

A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS

Music by Sheila Silver
Libretto by Stephen Kitsakos

Adapted from the novel by
Khaled Hosseini

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SUMMARY

Based on the international best-selling novel by Khaled Hosseini, "A Thousand Splendid Suns" is set in Afghanistan from the 1960's to 2002. It is the story of two women, born a generation apart, one an uneducated bastard child and the other an educated modern beauty. Fifteen years apart, each is married to the same brutal man, Rasheed. Cold to one another at first, they bond in a loving mother-daughter relationship and make heroic sacrifices for one another as war surrounds them and their husband's abuse mounts. A story of love and passion, two heroines emerge as symbols of a universal bond that exists between women.

SYNOPSIS

Fifteen-year-old Mariam, the cast-off bastard child of a rich father, is forced to leave her rural home after her mother's suicide and marry a middle-aged shoemaker from Kabul named Rasheed. Alone, scared and forced to wear the burqa, something unfamiliar to her, she tries her best to be a dutiful wife but is unable to conceive a child. Consequently, she lives a loveless existence with a husband who abuses her regularly for her failure to give him a son.

Years later, as competing factions of sectarian warlords secure a stranglehold on Kabul, a bomb explodes in Mariam's neighborhood killing the parents of fourteen-year-old Laila, a modern, educated, ravishing beauty. Rasheed brings the wounded girl to his home and Mariam, reluctantly, nurses her back to health. Rasheed, now a sixty-year old man, schemes to get Laila to marry him by concocting a story that her beloved fiancée, Tariq, who was forced to flee to Pakistan with his parents, has been killed. Laila, secretly carrying Tariq's child, agrees to marry Rasheed, hoping to create a safe haven for the child.

At first Mariam is cold to Laila, but gradually the women bond over Laila's baby, a girl named Aziza, as well as their hatred of Rasheed, who abuses them physically and psychologically. Eventually the Taliban rise to power and life in Kabul becomes more oppressive. When the two wives and Aziza attempt a daring escape from the city they are caught at the Kabul central bus station, escalating Rasheed's abuse and anger. Although Laila eventually gives Rasheed the son he has always wanted, the violence continues.

The turning point comes when Tariq, Laila's beloved, returns to Kabul and finds her. Rasheed learns of Tariq's visit to the house and in an act of extreme rage begins to strangle Laila. Mariam, refusing to stand silent, saves Laila's life by hitting Rasheed on the head with a shovel, killing him.

Mariam convinces Laila to flee with Tariq and Laila's two children. She will remain behind to take responsibility for killing Rasheed, knowing that she will be sentenced to death. As Mariam walks to her execution, an understanding of her life brings her a sense of self-worth and spiritual peace: she has loved and been loved. She saved Laila's life and has lived a life of consequence. She knows that Allah will forgive her.

CAST

MARIAM, daughter of <i>Nana</i> , ages 15-39	mezzo-soprano
LAILA, daughter of <i>Hakim</i> and <i>Fariba</i> , ages 14-25	soprano
RASHEED, husband of <i>Mariam</i> and <i>Laila</i> , ages 45-60	baritone
TARIQ, boyfriend of <i>Laila</i> , ages 16-27	tenor
NANA, mother of <i>Mariam</i> , 35	dramatic soprano
FARIBA, <i>Laila's</i> mother, ages 30-45	mezzo-soprano
HAKIM, <i>Laila's</i> father, ages 35-50	bass-baritone
JALIL, <i>Mariam's</i> father, age 40	tenor
JALIL'S WIFE #1	mezzo or contralto
JALIL'S WIFE #2	soprano
JALIL'S WIFE #3	soprano
MARKET WOMAN #1	soprano
MARKET WOMAN #2	soprano
MARKET WOMAN #3	mezzo or contralto
MULLAH	bass
DR. WAJMA, attends <i>Laila's</i> birth	soprano
ABDUL SHARIF, businessman	bass
WAKIL, stranger in bus station	tenor
DRIVER, <i>Jalil's</i> chauffeur	bass
TALIBAN SOLDIER	bass
PRISON GUARD	tenor
AZIZA, daughter of <i>Laila</i> and <i>Tariq</i> , age 3 (may be a doll)	non-singing (optional)
ZALMAI, son of <i>Laila</i> and <i>Rasheed</i> , age 5	boy soprano

While there is no chorus, additional non-singing performers may be used on stage as *Jalil's* servants, people of Kabul in the various markets, at the Kabul Bus Station, in Ghazi Stadium, as Taliban Soldiers and to play 8-yr. old *Aziza*, briefly, in the final scene.

Several roles can be doubled or tripled making the opera performable with 11-12 soloists plus a boy soprano.

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

Prelude. 1974. Lights up on a rustic hut (a kolba), flanked by an imperious willow tree, in the hills outside Herat, a provincial city in Western Afghanistan. NANA, a woman in her mid-30's, frazzled and beaten, is lighting a tandoor and flattening dough as she argues with her illegitimate daughter, MARIAM, aged 15.

NANA

This is my reward, ungrateful daughter.
Listening to his lies. Rich lies!
A rich man telling rich lies.

MARIAM

Nana, my father loves me.

NANA

He cast us out.
He betrayed us.
He made you a bastard, little *harami*.

MARIAM

He comes every Thursday to see me.

NANA

Bah! To this rotten rathole of a house
while he lives in town with his fancy wives,
in his big, fancy house.

MARIAM

Nana, my father loves me.
He sings to me and tells me stories.

NANA

Stories! His children get ice cream
but you get *stories* of ice cream.

MARIAM

Nana, you don't know him.
You never see him.
You hate him.
Nana, my father loves me.

NANA

You know what he told his wives?
That I forced myself on him.
Me, a lowly servant.
A lowly servant in his house.
That it was *my* fault, Mariam!
That it was *my* fault, Mariam!

MARIAM

Today is my birthday.
He will come. He will come.

NANA

Don't be foolish, Mariam.
Don't be foolish, Mariam.

NANA

Like a compass needle pointing north
a man's accusing finger always finds a woman.
Always finds a woman.
I'm the only one who loves you.
I'm all that you have in this world and
when I'm gone you'll have nothing.
Little *harami*. Little *harami*. Little *harami*.
Ungrateful daughter!

MARIAM is unmoved.

I'll die if you go. The *jinn* will come,
I'll have a fit and die if you go!

MARIAM

Nana, you always say that.

NANA

This time it will be true.

MARIAM turns her back on her mother as if she's heard this all before and starts to leave. Nana glares after her then goes back into the kolba. MARIAM approaches her favorite willow tree and prepares to wait for JALIL, her father.

MARIAM

It's almost noon.
He'll be here soon.

MARIAM dances around the tree as she sings.

"Lili lili birdbath, sitting on a dirt path.
Mynah sat on the rim and drank.
Slipped, and in the water sank."

She stops dancing as her impatience overwhelms her.

He must have been detained.
He is a businessman.
He'll be here soon.

She ponders her situation and suddenly it's clear to her what she must do. She bends over and rolls up the trousers beneath her dress and prepares to cross the stream. She sings with determination.

Today I am fifteen and I have never crossed the stream.
I have never walked down the mountain to Herat
to the town where my father lives.

I only know stories.
I want more than stories.

MARIAM enters into the river and starts walking.

Lord give me strength!
Allah, fill my heart with courage.

The lights fade slowly and reveal the nighttime sky. When they come up we are in the world of early morning light. The kolba and willow tree have re-emerged, but are obscured. We see MARIAM being escorted by a DRIVER. She trudges along dejectedly, walking slightly behind.

MARIAM
My father would not open his door to me. Why?

DRIVER
I don't know.
He told me to take you home.

MARIAM
I slept outside like a stray dog.
I am so ashamed.

DRIVER
We are almost there.
Hurry up Mariam jo. Hurry up!
Hurry up, Mariam jo.

