

HAMSHIRA

Written by

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A note on context.

Malalai Joya, the political activist, women's rights campaigner and former Afghan politician, writes in her book *Raising My Voice* (2009) about a time when she was walking home late one night after teaching in a small, underground school for girls and was tailed by members of the Taliban in one of their infamous open-back pick-up trucks. An unnerving situation under normal circumstances was made worse by the fact that Malalai was carrying school books under her burqa, the punishment for which would have been severe had she been caught.

The account of how she avoided such a fate (and what it meant to her on a wider scale) has been of huge importance in the development of this script.

*As casually as I could, I turned into the yard of the next house I came to, opening the old wooden gate and walking up to the front door. It was a very modest home, the yard surrounded only by a wire fence. I knocked on the door and held my breath, aware that the truck had slowed right down and that the Taliban were watching me from the street. I tried my best to remain calm.*

*An older woman opened the door of this stranger's home. As quietly and politely as I could I asked, 'Forgive me, Mother, may I come in to have a glass of water?'*

*Without saying a word, she motioned for me to come in, and immediately I could tell that she understood my situation.*

*Inside, she brought me the water. Then she waited with me for several minutes until the Taliban had left the street. 'My child, it is dangerous to be out at this hour,' she chided me.*

*'I know, Mother, but I must get home to my parents.'*

*She did not ask me any questions even though she could see that I was carrying books. Who knows what would have happened to me if no one had come to the door, or if it had been the man of the house who had answered when I knocked.*

*As I headed back out to finish my walk home, she simply said, 'God keep you safe, my daughter.' She understood that she had helped me out of a dangerous situation.*

*Really though, there was nothing too unusual about this interaction. Every day, even now, hundreds if not thousands of ordinary woman act out these small gestures of solidarity with each other. By necessity, after decades of brutality, we are our sisters' keepers.*

*A note on dialogue.*

All dialogue in the script is intended for presentation in subtitled English.

Unless stated otherwise, it is delivered in Dari.

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1 **EXT. MOUNTAINSIDE - AFGHANISTAN - DAWN**

A kuchi nomad encampment erected on rocky terrain.

Dark, wide tents, closed against the dark morning light.

Donkeys, relieved of their heavy loads, shift in their sleep, their breath marked by the cold.

2 **EXT. POPPY FIELDS - AFGHANISTAN - DAWN**

A sea of red. Surging waves through the flowers.

Rickety wooden carts laid to rest for the night.

3 **EXT. BAMYAN BUDDHAS - AFGHANISTAN - DAWN**

Giant cavities in a cliff-side, the shape of men, heaving in the shadow.

Fruit and water stands closed up, waiting for the new day's trade.

4 **EXT. QUIET STREET - KABUL - DAWN**

Dying delivery vans creep along a narrow road, their bearded drivers squinting against the low sun and tired eyes.

Market stalls emptied of their wares, trade skeletons for the night.

Shop fronts locked up safe behind heavy metal security gates.

5 **INT. SHOP FLOOR - SARA'S TEAS - DAWN**

Pitch black.

Keys JANGLE.

The SCREECH of metal on metal.

Light pours in through wide shop-front windows.

Three silhouettes marked against the white: a tall, scruffy head, a shorter, equally scruffy head and a slight, smoother, more rounded one.

A bell RINGS as the largest silhouette eases open a door.

6

**INT. SHOP FLOOR - SARA'S TEAS - MORNING**

A narrow corridor of a room, the floor tiled in a repeating mosaic thread run out across the entire space.

Small sets of tables and chairs line walls decorated in small paintings and drawings framed and askew.

At the centre of the room is MEHRI (17), a stern girl in an unpinned navy headscarf, dressed in the loose-fitting trouser-shirt combination of *shalwar kameez*.

She SWEEPS the floor with a battered old broom, dust swept up into plumes filling the light of the morning.

At one of the tables, folded over a dog-eared, scrawly ledger, is KAMRAN (37), a tired wraith of a man with a cigarette hanging from one corner of an empty pair of lips.

He studies the contents of the ledger, worry etched into his face.

He TUTS.

Mehri looks up and over. Nothing from Kamran.

Mehri goes back to sweeping.

7

**INT. KITCHEN - SARA'S TEAS - MORNING**

A tiny space.

The walls crawl with pots, glasses, saucers, heavy sacks of tea.

There's barely an inch to move around, let alone operate the hulking old gas stoves taking up most of the floor space.

Standing at one of these is NILS (18), a narrow boy in a dirty white apron, an adolescent beard doing its best at his shallow jaw.

