

The Cost by Mia S, Huddersfield Grammar School

Counting the cost. I could be talking about the cost of living which threatens to crush us all under its weight. I could be talking about the cost of poor decisions made by a poor government. But I'm not. Not right now at least. I'm talking about that old man who was just beaten out on the street; he used to teach at the university you know. He comes out every day to see if his sons have come home. They left a long time ago and we all know they're not coming home but none of us have the heart to tell him that. I once asked my Mōr, my mother, why he risks himself for people who are already gone. "Do you not think I would do the same?" she had questioned, "He remembers their first steps before the Bamiyan buddhas many, many years before their disgusting destruction, and I remember yours on the floor of this kitchen. No amount of fear can drown the love we hold in the deepest pits of our hearts."

I don't believe her. Looking out at my once beautiful country now ravaged by war, I see no love, only pain. My beautiful Afghanistan has been desecrated by tyrants, and my beautiful home, Kabul, is lost to darkness.

The events that took place two days ago may shed light on my newfound pessimism. I was in my Nani's room; she had been very ill and was yet to recover. I had been cleaning the small room and was about to leave when her croaky voice called me to her side. "What's wrong Nani?" I asked, but I already knew.

"My time has almost come to an end." There were no tears on her face; there was no regret.

"Of course it's not your end Nani, you still have many years left!" I smiled with false cheer, she knew what I was doing and smiled back.

"I am as old as Pakistan," she had said, "I was born during the partition. My father made sure me and my elder brother made it out, but something went wrong, and we ended up in Logar. I was just a baby, so I don't remember much but I ended up living in Logar being raised by a Hazara maid till I was 20. I have no idea what happened to my brother but the maid, Zarlashtha was her name, always told me she woke up one morning and he was gone."

I frowned. "I don't understand," I told her, "Why are you telling me this? What does it matter now?"

She didn't reply straight away as coughs shook her frame. "I want to see my Pakistan one last time."

I looked at her with a look that under any other circumstances would have been funny. "You know that's impossible. Anything else please ask for anything else."

She didn't answer me. And that was it.

The last thing I ever told her was that her dying wish was impossible. In my defence it was but I didn't have to say it.

Alexander the Great once said, "May God keep you away from the venom of the cobra, the teeth of the tiger, and the revenge of the Afghans." Or at least they say he did. Apparently, he said quite a few things about Afghanistan; I wonder how different it would have been back then. Oh! The things I would give to be born again in a different time, maybe in a different skin, a different place... still it doesn't matter now, books written by women have been banned from universities and I don't know how much longer I can last. That's why I'm up here on the flat roof of my family home, the soft breeze of Kabul on my face. I'm not wearing anything over my face right now as I lay on my blanket; I'm standing up, I'm dangerously close to the edge of the ledge looking out over my city as though I'm some divine being shaking my head at the failings of man.

I lean forward, little tears dropping from the corners of my eyes. I've not cried in a long time, but this doesn't feel like crying used to. I blink a few times then step down and crawl back to my blanket. I know what you were thinking and if I was softer maybe I would have, but war has forced me to become hard. Soft people can be strong if they so will themselves to be. And I want to see the end of this. Because this war has turned the causes of my happiness into the causes of my sadness. this war has stolen my childhood, my innocence. this war has stolen my education and my sanity. this is the war that has destroyed the Bamiyan buddhas just as brutally as it has destroyed the old man's spirit. Just as it has killed his sons. But I'm staying, because, for all this war has taken, still it will end; the children will jump and cling to their heroic father, she will go to school, streets shall no longer run red, because, for all this war has taken, it will end. And we will pay the price

881 Words

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Year Nine

A trouble shared is a trouble halved...

“A trouble shared is a trouble halved”, Emily whispered, and the words settled in the air like dust.

I didn't understand what she meant at first. The evening had already begun to rot. The sky outside her bedroom window was the colour of bruised fruit, the last of it draining into the trees. Her curtains were half drawn, turning everything a dull, suffocated grey. Even the air felt wrong, too warm, too still carrying a faint metallic scent I couldn't place.

Emily stood by her wardrobe, one hand resting against the door. She had always been soft spoken. Small. The kind of girl teachers trusted with to go to their office to get something or to rummage through their desks to find a pencil. But there was something different in the way she was standing – too steady, too composed, as if she had rehearsed it the night before.

I shouldn't have opened the wardrobe. The door had been slightly ajar, and curiosity – stupid harmless curiosity – had nudged it wider. Inside sat a wooden keepsake box. It was ordinary. Pale oak, brass hinges, the sort of thing you would buy at a craft fair. However, when I lifted the lid, something inside me seemed to drop through the floor.

Jewellery lay tangled together in the dark velvet lining.

