SHABANU

Daughter of the Wind

Suzanne Fisher Staples

Guluband

Phulan and I step gingerly through the prickly gray camel thorn, each of us balancing a red clay pot half filled with water on our heads. It was all the water we could get from the *toba*, the basin that is our main water supply.

Our underground mud cisterns are infested with worms. We'll dig new ones when the monsoon rains come—if they come.

The winter sky is hazed with dust. There has been no rain in nearly two years, and the heat of the Cholistan Desert is as wicked as if it were summer.

Phulan walks with her eyes down, her feet shuffling, kicking up puffs of sand that is light as dust. Her name means "flower," and she is beautiful when she smiles.

I am Shabanu. Mama says it's the name of a princess, but my red wool shawl has worn so thin I can see through it. I pull it tighter around me and pretend it's a *shatoosh*. It's said that real princesses wear *shatoosh* shawls so fine they can pass through a lady's ring.

In the courtyard that circles our round, thatched huts, Mama and Auntie have made a fire, and a kettle keeps warm beside it for tea. Even when we are down to the last of our water we have tea. Grandfather leans against the courtyard wall, chin on his chest, his turban nodding in rhythm to his snores.

Mama sits with yards of yellow silk in her lap, stitching one of Phulan's wedding dresses. She has embroidered silver and gold threads, mirrors, and tassels into the bodice. You'd think Phulan was the princess!

Mama holds up the tunic and measures it against Phulan's shoulders and chest. She laughs, her teeth gleaming in the opal haze of the setting sun.

"If you don't grow breasts soon, this will look like an empty goatskin," she says, her strong brown fingers plucking at the extra silk in the curved bodice. She has made it big enough to fit Phulan when she's grown. Phulan is thirteen. She will marry our cousin Hamir this summer

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during the monsoon rains. The monsoon, God willing, will bring food for our animals and fruit to the womb of Phulan.

"If God had blessed you with sons, we wouldn't have to break our fingers over wedding dresses," says Auntie as she sews the hem of the skirt. Her sons, ages three and five, play noisily nearby.

Mama ignores her and sets the silk aside, for Dadi will come soon from tending the camels, and he'll be hungry. She dips her tall, graceful frame through the doorway of our hut and comes out with a large wooden bowl. Squatting before the fire, she kneads water into wheat flour to make *chapatis*.

"I worry," Auntie goes on, her fingers flying over the yellow silk. "You'll spend your life's savings on two dowries and two weddings. Without a son, who will bring a dowry for you? And who will take care of you when you're old?"

Mama pulls at the dough and slaps it into disks. She whirls the flat bread onto the black pan over the fire.

"Mama and Dadi are happy," I say, sticking my chin out.

"What do you know?" Auntie asks, folding her pudgy arms over her bosom. "You're nothing but a twig."

"They laugh and sing. Aren't you happy, Mama?" Mama smiles, and her eyes are merry in the glow of the fire. Auntie almost never laughs.

"Don't worry, little one," says Mama. "You and Phulan are better than seven sons." Auntie purses her lips and picks up her sewing again.

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Life is both sweet and cruel to strong-willed young Shabanu, whose home is the windswept Cholistan Desert of Pakistan. The second daughter in a family with no sons, she's been allowed freedoms forbidden to most Muslim girls. But when a tragic encounter with a wealthy and powerful landowner ruins the marriage plans of her older sister, Shabanu is called upon to sacrifice everything she's dreamed of. Should she do what is necessary to uphold her family's honor—or listen to the stirrings of her own heart?

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