

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Born Under a Million Shadows

Andrea Busfield

About the Book

The Taliban have disappeared from Kabul's streets, but the long shadows of their brutal regime remain ...

In his short life eleven-year-old Fawad has known more grief than most: his father and brother have been killed, his sister has been abducted, and Fawad and his mother, Mariya, must rely on the charity of family to eke out a hand-to-mouth existence. But despite their struggles, Fawad's love of life never fades.

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Born Under a Million Shadows

Andrea Busfield

For my mum, my dad and my sister

Part One

1

MY NAME IS Fawad and my mother tells me I was born under the shadow of the Taliban.

Because she said no more, I imagined her stepping out of the sunshine and into the dark; crouching in a corner to protect the stomach that was hiding me, whilst a man with a stick watched over us, ready to beat me into the world.

But then I grew up and I realized I wasn't the only one born under this shadow. There was my cousin Jahid, for one, and the girl Jamilla - we all worked the foreigners on Chicken Street together - and there was also my best friend, Spandi. Before I knew him, Spandi's face was eaten by sand flies, giving him the one-year sore that left a mark as big as a fist on his cheek. He didn't care though, and neither did we, and while the rest of us were at school he sold spand to fat westerners which is why, even though his name was Abdullah, we called him Spandi.

Yes, all of us were born during the time of the Taliban, but I only ever heard my mother talk of them as men making shadows so I guess if she'd ever learnt to write she might have been a poet. Instead, and as Allah willed it, she swept the floors of the rich for a handful of afs that she hid in her clothes and guarded through the night. 'There are thieves everywhere,' she would hiss, an angry whisper that tied the points of her eyebrows together.

And, of course, she was right. I was one of them.

At the time, none of us thought of it as stealing. As Jahid explained, because he knew about such things, 'It's the moral distribution of wealth.'

‘Sharing money,’ added Jamilla. ‘We have nothing, they have everything, but they are too greedy to help poor people like us, as it is written in the Holy Quran, so we must help them be good. In a way, they are paying for our help. They just don’t know that they’re doing it.’

Of course, not all the foreigners paid for our ‘help’ with closed eyes. Some of them actually gave us money – sometimes happily, sometimes out of shame, sometimes just to make us go away, which doesn’t really work because one group is quickly replaced by another when dollars are walking the street. But it was fun. Born under a shadow or not, me, Jahid, Jamilla and Spandi spent our days in the sun, distributing the wealth of those who’d come to help us.

‘It’s called reconstruction,’ Jahid informed us one day as we sat on the kerb waiting for a 4×4 to jump on. ‘The foreigners are here because they bombed our country to kill the Taliban and now they have to build it again. The World Parliament made the order.’

‘But why did they want to kill the Taliban?’

‘Because they were friends with the Arabs and their king Osama bin Laden had a house in Kabul where he made hundreds of children with his forty wives. America hated bin Laden, and they knew he was fucking his wives so hard he would one day have an army of thousands, maybe millions, so they blew up a palace in their own country and blamed it on him. Then they came to Afghanistan to kill him, his wives, his children and all of his friends. It’s called politics, Fawad.’

Jahid was probably the most educated boy I’d ever known. He always read the newspapers we found thrown away in the street and he was older than the rest of us, although how much older nobody knows. We don’t celebrate birthdays in Afghanistan; we only remember victories and death. Jahid was also the best thief I’d ever known. Some days he would come away with handfuls of dollars, taken from the pocket of some foreigner as us smaller kids

annoyed them to the point of tears. But if I was born under a shadow, Jahid was surely born under the full gaze of the devil himself because the truth was he was incredibly ugly. His teeth were stumpy smudges of brown and one of his eyes danced to its own tune, rolling in its socket like a marble in a box. He also had a leg so lazy that he had to force it into line with the other.

‘He’s a dirty little thief,’ my mother would say. But she rarely had a kind word to say about anyone in her sister’s family. ‘You keep away from him . . . filling your head with such nonsense.’

How my mother actually thought I could keep away from Jahid was anyone’s guess. But this is a common problem with adults: they ask for the impossible and then make your life a misery when you can’t obey them. The fact is I lived under the same roof as Jahid, along with his fat cow of a mother, his donkey of a father and two more of their dirty-faced children, Wahid and Obaidullah.

‘All boys,’ my uncle would declare proudly.

‘And all ugly,’ my mother would mutter under her chaddar, giving me a wink as she did so because it was us against them and although we had nothing at least our eyes looked in the same direction.

