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We know
books

GOOD PEOPLE

PATMEENA SABIT



Virago

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The Hour

Qandi Gul

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

. . . And our eyes fell on the children. Little flowers born in war and grown in war, who of all the world knew only the things war brought and the things it took. Then we said: God, You have brought this on our heads and made us endure and we have endured. In Your great wrath at we know not what sins of ours, You have doomed this dirt and turned it into a graveyard for the living and the dead. But even You—even You have no right to these children.

So we fled. Leaving all. The bones of our mothers and fathers. Home. Honor. Hope. Sister away from sister. Brother from brother. Our people blown like ash to the four corners of the earth. Barbad barbad. Some of us, by what hand of fate, brought here. To this strange country that before the wars came we had never even seen in a dream of a dream of a dream. . . .

August 30

Margaret Hoffman

FORMER SHARAF FAMILY NEIGHBOR

I remember it clear as yesterday.

I was up with the birds, like always, puttering around the yard all morning, trying to get at the crabgrass before it got too hot out. We have someone who comes in every week to take care of the lawn and flowers and things, but in the summer the crabgrass shoots up like fire. Leave it alone for even a couple of days and just the one little spot'll send off a zillion seeds. Ruins the whole yard before you can say go.

James doesn't understand why I bother. He's always saying we should just nuke the whole thing and start over. But all it needs is a little patience and effort. It's a shallow grass and pulls out easy, and the whole trick is to scuff it up and lay down a bit of bark or pine straw where it used to be. Cut off its light and it's gone for good.

I remember I was out there a little longer than usual that day. We were having a big cookout over the weekend and I wanted everything looking nice and neat. It was about midmorning by the time I finished up with all the weeding and watering, and after I turned the sprinklers off I went around and gave everything a once-over, you know, just checking the nets for critters and the leaves for beetles and mites.

It was already broiling out. All summer long, we'd had the most glorious weather—warm, sunny days and clear, cool nights. But toward the end of August it just started burning up. It hadn't dipped below a hundred in a week straight, and they were blaring heat wave warnings day

and night, going on about it being the hottest August in Fairfax since God knows when.

Well, my knees were starting to act up and I was more than ready to call it a day, but the hydrangeas had come in so gorgeous, I wanted to get some for the house before I went in. So I got my clippers and a little bucket of water and came around front. That's when I saw them, right there across the street.

The two older kids were out in the driveway with their dad. There was a heap of bags just sitting there, and it looked like the kids were helping him fit everything into the trunk. The little ones were chasing each other around the yard, shouting their heads off and having the time of their lives, from the sound of it. And mom—she was just standing at the front door, talking on the phone. She saw me and waved and I waved back.

To be honest I didn't really pay much attention to them after that. I just wanted to get the heck out of the sun and put my feet up with something cool to drink. I cut a few bunches of flowers as quick as I could and went on inside.

It was about half an hour later when I came back out to check the mailbox. And by then they were all gone.

Ustad Khairyar

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

That was in '97 or '98 when they came. In the winter.

One day we heard there was a new family in Arlington, a man and his wife and little son, come just a few days before, who didn't have anyone here.

By that time, those of us who fled in those first years after the Russians invaded had been here for sixteen, seventeen years already. We'd made a little community. People of our own we could sit and stand and come and go with.

It's true they were strangers to us and we to them. But that didn't mean anything. Those of us who came before always tried to help the new ones any way we could. Because even if we lived here a hundred years more, we could never forget how those first times were like Judgment Day itself. How it wasn't like coming to a new country but to a whole new world, and coming to it like penniless deaf-mutes at that.

If nothing else they were our people. Our fathers and grandfathers were buried under the same black soil. That was enough.

Aziza Popal

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

We women called each other and divided the cooking amongst ourselves so we could take them dinner that very day.

Early in the afternoon it started to snow, flakes as big as my hand, and by evening the roads were in a bad situation. Everywhere on the way there were accidents and the police. We were all in some six or seven cars, one behind the other, and the snow made us so slow it was black night by the time we reached there.

He opened the door to our knock and she was standing there behind him, both their mouths open and their eyes big, haq ow paq to see us, some twenty or thirty strangers crowded in the hall. Ustad said, “Countryman, put your shoes and coat on and come help us bring in the food. And sister, I hope to God your house is clean because we’ve brought the women and you know how they like to talk.”

Then he came out, barefoot, and took Ustad’s arm—not his hand but his whole arm, like a child—and she started crying like her heart had just burst.

Asma Sarwary

SHARAF FAMILY FRIEND

They didn't have anything. Not a splinter to call their own. They came at a bad time, just before Christmas, when all the refugee offices were closed for the holidays, and the caseworker told them to make do until they could see about everything in the New Year.

They were in a small one-bedroom apartment in one of those old low-rise buildings. On one side of the living room suitcases were stacked on top of each other and covered with a bedsheet, and on the other side blankets were folded on the bare floor where they sat and slept. In the kitchen there were just some few cups and plates and bowls and a little pot they were using to boil the water for tea.

When we saw how it was we called every Afghan in the county. The very next day people started bringing whatever they did or didn't have from their own homes. Boxes and boxes of pots and pans and dishes. Mattresses and blankets and pillows. Farid brought an old television and VCR. Zarghoona gave them a little round dining table with four chairs. And Halima had just bought a whole new furniture set for her salon, and when it came she paid for a truck and sent them all the old things. Two nice black leather couches, a red Turkish carpet, and a beautiful glass coffee table. Soon the apartment was so full you couldn't turn around in it.

