

Kamil's First Snow  
Mike Nelson

Some kids stared but most wouldn't look at Kamil when he walked through the door of his new high school. A refugee program that relocated war survivors placed Kamil and his mother there a month earlier. An anonymous sponsor paid to get them to America. Kamil's home in Herat was destroyed by a bomb. His father was in the house at the time. Nobody knows who fired it and nobody ever will. As Kamil stood in the high school lobby with unfamiliar faces swirling around him, he felt as alone and as afraid as when he first heard that his father died.

That morning, his mother gave him a piece of paper with a list of numbers on it. They were the room numbers that he was to go to throughout the day. The first number was 101. Kamil picked a hallway and started walking. The numbers on all the doors started with 5. He knew he was in the wrong area. Kamil returned to the lobby. The bell rang and the remaining kids disappeared behind closing doors.

Kamil wasn't sure where to go. He then heard footsteps. Out of one of the hallways came a man dressed in green pushing a broom. Kamil's heart jumped when he saw the man's face. The man had dark skin and a thick mustache, like his father. The school and America seemed to vanish and Kamil was home again in Afghanistan.

The man with the broom stopped and smiled broadly. "You must be Kamil," the man said in accented English. "They told me a boy from Afghanistan was starting today."

Kamil didn't understand everything the man said. He smiled and held up his piece of paper. The man with the broom took the paper from Kamil to read it.

"Let's see where you're going. Room 101, Mrs. Patrick's class. She's very nice. You'll like her."

The man gave the paper back to Kamil. He studied the man's face and couldn't believe he was looking at someone from his own country.

"C'mon, I'll take you to Mrs. Patrick's class myself. But first, let me tell you something that'll help you the rest of the day."

Kamil followed the man with the broom to the center of the lobby. The lobby was shaped like a big semicircle with five halls radiating like spokes. The man with the broom pointed down the hall on the far left. "All the rooms that start with 1 are down there." The man moved his arm to the next hall. "All the rooms that start with 2 are down there." He moved his arm to the hall straight in front of them. Kamil smiled. "3," he almost shouted, his loneliness and fear lifting a little. "Yes," laughed the man with the broom, sharing Kamil's excitement. The man remembered being the new person a few years ago and understood. Kamil pointed to the next hall. "4," he said with certainty. Then he moved

his arm to the last hall on the right. “And 5.” The man patted Kamil’s shoulder and said, “You got it, son.” Kamil smiled at the man with the broom, a friend in this new place.

“Now let’s go. You’re really late.” They walked quickly to the first door in the hallway on their left. “101,” the man said. Kamil looked at the door. Fear returned to his heart. “By the way, my name is Muhammad. But everybody around here calls me Hammy.” Why “Hammy?” thought Kamil. Muhammad shrugged. “Go ahead, you’ll be alright.” “Thank you,” Kamil said. And he opened the door.

All talking stopped and all faces turned to look at the stranger. Mrs. Patrick’s voice broke the tension. “You must be Kamil. Welcome.”

Mrs. Patrick had long red hair and lots of freckles.

“Everyone, this is Kamil. This is Kamil’s first day at our school. We should do whatever we can to make Kamil feel comfortable.” No one said anything.

Mrs. Patrick led Kamil to an empty desk in the front row and he sat down. Kamil looked to his left. The boy next to him was glaring. Kamil immediately looked forward. How could someone he never met be so angry at him? Kamil turned to his right. There was a girl with a pale face and freckles like Mrs. Patrick, but she had short black hair and was dressed plainly in a green tee shirt and jeans. She turned and looked at Kamil. Their eyes met and the girl gave him a shy smile. He was ashamed and dropped his eyes to his desk.

Mrs. Patrick started talking. He got out his notebook. His mother told him to write down the words he understood and she would help him fill in the gaps when he got home. Of course, he would write them the way they sound in Dari, his native language, because he couldn’t write in English yet.