Together, all seven of us shared four small rooms and a hole in the yard. Not easy, then, to keep away from cousin Jahid as my mother demanded. It was an order President Karzai would have had problems fulfilling. However, my mother was never one for explaining so she never told me how I should keep my distance. In fact, for a while my mother was never one for talking full stop.

On very rare occasions she would look up from her sewing to talk about the house we had once owned in Paghman. I was born there but we fled before the pictures had time to plant themselves in my head. So I found my memories with the words of my mother, watching her eyes grow wide with pride as she described painted rooms lined with thick

cushions of the deepest red; curtains covering glass windows; a kitchen so clean you could eat your food from the floor; and a garden full of yellow roses.

‘We weren’t rich like those in Wazir Akbar Khan, Fa-wad, but we were happy,’ she would tell me. ‘Of course that was long before the Taliban came. Now look at us! We don’t even own a tree from which we can hang ourselves.’

I was no expert, but it was pretty clear my mother was depressed.

She never talked about the family we had lost, only the building that had once hidden us – and not very effectively as it turned out. However, sometimes at night I would hear her whisper my sister’s name. She would then reach for me, pulling me closer to her body. And that’s how I knew she loved me.

On those occasions, lying almost as one on the cushions we sat on during the day, I’d be burning to talk. I’d feel the words crowding in my head, waiting to spill from my mouth. I wanted to know everything; about my father, about my brothers, about Mina. I was desperate to know them, to have them come alive in the words of my mother. But she only ever whispered my sister’s name, and like a coward I kept quiet because I was afraid that if I spoke I would break the spell and she would roll away from me.

By daylight, my mother would be gone from my side, already awake and pulling on her burqa. As she left the house she would bark a list of orders that always started with ‘go to school’ and ended with ‘keep away from Jahid’.

In the main these were orders I tried to follow out of respect for my mother – in Afghanistan our mothers are worth more than all the gold that hides in the basement of the President’s palace – but it wasn’t easy. And though I knew she wouldn’t beat me if I disobeyed her, unlike Jahid’s father who seemed to think he had a God-given right to hit me in the face on any day the sun came up, she would have

that look in her eyes, a disappointed stare I suspected had been there from the day I crept out of the shadow.

I am only a boy, but I recognized our life was difficult. Of course, it had always been the same for me, I knew no different. But my mother, with her memories of deep-red cushions and yellow roses, was trapped by a past I had little knowledge of so I spent most of my days on the outside of her prison, looking in. It had been like this for as long as I could clearly remember, yet I like to think she was happy once; laughing with my father by the clear waters of Qagha Lake, her green eyes – the eyes I have inherited – smiling with love, her small hands, soft and clean, playing with the hem of a golden veil.

My mother was once very beautiful – that’s what my aunt told me in a surprising burst of talking. But then the shadow fell, and although she never said so, I guessed my mother blamed me. I was a reminder of a past that had dragged her into the flowerless hell that was her sister’s house, and from what I could tell, my mother hated her sister even more than she hated the Taliban.

‘She’s just jealous!’ my mother once screamed, loud enough for my aunt to hear in the next room. ‘She’s always been jealous – jealous of my ways, of the fact that I married an educated man, of our once happy life . . . and I long got over apologizing for it. If Allah blessed her with the face of a burst watermelon and a body to match it is not my fault!’

‘They’re women, they’re born that way,’ Jahid told me one afternoon as we escaped once again from the screams and insults flying around the house to steal from the foreigners in the centre of town. ‘They are never happier than when they are fighting with each other. When you are older you will understand more. Women are complicated, that’s what my father says.’

And maybe Jahid was right. But the argument that had just taken place had more to do with money than being women. My aunt wanted us to pay rent, but we could barely

afford the clothes on our backs and the food in our bellies. The few afs mother earned from cleaning houses along with the dollars I picked up in the street were all we had.

‘Maybe if you gave a little more of your dollars to your mother she wouldn’t be so angry with my mother,’ I suggested, which was obviously the wrong thing to suggest because Jahid punched me hard in the head.

‘Look, you little bastard, my mother gave your mother a roof when you had no place to stay. Coming to our home begging like gypsy filth, forcing us to give up our room and put food in your idle fucking bellies. How do you think we felt? If we weren’t good Muslims your mother would be pimping your ass to every fucking homo who passed by. In fact, you want to help? Go pimp your own fucking ass! Pretty boy like you should make enough afs to keep the women happy.’

