

Truth and Silence

by Karima Qias

I had the last bite of my dinner and kissed Ben. I had to hurry to catch the tram.

“See you later,” I said.

I rushed down the stairs and put on my shoes. My footsteps echoed through the corridor as I hurried toward the station.

The board showed the tram would arrive in two minutes. I looked around the light rain on the pavement, the smell of autumn, the quiet hum of the city.

When I looked up, I saw the tram curling around the roundabout.

My heart tightened, and my eyes filled with tears.

It was the same tram my brother and I used to take to the city center, years ago.

When it stopped, I took a deep breath, wiped my tears, and stepped inside.

I sat by the window. A young man outside waved kindly.

“Are you okay?” asked a lady sitting nearby.

“I’m alright,” I said, smiling faintly.

As the tram began to move, his reflection faded, but for a brief second, I could swear I smelled my brother’s old overcoat that scent of home that never really leaves you.

A few stops later, I got off and walked toward Kathrin’s house. The city lights flickered softly on wet cobblestones.

“Hey, Karina! Hello, kids!”

“How are you, dear?”

“I’m fine,” I said, not entirely sure it was true.

“Look, I have to run. They had dinner an hour ago. Bedtime around eight, please!”

“Got it, don’t worry!”

“Charlie, Mia, Karina is the boss tonight, okay?”

“Okay, Mom!”

Kathrin kissed the kids, waved, and left.

“TV time is over!” I said. “Now brush your teeth and get ready for bed.”

“Okay,” Mia murmured, half-distracted by the cartoon.

The kids ran up the stairs and jumped onto their beds.

“Come on, you two, it’s bedtime.”

They laughed. “No! It’s playtime!”

I sighed, smiling. “But your mom said I’m the boss.”

Charlie grinned. “No, we’re the boss! You have to play with us!”

I laughed. It was already past nine, and I had to catch the tram in an hour.

So I tried something else.

“Alright, let’s play a new game : the King of Silence.”

“The King of what?”

“You lie down and stay silent. Whoever stays quiet the longest wins.”

They agreed immediately. After two minutes, Mia whispered, “Karina, when will Mom come back?”

Charlie burst out laughing. “You lost!”

We laughed, played again, and after a while, Mia fell asleep.

Charlie stayed awake. He looked at me and asked quietly,

“Do you have a brother too?”

I nodded. “Yes. We used to play the same game.”

“Where is he now?”

“In another city,” I said softly.

“Do you miss him?”

“Every day.”

Charlie thought for a moment, then smiled. “Then he’s still with you. People you miss never really go away.”

His words warmed my chest like a candle in winter.

When the house finally grew silent, I closed my eyes for a moment and drifted back - back to the yard of our old house in Iran. The smell of the soil after rain. The white flowers of the pear tree glistening in the sun. Children shouting from the park behind the fence, the sound of the ball hitting the metal and someone yelling: “Goal!”

Back then, I dreamed of the clean streets of Europe, polite people saying “thank you” and “sorry.” And now I have all of that.

But I've learned something new: in Iran, the streets only looked clean. The dust was hidden — like the weight we all carried. We tried to smile, to make life seem fine, to convince ourselves that hardship was normal.

We worked twice as hard just to stay where we were, paying for everything, from school to survival, pretending we were alright.

I've drifted far from home and yet in this distance, I've found so much.

Here in Brussels, I learned that migration is not just leaving a land ; it's a journey within oneself.

Where once the word migration smelled of failure and despair,
here it carries the scent of freedom even if it begins with silence, solitude, and the struggle of learning a new tongue.

Here, you can be a woman : free, calm, unafraid of the night.

You can walk alone, without needing another's name beside your own.

Where women elsewhere still live under fear and someone else's rule, here you can simply be yourself, whole and unbroken.

I think of those who journeyed before me. My grandfather, who set out from Bukhara to Afghanistan. My mother's family, who migrated from the city of Tus in Tajikistan to Afghanistan. My parents, who once again crossed borders and arrived in Iran.

After nearly 47 years, our lives in that land remained without identity, even though I was born on that very soil. And I, together with my sisters, brothers, and mother, decided to leave our temporary home once more.

Each generation set foot on a path full of twists, turns, and peril. Not to escape, but to find peace, to build a brighter future and to claim an identity that truly belonged to them.

Now, as I walk through the streets of Brussels, past by bakeries where the scent of fresh bread drifts in the air, trams gliding slowly along the cobblestones, walls cloaked in ivy, and laughter spilling from cafés, I realize I have finally stopped running and that I can simply feel life unfolding.

This city, with all its flaws and rain, has taught me that true belonging is not to a place, but to myself.

When I hear the key turn in the lock, Kathrin's voice pulls me back:

"Karina... I'm back, you were asleep."

I laugh softly, rubbing my eyes.

"Yes," I say, "but it was a good dream this time."