One Half from the East, by Nadia Hashimi

Epigraph

where are you from I asked
she smiled in mockery and said
one half from the east
one half from the west
one half made of water and earth
one half made of heart and soul
one half staying at the shores and
one half nesting in a pearl

- From the poem 'You Are Drunk,' by Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, thirteenth century Persian poet.

One

Sleep, Obayda, and by morning all will be forgotten.

My mother's advice worked quite well for most troubles: an argument with my sister, a bad grade, a tear in my favourite dress. But six months ago, something so bad happened that even her wisdom could not see me through it. As hard as I try, the memory won't go away and that's because a reminder of that gruesome day lives in my home and calls me daughter.

I try to focus on my father's gentle face or his perfectly complete hands, but my eyes always drift down to where his leg used to be and everything comes back in one horrible rush.

On that terrible day at the very beginning of spring, my father had taken me to see the doctor. My parents were worried because I'd been coughing for two whole weeks and my throat was so sore I could hardly eat. The doctor looked in my throat and put a stethoscope to my chest. When he was done, he gave my dad a prescription for antibiotics. On our way home, my father decided we should stop by the pharmacy to pick up the medication.

I was so tired from all the walking. It was morning and my father still wanted to get to work in the afternoon. He found a plastic chair outside a clothing store and told me to wait for him there. I watched him walk the two blocks down the street and go into the pharmacy. When he came out, he had a small paper bag in his hand. He lifted it into the air and waved at me with a smile. That medicine was for me and it's the only reason we were in the market that day. I try not to think about that too much.

A second later, a white car pulled up in front of the pharmacy and blocked my view. I waited for my father to reappear.

After that, things get pretty fuzzy. I remember the loudest sound I've ever heard. I remember smoke and screaming and people running. I remember horns and fire and the sound of glass breaking. I remember putting my hands over my ears and falling to the ground.

I stayed that way for a long time—waiting for the sounds to stop.

I looked up and tried to find my father, but where I'd last seen him standing there was only the car. It was missing its hood and inside the car was one big ball of flames.

I'm sure I was crying. I don't know if I was screaming. My throat hurt even more the next day, so I probably had been.

Everyone was trying to get away from the white car. Everyone but me.

I ran right into the smoke, which I now know was a bad idea, but I wasn't really thinking straight. There were people on the ground. I looked only at their faces. I ignored everything else.

I grabbed my father from under his arms and tried to drag him away from the car, but he was too heavy. A couple of men helped me—one on either side. They started doing something to my father's leg. I was waiting for my father's eyes to open and didn't pay much attention to anything aside from his face. I just wanted him to talk to me.

It wasn't until we were at the hospital that I realized the men had used their jackets to wrap up the wound where half my father's leg had been blown off. Their brown jackets turned dark and wet in a way that made my stomach lurch.

It was the worst thing I've ever seen, and I'm glad I don't remember more of it.
My father stayed in the hospital for weeks. We didn't visit him much that spring because my mother said it was no place for children.

He came home with a stump wrapped in white gauze, half of his leg gone. He couldn't move around and needed help with everything. We lived on the third floor of our building, which meant that once he got into the apartment, it was really hard for him to leave because there was no elevator.

My father was angry and tired all the time, probably because he was in a lot of pain. He was at his worst when his pain medications wore off or when my mother was fixing up his bandages. My mother changed the dressings on his stump every two days. She would wipe the crust off the raw, fleshy part and rewrap it as gently as she could. It was gruesome to look at. I saw it a few times and, after that, I would make up some excuse to leave the room any time she undid the gauze strips.

Eventually the end turned into knobby skin and my father didn't seem to be as angry. Instead, he turned into a ghost.

I don't mean that he died, but that he could be in a room and people hardly knew he was there. If he talked, it was in a light whisper. Most of the time he stayed in the bedroom he shared with my mother.

When he got a little better, he would come out once every couple of days but avoided all conversation by saying his leg hurt. It gave him a good excuse to be alone and sleep, which is all he wanted to do. I suppose he was trying to forget, too.

Since my father got hurt, he couldn't work as a police officer anymore. I miss seeing my father smile and having him hold my hand when we walk through the market. I didn't realize how proud I was of him until he lost his uniform.

This fall, much more has changed than the colour of the leaves. We had to pack up and move to the village to be closer to my father's brothers so they could help us out. And living in an apartment at the top of three flights of stairs wasn't a great idea for a man with one leg.

