SEVEN MINUTES OF SUNLIGHT

Mishall Umar

It's exactly 1:58 AM, and it's almost time for me to break the law from inside my own bedroom. I know I shouldn't touch it. I'm not allowed to touch it; it knows I'm not allowed to touch it, yet all it does is beg for me to press its dusty buttons.

"Lema, you know what I am and what I can do for you. All the anger, pain and silence you carry, I can make that noise. I can take it away from you. Just one twist of a dial, Lema, and all of Kabul will hear you tonight."

1:59 AM

I hover my hand over the "ON" button. I can't back off now; hundreds of other girls, mothers, aunts, grandmas are all switching on their radios, tuning to my frequency, burying what would be labelled as contraband in their hands closer to them. All to light a spark in their burnt-out روح ها (souls) again.

Lā (my brother) isn't home; he wouldn't know. I deserve it; Tahmina and Layla deserve it too. Wherever they are.

I press the red button and the radio hisses to life, with a low electric hum. I bring something to life at the cost of my own. Unlike this radio alone, my voice is illegal. But right now, it's the only sound of defiance in this neighbourhood.

I lean in close to the box, feeling the dead butterflies in my stomach regain consciousness.

2:00 AM

"سلام خواهران عزیزم کابل. من امیدوارم که شما بتوانید صدای من را بشنوید.لطفاً به صدای من گوش دهید."

"Hello, my dear sisters of Kabul. I hope you can hear me. Please listen to my voice."

I pause for a moment. The stillness hits me like a wave. I'm breaking the law. But I can't stop here. Not now. Protesting women who go outside, raise their signs and voices, are beaten to the point of not being able to speak. I still have my life, my voice, but what is it worth if it's tangled and jailed in my throat?

"امشب، ما به یاد یکدیگر می آییم"

"Tonight, we remember each other."

The words coming out of my mouth sound too loud. Even as a whisper, they somehow seem to bounce off the walls of my empty, dark bedroom, threatening to bleed through the cracks in the walls and seep under the windows, out into the street. I don't have much time. At exactly 2:09, their signal-tracking vans will pinpoint the frequency of the radio. The radio in my house. The radio next to me.

It's already 2:01 AM

I have 7 minutes. In 7 minutes, I have to try to comfort thousands of wounded and broken hearts- 7 minutes that could be my last.

But I know they're waiting, locked up in their houses, hiding the radios under their hijabs and burkas, using them as protection. The irony of it. Using their battered, bleeding hands just to hear a ghost describe a familiar life. I close my eyes and think of Tahmina and Layla, sitting wherever they are, and hearing my voice slicing through the veil of darkness that weighs on them. Suddenly, I hear a truck rumble in the distance, its headlights flashing through the street and casting its predatory silhouette onto my ceiling. I realise I don't have much time, and the butterflies in my stomach soar to my throat. I feel my heart banging against my ribcage, fighting for freedom. I lean closer to the mesh microphone and force the butterflies out.

آنها میخواهند که ما فکر کنیم که ما تنها هستیم .که ما هیچکس نیستیم .آنها میخواهند که ما فکر "کنیم که ما نامرئی هستیم .مگر آنها نمیتوانند روی آفتاب نقاشی کنند .آنها نمیتوانند برکه های آبی شان را بگیرند، آن را بالای ما بیندازند و فکر کنند که اینها برای خاموش کردن ما کافی خواهد بود".

“They want us to think we're alone. That we are nobodies. They want us to think that we're invisible. But they cannot paint over the sun. They can't take their blue burkas, throw them on us and think they're going to be enough to silence us.”

"آیا شما میتوانید به زمان که ما آزادانه گشت و گذار می کردیم فکر کنید؟ چگونه ما با باد در آفتاب میرقصیدیم، اجازه میدادیم نور بدون هیچ مانعی در بین ما را لمس کند."

“Can you think back to the time when we used to roam free? How we used to dance with the wind in the sun, letting light touch us with no barrier in between.”

