

Zynab

An Afghan girl fight for the right to education and
empowering girls

Inspired by True Events and the Wisdom of Rumi

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This book is dedicated to my granddaughter, Sabrina, and the girls of Afghanistan

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Author's Note

You Were Born with Wings

In the winter of 1974, Zynab left school for the last time, thinking about her future.

There were so many things Zynab wanted to do, so many things she'd promised her mom she would do, but she didn't know how she would accomplish them.

Outside, she saw her best friend and cousin, Fatima, standing by the entrance, ready to walk home with her. Fatima smiled faintly. "This is it. The end of the road for us after eight years."

Zynab shook her head and sighed. "Don't remind me. It occupied my mind the entire day."

Fatima put her notebook in her white cloth bag. "At least you have a relative in the city. I have no chance of getting a high school diploma."

They passed the same wooden bridge, climbed the same hills, and walked to their mud farmhouses on the same dirt road they had every day for the past eight years. Many days on their way home, they would stop at the river, splash in the water, talk, and laugh. Before going home on hot summer days, they would finish their homework under a sizeable willow tree by the riverbank. But not today. Today, there was no laughter or girlish talk. They stepped over the fallen yellow leaves along the river and sat at their favorite spot by the riverbank.

Fatima placed her schoolbag beside her, splashed water on her face, and wet her short hair.

Zynab pulled a white cotton cloth from her schoolbag and handed it to Fatima. "You're so lucky. You can wash your hair by the river and dry it in minutes."

Fatima dried her face and hair and returned the cloth to Zynab. "Now that you've finished school, asks your mom to cut your hair short."

Zynab took off her shoes and dipped her feet in the cold water. "You know my mom," she sighed.

Whenever Zynab asked her mom if she could cut her hair short, her mom stared at her in disbelief. "Zynab *Jaan*," she'd say, "you know girls don't cut their hair before marriage. It's an important part of our culture!"

Fatima wrapped her white scarf around her neck. "If you go to the city for high school, you can't go to school with that long, oily braided hair. The other kids will make fun of you."

Zynab put on her shoes. "That might not happen."

"You said your dad spoke with your aunt."

Zynab let her white headscarf drape around her neck. "My aunt told him the school is too far from her house."

“Is it?”

Zynab stood up. “I don’t know. She probably doesn’t want me staying at her house.”

Zynab held Fatima’s hand and helped her up, and they continued home.

As they approached Fatima’s house, Zynab paused and whirled around to face Fatima. “Come stay at my house tonight.”

Fatima dusted off her long black school uniform dress. “Let me ask my mom.”

Zynab followed Fatima to her house and waited outside by the door. She could hear Fatima speaking with her mother.

Fatima’s mom helped her dad stand up from his seated position on the floor to go to the outhouse. “Not tonight. Your dad’s back pain has gotten worse. You need to feed the goats and clean the barn.”

Zynab waved goodbye to Fatima and trudged toward home, thinking about how and when she would ask her mom to cut her long hair. Zynab loved the idea of having short hair. She’d dreamed of it for years but knew her mom would never agree.

A herd of three goats followed Zynab home. One of the goats started nibbling her long dress. Zynab stopped and patted it on the back.

The next day started like any other. With the sound of the *azaan*, the call to prayer, from the mosque, Zynab put a kettle on the stove and mixed hot and cold water for the family’s ablutions before prayer. Her father spread the old handmade prayer rug on the floor, and they all stood behind him for *namaz*.

Zynab started doing *namaz* when she was five years old. She had performed this daily ritual five times a day, seven days a week, for the past ten years. Moving together in a shared rhythm, the family members all bowed and put their foreheads on the ground while reciting verses from the Quran. Then, they raised the palms of their hands in front of their faces, asked God for forgiveness, and prayed for health, rain, and productive farming.