MARIAM
How can I face my mother again?
She warned me.
She was right all along.

The DRIVER stops abruptly. He sees something ahead and turns to MARIAM to shield her from the sight. Lights isolate the willow tree. A chair has been kicked on its side.

DRIVER
Don't look! Don't look! Mariam, don't look!
Turn back, turn around, Mariam!
Turn around... Mariam! Turn around, Mariam.

As they struggle MARIAM breaks free and runs forward to stare at the body of her mother, NANA, hanging from the from the end of a rope.

Don't look ...

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

Prelude. 1974. Herat. A week later in the house of JALIL KHAN, the luxurious and well-appointed home of a wealthy man. MARIAM is seated, surrounded by the three wives of her father. Dressed elegantly, they wear black scarves around their necks, a superficial token of mourning. They look like glamorous crows gathered around to peck at the young girl. JALIL stands apart from them nervously. The women overlap each other.

WIFE #1

(with sanctimony)

This is your father's house.
We have looked after you since
your mother committed yet, another sin.

WIFE #2

(mockingly)

But your father pities you...

WIFE #3

and so

ALL THREE

he is giving you a future.
A husband, Rasheed.

WIFE #3

A kind, middle-aged man.

ALL THREE

He doesn't care that you are only fifteen.

MARIAM

(to JALIL)

I don't want this. Please don't make me.

JALIL

(angrily)

You cannot spend the rest of your life here!

ALL THREE

It's an honor, it's your duty, it's a privilege.
It will bring you joy. It's a moral obligation.
You must do this for your father.
You have no choice!

Rasheed is a good man.
A widower, lonely for a wife.
He has a shop in Kabul and a two-story house.
Trust us Mariam, you won't do better.

WIFE #1

You don't have many choices.

WIFE #2

You don't have any options.

WIFE #3

A *harami* doesn't.

ALL THREE

A *harami* doesn't!

A *harami* doesn't!

You must not cry. It's pointless.

Your mother is dead. She's not coming back.

MARIAM jumps up from the chair and runs over to her father.

MARIAM

You told me I could stay here.

You told me I could go to school.

Stories. You give me only stories.

I want more than stories.

WIFE #1

Your father has decided.

The marriage will take place in the morning.

The bus for Kabul leaves at noon.

MARIAM

Tell them! Tell them! I won't ...

JALIL looks back and forth anxiously between MARIAM and his wives.

JALIL

(suddenly)

Goddamn it Mariam!

Don't do this to me!

The next morning. SERVANTS are being directed by WIFE #1 to set up the room for the wedding, arranging flowers, isolating two chairs which will be used for the bride and groom, setting up a table on which is placed a mirror, a green veil and a Koran. This is all done ceremoniously. JALIL enters with MARIAM and a MULLAH. She is seated in one of the chairs while a WIFE places a veil over her face. The WIVES flank her on one side while JALIL and the MULLAH are on the other side. Though there is an attempt at civility, there's a palpable sense of awkwardness that dominates the entire scene.

JALIL

(with authority)

Show him in.

RASHEED enters tentatively. He is tall, thick-bellied, broad shouldered. Clearly older than MARIAM. One can sense his excitement. He is wearing a plain suit and tie. His hair is grey with flecks of black and is combed and slicked back. He is seated in the chair next to MARIAM. He appears nervous but compliant.

MULLAH

Allah. Allah. Allah.
Allah has created male and female.
Each in need of one another.
He has set between them love and mercy.
Do you, Rasheed, wish to enter
into marriage with Mariam?

RASHEED

Yes, in the name of Allah.

MULLAH

Do you, Mariam, wish to enter
into marriage with Rasheed?

MARIAM does not answer.

WIFE #1

(impatiently)

Yes, she does.

MULLAH

(indignantly)

She must answer for herself!
Do you, Mariam, wish to enter
into marriage with Rasheed?

JALIL

Mariam! ...

MARIAM

Yes ...

A mirror is passed beneath MARIAM'S veil and she glimpses RASHEED who smiles proudly. He takes out two gold bands from his pocket and hands one to MARIAM to slip onto his finger which she does nervously. Then he takes her hand and places the other ring on her finger. The MULLAH presents a document and pen to her. MARIAM takes the pen but does not move to sign.

MULLAH

Sign your name here.

May Allah fill your lives with joy and tranquility
and tender regard for each other.
Sign your name here...now.

MARIAM

(she signs the contract)

Meem, Rah
Ya, Meem

MARIAM and RASHEED stand. Towering over her, RASHEED lifts the veil and they see each other for the first time. The MULLAH and the smiling WIVES fade into the background. RASHEED follows them out leaving only JALIL and MARIAM together. JALIL hands her a weathered suitcase.

MARIAM

I used to worship you.

You are ashamed of me.

It ends here now for us.

Don't come. Don't come.

I won't see you. I don't ever
want to see you again!

JALIL

Mariam jo...

I'll come to visit.

I'll come to Kabul to see you.

Please don't say goodbye like this.

Mariam, Mariam jo.

Please, please don't
say goodbye like this.
Please Mariam. Mariam!

JALIL moves to embrace her, but she turns and walks away as RASHEED emerges, hand extended to her.

MARIAM

(with controlled rage)

I have a husband now.

ACT ONE, SCENE THREE

1974. A week later. The interior of RASHEED'S home in Kabul. Downstairs, a disheveled kitchen and minimally furnished living area. A set of stairs leads to the bedrooms upstairs. The house is in deep neglect. MARIAM is upstairs on the side of her bed. Her suitcase stands upright by the bed. She has been crying.

MARIAM

Nana was right. My father doesn't love me.
He has cast me aside like a dead weed.
Now I have landed here, frightened and cold.
And I feel like a stranger,
a stranger in a strange man's house.

I have never been afraid before.
I always knew what lay outside my door.
But now I am scared...terrified... numb.
And I feel like a stranger,
a stranger in a strange man's house

What must I do for this man?
Who does he want me to be?
What do I know about being a wife?
I am only fifteen. Only fifteen.

Everything familiar has disappeared.
My father, my mother.
That day I made the choice to
walk down the mountain to Herat.

Allah! Allah! Give me courage.

MARIAM begins to cry as RASHEED enters the room.

RASHEED
(gently)

What is this crying about Mariam?
I do not like the sound of a woman crying.
It's time to stop your crying, Mariam. Come here.

He takes her hand.

Look out the window my sweet Mariam.
See what is growing there on the window sill?
White tuberose to welcome you here.
White tuberose! I placed them there myself
to welcome you here, to your new home.
This is your home now, sweet Mariam.
You will be happy here, sweet Mariam.

RASHEED
We have many things you have
never had like electricity,
most days and nights.
And a large stove for cooking!

This is your home now, sweet Mariam.
You will be happy here, sweet Mariam.
Mariam, don't be frightened.
Mariam, no more tears. Mariam ...

MARIAM

I want to go home to my
own house, with my Nana.
I'm just a stranger in a strange
man's house.

(she begins to cry again)

RASHEED
(angrily)

Stop your crying now.
Stop your crying now!
What did I say about crying?
I cannot stand the sound of a woman crying.

She stops abruptly. Frightened. RASHEED lights a cigarette and walks around the bed menacingly. He points to the suitcase on the floor.

When are you going to unpack that thing?
Is this some kind of hotel?
I wanted to give you some time but this is absurd!
I expect you to start acting like a wife.
Like *my* wife. Is this understood?

MARIAM

(quietly, trying not to sob)

Yes.

RASHEED

(resolutely)

Well then, this is a new day Mariam.
We can be happy here, sweet Mariam.

RASHEED comes in closer to her and puts his arm around her. She starts to shake a bit.

No more crying sweet Mariam.

