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I traced the letters in the dust with my finger, spelling out my name: *Zulaikha*. Squinting my eyes in this middle time between night and morning, I checked to make sure my brothers and sister were still sleeping. Then I began to write the alphabet. *Alif, be, pe, te*. . . . What was the next letter?

I wriggled my fingers in the cool brown powder before I swept out what I'd written. "I'm sorry, Madar-jan," I whispered, hoping that somehow her spirit could hear me. "I'm forgetting what you taught me."

My sister, Zeynab, still slept on her toshak next to mine. Her shiny, straight black hair draped over her smooth, round face and her pretty mouth. She licked her lips in her sleep. No matter how many times I looked at her, I was always fascinated by her beauty, wishing I could be even half as pretty as she was. I found my blue chador and pulled it up over my face. It needed a wash, smelling of salt and smoke.

Roosters crowed, and a few dogs barked. The small city of An Daral still slept, but not for much longer.

"Allahu Akbar" came the voice of the muezzin over the speaker a few streets away, calling the faithful to prayer. The day had begun.

Zeynab rubbed her eyes. "Ooooh, so early." She turned to