

THE
BREADWINNER

Deborah Ellis



ONE

“I can read that letter as well as Father can,” Parvana whispered into the folds of her chador. “Well, almost.”

She didn’t dare say those words out loud. The man sitting beside her father would not want to hear her voice. Nor would anyone else in the Kabul market. Parvana was there only to help her father walk to the market and back home again after work. She sat well back on the blanket, her head and most of her face covered by her chador.

She wasn’t really supposed to be outside at all. The Taliban had ordered all the girls and women in Afghanistan to stay inside their homes. They even forbade girls to go to school. Parvana had had to leave her sixth grade class, and her sister Nooria was not allowed to go to her high school. Their mother had been kicked out of her job as a writer for a Kabul radio station. For more than a year now, they had all

been stuck inside one room, along with five-year-old Maryam and two-year-old Ali.

Parvana did get out for a few hours most days to help her father walk. She was always glad to go outside, even though it meant sitting for hours on a blanket spread over the hard ground of the marketplace. At least it was something to do. She had even got used to holding her tongue and hiding her face.

She was small for her eleven years. As a small girl, she could usually get away with being outside without being questioned.

"I need this girl to help me walk," her father would tell any Talib who asked, pointing to his leg. He had lost the lower part of his leg when the high school he was teaching in was bombed. His insides had been hurt somehow, too. He was often tired.

"I have no son at home, except for an infant," he would explain. Parvana would slump down further on the blanket and try to make herself look smaller. She was afraid to look up at the soldiers. She had seen what they did, especially to women, the way they would whip and beat someone they thought should be punished.

Sitting in the marketplace day after day, she had seen a lot. When the Taliban were around, what she wanted most of all was to be invisible.

Now the customer asked her father to read his letter again. "Read it slowly, so that I can remember it for my family."

Parvana would have liked to get a letter. Mail delivery had recently started again in Afghanistan, after years of being disrupted by war. Many of her friends had fled the country with their families. She thought they were in Pakistan, but she wasn't sure, so she couldn't write to them. Her own family had moved so often because of the bombing that her friends no longer knew where she was. "Afghans cover the earth like stars cover the sky," her father often said.

Her father finished reading the man's letter a second time. The customer thanked him and paid. "I will look for you when it is time to write a reply."

Most people in Afghanistan could not read or write. Parvana was one of the lucky ones. Both of her parents had been to university, and they believed in education for everyone, even girls.

PARVANA felt the shadow before she saw it, as the man moved between her and the sun. Turning her head, she saw the dark turban that was the uniform of the Taliban. A rifle was slung across his chest as casually as her father's shoulder bag had been slung across hers....

The Talib kept looking down at her. Then he put his hand inside his vest. Keeping his eyes on Parvana, he drew something out of his vest pocket.

Parvana was about to squish her eyes shut and wait to be shot when she saw that the Talib had taken out a letter.

He sat down beside her on the blanket.

"Read this," he said.

Imagine living in a country in which women and girls are not allowed to leave the house without a man. Imagine having to wear clothes that cover every part of your body, including your face, whenever you go out. This is life in Afghanistan, where the Taliban, members of an extreme religious group, run most of the country.

DEBORAH ELLIS has been to Afghan refugee camps and heard many stories like Parvana's. All the royalties from this book will be donated to Women for Women in Afghanistan, dedicated to the education of Afghan girls in refugee camps in Pakistan.

www.groundwoodbooks.com

Groundwood Books
House of Anansi Press

Can \$9.95 / USA \$8.95

1012;57

Cover illustration by Pascal Milelli

Distributed in the USA by

Publishers Group West

Printed and bound in Canada

ISBN-13: 978-0-88899-416-5

ISBN-10: 0-88899-416-8