The lights fade on MARIAM and RASHEED. A call to prayer is heard and we are in the bustling neighborhood market of Deh-Mazang. Barrels filled with grains, fruit and nuts, used clothing, spices and rice. Vendors and shoppers fill the scene. Some women are wearing the burqa, others just a headscarf, still others in Western dress. FOUR MARKET WOMEN gather in a line waiting to bake their bread in the community tandoor. They carry their dough wrapped in cloths and greet each other as they join the line. One of them, FARIBA, is dressed Western-style.

FARIBA

WOMAN #1

WOMAN #2

WOMAN #3

Salaam, Salaam,
Khala jan.

Salaam, Salaam
Khala jan.

As if the meals
cook themselves!

Did you soak your rice?

Salaam, Salaam,
Khala jan.

Salaam,
Khala jan

Salaam, Salaam
Khala jan. What
about your
son's cough?

Is it better?

A little better.

Allah be praised.
Allah be praised.

Allah be praised.
Allah be praised.

Allah be praised.
Allah be praised.

Salaam aleikum.

Aleikum salaam!

Aleikum, Salaam.
Always cooking.
Always cleaning.

Doesn't matter
what I cook.

He still hates your
cooking.

Mine always loves
my cooking. Better
than his mothers
even though she
taught me!

Mine still loves his mother
And she hates my cooking.
Nothing I do
will please her.

Ai, ai ,ai!
Allah give us
patience.

Ai, ai, ai!
Allah give us
patience.

Ai, ai, ai!
All give us
patience.

Ai, ai, ai!
Allah give us
patience.

Is your husband
working now?

No! No! No!

I have to see him
morning, noon and night.

But your husband
is so handsome!

Not so in the bedroom.

Mine is quite an
expert in that
department.

Lucky you.

Lucky you.

Ladies please!

Allah be praised
for such men.

Allah be praised
for such men.

Allah be praised
for such men.

Allah be praised
for such men.

FARIBA notices MARIAM, holding a folded cloth, and goes over to her. She shrinks a bit.

FARIBA

Are you the new wife?
Rasheed's new wife?
The one from Herat.
You are so young!
What is your name dear?

MARIAM

Mariam.

FARIBA

Welcome, Mariam, to Kabul,
I am Fariba. I live on your street.
Five houses to your left.
The house with the green door.
My husband, Hakim teaches school.
You live so close to us.
Your house has the brown door.

Your poor husband
living in that house alone,
behind those walls for years.
First his wife dies,
then his son is drowned.
There's nothing in that house but tears,
nothing but tears.

But you will bring him joy, Mariam.
And give him many sons.
You live so close to us.
Your house has the brown door.

Ladies come! Meet Mariam,
Rasheed's new wife.

The MARKET WOMEN gather around MARIAM

FARIBA

Let her be. Move aside.
Move aside.
Can't you see?
You're frightening her.

MARKET WOMEN

(overlapping)

Salaam, Mariam, Rasheed's new wife.
We heard you were coming.
You are from Herat? She's from Herat!
My cousin lives there!
Do you know how to cook?

Sisters please, sisters please.
Move aside.
You're frightening her.

MARIAM suddenly bolts from the women. Running, she trips and falls. Her package opens and scatters. She is frantic and she is lost.

MARIAM

Where am I? Where am I?
I want to go home.

MARIAM begins to remember FARIBA'S words.

FARIBA *(offstage voice)*

You live so close to us.
The house with the brown door.

MARIAM picks herself up and tries to calm herself. Lights change as we segue back to the house. MARIAM is cooking. RASHEED is standing in the doorway watching her. He enters, carrying a paper bag. The kitchen has been cleared and the room is organized. She has cleaned herself and it's clear she has made an effort.

RASHEED

I see you've been busy.

MARIAM

I laid a *sofrah* for your dinner.

RASHEED

Good I'm starving!

MARIAM brings RASHEED a bowl of water to wash and he sits and prepares to eat. He tastes some food.

RASHEED

MARIAM

It's good.
Maybe better than good.

He tastes some more. She is filled with relief and smiles while he eats greedily.

Tomorrow is Friday.
I'd like to show you around.
No. Calcutta.

Kabul?

(spoken) It's a joke, Mariam.

(shyly, but excited)

I'd like that very much.

RASHEED

You have cooked me a decent meal.
and you have stopped your crying.
I have something to give you, Mariam.

He fumbles in a bag and presents her with a bright blue burka. She stares at it with unfamiliarity.

Do you like it, Mariam?
After all, you are now a married woman,
and my wife.

Honor and pride. That is what I live for.
Honor and pride. That is what I'm about.
Hakim is a teacher who lives on this street
in the house with the green door.
Fariba, his wife, covers only her head,
wearing a scarf, nothing more.

She is an embarrassment, she spoils her husband's honor.
She should know that a woman's face
is only for her husband. Only him.

There are married women who come to my shop
with their arms and legs exposed,
unconcerned that I touch their naked feet
or see their sultry Western clothes.
They are an embarrassment.
They should know that a woman's body
is only her husband's business. Only his!
This gift, Mariam, is a way to remember this.

He helps MARIAM put on the burka and then he sings tenderly, with renewed vigor, while she stares out uncomfortably from underneath the burka.

Well then, this is a new day, Mariam.
This is your home now sweet Mariam.
You will be happy here sweet Mariam.
Tomorrow we'll go to the park
to see the boys who fly kites.
And I will buy you ice cream, Mariam.

She awkwardly lifts the face covering revealing her face.

RASHEED

You know what a husband
and wife do?

MARIAM

I know.

It is what the Prophet himself
did with his wives.
There is no shame in this Mariam.
No shame, Mariam. No shame.

Not yet. Not yet.
Please don't make me.
Not yet. Not yet. Not yet!

He takes her gently by the hand and leads her to the staircase. They begin to climb. She resists meekly. Eventually, he lifts her up and carries her up the stairs.

ACT ONE, SCENE FOUR

1978. A few years later. FARIBA, dressed in Western clothing and wearing a headscarf is walking home from the market. She is nine-months pregnant and holding shopping bags in each hand. As local vendors, neighbors and children pass by she waves hello. She spies MARIAM outside her front door dressed in a burqa and carrying parcels from the market.

FARIBA

Mariam? Mariam *jan*? Is that you?
Every time I see you, you avoid me.
It's been four years now since we met
and we never speak.

MARIAM looks away.

MARIAM

I know you've been warned
not to talk to Fariba.

No, he never. He never ...

I know that you lost three babies.
I wish you would have let me help you.
Such pain for a young bride.
And here I stand with two healthy sons
and another waiting to come out.

MARIAM is torn between listening and going into the house.

Everyone is not designed
for making babies.
Only Allah creates life and death.

I need to go now.
My husband will be home soon.
I must go ...

Airplanes are heard overhead.

Listen!! So many planes now.
The Russians will be here soon.
Go inside. Turn on the radio.

MARIAM goes inside and removes her burqa.

MARIAM

How quietly we endure all that falls upon us,
like snow that drops silently on the people below.
How silently we endure. We endure.
He was not unkind at first, when the
promise of a child was so close. So close.
But I could not give him what he wanted.
I could not give him a child.
I could not give him a son. A son.

Allah, Allah, give me a child.
Someone to love.
Someone to love *me*.

How quietly we endure all that falls upon us.
Like snow that drops silently on the people below.
Each snowflake is a sigh, a sigh,
heaved by a sad woman.

Oh Nana, you told me this a long time ago.
Nana, forgive me. Forgive me, mother.
I miss you.

RASHEED bursts in and starts to fiddle with a radio sitting on a table.

RASHEED

Get up. Turn on the radio!

The Communists, you idiot.

You are so stupid!
Allah, why did you give me
such a stupid wife?

You wouldn't understand.

Put it down and be quiet.

MARIAM

What's all this, Rasheed?

What's a Communist?

What do they believe?

I made *sabzi* for your dinner,
it's your favorite.