Remembering what Muhammed told him he found the rest of his classes easily. He noticed one thing that is the same in America as in Afghanistan: whenever girls are giggling, it feels like they’re giggling at you. Kamil’s accent was the highlight of every conversation. Many kids introduced themselves and asked him questions. They quickly learned how to ask, “What?” in Dari.

Kamil’s mom told him to wait for a taxi at the end of the day. He stood in front of the high school and watched the other students get into busses or their parents’ cars. He started to wonder if his mother got the time for the end of school wrong. Once again he found himself alone.

A departing teacher asked Kamil if he had a ride home. Kamil said something that had the words “yes,” “mother,” and “taxi” in it. The teacher smiled and said, “Okay,” and added that Kamil could wait inside if he wanted. Kamil turned toward the empty driveway. He heard the lobby door open. He felt he was being watched. He turned and saw the boy from his first class glaring at him again. As the boy passed Kamil, he slowed down and moved in close, “You better watch yourself, Kammy, ’cause I’m watchin’

you.” Kamil looked into the boy’s eyes. What he saw reminded him of the look in his father eyes when he talked about Americans in Afghanistan. It was a dangerous mix of anger and fear. A rusty blue car spewing grey smoke pulled into the driveway. The boy got into the noisy car and left. Kamil’s taxi arrived soon afterwards. He handed the driver a second piece of paper that his mother had given him and he was driven home.

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Kamil lived in a part of town with rows of five-story brick buildings along the river. He was told the buildings were called mills, where they once made miles and miles of cloth. The superintendent of his building showed him some of the old looms stored in the basement. They reminded him of the looms his mother and grandmother used, to make cloth for the family back in Afghanistan. The superintendent was an old native American named Black Feather, but everybody called him Blacky. He told Kamil the mill buildings used to be filled with hundreds of these machines. He said that men, women, and even children his age used to work day and night weaving cloth that was shipped all over the country and the world. Black Feather also told Kamil that some of his ancestors worked in the mills. “It was either go to the reservations and starve or go to the factories and work.” The mills were converted into inexpensive apartments, where people from all over the world come to live when they arrive in America.

The river behind Kamil’s building was wide. It reminded him of the Hari-rud, a river that ran south from Herat. His father took him there often to talk about life and watch the birds. Now, every evening, Kamil sat by the river remembering his father. As the scenery around him faded, Kamil imagined he was sitting by the Hari-rud with his father, silently watching the river disappear into the night.

Kamil’s English improved every day, although his accent remained a constant source of amusement at school. He soon got used to his nickname, Kammy. Some of the teachers started calling him Kammy as well. It was easier to answer to it. But he suspected his father would have been upset if he heard people call him Kammy.

Kamil was assigned a locker. It was nice not to have to lug his heavy book bag around anymore, and the locker gave Kamil a deeper sense of belonging. It was something that was his and nobody else’s. “A place to hang your hat,” Muhammed said, using the curious American expression. Muhammed told Kamil that he had a locker as well, and that he had pictures of Afghanistan and the Ka’aba at Mecca taped inside the door. Kamil liked that idea. He hung an aerial picture of Herat torn from a magazine, and the only picture he owned of his father inside his locker. Every time he unlocked it, he would touch the picture of Heart, and touch the picture of his father and say, “Salaam Alaikum.”

Every morning since he started school he was greeted by the same angry glare from the boy who sat to his left. This bothered Kamil. The boy, who’s name he now knew was Arthur, who everyone called Arty, seemed to have a problem with Kamil that neither Kamil nor any of the other kids he asked understood. “Oh, he’s just a bully,” some would

say; “Just ignore him,” others advised. But Kamil couldn’t ignore him. He decided he would talk to Arthur about it.