I glance at my watch. I stare into my blank bedroom wall, trying to see through it. Trying to remember Layla, Tahmina bumping into me as we ran through these very streets with our bags slung onto our backs. Back then, I’d count down the minutes until I got home and take that bag off my shoulders, as though knowledge itself were a burden. Today, I’d do anything to put it back on. To feel that ‘burden’ again.

2:04 AM

"دوباره چنین روزهایی خواهد بود. زمانی خواهد رسید، که ما با هم به مکتب می رویم، با هم میخوانیم و می نویسیم، در آفتاب می دویم و بازی میکنیم. هیچ مردی در مقابل ما ایستاده نخواهد شد و از ما خواستار رفتن به خانه باشد و ما را با اسلحه و چوب تهدید کند. سرک های ما پر از زندگی و رنگ خواهد بود، خانه های ما بوی پولاو خواهد داد، و باغ های ما زیباترین گل ها را رشد خواهد داد. در آن زمان، ما از بیرونی ها نخواهیم ترسید، ما مردان مسلح نخواهیم داشت که دروازه های ما را بشکنند، بلکه ما با آغوش باز از یکدیگر در خانه های خود استقبال خواهیم کرد. نه مشت های بسته و چهره های ترسیده."

“There will be days like that again. There will come a time when we go to school together, we read and write together, we run and play in the sun. There will be no man standing in front of us, demanding we go home and threatening us with guns and sticks. Our streets will be full of life and colour, our homes will smell of Pulao, and our gardens will grow the most beautiful flowers. In that time, we will not fear outsiders; we will not have armed men breaking down our doors, but rather, we will welcome each other into our homes with open arms. Not closed fists and frightened faces.”

2:06 AM

"این، خواهران من، تنها زمانی اتفاق می‌افتد که دست‌های ما در تاریکی در دست هم باقی بماند. ما برای ترمیم آنچه شکسته شده به سلاح نیاز نداریم—ما فقط به یکدیگر نیاز داریم. بیایند از کوچک شروع کنیم، قدم به قدم. هر شب در این ساعت بشنوید، و بگذارید این فضا جایی باشد که قدرت پنهان خود را تقسیم کنیم، قلب‌های یکدیگر را نگه داریم و امید خود را دوباره به آرامی زمزمه کنیم."

"That, my sisters will only happen if our hands remain held in the dark. We do not need weapons to mend what has been broken - we only need each other. Let us start small, step-by-step. Tune in every night at this hour, and let this space be where we share our hidden strength, hold each other's hearts, and gently whisper our hope back into existence."

2:07 AM

I switch the radio dial back.

Just in time. That's the first time I've talked this much in one go. That too after months. I sit back in my bed and look out my window. Did anyone really hear me? Did it work? Did the girls remember from the market this morning, or was I too quiet when I told them about the radio channel? There's no point wondering about this right now. I can only hope for tomorrow; a head nod or tiny whisper might be enough of a sign. Right?

7:38 AM

I check the clock, and Lā should be home by now, meaning he can accompany me to the market. I change into my abaya and hijab, and head out of my room, giving him no time to complain about my lack of preparation or covering.

8:15 AM

We have now reached the market, and I am constantly glancing up and down, trying to catch the wandering eyes of another girl, since older women must wear burqas over their faces. They'd recognise me. They're the only people who have heard my voice, and for those who don't, I hope word reaches them soon. Every passing girl glances at me, but just for a second. I

keep walking with Lā, and he stops to ask me what I need to cook for tonight. I give him a list, and he turns to deal with the shopkeeper.

"آنها نمیتوانند روی آفتاب نقاشی کنند."

“They cannot paint over the sun.”

I turn around so fast I nearly hit Lā. Did I hear that right? But there’s no one standing behind me waiting to say more. I wait for another girl to pass by.

"آنها نمیتوانند روی آفتاب نقاشی کنند".

“*They cannot paint over the sun.”* Another voice echoes.

They heard me. They heard my speech. I spin my head again, scanning the sunlit market, hoping for another form of recognition. I make eye contact with a girl who looks a bit older than me. Suddenly, tears well in her eyes, and she mouths:

"آنها نمیتوانند روی آفتاب نقاشی کنند."

“They cannot paint over the sun.”