whoever wrote the message had been here before her and was already gone. She wondered whether the words were meant to guide her somewhere, but there were no arrows and she had not been taught how to follow a sentence.

By evening she came to a house whose walls still stood. Through the open door she saw a mattress, a table, and a cup balanced on the edge of a shelf. She laid a hand on the mattress. It gave beneath her fingers. She could not remember the last soft thing she had touched.

A voice shouted from the doorway.

“Get out!”

A man with a rifle stood there. His jacket was torn. The eyes above his dark beard were not angry so much as startled, as though she had been a sudden noise.

“I only want—”

“Out!”

She gathered her bag. “I'm sorry.”

Outside, behind the low garden wall, she saw his family: a woman holding a baby, two boys, and an old man whose shirt had been folded tightly against a wound. The man was afraid that if anyone discovered them, the planes would return. He could have told her so. But fear makes adults use the smallest possible number of words, and children mistake those words for the entire truth.

Mariam walked on thinking that she had been refused a bed because she was dirty.

Night found her beneath an olive tree. Its trunk was old and twisted, divided near the base into two limbs that came together above her head. Her father had told her olive trees could live longer than grandfathers. She wondered whether this one remembered all the people who had rested beneath it.

She closed her eyes. Somewhere far off a blast shook the ground. She woke reaching left for her mother's hand. Her fingers closed upon empty air. She reached again, moving them over the dirt as if she had simply misplaced it.

She cried quietly. She had learned that crying loudly did not summon anyone.

“I'm so tired,” she told the branches. “Aren't you tired?”

The stars came out above her. They had not changed. She resented them for it, briefly and with the fierce certainty of a child who has caught an adult being unfair.

III. The Line

On the following morning, three soldiers crouched behind a broken concrete barrier at the edge of a road. They were men from Mariam's country, though the dust and the sleeplessness made their faces hard to distinguish from the ruins. One saw the yellow dress moving through the smoke and thought at first that sunlight had found a torn piece of cloth.

“Child!” he shouted.

Mariam came closer. He showed her his empty hands and knelt.

“Where are your parents?”

“At home.”

“Where is home?”

She pointed behind her, and he looked toward a horizon that had lost the names of its villages.

“You cannot go this way. They're shooting.”

“I know,” she said. “Everybody is shooting.”

One of the other soldiers let out a short laugh, a sound with no pleasure inside it.

“What is your name?”

“Mariam.”

“Listen, Mariam. You have to stay here.”

“I can't.”

“Why not?”

“I'm looking for somewhere to sleep.”

He thought of his daughter, who had turned five shortly before the war became too dangerous for birthday candles. He remembered that she once demanded the family sing twice, once for herself and once for the stuffed rabbit beside her plate. He had not seen her in months. He could no longer recall whether their last goodbye had been hurried or gentle.

“Please,” he said.

Mariam looked down the road. “Is there a bed there?”

He did not answer. He wanted to promise her one, because an adult should be able to promise a child a bed. But there were soldiers across the valley, a watchtower above the fields, and rifles trained on the road.

She stepped around the barrier.

“NO!”

The first shot struck the concrete beside her. A little spray of grit touched her cheek. Another hit the roadway. She ducked, then stood again, confused at the sudden fury with which the world seemed to object to her walking.

“GET DOWN!” the soldiers shouted. “COME BACK!”

She kept moving. They called after her until the wind and gunfire swallowed their voices.

Across the valley, a sniper tracked her through his sight. He had been taught that movement beyond the boundary was a danger and hesitation could be fatal. He had learned a vocabulary for decisions he would otherwise have had to remember as individual acts. A child might be a decoy; a bag might conceal a device; a body might carry a threat. He had heard these propositions repeated until they seemed as practical as the weight of ammunition.

He placed the crosshairs on the girl and fired.

The round went wide.

He adjusted for a wind scarcely strong enough to move grass. Fired again. A stone jumped behind her. He checked the sight, the chamber, the position of his body. All were as they should be.

On the road, Mariam stopped to retrieve a sandal whose strap had come loose. She sat on a rock and tried to push the torn leather through the buckle. The sniper watched her bend over her foot, irritated in the ordinary way of a child interrupted by an ordinary inconvenience.

He raised the rifle. The girl stood. She looked toward the tower, shielding her eyes. For a moment he thought she could see him—not the tower or the glass, but the man behind it. He drew in a breath, and the sight moved against his will. He lowered the weapon.

Farther down the line, another soldier fired and struck a wall. A third found his rifle jammed. A tank turned its turret. A shell landed close enough to erase Mariam beneath a tall, gray cloud of dust.

The men behind the barrier stopped shouting. Even the sniper stood from his chair. For several seconds the road was empty.

Then Mariam came out of the dust, coughing. She had lost the sandal again. She bent, pulled a pebble from her heel, and held the shoe in her hand rather than attempting its repair a second time.