Before lunch, when the halls were packed with other students, Kamil approached Arthur as he was putting his books away in his locker. A picture of an American soldier in uniform was taped inside the door. Arthur slammed the door shut and turned around. Kamil was standing in front of him. The other students went silent. “Uh...hi, Arthur,” Kamil said. “What the hell do you want?” Arthur snapped. “I...uh...just wanted to say hi,” Kamil said, realizing this was a bad idea. Then he blurted out, “Who’s that inside your locker.” Arthur’s face went red. He grabbed Kamil by the shirt, spun him around, and pushed him hard against the lockers, knocking the wind out of him. “You should know, you little terrorist,” Arthur yelled. “He was last seen alive in your country. Now stay away from me.” Arthur left, leaving Kamil shaken. The bell rang for lunch and the other kids took off down the hall.

“That was so stupid,” Kamil said out loud.

Someone put their hand on Kamil’s shoulder and he jumped. It was the shy girl from his first class. “Are you okay?” she asked. Her touch felt electric and calming at the same time. “Yeah,” Kamil replied. He saw sadness in her eyes, which made him forget about his own for a moment. “C’mon,” she said, “let’s go to lunch.”

“What’s your name?” Kamil asked. “Cara,” she said. “Thank you, Cara.” “For what?” she asked. “I don’t know. For not running away like everybody else.” “Sure.”

Kamil sat by the river that evening. The word terrorist echoed in his head. He thought about Arthur and the picture in Arthur’s locker. He thought about his father and about how war takes a mess and makes it worse. Arthur called him a terrorist, but it was Kamil who was terrified. He thought about Cara and he felt calm again: one friendly voice cancels a thousand unfriendly ones.

October came and went. Kamil had his first experience with Halloween. His mom bought masks of two famous American mice at the department store where she worked. They wore them while giving out candy to the kids in their building. Since the day when Arthur shoved Kamil against the locker and Cara came to his rescue, Kamil and Cara became good friends. Before then they ate their lunches alone, but now they looked forward to having lunch together every day.

One morning in November the temperature fell to one degree below zero. Later that day at lunch Kamil told Cara that he had never actually seen snow up close before. “I only saw snow north of Herat, on the tops of the Safid Kuh—and even there it melted quickly.” “What does Safid Kuh mean?” asked Cara. “It means ‘White Mountains,’” said Kamil. “Really?” said Cara. “There are mountains near here called the ‘White Mountains.’”

Arthur walked by the table. “Hey, freaks, enjoying your lunch?” Cara gave him a dirty look. Kamil lowered his head. Arthur cackled and walked away. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to sit with me if you don’t want to,” said Kamil. “Don’t be sorry,” said Cara. “And don’t be silly. I don’t care what he thinks.” Cara reached across the table and squeezed Kamil’s hand. Once again Kamil was calmed by her touch. He lifted his head. Cara smiled. Kamil smiled back.

At Thanksgiving Kamil was taught that the first European people who sailed to America made friends with the native peoples, and that the holiday was a celebration of their mutual cooperation. There were two days off from school. Cara was flying across the country with her dad and his girlfriend to have dinner with her mom and her new husband and his two teenage sons from his first marriage. Kamil was sad that he wasn’t going to be with his family. But then he got an idea.

It was the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. After school Kamil ran down to the basement to find Black Feather. He accepted Kamil’s invitation to have dinner with Kamil and his mom the next day. Black Feather brought a homemade apple pie and Kamil’s mom roasted a small turkey and made mashed potatoes from a box. Black Feather and Kamil’s mom shared stories and laughed. They had so much in common. Kamil loved it. It was the first time since Kamil’s father died that he sensed the closeness of family.

Right after Thanksgiving, everyone started getting ready for Christmas. Kamil knew who the Prophet Jesus was but where Kamil was from, Jesus didn’t figure into any holidays. But Kamil soon learned that Jesus didn’t figure very prominently into Christmas either. Kamil began to see Santa Claus everywhere, and all anybody at school talked about was presents. Kamil felt like he wanted to get Cara a present but he wasn’t sure what it should be.

