

A THOUSAND AND ONE LIVES: A TALE OF PATCHED LIFE IN THREE PIECES

Short Introductions:

This tale examines how various urban spaces transform into territories of collective life, using the metaphor of a patchwork—a mosaic of interconnected yet distinct elements, woven together by many hands to reflect shared experiences, memories, and aspirations, turning spaces into dynamic expressions of life.

A Thousand and One Lives draws from personal experiences narrated through the journey of The Little Match Girl by Hans Anderson as a traveler. Inspired by A Thousand and One Nights, where every story is left unfinished, and Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities, with its poetic tone in which cities become layered metaphors.

The tale weaves together three distinct spaces, each representing a different form of collective life. The story begins with informal courtyard housing in Kabul, expands to city-level urban art, and finally reaches Calais camp in France. The ending of each story is an event that has happened in real life and has been narrated as different systems of oppression which act and play an important role in the production of urban space.

The Whispering Courtyard

Yaki Bod, Yaki Nabod, Ghayr az Khuda Hech Kas Nabod (Once upon a time), on the coldest and longest night of the year, *Shabe Yalda*, the Little Match Girl, wrapped in a mysterious patchwork jacket—her final gift from a beloved grandmother now gone—arrived in the City of Mountains, Kabul, where high bastions stood overgrown like pine trees, their roots

deep in earth and high to the heavens. Streets twisted like rivers, threading through forty flowered courtyards and a four-arched Bazaar, where magic carpets unfurled like the veins of the city.



Kabul city centre view (Detail of Kabul view, n.d.)

But beyond the grandeur of its skyline lies its soul, a quiet, hidden sacred courtyard where time slows, life weaves itself together, and the loudness of the outside fades away. The courtyard architecture is a patchwork, not of stones and bricks but of relationships between the clusters and the events inside and outside. The courtyard, though it does not speak of its autonomous history, carries it within, like the intricate patterns of a patchwork blanket, each

piece sewn together by the hands of many, stitched into the walls and whispered through the narrow alleyways, where every piece and thread hold a secret of resilience.

The courtyard is not just a space but a world within a world. As one enters the narrow alleyway, the world outside fades away, and a display of houses layered one into another shows itself like a shared dance, a room within a room, where the boundaries blur between private and collective. Though the stranger might feel lost and unwelcomed, the Little Match Girl finds hope and adventure as she knocks on each door and turns her matches on. She finds a tangled connection of life where every door leads to another door, appears closed, even distant, and finds warmth and a flicker of hope in a hidden corner. Here, Nanavati (seeking protection) is an unspoken principle, as evident as the lines of the hand. It is a daily ritual of refuge, not just a mere act, but a silent command that lives like a breath in the air. The displaced, the outsider, whose eyes glazed like the last matchstick, find shelter not in the glow of fire but in the gentle refuge of human care. It is a space that refuses to reject and respond to a hand extended in the darkness with a promise to protect.

One should praise the scent of bread, baked over juniper wood fires, and the murmur of women exchanging knowledge—not only through cooking but through skills that weave bonds, strengthening the threads of their network. It is a form of resistance that transforms being into a practice of care. The courtyard is a living mosaic where girls, denied education and excluded from the public eye, sing freely the melodies of resilience and hope, unbound by walls or rules. The courtyard exists as a collective, a space where no dream is lost and where every sound and hand contributes to the shared rhythm of its life.

Here, every day is a new beginning, where nothing is finished, and nothing is genuinely started. Everything flows in a cycle, like a river that never reaches the sea. Here, no single voice

rises above the rest; the air hums with the sounds of agreement and disagreement, like the ocean tides—endless, yet collective. Here, the Jirga (tribal council) grants everyone a voice, convened in the shade of the courtyard walls, a council of the people ensuring no one stands outside the collective. There is only one rule: the collective. No decision is made without first listening to every echo of sound.

The Little Match Girl believed she had uncovered the mystery of her patched jacket when she first saw the patchwork blanket of the Sandali, its squares of fabric stitched together by hands across generations. She ran her fingers over its seams and asked about its history, and in the answer, she felt something spark: a story of time, survival, and the warmth shared through countless winters.

In the courtyard, she found a rhythmic life. She looks toward the high mountains; its peaks remind her of herself and her resilience, standing firm despite the storms. On the roof, she flew kites that danced with the sky and whispered to her friends through the roof's shared wall. Beyond that, she sees the two halves of the city. In one, houses are clinging to the hills, barely balanced but enduring. The other half is stone, concrete, and marble, with schools, banks, malls, parks, and prisons. One half is fixed, immovable, with solid foundations deep into the earth, while the other is restless, flux, and always ready to take flight. Here, the fixed takes off the noises and colors of the flux and strives to make everything still and the same.



Shabe Yalda and Sandali painting (Sandali painting, n.d)

One day, the Little Match Girl woke early to greet the mountain but found it gone. High grey walls swallowed the mountain, and iron fences rose where the horizon was. She lit a match and stepped into the twisted pathways to find answers. The match flickered, and its glow was swallowed by the shadow that became larger with each step. Her match burned into her fingertips, and she stopped, hoping the moon and the stars would offer her some light, but there was no moon, no stars, only walls.