He taps at a mobile phone in his hand, not paying attention to a pot of water BUBBLING over before him.

Mehri enters, broom in hand.

She sees the water, reaches around Nils and flicks off the gas, the sound of the burner cutting hard, leaving only the bubbling water.

Nils doesn't notice.

Mehri straightens up and faces him.

MEHRI

You present?

Nils smiles.

Mehri steps back, tucks away the broom.

NILS

Have it to yourself soon enough. No more trouble from me.

Mehri turns for the exit.

Nils looks.

NILS (CONT'D)

Unless you come with?

Mehri pauses at the door.

MEHRI

You'll always be trouble. You'll just be someone else's.

Another smile from Nils.

Mehri leaves.

8

**INT. SHOP FLOOR - SARA'S TEAS - AFTERNOON**

Mehri glides across the tiles, table to table, whipping up lazy cigarette smoke into momentary grey swirls.

Out the front of the shop, through the window, she catches in her turning a glimpse of a black saloon car, parked close to the door. A young, skinny man, the driver, leans against the bonnet, smoking, eyes lost somewhere down the street..

Mehri moves on, swinging in her service from one request to the next. The day is in full swing, but not all the tables are full.

From one table, Mehri collects up onto a tray two used glasses and a few coins of small change left in payment for cheap tea.

At another table, a pocket of men sip from small glasses, CHATTERING.

At another, a wizened old man has his face buried in a yellowing book, his legs crossed, feet turned out to the shop.

IN ONE CORNER, two tables pushed together accommodate a larger group.

At one end, Kamran talks in close confidence with HAROON (39, well-kept, broad shoulders, heavy brow), their heads only a short space apart.

At the other end, JANAN (33, measured, a tidy beard and neat glasses) leans down to listen to the pronounced baby bump of NAJIBA (17, Mehri's twin, just about identical), who leans back, smiling wide.

Mehri arrives at the table.

Haroon looks up, Kamran still in his ear.

HAROON

Mehri, my sweet, the sugar in my tea has not a spot on you.

Straight face from Mehri.

Kamran pulls back from Haroon.

Janan and Najiba stick to their baby play.

MEHRI

(nodding at empty glasses)  
Would you like some more?

HAROON

Yes!

Mehri reaches down for the used glasses and jug. Kamran leans in.

KAMRAN

(quiet)  
Hotter this time. Bring the little heaters.

Mehri pulls up.

KAMRAN (CONT'D)

(louder)  
Thank you, my child.

Haroon moves for his pocket. Kamran sees.

HAROON

Let me-

KAMRAN

We're family here.

Haroon looks at Kamran, tilts his head.

HAROON

Please. I know how it is.

Kamran bows his head.

HAROON (CONT'D)

(to Mehri)

Here, child.

Haroon reaches out a few coins.

Mehri takes the money and steps away, Haroon watching after her.

HAROON (CONT'D)

Family.. *inshallah*.

9

**INT. KITCHEN - SARA'S TEAS - AFTERNOON**

Mehri reaches up to a high shelf, pulls down a miniature gas cooker, like a tiny camping stove.

Behind Mehri is Nils, watching her work.

NILS

Ignore it.

He takes up his phone, stares at the screen, taps.

NILS (CONT'D)

Just how he is.

Mehri puts the cooker onto a tray, pulls together in a composition of perfect symmetry a pot, some fresh glasses, sugar, a strainer. She's a blur of harmony and efficiency.

She takes up the tray, looks at Nils.

MEHRI

Still on for later?

No response.

MEHRI (CONT'D)

Hey.

Nils looks up from his phone. No idea what she's on about.

MEHRI (CONT'D)

Walk? Later?

NILS

Yeah, yeah.

He goes back to the phone.

MEHRI

You're a moron.

NILS

Yeah, yeah.

Mehri steps off.

10

**EXT. SARA'S TEAS - AFTERNOON**

The metal security gate comes SCREECHING down over the doors and window.

Mehri turns a key in a padlock at the bottom and raises up to look out over a street closing at the end of the day.

Vendors pack away their produce, sweep their shop-fronts. Cars crawl by, motorcycles weaving between them, just managing to keep upright.

Kamran and Nils stand to one side, watching Mehri.

Behind her, up above the security gate, a tired, hand-painted sign reads SARA'S TEAS. There's a very faint profile of a woman's face at one end of the sign, visible only just through the years of sun, rain and neglect.

Mehri turns, looks at Nils.

MEHRI

Ready?

Nils nods.

KAMRAN

Make sure you're back for dinner.

MEHRI

Sure, sure.