A thin silver bracelet with a miniscule heart charm. I'd seen Carrie Bennett wear it every day, fiddling with it during maths. An emerald ring that had belonged to Lauren Price – the girl who'd “moved away” without saying goodbye. A cracked hairclip with a smear of dried foundation along its edge belonged to Natalie Thomston whose body was never found.

None of it belonged to Emily.

The house was silent behind me. Too silent.

“You weren't meant to see that yet”. Her voice slid across the room. I turned. She was standing in the doorway, blocking the exit. The light from the hallway cut her in half – one side illuminated, the other swallowed by shadow. Her

expression wasn't panicked it wasn't even angry. It was disappointed. Like I'd opened a birthday present early.

For a moment, neither of us moved. The ticking of the clock on her desk sounded thunderous. Then she stepped inside and closed the door. My mouth went dry.

"Emily... where did you get these?"

Her eyes flickered towards the box, then back to me. They were brighter than usual. Alert. Hungry.

"They're memories," she said quietly.

A tremor ran through me. She crossed the room slowly almost lazily and perched on the edge of her bed. The mattress dipped, revealing something half hidden on the quilt. It was rope. Not decorative, not accidental. Thick, coiled, deliberate. The metallic smell in the air sharpened in my nose.

"You've noticed, haven't you?" She asked. I didn't answer. Her gaze drifted to my face, studying every flicker of fear. Her lips curved slightly – not into a smile, but into something smaller, tighter. Controlled.

"Carrie trusted me," she murmured. "They all trusted me."

The room felt smaller with every word. "I just wanted to see," she continued, almost thoughtfully. "What it looked like," Emily spat. The moment when someone realises that they can't leave. "When they understand you've decided."

"You're lying," I said, but it came out shaky and weak.

She tilted her head

"You think they ran away?" Emily said, with a smirk on her face

Outside, wind brushed against the window, a dry scraping sound like fingernails. She stood up again, moving closer. Not fast. Not threatening.

Certain.

"I was going to stop", she said in a stoic tone

"After tonight."

My stomach twisted. The rope on the bed shifted slightly as she brushed past it. I noticed then the faint reddish stain near one end – scrubbed but not

completely gone. The house creaked. You shouldn't have looked in the box", she said softly.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, sudden and violent in the quiet. The sound snapped through the room. Emily's eyes darted to the sound.

In that split second, something changed. No fear. Calculation.

I understood then what she had meant earlier, what she had whispered under her breath when she thought I wasn't listening. A trouble shared is a trouble halved. If I knew, I was part of it. If it helped – even by staying silent – the secret would be split between us, binding us together.

Two people carrying the weight. Two people who could never betray the other without destroying themselves.

Her hand moved slightly, almost unconsciously, towards the rope. Outside, gravel crunched. A voice yelled my name. Emily hadn't expected that. For the first time, her controlled flickered. Her pupils widened and for the first time, she realised she wasn't the only one watching.

Blue lights flashed through the window.

Turnbacknowland: The History

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The year is 2000. The millennium turned and yet Turnbacknowland seemed to still struggle with the general advancements of the other nations. Profits were decreasing every day. Once 224 or so years back, it was a stunning city for the time. Clean water, little crime, low poverty and 50 billion or so Yuh. The currency of Yuh was magical. Easy, even. But push forward around 196 years, that currency was dwindling. 20 billion Yuh, then around 1993 it was 15 billion Yuh. By 1998, only 10 billion Yuh circulated the nation. Ever since Rill Wadcliffe, in the year of 1850, entered the nation and married into the royal bloodline, they got greedy and splurged it on a Steam Deck. The Steam Deck was an advanced device but needed attention for its mechanics to be kept going. They did not pay attention to the device, and its potential use for the town was completely wasted. Coming back to the year 2000, the water was dirty, crime was skyrocketing and all due to the struggle of housing. People left to other, more advanced nations. Kilmey's industrial system thrived, making it an easy location to prosper and live comfortably. Thanks was an incredible commercial society, where it felt any business fit comfortably into many of their malls. Turnbacknowland had expensive housing, a dwindling population and no form of tourism other than some ran down hotels and some abandoned malls. But one man had an idea to get that Yuh back. That, was Christopher H. Radcliffe. The Radcliffe family was a rival to the Wadcliffe family for 96 years, with less control compared to the latter, but Christopher had enough. He made a risky decision. He traded 7 billion Yuh with Ruis, Rill Wadcliffe's tyrannical great great great great grandson. Once he got that money, Christopher spent it fixing the broken railways that were attempted to be built to further popularity in 1993, but failed significantly. This time, schedules, pathing and the trains themselves were designed perfectly to a tee. The process of income coming back in was slow at first, but after a year or so the trains had become a massive sprawling metro system. Turnbacknowland became a harbour for shopping, building, farming and tourism. 25 years later, Turnbacknowland has a population of 3 billion, and around 4 trillion Yuh circulating the population, all thanks to one brave character who reinvented a once ancient considered idea of a locomotive prioritised population.