The gymnasium at the school was being decorated for Christmas. Big green wreathes with big red bows lined the walls. In the corner they put up a giant evergreen with little lights all over it. Every kid in the school was assigned to make an ornament for the tree. Kamil liked having the tree indoors. He thought he would like to have a tree in his room all year long just for that smell. In woodworking class Kamil used a scroll saw to carve out a crescent moon as big as his own head with a star that dangled by a little string in between the tips of the moon. He covered the moon and the star with silver glitter. Some kids hung their ornaments themselves low on the tree but many of the ornaments were given to Muhammad to hang higher up using a ladder. The next time Kamil went to the gym he was stunned to see his ornament glittering at the top of the tree.

The last day of school before Christmas vacation was a Friday. The weatherwoman on TV predicted snow. She explained that they were on the edge of big storm and, depending on the winds, they were either going to get a dusting of snow or a few feet of it.

The first few flakes of snow began to drift out of the sky when Kamil sat down for his first class. The kids were excited. Mrs. Patrick said they might end up having only a half-day of school. Kamil grinned at Cara and Cara smiled right back just as big, sharing in his joy of seeing his first snowflakes.

When the second class started the snow was coming down hard and fast. Between classes Kamil noticed some of the teachers talking nervously in the hall. Kamil wanted to run outside and see what snow felt like. By the end of the second class it was coming down so hard they could barely see out the windows. The principal made an announcement over the intercom that everyone should go to their third class as scheduled, but the busses were coming and everyone would be going home soon. During the third class students were allowed, one class at a time, to go to their lockers to be ready when the busses arrived. The original excitement about the snow was being replaced with nervousness among the kids. Outside every window they could see nothing but snow.

Then the power went out.

Without the hum of the florescent bulbs all they could hear was the wind whipping snow against the windows. The principal came to the door and told the class, “The roads are unsafe now and the busses can’t get here yet.” Then he spoke directly to the teacher. “Many of the other teachers are taking their classes to the gym to stretch their legs. School is over for now.”

The class followed the teacher to the gym. It was already buzzing with many conversations. Everybody spread out looking for someone to talk to. Kamil started looking for Cara but he didn’t search long. “Kamil!” Cara appeared and gave Kamil a hug. “So what do you think of this snow?” Cara asked excitedly.

“I can’t believe it,” said Kamil. “I wish I could go outside.”

Cara grabbed Kamil’s hand. “C’mon.” She led Kamil through the crowd, zig-zagging around kids until they reached the double doors of the gym that led outside. She positioned Kamil in front of one of the doors. His nose almost touched it. “Ready?” Cara asked, standing beside him. Kamil turned his eyes uneasily towards Cara, who had a devilish grin. He wasn’t sure what she was going to do. Cara pushed down on the long metal handle of the door. It unlatched with a clunk. Then she leaned on the door and pushed with all her might against the snow, piled up on the other side. Kamils eyes went wide as the snow hit his whole body, almost knocking him backwards. The other students recoiled from the sudden blast of wind and white flooding in through the door.

One of the teachers yelled from the other side of the gym, “Shut that door.” Cara pulled hard on the metal handle and, with the help of the wind, the door slammed shut. Cara laughed and hugged his snow-covered body. Kamil laughed with her as he regained his senses and hugged her back. All the other students stared at the two misfits. “Thank you,” Kamil said to Cara.

Arthur emerged from the crowd. “What the hell are you freaks doin’?” The other students pulled in closer. “Shut up, Arty. You wouldn’t understand,” snapped Cara. Arthur’s eyes narrowed. “Oh really,” Arthur said quietly as he stepped uncomfortably close to Cara. “Why don’t you explain it to me.”

Without thinking Kamil wedged himself between them, facing Arthur. Arthur stepped back. “Look Arthur,” Kamil said, “just leave us alone. Please? We haven’t done anything to you.” Arthur’s face was as red as the day Kamil asked him about the picture in his locker. The next thing Kamil knew, Arthur shoved him hard through the door and out into the driving snow. Arthur followed him. “Haven’t done anything to me?” Arthur said with a sneer. “Your people killed my father while he was over there trying to protect them, you little terrorist.” Arthur lunged at Kamil, knocking him down.