Canvas of the Silent City

The Little Match Girl lit another match, and before it flickered out, she followed a trail of stardust that led her deeper into the heart of the city, fixed in time, draped in grey. Here, everything is static and uniform, walls reaching up with iron fences encircling their silent

isolation. She felt lost and decided to return to the warmth of her courtyard, but then, she saw it: a rainbow of colors, weavers of light and colors, who were transforming the rigid walls into canvases of hope, care, and resistance. They found the empty canvases as a city waiting to be filled, not with walls again, but with colors, unheard voices, and meaningful connections. These areas of exclusion created new possibilities for collective living, where what seems uninhabitable reveals hidden potential.

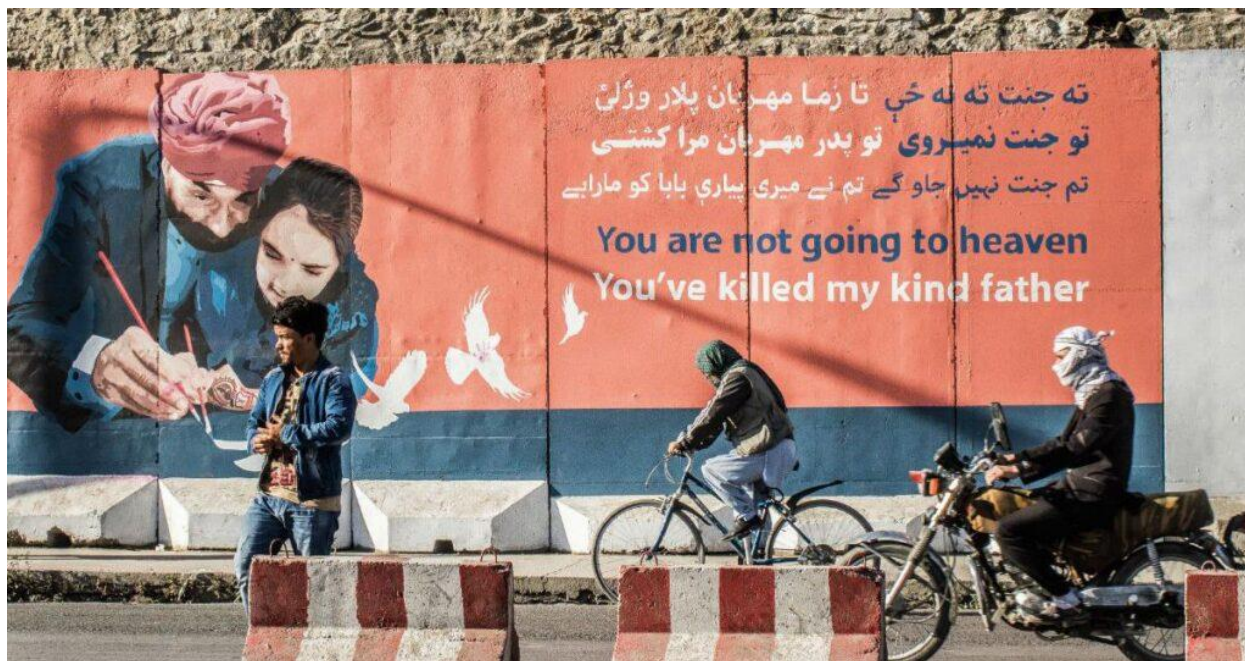


This picture depicts an art mural painted on a barrier wall in Kabul (Gul, 2015)

Is it merely for enjoyment, or is it part of the game? As she walked along, she saw a gaze of immense eyes filled with blame, pain, and fatigue; they seemed alive, as if destiny had chosen her to be lost in them. On both sides, the words acted as warnings, accompanied by heavy rain saying, “I can see you.” She no longer moves along the dead walls but through layers of life—the dreams of a daughter who painted her father’s absence on the wall as a curse. With nothing but her brush, her grief, and the collective voice of everyone around her. As the Little Match Girl

stepped into another wall, she saw a woman's face dreaming, with closed eyes, hair flowing in the sky, and threads of Rubab that conveyed her freedom breaking through restrictions.

The Little Match Girl stood in awe, tracing the lines with her eyes. It was as if the woman painted on the wall had broken through its unyielding surface, claiming it not as a prison but as a canvas. She thought of the patchwork blanket on the Sandali, stitched together by many hands. This wall, too, was a kind of patchwork—stitched with stories, colors, and resistance, offering warmth in the cold streets.



A mural by Art Lords in response to violence (Detail of violence mural, n.d)

These stories are not individual but collectively quilted on solid canvases through collective action beyond mere survival as an act of care, repair, and an alternative to colorless life. It's a collective that allows them to show they exist in the city, though behind protected walls, exposed to any danger, still having a sense of belonging and new ways of living together. These are filled with memories of the past, ongoing challenges, and hope for a better future. It is

the story of endurance, where everyone is creative to update their way of living, using any practice, material, and design.



