**The Secret Kite**

by Deborah Ellis

When the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, not only did they make it illegal for women to work outside the house and girls to go to school, they also outlawed many of the things that help people to enjoy life, such as music, books, and flying kites. In the first of three short stories specially written for our Children Helping Children appeal, Deborah Ellis tells how one boy defied the killjoys. Illustration by David Rooney

"You're 10 years old," he said. "You are too old to have a kite. You should give it to me. I'm still young. I'm only five."

"I was seven years old when Mother and Father gave the kite to me," I said, more to myself than to Omar. It had been a birthday present. Before I got to fly it, the Taliban came to my city of Mazar-e-Sharif, and we had to hide the kite away.

"Can I have Mustafa's kite?" Omar asked my mother, who was sitting in the brightest spot of our dim, one-room house mending clothes.

"The kite belongs to Mustafa," she said. "He can do with it what he wishes."

"He can't fly it," Omar said.

"It's against the law to fly a kite," I said, as I had said a million times before. "The Taliban would arrest me."

Omar flicked a fly off his arm. "That's what I'd do to the Taliban," he said.

It was all very well for Omar to make brave-sounding statements about the Taliban. He stayed in the house all day with my mother. He never had to see them. Besides, he was too young at the time to remember when the Taliban soldiers first came. He doesn't remember the screams from the neighbours, the killings, the cries in the night, the terrible fear that our door would be the next one they came through.

I flipped the newspaper back down over the beautiful kite, unfolded the corner of the carpet over the newspapers, and pulled the sleeping mat over that. If the police came in, looking for my kite, they'd never find it.

"Give him the kite," my older brother, Ghulam, said. "You'll never fly it."

"One day I will."

"If you're going to dream," Ghulam said, "dream something sensible. Dream that our father has found work for today so we can eat tonight. Dream that my leg will grow back."

Ghulam lost his leg in a minefield. I can't argue with him when he talks about his missing leg, since I still have both of mine.

"I'm going to go to work now," I said to my mother.

"Be careful," she said.

"I'm always careful," I said back, then I left.

I work as a secret keeper. People hire me to keep watch while they do things they're not supposed to do, like listen to BBC radio broadcasts, or teach girls to read. Four women hire me now and then to stand guard while they paint their faces and their fingernails and read poetry they've written. People do their secret things inside their houses, and I stay outside, and keep watch.

Sometimes I worry that one day I'll have so many secrets inside of me that I will become heavy with them. They will weigh me down and make me old.

That afternoon I was guarding some men who were listening to music cassettes. The house they were in, grander than mine, had a high wall around it. To keep watch, I had to climb into the tree that was in the yard. From there, I could see in all directions.

If the music men were caught, they'd be arrested and taken to the soccer stadium. The Taliban did things to prisoners in the stadium that grown-ups spoke about in anguished whispers, and went silent about when I was around and listening.

Sitting and watching for hours can be boring unless the police come by to liven things up. Fortunately, I can watch and think at the same time, and what I thought about that day was my little brother.

Was he right? Was I getting too old for a kite? Maybe I should give it to him. He couldn't fly it either, but it would make him happy to own it.

But I couldn't do it. I couldn't give up my kite without once seeing it fly.

I sat in the tree, keeping watch and thinking. Maybe I could find a way to fly it. There must be a way!

I thought about it all afternoon.

At first I thought about taking the kite out in the middle of the night, and running back and forth in the street with it a few times, but I knew that wouldn't satisfy me. It would feel like I was ashamed of the kite, and ashamed of myself for flying it.

At the end of the afternoon, the music men came out of the house, their faces closed off as they tried to hold the music in their heads for as long as possible. I was paid in bread, and headed home.

I got the idea as I was passing the police station.

The highest point in my neighbourhood is the old radio tower on top of the police station. My kite would look wonderful flying from there.

The thought made me cold and tingly, and I knew that I would have to do it, and that I would have to do it that night. I couldn't give myself time to think about it. If I did, I wouldn't do it, and my kite would be hidden forever.

I had to wait a long time that night, but finally, everyone was asleep. Carefully, quietly, I took my kite out of its hiding place, and crept outside.

I moved like a shadow, soft and silent. If I could do this, I would be able to do anything - jump over mountains, fly with the birds, sit on the moon and laugh atthe sun.

My mind and heart were clear and calm, and I felt no fear. I walked past the sleeping guards, and climbed up the ladder that leaned against the police station wall. The tower on the roof got very narrow toward the top, but my feet did not slip.

I tied the kite string to the top of the tower. A breeze gently lifted the kite from my hand, and carried it out the length of the string. My kite was finally flying.

I returned to the police station early the next morning, with Omar. A crowd was there, looking up at my kite, and ignoring the angry yells from the police.

The Taliban struggled to get the kite down.

"The kite must be burned!" the police captain decreed.

The policeman at the top of the tower cut the kite string to bring my kite back to earth, but my kite had other plans. It slipped through the policeman's fingers, and kept flying.

It flew all around the police station. It shone green and gold in the morning sun.

"Shoot it down!" the captain ordered, and the Taliban fired their rifles and machine guns into the air to kill my kite. But my kite was smarter than their guns, and their bullets didn't hurt it.

My kite caught an upward breeze and flew off. I stood and watched it with Omar, who laughed as it flew away to a world where children can play and families can eat and kites don't have to hide under rugs.

I am like the kite. I am here. I am alive, and one day, all the thoughts and secrets that are hidden deep inside of me will burst out, and I will fly away with them to a better world.

Next week: 'Selling Naseer'

Deborah Ellis lives in Toronto, Canada. Her novel for nine to 13-year-olds about life under the Taliban, 'The Breadwinner', is published by Oxford University Press and she is working on a sequel. She is the author of 'Women of the Afghan War', published in the US by Praeger University Press, and of novels for teenagers published in Canada

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