Zynab’s life was quite different from the lives of other girls in the village of Ghylawn. Her father, Mr. Rahim, was a teacher and a Rumi scholar who began teaching her poetry and Farsi literature when she was seven. That’s when she learned her favorite Rumi poem, though she only understood its whole, profound meaning much later in life:

“You were born with potential.

You were born with divine energy

You were born with wings.

You were born with greatness,

Fly, don’t crawl.”

Each morning, after Zynab finished her studies with her dad, she braided her long cascade of black hair. She untangled her hair and combed it with olive oil since her mom said it made it shiny and healthy. She hated this part of her daily chores and longed for short hair but didn’t want to subject her mom to

village gossip. After all, her father was an elder, teacher, and respected man, and her mother was a traditionalist and a conservative role model in Ghylawn. But now that Zynab had graduated from eighth grade, she felt a new sense of freedom and resolved to cut her hair short.

Two days after her graduation, Zynab made her move. After she completed her chores, she went to the sitting room to talk with her mom, Khadija. Khadija put aside her knitting and said, "I bought some *zytoone* oil for your hair. Let me comb and braid your hair tight."

Zynab sat next to her mother on the red embroidered *toshak*, or floor mattress, and filled Khadija's cup with green chai. "*Bobo Jaan*, I don't want to have long hair anymore. I want to cut my hair short."

Khadija's eyes widened. She stared at her daughter for a few seconds without saying a word. There was a grim silence in the room. After opening and closing her mouth a few times, she finally said, "Zynab *Jaan*, what are you saying? What will people in the village say?"

Zynab placed the palm of her hand on her mom's knee. "*Bobo Jaan*, people will gossip whether I have long or short hair. They will always find something to talk about."

Her mom patted her on the back. "This will ruin your father's reputation. Did you think about that?"

Zynab said with a smile, "You know I would never do anything to damage my family name and reputation."

Her mother picked up her needles again, started knitting, and raised her eyes to Zynab's. "If you insist, I'll talk with your father."

Zynab arranged the humongous pillow against the wall behind her mother's back. "Let me talk with Dad first." She knew her father wouldn't object to her having shorter hair.

The following day, her father left early to cut down an overgrown tree on the hill by their farmhouse. Zynab didn't get to talk to him about cutting her long hair.

After he left, Zynab picked up a straw basket and walked out to the vegetable garden. She picked a few red apples so her mom could make marmalade for Ramadan, thirty days of dawn-to-dusk fasting. She returned to the kitchen and peeled, cut, and washed the apples. Then, she put them in a clay pot.

She started a fire in the *hojagh*, an open fire pit, and opened the small kitchen window so the smoke could escape. Her mother entered the kitchen, squinting and coughing through the plume of smoke from the *hojagh*. She pointed at the ceiling. "The smoke hole is blocked. It was windy last night."

Zynab looked up, ran down the hallway, climbed the eight narrow mud stairs to the rooftop, and removed the debris from the smoke hole. When she returned to the kitchen, her mom said, "Zynab *Jaan*, you put damp wood in the *hojagh*! Where did you get it?"

Zynab brushed away a few smoke-induced tears with her sleeve. "It was stacked next to the tandoor," she said, referring to the clay oven outside.

"Your dad cut that wood yesterday and put it there to dry."

"I didn't know. I'll go gather dry wood."

She went to the backyard, fetched a few dry blocks of wood, and rekindled the fire.

“Mom, do you want me to make marmalade for Ramadan this year? I want to learn how to make it,” Zynab said.

Khadija wiped the knife she was handling with a clean cloth and put it on the small cutting board. “Yes, it’s a family tradition to have marmalade for *iftar*,” she said, referring to the meal that breaks the Ramadan fast. “You ought to learn how to make it.”

Khadija pulled spices and sugar from a wooden rack next to the kitchen door and placed them in front of Zynab. “Don’t put in too much sugar.”

“How much do I need for twelve apples? Do you measure?” Zynab asked.

“I put in five cupped handfuls of sugar with one glass of water.”

Zynab scooped the sugar with her hand and added it to the pot. Then, she filled a glass with water and held it up. “This much?”