Shamsia Hasani drawing her Graffiti art in walls of Kabul (Details of Shamsia artwork n.d)

The Little Match Girl discovers a new way of life in the city, where she weaves rainbows of hope through her art. These works become her guide, leading her back to herself. Though the mountain remains out of sight, she sees its strength reflected in the silent, faceless woman with her Rubab, whose music carries the weight of the peaks.

But like the time between Asr and Maghreb, like the brief fading of light as day slips into night, the colored life did not endure. One day, a storm comes, heavy with rain. The dark clouds blot out the blue sky, and strange birds replace kites. The sky turns black and white, and the torrent washes away the walls. Now, holding her last matchsticks, the Little Match Girl does not know where to go. She wanders, tracing the mountain's edge, but finds no trace of her past, no echoes of the life she once knew. The city has fallen silent—no colors, no voices, no dances

remain—only the stillness. In the quiet, she strikes a matchstick. As the flame flickers, she sees a paper boat drifting on the river, a final chance to seek out a new patched life or remain in the erasure of a forgotten city.



New government after 2021 have painted over all images with words (Latifi, n.d)

The Spider City

After drifting across the restless sea from a faraway continent in her fragile boat, carrying her uncertainty, swayed by the winds and waves, the Little Match Girl stepped into the spider city, where life is suspended between the earth and sky, between the future and past, between heaven and hell. Life between these webs is uncertain, fragmented, and hopeful.

In this webbed city, two types of webs are woven, each reflecting opposing forces and tension. On one web are the orderly, solid knots, as sterile as the rules that bind them, the prefabricated shelters; yet on the other web are the wild, organic knots, as fragile as the hopes

that weave them, the tents (Zangal). In the ordered web, everyone is sentenced to bare life, where ways of life are suspended, a place where they could never be home. It is a place for everyone but no one.

On the other web, every cluster has its essence; it belongs to people from diverse backgrounds, yet each holds a unique character. From physical structures to graffiti, flags of destined nations, and names of streets, all protest the bare life yet a collective effort to transform Zangal from a mere act of survival to a place of re-imagination. The life of Zangal is like a honeycomb. Everyone can put something for others to remember, from art, letters, names, and flags to shops, mosques, and churches.



This picture shows prefabricated shelters and tents in the Calais camp (Detail of Calaise Camp shelters, nd)

Here, the knot of the Mosque is wider, and the church's is higher—both spires of faith in the chaos. The street is not just a muddy pathway but a web of connection.

As the Little Match Girl walks along the street, a barber sharpens his scissors, a baker kneads the dough beside him, and fruits hanging from tents. The stream of voices, buyers, sellers, donors, and storytellers, the air is a mosaic of children's laughter, stories of individuals passing through deserts, oceans, and fire.

Despite its temporality and uncertainty, it was a net of connections bound together by threads of hope and memory, defying forces that would render them invisible. Here, every thread that holds different knots of shelters is a lifeline; here, no one is alone despite the differences.

One day, the Little Match Girl climbed to the hilltop with others, and they gestured toward the horizon of their dream city. They called it "The Promised Land," a place with bridges of opportunities and a river of paradise across the city, carrying the promise of refuge and peace. There, every face will be greeted with a smile and warmth because the people there have a history of offering care and shelter. As the Little Match Girl listened to their words, the city they described began to take root in her imagination, and it became her dream city as well. She envisioned herself walking on its street, where every door and house was open like a courtyard in her town.



Graffiti at the camp, reflecting the migrants' desire to reach the UK (Detail of Graffiti in Calaise Camp ,n.d)

As for the destiny of the Little Match Girl, it echoes in words of Hafiz , "If it did not stay like that, it wouldn't last like this either." An earthquake shakes the Zangal, leaving everything

demolished. The Zangal is no longer alive, just a dark forest of barren poles. The Little Match Girl climbs to the highest point of the hill, gazing toward the promised land. Her wings are broken—they cannot fly. Her hands are cold—they cannot move. Her boat is drowned, it cannot cross the sea. All she has left are her three last matches. She drew out one, and it flickered into a small candlelight. In its glow, she saw herself sitting on the roof of a courtyard, watching the kites in the sky and the sunset behind mountains. But it suddenly disappeared as the matches burned out.

The Little Match Girl struck another match, and the flame became higher as the walls of her city; she could see the colors of her art, vibrant and alive, repainting her world. Then the match burned out again. She lit another match, and she saw herself under a tree in Zangal, running with her new friends in the street; as she approached her favorite pastry, the match flared up again.

Now, the Little Match Girl is left with her final matchstick. As she strikes it, a star falls from the sky. In the light of the match, she sees her grandmother smiling at her, her presence warm and comforting. The girl cries out, begging her grandmother to take her away, but the grandmother points to the falling star and tells her, "Make a wish—every wish can come true." As the match burns lower, the girl hesitates. Should she wish for the promised land, where dreams might come alive? Or should she take her grandmother's hand and follow her into the unknown?

Her thoughts race: What if the promised land is a whole of new patched adventures? What if I can find a new life? Or will it vanish, like the places I've seen? What if the journey is dangerous? What if the sea holds creatures I cannot escape? What if I fall, and no one catches

me? Does a patched life exist everywhere, or does it only live in the cracks and margins of the world?