RASHEED finally gets it to speak and a crackling radio news broadcast fills the room. Gradually the lights shift to another part of the stage to reveal a simple Hospital Room. FARIBA is lying in bed giving birth attended to by DR. WAJMA while HAKIM paces back and forth. For the remainder of the scene all of the CHARACTERS should be continuously observed somewhere on stage.

VOICE OF QADAR
(coming from the radio)

**Earlier today the Fourth Armored Division seized the Kabul Airport.
The President has been captured.
A new Afghanistan is born to respect all people.**

RASHEED turns off the radio as the focus shifts to the Hospital Room.

DR. WAJMA

Fariba *jan*, it's coming soon.
Push! It's coming.
Coming now! Push
Now! Push!

FARIBA

Aii! Come child.
Aii! Aii! Aii!
Now! Push!

Focus shifts to RASHEED and MARIAM.

RASHEED

We're in bed with the Russians.

Bad for the rich.
Maybe not so bad for us.
I'm hungry. Give me my dinner.

MARIAM

Is this good or bad?

He sits down as MARIAM brings a pot over. She stands subserviently next to him. He puts his fingers in the bowl, making a ball of rice with his fingers, puts it in his mouth, chews a few times and then fiercely spits it out.

(mockingly)

What's the matter?
You've done it again.

What's the matter?

I cooked it the way
you asked me to.

You're a liar.

I'm not lying. I'm not!

He pushes the bowl away violently and it spills out. He gets up, opens the front door, slams it and exits. MARIAM gets on her knees and begins to clean up, taking deep breaths, her hands trembling.

DR. WAJMA

A girl, a girl!
Fariba *jan*, you have a daughter.
Hakim, come see.
You have a beautiful daughter.

The DOCTOR puts the baby into FARIBA's arms and leaves the room. Simultaneously, RASHEED returns. He pulls MARIAM up roughly, opens her hand, drops in a handful of pebbles and pushes her back down.

RASHEED

Put these rocks in your mouth!

I said put these rocks in your mouth!
Put them in and chew.
I said put them in and chew.
I said CHEW. CHEW! I said CHEW!

MARIAM

(confused & frightened)

No, I won't. No Rasheed!
No! No! No!

He grabs her by the hair and shoves the rocks in her mouth.

Now you know
what your rice tastes like.
Now you know
what you've given me in this marriage.
Nothing but bad food.
Nothing else. Nothing else. Nothing else.

*RASHEED exits leaving MARIAM crumpled on the floor spitting out a mouthful of pebbles and blood.
Focus shifts to HAKIM cradling his daughter.*

HAKIM
She is like a gemstone.
Green eyes of jade.
Ruby pink cheeks.

MARIAM
Allah. Allah.
Allah. Allah.

RASHEED

FARIBA

Laila. Night beauty.

How can I live
with this man?

What shall we call her?
Why did you give me
this barren wife?

Why can't you give me
a son?

How can I live
with this pain?

A son.

Laila, night beauty.
Night beauty.

Laila. Night beauty.
Night beauty.

Laila. Night beauty.
Our daughter.

Give me courage.

Give me a son
to love.

Laila. Night beauty.
Our daughter.

Laila, a daughter
to love.
A daughter
to love.
A daughter
to love.

Give me someone
to love me.
A child. A child.
Someone to love.
Give me someone
to love.
A daughter to love.

A son
to love me.
Give me a
a son to love
me. A son.
to love.

Laila, a daughter
to love.
A daughter to love.
A daughter to love.

ACT ONE, SCENE FIVE

1992. Fourteen years have passed. The Soviets have withdrawn from Afghanistan. FARIBA, now aged 38, is in the kitchen of her house frantically opening cupboards. The two-story house has a small living room. A balcony leans out from the second story.

FARIBA

Laila! Laila! Laila!
I need some help.
Where is that girl? Laila!
Where is she?

LAILA comes running in. She is a stunning beauty at age fourteen, a blonde with striking features.

LAILA

Mammy, mammy, here I am.
What do you need, Mammy?

FARIBA

(looking at her disapprovingly)

So, you're plucking your eyebrows now?

Is this for Tariq? How old is he now?

And you're still fourteen.
Barely in a bra.

A girl's reputation is a delicate thing.
Like a mynah bird in your hands.
Slacken your grip and away it flies!

LAILA

Only a little.

Sixteen.

He's just a friend.

But Tariq is like a brother to me.

FARIBA slams down a pot violently and turns on the young girl.

That he is not!
Do not compare your brothers —
heroes, martyrs, who died fighting
the Russians, to that
one-legged carpenter's boy.

(angrily)

How can you call him that?
He lost his leg on a land mine!!

(catching herself)

What I'm trying to say Laila,
if you're not careful, people will talk.
You are not a child anymore.

HAKIM

(entering)

What's going on in here?

FARIBA

(mercurial)

Oh nothing. I'm off to the market.

FARIBA exits.

LAILA

Oh Babi, she's so unfair to criticize me.

HAKIM

My beautiful Laila *jan*, your mother
always says what's on her mind.
Sometimes without thinking.
But I'm glad that she gave you to me.
I'm so glad that she gave you to me.
Thank Allah! Thank Allah!
Every day I thank Allah
for giving you to me.

LAILA

Oh, my Babi, I love you.

Thank Allah for giving you to me.

Thank Allah for giving you to me.

They embrace and HAKIM goes out one way, LAILA goes upstairs and out onto the balcony.

LAILA

Tariq. Tariq. Tariq. It's always you.
Tariq it's always you, dancing,
dancing, dancing in my mind.
You make me laugh and cry
as I rock myself to sleep.
You take me from my waking thoughts
and bring me to my dreams.
Tariq. Tariq. It's always you.
Always you, dancing, dancing
dancing in my mind.

I want to feel your fuzzy lip tickling mine.
To feel you kiss my neck, my back, my breasts, my belly,
and then I'll know, it's not a dream. It's really you.
How can you be like a brother when
I want you as another?
As my lover, Tariq.
As my husband, Tariq.
Forever, Tariq.
Tariq, Tariq it's always you, always you.
Dancing, dancing, dancing in my mind.

TARIQ appears below the balcony. He is sixteen, quite handsome and muscular. He limps slightly, his left leg attached to a prosthesis. He is standing carelessly, leaning against the railing, smoking a cigarette.

LAILA <i>(annoyed)</i> How long have you been standing there? Your mother would kill you if she saw you smoking. "Tell your secret to the wind but don't blame it for telling the trees." Khalil Gibran. Well then give me a cigarette. Well I assure you it's not. What girls anyway? Don't be silly. Just indifferently curious. So, there's an "us" now. And what are they saying? And his sad wife ... He called us <i>Laili</i> and <i>Majnoon</i>. The star-crossed lovers. The star-crossed lovers. The Romeo & Juliet of the East.	TARIQ La, la, la, la, la, la, lai I saw you from the street come out onto the porch. And who will tell her? Show off! <i>(He climbs up onto the balcony.)</i> Of course not. It's bad for you. I do it for the girls. They think it's sexy. Are you jealous? Well, don't be. Besides don't you know that everyone is talking about us now? <i>(with animation)</i> We are canoeing down the river of sin. Riding the rickshaw of wickedness. <i>(he takes her two hands)</i> But Laila, you know that I only have eyes for you. Do you remember the other day when the shoemaker Rasheed, passed us on the street? He called us <i>Laili</i> and <i>Manjoon</i>. The star-crossed lovers. The star-crossed lovers. The Romeo & Juliet of the East.
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TARIQ

Remember when we learned
their poem at school?

"I pass by these walls, the walls of
Laili. The walls of Laili.
And I kiss them, these walls, these walls.
I kiss these walls of Laili.
It is not the love of the house that has
taken, that has taken my heart,
but of the one who dwells therein. Therein."

TARIQ & LAILA

"I pass by these walls, the walls of Laili.
And I kiss them, these walls these walls of Laili.
It is not love of the house that has taken my heart,
but of the one who dwells therein. Therein."