We moved from Kabul to a village in the middle of nowhere, and that's where we live now, in a dry valley. Most of the red, orange, and gold leaves have turned brown under the feet of villagers. My father grew up here but moved to Kabul, where my mother's family lived, as a young man.

Life in Kabul was so much better. Our apartment had a balcony, which I really liked because I could see everything that was happening in the street or in the balconies below us. I loved leaning over the railing and watching drivers roll down their windows and yell at each other, their cars just inches apart.

My school in Kabul was in a really nice building. It was messed up so badly during the war that they had to rebuild a lot of it. We had blackboards and desks and a playground with swings.

The village is far from Kabul and very different.

There aren't as many people and there are nowhere near as many cars. Families live closer to each other and there are no apartment buildings. We live in a small home close to my uncles' houses. Our village home has a courtyard, but there's nothing exciting to see there unless you like watching clothes dry on a line.

My eldest uncle takes care of his younger siblings plus his own wife and children. That's the way things go. The oldest boy in the family is the one who's responsible for looking after everyone. He's sort of like the backup father. But my family doesn't have a son, which means we don't have a backup father.

Like our Kabul apartment, our village home has an "everything" room, which is basically our living room but more.

Our everything room in Kabul was painted yellow, but the one in our new home doesn't look like it's been painted at all. We moved all that we had in our old everything room into our new everything room.

Here in the village, we have a single television against the wall with a DVD player, which we use to watch pirated movies we bought from street vendors in Kabul. The only problem is, we can't do this very often since electricity is really unreliable. The earth floor is hidden by a few burgundy carpets woven with intricate geometric patterns.

Along the sides of the rooms are long, flat cushions we lie on with big pillows propped against the wall. My mother likes to rest her back on these pillows while she's sewing. When it's dinnertime, we lay a vinyl tablecloth on the ground and eat.

On weekends, which are Fridays and Saturdays, we welcome guests here (which means bringing them tea and dried fruits). When it's cold out, we use a low stove with hot coals at the base. We cover the stove with a thick blue-and-gray plaid comforter so we can sit around it and warm ourselves. We set bowls of walnuts nearby and snack on them.

In the afternoons, we spread out our notebooks from Kabul and review old homework assignments. My sisters and I read side by side, sometimes helping one another if we get stuck on a word. When my mother is in a good mood, we can get her to play cards with us. We play games called "five card" or, my favorite, "game of the thief." The loser has to do something awful, which usually means washing the dishes.

There are two other rooms—one room for my parents to sleep in and one room that I share with my sisters. We all sleep on thin

mattresses that rest on the floor. In the mornings, we fold our blankets and lay them on our beds. There's also a small room that opens to the back of the house, and that's where my mother does the cooking, letting the smell of sautéed onions escape into the open air.

It's a pretty simple house, not made of any concrete or metal like our apartment building in Kabul, but my mother keeps reminding us that things could be worse. I think she just tells us that so we won't keep talking about how much better things used to be.

My mother tries really hard. She's not happy about living in this village. It's far from her family and friends. She misses our home in Kabul. She misses the hair salon she would go to (even if she went only once a year) and the new sofa we'd just bought for our home. I think she misses the way my father used to be too. It's a lot harder to make her laugh now, even when I'm being really funny.

And I know my mother is not all that happy about being closer to my father's family. My aunts come and talk to her, but she either gives them tight, polite smiles or looks like she's trying not to roll her eyes. Everyone lives so close to us it takes only a few minutes to walk from house to house. And it's not like we can pretend we're not home. We're always home because there's nowhere to go.

I can see this stuff now because I'm ten years old and not a child anymore. My father's leg taught me a lot about my parents. I can see they're not always strong and they're not always right.

And because I'm ten years old and smart enough to notice, I see that lately my mother's been giving me a strange look—like she's got something bad to tell me. But I know she's going to do what parents do and pretend that it's actually something good.

Two

I hear a knock on the outside door, the one that separates our courtyard from the street. I open the door for my father's brother and his wife. This is their third time coming by this week. I don't mind my uncle. He's the oldest in the family and looks it. He's tall with a heavy belly and a round face. He smiles when he sees me or my sisters but doesn't talk to us a whole lot. On the other hand, I don't really like being around his wife, Khala Aziza, but she is my aunt, so I have to be nice. She's the kind of lady who starts every sentence with *Let me tell you what you should do*. That's her thing.