Cara was right behind them. “Leave him alone you big jerk.” Cara grabbed the back of Arthur’s shirt. “He didn’t do anything to you or your father. You’re the one hurting him.” Arthur turned and shoved Cara. When she hit the ground something in her right hand snapped. Cara screamed with pain.

Kamil was overcome with anger and confusion. Arthur was at him again. Arthur grabbed Kamil’s shirt with one hand and cocked his other hand back. Kamil was about punch Arthur when he saw Muhammad standing in the doorway looking straight at him. Kamil’s fist relaxed. Angry tears rolled down his cheeks. “My father is dead, too,” Kamil yelled at Arthur. Arthur reacted as if he’d been hit. His fist dropped. “What did you say?” Arthur said, shaking, his own eyes welling with tears. “My father died over there, too,” Kamil said. “Our house was bombed by a jet and my dad was inside.”

Arthur released Kamil’s shirt and collapsed in the snow beside him. Muhammad took Cara inside. The door closed, leaving Kamil and Arthur outside alone. Arthur began to sob. Kamil stared at Arthur for a moment, then put his hand on Arthur’s shoulder.

Within a couple of hours the snow stopped, the roads were plowed, the busses came, and everyone went home. Kamil and Arthur didn’t say anything else to each other that day. Neither of them said much to anyone that day. Cara went to the hospital and got a cast on her right wrist. She told the teachers, her parents, and the doctor that she just slipped on the snow.

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The next day, Kamil called Cara to see how she was doing. When Kamil told her about Arthur crying she was glad she didn’t tell on him. “I’m proud of you too for not hitting him Kamil,” Cara said. “At the time I really wanted you to, but it just would have made things worse.”

Monday was Christmas Day and since Cara wasn’t going to be traveling anywhere she and Kamil made plans to see each other. Kamil told his mom that he wanted to get Cara something for Christmas so she took him to the store where she worked to look at the

small selection of jewelry they had there. Most of the jewelry was either too expensive or too cheap looking. But he noticed one pendant that stood out from the rest. It was a silver triangle with a round piece of amber set into its center. It came with a free chain, and was only \$19.95. The tag read, "Handmade by Eliana Ahava."

When Kamil and his mom arrived home, they found an envelope addressed to Kamil wedged in their front door. It was a Christmas card with a corny picture of Santa getting ready to slide down a chimney. He opened it and read the handwritten message. "Kamil, sorry. And thank you. See you in the new year. Have a Happy Christmas. Arthur." "Who is that from?" Kamil's mom asked. "A friend from school," Kamil replied. "A new friend."

The next day was Christmas. Kamil and his mom had breakfast together and exchanged gifts. At around noon there was a knock at the door. Kamil jumped from his chair and opened the door. Cara stepped in. "How's your arm doing?" Kamil's mom asked. "It's a lot better, thanks," Cara replied. Kamil wanted to give Cara her present but not with his mother around. "Hey Cara let's go outside. I want to show you the river."

Kamil led Cara through the maze of hallways and stairways to the back door of the building. Outside, They walked through the snow towards a tree on the bank of the river. Cara followed, stepping in Kamils tracks. "I noticed yesterday a spot under this tree without any snow on it." Kamil and Cara ducked under the branches and sat down next to each other with their backs against the thick trunk. "Wow," Cara exclaimed. "What a great spot." "Yeah, I come out here all the time," Kamil said. "The river reminds me of the Hari-rud back in Herat." Kamil reached into his jacket pocket and offered the little box to Cara. "Merry Christmas," he said. "I can't believe you got me a present Kamil," she said. Kamil suddenly felt nervous. Cara opened the box and saw the pendant. "It's so beautiful!" she said, lifting the pendant on the chain in front of her. "Thank you."

Cara put her head on Kamil's shoulder. She held her pendant in both hands, tracing the line of the triangle with her thumbs. As they watched the river, Kamil thought of the Hari-rud again. It doesn't flow into another river or into a sea, like other rivers. The Hari-rud flows into the sands of the Kara-kum desert. The whole river, absorbed by the Kara-kum.