

An extract from *My Dear Kabul: A Year in the Life of an Afghan Women's Writing Group* (Coronet, 2024). Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, twenty-one writers in Afghanistan – among them the five contributors to this guest edition – kept a collective diary in their WhatsApp chat group, in which they recorded and responded to the changes they were all living through.

A false return

Fakhta

Daikundi Province, central Afghanistan, mid-September, 2021

As the road brought me closer to Daikundi, I felt more and more distant from my studies and my fiancé. I kept thinking, had I stayed in Kabul, maybe I would have a better chance of seeing him again – it would be impossible for him ever to come to Daikundi. But then I remembered my parents were waiting to receive me and that brought a smile to my face.

I arrived home around breakfast time. My father was at his clinic. He is a doctor and goes to work very early. I had breakfast with my mother, and

she joked that now my father was thinking of taking us all to Kabul. I asked what his reason was, but she didn't know. I didn't think any more about it. I went to take a nap.

My mother woke me up for lunch. When I walked into the hall, I saw my father sitting down to eat. He never usually comes home for lunch, so I was surprised. I said Salam, and we all ate together. My father looked stressed and somehow depressed. I gestured to my mother to ask if she knew why? She shook her head. I couldn't bear the look on my father's face, so I asked him what was wrong. He was silent at first. Then he turned to face us and told us what had happened.

My father had got a phone call the previous day from an unknown number. The man at the other end of the call spoke Pashto. My father has enough Pashto to reply, so he returned the man's Salam and then asked what he was calling for. The voice said, '*Dokhtar-e tu ra mekhaham*, I want your daughter,' and started to laugh. My father hung up and blocked the number.

My father is a doctor, and a mild man. He has always been very nice to everyone. He believed that the call must have been from one of the people looking for my fiancé, most probably the same Talib who went to visit my fiancé's mother. My father believed that, since they hadn't been able to reach my fiancé, they were now trying this manipulation to get him to return to Daikundi for my sake.

The thought brought so much anxiety and fear among us. My father was more stressed than anyone. He kept saying that if they had a problem with him, he wouldn't mind but he was terrified they were bringing me into it. I saw he had lost his peace of mind and felt I had now become a headache to my parents.

To have more space to think, my father switched off his phone. Yet our days were still anxious. My parents could not sleep at night: my mother recited the Quran and prayed; my father walked up and down the yard. And I was too scared to close my eyes.

My father managed to speak to my fiancé and asked him to stay in Herat and not to go to Iran until we knew what to do next. After five days, my father switched his phone back on. Within three hours, the person called again and repeated the same words. My father got very restless and left the house. We waited for him in the yard. After forty minutes, he returned. He faced us again. 'Pack your things, we are to make a journey tonight.'

He then called my fiancé with his new plan: 'We've booked a car to take us secretly to Kabul tonight and from there to Herat. I am bringing Fakhta with us. I'll give her hand into yours, so wherever you go, you go together.'

During the last Taliban regime, some twenty-two years ago, I was six

months old when my parents migrated to Iran due to Taliban oppression. My father knew only too well what it meant to be smuggled across a border. He acknowledged that life would be difficult for us but said, 'Despite this journey's hardships, I prefer my daughter to be far from this land of wrath.'

We did as my father chose. In the middle of the night, all three of us – my parents and I – walked towards our ride to Kabul. I remember we left Daikundi at exactly two in the morning. I wished I could say goodbye to my friends and to our village for the last time, but we left without telling anyone we were going.

Towards an unknown fate, we all kept moving.

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