She loves to talk too. We moved to this village almost three weeks ago, in the beginning of fall. My sisters and I were looking forward to going to school, even though it was nearly the end of the school year, which starts in the spring and lets out for three months in the winter.

During the first week in our new home, Khala Aziza came over every day, until she was sure she had told my mother everything she needed to know about each and every person in our whole extended family.

“Where’s your father?” my uncle asks.

“In the bedroom,” I tell him. It’s the same answer I’ve given all week. My uncle walks into the house, says a quick hello to my mother, and makes a right. My aunt pulls me toward her and draws my face into her hands.

“How are you, dear? Are you doing well?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” I’m thrown off by her asking me. I’m the youngest in the family and don’t really have any gossip to share with her. Since she’s still holding my face, I try talking my way out of her hands. “Er, how . . . how are you?”

“Surviving, I suppose.” It works. She lets go of my face and shakes her head. I try to look around her and see if one of my sisters is nearby. I need a way out of this strange conversation, but there’s no one else in the courtyard—just the two of us.

“My mother is inside. Why don’t you come in?” I say in my most polite voice.

“I will, I will.” But she doesn’t move. She’s got her hands on my shoulders now, so I’m trapped.

“Obayda, you’re such a bright girl,” she says. “I think you could do so much for your family.”

I have no idea what she means by this.

“Uh, thanks . . .”

She leans in. I’m so close I could count her eyelashes if I wanted to.

“You can help your father,” she whispers. “You can make him proud.”

I smile awkwardly and wiggle my shoulders to loosen her grip. I can’t wait for Mother to enroll us in school. I’d much rather not be home when my aunt comes by. Mother’s promised we’ll start soon. She hates for us to miss any school and fall behind in our studies.

“Okay, Auntie, but I have to go . . . Meena is waiting for me,” I blurt out and run into the house. I race past my mother.

“Obayda, where are you going?” she calls after me as she pulls herself off the floor cushion.

“Khala Aziza is here,” I say without stopping.

I run into the bedroom I share with my sisters: Neela, Meena, and Alia.

Neela is sixteen years old, Meena is thirteen, and Alia is twelve. They’re all older than me, and I’ve spent my life either chasing after them or running away from them. That’s how it goes for the youngest in the house.

Meena is on her hands and knees, patting the carpet. I flop onto my sleeping cushion and pick up my stuffed panda.

“What are you doing, Meena?”

“I lost my earring,” she mutters.

“Again?”

Meena’s had these tiny gold hoops since she was a baby. I put the panda down and crawl onto the carpet to help her. The earring has a way of blending into the pattern of the rug.

“Auntie Aziza is here.”

“Yeah, I heard her voice.”

“She’s acting weird,” I tell Meena quietly.

“Look over there. I’ve already checked this part.” I scoot over a couple of feet. She’s let me wear her earrings a few times, and I love the way the hoops dance on my earlobes. That’s why I’m willing to help her look.

“Meena, did you hear what I said? She’s saying strange things.”

“Like what?”

“Like that I should make our father proud.”

“That’s not that strange, Obayda.” Meena jumps to her feet. “I found it!”

I watch her slip the hoop back into her ear.

“Meena . . .”

Meena shoots me a sly look.

“Come,” she says. “Let’s go see what Khala Aziza’s talking about.”

Meena takes my hand and leads me into the short hallway. We tiptoe past the room my parents sleep in. My uncle is sitting with his back to the doorway, talking to my father in a low voice. They don’t notice us creeping past them. We stop just outside the living room. Meena puts her finger up to her lips, reminding me to stay silent.

My aunt is not afraid that someone may be listening. We hear every word.

“We all see it. He won’t talk, not even to his brother. He won’t get out of bed. He’s barely eating. How is he supposed to get any better if you don’t do something?”

“I think he just needs some time . . .”

“He’s had lots of time, my dear. If you care about his health, you’ll do the right thing.”

“I just can’t do that to Obayda. It’s not right. I don’t want to change her. She’s such a . . . a girl. She loves her dresses and her dancing and her sisters. I don’t want to take all that away from her.”

My shoulders tense when I hear my name. Meena’s looking at me with her eyebrows raised.

“She’ll learn to love new things. And she can always go back to loving those things in a few years. It’s the perfect solution. It’s a simple change and doesn’t cost you any more than a couple of pairs of pants.”

