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About 2,000 words

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## SNOW TROUT

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“Take this form to the Department of Social Services on Greenwich Street,” the man behind the desk said as he dabbed at a coffee stain on his tie. “Better make it quick. They close in an hour.”

That was nine minutes ago. Less than fifty remained.

Kaameh stood at the subway entrance, a subway card the NGO worker had given her clutched between numb fingers as ice wind tore at her hajib. New Yorkers streamed around her like the snow trout in Qargha that Nabil was always going on about. She glanced down the street at the tiny apartment her family had been lent as part of the refugee resettlement program. Her mother was there and her younger siblings. Fahima was probably tucked under a blanket watching English lessons on YouTube, while Nabil nagged their mother for rice. Kaameh’s chest

clenched. If she didn't get the form to the social services building before they closed for the weekend there would be no rice. There would be nothing for the next week. She stared at the darkened subway tunnel. Florescent beams protruded from its ceiling, bracketing it like teeth.

A taxi next to her blared and Kaameh jumped, heel slipping on a patch of ice. The railing saved her from falling down the stairs, but not her bag. It slipped from her shoulder, scattering her belongings down the stairwell.

*No!* To her horror, the social services form slipped from her bag and vanished between bustling feet. She raced after it, collecting her things as she went. Her bag, a blue hand-me-down from her sister with a sheep stitched into its side, was half-buried in a pile of muddy snow along the stairwell edge. She shook away the dirt and a lump that clogged her throat and kept moving. The phone that the NGO worker had dug out of the bottom of a drawer was found a few steps down with a crack zigzagging across its face. Kaameh hit the power button. Black and white lines stuttered across the screen. Broken. She sucked in a breath and shoved it into her pocket. *I don't have time for this.* A flash of something white stuck to the underside of a man's boot caught her eye, and she followed it, catching up as he shook her paperwork off into a pile of trash.

Kaameh knelt, breathing through her mouth to block out the rotting food and urine that emanated from the floor as she collected her form. It was torn in one corner and wrinkled, with a brown shoe print stamped across it, but the NGO worker's signature was still legible along the bottom next to a stamp that meant her family could receive financial assistance. She tucked it into the safety of her bag.

The incident had cost her precious time. She couldn't afford to waste anymore.

Kaameh pulled her hijab tightly around her face, thankful for the thin layer of protection it provided against the winter chill. She shuffled through the dense fog of New York City subway passengers, weaving through the crowd as she would've in the market near her house in Kabul. There she had always been wedged between her older sisters, chattering in Pashto as they eased through the crowd to familiar vendors. Now she was alone. Alone without a phone to tell her which way to go or even what the unfamiliar English words scrawled along the signs above meant.

The crowd in front of her shuffled through a system of mechanical gates, and she watched as people placed their subway cards on a screen that flared green before letting them pass. Kaameh's hand squeezed on—nothing. *The card.*

She ripped her bag open, rifling through its contents. No card.

The line shuffled forward.

She patted her pockets. No card.

The line shuffled forward.

Only a few people stood between her and the gate. Kaameh sucked in a breath, re-checking each pocket carefully. No card.

The person in front of her passed through the gate.

She yanked her bag open once more and felt around. Plastic brushed the back of her hand. *Thank Allah!*

Kaameh tore it from her bag and pressed it against the machine's screen.

It flashed red. She glared at the card in her hand and tried again. Again, it shone red. *Oh, come on!* Someone coughed behind her. A third try yielded the same result. *What the—*

A tap on her shoulder made her jump and she turned to find an oversized orange coat with a teenage boy stuffed into it. A matching orange hat sat atop his head like a traffic cone. *So much orange.* Traffic Cone cleared his throat, holding out his hand.

“Sorry, I...” she said, fighting to remember the few English phrases she knew. *I don’t know what I’m doing.*

The boy stared at her, fingers twitching.

“I don’t—” she said.

Traffic Cone snatched the card from her hand, flipped it over, and pressed it on the screen. Green.

Kaameh’s cheeks heated. “Thank you,” she said as he pushed the card back into her palm. She dashed through the gate.

The subway station branched off into two tunnels before her. “Greenwich,” the NGO worker had said. *Green...wich. Which direction is Greenwich? Maybe Traffic Cone knew.* Kaameh turned, searching. A flash of orange bobbed ahead, disappearing through the tunnel on the left. She sighed in frustration, glancing around for help. On the far side of the room against the wall, a large map caught her eye, and she maneuvered through the thickening crowd to reach it. Kaameh squinted at it, trying to see past a crack in the plastic encasement that obscured parts of the city sprawling out beneath it like a black widow’s web. Unfamiliar English dotted it. Without a way to translate, the map was useless.