‘Yeah?’ I spat back. ‘And maybe they’d pay just as much money to keep the donkey’s ass that’s your face away from them!’

And with that I ran off, leaving my cousin shouting curses about camels and cocks in my direction while dragging his dead leg in fury behind him.

That day I ran from Jahid until I thought my legs would die. By the time I reached Cinema Park I could barely breathe, and I realized I was crying - for my mother and for my cousin. I had been cruel. I knew that. I understood why he was saving his money, why he buried it under the wall when he thought no one was looking. He wanted a wife. ‘One day I will be married to the most beautiful woman in Afghanistan,’ he always bragged. ‘You wait. You’ll see.’ And that’s why he needed the money, because with a face like his he’d have to come up with a hell of a dowry to make that dream come true. It’s not even as if he could rely on the force of his personality to win over a wife. He had the foulest mouth I had ever heard, even more so than the

National Police who cluttered the city's roundabouts, barking curses and demanding bribes, even from crippled beggars. In fact, the only other thing that could have saved Jahid was school, where he'd shown an unlikely talent. He threw himself into his learning as only a boy with no friends can do. But then the torment and the beatings he took day after day finally drove him away and he became increasingly hard.

My country can be a tough place to live in if you're poor, but it's even tougher if you're poor and ugly. And now Jahid was like stone; a stone that knows he will never find a woman who will willingly marry him, but whose father might agree for the right price.

'Come on, Fawad, let's go to Chicken Street.'

Through my tears I saw Jamilla standing before me, the sun throwing an angel's light around her body. She was small, like me. And she was pretty.

Jamilla reached for my hand and I dragged myself up from the ground to stand by her side, wiping my face dry on the sleeves of my clothes.

'Jahid,' I said by way of explanation.

Jamilla nodded. She didn't talk much, but I guessed she would grow into that if Jahid was right about the ways of women.

Jamilla was my main rival on Chicken Street. She cleaned up with the foreign men who melted under the gaze of her big brown eyes while I cleaned up with the women who fell in love with my big green eyes. We were a good team whose pickings pretty much depended on who was passing by, so if we found ourselves working on the same day we would split our money.

Fridays were the best, though. It was a holiday, there was no school, no work, and the foreigners would come, stepping out of their Land Cruisers to trawl Kabul's tourist area for souvenirs of 'war-torn' Afghanistan: jewellery boxes made of lapis lazuli; silver imported from Pakistan; guns and

knives apparently dating back to the Anglo-Afghan wars; pakouls; patus, blankets, carpets, wall hangings, bright-coloured scarves and blue burqas. Of course, if they walked twenty minutes into the heaving mess of Kabul's river bazaar they would find all these items for half the price, but the foreigners were either too scared or too lazy to make the journey - and too rich to care about the extra dollars that would feed most of our families for a week. Still, as Jahid noted, their laziness was good for business, and Chicken Street was their Mecca.

Along with the aid workers, now and again we would see white-faced soldiers hunched over the counters of stores selling silver, looking at rings and bracelets for the wives they'd left behind in their own countries. They were mainly tall men with big guns, metal jackets and bowl-shaped helmets strapped to their heads. They came in groups of four or five and one would always stand guard in the street as the others did their shopping, watching out for suicide bombers. 'America good!' we would shout - a trick that always earned us a couple of dollars. Money in hand, we would then move away, further down the street, just in case there were actually suicide bombers around.

Most of the other foreigners, though, were less interested in America so we used different tactics to win their dollars, following them as they weaved their way from shop to shop yelling out all the English we could remember. 'Hello, mister! Hello, missus! How are you? I am your bodyguard! No, come this way, I find you good price.' And we would take their hands and drag them to a store where we could earn a few afs' commission. Most of us were on the payroll of four or more shopkeepers, but only if we brought in customers. Therefore, if the foreigners didn't bend to our thinking, we would follow them into stores, tutting and shaking our heads in pretend concern, but carefully out of sight of the owners. 'No, missus, he is thief, very bad price. Come, I show you good price.' We would then lead them to

the shops that paid us, telling the owners of the figure given by one of their rivals so that he could begin his bargaining at a lower but still profitable price.