They share their first kiss when suddenly the violent sound of gunfire and explosions are heard.

LAILA

Tariq! Tariq! What is going on?

All against each other!

Mammy's at the market.
I hope she is safe.

TARIQ

There's fighting again.
Now that the Russians are gone
we lack a common enemy.
So we turn against each other.

Pashtun against Hazara.
Tajik against Uzbek.
All against each other.
All against each other!

I must go home.
My mother and father need me.
They'll be afraid.

He starts to descend the stairs down from the porch.

Oh, be careful, Tariq! Be careful.
Tariq, be careful!

I will find you later. I promise.
My Laila ...

The whistle of a rocket getting closer and louder. Explosions and gunfire heard in the distance.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

1992. Six months later. Prelude. The mujahadeen have been fighting each other. The sound of explosions and gunfire. Lights come up on the house of FARIBA & HAKIM. Mid-afternoon sun shines in. TARIQ enters to the sound of distant gunfire.

TARIQ

You're here alone?

LAILA

Babi took Mammy to the doctor.
They were afraid to leave the house,
rockets flying everywhere.

TARIQ

It's war out there!
Laila, I have something to tell you.

LAILA

What is it, Tariq?

Something so hard,
I don't know where to begin.

What is it, Tariq? What is it?

My heart is filled with sorrow and I
know that my news will crush you too.

He is nervous and fidgety.

I must leave you. I must leave Kabul.

I don't understand.

My father is sick. His heart is broken.
My mother cries in anguish night and day.
I must take them away.
I'm their only son.
It's my duty!

(stunned)

But where will you go?

To Pakistan. Peshawar.

You cannot abandon me now!

Please understand it's my duty.
My duty. I love you Laila.
Please understand, Laila!

No, Tariq! No, no.
No, no!
Do not abandon me now.

LAILA pounds on on TARIQ'S chest. At first he lets her, and then he grabs her wrists to restrain her. As they look at one another, their passion overcomes them and they descend to a heap on the floor in each other's arms and make love. Afterwards, they look at each other in astonishment.

TARIQ

Laila, marry me, Laila.
We can get married today!
I'll ask your father.
I know that he will bless us.
Please Laila! Marry me.
Come with me,
come with me, Laila.

We must die a little
to keep them alive!

I love you!
I will come back for you.
I love you.
I promise, I promise. Laila!

LAILA

What have we done?

I can't Tariq. I can't leave my father.
It would kill him. I'm all that he has.
My mother will not leave and
he'll never abandon her.
You must leave to save your parents.
I must stay to keep mine alive.

We must die a little
to keep them alive!
You must go now.
Go now.

Go now.
Go now!

Laila tries to push Tariq out the door but he resists. Finally she succeeds in closing the door and leans against it crying while he continues to plead and pound on the closed door.

In the distance the encroaching sounds of gunfire. The lights dim. When they come up again it is four weeks later. LAILA is lying still on the couch fanning herself.

LAILA

It's hot. So hot.
And there's no electricity.
Tariq, Tariq, where are you, Tariq?
Tariq! Dancing, dancing, dancing

Distant gunfire, explosions, are heard.

More bombs. More wretched bombs!
So hot. It's so hot.

HAKIM bursts in with a suitcase and a carton of books.

HAKIM
Laila! Sweet Laila!
Your mother has agreed.

Yes.

To Pakistan. Where Tariq has gone.

We will find your Tariq.

We will find him.

LAILA

We're leaving?

But where will we go?

Oh Babi, I want to shriek with joy.

We'll find Tariq.

Tariq we will find you!

HAKIM, beginning to pack books, stops, looking forlorn. LAILA, gives him a reassuring hug.

My Kabul.
I've lived here all my life.

Oh, Babi, Babi.

He has found the Tabrizi book in the box and looks at it lovingly, finds a passage and begins to read.

My books, my beloved poet, Tabrizi.

*"Every street of Kabul is enthralling to the eye.
Through the bazaars, caravans of Egypt pass.
One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs,
or count the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls."*

HAKIM & LAILA

I shall miss the moons that shimmer on her roofs,
and the thousand splendid suns
that hide behind her walls.

FARIBA enters in a huff, carrying a box full of clothing and her wedding dress slung over her arm.

FARIBA
We must sell everything. Even your father's books.

LAILA
But Mammy, you cannot sell your wedding dress!

FARIBA
We have no room for things like this.

LAILA takes the dress out of her mother's arms dancing around with it, imagining herself wearing it. FARIBA starts to call after to admonish her, but HAKIM silences her. Their eyes follow their beloved daughter. Suddenly, there is a giant roar and flash of blinding, white light that fills the stage. LAILA is thrown back, the wedding dress flies through the air, a rainstorm of wood and glass, dirt and rocks. Silence and then darkness.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

Three weeks later. RASHEED'S house. LAILA is lying in MARIAM'S bed, asleep and covered with a sheet. The room has been converted to a makeshift sick room. He sits by the bed like a sentinel keeping watch. Now a man in his sixties, his hair has grown thick and white. MARIAM, now 34, is downstairs in the kitchen. She looks like a dog that has been punished for years.

RASHEED

Lucky, lucky for you, I was there
to dig you out of the rubble
with my own hands.
Lucky for you. Lucky for you.

The focus shifts to the kitchen where MARIAM is lost in her thoughts.

MARIAM

Lucky. The beautiful are always lucky.
Always lucky.

Lucky for you, but not so lucky
for your parents, buried in the
ashes of your father's books.

She is so young and beautiful.

Sleep, Laila ...
She is so young, so young ...
and beautiful.

I was never beautiful and I was never lucky.
She is so young and beautiful.
The bruises cannot hide what lies beneath.

She is so young, so young ...
and beautiful.

All I could offer him was youth.
Now I cannot offer even that.
Just weary bones and sadness.

Lucky for me I was there
to dig her out with my own hands.
Lucky for me.
I think I may be in love with her.
God help me.
God help me. God help me.

Lucky her. Lucky her.
God help me.
God help me. God help me.

LAILA awakens. RASHEED gets up and calls downstairs to MARIAM.

Mariam, get up here now!
She's stirring.

MARIAM calmly gets a basin of water and a cloth and goes upstairs. She puts the cool cloth on LAILA's forehead.

MARIAM
How long is *she* staying?

RASHEED
She's in no shape to leave.

LAILA begins to move restlessly.

LAILA
Babi, Babi. Is that you?

RASHEED
(sweetly)

It's Rasheed, from down the street.
I brought you here to my house
after the bomb went off.
Do you remember?

(he barks at MARIAM)
Mariam, help her sit up!
Give her some water!

MARIAM glares at RASHEED and helps LAILA sit up. She begins to retch and vomit pours out of her mouth. She begins to cry.

MARIAM
No!! Not on the bed.

RASHEED
Mariam, clean this shit up!

Disgusted, RASHEED exits. MARIAM gives LAILA a cloth to wipe her mouth.

LAILA
I'm sorry. I can't tell when
I'm going to be sick.
I shouldn't be here.

MARIAM

No, you shouldn't.

MARIAM exits. LAILA lifts herself from the bed, slowly and painful. She places her two hands on her belly and rubs slowly.

LAILA
Tariq, Tariq, Tariq. It's always you.
I will heal quickly and I'll find you.
Tariq, Tariq, Tariq. And we will be together.
And I will bring to you our child.

The lights dim and then come up on mid-morning a week later. MARIAM and LAILA are downstairs in the kitchen. MARIAM, chopping vegetables, puts a bowl in front of LAILA, still bandaged.

MARIAM

It's been over a month since
the blast that killed your parents.
While you are here make yourself useful.

A knock at the door is heard. The two women look at each other. MARIAM puts on a veil to cover her face and goes to the door and answers it. LAILA awkwardly, follows her example.

There's a man here to see you.
He says his name is Sharif.