The battle did not become merciful. Men died around her. The fields were torn open. The air thickened with smoke. Nothing beyond the little girl was spared.

She paused at the far end of the road and looked back. The first soldier, watching through the drifting dust, saw her lips move. He could not hear her, but he understood the question, because he had heard it before in his own daughter's small, impatient voice when a difficult day would not end.

“Aren't you tired?”

Then Mariam crossed the line.

IV. The Unbroken Villages

The grass on the other side was green.

It grew beside a stream that ran beneath a stone bridge, tumbling over smooth rocks with the carefree noise of water that no one had to carry home. Mariam knelt and drank. She washed her face, then her arms, then the blood and dust from her knees. She washed the outside of her bag carefully, keeping the zipper closed.

A breeze moved the reeds. Bees worked among small yellow flowers. She could hear children laughing beyond a stand of trees. For a moment she was sure she had found the place she had been walking toward all along.

Houses with red roofs nestled against the hillside. Laundry hung in the sun. A little dog slept beneath a chair. In a garden, a woman watered roses while speaking on a telephone. Mariam stood and watched the water fall from the hose in a clear, glittering arc. Her mother had washed vegetables in a bowl and poured the leftover water onto the courtyard plants. Here the flowers were given more water in a minute than their family had sometimes possessed in a day.

Two girls played beside a swing set. Mariam approached them with a shy smile.

“Can I play?”

One looked at the yellow dress, then at Mariam's feet. “Where are you from?”

Mariam pointed back toward the hills. The girl's expression changed. She dropped her skipping rope and ran. The other followed.

Mariam waited for them to return. Perhaps they had gone to ask their mother whether she could join.

Instead, a woman emerged from a house and called, “What are you doing here?”

“I need somewhere to rest.”

The woman called for her husband. He came outside holding a telephone. His gaze moved from the bag to the road behind Mariam, as if the child might have brought an entire army folded into the folds of her dress.

“Stay there,” he ordered.

Mariam stood in the sun while he made a call. The dog woke, stretched, and returned to sleep. She envied it so fiercely that tears stung her eyes.

A vehicle arrived. Two uniformed men stepped out. One wore dark glasses. He asked where she had crossed, who had sent her, and what she was carrying. Mariam answered what she understood and looked bewildered by the rest.

“Open the bag.”

She hugged it to her chest. “No.”

“Open it.”

“It's mine.”

He reached for the strap. His hand slipped. He reached again, but the clasp broke and the bag fell safely into Mariam's arms. She cried out and backed away. The other man raised his rifle. A flowerpot broke behind her. She ran between the houses while shouts rose across the street.

She escaped through a passage scarcely wider than her shoulders, then crawled under a hedge into a garden shed. There were spades, sacks of soil, and an old blanket smelling of cut grass and oil. She crawled underneath it, holding the pink bag close, and fell asleep.

She dreamed of her mother's kitchen. It was whole. The copper pot steamed. Her father sat with the radio murmuring beside him. Birds crowded the wall and argued over crumbs. Her mother stood at the sink, sleeves rolled to the elbow, humming a tune Mariam had heard a hundred times and never learned to finish.

“Come, little bird,” her mother said.

Mariam ran toward her, hand outstretched, but the space between them began to grow. The kitchen lengthened like a corridor. The tiles multiplied. Her mother receded, still holding out her hand, until she seemed no larger than a figure on a distant hill.

“Mama, wait.”

She woke with both arms reaching into darkness. The garden shed was cold. A car moved along the road, its tires whispering over smooth pavement. She rubbed the center of her palm with her own thumb, trying to make the remembered circle.

“I'm so tired,” she whispered into the blanket. “Aren't you tired?”

In the villages beyond, she saw astonishing things. Windows without cracks. Schools filled with children. Shops where bread was left on shelves, unguarded and plentiful. Houses with three bedrooms, four bedrooms, bedrooms standing empty behind curtains that billowed in a breeze. In the destroyed country, a bed had become something a family might die trying to reach. Here there were beds waiting for guests who had not yet decided to visit.

At a bakery an older man stepped outside and gave Mariam a warm roll. She took one bite and shut her eyes. The bread was soft and tasted of salt and the place in a day before hunger has learned to hurt. The baker watched her expression change, and shame entered his face with the force of a memory.

A woman crossed the street. “Why are you feeding her?”

“She's hungry,” he said.

“Do you know what those people do? They send children.”

Mariam kept eating. The woman took out her phone. The baker touched her arm and said, “Don't,” but when Mariam walked away he did not follow. That night he would tell his wife he had wanted to help. He would remember the wanting more clearly than what he had actually done.