Khadija nodded. “Yes, but add more water as you stir. Stir until all the water is gone.” She removed the lid from the aluminum pot, picked up a wooden spoon, and tasted the apples with the tip of her tongue. “It needs more sugar.”

Zynab threw another handful of sugar into the pot on the fire.

Her mom tasted it again. “Yes, this is good. You can add the walnuts now.”

Zynab dropped a handful of walnuts into the pot, closed the lid, and pulled a small straw chair away from the *hojagh* for her mom. She didn’t want Khadija to overheat from sitting too close to the fire. The aroma of cooked apples, walnuts, and cardamom wafted through the kitchen. Zynab stirred the pot, scooped up another piece of apple, and gave it to her mom.

Khadija tasted the marmalade. “It’s done. Take the lid off and leave it outside to cool. Watch for ants, though. They can get in it fast.”

Zynab followed her mother’s instructions. Returning to the kitchen, she sat on a low clay bench against the wall near Khadija’s chair. “Zynab *Jaan*, I saved enough for us to go to Mazar-i-Sharif. And I can knit five more sweaters to sell by the new year.”

“*Bobo Jaan*, I can’t wait to go to Mazar-i-Sharif to see Rumi’s birthplace, but—”

“Zynab *Jaan*, all I want from our trip to Mazar-i-Sharif is to touch the Jendah and pray for Jamal.”

The Jendah is a massive pole erected in the courtyard of the Imam Ali Mosque in the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif on *Nowruz*, or the Afghans new year. Pilgrims travel worldwide to touch the Jendah on *Nowruz*, believing it will grant their deepest wishes.

“You don’t have to work this hard,” Zynab said. “When I go to the city, I can work and save money.”

“We don’t have anyone you could stay with in the city while you attend high school.”

“Can Dad ask my aunt one more time? I can work and pay them.”

"I'll mention it, but I don't think it'll happen."

"*Bobo Jaan*, I don't want a future like the other girls in the village," Zynab said in a small voice.

Many villagers didn't allow their daughters to go to school at all. A few, like Zynab and Fatima, were permitted to attend the Ghylawn school, which only went through the eighth grade. If they wanted an education beyond that, they had to go to the city and live with a relative since girls weren't permitted to live alone. Most villagers felt that school interfered with their life, culture, and religion and that educating girls didn't prepare them for their proper roles as mothers and wives. Many girls were responsible for the daily household chores, such as fetching water from the river for washing and drinking, cleaning the barn, feeding the animals, and gathering wood for cooking and heating during the winter. Boys were too busy attending school in the morning and helping their fathers on the farm in the afternoon to perform such tasks.

The next day, Zynab went to the living room to talk with her mom. She waited a few minutes until her mom finished *namaz* and folded the prayer rug. "Open the window," Khadija said. "I love the smell of apricot blossoms."

Zynab opened the window, stuck her head outside, and let the cool, mild breeze blow through her hair.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Khadija said, "I finished knitting Jamal's sweater. Ask him to come here and try it on."

Zynab peeked into her brother's room to see if he was there. He wasn't, so she went out to the barn. "Mom wants you to try on your new sweater."

Jamal nodded, finished brushing his horse, and picked up his cane.

Zynab said, "Stay on your right. There's cow dung by the barn's gate."

He smiled. "I stepped on it coming out here." Jamal rubbed his shoes back and forth on the grass and then took them off before entering the house. He followed Zynab to the living room and tried on the sweater.

Khadija said, "It looks beautiful on you, though it's a bit longer than I measured."

Jamal smiled, touched the sweater, and ran his fingers through it. "Mom, thank you. It feels soft and fluffy. It'll keep me warm when I ride Palawan on cold winter days."

"I'm glad you like it. Next, I'll knit a handkerchief for you."

"No, Mom, make something for Zynab. You already knitted a sweater and gloves for me."

Zynab's gaze fell onto the old Persian rug in the living room.

"I'll make something for each of you, then."