SHARIF enters the room, a thin, wiry, middle-aged man, dressed in a suit and tie. He carries a handkerchief which he uses to dab at his brow and forehead. MARIAM recedes back into the kitchen, keeping watch from her position.

SHARIF

Forgive me, *hamshira*.

No, I am a traveling businessman.

It was in Pakistan that I took ill and
shared a room in the hospital with
your Tariq.

I saw he had lost both his legs,
The right one from the shrapnel
the left one lost long before.
He told me to find you,
to tell you that he loved you.
And so I do my duty.

And also, I'm sorry to say.
The poor young man did not survive.

LAILA

Were you a friend of my father?

I don't understand.

You have news of Tariq?

(LAILA gasps loudly)

Oh, my poor Tariq. I must
go to him now.

Tariq is dead?

SHARIF nods. LAILA stares in silence. MARIAM, who has heard the entire story, comes in to usher SHARIF out. Both women remove their veils.

MARIAM
(indifferently)

I have no wisdom to give you.
No words to comfort you.

MARIAM exits. LAILA, alone, drops to the floor.

LAILA
(gently rubs her belly)

Tariq, Tariq.
What will become of us now?

Later that evening. MARIAM is silently clearing the supper dishes. RASHEED smokes in a chair.

RASHEED
Ask her to come downstairs.

MARIAM
She's upset about the boy.

(sarcastically)
I think our Laili has lost her Majnoon.

MARIAM glares at him and then an uncomfortable silence.

RASHEED
What do you think you *know*?

MARIAM
I *know*. I *know*.
I know what you're planning to do.
You're planning to marry her.

RASHEED smiles, like a cat who swallowed a bird.

Well, we must make this situation proper.

I won't allow it. She's too young and
I'm too old for you to do this to me.

(laughing)
My, aren't we dramatic, Mariam?
Your father had three wives.
My mother married at thirteen.
You were *fifteen* Mariam. Remember?

It is not your decision.
She can leave if she likes.
But she won't get very far.
The roads are unforgiving, Mariam.
There are soldiers and rapists everywhere.
The way I see it, I deserve a medal.

No I won't allow it!
I was here first.

I deserve a medal! A medal.
Don't be so dramatic, Mariam.

I won't be cast aside.
I won't allow it.
I won't be cast aside.

They suddenly see Laila standing on the top of the stairs, staring at them as if in a trance.

LAILA
Yes, Rasheed. My answer is yes.
I will marry you

ACT TWO, SCENE THREE

Prelude. 1994. RASHEED'S house, one year later. MARIAM is cleaning up the dishes. LAILA is sitting at the table bouncing the infant, AZIZA on her lap. There is a small cradle nearby. The baby is screaming and LAILA is trying to calm her down. MARIAM is doing her best to ignore the situation.

RASHEED

Take that thing outside!

LAILA

She'll catch pneumonia.

RASHEED

(sarcastic)

It's springtime, you idiot. Get her out of my sight!

LAILA gets up from the table and walks around the room, gently bouncing the baby. RASHEED gets up in disgust and follows her.

RASHEED

You've no time for *me*,
to do your duty.

LAILA

She's a baby.
She needs to be fed,
to be changed, to be held.
To be loved!

I wouldn't get *too* attached.
They say that in Kabul, one in in four
children will die before the age of five.

You disgust me talking
about your daughter that way.

LAILA starts to climb the stairs and he pulls her back.

Where do you think you're going?

Away from you.

It's been two months! Two months!
You're my wife. It's your duty!
I won't wait much longer, Laila.

RASHEED exits and LAILA continues to quiet the baby. MARIAM is finishing cleaning up. AZIZA has stopped crying and LAILA places her inside the cradle.

MARIAM

How convenient. Just when all
the cleaning has been done.

LAILA

I would help more if I could.

MARIAM

So, where did you put it?

My wooden spoon.

So I've noticed. Do you think it
grew legs and walked out of here?

Misplaced it? Misplaced it?
For nineteen years I have
lived in this house.
For nineteen years I have
kept that spoon in this drawer.
Nineteen years! Since you
have been shitting your diapers.

If you think you can use your looks
to get rid of me, you're wrong.

And you're a thieving whore.
A thieving whore ...

RASHEED

(entering)

Shut up! Shut up!
Shut up you two!

(to LAILA)

The doctor said six weeks.
Now, *you* come upstairs with me.

I said, come right now!
Did you play that game with *him*?

You and that cripple, your cripple Tariq.

LAILA

Put what?

I hardly come in here.

Perhaps you've misplaced it.

What are you talking about?

You're a sad, miserable woman.
A sad woman ...
A sad woman ...

LAILA

No. I can't right now.

I don't know what you mean.

You're a monster!!! A monster!!

RASHEED immediately turns his wrath on MARIAM and begins to unbuckle and remove his belt from his trousers, wrapping it around his fist. He begins to beat her.

RASHEED

This is your fault, Mariam!

You're the one who has
taught her to deny me.

MARIAM

I did nothing.

No, Rasheed ...

LAILA

*(Laila starts tugging at Rasheed to
stop him from beating her)*

RASHEED

MARIAM

LAILA

It's your fault!

No, Rasheed.
Stop.

Stop it, Rasheed.
Don't hit her.
Please don't hit her.
Please Rasheed!

I should have known.

LAILA starts tugging at RASHEED, trying to stop him from hitting MARIAM.

Let me go. Let me go.
Let me go you bitch. Let go!

She runs to the stairs to lure him away.

Come Rasheed.
I will go upstairs with you now.
Come upstairs with me now
Rasheed. Let's go.
Come upstairs with me now.

RASHEED stops suddenly, distracted by LAILA'S invitation, uncertain how to proceed.

I won't be made a fool.

LAILA goes over to the cradle, lifts the baby and puts her in MARIAM's arms. The baby stops crying. LAILA walks towards the stairs, RASHEED trailing her like a wolf.

MARIAM

Why are you smiling?
Why are you smiling?
You have a brute for a father and a fool for a mother.
You wouldn't smile so much if you knew.
You wouldn't smile so much if you knew.
Why are you smiling at me?

What can I give you?
What can I give you?
What do I know about caring for babies?
Me, a discarded *harami*.
You wouldn't stop your crying if you knew.
You wouldn't stop your crying if you knew.

Stop flirting with me, little girl.
If you only knew.

MARIAM cuddles with the baby and after some time LAILA comes down the stairs, observes the two of them and waits a moment. MARIAM goes to return the sleeping baby to LAILA.

LAILA

No. You keep her.
See how happy she is with you.

Your past is no secret, Mariam.
I know about your mother, your father,
about the babies that you lost.
We all have our secrets, but
I knew that I could trust you
when I saw you holding Aziza.
I knew that I could tell you...

Soon, very soon
when the the time is right,
after the spring rains have soaked the streets,
and the mud has dried,
I will leave with Aziza,
And you, Mariam, will come with us.
You'll come with us and you'll be
a mother to us.

I've been stealing bits of money from
his wallet, and soon we'll have
enough to get away.
Please say you'll come with us.

She is like *you*, Mariam. Like you.
She is like *you*. Aziza is like you.

Rasheed is not her father.
Her father is dead. Tariq.
Now do you understand why I
married Rasheed?
She is all that I left of him and
I will live for her.
For Aziza. Aziza.
She will be happy.

LAILA and MARIAM embrace.

MARIAM

Laila, nobody has ever
stood up for me before.
I have never had a friend.
Your mother wanted to be
my friend but
he would not allow it.

Tell me what?

But how can I go?
Me, a discarded *harami*.

What are you saying?

For Aziza. Aziza.

We must protect her.

MARIAM & LAILA

(duet)

Soon, very soon.
When the time is right.
After the snows drape Kabul.
Before the fight has left us.
We will leave with Aziza.
We will be better off without him.
Soon, very soon before the fight has left us,
we will leave together.