KAMRAN

I mean it this time-

11

EXT. ROOFTOPS - KABUL - DUSK

Mehri clambers up onto a low ventilation shaft. Nils lags behind.

They're on a long, rolling rooftop, pockmarked by radio antennae, water tanks, washing lines and satellite dishes, the Hindu Kush mountains fading into the washed-out blue of the horizon behind.

Mehri hops down.

NILS

There's loads you could do.

Mehri waits as Nils catches up.

NILS (CONT'D)

Some business course?

MEHRI

I'm learning now.

NILS

Shop hardly counts.

Mehri steps off.

MEHRI

Not all of us have parents who can afford it.

Nils laughs.

NILS

We'd look after you.

Mehri looks at him, frowning.

NILS (CONT'D)

You might like it.

Mehri shakes her head, scrunches up her nose at his assumption.

The pair spot a short tower nearby, the highest point around. There's an obvious route over to it, fifty yards away.

A pause as the two eye one another..

Nils bolts. Mehri goes just after.

A few quick stretches and they're there, flown across the rooftops..

Nils leaps up at the tower.

Trying to catch up, Mehri jumps too early, misses her handhold and trips.

MEHRI

Ah!

Nils pulls himself up, not seeing Mehri. He lifts his arms into the air.

NILS

CHAMPION!

He turns back to Mehri for a victory taunt, sees her sat inspecting a wide rip at the knee of her trousers.

NILS (CONT'D)

Ha!

Mehri dabs at the rip.

MEHRI

Shut up.

A touch of blood comes through. She wipes it away and gets to her feet.

MEHRI (CONT'D)

You went early. Cheat.

Nils offers down a hand to Mehri. She ignores it and pulls herself up onto the tower.

A pause as the two look out over their city, shoulder-to-shoulder, the evening calling out around them in families settling for evening meals and catch-up.

NILS

You should come with us this time.  
Mum'd love it.

Mehri thinks.

MEHRI

Too far.

NILS

You'd be back in summer, like me,  
like always.

He turns to Mehri.

NILS (CONT'D)

I get to see everyone every year.

Mehri's quiet, unsure of her response.

Nils nods, knows not to push it.

Mehri keeps her eyes on the city spread out before them:  
night is here.

12 **EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - KABUL - NIGHT**

Mehri wanders the quiet street, looking down at a phone in her hand.

Around her, the familiar sounds of families sitting down to dinner RING OUT through open windows.

Mehri stops by a tall, wooden door set into a tall, brick wall.

She pockets her phone and pulls out a key, puts it into the lock in the door.

A quick once-over, Mehri straightens her shirt, her scarf, brushes at the rip in her trousers.

She reaches out and turns the key.

13 **EXT. COURTYARD - MEHRI'S HOME - NIGHT**

The wooden door swings open onto a space the size of half a tennis court.

Mehri steps through into the half-light spilling out a handful of windows in the two-storey house over at one side.

A football whizzes past her head and SMACKS into the wall behind her.

MEHRI

HEY!

She looks out over the courtyard.

Kamran is there, apology across his face.

Next to him is OMAR (12), a scruffy and over-fed boy, smiling in a tatty Manchester United shirt.

KAMRAN

Mehri-jan, sorry!

Mehri whips closed the door behind her. She looks across at Omar, out from under a deep frown.

MEHRI  
Little brother..

Omar freezes, worried.

Mehri moves for the ball come to rest a few feet away.

MEHRI (CONT'D)  
What kind of shot was *that*?

A big smile on Omar's face.

Mehri kicks the ball back and moves toward an open doorway into the house.

Kamran watches her go.

MEHRI (CONT'D)  
Going to wash up.

KAMRAN  
Mehri-jan, you're aunt is here!

Mehri's gone.

OMAR  
(to Kamran)  
Back in goal!

Kamran pulls his attention back to the match. Omar pings another terrible shot his way..

**14     INT. KITCHEN - MEHRI'S HOME - NIGHT**

A small, cramped room, with microwave piled upon oven piled upon fridge piled upon sink.

Small trinkets are laid out along a window sill above the sink. They're delicate porcelain animals in all colours, tiny relics of travel.

Mehri's at the stove, FRYING.

Behind her, sat at a small, square table is ZARMINA (12, blooming cheeks, Omar's twin sister). She's got a tatty paintbrush in her hand and a work-in-progress laid out on the table. Most of the colour is spread down the front of her shirt.

Her tongue sticks out in concentration.

MEHRI  
(over her shoulder)  
Might need your help in a sec.

