

The Word of Science

I was born in Khaja, a small village near Herat. Dust on the road, mulberry trees, quiet nights. Our house was simple, but my father's bookshelf looked big to me. It stood like a small wall near the window, wood a little cracked, full of Islamic books in Persian and Arabic. Some had brown covers and a smell like old tea. When I was a child, I thought the books were alive. My father took one out with both hands, like it could break or like it could break him. He was not a university man, but he was a knowledge man. He respected the page. He respected me also, in a quiet way. Sometimes he called me by our last name, which felt funny because I was small, but it made me stand taller. He told me small stories from tafsir before sleep. He did not tell those stories to my brothers and sisters, or maybe he did and I did not notice, because when my father spoke to me, I felt it was only for me. I remember his finger on the line of text, his nail a little long, moving left to right slowly. "Read," he said. "Take it easy. Don't run." Like most boys, I went to the mosque from seven. We sat on the carpets with our knees folded, copying the mullah's voice, repeating verses. I learned Qur'an before I joined first grade at Yadgar School. My father had already taught me letters on paper, also on sand outside when paper finished. The first mullahs were okay, some strict, some soft. I liked the rhythm. I liked when my mouth moved with the others, like one body. I liked the smell of the carpet after many feet, clean and not clean at the same time. Then a new mullah came. People said he knew many books. He said that too. He came with a good shawl, a watch that flashed a little, and a face that stayed hard even when he laughed. When he talked, his mouth made a thin line. He had quick answers for everything, heavy answers. If a boy asked about a word, he said the boy should already know. If a boy mispronounced, he smacked the air with his stick, fast like a bird wing.

I was a curious boy.

Maybe too curious for him. My father liked my questions; he did not always answer, but he smiled and told me to search. I asked this new mullah about things not only in the lesson. I asked why people suffer. I asked why God made the universe so big if our village is so small. I asked why a person's heart can be good but his hands do bad, or opposite. I asked if doubt is a sin or a step. He did not like my questions. "These are from non-believers," he said. "Don't bring them to me." He looked at me like I had dirt on my face. His voice cut the room. Some students looked down. Some looked at me with fear, like I was contagious. I felt heat in my neck, but the questions did not stop inside. They knocked. They always knocked. One winter morning, when I was eleven or maybe twelve, Salat al-Fajr finished. The sky was still blue like before dawn, cold air scratching the nose. I had a school exam after sunrise. I left the mosque early, walked quickly to my house, wanted to read a little before school. When I came back later for the study session, he asked, "Why did you leave after prayer?"

"I had exam," I said. My voice was steady. I was proud of being honest.

“School is not more important than mosque,” he said. His eyes were small, like the light was too bright.

“For you maybe not,” I said, silly brave. “But for me it is important. I want to study.” My words came simple and straight. I did not think about consequence. Children think truth is a shield.

Everything inside the room became quiet. I remember a small cough from a boy, then nothing. The mullah’s hand touched the stick on the floor. He told two older students to bring ropes. They moved fast. Their faces were red, not angry, not happy, just red. My stomach went tight. I still see the carpet pattern under my knee, little flowers like stars, a coffee stain near the pillar. They tied my legs. They raised me, awkward, my body not ready. The mullah began to beat. The stick came down and down, quick as if he practiced many times. The first hit was cold, the next ones were fire. When the stick broke, he used his hand, then the new stick. Once he punched and my tooth cracked. I tasted blood and a small chalk-like piece in my mouth. I started to cry, not loud, more like leaking. I wanted my father. I wanted my bookshelf. I wanted my exam paper that was waiting for me like a friend. No one stopped him. Not the teacher who sometimes smiled at me. Not the boys who borrowed my pencils. I could not see their eyes. They looked at the floor, at the wall, at their own hands, not at me. Shame is a strong glue; it keeps you stuck. I understand that now. He hit my head and skin opened. Warm wet came down. It sounded like silence got heavier. A boy near the door swallowed hard. I remember that small sound more than the hits. The body remembers strange details. The brain looks for meaning. I know this now because I study psychology, but at that time I only felt like a small animal inside my own chest. At some point he stopped. Maybe he got tired. Maybe he thought the lesson entered my bones. Two students untied me and carried me out. The dawn had turned to morning. Chickens were awake, pecking near the road. My feet touched the dust and it felt like mercy. The boys brought me to my house like carrying a heavy water pot that you don’t want to drop. My mother cried. My father did not shout. He cleaned my head. He looked at my broken tooth with quiet eyes. He had a sad smile, like he was paying an old debt he never made. That day was heavy. But later something happened. The government men came and arrested the mullah. I heard it from neighbors first. It was not because of me only; there were other complaints. I did not feel victory. I felt empty. I felt tired. Anger is warm, but after it passes, it leaves cold air.

I decided not to study in the mosque anymore. I told my father. I was scared of his answer. He listened, then he said, very soft, “It’s on you.” He put his hand on the bookshelf like it was a person. “You love knowledge. I prefer you study English first. Your heart is already there.”