Zynab shook her head and sighed. "I don't need a sweater. You don't let me go outside anymore, anyway. Why do I need a sweater?"

Jamal picked up his cane. "Mom, I need to go. I'm teaching my friend some of Rumi's poetry. He should be here any minute."

After Jamal left, Zynab sat down beside her mom. “*Bobo Jaan*, I spoke with Dad, and he gave me permission to cut my hair.”

Khadija’s eyes bulged, and the teacup rattled in her hand. There was silence in the room. Zynab sensed her mother’s disappointment and felt guilty for putting her through this pain.

Her mom’s gaze had fallen on the family picture on the wall. She sighed. “I never thought you’d ask me to cut your hair short before getting married.”

Zynab put some wood in the cast-iron stove in the corner of the room and closed the window. “Do you want me to take the scissors to the bazaar for sharpening?”

Khadija picked up her knitting needles. “No, I’m going to the mosque tomorrow. I need to talk with the mullah.”

When Khadija returned from the mosque the following day, she placed the Quran on the rack in her bedroom and asked Zynab to go to the sitting room. She stared at her daughter as if she were about to say something unpleasant. Instead, she said, “Get the bathhouse ready tomorrow. I’ll go to the bazaar and sharpen my scissors.”

Zynab hugged her mom and kissed her on the cheek.

The next day was freezing and snowy. Zynab drew water from the well and filled the colossal washbasin inside the bathhouse with ten buckets of water. She also poured water into the large kettle on top of the small cast-iron stove in the bathhouse. Then, she wrapped a towel around the kettle handle and mixed hot and cold water in the washbasin.

Zynab removed her long floral-print dress and placed it on a wooden platform outside the bathhouse. She wrapped a sizeable yellow cloth around her waist, put on her rubber slippers, and mixed the hot and cold water in another large aluminum pot next to the washbasin. A five-inch-long scar on her right leg reminded her to stay away from the stove. She picked up the small mirror and a wooden comb from the rack behind the door, undid her tangled braid, and combed her long hair for the last time.

Khadija walked into the bathhouse holding a stick of amber incense. “I purchased this in the village bazaar. It’s tradition to burn amber when a mother cuts her daughter’s hair for the first time. It’s for good luck.”

The scent of Amberwood and the steam from the boiling water reminded Zynab of the early morning mist in the forest. Heat sizzled from the red bricks under the stove. Sweat poured down Khadija’s face. She picked up a towel and dried her forehead and neck.

Zynab sat on a short wooden stool. Khadija ran her hand down Zynab’s long, thick hair and held it for a few seconds as though she were performing an ancient ritual. She then picked up the scissors, stood behind her daughter, and cut her hair. After she had trimmed a few inches, she lathered Zynab’s head and shoulders with soap, poured warm water over her to rinse the soap away and held up the wooden mirror. “What do you think?” she asked.

Zynab looked at her reflection in the mirror and ran her fingers through her hair. “Can you cut a little more?”

Khadija cut some more hair and held the mirror in front of her daughter again.

“Yes, *Bobo Jaan*! Thank you! It looks great,” Zynab said. She tilted her head, considering her reflection. It was the first time she’d ever seen herself with short hair. She had pictured herself with short hair for years, but the reality was exciting. “Mom, what do you think?”

Khadija wiped the sweat from her forehead. “It reminds me of the day your grandma cut my hair and combed it with this wooden comb. It was a week before my wedding. I was sixteen years old. Don’t lose this comb. It’s been in the family for a generation.”

After Zynab was satisfied with her haircut, Khadija scrubbed her back with a *kessa* glove, an exfoliating bath glove, and *royshowya*, an exfoliant paste, sloughing off the layer of dead skin. The trickling water echoed in the bathhouse as she poured water over Zynab’s head and slender shoulders. When she had finished, Khadija stood before her daughter and gazed at her for a few moments. “I must confess, you look good with short hair.”