ZARMINA  
Mm-hm.

Zarmina adds a couple of finishing touches and drops the brush into a glass of dirty paint water, turning the green hue to blue in a swirl.

She jumps to her feet and bounces over to Mehri, peers into the pan.

ZARMINA (CONT'D)  
You're burning them.

MEHRI  
Well why didn't you-

FOOTSTEPS draw both Mehri and Zarmina way from the cooker.

ZARMINA  
AUNTY!

Mehri smiles and watches, forgetting the pan.

Standing in the doorway is WAHIDA (40), a picture of grace and calm set into a tired face.

She reaches down for Zarmina, who jumps into her arms.

WAHIDA  
Little one! You're so big!

Wahida looks over Zarmina's shoulder at Mehri. Mehri smiles down at her.

ZARMINA  
Almost as big as you.

Wahida pulls out from Zarmina. She puts her hand on the girl's cheek.

WAHIDA  
Still a way to go, yet, niece.

Wahida reaches into a pocket.

WAHIDA (CONT'D)  
Look..

She presents to Zarmina a tiny porcelain animal, another one for the windowsill.

Zarmina holds it up to the light: a little orange bear.

Zarmina beams.

Wahida kisses Zarmina's forehead and rises up, facing Mehri.

MEHRI

Aunty.

Wahida moves over and puts her arms around Mehri.

WAHIDA

My love.

A deep, warm embrace.

Zarmina skirts round them to the sink, climbs up to the sill and adds the bear to the parade.

She spots the stove, the smoking pan, hops over to take charge of the frying..

WAHIDA (CONT'D)

(to Mehri, still in  
embrace)

I've missed you.

MEHRI

And me you.

They separate, still holding onto each others' arms.

Wahida sees Zarmina at the pan.

WAHIDA

So what's cooking?

Mehri steps aside, lets Wahida pass through.

Mehri looks on as her aunt and sister stare into her charred efforts.

MEHRI

Maybe not that much?

15

**INT. DINING ROOM - MEHRI'S HOME - NIGHT**

A small room, dominated by its furniture: a large, threadbare carpet spread across most of the floor and a low, tired dining table with filled plates set the whole way round.

A once-ornate, orange shade covers a dark bulb overhead, its elegant glow faded now, lost to time and the forgotten hand that raised it.

Sat below here on old cushions are Kamran, Omar, Wahida, Mehri, Zarmina and the children's grandmother, SAMAN (60s, a presence, composed and wound tight).

All heads are bowed.

KAMRAN

(croaking)

-ask that You bless the food You have provided and the continued peace of those so dearly departed.

He looks up and over to a small collection of framed photographs on a sideboard.

They're portraits. One smiling woman is the only unrecognisable face, the rest present.

KAMRAN (CONT'D)

May He watch over your rest until the day we meet again.

(pause)

In the name of Allah-

ALL

Ameen.

Heads up.

Kamran starts on his food.

Saman's next. She inspects the charred contents of her plate, turns her nose up a touch at the blackened cooking.

Zarmina watches Saman, sat beside her, nervous of the older woman's reaction.

Saman forks a chunk, lifts it to her mouth, takes it in, nods, eats on.

The rest follow.

A sigh of relief from Zarmina.

Silence as the first few bites are taken.

Saman looks at Zarmina next to her, sees the paint on the girl's shirt. She reaches over, starts scratching it off.

Kamran stops eating, looks around the table.

KAMRAN

I want you all to listen a moment.

Omar looks up, as does Wahida.

Saman keeps on at Zarmina's shirt.

Mehri and Zarmina continue to eat.

KAMRAN (CONT'D)

Our country has changed.

Omar goes back to his food: just another rambling moan.

Wahida watches Kamran.

KAMRAN (CONT'D)

The provinces. Cities, towns. I don't recognise my land.

MEHRI

(eating)  
Worse before.

SAMAN

(to Mehri, in *Pashto*)  
Let your father finish.

WAHIDA

(to Saman)  
She's not wrong.

MEHRI

We should be proud of where we've come from.

SAMAN

I know exactly where we've come from, child. I was there-

Kamran puts out a hand in protest.

A pause as everyone returns to their plates.

KAMRAN

I'm saying, everybody has *left*. Change means repercussions. The pebble in the pond, ripples right to the edge.

Kamran looks to Saman. She gives him a nod.

KAMRAN (CONT'D)

(weak)  
We're closing the shop.

All heads up and eyes on Kamran.

MEHRI

What?

SAMAN

He said we're closing the-

KAMRAN

Mehri-jan, it's too expensive to keep open.