That moment felt like someone opened a window in a room that had no window before. I said yes. Maybe I said it too fast. But I said it with my full body.

I started with one teacher in our village. He was simple, kind, sometimes wrong, but honest. He wrote words on the board and waited. The first word that entered me and stayed was “science.” He wrote it slow: s-c-i-e-n-c-e. White chalk made a soft sound, like a whisper. When I copied it, my hand shook a little. The word looked like a small white boat moving across a dark sea. I took

that boat. I still carry it. We moved to the city later. I changed school, changed routes, changed friends. I was shy at first because my English was broken like an old fence, but I didn't mind. Broken can be repaired. Broken can also show where the light enters, I think. Anyway, I studied every day. Morning, night, in the bus, in the line for bread. I read children's books, then newspapers, then big texts I did not fully understand. I repeated words to myself while washing dishes: mind, memory, behavior, freedom. My mother joked that I spoke to bowls. Step by step, English opened doors. Not big doors with guards, just many small doors with easy locks. I joined online groups, talked to people from countries I only saw on maps. I learned how someone in Brazil also fears exams, how someone in India also fights with his uncle, how someone in Norway loves quiet nights. It made the world feel connected but also normal. Not a fairy tale. Just humans with headaches and dreams.

I fell in love with psychology because it gave names to feelings I knew but could not organize. Trauma, resilience, attachment, bias—these words were like tools, simple ones. When I read about how the body keeps score, I could finally explain why that morning stayed sharp in my mind, why certain smells pull me back, why I wake sometimes before dawn with my teeth pressed together. But I also learned about growth. Post-traumatic growth—strange term, but I saw it. Pain can be a teacher if you get a safe classroom. My safe classroom was a father's bookshelf and a chalk word on a board. Through English, I wrote small articles. At first they were clumsy. I used too many commas. I repeated ideas. But I sent them to small places on the internet. One got accepted. Then another. I kept the emails. I didn't show many people because I felt shy. Still, I knew I was moving. I also helped a cousin translate for a business paper. Later I got a small business license. These things sound big when I say them together. They were small steps when they happened. Walk, not run, my father said. Sometimes I think about that mullah. I don't hate him now. Hate is heavy to carry. He was a man with knowledge and anger, and maybe fear. Maybe my questions scared him because they woke his own questions. Maybe he learned to teach with force because force was used on him when he was a boy. This is not to excuse. It is to understand. Understanding is not the same as forgetting. I stayed Muslim. The Qur'an still calms me. The call to prayer still makes my chest open a little, like a window again. I do not judge Islam by one man's stick. My father taught me that faith is a river; people carry cups to it, some clean, some dirty, but the river is still water. When I read in English about ethics and compassion, I see it also in my own religion. Two mirrors facing each other, showing many reflections.

Now I am twenty-one. I study psychology. I still live simple. I travel sometimes, not big trips, but enough to feel my feet in another city. Airports scare me and excite me. I buy books in English when I can. I keep them near my bed like my father kept his books near the window. Sometimes I put my hand on them the way he did. I guess I learned that from him. Do I still remember the mosque floor? Yes. I still see the rope burn on my skin when I close my eyes too long. I still feel the tooth gap with my tongue when I am nervous. I still taste a little iron sometimes, like memory has its own blood. But something changed. I do not feel small when I remember. I feel... mixed. Sad for the boy. Proud for him also. He did not stop loving

knowledge. He argued once and paid the price, but he kept the fire. Maybe there was a seed that day, planted under pain, and it grew a strange plant that now gives me shade. When I visit my village, I go to Yadgar School and look at the door where I used to stand with dusty shoes. I listen to young voices. I see a boy carrying a notebook with drawings of planets. I want to tell him that questions are not a disease. I don't tell him; I just smile and move. I sit with my father and drink tea. He is older, but his finger still moves on the lines of a page the same way. He asks about my articles. He does not understand everything I write, and I don't expect him to, but he nods like he does. He still calls me by our last name sometimes. I still stand taller. People ask me if I regret anything. I don't know. Regret is a heavy word. I would not choose that beating again. I would not choose broken tooth, open head. But I cannot cut it out of my story. It is in the wood. It made the rings that show my age. Pain took me to a corner where I had to choose: silence or search. I chose search. I am still choosing it every morning.

I try to be gentle with myself and with others. I try to answer questions from younger students with patience, even when I am tired. When someone asks me, "Is doubt bad?" I say, "Doubt is a door. You can close it or you can walk through. If you walk, please bring your manners with you." I laugh a little when I say it. They laugh too. Laughter makes hard things smaller. Today, as I write this, I am sitting by a window in another country. Not the same window as my father's, but still a window. On my desk there is a notebook with words I want to remember. I look at the first page. The first line on that page is the same word I copied years ago from a blackboard with a shaking hand. The chalk is gone now, but the word remains, simple, white in my mind, a small boat moving.

science.

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