Brown eyes roved back and forth between the tunnels. Both buzzed with people rushing confidently along well-traveled routes. Kaameh sucked in a breath. She had navigated Taliban checkpoints in Kabul. She could navigate American public transportation. She chose the tunnel

on the right. Clutching her sister's bag beneath her arm, she joined the crowd. *Just like snow trout.*

The tunnel led to an escalator that carried the crowd deeper underground to a subway platform. Part of the crowd rushed toward a train that sat with doors wide, already loading and unloading passengers like a yawning snow leopard. Other passengers lined the opposite side of the platform, waiting for a different train.

Kaameh glanced around. Surely there was someone who could tell her which train went to Greenwich. A stout woman in brown coveralls swept garbage on the other end of the platform.

"Excuse me," Kaameh said, tongue curving strangely over unfamiliar English.

The woman paused her sweeping and eyed her with boredom.

"Greenwich?" she asked, stumbling over the "ch".

The woman sighed and dropped her broom against a trashcan, muttering something. A train rumbled behind her, tires screaming. *What?* The train jarred to a stop and released a fresh crowd of bustling New Yorkers as a voice echoed through a speaker above. Kaameh strained toward the woman, willing herself to remember the English lessons Fahima had given.

"Sorry?" she said.

The woman's forehead pinched, and she repeated the last bit with annoyance. The words slurred together, lost beneath her grumbling and the percussive banging coming from a man who drummed on a collection of overturned buckets in the corner. "Greenwich," was all Kaameh understood. And it was different from how the man at the NGO office had said it. *An accent?* The woman jabbed her finger in the direction of the platform Kaameh had come from. Two trains lined it on either side. *Which one?* But the woman was already marching away.

Kaameh's mother's hopeful smile, dropping beneath the weight of another loss flashed through Kaameh's mind. They had lost their home, Kaameh's father was in Taliban hands, and two of her sisters remained trapped in Kabul. They could not take another loss.

"Wait!" she said in Pashto, grabbing the woman's sleeve. "Please, help me. Please—"

Eyes turned on her, wide with surprise and fury. The woman tore her arm away, cursing.

"Please," she continued, pushing through the terror that clogged her throat, "I'm trying to find the Social Security Office." She tugged the stained paperwork from her bag and pointed at the words that read the location.

The woman yelled past Kaameh.

"Please, listen."

A man in a uniform appeared beside them.

"Oh good," Kaameh said, continuing in English. "Thank you—"

A raised palm silenced Kaameh, and she stopped, trying to understand what was being said. The woman gestured toward her while the uniformed man listened, eyebrows raising. Finally, the man turned to her. He spoke in a tone that reminded Kaameh of her father when he was displeased.

"I don't speak English," she said. She gestured to the paperwork, pointing to the top. "Greenwich, please."

The man's brows knit together. He waved the woman away and gestured for Kaameh to follow him, pointing up toward the escalator she had come down earlier.

"No. Greenwich," she said, shaking.

The man shook his head and gestured in a way that brooked no argument. Kaameh fought back tears as she followed him up the stairwell. They passed a clock on the wall as they moved

through the dense flow of traffic. Twenty-four minutes remained until the Department of Social Services closed for the weekend. Nabil and Fahima—her mother—would go hungry.

Kaameh's chest squeezed.

"You need help getting somewhere?"

Kaameh's head shot up at the familiar lilt of Dari. A Pakistani man in uniform stood in front of her. The other man strode away.

"I'm trying to get to the Department of Social Services on Greenwich," said Kaameh. "I need to get there before they close."

The man's eyebrows rose. "They might already be closing now."

"Please."

"Alright." The man nodded. "This tunnel will take you to the right platform," he said, pointing to the one that Traffic Cone had disappeared through earlier. "You want the train heading east—the one on the left."

"Thank you," she said.

Kaameh sprinted down the passageway, ignoring grunts of annoyance as she squeezed between people. She bypassed the crowded escalator and charged down the stairwell. When she hit the ground, she saw the train on the left, crammed full and loading its last passenger. She darted in, packing against other people as the snow leopard's mouth closed.

When the train arrived at Greenwich Street, Kaameh blew through the subway terminal, pausing just long enough to read a clock on the wall. Seven minutes remained. She ran up the closest flight of stairs.

A rush of cold air and daylight assaulted her senses. She coughed, tears stinging the corners of her eyes as she tried to orient herself. Grey skyrisers loomed above her, each nearly

identical to the next, like a squadron of glass giants. *Which one is it?* She trekked between crowds of people buzzing in and out of a large shopping mall and past some sort of mailing hub, to an unmarked door with numbers that matched the ones listed on the form. *Finally.*

As she reached for the door handle, it swung open. A sturdy woman in a security uniform and a hajib stood on the other side.

“Oh, are you looking for the Social Security Office?” the woman asked.

“Yes. Please, I know you’re closing but I really need to get this in today.” Kaameh tugged the stained form from her bag and offered it to the woman.

The woman’s eyes softened. “The third door is Yusef’s office. He speaks Dari.” She nodded toward a hallway to the right of a large wooden desk. “You’re lucky. I was just about to lock the door.”

“Thank you,” Kaameh said and stepped inside.

End