In another settlement men shouted at her and threw stones. One struck her shoulder, another her calf. She fled through a row of houses while a dog barked and someone cried that she should go back where she belonged. She did not know where that was anymore. Home was a place beneath stones. The soldier on the

other side of the line had begged her not to cross. Everyone here wanted her gone. She could only keep walking.

She hid in an orchard and ate an apple fallen into the grass. Its sweetness surprised her. Sitting beneath the branches, she wondered whether she had broken some rule that adults knew and children were not allowed to ask about. Her mother had always told her to request permission when entering another person's house. Mariam had asked. People had said no.

“I ask nice,” she told the trees.

The trees did not disagree.

At the edge of the orchard, on the trunk of an old olive tree, someone had cut the words with a knife:

DO NOT BE AFRAID, BECAUSE THEY ARE.

She touched the rough letters. The cuts were old. Whoever had written them might have been gone for years. Yet the sentence had somehow reached this place before her. She put her palm against the tree, and for the first time she noticed that her hand was small enough to fit inside the word afraid.

Beyond the fields, high above the roads and gardens, a city shone on a hill. Its pale buildings caught the late sunlight, and its towers looked like candles that no wind could extinguish. Mariam had seen such cities in the stories her grandmother told: places where rulers lived and where important people had answers to questions ordinary people could not solve.

She stood, tightened the strap of the bag, and walked toward it.

V. The Shining City

The city was called Oratha.

Its rulers spoke often of the suffering of their ancestors, and much of that suffering was real. Over generations, the state's governing doctrine had turned the memory of persecution into a claim that its own safety required permanent control over another people's land and lives. Officials called the settlements restoration, the closed roads security, the demolitions enforcement, the bombings necessity. There were people within the nation who objected, sometimes at considerable personal cost; there were others who knew and approved; and many who had learned to ask no questions that might trouble the comfort of dinner.

Mariam knew none of this. She knew only that Oratha had sidewalks without holes.

Water danced in a fountain near the first square. It rose in silver fans and fell into blue basins. She watched it for a long time, amazed that water could be allowed to play when no one was thirsty. When she cupped her hands to drink, a man shouted for her to leave the fountain alone. She hurried away, apologizing, though she could not see what harm she had done.

There were people beneath colorful awnings eating sweet cakes. Trams whispered past. Glass doors opened when people approached them, a small miracle Mariam tested twice before a woman frowned at her. The city smelled of roasted coffee, clean rainwater, and flowers arranged in neat beds that no one stepped on.

Then the people began to notice her.

A girl in a torn yellow dress. Bare feet. Bruised knees. A pink doll's bag held too tightly. She seemed to have walked into the city from a different kind of weather.

Some stared. Some turned away. Some reached for their telephones. Young men began following, calling words she did not understand. Fruit struck her back. They laughed. She walked faster. Someone threw a stone. It struck her leg and she stumbled into a square dominated by a statue of a victorious soldier.

Beneath the statue a plaque praised the city's founding. Mariam could make out a few words before a crowd gathered around her. A woman pulled her own child behind her. A man with a flag pinned to his coat stepped across Mariam's path and shouted that she did not belong here.

Mariam reached for the bag as it slipped from her shoulder. The man kicked it across the immaculate pavement.

“NO!”

It was the first great scream she had made since waking beneath the ruined roof. She scrambled after the bag, folded herself around it, and pressed her forehead against the dusty pink fabric. People shouted above her. A stone was raised. A boot drew back. Yet neither came down. The hand holding the stone seemed to forget how to release it; the man about to kick her staggered as if he had stepped from a curb he could not see.

Mariam got to her feet. Blood trickled from one knee. Her cheeks were wet. She held the bag against her chest, and the crowd

opened before her—not generously, not even willingly, but with the confused movement of people who suddenly found themselves unable to stand in the path of something they had been certain was powerless.

She crossed beneath the statue and looked up the avenue.

At its end, behind a long climb and a procession of perfect trees, stood a residence of white stone. She had decided without evidence that whoever lived there must have enough beds for everyone. Perhaps there would be a place for a girl who promised not to make noise, who would clean her feet and keep her bag closed and sleep only until morning.

She began the climb.

VI. The House on the Hill

Twelve guards stood at the first gate. They wore dark uniforms and carried weapons polished almost as carefully as the brass letters set into the wall. One called to Mariam to stop. Another spoke into a radio.

“Get down,” the first guard ordered.

She looked at the ground. She had spent so much of her journey there: beneath rubble, behind a barrier, inside a ditch, under a tree, curled beneath a blanket in a shed. She did not want to lie on the ground again.

“I need to sleep,” she told him.

The guard stepped forward, raised his hand to seize her, and stopped. There was no force holding his arm. He could move his fingers and turn his head. He simply could not complete the motion. Mariam walked past him. A shot struck the stone gate above her. Another weapon failed to fire. She did not run. She had almost nothing left with which to run.

