

# Nasreen's Secret School

A TRUE STORY FROM AFGHANISTAN



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A GLOBAL FUND FOR  
Children  
BOOK





**M**y granddaughter, Nasreen, lives with me in Herat,  
an ancient city in Afghanistan.  
Art and music and learning once flourished here.





Then the soldiers came and changed everything.  
The art and music and learning are gone.  
Dark clouds hang over the city.





Poor Nasreen sat at home all day,  
because girls are forbidden to attend school.  
The Taliban soldiers don't want girls to learn about the world,  
the way Nasreen's mama and I learned  
when we were girls.





One night, soldiers came to our house





and took my son away,  
with no explanation.





We waited many days and nights for his return.





Finally, Nasreen's frantic mama went searching for him, even though going out alone in the streets was forbidden for women and girls.





The full moon passed our window many times  
as Nasreen and I waited.





Nasreen never spoke a word.

She never smiled.

She just sat, waiting for her mama and papa to return.

I knew I had to do something.





I heard whispers about a school—  
a secret school for girls—  
behind a green gate in a nearby lane.  
I wanted Nasreen to attend this secret school.  
I wanted her to learn about the world, as I had.  
I wanted her to speak again.





So one day, Nasreen and I hurried down the lanes until we came to the green gate. Luckily, no soldier saw us.





I tapped lightly.  
The teacher opened the gate,  
and we quickly slipped inside.





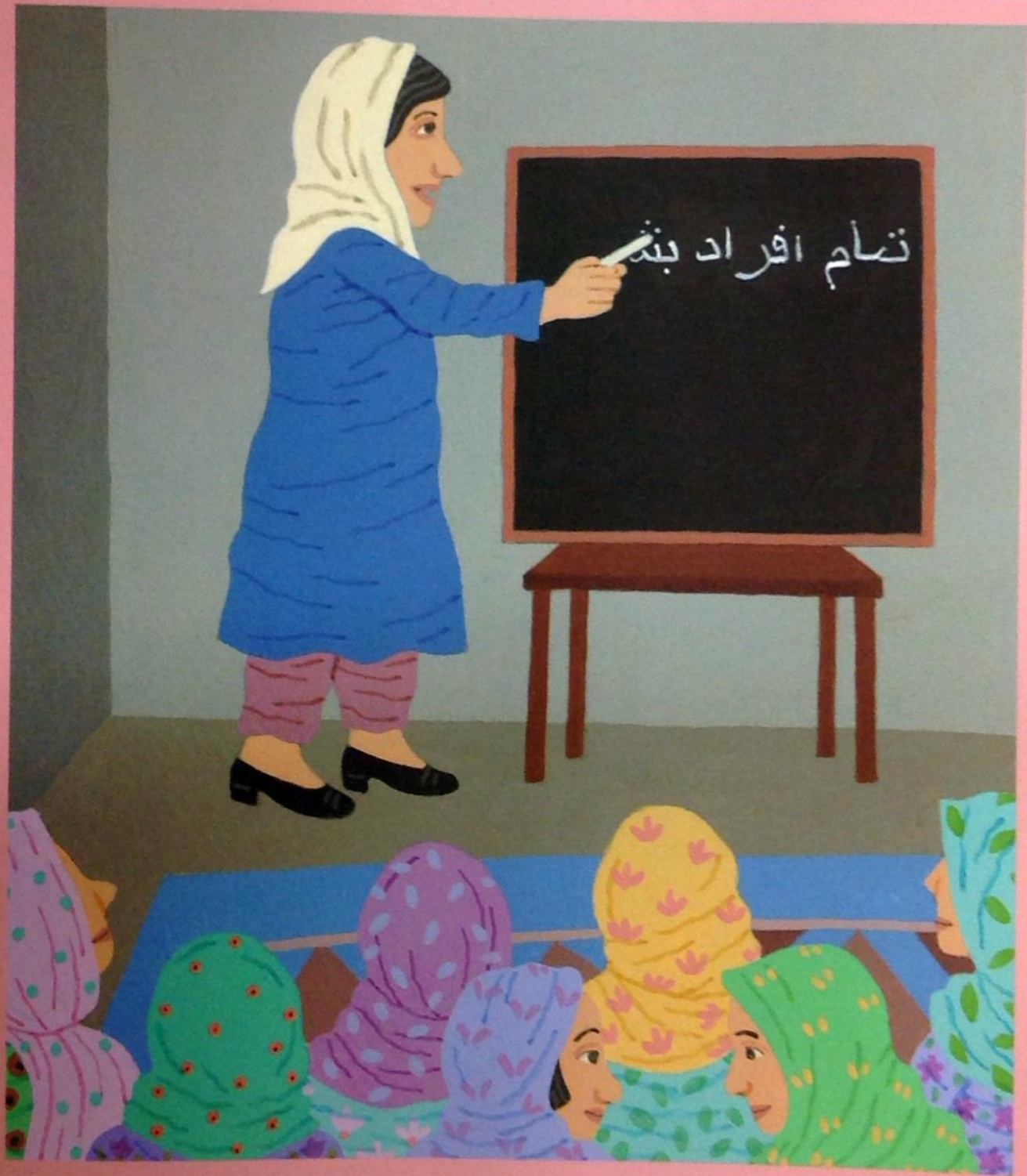
We crossed the courtyard to the school—  
one room in a private house,  
filled with girls.





Nasreen took a place at the back of the room.  
*Please Allah, open her eyes to the world,*  
I prayed as I left her there.





Nasreen didn't speak to the other girls.  
She didn't speak to the teacher.  
At home, she remained silent.





I was fearful that the soldiers would discover the school.  
But the girls were clever.  
They slipped in and out of school at different times,  
so as not to arouse suspicion.  
And when boys saw soldiers near the green gate,  
they distracted them.





I heard of a soldier who pounded on the gate,  
demanding to enter.





But all he found was a room filled with girls reading the Koran, which was allowed. The girls had hidden their schoolwork, outwitting the soldier.





One of the girls, Mina,  
sat next to Nasreen every day.  
But they never spoke to each other.  
While the girls were learning,  
Nasreen stayed inside herself.





When school closed for the long winter recess,  
Nasreen and I sat by the fire.

Relatives gave us what food and firewood  
they could spare.

We missed her mama and my son more than ever.  
Would we ever know what had happened?





The day Nasreen returned to school,  
Mina whispered in her ear.





And Nasreen answered back!





With those words,  
her first since her mama went searching,  
Nasreen opened her heart to Mina.





And she smiled for the first time  
since her papa was taken away.





At last, little by little, day by day, Nasreen learned to read, to write, to add and subtract.





Each night she showed me  
what she had discovered that day.





Windows opened for Nasreen  
in that little schoolroom.





She learned about the artists and writers  
and scholars and mystics who, long ago,





made Herat beautiful.





Nasreen no longer feels alone.  
The knowledge she holds inside  
will always be with her,  
like a good friend.





Now she can see blue sky  
beyond those dark clouds.





As for me, my mind is at ease.  
I still wait for my son and his wife.  
But the soldiers can never close the windows  
that have opened for my granddaughter.

Insha'Allah.