Meanwhile, as the foreigners argued a few extra dollars away, the old women who also worked the street but knew no English would descend, hovering in shop doorways to reach out with their dirty hands, grab at elbows and cry into their burqas. They all come from the same family, but the foreigners don't know this and as woman after woman would come to break down in tears pleading for money for her sick, dying baby, this would usually be the point when it became too much for the westerners and they would climb back into their cars, trying to avoid our eyes as their drivers sped them away from our poverty and back to their privileged lives.

However, as the Land Cruisers screeched out of Chicken Street and into the gridlocked traffic of Shahr-e Naw, Spandi would appear to tap his black fingers on their windows and hold out the bitter, smoking tin of herbs that we call 'spand', the smell of which was so unbelievably foul it was said to chase away evil spirits. Without doubt this was the worst of all our jobs because the smoke gets in your hair and your eyes and your chest and you end up looking like death. But the money is pretty OK because even if the tourists aren't superstitious it's hard to ignore a boy at a car window whose scarred face is the colour of ash.

However, on a good day in Chicken Street we didn't need to hustle. The foreign women would happily hand over their bags as they struggled with headscarves they had yet to grow used to, and I would carry their shopping until they called it a day, sometimes earning five dollars for my trouble. Jamilla would smile prettily and get the same for carrying nothing.

'And what is your name?' the women would ask slowly. Pretty white faces with smiling red lips.

'Fawad,' I would tell them.

'Your English is very good. Do you go to school?'

'Yes. School. Every day. I like very much.'

And it was true, we all went to school - even the girls if their fathers let them - but the days were short and the holidays long with months off in the winter and summer when it became too cold or too hot to study. However, the English we learnt came only from the street. It was easy to pick up and the foreigners liked to teach us.

And even if Jahid was correct and they did come to bomb our country and rebuild it again, I quite liked the foreigners with their sweaty white faces and fat pockets - which was just as well really, because that day I returned to my aunt's house to be told we were going to live with three of them.

2

IT DIDN'T TAKE US long to move out of my aunt's house, possessing as we did only one blanket, a few clothes and a copy of the Quran. We would have taken more, but my aunt seemed to think that the few pots and pans we'd gathered over the years now belonged to her.

Thankfully, my mother was in no mood to argue that day and simply spat at her sister's feet before lowering her burqa and dragging me out of the door.

'Goodbye, Jahid!' I shouted behind me.

'Bye, Fawad jan!'

I looked back, surprised by the affectionate 'jan' added to my name, and just in time to see my cousin wipe something from his one good eye.

'Don't forget us, you donkey cunt!'

It was a quick extra that earned him an equally quick blow to the ear from the fat fist of his mother.

It took us two whole hours to walk from Khair Khana on the edge of the city to Wazir Akbar Khan, the location of our new house, in which time I managed to get from my mother that we were to live with two women and one man. She said she only knew the name of one of the women, the one who had invited us; her name was Georgie. And apparently, she had been washing *Georgie's* clothes for weeks.

I couldn't believe she hadn't mentioned this before.

'But why were you washing her clothes?' I asked.

'For money, what do you think?'

'Why doesn't she wash her own clothes?'

'Foreigners don't know how. They need machines to wash their clothes.'

'What kind of machines?'

'Washing machines.'

This sounded incredible to me, but my mother wouldn't lie. OK, she didn't talk much, but when she did it was always the truth. I also knew that foreigners were a Godless people so I had to assume that as well as going to Hell they hadn't even been blessed with the common skills given to ordinary Afghans like us.

'Does she sew?'

'No.'

'Can she cook?'

'No.'

'Does she have a husband?'

'No.'

'I'm not surprised.'

Mother laughed and dragged me into a hug as we walked. I looked up but I couldn't see her face through the screen of the burqa, so I held her hand tighter, my ears burning at the thought of having made her smile.

This was fast turning into the best day of my life.

Although I had no real memories of what it had been like before my aunt's house, I knew my mother was miserable after we moved from Paghman. Locked in one room with a thin carpet that offered no comfort from the cold scratches of the concrete floor, we lived, ate and slept like tolerated prisoners under my aunt's roof. The toilet was also a constant torment to my mother, smattered as it usually was by the missed aims of four careless boys and a man whose bowels were as loose as a slaughtered goat's; and we were plagued with illness, from malaria in the summer to flu in the winter, as well as the worms and bugs that permanently lived in our stomachs. Yet we had to appear grateful because my aunt had taken us in on the night we lost everything.