Zynab pulled a strand of hair from her cheek and shook her head. “My head seems lighter. It feels so good.” Looking up at her mother, she added in alarm, “*Bobo Jaan*, you’re sweating. It’s getting too hot here. Let me open the door. You’ll catch a cold when you go outside.”

Khadija wiped away the sweat on her forehead. “Yes, I caught a bad cold last winter when I stepped out of the hot bathhouse into the snow.”

“*Bobo Jaan*, stay inside longer and take a bath,” Zynab urged.

“I’m too tired.”

“I can wash your back and shampoo your hair for you.”

“Next week, Zynab *Jaan*.”

Zynab covered her mother with a heavy cotton coat and wrapped her sweater around her neck and head.

“Zynab *Jaan*, you covered my mouth,” Khadija protested.

“It’s okay, *Bobo Jaan*. Just get to the house quickly. Otherwise, the freezing air will get into your lungs.”

Khadija walked out into the cold, shivering.

Alone in the bathhouse, Zynab poured more hot water over her head, combed out her hair, looked at her reflection in the mirror again, and smiled.

The next day, Khadija developed an intense cough. Within a week, it had gotten worse. Rahim took her to the *hakim*, the medicine man, who mixed various herbs in a bottle. He instructed her, “Take one teaspoon of this each night before bed.”

Khadija followed the *hakim*’s instructions, but her condition worsened, and her cough became persistent. She spat out thick yellow sputum each time she coughed.

One night, as Rahim helped her lie down on her cot and covered her with a blanket, he said, “Khadija, we have to take you to the hospital.”

She spoke weakly between gasping coughs. “No need. I’ll be... better in... a few days.”

Rahim touched her forehead. “You have a fever. You need to see a doctor.”

Khadija half-opened her eyes. “Is there a female doctor?”

“No, there’s no woman doctor in the hospital.”

A flicker of sadness crossed her face. “It... is a sin for a man to see my naked... body.”

“Khadija, it’s not a sin. Doctors are *maram*—close family members.”

Zynab sat at the edge of her mom’s cot and spoke up. “If Cindy’s at the hospital, she can see you.”

Khadija asked, “Cindy?”

Cindy was a Peace Corps nurse who had moved to the nearby city of Herat six years ago, and in that time, she’d become a good friend of the family. She was particularly fond of Zynab and brought her books whenever she came to the village to treat children at the school for eye infections.

Rahim said, “Cindy won’t be back in the village for three weeks.”

Khadija responded in a soft, dreamlike voice, “I can wait.”

“No, you can’t, Khadija. Your condition gets worse every day. You must see a doctor. Soon.”

Zynab helped her mom roll onto her side. Khadija faced Rahim and struggled to keep her eyes open. “Can’t the nurse examine... me?”

Rahim leaned forward. “No. You need to see a doctor.”

Khadija took a deep breath. “I don’t want... a male doctor to... to touch my body,” she whispered. “I can’t. You... you know this, Rahim *Jaan*.”

Rahim sighed in frustration.

Zynab approached her mother’s cot and placed a hand on her arm. “*Bobo Jaan*, you’ll wear a gown in a closed room. You’ll be covered.”

Jamal sat on the floor next to the cot. He added, “Mom, please go. I’m worried about you. You coughed nonstop last night.”

Rahim walked toward the door. “Don’t make this hard for us.”

Zynab wiped the corner of her mom’s mouth, removed the pillow behind her, and helped her lie on her back again after she finished coughing.

When Khadija was comfortable, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Zynab *Jaan*, will you go with me?”

Zynab placed her palm on her mother’s forehead, gauging the fever. “Yes, I’ll go with you.”

Khadija's fever spiked red and hot. Zynab put the *hakim's* herbs in a glass of water, stirred the mixture, and half-raised her mother to give her the medicine. She then spread Khadija's shawl on the floor and lay down upon it, hoping to get at least a little sleep that night.

Rahim and Jamal slept in the next room. Rahim came in many times throughout the night to check on his wife.