“He loves his daughters. He always has. But I do remember when he used to talk about wanting a son.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying! You know what a difference it would make for him. You’ve seen my husband talk about our three sons, haven’t you? Oh, his face just glows when he gets started on them. A son can do for your husband what no doctor can.”

“You really think so? And wouldn’t it be hard on her? I mean, she’s a girl. I can’t just make her wake up as a boy.”

“It’s much easier than you think. And Obayda will love it. When I was a young girl, my neighbour was a *bacha posh*. She was my age, and we used to play together until her mother changed her into a boy. Then she ran with the boys and was too busy to have anything to do with me. She was the happiest girl in our neighbourhood, I promise. Do it now, before the girls start school. It’ll be easier on everyone.”

My eyes go wide. Is she suggesting what I think she’s suggesting?

“And for how long do we keep her that way?” My mother sounds unsure.

“It’s very simple, dear. Make Obayda into a boy. With her as a son, she will bring good luck to your home. You’ll see your husband cheer up. Then you plan for another baby in the family. Having a *bacha posh* at home brings boy energy into your household. The next baby that comes will be a boy. And once you have a real son, watch what happens. Your husband will come back to life. I’ve seen this work in the families around us. It’s not magic—it’s just how it is. And that’s when Obayda can go back to being a girl. Everyone wins.”

I hear my mother sigh. “How will I make her believe it? How will I make her sisters believe it?”

“Make her not just a son, but the most precious son that ever lived. Take away her chores. Don’t let her do anything that girls usually do. Tell her she’s a boy with every bite of food you feed her, with every word you speak to her, with every pass you give her on her boyish troublemaking.”

My mother is silent. She must be thinking this over.

“And there’s something else you’ll need to think about,” my aunt warns. “You must know that the brothers cannot go on supporting an entire family forever. A boy can work and earn money. A boy is good luck. A boy brings other boys into the family. Girls can’t do any of those things. You’re not in Kabul anymore, my dear. This town is run by that awful warlord Abdul Khaliq, and if you don’t throw yourself at his feet, it’s hard to scrape by. Time to think seriously about what you can do for your family. You don’t want to see your daughters go hungry, do you?”

“Of course not,” my mother whispers. It sounds like her voice is cracking.

Meena takes my hand into hers and squeezes. There is a pause. I can hear my aunt pouring herself a cup of tea.

“Make Obayda your son, and let him fix everything that’s wrong with your family.”

Three

“You’ll be able to do what no other girl can do.”

She gets my attention with that one.

“You’re lucky to have this chance. Girls would kill to take your place.”

This is what my mother tells me. She’s been chewing her lip for the past three weeks, thinking about my aunt’s suggestion to make me into a boy. She seems to have woken this morning with her mind made up. She knows I’m nervous and I can tell she is too. I don’t know how people will react to me. I’m not even sure how *I’ll* react to me.

“It won’t be forever.”

Maybe that’s where the problem is.

My mother wields a pair of scissors, blades that usually nip pieces of string or folds of paper or stems of mint—nothing as important as this. She looks unsure.

So am I.

For ten years I've been a girl. That's a pretty long time.

I like being a girl. I like doing girl things. My mother tells me that as a baby, I danced before I walked. I would crawl up to a table, pull myself to stand, and sway side to side to the rhythm of the music on my father's radio. I love when the song starts slow and then moves into tabla-drum rumbles, fingers beating against an animal skin stretched taut, and the song goes wild. It's fast and exciting, and I can't help but bounce to it.

By the time I was four, I had memorized a few dances from some Indian movies. I'd put on my fullest skirt and sneak one of my mother's head scarves from her dresser. My favourite was the purple-and-gold one my sisters had outgrown. With the ends of the scarf in my outstretched fingertips, I would pivot on one foot, my right shoulder dipping in and flaring back, in and back, in and back.

Neela, Meena, and Alia love to watch me dance, though they can't keep from telling me what I'm doing wrong.

"Don't forget your eyes!" my sisters would chide. "The eyes are so important. They tell the story of the song."

Meena heard an Indian movie star say so once in an interview. I would keep mine wide, my eyeballs rolling from corner to corner

and my lips curled in a coy smile. I learned how to flip my head just right so all my hair would fall to the side.

I couldn't mess up a single move. My sisters would call me on it if I did.

My wrists would twirl together in a wide arc over my head. I loved when my sisters would clap for me.

