

## The girl at the market

It was August 2022, and a year had passed since the Taliban took over. After spending two weeks in Kabul for my brother's wedding party, we came back to Mazar city. My sister and I went shopping, unaware that during these two weeks, the Taliban had implemented new rules for women, making it mandatory for them to wear the black hijab and mask, and restricting women from walking in the city. My sister had a mask and chador, covering her whole body, due to a cold, but I had chosen to stick to the dress code that the Taliban had suggested before the new rules came in. While shopping, we were suddenly interrupted: "The Taliban are coming; be careful", someone shouted.

The shopkeeper gave me a strange look and said: "Leave my shop immediately and find a hiding place. I'll sell you what you need when they're gone. For now, leave this place!"

I was confused and asked: "Why should we leave your shop?"

At that moment, someone from behind asked: "Are you a foreigner who just arrived in the country?"

We turned around to see a short Taliban member accompanied by four angry armed men questioning me: "Are you Non-Muslim?"

I was confused and asked: "What's going on?"

The Talib angrily replied: "How can you be a Muslim? Why is your dress short, and why don't you have a mask? Shameless girl, come with me to the Talib's station..."

I was terrified and responded: "What's wrong with my dress? It's not revealing or attractive. I didn't know about wearing a mask; otherwise, I would have worn one!"

The Talib said: "Come with me to the Talib's station. Who is your father? Your father is a non-believer who allows his daughter to leave the house like this. Call your father immediately to come here; otherwise, both of you stay here until he arrives!"

Hundreds of people had gathered around us. My sister remained silent from frustration, while I, as usual, responded with a sense of humor amidst fear. I called my father and explained the situation. Suddenly, a Taliban member demanded my phone and said: "I'll handle this!"

He took the phone from me and removed the earphone, not knowing that the phone wasn't working without it. He gave the phone back to me, frustrated with his inability to use it. I said to him: "You need to use the earphone. Put the microphone closer to your mouth so your voice can be heard!"

At this point, the Taliban were embarrassed, as he didn't know how to use the earphone. I explained him how to use the phone correctly, and he reluctantly complied. Meanwhile, the crowd of onlookers burst into laughter at the Talib's foolishness.

The Talib spoke with my father and continued to insult him. My father, who is indifferent to religion, argued with him and said: "My daughter has stuck to the dress code suggested by Islam; you have no right to criticize her!"

The Talib persisted in insulting him and responded: "If you want your daughters safe, come here, so I can put you in the Talib's station. We're waiting for you. "

For the second time, I realized the foolishness of the Talib and said: "You gave the wrong address, tell him the right one, so my father can find us!"

With that said, the people around us burst out laughing, and each of the five Taliban were embarrassed and even angrier than before.

Suddenly, they noticed a couple. A very well-dressed and modern man with a veiled and a masked woman were passing by hand in hand, without noticing the scene. The short Talib immediately went up to them and gave the man a strong slap in his face, while everyone was watching. The laughter turned into astonishment. The man asked angrily: "Why did you do that? Do you know who I am?"

The man was getting his phone to call someone, but the Talib grabbed it and repeatedly gave him six slaps in his face and shouted: "Why are you so arrogant and well-dressed? Come with me to the Talib's station, I'll find out who you really are!"

The man's wife tearfully begged for his release, but the Taliban showed no mercy. They forced him into their car.

A Taliban member then approached me and said: "Get out of here, shameless girl, go home now; we're waiting for your father!" We immediately got into a taxi, keeping our distance from the Taliban. I called my father to prevent him from coming, and we safely returned home.

We were saddened and frightened when we arrived home, but my father comforted us, saying: "These cursed ones will soon be gone out of the country. Stick to the exaggerated hijab for a while."

But the disappearance of these cursed individuals was just wishful thinking. Now, three years into the Taliban's rule, conditions have changed for women. Over time universities, schools, workplaces, occasional recreational outings, sports salons, bathhouses... everything was closed for women.

Everything is still closed for us. When do we get our life back?