LAILA

MARIAM

And I'll be a daughter to you.

And I'll be a mother to you.

MARIAM

Allah, Allah, Allah.
You have given me someone
to love, someone to love me.
You have heard my prayer.

LAILA

MARIAM

Allah, Allah, Allah.
Please give us courage.

Allah, allah, allah.
Please give us courage.

MARIAM gets on her knees and begins to pray as the lights fade.

ACT TWO, SCENE FOUR

1996. A busy bus station in Kabul. Loudspeakers attached to utility poles proclaim: ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MULLAH OMAR, LEADER OF THE TALIBAN, NO WOMAN CAN LEAVE THE HOUSE WITHOUT A SHARIA MAHRAM. NO ONE IS PERMITTED TO WATCH TV AT HOME. WHOEVER LISTENS TO MUSIC WILL BE SEVERELY PUNISHED. NO SINGING OR DANCING IS ALLOWED. THOSE WHO DISOBEY WILL BE BEATEN.

Women in burqas, travelers, Taliban soldiers and people with overflowing baggage, fill the stage. LAILA and MARIAM enter with AZIZA. MARIAM is holding the three-year old in her arms. MARIAM and LAILA are nervous with MARIAM praying silently.

LAILA

MARIAM

Mariam, calm down.

Calm down, mother.

What if he finds out before we leave?

Look at all these soldiers!
I'd rather a bullet than to
see his face once more!

We have a plan. Stay calm.

(she points to one of the men traveling)

What about him?

No, he doesn't look trustworthy.
Wait. I see someone.

She walks away from MARIAM and AZIZA towards a pleasant looking man named WAKIL.

LAILA

Forgive me, brother.
Are you going to Peshawar?

WAKIL

What do you need, sister?

LAILA points in the distance to MARIAM and AZIZA.

LAILA

I am a widow with only
my daughter and mother left,
and one uncle in Peshawar.
We are not allowed to travel alone.

WAKIL

Would you like to join
my family on the bus?

LAILA
(joyfully)

Oh, yes! Thank you, brother
May Allah bless you for your kindness.
Here's the money for our tickets.

LAILA discreetly hands WAKIL some money.

WAKIL

Come and stand behind us
when the line forms.

They nod an understanding to one another and LAILA hurries back to MARIAM.

LAILA

You see Mariam, Allah will protect us.

All will be well.

MARIAM

Praise, Allah.

All will be well.

Come sweet Aziza,

We're going to ride on a bus!

A bus announcement is made calling passengers to board. "BUS TO PESHAWAR. BUS TO PESHAWAR. KABUL TORKHAM. KABUL TORKHAM." MARIAM, LAILA and AZIZA get in line behind WAKIL. As they stand in line behind him he leans over and whispers something to a TALIBAN SOLDIER.

LAILA

We have tickets.

I don't understand.

We're traveling with our cousin.

TALIBAN SOLDIER

Stop! You two!

Move away from the line!

Move now!

It's a crime for a woman
to run away from home.

A severe change of lighting as the crowd peels away. The TALIBAN SOLDIER shouts to LAILA and MARIAM, who holds AZIZA tightly:

"Where are you going? Who is your Uncle? Where does he live? Is this your mother? She has a Herati accent! Are you telling the truth? It is a matter of the law! It is my responsibility to maintain order."

As the tension mounts LAILA closes her eyes and covers her ears. When she opens her eyes she is confronted by the large, sinister figure of RASHEED emerging from the chaos, towering over LAILA and MARIAM.

RASHEED

Did you think you could get away from me?

LAILA

It's my fault.

I made her do it.

She didn't want to go.

Please, Rasheed

RASHEED

I'll teach you both a lesson.

Taking AZIZA in his arms, he pushes MARIAM down, kicks her and then knocks LAILA to the ground. He walks off with AZIZA as they follow. The TALIBAN SOLDIERS and others at the Bus Station watch.

ACT TWO, SCENE FIVE

Prelude. The Taliban have solidified their power throughout Afghanistan. July, 2001. The lights come up on RASHEED's house. MARIAM is in the kitchen feeding some rice to ZALMAI, a plump little boy, about five years old with a strong resemblance to RASHEED.

MARIAM

Five years old, already
and look how you've grown.
We live so poorly,
but look how big you are!
Your mother will be home soon
from visiting your sister.

ZALMAI

Ziza! Ziza!
I want my sister.
When will she be home, Auntie?

The door flies open and LAILA enters hurriedly, peeling off her burqa as quickly as possible. ZALMAI runs up to her for a hug.

LAILA

MARIAM

ZALMAI
Mammy! Mammy!

I'm here sweet Zalmai.

(to MARIAM)

I got through this time
past the Taliban patrol.
They're always looking
for a woman traveling
without a man.

I worry for your safety,
But I know you need
to see your daughter.

My poor Aziza,
banished to an orphanage
so that he could
put more food in his fat belly.

Allah, be praised you
were not caught, not
beaten by those thugs.

As if it is different living
here with our husband?

Mammy! Mammy!
When will my sister
come home?

Soon, sweet Zalmai.
when your father finds some work
and there can be enough
food for us all.

And now it's time for your nap.

(petulant)
I don't want to.

Come, I'll tell you a story.

LAILA takes the boy upstairs and MARIAM continues working in the kitchen. Suddenly, the front door opens and RASHEED enters carrying a package. He sneers at MARIAM.

RASHEED

Where is the boy?

MARIAM

She just took him upstairs for a nap.

Useless and stupid
the two of you are.
Wake him up I have
a present for him.

ZALMAI hearing his father's voice, comes running in. RASHEED picks him up, swings him around and then gives him a small basketball. LAILA hurries in quickly.

ZALMAI

Baba jan! Baba jan!
You have a present for me?

RASHEED gives ZALMAI the ball and he begins to bounce it around the room.

LAILA

(to RASHEED)

We have no money for food
and your daughter is in an orphanage.
Yet you spoil your son with useless toys.
You are despicable!

RASHEED

My, that's a big word.
I've always disliked
that about you.
What happened to you?
I married a beauty
Now you're turning
into Mariam. An old hag

LAILA

You disgust me!
You're a selfish brute.

A selfish brute.

MARIAM

Laila, don't let him
get to you!

Don't provoke him!

(to MARIAM)

You shut your mouth.
I'm warning you.

You're a lazy
selfish pig.

RASHEED slaps LAILA hard on the face and the blow knocks her to all fours. MARIAM picks up ZALMAI and hustles him upstairs and shuts the door. His protests are heard as they exit.

ZALMAI

I want to stay with my Baba *jan*!

RASHEED

Perhaps I will go to the Taliban one day
and tell them about you and that *cripple*.

LAILA and RASHEED circle one another like caged animals, enraged she sees an opening and punches him full in the face. He staggers back, knocking things over.

RASHEED

I swear one day you're going
to make me kill you!

The lights fade. When they come up it is towards the end of the next day. The women are preparing dinner. LAILA is holding a wooden bowl. ZALMAI is bouncing his basketball. MARIAM hears knocking. Frantically she looks around for her face covering, puts it on, and goes to the door. A knock at the door. MARIAM reaches for her veil and goes to answer. She is shocked to see TARIQ standing there.

MARIAM

Laila *jan*! Laila *jan*!
Come quickly.

LAILA turns from her work in the kitchen, takes a few steps into the room and sees TARIQ standing there. Shocked, she does not move. ZALMAI is watching her like a hawk.

ZALMAI
(to MARIAM)

Who is that man?
I don't like him

TARIQ limping moves towards ZALMAI

TARIQ

Hello there, little man.
What's your name?

ZALMAI

Get away you!

MARIAM
(sternly)

Zalmai, come with me now.
Come upstairs with me. Now!

MARIAM takes a resistant ZALMAI upstairs and closes the door. LAILA is careful not to show emotion in front of ZALMAI. When he is gone she rushes into TARIQ'S arms.