When I was around six years old and Alia was eight, she decided we should re-create the duet dance, one where a man and woman flirt with each other. The woman in the movie pretends not to be interested, but the guy chases after her because he loves her so much. I was given the part of the guy because Neela and Meena thought I'd be better at it.

It wasn't as much fun at first. I missed making my skirt billow out as I twirled, looking like a spinning top. But I could do it. Shoulders back, hips forward, head cocked to the side. Alia's steps were delicate and graceful like the song of a flute; mine were heavy and bold like fists thumping on a drum.

Leaning in, I would take playful steps toward my sister, grabbing the end of her head scarf just as the actor did in the movie. Hand over hand, I'd pull her closer to me, in a tug-of-war that no woman ever won.

I was the victor, the conqueror, the man.

But that was pretend, and what my mother is talking about now is very different.

She's talking about a real change, not something I'll stop doing at the end of a song.

“You won’t have to worry about tying your hair back. Remember last Friday, when you wanted to hang upside down from the branch of that old poplar tree in the park? How long have you been asking me to let you run with the boys when they chase each other through the streets? How many times have you asked to ride your cousin’s bicycle? Today is the day I will tell you yes. *Yes, yes, yes*.”

My mother is good. If she were one of those kids who sold sticks of stale gum on the street, all the foreigners would buy from her.

My sisters follow as my mother leads me to the patio behind our four-room house.

It’s a simple house with nothing on the walls but a prayer in calligraphy and a picture of our family. Our home is surrounded by a courtyard, which sounds fancy but just means there’s open space. There’s a pear tree in the front and a dried-out acacia tree in the back, where our laundry hangs on a clothesline. The courtyard is closed in with a clay wall that goes all the way around, making our house a box inside a box. There’s a gate in the wall the opens out into the street where all anyone can see is walls because all homes are made the way ours is. That’s what gives us all privacy and keeps neighbours from seeing into our home and us from seeing into theirs.

“Sit on this,” she says, pointing to a wooden crate.

“Why don’t you do this for them too?” I ask the questions my sisters won’t ask. That might be my thing. I’ve been wondering if I have a thing. It’s easier to spot other people’s things than it is to pick out my own.

“You’re only ten years old. They’re too old for this. A boy can’t have breasts.”

I think about this. Because my sisters are older, their bodies are made of curves and circles. Mine is different.

My shoulders and hips are as square as a piece of paper. Neela’s definitely got breasts, but Meena’s got nothing more than two small bumps that you can’t see because she’s wearing one of Neela’s dresses – one she hasn’t quite grown into yet. Alia is too pretty to be a boy. I don’t even argue with my mother about her.

I’m raw clay and they’re pottery.

“Then why didn’t you do it before? Neela was my age six years ago.”

“We were in Kabul. Your father was working and we were…we were just different then.”

I know Kabul was different.

In Kabul every family sent their girls to school. In the village, there are two kinds of families. There are the ones that send their daughters to school – and then they are the ones that don’t.

Some families think daughters are born to be wives and mothers and don’t need to bother with books or writing. I feel bad for these girls because they don’t get to do all the things schoolgirls do. They can count only how many cups of rice to soak and can’t tell the letter *kof* from the letter *gof*.

Other families are more like ours and think girls should be able to write their names, read books, and multiply. They still think girls

will grow up to be married, but, like my mom always says, a smart girl will be a smarter mother.

I remember what Khala Aziza said about this making my father better. She doesn't seem like the most reliable authority, but if there's even a chance she's right, I should do it. I owe Padar-*jan* that much.

"How long will it take for my hair to grow back?"

My mother doesn't answer.

"Mother, are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Obayda, why wouldn't I be sure?"

She's got her hand on her hip, but she answers my question with a question, which is a sure sign that she doesn't know what the answer is. I wish she would just say that.

My hair falls just past my shoulder blades now. My mother is stroking it, trying to even it out, bracing herself as she prepares to make the first cut. She takes her time. I wonder if she's changing her mind.

I like my long hair. I like having my mother brush it out and braid it—one thick, brave plait. When I turn my head it swings like a horse tail. I like my dresses. I don't tell my sisters, but I like that they've worn them before me because it means I know what I will look like even before I put them on. Alia and I are close enough that we share some of our clothes. That won't happen anymore. Alia can't wear pants.

My mother cuts. The scissors are dull and my hair is thick. It puts up a noble fight.