MEHRI

We're the ones making the money!

Saman TUTS.

KAMRAN

We can't afford the lease anymore.

MEHRI

I don't know what that means-

WAHIDA

(calm, to Kamran)  
How long is it for?

Zarmina looks over at Omar. He shrugs.

KAMRAN

A year.

WAHIDA

At?

KAMRAN

Three hundred.

Mehri stares at Kamran. He won't meet her eyes.

Wahida watches on.

Omar and Zarmina shift in their seats, uncomfortable in the silence.

KAMRAN (CONT'D)

Mehri-jan, it's time for you to come home.

MEHRI

Why? There's nothing here I-

SAMAN

Because you need to learn about the house.

MEHRI

(to Saman)

What for?

SAMAN

Your sister, she's so far ahead. The baby, the husband, the house..

MEHRI

That has nothing to do with me.

KAMRAN

Mehri, calm. Your grandmother's right. We can't keep on as we are. We have so little left.

Mehri stares into her plate.

KAMRAN (CONT'D)

(gentle, to Mehri)

We have look after ourselves. Make the best of what we do have.

MEHRI

I don't see the sense in this.

SAMAN

You don't need to.

KAMRAN

(cross, *Pashto*)

Thank you, mother.

Saman nods, starts to pick again at her food.

KAMRAN (CONT'D)

(gentle)

Mehri-jan, you need to be here. Omar will fill in until we close.

WAHIDA

(to Kamran)

How long?

KAMRAN

We have to be out in two weeks.

Raise eyebrows from Wahida.

WAHIDA  
Is there someone coming in after  
you?

KAMRAN  
Not that I know of, but-

MEHRI  
This isn't right.

Kamran slumps in his seat.

Saman straightens up.

SAMAN  
This is how it has to be.

Mehri stares down into her plate, her appetite gone.

16

**INT. KITCHEN - MEHRI'S HOME - MORNING**

Mehri is at the table, sitting with a small glass of steaming tea, lost in her head. She's dressed for the day in her torn shalwar kameez.

Weak sunlight drifts in through a window.

Wahida enters.

WAHIDA  
Bit early for you?

MEHRI  
(nodding)  
Habit.

Wahida moves over to the fridge, takes out a bottle of water.

Mehri has a proper look at her: Wahida is dressed to go out.

MEHRI (CONT'D)  
Where are you going?

Wahida fills a glass.

WAHIDA  
I have work to do.

She puts the bottle back in the fridge, takes up the glass and turns to Mehri.

WAHIDA (CONT'D)  
Why I'm in town.

Wahida drains the glass.

MEHRI  
Can I come?

FOOTSTEPS.

Wahida looks over at the door.

Saman stands there, looking Mehri over.

SAMAN  
You as well?

Mehri's confused.

Saman nods at the tear at Mehri's knee.

SAMAN (CONT'D)  
What is wrong with you two? Your  
sister's just as bad.

Wahida motions to exit.

SAMAN (CONT'D)  
(to Wahida)  
Off out?

WAHIDA  
(nodding)  
I've got-

SAMAN  
Take this one with you.

Saman turns to the doorway.

Wahida looks at Mehri: *what's going on?*

SAMAN (CONT'D)  
(shouting)  
Zarmina-jan! Time to get up!

Saman turns back to them both.

SAMAN (CONT'D)  
Get them to the market. They need  
something proper to wear. Something  
that'll stick up to paints and..

Saman turns to the rest of the house.

SAMAN (CONT'D)  
ZARMINA-JAN!!

She turns back.

SAMAN (CONT'D)  
..and-

She looks at Mehri, shakes her head.

SAMAN (CONT'D)  
God only knows what..

Wahida and Mehri are both taken aback by this sudden intrusion into their morning.

WAHIDA  
I was actually going-

SAMAN  
(insistent)  
Some time with your nieces? Isn't  
that what you're here for?

Saman looks at Mehri, looks for support. Mehri shrugs.

WAHIDA  
(reluctant)  
Of course.

SAMAN  
Good.

Saman turns to the door again.

SAMAN (CONT'D)  
ZARMINA!

17 **EXT. RAUCOUS MARKET - MORNING**

Mehri and Wahida step through high banks of multicoloured fabrics, under low canopies and around waist-high, bullet-train children, all set to the tune of eager market HAGGLING.

They stop at one stall where Wahida reaches out to a shirt.

MEHRI  
Do you work on your own?

Wahida ignores her, leans in for a closer look at the shirt.

MEHRI (CONT'D)  
Must get lonely.

The remainder of the script is available on request.

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