We also put money together and bought them a month's worth of groceries. Big big sacks of flour, sugar, rice, onions, potatoes, red beans,

and black and green tea. Kilos and kilos of lamb and chicken and kofta. A ten-gallon tin of oil.

Even after all that there was a pretty amount left over, so Aziza and I went to the K-mart and bought them a stroller for the boy and a microwave and a nice big silver kettle that whistled when the water boiled.

You won't believe it, but years and years later, when the children were all grown and our hair was half white, I would go visit, and Maryam would make tea with that same kettle. And it was still like new! Not a scratch on it. Things in those days were just of a different quality. Not like these cheap, two-dollar things of today and tomorrow. But we always used to laugh about it, about how that kettle was going to outlive us all.

August 30

Kalyani Nageshvara

SALES ASSOCIATE, PEOPLES DRUG

The police take my everything. My name, my address, my phone number. They write all. How long I been working here, what time I'm working, where I'm working before.

They say, "Tell to us everything."

I say, "What everything?"

They say, "What they did? What they said? Are they happy? Are they sad?"

I say, "My God, sirs, please. I don't know all these things. How I can know all these things? This is bigger store, isn't it? People are coming, people are going. Too many people. How I can remember then what everyone is doing? If they are laughing or talking or crying?"

I tell them only like I know.

That time in the morning it's quiet. Just some few people waiting in back in pharmacy for medications. I'm putting the things for special sale for the holiday on the front shelf like my boss, Mr. Carboni, he told me. Jorge and Eddie are working too, but they're in back. Only me I'm in front.

I didn't see them first, because the door is on my back, but I hear shouting so loud so loud I get scared, you know, I say my God what happened? Then I see, I say oh these are just children. A girl and a boy, maybe just a little smaller than my sons, six and seven, like that. The little boy, he's wearing the Spider-Man T-shirt just like my sons. Then

one tall girl she's coming after them with the long long hairs and the big big eyes and doing too much fashion. There's a bigger boy with her too. He has the same eyes like her, but he's not the same beautiful like that.

Then fast fast they're running everywhere in the store shouting, "Get this one! Get that one!" I don't know how long. Maybe five, maybe ten minutes. Not long time. When they finished I come to the checkout.

After, when the police are coming to ask from me so many questions like I tell you, I read the store receipt copy so many times like I'm studying for my matriculation exam. I say maybe I remember something then. Maybe I know then what they want I should say. Believe me, until today that receipt is copied on my mind. Water, Coca-Colas, Dr Peppers, apple juice, cranberry juice, chips, pretzels, gold fishes, Pop-Tarts, oatmeal cookies, gummy worms, water-gun toys, filmi star magazines, nail polish, mascara, and sun-screening cream.

I'm scanning and scanning and then the older girl she say, "Oh, we forget the less-salt crackers for Mummy." She's running after it and the older boy he say, "Hurry up." Then they pay and take all the bags. The little boy and girl they say so cute, "Thank you, thank you, have a nice day," and I laugh and say the same like that to them. Then they go fast fast just like they came.

I tell them everything just like that.

But then they say, "What else? Think more. Maybe you see something or hear something that you don't know you see it and hear it. It's too much important. If you want to help us then you should remember."

But how I can see something I don't see it? How I can hear something I don't hear it?

Then all the nights I'm not sleeping. All the days I'm not eating. My clothes are becoming too loose. I wish I never see those children in my life. Like a big rock it's sitting here on my heart. Sometimes I can't breathe. I say my God my God what they want from me? Maybe they take me out from my job because I'm not remembering properly. Maybe they put me in the jail because they think me I know something and I'm not saying. Maybe they even think me I did something and they take us out from this country.

Every minute I'm thinking now they coming for me. Every time the doorbell is ring, my heart it's stopped. I show my husband where I'm keeping just some little money for emergency in ziplock in the freezer, and I take my gold set and my bangles to my friend's house so she can keep it for my sons.

I'm waiting like that for so many days and my blood pressure is becoming too high and sometimes I feel like the needles is coming in my heart. Then one day I just come to my boss Mr. Carboni and I cry.

I say, "Sir, please. Every day I'm coming one and half hours in the bus and I'm going back the same at night. I never take day off even if I'm sick. My mother she died and on the second day I came to work. Only for my children. You know I'm working hard only for them. That's why I'm not wasting the time looking to every one customer to see what he is doing and saying. Only I'm watching them if they look poor like a thief, like you say. Please sir. Don't let the police they do something to me."

He say, "Okay, okay, Kaly. It's okay. There's no problem for you. Forget all these things. You just do your work good like always you do it and forget that all. Just forget that."

He say like this, but still I'm scared. I say maybe they told him say like this to make a trick on me. But then he say they know I'm only saying the truth because they see it in the camera video. That's why they don't come back to ask me again.

Now every day when I come to work I see the outside camera I say thanks God. I see the inside camera I say thanks God. Even I'm not at work and I see camera at bank and grocery, I'm saying always thanks God.

One time my littler son he ask me, "Why you always saying like that, Mummy?"

I say, "Because even we don't know it, but always always God is watching on us."