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Tahmina Afeki

Not one of us looked back

Original title: *Geen van ons keek om*

NOVEL

Friendship is stronger than war.

Autobiographical novel about friendship
and loss in Afghanistan.

About the author

Tahmina Akefi (1983) is a journalist. From 2007 to 2011 she was on the editorial staff of the Dutch Broadcasting Authority's news programmes (*NOS Journaal*). Akefi was born in Kabul and lived there until she was 12. Last year she saw her childhood friend again after seventeen years. In March 2009, she went back to Kabul for the first time in fourteen years.



About the book

Two young girls, Tiba and Setara, live next door to each other in Kabul and are bosom friends. Their families are entirely different. Setara's has the structure and vitality of an ants' nest. In Tiba's family, order and peace prevail. Her father is a colonel in the Afghan army and has a library containing some forbidden books. The dreams and future plans of these little girls come to an abrupt end when war suddenly breaks out.

Tahmina Akefi, *Geen van ons keek om*
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The press about *Not one of us looked back*:

‘A beautiful novel.’ – *Marie Claire*

Excerpt from the book

I have known Setara ever since I can remember. We lived next door to each other and did everything together. Setara was almost exactly a year older and we could not be more different. Nevertheless, other children referred to us as twins. Our families had known each other since long before Setara was born. We lived in Khairkhana, in the north of Kabul. Our house and Setara's, both with two storeys, were separated by a long wall. That is where Setara and I saw each other every evening after our meal. Setara would place the ladder against the wall and climb it. We had asked our families to remove the wall completely or to make an opening. They had promised to discuss it. The wall went through the passageway and extended into the garden, which had an apple tree and a mulberry tree. My father had planted all sorts of flowers in the middle of the garden, mainly roses, with the colours light and dark pink, yellow and red. In the evening, when I stood talking to Setara by the wall, I could often smell the flowers, the scent suddenly rising up and the wind blowing it in our direction. The memories of that garden are inextricably bound up with an image of my father, always sitting on that white stool, completely lost in the world of a book. Sometimes my mother would sit next to him while he read to her. Then she would lean back, close her eyes and listen to my father's voice. He liked French writers and also Afghan and Persian poets. Perhaps he still likes them, but he does not read any more. Not even poetry.

Setara's garden was more of a playground for her cousins. There was a swing, a small slide and three little cars in which her boy cousins rode round and round and pretended they were adult men on their way to work.

Opposite the play area, there was a large grapevine with a row of light blue chairs under it. Setara and I could be found there every afternoon. Except if it snowed; then the chairs were stored away in the cellar, which was under the ground and could be entered from the garden. Setara's house had nine rooms, just like ours. Their living room was downstairs; ours was upstairs. We had two bathrooms, one upstairs and one, not so nice, downstairs. Our house also had two kitchens; one was in the garden and the other, in which meals were only cooked in the winter, was on the first floor. We did not have an underground cellar and neither did we have a *pas khana*; a hidden space in a room. There was an opening in the wall where a door would fit, and behind that a dark little room. Setara hid there often because she knew I did not dare enter.

When Setara was in our house, we sometimes locked ourselves in the study to read books we were not allowed to read because we were still too young. Perhaps 'reading' is not the right word, for we would leaf through the books and, now and again, Setara would read a few lines aloud, close the book, put it back in the bookcase. Then we left the room just as noiselessly as we had entered. One of the books was *Zanbaqe dara* by a French writer whose name I later learned to pronounce.

Sometimes, when it was quiet in Setara's house, we went upstairs. In the room opposite the stairs there was a video player and, in the cupboard underneath, all sorts of Indian films we were not allowed to watch. We did not have a video player because my father did not think it necessary.