LAILA

(simultaneously)

I can't breathe.
I've stopped breathing.

Tariq! Tariq! Tariq!
You are alive. Alive!

A man came.
He told me you were dead,
I believed him.

Tariq! Tariq! Tariq! You are alive.
What happened? Where were you?

I had no letters.
I only married Rasheed because
I thought you were dead.
I had no choice.

Tariq, Tariq you have a daughter.
Her name is Aziza. Aziza.

We have a daughter. Aziza!
Her eyes are like yours,
so sparkling and bright.

She's smart like my father,
and kind like your mother.
We have a daughter!

TARIQ

(simultaneously)

Laila! Laila! Laila!
I never thought I'd see you again.

I know you're married and
a mother now and
here I am at your door.
Maybe it isn't fair,
but I had to see you.

Laila, I never should have left you.
I never thought I'd see you again.

TARIQ

Mother and Father did not last the
year. I had no home. No money.
I was tricked by a clever man
into delivering drugs and I was
caught and put in prison.
But I wrote to you many times.
I never heard back.

Aziza? I have a daughter?
We have a daughter! Aziza!

We have a daughter!

Rasheed has banished her
to an orphanage.
He does not know she is yours,
but he suspects.
She is what has kept me alive.
She is all I had of you.
We had to die a little to stay alive.

Laila, where is our daughter now?

We had to die a little to stay alive.

TARIQ touches LAILA'S bruises tenderly.

You must go now before he gets home.
You must go now.
Go now.

I will wait for you, Tariq!

Tomorrow at noon.

He hurts you, doesn't he?

I love you.
I will come back for you.
I promise, Laila.

I will come back
for you and our child.
Tomorrow at noon.

The lights dim and come up later that evening. RASHEED is seated finishing his dinner while LAILA and MARIAM stand like sentries to serve him. ZALMAI is bouncing his ball.

LAILA

Zalmai, stop bouncing that ball.
Your *baba jan* is eating.

ZALMAI

I don't want to.

RASHEED
(sternly)

Zalmai, give me the ball!

ZALMAI surrenders the ball and looks for other mischief to make.

ZALMAI

Mammy has a new friend!

He looks to see what effect he is having.

RASHEED
(sarcastically)

Does she now?

LAILA and MARIAM exchange an ominous glance.

ZALMAI

A man with a funny walk.

RASHEED
Is this who I think it is?

MARIAM
He was just visiting.

RASHEED
Shut up you.

(to LAILA)

So you let him into my house?

LAILA

You tricked me. You knew I
would leave if I thought he
was still alive!

(gloating)

I hired a man to convince you
your Romeo was dead.

You lied to me.

And you didn't lie to me
about your *harami* ?
You whore! You whore!

RASHEED sweeps his hands across the sofrah clearing it away. It startles ZALMAI who begins to cry. Then he pulls MARIAM up and slaps her.

And what were you but her confederate?

He turns on LAILA quickly.

RASHEED
You let him see your face?
Didn't you? Didn't she?
Answer me boy!
Answer me boy! Answer me.

LAILA

It's okay, Zalmai
to tell the truth.

ZALMAI
(crying bitterly)

Yes, Baba. Yes.

Did you sit and talk
with him too? Answer me boy!

I went upstairs with
Auntie.

And where was your mother?

Downstairs.

Teamwork!

RASHEED lands a punch directly on MARIAM'S face which knocks her to the ground. He grabs his son by his torso like a football, and locks him in the upstairs bedroom. MARIAM is frightened, but LAILA is defiant. He grabs her and begins to punch and slap her. MARIAM jumps in and tries to pull him off. The women fight back, getting in a few blows. RASHEED is enraged and grabs LAILA by the throat, throttling her. She is struggling. MARIAM cannot pull him off. She runs off and, as LAILA begins to quiver and succumb, MARIAM runs in with a large shovel and brings it down on RASHEED'S head in a moment of extreme and brutal violence. RASHEED, stricken but not dead, rises to look at her in disbelief. Again, she picks up the shovel and hits him again and then for a third time brings it down deliberately to kill him. Then she runs over to LAILA to revive and resuscitate her.

MARIAM

Breathe, Laila, breathe, daughter.
Allah, do not let her die.

Calm yourself, Laila.
Calm yourself, daughter.

MARIAM wipes the blood from her.

It all stops tonight.
There will be no more suffering.
We will not suffer anymore.
We will not suffer from his hand anymore.

Zalmai must not see him. We must move him.
But first rest awhile. Rest awhile.
All will be well.

The two women embrace as the lights dim and fade. When they come up again the body of RASHEED has been moved. It is now later that evening. MARIAM is sitting silently on the couch. LAILA comes down the stairs from checking on ZALMAI.

MARIAM

Tariq will come at noon.
Take your son. Go and get Aziza.
The four of you must leave
as quickly as you can.

I must stay here.

MARIAM, pained, hesitates to tell Laila.

You know I cannot go with you,
Laila *jan*. Laila *jan*. It's not possible.

LAILA

*(Laila is groggy, focuses on Mariam
and then sees Rasheed's body.)*

Mariam! Mariam! What have we
done? We must leave.
We cannot stay here.

LAILA

Zalmai is asleep now.

And where will we meet you?

No!! We must all leave together.

It's not possible. Not possible.

What do you think they will do
when they find a dead husband
and two missing wives?
Think like a mother. Think like a mother.
It is fair. It is fair.
I killed our husband,
Zalmai's father.
But I saved your life.

MARIAM takes LAILA's two hands in her own.

Soon, very soon.
Now the time is right.
Now that the fight is over.
You will leave with Tariq
and the children. The children.

And you've been a daughter to me.

Mariam, don't break my heart.

Don't make me leave without you.

It isn't fair. It isn't fair.
Mariam ...

(LAILA is sobbing)

Now the time is right.
Now that the fight is over.
I will leave with Tariq
and the children. The children.

You've been a mother to me.

MARIAM

The Koran speaks the truth, my daughter.
Behind every trial and sorrow
that He makes us suffer,
God has a reason.
May he give you the courage to leave.
And me, the courage to stay.

LAILA wraps her arms around MARIAM and weeps as the lights dim. RASHEED'S house transitions to a Prison Cell. When the lights rise, MARIAM, now wearing a burqa, is seated calmly on a chair, praying. A PRISON GUARD enters with a rifle.

PRISON GUARD

We are ready for you now, woman.

MARIAM looks up at him.

Are you hungry? I have a biscuit.
You can have it if you like.

MARIAM

No. But thank you
for your kindness.

PRISON GUARD

Are you frightened, woman?

MARIAM

Life has been unkind.
I entered a *harami*,
lowly, discarded, struggling to be worthy.
Yearning for the same things
all God's children desire.

But now I have found
what I've been searching for.
Now I know how it feels to be a mother
who can sacrifice herself.
For I have loved and been loved.

There is a stark change in lighting. MARIAM rises and begins to walk slowly, trancelike, as the PRISON GUARD follows at a distance. Others start to enter the stage to witness what is about to happen. MARIAM turns center to face the audience, absorbing all the eyes on her -- we are now in the Ghazi Stadium awaiting her execution.

MARIAM

Abundant peace is washing over me,
cleansing me with joy.
Abundant peace is washing over me,
cleansing me with joy.
I know God will forgive me.
It is not so bad to die this way.

MARIAM kneels, bows her head and makes a silent prayer. From a corner of the stage, as if in her mind's eye, LAILA & TARIQ appear, happy and smiling. An older AZIZA and her younger brother ZALMAI are standing with them. As they fade away Taliban soldiers gradually fill the stage to observe the execution.

Abundant peace is cleansing me with joy.
Laila.
My Daughter.
Laila.

From here to the end, MARIAM walks into position, makes a silent prayer, then kneels down and bows her head as the lights dim. No shot is heard.

END OF OPERA