

# TORN

by Sahar Mustafah



FLYLEAF

Illustrated by Mark Para

We sat cross-legged on my bed, the globe wobbling between us on its plastic stand, and you turned it until a part of Asia and all of Australia faced me. You pressed your palm against Africa and teased a corner of South America until you peeled it off, taking most of the Atlantic Ocean with you. I held my breath, worried you were going to tear it away from the rest of the world—much too easily—and ball it up and throw it into my wastebasket.

But you let it hang there, and when I slowly spun the world I pushed my fingers through the hole as though, at nine years old, I might feel water and seaweed and a shoal of fish and maybe the rough dorsal ridges of a whale.

You were ten then, older and wiser, and said if I could actually reach in and touch the core of the earth my entire hand would instantly melt from red-hot magma. I pulled out my fingers and carefully lifted the thin paper and pressed it into its proper place, but it wouldn't stick.

Now you, twenty years old, stare at the globe on the wooden bureau. My mother's orchid plant sits in a ceramic bowl beside it, flowers newly opened. One of its branches almost touches the ceiling of my room.

We sit on my bed—you on the edge, naked and lean, your shoulders broad and taut from years of swim practice. Your mother used to drop you off at Elsner High School in her cotton nightdress, a grey wool coat and winter boots before the sun broke through the great pines of Bowling Ridge where we used to sit in that abandoned car, holding hands and not kissing, though I wanted to.

She wore the same coat to my mother's funeral a year ago and never took it off, even afterwards when she helped my aunts serve casserole and beer. She only unbuttoned it so she could stretch out her arms to pull paper plates off a high shelf in the pantry. When she hugged me close, her

sleeves chafed against my cheek and she smelled faintly of lemon dish soap.

On my bed your back is to me now, and I watch the ripples of muscles as you breathe. I tie my mother's robe tightly around my waist, waiting for you to turn around and look at me, but you won't.

Outside my window fallen maple leaves rustle and blow across the backyard. Dawn breaks and a goldfinch twitters on a roof shingle, then is silent. I listen for another moment and wonder if it has flown away. It rained all night and you pulled off your work boots, their soles covered in patches of brown and damp grass, before entering the kitchen.

As sunlight gathers in my room, you tell me I won't survive the desert, that girls like me didn't fight ragheads. I scoot closer to you and the mattress creaks.

"I won't be fighting," I tell you, "I'll be a medic and you won't change my mind." I trace the wing-bone in your shoulder.

*It's because of your mom, isn't it?* you say, and I hear something catch in your voice like the time we were kids and you couldn't save Smokey after a pick-up ran him down. We were playing tag when we heard a horrible yelp. You wouldn't let the driver—a man wearing a corduroy jacket and the sorriest look I'd ever seen on a grownup—help you carry Smokey into the house. The fur along his neck was matted down with blood so Smokey looked wet like he'd been running and barking in the rain as he loved to do. But he was dead and limp and you held him and wouldn't let go until your dad unfurled your arms from around Smokey's body and gently carried him and laid him in the flat bed of his truck.

"Yes," I tell you, "it's because of my mom."

I tuck strands of outgrown bangs behind my ears,

bangs I cut myself with my mother's sewing scissors the summer before our senior year. When we weren't together, I'd spend time leafing through *Vogue* and wanted so desperately to be like Kate Moss and those other runway models. They were the kind of girls you didn't like, but I still wanted to be beautiful and stylish, and I figured if I cut my hair I'd get a little closer.

My mother came home that day and found me in the bathroom, wisps of hair shorn like grass from a blade. They had fallen obviously into the sink. I had cut my hair with a vengeful hope.

She told me there were no more treatments left, that she had exhausted every possibility. Her face was so pale that the circles under her eyes grew darker as the days passed. I just want to be home with my family, she said. She used that word—family—though it was only the two of us, and Nana, who secretly called my father in Denver, but he never returned her messages.

That day she came home from the clinic, she stared down at the fragments of my hair—dark chestnut color like hers before clumps of it had begun to fall on the cool floor tiles of the stall when she showered. She pressed one hand against the glass door and crouched down to vomit into the drain. I'd sit on the toilet seat and watch the water stream down her face, mingling with her tears until I could no longer tell the difference. I'd patiently wait, clutching her white robe in my lap, getting ready to wrap her in it as soon as she stepped onto the sea-green bath rug.

I hear the goldfinch twitter again, closer, on my windowsill. Your back's still to me as you say, *You'll regret it. It's not what you think it is over there.*

"How would you know?" I respond, and then you dip

your shoulder away from my touch and finally turn to face me.

*I don't know, you mumble.*

The only hair on your chest gathers like sleek feathers in the hollow space between your pecs. I press two fingertips into your strawberry blond tuft. You never shaved it for swim meets and the other boys had teased you about it being the difference of a millisecond on your recorded time.

"I'm going," I say again, but this time it's a whisper while I look straight into your speckled blue eyes. They are lightest when you are naked, when they don't absorb the color of your favorite denim shirt, which lays wrinkled on the floor after I had gently pulled it off your shoulders last night. It's still damp from the rain.

Ten weeks later, you won't come to my graduation from basic training because you'd been drinking the night before at Fatty's Pub and you pass out in your brother's car at the mouth of Bowling Ridge. A morning jogger sees you and calls the state police. You miss the Amtrak to Georgia.

I'll be transferred to Fort Sam Houston for my MOS and a year later, you'll drive nearly two thousand miles to see me in a car you rented with money from your new job at your uncle's insurance agency. When you're a motel away, I'll text you that maybe it's not a good idea for you to visit after all. I don't tell you it's been lonelier than I could've ever imagined and I've been sleeping with another recruit who doesn't look at me when he's thrusting inside. But you've known it all along. I can still feel the flutter of your eyelashes against my temples when we rocked against each other's body.

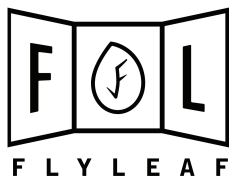
You show up anyway, wearing dark-wash jeans and a

disheveled sports coat I don't recognize. "Fancy," I say. You look smaller. Your shoulders seem to have shrunk beneath the weight of fabric and I wonder if your wingspan is still magnificent and fierce.

I stand before you, erect in fatigue pants and a desert-colored t-shirt. My hair's in a tight ponytail, no longer deep-conditioned or smelling like strawberries—just clean. I hope you won't tell me how proud my mother would have been.

Instead you smile and take my hand across the table at the Denny's and say, *I never did know how to let go.*

Neither have I.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SAHAR MUSTAFAH is a writer, editor, and teacher from Chicago. Her work has appeared in *Word Riot*, *Hair Trigger 35*, *Mizna*, *New Scriptor*, *Chicago Literati*, and *Dinarzad's Children: an Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Literature* (2004). Her short story "Shisha Love" won the 2012 Guild Literary Complex Fiction Award and was nominated for a 2013 Pushcart Prize; her short story "Perfect Genes" earned 3rd Place in the 2013 Gold Circle Awards from Columbia University Scholastic Press Association for collegiate magazines. She is the co-founder and editor of *Bird's Thumb*, a literary journal.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

MARK PARA lives in the Chicago suburbs with his wife, Helena, and his dog Dino. He draws inspiration from intricate craftsmanship and vintage charm. His taste is further influenced by his love of cars and modern architecture, as well as a great appreciation for the simplicity of nature. Among his many hobbies, Mark collects fine automatic timepieces and spends time restoring his antique Mercedes 2505. His other designs can be seen at [www.paradesigns.com](http://www.paradesigns.com).