“You see how easy this is? Now I just need to make it even.”

My mother manages to get rid of the length, but she doesn’t quite know how to make it look like a boy’s head. She just keeps cutting from the ends until I have a shaggy cap of hair. I still look like a girl. My mother takes a step back to judge her work. She looks like she might cry.

Meena steps in and takes the scissors from my mother’s hands.

Snip, snip, snip. Clumps of hair fall at my feet.

Some people can look at something and know how to make it better. That’s Meena’s thing.

When Meena is done, I stand and check out my reflection in the window that looks into our kitchen. My ears are much bigger than I ever realized. I turn my head to the side.

There’s no horse tail to swing.

There are no knots for my mother to gently brush out.

My purple hair clips—the plastic ones that look like tiny bows—I can’t use at all.

My hands are on my head, pulling at nothing. What has she done to me?

“Meena, take her inside so she can change into the shirt and pants. I’m going to clean up here.”

My mother grabs a short broom and starts to sweep my hair from the courtyard.

“I don’t need Meena’s help. I can dress myself.” The words come out with more strength than I mean them to.

I wonder if something’s happening to me already.

I go inside and find the blue plastic bag. Inside are a pair of navy-blue cargo pants with four pockets, which are four more than I’m used to having, and a grey button-down shirt with a wolf patch sewn onto the left arm, just below my shoulder. The wolf looks fierce, his mouth open just enough to reveal two dramatic fangs. I try to copy his snarl. I put the pants on and feel like I’ve stepped into another world.

Meena comes into the room and stares at my backside.

“I can see your whole body,” she whispers.

I’m covered from head to toe, but not with the shapeless shift of a dress. These clothes outline my form so clearly that Meena could (but doesn’t) measure the distance from my shoulder to my hip or from my collarbone to my knee.

I look over my own shoulder, twisting my neck as far as it will go. I want to see my behind. I want to know what it looks like in pants. It’s hard not to feel naked. Aside from when I’m taking a bath or the day I was born, this is as naked as I’ve ever been.

“Why are you watching me, Meena? Girls shouldn’t be watching boys.”

It’s not something I actually mean. The words and the boldness are things I need to try on—like the cargo pants.

“Oh, that’s just great. Now we have to deal with your attitude, too. Don’t think I’m going to treat you any differently. You’re still Obayda to me, today and tomorrow and all the days after that.”

I step in front of her, close enough that she can see the flyaway hairs she missed cutting.

“What do you really think? Do I look like a boy? Am I really going to be able to do all those things Madar talked about?”

Meena shrugs. “Why not? You look like you’re one of the boys now.”

I run my hands over my head. There’s nothing to braid, brush, or tangle.

I’m not sure how I feel about this.

“But how will I know for sure that I can do all those things?”

Meena thinks for a second, tapping her finger on her rose lips. “Think of the things that only a boy could do and then go and do them. If everything goes well, then you’ll know for sure.”

She might be right.

In a stroke of brilliance, I come up with a plan to test this out.

I don’t have a brother, but I’ve seen how boys pee. I saw a little boy in the market once, standing by the edge of a ditch. His mother was trying to fan out her skirt and cover him from view, but I could still see.

He couldn’t have been more than five or six years old, so it was okay for me to steal a curious peek. I saw him lean his shoulders back and thrust his hips forward, and a yellow stream made a high arc before landing in the ditch.

I had a plastic gun once. A little orange squirter that I filled with water. If I squeezed it just right, I managed to hit my sister right in the ear, so I think my aim must be pretty good.

I walk into our outhouse, which is a small shack behind our home.

If I can do this, I’ll know I can be a boy.

Our outhouse is like any other outhouse. It’s got just enough room for one person to stand. There’s a hole in the middle with one brick on either side. Usually I crouch down with a foot on each brick and my pee can’t help but go into the hole right under me. Easy enough.

I stand with my back to the door. There’s just enough light filtering in through the small window on the wall to my right. I pull my new pants down and thrust my hips out, the way the little boy did. I try to peek down and see if this is going to work. Since it’s hard to see anything, I point my hips out a little farther. I hope I don’t overshoot the hole. My aim with the orange squirter was pretty good, but this is a little different.

I will do this. If I have to be a *bacha posh*, I will be the best *bacha posh* there ever was. My mother will think she's had a son all along.

I let go and a hot stream runs down my leg, soils my new four-pocketed cargo pants, and puddles in my sandals.