Every year, people around us died from disease, rocket attacks, forgotten mines, the bites of animals large and

small, and even hunger. And even if you did have food, that was no guarantee of coming out of the day alive. Mother cooked our meals on an old gas burner that sat in the corner of our room threatening to explode and knock the heads from our very necks. That's what happened to Haji Mohammad's wife three doors away. She was cooking chickpeas in the kitchen when the burner exploded into a ball of flames. It then shot from the floor like a rocket, taking her head clean off. It took them weeks to clear the blood and brains from the black remains of the kitchen. Even today, dents from bullet-propelled chickpeas scar the walls of the house and Haji Mohammad won't eat anything but salad, fruit and naan. Anything, in fact, that doesn't need cooking. Thanks be to Allah though, because he'd been blessed with a second wife - and she was younger than the first.

'So, how did you get to know her?'

'Who?'

'The foreign woman, Georgie.'

'I found her.'

'What do you mean you found her? How did you find her?'

'Oh, Fawad! So many questions! I was knocking on doors looking for work and she gave me some. After that she gave me some more and then she invited us to come. OK?'

'OK.'

As we marched through the streets, dodging dog shit and potholes, and with my mother now refusing to give any more information as to how we came to be moving towards this sudden freedom, I tried to imagine the mysterious Georgie who had been found by my mother. I pictured a woman with long golden hair and an easy smile standing under a tree in Wazir Akbar Khan, looking lost with her arms full of the dirty clothes she had no idea how to wash. In my head she looked like the woman from *Titanic*. In reality, she looked more Afghan than I did.

Turning left, just before Massoud circle, we criss-crossed three roads lined with concrete barriers protecting huge houses that peered over high walls with curls of barbed wire fixed on them. Men holding guns stood guard every ten paces and they eyed us with lazy suspicion as we moved further into the residential area of the rich. Eventually we came to a standstill in front of a large green metal gate. Another guard wearing a light blue shirt and black trousers came out of a wooden white hut positioned nearby and greeted my mother. He then opened the side door and shouted inside. As we stepped through, a woman came walking towards us with hair as long and dark as my mother's. She wore a white shirt over blue jeans and looked quite beautiful.

'Salaam aleykum, Mariya!' the woman sang, clasping my mother's hand as she did so.

'Waleykum salaam,' my mother replied.

'How are you? How is your health? Are you well? How was your trip? No problems?'

As my mother rattled off her replies, I stared at the woman I guessed to be Georgie, surprised to hear her speaking one of our languages and surprised to find that not only was she dressed like a man, she was also as tall as one.

'And this must be your handsome son Fawad. How are you, Fawad? Welcome to your new home.'

I held out my hand and Georgie shook it. Although I tried to speak, my mouth was a few steps behind my head and I couldn't find the words to answer her.

'Ha! He is a little shy, I think. Please, come in, both of you.'

My mother walked further into the yard, where she felt free to lift the burqa back from her face. My first thought was that she looked afraid, which didn't exactly set my mind at rest. But then I realized that, like me, she didn't quite know what to say.

Silently, we followed Georgie to a small building sitting behind and to the right of the gate.

‘This will be your place, Fawad. I hope you will be happy here.’

Georgie pointed to the building, waving at us to follow her in. So we did.

Inside there were two rooms separated by a small, clean toilet and shower area. As she opened the door to the first room I saw two beds with blankets sitting upon them. They were still in their plastic cases and looked new. In the other room there were three long cushions, a small table, an electric fan and a television – a real live Samsung television! And it looked like it might even work! All my life I had dreamt of owning a TV, and I felt tears sticking sharp pins in the backs of my eyes at the very sight of it.

‘Come,’ Georgie said with a smile, ‘leave your things here and I’ll show you around.’

My first day in the new house was a blur of sights, smells and sounds. There was our home and a bigger building where Georgie and her friends lived upstairs. There was a kitchen the size of the yard where my mother was told she would do much of her work, and a sitting room with another television (much bigger than ours), a music system and a pool table. To the back of the house was a massive lawn framed with rose bushes. When I saw them parading their pretty colours in the sun my heart leapt at the thought of my mother once again being surrounded by such beauty.

But then I saw a man standing in the middle of this beauty with his chest as bare as that of Pir the Madman who played with the dogs in Shahr-e Naw Park and I began seriously to worry for my mother’s reputation. The man was holding a long stick in his hand, a bottle of beer in the other, and he had a cigarette balanced between his teeth. He had been using the stick to hit a small ball into a glass lying on the ground, and not doing very well by the looks of it.