Inside the grounds, water lay smooth in reflecting pools. White flowers bordered the paths. Jasmine filled the air with a sweetness so intense that Mariam remembered her mother's soap: cheap, yellow, always worn down into a thin transparent sliver because her mother refused to throw away anything that still had work left in it.

She passed a bench beneath a flowering tree and almost lay down. But the great doors were ahead. She imagined a bed inside, with a blanket and a pillow cool against her cheek. She

could ask for it properly. She knew how to say please.

The marble floor of the entrance hall was so clean that Mariam could see the pale shape of her own face in it. Behind her, gray footprints appeared one by one. She stopped, embarrassed. Her mother would have told her to wipe her feet before entering someone's home. She searched for a mat, found none, and whispered, “Sorry,” to the room.

Paintings lined the walls: mountains beneath clear skies, uniformed men, soldiers raising a flag. She looked at a painted family in front of a perfect house and wondered whether they ever had to leave it. An alarm sounded somewhere distant. Doors opened and closed. Shoes hurried over marble. She continued at the same weary pace.

At the end of a passage stood two masked guards before carved wooden doors. Their rifles rose. Mariam stopped, trembling, her face streaked with dust and tears.

“Please,” she said.

They did not answer.

“I'm so tired.”

A guard shifted his weight. Mariam searched the place where his face ought to have been. “Aren't you tired?”

She walked between them. Behind her, neither man could later explain why he had let her pass.

The doors opened.

VII. The Hand

The ruler stood before windows that faced west.

From this height the city looked serene. Its avenues curved around gardens, its roofs glowed in the evening sun, and beyond the distant hills the sea caught the last light in long, quiet strips. The windows did not look east, toward the villages his government had spent years reducing to maps of rubble. He liked the evening view. It gave him, he had once said, a sense of perspective.

He was an older man with careful silver hair and a face trained by decades of speeches and photographs not to betray surprise. He had seen the dead in reports. He had read figures in briefing folders and studied aerial images of neighborhoods before and after operations. He knew the language that turned a destroyed house into a cleared structure and a child's death into an incident under review. That language had allowed him to finish his meals and sleep through the night.

He had never seen one of the children enter his house.

Mariam stood inside the doorway. The room contained a thick carpet, a long sofa, chairs upholstered in pale cloth, and a table bearing a pitcher of water untouched by any dust. It was the most comfortable room she had ever entered. She looked first at the sofa, not at the ruler.

“Who is this?” he demanded.

A masked soldier moved in front of him. Advisers exchanged sharp whispers. Someone raised a telephone. The ruler held up

his hand.

“What is your name?”

“Mariam.”

“What are you doing here?”

She looked at the sofa again. “Can I sleep?”

He frowned. “Where are your parents?”

“At home.”

“And where is home?”

She pointed east, toward the wall without windows.

“How did you get here?”

“I walked.”

The ruler looked at the armed men. The guards stared back. None of them had an explanation. Then his gaze settled on the pink bag, so small and filthy in the enormous room.

“What have you got there?”

Mariam looked down. For a moment her whole face seemed to contract around a grief she had been carrying longer than her body knew how to bear. She eased the strap off her shoulder. The nearest soldier raised his rifle. She recoiled and whispered, “It's mine.”

The ruler motioned for the weapon to be lowered.

Her fingers searched for the zipper. They were swollen with dust, scratched and sore, and twice the tiny metal tab slipped from her grasp. She began to cry. Not loudly at first. The tears fell onto the doll's faded face, darkening the fabric around the empty button eye.

Mariam remembered her mother's thumb turning its little circle in her palm. She remembered her father's brown shoe tapping beneath the kitchen table as he listened to the radio. She remembered the birds on the courtyard wall, the warm milk promised for morning, and the narrow bed where she had once complained that there was not enough room for everyone.

Her mother had laughed then. One day you will have a bed as big as a house.

The zipper opened.

Mariam reached inside and carefully withdrew her mother's severed hand. The plain gold wedding ring was still on its finger. She held the hand by the wrist, as though her mother might yet close her fingers around Mariam's own. The ruler stared. One adviser turned his face away. A soldier lowered his rifle until its barrel pointed at the marble floor.

Mariam stepped forward. The sobs that came from her were no longer the small, cautious sounds of a child waiting for a grown person to answer. They shook her from her shoulders to her bare, bleeding feet. She had crossed the destroyed villages, the soldiers' line, the orchards, the shining streets, and the gates of this house. She had carried the only part of her mother she could bring. Now she had reached the man she believed must know what to do.

She offered him the hand that had fed her, washed her face, braided her hair, and made the small circle in her palm when fear would not let her sleep.

And through her tears, in the soft dialect of her destroyed village, Mariam whispered:

“I'm so tired. Aren't you tired? I just need to rest.”

— END —