Looking for Paradise

 This is a nightmare.
 Working in the lignite mines every day from eight a.m. to eight p.m., dressed as a boy, packed with a hundred men, sweaty, and hungry. I couldn't rest, I could barely breathe, my arms were on fire. Yet, I continued to work all day, just to help my family survive. Digging was tough, exhausting work, but I kept going, each time going deeper and deeper. How can a twelve-year-old girl like me keep up with the work that grown men do? I kept asking myself, trying to understand why I had to go through this living hell. I always wondered, *how can people survive after going to hell and back?* I had only been in the mines for a couple of hours and I could feel the sanity leaving me. I can still remember how this nightmare begun.
 It was a hot day in Daraa, Syria, when my grandmother Akin developed a severe case of Rheumatoid arthritis, she couldn’t move.
   My mother, Naua, said in a light tone, “Akin, come, you will stay with us. We will take care of you.”

 Adeena and Kahli, my five-year-old twin sisters sang merrily, “Grammy is gonna stay! She can stay in our room!”
 Mom just stifled a laugh and my dad, Mohammed, took Grandma into our cement house. How many people can fit in this place? Mom, Dad, Adeena, Kahli, my two four-year-old brothers, Salhi and Moham, and now Grandma? Gosh, thank God, Dad has a job that gives him enough money to raise us.
 “Grams, you can stay in my room, after all it is less crowded,” I told her.
 “Mahani, that is a great idea!” My dad exclaimed.
I love Grandma. It’s wonderful that we can take care of her. I will read to her the story of the first mermaid, Atargatis, and other Syrian stories. I can sing to her. I will never abandon her. These joyous thoughts filled my once foolish mind.
 My family was merry, all united, yet the next day we had to go to Bosra Elementary School.
 “Why do I have to go to? My brother and sisters are leaving at twelve p.m. I have to stay until three!” Moham whined and with innocent eyes stared at Father, hoping he would allow him to stay.
 “It wasn’t my fault that you punched a boy at school yesterday, is it?” Mohammed divulged harshly. “Now go! You are gonna be late!”
 Before I left, Grams gave me a charm necklace with a metal star.

 “Keep it,” she said in a barely audible whisper, “it’ll give you hope.”
 When I came home after school, I found my dad and mom talking in whispers. Huh, isn’t dad supposed to be at the Arab International University teaching about accounting?
 I asked my mom, “Mother, what is going on?”
 “Sweetie, we have bad news,” she replied fiddling with her colorful and golden embroidered dress, “the university in which your dad worked has been shut down.”
 “What!” I yelled in shock. “Why?”
 “Mahani, you probably don’t know about the Civil War that started a few years back, but it is coming near, and we need to leave soon” mumbled Dad.
 “But what about Grandma? We can’t leave her behind,” I protested, these thoughts shook me from the inside out, leaving me blank, staring at Father. Confusion was building inside me, my head throbbed, just the thought hurt.
 “It’s our only choice Mahan!” Mother said.
 “Then I am not going,” I bellowed, storming up to my bedroom in which I saw Grams sleeping peacefully in her woolen nightgown. I slammed the door shut and slumped against the door. The tears started to come and they never stopped. How can this happen? I am happy here. My brothers and sisters are happy. Akin is happy. Everyone is happy. How can mom and dad simply decide? I am not letting them leave Daraa and Grams. It is our home. We are staying. As I wept, the time flew as plenty of thoughts crowded my mind. All these thoughts left as I heard the ongoing conversation in the living room.
 “Maua, where is Moham?” my father asked.
 “I don’t know. Let me ask Kahli,” Mom replied. “Kahli, have you seen Moham?” she said loud enough for her voice to echo through the thin walls.
 “No mommy,” Kahli admitted in a sweet tone.
 “He hasn’t entered the house. We need to go look for him. Now!” my dad insisted, anxious and filled with panic.
 I heard fast and heavy footsteps and a door slamming shut. I started freaking out. Where was Moham? Why wasn’t he home? What could have happened? I decided to look for him as well.
 While I ran down the stairs, I yelled, “Kahli, Salhi and Adeena, I’m leaving. Take care of Grandma!” I then barged through the door and ran all the way to school, the sun was just setting.

 The pebbles and tiny rocks were piercing my feet as I ran, but I didn’t care, I had to find my brother. Before arriving, I saw a pile of small and fragile bodies, stacked in a pile. I froze and my face turned bitter when I saw two tall shadows crouched over a small figure. I walked closer and gave a small gasp. It was mom and dad.