‘Hello, I’m James,’ he shouted, looking up in time to catch us staring at him.

He wandered over to offer his hand to my mother who, quite rightly, waved but didn’t accept it. Georgie said something sharp in what I recognized was English and the man gave a small easy laugh before reaching for his shirt, which lay close by on the back of a white plastic chair.

‘This is James,’ explained Georgie. ‘He’s a journalist, so please forgive his manners.’

After James pulled on his clothes he walked back to us saying something I didn’t quite understand before reaching out with his right hand to mess up my hair. I shook my head, knocking him away, and threw him a look to warn that this kind of attention wasn’t appreciated, but then he rolled his hand into a fist, knocked me on the chin and started laughing. Georgie spoke again and James raised his arms in pretend surrender before putting his right hand to his heart and smiling at me. It was a true smile that made moon-shaped holes around his lips, and I accepted it with one of my own. I knew then that I liked the man, James. He was tall and thin and he had a dark beard. He could easily have passed for an Afghan if he managed to keep his clothes on.

Behind us I heard the gate open and a woman came striding into the garden. She looked angry and slightly confused, but when Georgie spoke she smiled and waved.

‘Our final housemate,’ explained Georgie. ‘This is May, she’s an engineer.’

May greeted us with handshakes. She was short with yellow hair escaping from a green headscarf. She had spots on her face and she also looked nothing like the woman from *Titanic*. The man called James gave her his beer and she seemed happy with this. And although I tried not to look, I could see that under her blue shirt she had the most enormous breasts I’d ever come across. I wondered whether James had seen them.

‘We are all quite friendly here and very relaxed, so please treat this place as your home for as long as you need it,’ said Georgie.

My mother then thanked her and led me back to our rooms – away from the foreigners who had invited us into their home and away from the sight of May’s chest.

Over the next few days, as my mother washed and cooked and basically did everything the foreigners seemed incapable of, I kept a careful eye on my new landlords. Although I was glad to be there, I had to protect my mother, and to do that I needed to know just who and what I was dealing with. My main concern was the naked journalist.

Thankfully, the layout of the place gave me the chance to observe pretty much everything, unseen. The passageway behind the house allowed me to watch the garden unnoticed; the big windows gave me a grand view of what was happening downstairs, when it was dark outside and the lights were on; and the high walls and balconies gave me a way in to some of the sights above. Now and again my mother would catch me spying on the foreigners and shake her head, but although her eyes looked puzzled they seemed fairly unconcerned. She’d also taken to laughing more – and mainly when one of the guards, Shir Ahmad, came from his hut to refill his teapot.

I made a mental note to investigate Shir Ahmad as soon as I’d finished with the foreigners.

With so much spying to do, for the first few weeks after we moved to Wazir Akbar Khan I kept away from Chicken Street, despite the almost unbearable ache to tell Jahid about our television, and fill Jamilla’s head with the sights and sounds of my new home. Instead, I would return from school, sit in the doorway of the kitchen, chat with my mother as she did her chores and wait for Georgie, James and May to come back from wherever they had been.

'How does Georgie know our Dari language?' I asked my mother as she peeled potatoes for that night's dinner.

'From her friends, I think.'

'She has Afghan friends?'

'Apparently so. Pass me that pan, will you, Fawad?'

I reached for the metal container, tipped a dead fly out of it, and handed it over.

'So, have you seen these friends?' I asked, settling back on to the kitchen step.

'Once, yes.'

'Who are they?'

'Afghans.'

'I know *that!*'

My mother laughed, throwing the naked potatoes in the pan as she did so. 'They are Pashtuns,' she finally offered. 'From Jalalabad.'

'Oh, she's got some taste then.'

'Yes.' My mother smiled before adding somewhat mysteriously, 'Sort of.'

'What do you mean, "sort of"?''

'They're not . . . how should I put it? They're not the kind of friends I might choose for you.'

'Why not?'

'Because you're my boy and I love you. Now that's enough, Fawad. Go and finish your homework.'

Dismissed, and left dangling once again by my mother's riddles, I returned to my room to practise the multiplication tables we had been set at school that day. I guessed that in the same way I'd found out about the Taliban shadow, the reason Georgie had sort-of friends would become clear at some later stage of my life. However, I was glad they were Pashtun, like me. If they had been Hazaras they would have cut off her breasts by now.

As we actually had water connected to the house I no longer had to make the back-breaking trip to the nearest tap to

fight with other kids and dirty dogs for a bucketful of liquid that lasted five minutes, and so after completing my homework my only real job was to run to the baker's each evening with a handful of afs to collect five hot fresh long breads.

Other than that, my life usually involved waiting for the foreigners.

Georgie was normally the first to arrive home, and quite often she would allow me to sit in the garden with her as she drank her coffee. Although my mother was always invited she rarely came to join us. She had quickly made friends with a woman across the road who managed a house for the wife of one of the Ministry of Interior's men. Her name was Homeira and she was pretty fat so I guessed they paid her well. I was happy my mother had found a friend so I felt no jealousy when she spent much of her time talking to her in our room or at Homeira's working house. In fact, I was more than happy, I was amazed. It was as if a hidden key had turned in my mother's head, releasing a river of words that had been locked in there for years.

More amazing, however, was my mother's willingness to let me stay in the house alone and to sit with the westerners for as long as 'they don't become bored'. Perhaps she thought it would be good for my English, although James was hardly ever around, May always seemed to be crying, and Georgie and I usually spoke Dari together.

From these little conversations I learnt that Georgie came from England, the same country as London. She'd been in Afghanistan for ages and came to live with James and May two years ago because they had become friends and James needed the rent money. She worked for an NGO and combed goats for a living, and because she knew the country and travelled a lot she had made loads of Afghan friends. In that way, and many more, she was different from most foreigners I had met and I think I fell in love with her instantly. She was gentle and funny and she seemed to like

being with me. She was also very beautiful with thick almost-black hair and dark eyes. I hoped one day to marry her - once she had given up smoking and converted to the one true faith, of course.

The engineer, May, was usually the second one home and tended to disappear into her room as soon as her quick greetings were over. Georgie told me she came from America on a contract with one of the ministries and that she was 'a little unhappy right now'. She didn't explain further and I didn't ask more. I liked the mystery it gave to May's tears.

As a rule, James was always the last one home and at least twice a week he would return very late, bouncing off walls and singing to himself. The more I got to know him, the more I was convinced he was related to Pir the Madman.

'He works very hard,' Georgie explained, 'and mainly with the ladies.'

Georgie laughed at that, and I wondered how these women got permission from their husbands to work so late with a man who freely showed his nipples to the world as if they were medals of war.

'What work does he do with them?' I asked, causing Georgie to laugh even louder. It was a good strong sound, like thunder in summer.

'Fawad,' she finally said, 'you'd best ask your mother that question.'

And that put a stop to that.

And because that's always the way with adults - they shut you out just as things get interesting - I had no choice but to carry on with my own investigations - investigations my mother might call 'snooping'.

Through much trying and failing, I found the best time to watch my new friends was at night, when the lights were on, it was dark outside and everyone thought I was asleep. Luckily, my mother was a great help when it came to my night-time spying as she had chosen to sleep in the TV

room, meaning I now had a bedroom to myself for the very first time, which gave me complete freedom to explore my surroundings and its strange Godless inhabitants.

Now and again, about an hour after I'd turned out my light, my mother would open the door to my room, which surprised me the first time because I was a breath away from leaving. But it was one of those warm surprises that make your toes tingle and your heart feel like it's bleeding inside because, thinking I was asleep, she kissed me softly on the cheek before returning to her own room, satisfied I was safely locked up in my dreams. Which of course I wasn't. As a result of that first sweet surprise, I quickly learnt to wait a good hour until after my mother's visit before pulling on my shoes and allowing my adventures to begin.

Creeping along walls and crouching in bushes, I listened to magical, mysterious conversations that exploded with laughter as Georgie, James and May spoke with other white-faced friends around the table in the garden. Of course, I could hardly understand a bloody word they were saying, but this simply meant I now had a code I would have to learn to decipher.

Really, I felt like I'd been plucked from the flames of Hell and placed into Paradise. In those first few weeks I wasn't simply Fawad from Paghman, I was Fawad the secret agent. In those days, Kabul was crawling with spies - British, Pakistani, French, Italian, Russian, Indian and American men as big as giants who wore their beards long to try and look Afghan. My mission from the President was simple: to discover who in the house was working as a spy, and the identity of their masters.

As I crept and crawled my way through the heavy heat of those Kabul summer nights, I wrapped layers of dreams and heroic tales around my adventures, and I plotted escape routes and hatched complicated plans to avoid detection so that I might hand over my carefully gathered information to