 I took a step closer and when I saw the face of the figure, my eyes bulged out, and my face turned pale, I shrieked, “Ahh, it’s Moham!” I then fell to the cement road and bawled my eyes out, tears running down my freckled face. My mother was wailing on my father's lap while he tried to comfort her. How can this be happening? Who did this?
 Apparently, my father was able to read my mind and said in a barely audible
whisper, “The war, it’s here.”
 We need to leave. This place isn’t safe. What about Grandma? We can’t leave her! My parents stared at me and I replied bitterly, “We leave, now, and we leave Grandma.” We ran home, grabbed my siblings, left Grandma, and begun our journey, it hurt but the privilege of choice was not available.
 We walked for five days straight, our stomachs on fire, our head spinning, no food, and some water. As we kept walking, Sahli kept falling since his fragile legs couldn’t hold him. The days seemed eternal, we were weak, we could barely move. My dad was carrying Salhi, my mom took Kahli, and I carried Adeena in my arms. Our stomachs rumbled and my vision became blurry. After what seemed a year, Father spotted a blue figure and a few vegetation in the distance.
 He yelled in excitement, “Water! We have water and food!”
 We all picked up our pace and arrived to Lake Assad. We woke up the youngsters and we all drank as much water as we could and ate a few figs my dad had heard about. We stuffed plenty in all our pockets and continued our journey to safety.
 Weeks went by when we finally arrived to Manisa, Turkey.
 “We have escaped war. We have found paradise,” Father blurted, “at last!”
After a long walk, we decided to settle down on an abandoned wooden house than could barely stand. With every step we took, the floorboards creaked.

 The house only had three minuscule rooms. The disused wooden furniture was rotten; stained with lichen while the curtains hung limp and moth-eaten. Two of the rooms had one wooden chair and a thin maroon blanket with several holes. One of the rooms was for Mom, Dad and Salhi, the other for Kahli, Adeena, and me. The other room had a miniature storage area, filled with cobwebs and spiders. We seeked for food each day. Not that it worked much.

 My face was gaunt and my bones were visible in my olive-colored skin. My hair was falling from my bony scalp and I only remained with a few and short strands of brown hair. My family wasn’t better. We were starving. I had a hollow pain in my chest, a ringing in my head, I could barely move. How are we going to survive? We haven’t eaten in a week. My parents don’t have a job. Our lives are ruined!
 My parents were in their room and I could hear faint whispers, “Naua, I found a job. It’s in the mines.”
 “Honey, it’s dangerous in there,” mother objected, “you can’t go!”
 “I have to. We have no choice!” my dad demanded in a harsh tone.
 I couldn’t take it anymore, so I ran to my room and burst into tears. Over the next few weeks, my father went to work in the mines. He worked twelve hours each day and he still couldn’t make enough money to give us sufficient food. While father worked, I spent my days locked in a room and when father arrived we ate a piece of chicken each. After that, we all went running to our rooms, throwing up.

 I can’t live like this anymore! My family is going to die! I need to help somehow! My mother is always home taking care of my siblings. I need to find a job. I know! I will work in the lignite mines with father!  But only boys can work there. I simply need to dress up like a boy and leave the house after my dad.
 “Bye kiddos,” father yelled before leaving the house, “bye Naua!”
 “Bye dad,” we all replied.
 Adeena, Salhi, and Kahli were running up the stairs, I was just entering my room, when thud! I turned around quickly and saw Adeena crying.
 “Mommy, I fell! My knee hurts!” Adeena whimpered.
 My mother ran to help her. This is the time. When Mother took Adeena to the nearest room, I slowly went down the stairs, opened the door, hoping it wouldn’t creak, and left. I ran down the streets with a pair of pants from Salhi, that were too small, and a shirt from Father.
 This is how I ended up in the mines. In this hell that I now call work. I kept digging and digging. Grabbing the coal and tossing it into the cart. All day long. No water and no food. This is way too hard. I cannot do this anymore. Hope. Grams gave me hope, I will do this for her. It’s for my family! I will make them proud. I will bring them food. I can do it. I know I can. I decided to take a break, so I sat down and wiped the sweat with the back of my hand.
 “Moham, get up and keep working!” Sizra, my boss, yelled.
 Who is Moham? It was my brother’s name, but he can’t be here. He is dead. Oh right, that is me! I can’t work with a girl’s name like Mahani. I am Moham.
 “Yes sir,” I replied while getting up and grabbing a pickaxe. Does this work ever stop?
 After the twelve most painful hours of my life, I asked Sizra for my money and left to the marketplace. The place was filled with people, all yelling and and tripping over each other trying to pay faster, before it would seem so stupid, but with hunger in every piece of me I could understand them. I tried to get through the multitude but only ended up being thrown to the floor multiple times.
 “Let me through!” I growled, hoping that someone would notice. It didn’t work, but after some minutes, the path was clear and I was able to buy two pieces of chicken. I ran all the way home and laid the food on the table.
 “Mahani, where did you get that?” my mom questioned.
 “I was taking a walk and I found them in the street, wrapped in plastic” I lied.

 “We have food for my tummy!” Salhi exclaimed and my sisters giggled.
 “Mahani, with the rice I bought after work, we can finally have a better dinner!” Dad pointed out.

 It may have been a different place, different feeling, and a different situation, but we were happy and that's all that mattered.
I have hope. Grandma gave this to me for a reason. If I keep working and helping, everything will be better. My dreams will come true. My family will find a home, we will be happy and satisfied. We will find paradise.